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## Experiences Of Successful African American And Hispanic Non-Traditional Single Mothers At An Urban Community College

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EXPERIENCES OF SUCCESSFUL AFRICAN AMERICAN AND HISPANIC NON-  
TRADITIONAL SINGLE MOTHERS AT AN URBAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

by

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A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Affiliated Faculty of

The College of Graduate and Professional Studies at the University of New England

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ABSTRACT

Single parents who are public welfare recipients and seek to complete a college degree face many obstacles to persist and stay enrolled. Factors such as (a) being custodial parents of a child(ren), (b) juggling a job and family responsibilities, and (c) dealing with financial strains, to name a few, can create role overload which can be daunting (Weber & Tribe, 2019). Because these barriers are present, it is essential to know the motivational orientation of the single parent who has persisted and stay enrolled. Besides documenting the research on programming and policies, the present study explored what motivation students needed to be resilient and persist through their barriers. The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of African American and Hispanic nontraditional single parents who (a) attend community colleges in an urban city, (b) have persisted into their second year and completed 30 credits, and (c) have a GPA of 3.0.

The following questions guided the study: 1. What is the motivational orientation of single parents who persist and stay enrolled through one year of a community college degree program? 2. What type of program interactions have single parents reported that have helped them persist and remain enrolled. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight single-parent CUNY EDGE students enrolled in Urban Community College (UCC) (pseudonym) and documented motivational orientations and the lived

experiences of single-parent students who persisted and stayed enrolled in a community college. The interview prompts focused on what the participants believed helped motivate them to persist and stay enrolled and the barriers they overcame.

The majority of the participants in this study shared similar perceptions of the need for self-sacrifice. They identified the barriers as challenges in their relationships, living conditions, school culture, and lack of finances and support systems. Participants were motivated to overcome those barriers so they could improve their economic status and provide for their children. The findings suggested the need to further develop and continue policies and programs to support single-mother African American and Latina students.

**Keywords:** *Single-Mother students, Motivation, Persistence, Community College, Special Programs.*

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I want to dedicate this body of work to my Grandmother and Mother who are not with us. The memories of their work have helped me to be resilient and to complete this body of work.

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*Be still, and know that I am God (Psalms 46:10)*

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

My life experiences led me to look at the problem of community college retention from the perspective of student motivation. My family immigrated from Haiti in the 1980s with no prior understanding of the United States of America, except that it was an opportunity to live a better life. I can remember growing up seeing my parents working so hard with unwavering determination and resilience to do anything to provide for their family. Although my parents worked hard, their efforts did not shield us from difficult times that caused my mother to start receiving public assistance, while subsequently moving into public housing or what is considered to be “the projects.” We came from a middle-class suburb and moved into an apartment complex in a low-income neighborhood. It was hard at first to adjust; however, my mother did not let our circumstances and where we lived define who we are. Coming from a family home to a 16-floor building complex was a culture shock for us, and it was very uncomfortable for us to reside in a community with very few resources and opportunities to be successful. We felt the gloomy cloud of hopelessness due to the conditions of the neighborhood. I saw higher crime rates, more single-mother households, higher rates of incarceration of African American and Hispanic young boys and men, and the effects of drug and alcohol use. Schools were poorly funded, there was limited access to healthy food, and well-equipped hospitals were not accessible. Even among these insurmountable barriers, my mother still had the motivation and determination to make sure her children had opportunities to be successful. My mother dropped out of college and sacrificed her opportunity to obtain a college degree in order to work to provide for her family. My experience

of living in a low socioeconomic neighborhood helped me to develop empathy for others who live in similar conditions.

Although I am not a single parent who is living on public assistance and in a low-income public housing complex, I too share similar experiences. For instance, when I was pursuing a college degree, I was living in similar conditions and it was difficult for me to persist and stay enrolled in school. Thus, that experience made me wonder about the experiences of single parents who came from similar circumstances and what motivated them when pursuing a degree to persist and stay enrolled. From a motivation perspective, what motivates African American and Hispanic single parents to enroll and persist in college? Moreover, how do these students make sense of their experiences?

### **Context of the Study**

In 2011, I made a career change from being a Child Protective Specialist to higher education. I went from investigating child abuse and neglect to directing and teaching in programs at a 2-year public institution. While working with students who were mainly single parents receiving public assistance, I realized that it took them, on average, over 6 years to complete their studies and, in some instances, they dropped out and never returned. Data have shown that the number of single parents attending college has increased over the years (National Clearinghouse of Education Statistics [NCES], 2015). Approximately three million undergraduates are single parents, and about 60% of them are single mothers (NCES, 2015). Although single parents enroll in 2- and 4-year institutions at high rates, 53% leave school within 6 years without a degree, compared to 31% of their non-parent counterparts (NCES, 2015). Further, 78% of single mothers who are students come from economically poor communities,

and of that group, less than 25% obtain their degrees, when compared to their low-income non-parent counterparts (NCES, 2015).

A review of the data suggests that students who are single parents withdraw from classes or drop out of school for many reasons. For instance, students leave because of transportation problems, finding a job after enrolling, poor academic performance, financial aid challenges, health problems, family obligations, and transferring to 4-year institutions (Weber & Tribe, 2019). The dominant patterns or reasons for not persisting and staying enrolled are evident; however, the factors that help support single parents in college are critical for persistence and graduation are less well-understood.

Further, single-parent students are at a disadvantage because they may lack motivation to pursue academic programs, which may be due to prior negative experiences, limited exposure to formal education, failing and dropping out of high school, and/or coming from programs that helped them to obtain a General Educational Development (GED) or Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC) (Pizzolato & Olson, 2016). The academic history of negative experiences may explain their lack of interest in attending college, low academic performance when in college, or the reason for leaving college (Pizzolato & Olson, 2016). Tinto (1993) suggested that college leaders who are serious about student retention should first recognize the origin of the challenges that students face. Community colleges are charged to develop programs and support systems that can encourage students to persist, stay enrolled, and graduate with a college certificate or degree (Pizzolato & Olson, 2016).

### **Motivational Orientation**

A greater understanding of the motivational orientation of students who persist and stay enrolled can help educational leaders create meaningful, sustainable programs that support

students who currently do not persist and stay enrolled. The motivational orientation framework comes from the social sciences and is supported by the social determination theory (SDT). SDT is used to understand how individuals may be motivated to perform certain behaviors, both internally (autonomous motivation) and externally (controlled motivation) (Taylor et al., 2014).

Controlled motivation refers to the idea of giving incentives based on the performance of behaviors that explicitly contribute to individuals' core self-needs and benefits. By contrast, autonomous motivation refers to the idea of giving incentives for the performance of behaviors that do not contribute to core self-needs and benefits (Taylor et al., 2014). Intrinsic motivation is considered an autonomous motivation. For instance, when individuals are engaged in activities in which they are interested, the activities are done willingly. By contrast, controlled motivation occurs when outside pressures force individuals into behaviors or actions they may not want to do. According to Deci and Ryan (2008):

Autonomous motivation predicts persistence and adherence and is advantageous for effective performance, especially on complex or heuristic tasks that involve deep information processing or creativity. Autonomous motivation is also reliably related to psychological health. Considerable research has found interpersonal contexts that facilitate satisfaction of the basic psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness to enhance autonomous motivation, which comprises intrinsic motivation and well-internalized extrinsic motivation. (p. 14)

My research interest was to investigate the motivational orientation of African American and Hispanic single parents who have persisted or stayed enrolled until the completion of a degree. The participants were all single mothers, so that focus is noted later in the study. [End of Discernment Statement]



## **Setting**

This study took place at a community college in New York City. Listening to the experiences of African American and Hispanic single-parent students at a community college provided data leading to a greater understanding of the motivational orientation of students who have stayed enrolled and persisted until obtaining a degree. The study illustrates how African American and Hispanic single parents make sense of their experiences while attempting to understand their motivational orientations and what they believe has supported them to stay enrolled and persist. The findings of this study will inform the leadership and staff of the community college as they work to meet the needs of their diverse student population and to increase retention and program completion rates.

The common problems of poor retention and low completion rates are concerns that administrators and stakeholders have to deal with in higher education (Roska & Whitley, 2017). Although questions of student retention and completion have been chronic concerns for postsecondary institutions, documenting the beliefs of students who persist may also be helpful in trying to understand how to best support students' success. For instance, one possible factor is the motivational orientations of students who persist and stay enrolled until completion. Tinto (2017) has suggested that the burden is usually on the college to provide a holistic experience for students to be successful; however, one should also consider if or how students' motivation affects the learning process and their abilities to stay enrolled and persist.

## **Higher Education**

Higher education is the catalyst needed to increase economic mobility. Further, individuals who attend college may develop a higher aspiration toward their goals. Higher education institutions have been shown to encourage family stability and serve as a pathway to

move out of poverty. The NCES (2015) data suggested that, because of the benefits of postsecondary education, many nontraditional students return to pursue a college degree. While there are clear benefits to having a college degree, lower-income students are seen to lag, compared to their counterparts in areas of college enrollment and degree completion. Some research has suggested that students who enroll in community colleges come from low-income backgrounds and are likely to be first-generation students (Perrakis & Hagedorn, 2010). The term *nontraditional student* defines a student who has one or more of the following characteristics: attends on a part-time schedule, did not earn a high school diploma, did not attend college soon after high school, is financially independent, and works more than part-time while having dependents (NCES, 2015). The increase of nontraditional students pursuing a college degree subsequently increases the number of students who do not persist and stay enrolled. Most postsecondary institutions were modeled and designed for traditional students; however, in recent times, nontraditional students have outnumbered traditional students in contemporary colleges, specifically community colleges. The increase of nontraditional students has brought about a set of challenges for postsecondary institutions and their leaders who may not be equipped to support nontraditional students. Nontraditional students may have a difficult time navigating and being successful in college. It is especially challenging for a subpopulation of nontraditional students: single parents who are disproportionately working-class, nonwhite, female, and first-generation college students. Further cultural studies have shown that minority and working-class students are ambivalent about attending postsecondary schools and receive more pressure from friends and family, who at times may not want them to pursue higher education (Nelson, Froehner, & Gault, 2013).

### **Community College Leaders**

In efforts to mitigate the concerns of low achievement and the success of low-income and first-generation students, policies and programs were created to support improving college access and degree completion. The research that examines the motivational orientation of African American and Hispanic single-parent students who persist and stay enrolled can identify which tools students have used to help them gain academic success as well as provide recommendations for what college leaders can do to support these students' persistence.

It is vital for community college leaders who are seeking to increase graduation rates to have a better knowledge of the experiences of African American and Hispanic single parents. If motivational orientation, for example, is a decisive factor regarding retention and completion rates, other strategies can be employed. If motivational orientation is a contrary factor, then strategies can be specified to alter it.

### **Comprehensive Support Programs**

College comprehensive support programs have an essential role in facilitating single-parent students' college experiences. Comprehensive support programs assist with the application process, academic advising, peer support, tutoring, and counseling and mentoring (Cerven, 2013; Fenster, 2003; Romo & Segura, 2010; Schumacher, 2013). Although these programs are present, students still struggle to persist and stay enrolled.

### **Urban Community College**

The research site is an Urban Community College (UCC) (pseudonym) in New York City. The institution has a diverse body of enrollment of over 10,000 students, and ASPEN has recognized it for its various student programs, financial support, childcare, and advising and

counseling. The UCC participates in a city program that assists academically and financially disadvantaged students. One of the programs is the CUNY EDGE (Educate, Develop, Graduate, and Empower) program, which assists parents receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits while also receiving cash assistance.

The CUNY EDGE program and the City University of New York (CUNY) have recognized that a student's program of study will not typically complete within the timeframe applicable to full-time students due to TANF/SNAP recipients' obligation to work at least part-time. CUNY EDGE programs offer a range of resources to student parents, and they are implemented in all CUNY schools. Human Resource Administration (HRA) funds each CUNY EDGE program to implement offices and support services that are comprised of leadership, advisors, attendance monitors, tutoring, and career specialists. Urban Community College has implemented the CUNY EDGE program into its student affairs department. CUNY EDGE serves as a comprehensive support program for students, especially single-parent students.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Although some higher education institutions have implemented programming and policies, there still seems to be a gap in knowledge about single-parent students who persist and stay enrolled (NCES, 2015). Many efforts provide holistic support; however, they may not align with what this population of students finds useful. Fenster (2003) offered information on what policies and programs should be implemented for low-income single parents who are attending community colleges. One of the suggestions from the study was to implement comprehensive programs and policies that help with the application process, tutoring, and providing tuition support. Although programs and policies were suggested, there is a limited amount of

information on what motivates single parents and what motivational orientation has proven to support students to overcome those barriers to stay enrolled and persist.

It is essential for college administrators, staff, faculty, other students, and stakeholders to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of low-income single parents and what obstacles single parents have to overcome as well as what motivational orientation has proven to help students persist and stay enrolled. With the information gathered, institutional leaders can then consider implementing useful programming and resources to support single parents who are pursuing a college degree.

### **Purpose of the Study**

NCES (2015) highlighted community college as the most accessible type of schooling for nontraditional students, particularly single parents seeking higher education. Inner-city community colleges have created programs and policies and collaborate with municipal entities to create comprehensive support programs at the college level. The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of African American and Hispanic nontraditional single parents who (a) attend community colleges in an urban city, (b) have persisted into their second year and completed 30 credits, and (c) have a GPA of 3.0. This phenomenological qualitative study focused on nontraditional African American and Hispanic single parents, who are (a) currently enrolled in 12-15 credits, (b) part of the CUNY EDGE program, (c) recipients of the full Pell/TAP grants, and (d) recipients of cash assistance from the HRA.

### **Research Questions**

The following questions guided the study:

1. What is the motivational orientation of single parents who persist and stay enrolled through one year of a community college degree program?

2. What type of program interactions have single parents reported that have helped them persist and remain enrolled?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Single-parent students balance the responsibilities of work, family, and HRA requirements while trying to persist and stay enrolled in college (Perrakis & Hagedorn, 2010). Thus, because of the pressures of balancing competing commitments such as children, rent, HRA, and so on, single-parent students may not have the ability to build and establish a connection with resources on college campuses, compared to traditional college students. Thus, understanding the motivational orientation of single-parent students is essential to help design appropriate academic and student support resources that will potentially meet their needs. The purpose of the study was to investigate the motivational orientation of single-parent students who are enrolled and have persisted in a community college.

For this research study, a motivational orientation framework was the theoretical foundation. Motivation levels based on Garrison's (1997) research suggest that these levels can affect students' efforts when trying to achieve their learning goals and complete their degrees. Motivational orientation is essential in the academic success of college students (Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006). Nontraditional college students have different motivations and processes compared to traditional college students (Justice & Doman, 2001). It is important to understand that students are more likely to be motivated when the material learned or the degree is relevant to their lives (Eppler, Carsen-Plenti, & Harju, 2000).

### **Assumptions, Limitations, Scope**

It was assumed that the participants in this research study would participate of their own free will in an effort to reflect on what their experiences were like as single-parent students. Also, it was assumed that the participants would share accurately and truthfully about their experiences while participating in the study. The participants were informed about and reminded of their rights if they participated or that they could leave the study at any time.

The method of the study required the recruitment of single-parent students. The pool of participants came from the CUNY EDGE program and the sample selection was made from that pool. It is understood that a single institution and a limited number of single-parent students who participated in the study may not provide the results needed to answer the research questions.

The researcher's position as a program leader in the study was a potential limitation of the study. Some of the participants were known to the researcher. However, the researcher coded, analyzed, and interpreted the information gathered with as little bias as possible. The researcher was aware of potential biases and sought to separate beliefs towards the study and participants. Addressing these concerns helped to ensure that ethical problems would not corrupt the data collection or influence the overall outcome of the study.

### **Significance**

Single parents who are public welfare recipients and are seeking to complete a college degree face many obstacles to persist and stay enrolled. Factors such as (a) being custodial parents of a child(ren), (b) juggling a job and family responsibilities, and (c) dealing with financial strains, to name a few, can create role overload, which can be daunting (Weber & Tribe, 2019).

Because these barriers are present, it is essential to know the motivational orientation of the single parent who has persisted and stay enrolled. Weber and Tribe (2019) explained that, of the single-parent student population who enrolled in and attended college, 73% had problems staying enrolled for consecutive terms, thus delaying degree completion. Single parents, when compared to their counterparts (i.e., married students), were more likely to raise their children while working full-time (Weber & Tribe, 2019). Although single parents may understand the impact that a degree can have on their economic position, they still find it a challenge to persist and stay enrolled. Besides documenting the research on programming and policies, the present study explored what motivation students needed to be resilient and persist through their barriers.

### **Motivation and Achievement**

Hidi and Harackiewicz (2000) stated that motivation and achievement have consistently shown a positive relationship with intrinsic motivation, academic achievement, and persistence. Intrinsic motivation in students helps them to invest themselves in what they are learning and to learn for the sake of learning, thus leading them to a higher chance of retaining and comprehending what they learn (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000). Intrinsic motivation can be explained as being motivated through interest in a task that is being learned, whereas extrinsic motivation is the receiving of rewards of factors external to the task. Intrinsic motivation is considered to be a positive form of motivation, whereas extrinsic motivation is seen as a less desirable form of motivation (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000).

Although intrinsic and extrinsic motivation have been widely referred to in the literature, there is not enough information on how they affect single parents to persist and stay enrolled in college. Understanding the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation factors needed for single-parent welfare benefit recipients to persist and stay enrolled may provide more information for the



limited body of research and may be helpful to highlight or identify supports and resources for higher education institutions.

Despite the available research on what motivates students in higher education, only a few studies have addressed how motivation theory can resolve issues that have deterred single-parent-students from persisting and staying enrolled specifically in community colleges (Pizzolato & Olson, 2016). Thus, exploring the lived experiences of these participants offers a deeper understanding of different ways to support and motivate students to persist and stay enrolled.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Academic Advisor:** A professional staff member whose primary job functions include advising on general education topics; maintaining and updating academic records; helping those students who have not made satisfactory progress (i.e., defined by a standard used by the U.S. Department of Education for continued financial aid eligibility—that students who maintain both a GPA of 2.00 or higher and a completion rate of 67% are considered to be in good academic standing and as making satisfactory progress); interpreting academic policies; referring to other campus services; and assisting with transfer and career planning.

**Extrinsic Motivation:** Typically, performance for some tangible payoffs such as grades, money, or recognition. If rewards come from an external source and are unrelated to the value of an action, they are considered to be extrinsic (Boshier, 1976).

**Intrinsic Motivation:** Factors include the satisfaction of completing a personal challenge or undertaking and learning something new (Boshier, 1976).

**Persistence:** Refers to the academic progress of a student toward the completion of a degree.

**TASC (Test Assessing Secondary Completion):** The TASC is a secure, reliable, and valid instrument that is used to verify that examinees know core content areas equivalent to that of graduating high school seniors. There are five tests in the TASC test battery: Reading, Writing, Social Studies, Science, and Mathematics (The New York State Department of Education, 2019).

**Urban Community College (UCC):** A 2-year institution located in or close to a significant city where individuals can obtain Associates degrees or advanced certificates (Lovell, 2014).

**Welfare Benefit-Recipient Students (WBRSSs):** Matriculated students enrolled either part-time or full-time while receiving food stamps to help purchase food, Medicaid to cover medical expenses, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), which is a monthly cash allowance to help with bills and necessities (Kim & Berry, 2019).

### **Conclusion**

CUNY has developed an internal infrastructure of social and academic support services and external partnerships with community and government groups (CUNY EDGE Program Manual, 2016). Community college leaders at sites like UCC should seek to understand what motivational orientations are prevalent in single-parent students who have persisted and stay enrolled because obtaining degrees or advanced certificates can be the catalyst of change to move out of poverty (Lovell, 2014).

By understanding what motivates single-parent students, community college leaders can provide programming that promotes a culture that supports and values the strengths and weaknesses of single-parent students. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the relevant literature to

explore what motivates students and to answer how motivational orientation affects students' persistence and their ability to stay enrolled in community colleges.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover the motivational orientation of single-parent students in a New York City Urban Community College (UCC) who have successfully persisted and stayed enrolled. Although some studies have examined this student population, the literature available is limited on what the motivational orientations are of single parents who persist and stay enrolled. Moreover, it is important to know what experiences and programs this student population views as helping to support them to persist and stay enrolled.

The purpose of a literature review is to position the study within the existing literature as related to the topic while also determining a research approach (Creswell, 2018). In using the qualitative research method, the first step was to gather and summarize studies and conceptual commentaries that related to the research and then represent them in an inductive design (Creswell, 2018). Creswell (2018) suggested that studies should demonstrate several aspects of previous research to examine new ideas and to frame and correlate data that were obtained through interviews. The empirical studies relating to single-parent students guide the literature journey, which helped develop a platform to explore the motivational orientation of single-parent students who persist and stay enrolled; these studies have thus deepened our understanding of this topic. The research topic guided the development of this literature review, and the research questions were woven into its fabric to develop a balance between existing data and relevant inquiry that set the stage for the qualitative data collection and subsequent analysis.

The topics addressed in the literature review are minority students' experiences in K-12, motivational orientation, federal education programs, and comprehensive programming for single-parent students.

### **Students' Experiences in K-12**

The New York K-12 public school system is the largest school district in the United States. The public-school system educates 1,126,501 students, of whom 13.2% are English language learners, 20.2% are students with disabilities, and 72.8% are economically disadvantaged. The race and ethnic groups served are 40.6% Hispanic, 25.5% African American, 16.2% Asian, 15.1% White, and 119,551 in a charter school (DOE Data at a Glance, 2019).

In 2018, graduation rates were roughly 75.9%, a 29.4% increase since 2005; although more students graduate with a high school diploma, they still seem to be at a disadvantage. While there was an increase in graduation rates between 2005 and 2018, the college readiness percentage was less favorable, with only 22% of students entering community college associate degree programs at the City University of New York (CUNY) and earning a degree in 3 years. Further, students are graduating from CUNY 4-year colleges at 55% over 6 years. Students' college readiness or lack thereof has substantial implications for academic success in 2- and 4-year colleges.

Attewell, Lavin, Domina, and Levey (2006) recommended that importance should be placed on secondary school preparation because it is a precursor to college success and degree attainment. The researchers further explained how "poor or the lack of high school preparation, rather than not taking remedial coursework, is what reduces students' chances of graduating from college" (p. 14). Based on this notion, one can argue that high school curriculum and performance have a direct correlation to and can predict if a student persists or stays enrolled.

Due to the unpreparedness of incoming students, colleges have created developmental education as an intervention to lessen the performance gap. However, the amount of time students remain in remediation courses has been shown to be detrimental to their chances to persist and stay enrolled.

Carnevale and Strohl's (2013) article "Separate and Unequal" highlighted the discrepancy in higher education and argued that White students are concentrated in the nation's most well-funded, selective 4-year colleges, while African American and Hispanic students are more concentrated in the 3,200-plus least funded, open-access two- and four-year college" (p. 7). College admissions and the distribution of the student population can also be used to further demonstrate that "minority students are more unprepared for colleges than white students and are more likely to be directed into crowded and underfunded education settings" (p. 9).

To better understand the correlation of secondary school preparation and student distribution in higher education, one should look at the discrepancies in the overall secondary school preparation of students. Ami Zusman (2005) described it best as "savage inequalities" when discussing the difference between wealthy and poor school districts. Kozol and Zusman further suggested higher education institutions should work with low-wealth schools and communities to advocate for increased resources and to improve their students' college readiness; if not, the United States will lose the multiple talents from this segment of the population.

Zusman (2005) challenged colleges to do more to develop effective ways to respond to low-income first-generation African American and Latino/a students who do not make it to college and drop out at higher rates than do middle-class White students. Although more students have been enrolled in colleges, there are still undeniable obstacles present, such as overcoming

inadequate academic preparation and the increasing burden of college costs, which can be exacerbated when students exhaust their financial aid on developmental coursework. This threatens the nation's overall well-being and prosperity. "Reducing access to higher education raises concerns about meeting society's economic and civic needs at a time of increasing economic, technological, social and political complexity and interdependence" (Zusman, 2005, p. 15).

Although researchers such as Zusman (2005) have suggested that one cannot examine college readiness discrepancies without addressing how academic expectations between high schools and colleges are not aligned in coordination or conversation, Arum and Roksa (2011) put it best: "Many students come to college not only poorly prepared by prior schooling for highly demanding tasks but more troubling, they enter college with norms, attitudes, behaviors, and values that are often at odds with academic achievement" (p. 3).

CUNY system leaders have not been successful in finding solutions for students with developmental Math and English who are not ready for college-level courses, despite their having earned a high school degree or its equivalent (nycfuture.org, 2017). Although the percentage of African American and Latino high school students who are considered college-ready has increased from 13% to 22%, it still does not compare to White and Asian students who are 50% more prepared for college than their counterparts.

For higher education institutions, it is not an option to have isolated initiatives; rather, it is a necessity that they collaborate with other programs that can help support students (Hunter, 2006). The efforts of college programming to ensure student engagement do not stop once they are admitted and must be part of an ongoing process (Tinto, 2017). Higher education institutions have an opportunity to do more to support and help students with different challenges and

weaknesses, especially when dealing with academic readiness. Two possibilities that Lovell (2014a) suggested are: (a) increase the funding for bridge-type programs that link higher education to secondary education, and (b) provide social and academic pathways to assist students in overcoming their lack of preparation for college.

Through his research on high schools that have a track record of consistently sending large portions of their graduates to college at a high level of college readiness, Conley (2010) provided principles that highlight best practices for high schools:

1. create a core academic program that aligns and leads to college readiness by the end of the 12th grade;
2. “develop and...maintain a college-going culture in the school” (p. 5);
3. create assignments and graduation policies that align closely with college expectations;
4. teach self-management skills and expect the students to use them;
5. make the senior year meaningful and challenging;
6. make college real by preparing for the complexity of applying to college and making the transition;
7. build partnerships with and connections to postsecondary programs and institutions (p. 9).

Roderick, Nagaoka, and Coca (2009) studied urban high schools and recommended policies to improve college readiness. The prescribed strategies to help high schools be college-ready are as follows:

1. help high school educators meet the instructional challenges;
2. use incentives and reliable signals for students;



3. develop valid indicators of college readiness and build accountability; and
4. bring the information and address the social capital gap (p. 202).

As noted, more students are graduating from high school; however, minority students are at a higher risk of not being college ready. From the research of Villavicencio, Bhattacharya, and Guidry (2013), the following were recommended to improve the college readiness of minority students:

1. invest resources in the ninth grade;
2. cultivate students' leadership/voice;
3. focus specifically on college readiness;
4. train school staff in culturally responsive education;
5. increase the opportunity for rigorous coursework; and
6. form strategic partnerships (p. 8).

Spence (2009) recommended the need for higher education to send college readiness information to high schools with specific standards that will enable high schools and their educators to focus on and prioritize college readiness. Kemple (2013) reported on the performance of NYC high schools and made the following recommendation to NYC policymakers to address and prepare students for college:

1. align performances curricula, standards, and instruction with the skills that are needed to be successful in college and career;
2. identify and support students who are struggling to meet the minimum requirements for a regent's diploma; and
3. develop high-quality multiple pathways toward success for students who may not opt for a 4-year college degree (p. 4).

## **Motivational Theory**

Motivational theory originated from Houle's seminal study in 1961, the results of which helped to shape and create a framework to understand the reasons that impel adult students to enroll and persist in higher education. Research studies on adult learner motivational orientation were conducted by Houle (1961), Sheffield (1964), and Boshier (1971, 1973, 1976), and provide the theoretical framework for adult learner students' motivation and their participation in higher education. It has been close to 6 decades since Houle (1961) introduced the concept of motivational orientation. He used a three-factor typology that was derived from interviews he conducted with 22 continuing learners. Houle described the three common motivational factors that cause adult learners to participate in learning were that they be (a) goal-oriented, (b) activity-oriented, and (c) learning-oriented. Although Houle's study had a small sample and did not have an empirical analysis, his typology has become an accepted and useful point from which to research motivational orientations (Boshier, 1976).

Houle's research was further developed when Sheffield (1964) took the three basic typologies of adult learners and developed a list of 58 reasons why adults said they participated in adult education courses. Sheffield's study created a classification of the 16 responses that represented Houle's three hypothesized learning orientations. A list was created into a questionnaire and then administered to 453 continuing education individuals who attended 20 adult education conferences in the United States. Sheffield's study validated Houle's learner types and confirmed the existence of Houle's learner orientation. The study provided a better understanding of goal and activity orientation. Goal orientation was defined as a personal goal and desire for sociability orientations, whereas activity orientation was defined as societal and

need-fulfillment orientations. Sheffield's study provided five adult learner orientations which included:

1. Personal Goal-oriented: Learners pursue accomplishment base on clear-cut personal objectives;
2. Learning-oriented: Learners seek knowledge for its own sake;
3. Need Fulfillment: Learners seek intrapersonal and introspective meaning;
4. Societal Goal-oriented: Learners participate in the learning out of concerns for society and community; and
5. Desire for Sociability: Learners seek social and interpersonal meaning (p. 21).

In 1971, Boshier sought to develop Houle's motivational orientation further. Boshier suggested that individuals are motivated by each of the typologies either because of deficient needs or growth needs. In 1971, Boshier developed and tested his findings from his large-scale database, and after an extensive research process to examine reliability and validity, only 42 items remained and were divided into seven 6-item motivational orientation factors. The scale is currently known as the Education Participation Scale (EPS). The 6-item factors are:

1. Social Contract: Individuals participate in learning because of the joy of learning with others; they like to be part of a group and make new friends.
2. Communication Improvement: Individuals participate in learning because they want to improve their writing, speaking, and listening skills.
3. Educational Preparation: Individuals participate in learning to make up uncompleted educational pursuits.
4. Professional Advancement: Individuals participate in learning to help prepare for professional advancement or a new career.

5. Family Togetherness: Individuals participate in learning to cope with family matters and prepare for family changes.
6. Social Stimulation: Individuals participate in learning to avoid being lonely and bored and to participate in meeting others and escaping routines, unhappiness, or loneliness.
7. Cognitive Interest: Individuals participate in learning to satisfy their appetite for learning, which is a meaningful and joyous experience (Boshier, 1971).

### **McClelland's Need for Achievement**

McClelland's (2001) Need for Achievement (nAch) theory focuses on individuals with an increased level of needing achievement in order to lead to an increased level of self-esteem. McClelland placed individuals into two categories: (a) those who do not have any concerns or worries nor a need to overcome challenges; and (b) those who may have faced adversities and, through these challenges, have learned how to overcome them to achieve success. Individuals who demonstrate high levels of need for achievement are always seeking new ways to gain success, regardless of their surroundings. This theory also suggests that if a need is powerful enough within individuals, it can have a positive effect on intrinsic motivation which, in turn, leads to satisfaction in meeting their needs.

Extending these theories into later studies and especially into the realm of education, Hodges Payne (2006) found that one of the most influential motivators for students was their influence on themselves and their need for achievement. Validating students for their achievement can lead to a self-affirmation process—when an individual reaches his or her higher levels of achievement (Terenzini et al., 1993). Leaders are responsible for developing cultures and spaces that help to increase and maintain a level of need for achievement for

students (McClelland, 2001). Beach and Lindahl (2004) suggested that leaders should have an understanding of motivational theories in order to apply them to help students to persist and graduate.

Not all college students have the same level of intrinsic motivation or even ability to deal with or handle obstacles or hardships. However, there is an apparent link between intrinsic motivation and higher academic achievement. Colleges and universities that promote systemic changes can help to develop intrinsic motivation for students to achieve college degrees, resulting in academic persistence and graduation (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007).

Wise (2003) pointed out that individuals cannot motivate each other, although they can provide a stimulus for others to motivate themselves. As Maslow's model demonstrates, human beings must have their basic needs met for their motivation level to increase. According to Hidi and Harackiewicz (2000), the two vital distinctive characteristics of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are that the former is dependent on one's free will, whereas the latter depends on one's behavior, attitude, and perceptions. Typically, extrinsic motivation is an external factor that extends and develops beyond the activities in which students are involved (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). When dealing with students who are not motivated, external reward may be the best option to use for motivation. Another way to increase students' motivation levels to become academically prepared is by helping students understand how important college degrees are and how they can change their financial trajectories for themselves and their families (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007; Sidle & McReynolds, 2009). Thus, an extrinsic reward may help to increase higher motivation for academically unmotivated students who come from lower-income communities (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000).

Martin (2009) further noted that students are motivated by different desires and needs. For example, some students are motivated by overcoming obstacles that appear to hold them back from achieving their goal, while others are more motivated by the support of others. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and McClelland's nAch models are based on the concepts of human needs (esteem, social, and self-actualization), and as such can be linked to understanding the barriers facing all students, specifically single-parent students.

### **Self-esteem**

Single-parent students are seen by some researchers to have lower self-esteem, which can likely hinder their progress toward academic excellence (Hick, 2006). As Maslow explained, satisfying self-esteem needs requires interactions with others to feel good about the self or be a part of a network of social relationships. It is not enough to be part of any group, but rather to be part of a group that respects an individual for himself or herself. However, in McClelland's theory of self-esteem, individuals who overcome barriers seem to provoke motivation which, in turn, increases self-esteem.

Extending this theory to the college setting, Perez (1998) and Rendon (1995) suggested that colleges must play an active role in helping students overcome issues of low self-esteem and fear of failure. As Hunter (2006) mentioned, college leadership should be intentional in developing activities that allow student involvement to increase the students' sense of belonging and feelings of inclusiveness, while also motivating students to increase their self-esteem.

Social needs are essential because many students need to be social by nature and to belong to something bigger than themselves (Maslow, 2001). Unfortunately, students who receive welfare benefits and enter college or postsecondary programs through back-to-work programs may have family members and individuals in their lives who may be unsupportive and

possibly standing in the way of their achievement, thereby reinforcing the lack of self-esteem. When social needs are not met, students may tend to be uncomfortable in college because they do not fit in socially (Tinto, 2017).

Students who experience similar barriers are at higher risk of leaving college, thus affecting their social and academic integration and feeling the need to depart from college; even if they stay, such students may not do well because of their lack of social integration (McCay & Esteralla, 2008). Thus, the social component and need to belong are critical to motivating students to persist and graduate from college. Although one purpose of college is to prepare individuals for the workforce through academics, the social element is equally essential because socially isolated students will not integrate or want to continue alone (Martin, 2009). Motivation increases when students are socially integrated and feel they belong to the higher education institution.

### **Self-actualization**

Maslow (1965) described self-actualization as an end state and a process of actualizing one's potentialities at any time and in any amount (p. 113). As individuals gain a higher nAch, they tend to obtain a better understanding of how to increase motivation to accomplish their goals (McClelland, 2001). Through certain experiences, a high level of achievement maximizes levels of self-development, which includes self-achievement. Students who participate in special college programs such as Trio, ASAP, and SEEK, to name a few, are not only assisted financially and academically but also receive help beyond the classroom. As a result, students in these unique programs persist and graduate at higher rates.

Owning a high level of nAch when an individual obtains goals can promote intrinsic motivation (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000). Having self-actualization experiences contributes to

the development of intrinsic motivation for what is already internal (Maslow, 1954). Self-actualization plays a vital role in the lives of disadvantaged students because it is crucial to the development of their academic abilities and social integration (Terenzini et al., 1993). Intrinsic motivation can be defined as laboriously progressing toward a goal for an individual's sake. Having intrinsic motivation can be helpful for nontraditional students seeking to integrate into the community (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007).

McClelland's (2001) nAch, as one theoretical approach or model, has provided information to help describe the human need to be motivated as it relates to motivational orientation. The use of this theory, coupled with practical research, may provide pathways to understanding motivational orientation and inform understanding of single-parent students' persistence and enrollment.

### **Federal Education Programs**

The U.S. federal government has created and implemented policies and program initiatives at the federal and state levels to help many low-income individuals find employment. Efforts have ranged from programs that focus on a specific population such as unskilled men, teenage parents, and youth to broader programs that target a more significant percentage such as mothers receiving assistance from the Aid to Families with Dependent Children Act (AFDC) (Kim & Berry, 2019).

#### **Aid to Families with Dependent Children Act (AFDC)**

The AFDC was created under the Social Security Act of 1935 and allowed states to provide cash welfare payments to children who have been deprived of care or parental support because their mother and father were absent from their lives. All 50 states at the time were operating under the 1935 Act, which allowed states to define what was considered a "need" in



their respective states. It also permitted states to set their benefits levels within the federal limits. In addition, states were entitled to unlimited federal funds for reimbursement for benefit payments. To receive the reimbursement, however, states were required to send proof of all persons who were eligible under the federal law and whose income and resources were under state limits, thereby making public support an entitlement.

### **Family Support Act (FSA)**

In 1988, the change to the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program occurred when the Family Support Act (FSA) was enacted. The centerpiece of the act, the Job Opportunities and Basis (JOBS) training program, provided adult AFDC recipients with training, education, and supportive services to help them be more self-sufficient and avoid long-term welfare dependency (Booshehri, Dugan, Patel, et al., 2018). The FSA goal was to use JOBS to change the culture and landscape of both welfare agencies and recipients so they might view AFDC benefits as more temporary and a way to gain employment and not be permanently entitled. The JOBS program cost the federal and state government about \$8 billion to operate, and it only touched a fraction of the intended population (Kim & Berry, 2019).

The JOBS program in 1993 serviced almost 4.98 million recipients a month; however, it needed to be overhauled because it did not reach the more significant percentage of the population who were receiving public assistance. The call for welfare reform was due to rising AFDC caseloads, concerns about escalating program costs, and public perceptions that AFDC is a permanent entitlement and not a transitional route to work. Policymakers were also concerned that the JOBS program was not designed to support and service a large number of AFDC recipients. In 1995, the federal government mandated each state to serve

20% of nonexempt caseloads, which raised the question of whether the JOBS program could even support the increased caseload while positively affecting the welfare culture. Thus, policymakers suggested that the only way to transform the welfare culture effectively was to have participation on a large scale along with the emphasis on work.

### **Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA)**

Since then, the JOBS program ended with the establishment of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA, 1996). This Act imposed time limits for receiving benefits, denied cash assistance to mothers who were under 18 years old and unwed, converted state AFDC funding into capped block grants for each state, and eliminated the AFDC as an individual entitlement. The PRWORA gave state and local governments the power to shape local policies according to the needs and desires of their specific constituents (Chamlin & Denney, 2019). Specifically, in the areas of welfare reform, one of the significant differences between the states is the extent of how much support will be given to educational programs as part of mandated work requirements for welfare recipients (Chamlin & Denney, 2019). Policymakers believe single parents have a better chance to move off welfare when they receive on-the-job training, whereas other states such as New York and California believe it would be better to support educational programs that have components incorporating on-the-job work experiences while enrolled in a degree or certificate program (Chamlin & Denney, 2019). The PRWORA has shifted federal welfare policies away from a work-first approach by adding more training benefits for single-parent welfare recipients than before (Chamlin & Denney, 2019).

### **Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF)**

TANF was the program that replaced JOBS; it was part of the 1996 PRWORA Act, with a focus to promote employment through “work-first” strategies with the options for educational opportunities (Chamlin & Denney, 2019). The PRWORA policy helped recipients to participate in immediate job searches and limited longer-term educational opportunities such as postsecondary education. The TANF program also capped lifetime aid for recipients to 60 months, which demonstrated a further push for recipients to have limited access to longer-term educational programs, which made community college an ideal fit for welfare programming (Chamlin & Denney, 2019). The push came from policymakers who believed the recipients’ pursuit of higher education while on aid would inadvertently undermine the goal of providing short-term assistance. The thought was that recipients who sought a college degree while receiving aid would remain longer on welfare than if they were instead directed toward employment (Chamlin & Denney, 2019).

### **College Support Programs**

The City University of New York (CUNY), under the NYC Human Resource Administration (HRA) democratic administration in 1998, created a comprehensive support program specifically to target single parents who were receiving welfare benefits. The program was called College Opportunity to Prepare for Employment (COPE Program Manual, 2016). Initially, the COPE program was designed to help move single welfare parents through at least 2 years of college in a program that offers career-focused skills. Higher education leaders and the staff of the COPE program focused on the persistence, retention, and graduation of COPE students (COPE Program Manual, 2016).

## **COPE**

The COPE program is founded on three standing principles: (a) servicing a small subset of students of welfare recipients (less than 15%), especially those who have a higher demonstrated college readiness; (b) creating a cohort of students, using a block schedule to facilitate peer studying and counseling; and (c) providing extra student services exclusively for COPE participants ranging from academic and personal counseling to specialized workshop to job placements (COPE Program Manual, 2016). With the early success of COPE, HRA and CUNY have continued to work together for over 20 years. The COPE program is solely HRA grant-funded, and CUNY does not have to provide the program with any funding. However, CUNY must adhere to policies and outcome goals to secure the funding.

In 2016, HRA was reformed and made a recent shift which caused some changes to the COPE program. One of the fundamental changes is that TANF recipients will have the opportunity to meet their work requirements by attending school leading up to a 4-year college and the full-time education and training requirements have been removed. It has also lifted the subjected limit on the type of degree that could be counted towards their work requirement. TANF recipients will also be allowed to count school, homework, and work study in their employment plan. The changes caused CUNY to change the COPE program to a more comprehensive support program designed so students could obtain a 4-year degree. The COPE program is now known as CUNY EDGE, which stands for Educate, Develop, Graduate, and Empower.

## **CUNY EDGE**

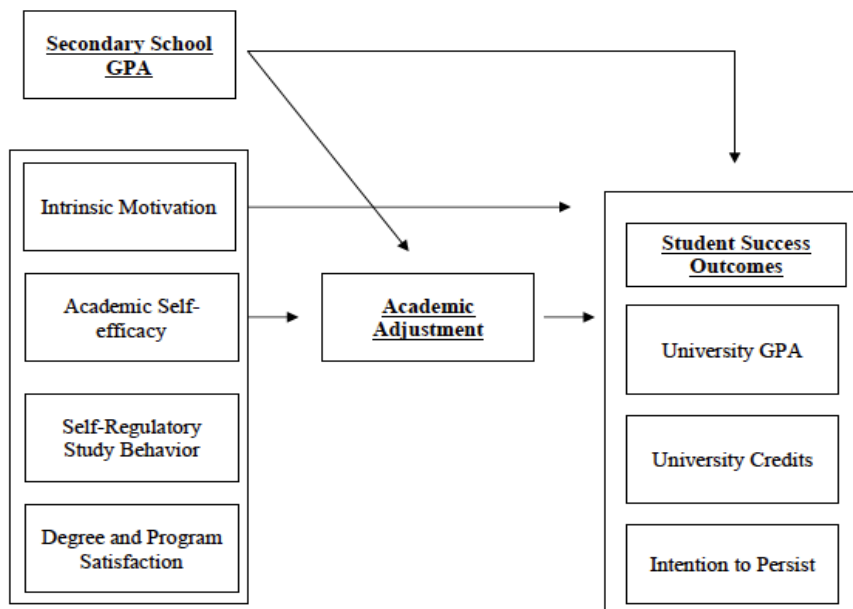
CUNY EDGE key components are as follows: (a) structured programming to help students complete degrees; (b) individualized academic, personal, and career support; (c) consistent enrollment each semester including intersession; (d) a culture of academic excellence; (e) the opportunity to have work experience while in school, including career development services; (f) staff who will lead professional and personal development seminar, i.e., career development, goal settings, and self-advocacy; (g) collaboration with other support offices in college; (h) programs so CUNY EDGE participants will be able to participate in other CUNY programs such as ASAP, College Discovery, and SEEK at the same time; and (i) the HRA fellowship program providing limited paid work opportunities to CUNY EDGE students (CUNY EDGE Program Manual, 2019).

CUNY EDGE serves a vital role for welfare recipient students when pursuing postsecondary education. CLASP 2016 studies have shown that obtaining a postsecondary education can provide a route out of welfare dependency and low-wage employment for those with the ability and motivation to pursue and complete advanced degrees. Welfare recipient students see having a college degree as a way out of welfare dependency. Further, Weber and Tribe (2019) provided evidence that postsecondary education, particularly at a 2-year institution, is associated with increased earnings. Research specifically on welfare recipients similarly showed that graduating with postsecondary education is associated with improved long-term outcomes, which can reduce welfare recidivism and increase employment opportunities (Weber & Tribe, 2019).

## Conceptual Framework

Motivational orientation attempts to address the question of “Why does one learn?” (Ryan, Cornell, & Grodnick, 1992). The contextual aspects of motivational orientation focus on a student’s identification with the school environment and interpersonal relationships with classmates and teaching staff. The student identification grows from the student’s sense of belonging or connectedness to the school or at least the values of education and achievement that support the student’s environment. The relationship between identification and motivational orientation is described as reciprocal, meaning students who identify with the school are motivated and motivated students feel connected to and participate in the school culture. There is a high positive correlation between identification and intrinsic motivation and perceived competence and intrinsic motivation. Students who identify with achievement reflect personal responsibility for their academics. The contextual aspect of motivational orientation focuses on students’ connectedness to the school environment which influences their motivational orientation and level of participation. A connected student feels supported by his or her peers and the adults in the environment. A connected student identifies and participates in school. A connected student feels encouraged and motivated, and possesses: (a) sense of mastery, (b) higher self-worth, (c) positive views of the school environment, and (d) the values of achievement and education.

Figure 2.1

*Motivational Orientation Framework Diagram***Conclusion**

Although the review of the literature touched on a wide range of topics, the components discussed describe the complexities, policies, practices, and challenges involved in discussing single-parent students' persistence and enrollment in higher education institutions. As the literature pointed out, understanding students' setbacks and what motivates them to continue to persist and stay enrolled despite undeniable barriers can help administrators, faculty, and policymakers create potential communities, cultures, and programming that promote academic success. Public education is the cornerstone in American society, and without it, the United States will not meet evolving economic and societal needs.

New York City has more than one million students in K-12 schools and over 500,000 in the higher education system. The literature provided models of effective practices and warnings by which to understand what motivates students, while also looking at how the lack of motivation may be a deterrent to the enrollment of single-parent students. Looking at the motivational orientation of African American and Hispanic single-parent students who persist and stay enrolled improves understanding what college leaders can do to support students, while also looking at what tools and resources successful academic students have employed to persist and stay enrolled.

The information gathered from the experiences of African American and Hispanic single-parent students can be vital to higher education institutions regarding increasing graduation rates. If motivation is a decisive factor in retention and completion rates, other strategies can be employed. If motivation is a contrary factor, then strategies can be specified to alter it. Motivation can be hard to measure. However, the literature has provided a workable and measurable approach to look at and analyze motivation in students and the effects of motivation as it pertains to enrollment and persistence.

This chapter situated the study with relevant writings and previous research, particularly looking at how motivational factors can shape students' persistence and enrollment. The literature review also looked at topics such as K-12, community colleges, the Back to Work Federal program, and comprehensive support. The literature review began by looking at the lack of educational preparation and what challenges perpetuate the lack of college readiness which can affect students' persistence and enrollment. Chapter 3 next explains the methodology that was used to carry out this study. Chapter 4 presents the data analysis, and Chapter 5 concludes with findings, discussion, and recommendations from the study.



## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

The data for this study came primarily from interviews with participants from a community college program called CUNY EDGE. The study's main purpose was to document the meanings and essences of the lived experiences of single-parent students who participated in the CUNY EDGE program. A second purpose was to analyze the motivational orientation of those single parents who persisted and stayed enrolled while benefitting from the programs and support systems they perceived helped them to stay enrolled.

This research study used a qualitative research design, which supported the full purpose of this research. The research questions that guided this study were as follows:

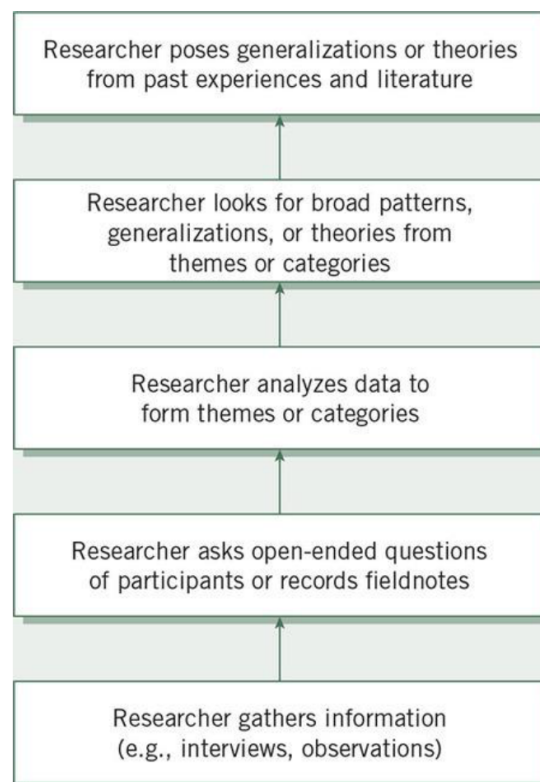
1. What is the motivational orientation of single parents who persist and stay enrolled through one year of a community college degree program?
2. What type of program interactions have single parents reported that have helped them persist and remain enrolled?

To best understand the qualitative paradigm, one must consider Creswell's (2018) work, which includes multiple theories of the naturalistic or constructivist approach, the post-positivist, the interpretive approach, or the postmodern perspective. Furthermore, one must also consider the notion that an individual creates meaning from one's lived experiences. The qualitative paradigm employs inductive logic, which was applied to this study. Individuals were asked to talk about their experiences in a selective community college from these individual experiences, and meanings and themes emerged. This qualitative study did not begin

with a specific theory, which is usually tested or verified, but it was based on an inductive model of thinking, where a theory may emerge during the data collection and analysis phase of the research or can be used relatively late in the research process as a basis for comparison with other theories (Creswell, 2018). Creswell outlined the inductive process in the following flow chart.

Figure 3.1

*The Inductive Mode of Research in Qualitative Study*



Source: Creswell (2018), p. 127

### **Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is a qualitative tradition of inquiries applied to a study; however, Creswell (2018) defined phenomenological study as one where the researcher describes the meanings of the “lived experiences for several individuals about a concept of the phenomenon”

(p. 7). Husserl (2003) explained that individuals can only know what they have experienced by focusing on the meanings and their perceptions that are brought to their consciousness from their lived experiences. This can be a way to understand what others experience through direct observations while adding a detailed description of the experiences. Phenomenological study also suggests there are essences to the shared experiences. “These essences are the core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced” (Patton, 2001, p. 106)

The focus here was on the individual, which prompted the use of a psychological approach for this phenomenological study. Creswell (2018) suggested a psychological approach also focuses on the meaning of experiences, but found individual experiences, not group experiences, central. The psychological approach suggests that the universality of general meanings derives from an individual’s meanings that are created out of their experiences.

### **Setting**

The Urban Community College (UCC) (pseudonym) is a public community college in New York City. The institution has a diverse body of enrollment of over 10,000 students, and ASPEN has recognized it for its various student programs, financial support, childcare, and advising and counseling. The UCC participates in a city program that assists academically and financially disadvantaged students.

The method of the study was qualitative. To understand the lived experiences of single parents, the researcher interviewed eight students who met the criteria. The students were screened by the researcher who works with students at the UCC. To help assure the welfare and well-being of the participants, the researcher sought approval from the school’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) before beginning the study. The participants also received information on

the purpose of the study, the research process, and the confidentiality of the information collected from the interviews. This study relied solely on volunteer participants who, at any time, could opt out of the research study.

### Participants

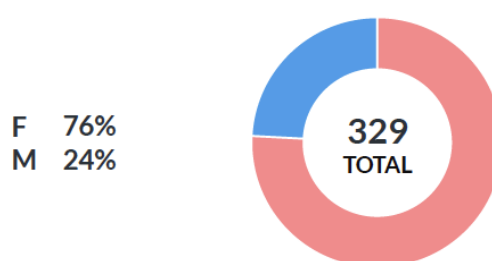
The participants of this study were single-parent students who were enrolled in a CUNY community college, referred to by the pseudonym “Urban Community College” or “UCC.” The participants for this study included eight single parents who were participants of the CUNY EDGE program, enrolled in an Associate of Science or Associate of Arts degree track, with at least 30 credits and enrolled from the Fall semester while maintaining a 3.0 GPA.

### Gender

There are 329 in the CUNY EDGE program of which 74% are female students and 26% are male students. There are 250 female students and 79 male students. This information was gathered from the internal data management systems.

Figure 3.2

*Gender of enrolled students in CUNY EDGE*



### Recruitment

Information on the study and the informed consent documents were sent through email to the students who were identified by their enrollment in a database of CUNY EDGE program participants. The information was also given to students during their one-on-one mandated

monthly check-in with their respective advisors. Also, a volunteer sign-up sheet was left at the front desk and passed around during monthly group seminars. Once the consent was signed, the researcher created an Excel file with the volunteers' names, phone numbers, and email addresses. Once the consents were signed, the researcher scheduled 1-hour time slots for each participant. The advisor provided an informed consent form with contact information. The participants were verified to ensure they met the criteria to be part of the study. To further protect their identity, each student was listed under a pseudonym.

For the participants who did not respond, the researcher followed up with a phone call. Further, if participants did not come for their scheduled time, the researcher followed up with calls and emails. The participants who completed the study received a gift card of \$10.

### **Types of Data**

The data collection consisted of one interview per participant conducted by the researcher. The method the researcher used to gather the data for this study was semi-structured interviews. They were intended to identify motivational orientations of the single-parent students and document the lived experiences of single-parent students who persisted and stayed enrolled in a community college. The interview prompts focused on what the participants believed helped motivate them to persist and stay enrolled.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight single-parent CUNY EDGE students. The researcher then generated themes from an analysis of significant statements made by the participants to develop textural and structural descriptions of the phenomenon of content selection. Finally, the researcher developed and presented the "essence" of the content selection.

In-vivo coding was used to capture the experiences of the participants. In-vivo coding is a form of qualitative data analysis that emphasizes the actual spoken words of the participants.

This form of coding can be especially helpful when interacting with the participants from a particular culture or micro-culture to help highlight how those participants use specific words or phrases in their interactions that might not otherwise be understood when using other forms of coding. In-vivo coding is championed by many for its usefulness in highlighting the voices of participants and for its reliance on the participants to give meaning to the data (Saldaña, 2015).

### **Analysis**

The phenomenological analysis occurred in several phases. Patton (2002) described the process as consisting of four phases. Phase I is the time to refrain from judgment. Within this phase, the researcher is required to look within to become aware of the biases and assumptions about the phenomenon. Phase II is known as “phenomenological reduction,” when a researcher brackets out presuppositions. The researcher looked at and identified critical phrases and statements that referred to the phenomenon. From these statements and phrases, the researcher then offered an interpretation and a definition of the phenomenon. In Phase III, the data collected are horizontalized, which means that all aspects of the data are treated with equal value. Then the researcher identified the cluster of meanings (Creswell, 2018). Finally, Phase IV is the synthesis phase. Patton (2002) suggested the textural portrayal is the abstraction of the experiences that provides illustration and content but does not yet give the essence of them. The structural synthesis does the opposite and looks beneath the emotions within the experiences to give deeper meanings for the individuals who make up the group. From this synthesis process, the researcher then reported the essential invariant structure or single unifying meaning of the experiences (Creswell, 2018).

Using a qualitative study method, the validity of the study is the base and foundation of the method. Polkinghorne (2007) referred to validity as a way of making sure a theory or an idea

is grounded and can be well supported. He further suggested that there are five critical points of importance to the validity of a phenomenology. One of the most critical points is that the researcher does not influence the participants, which could change the way they interpret or describe their experiences. The transcription of the interviews should be accurate and convey the meanings of the participants as they were given to the researcher. However, the researcher must identify all possible conclusions within the analysis phase. The transcriptions have examples to help support the structural description, and the structural description must be applicable to other situations and not be situation specific (Polkinghorne, 2007).

### **Participants' Rights**

An informed consent form was given to each participant. The participants were asked if they understood the consent and were given an opportunity to ask any questions before signing the form. Participants were also asked if they wanted to review the consent form during the duration of the interview process.

### **Potential Limitations**

1. The participants may not be able to articulate their feelings and thoughts about their experiences.
2. The results will not produce generalizable data, although they may be useful to other, similar program leaders.
3. The presentation of the results may be shaped by researcher bias and perspectives.

To capture the lived human experience phenomenologically, the researcher used the qualitative method to analyze the motivational orientation of single-parent students who persist and stay enrolled while benefiting from the programs and support systems they perceived helped

them to stay enrolled. This chapter outlined the method used for this study; the next chapter explains the findings of the research.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **FINDINGS**

The purpose of the study was to identify the lived experience of single African American and Latino parents who have persisted in an urban community college. This chapter contains the results from a phenomenological analysis of interviews with eight students who had similar lived experiences while persisting and staying enrolled in an urban community college (UCC). This chapter discusses the themes and voices of African American and Latino single parents in a community college setting.

#### **Researcher Bias**

The interviewer is the Director of Students in the CUNY EDGE program. To lessen interviewer bias, the following steps were taken. For instance, the researcher used reflective journaling and bracketing to help mitigate any biases throughout the study. Each interview was recorded with the TapeACall recording app so that the interviewer could focus on the participants being interviewed and obtain an accurate record of what the participant reported. The questions used allowed for an exploration of the participants' responses and also served as a way to identify the themes and recurrent patterns across participants' responses. The presentation of the findings in this chapter contains the results of the interviews with the eight students, where three themes and six subthemes were identified.

#### **Trustworthiness of the Data**



The data were collected in July and August of 2020 through telephone interviews with the participants. Open-ended and semi-structured questions were used with each participant (Appendix D). Each interview was coded after collecting all the transcripts from the recorded interviews. NVivo 12 was used to aid in the coding of the data and to discover the common emergent patterns or themes from the interviews with the students.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were coded and analyzed for emerging themes and subthemes using NVivo 12 for the coding of the data. This helped the researcher to categorize the themes from the participants' interviews about their lived experiences. The steps within the phenomenological method included bracketing, which helps limit the influence of the researcher's views; identifying segment statements; organizing and clustering themes; synthesizing the themes into structural and textual descriptions; and developing a composite description of the meanings and experiences (Creswell, 2007). The data analysis was a method used to better understand the information through the emergence of the themes. The qualitative data analysis method consisted of identifying, coding, and categorizing the patterns found in the data (Creswell, 2007). The main focus was to understand the meanings of the descriptions of the participants' lived experiences.

### **Participant Information**

There were eight single-parent participants who were all single African American and Latina mothers who volunteered to be interviewed for the study. The participants were each given a pseudonym, and the institution they attended was characterized as an urban community college and called "UCC" throughout. All of the eight participants were in their second or final year, had a grade point average (GPA) of 3.0 or higher, and were active participants in the CUNY EDGE program. Seven participants were African American, and one participant was

Latina. Four participants had one child, two participants had two children, one student had three children, and one had four children. The average age of the study participants was 28.9 years, with the youngest being 23 years old and the oldest being 40 years old. Three of the eight participants had a GED, and five participants graduated with a high school diploma. The average time participants took to complete their GED and high school programs was 7.5 years.

The researcher reached out to the pool of CUNY EDGE students to participate in this study, but only received responses from African American and Latina female students. All eight were single mothers and, at the time of the interview, were either in a relationship or had just left a relationship. The subsequent text will identify the participants as single mothers.

### **Participant 1**

Participant 1 is a 22-year-old single mother with one daughter. She is in her senior year and her major is liberal arts. Participant 1 is not originally from the current city in which she now lives; she moved up with her family from the South about 2 years ago. She received her GED at the age of 20 due to dropping out of school when she was pregnant. She is staying with family while she completes her studies, and her goal is to be a teacher. She travels a total of 5 hours combined to the UCC and her children's day care center and back to her home.

### **Participant 2**

Participant 2 is a 28-year-old single mother with two sons. She is in her senior year and her major is liberal arts. She is originally from the current city where she lives. She graduated from high school at the bottom tier of her class. However, she is the first in her family to receive a high school diploma and the only one who is pursuing a postsecondary degree. She does not have a particular degree in mind; however, she knows the associate degree will allow her to get a better job to support her family. Even with the support of her family, she still has difficulty

balancing her schedule due to the time she spends commuting. It takes her on average about 7 hours of travel time a day.

### **Participant 3**

Participant 3 is a 35-year-old single mother with three daughters. She is in her final semester and is pursuing a degree in liberal arts. She plans to attend a 4-year institution to which she has already been accepted for the fall. She has a good relationship with the father of her children, which helps when she cannot pick up the children from day care. She has not been in an academic institution for over 10 years; however, she returned 2 years ago to pursue her academic goals. This student travels about 4 hours a day to attend the UCC.

### **Participant 4**

Participant 4 is a 31-year-old single mother with one son. She is in her first semester of her senior year and she is pursuing a degree in liberal arts. She does not have any plans to pursue a 4-year degree as of yet. She is focused on finishing up the school year strong and making sure her son has everything he needs. She resides in a shelter and is in search of secure housing. She has been out of school for 13 years and returned to school to create a better future for her family. This student travels about 5 hours a day to attend the UCC.

### **Participant 5**

Participant 5 is a 21-year-old single mother who has one daughter. She is a second-generation college student. She is in her final semester and is a culinary art major. She has been accepted to a 4-year institution and has plans to attend it in the fall. She has no family support and is living in a shelter. She graduated with a high school diploma and tried college right after

but did not stay for a full year due to being pregnant. She has returned to school to further her goal to become a chef. She travels on average 3-4 hours a day.

### **Participant 6**

Participant 6 is a 30-year-old single mother with two sons. She is in her second year and is a nursing major. She shared her plan to enroll for one or two more semesters due to the rigor of the work for nursing students. She is excited to get into the program and stated that she has worked extremely hard to be accepted. She received support from her family members and the father of her son. She graduated top of her class but opted to work instead of going to school. Although she is now divorced, she has a good co-parenting relationship with her ex-husband. She has returned to school to further her dreams of becoming a nurse. She travels about 6 hours a day to attend the UCC.

### **Participant 7**

Participant 7 is a 25-year-old mother of one son. She lives alone and has no family support. She is in the final semester of her second year and is pursuing a degree in education. She has been accepted to a 4-year institution and is excited to start in the fall. She graduated with a high school diploma but had not attended any postsecondary school until now. She travels 4 hours a day to attend the UCC.

### **Participant 8**

Participant 8 is a 37-year-old single mother with four children, three sons and one daughter. She graduated with a high school diploma and attended the current UCC previously but did not stay to complete her degree. She transferred to a 4-year college and did not do well,

so she returned to the UCC to increase her GPA and graduate with an associate degree.

Participant 8 has family support and receives little to no support from the children's father. She is pursuing a degree in education and has plans to become an elementary teacher. She travels about 2-3 hours a day to attend the UCC.

## Results

An extensive review and thorough analysis of the eight participants' transcripts were completed to identify the emergent themes. The themes were extracted and established from the experiences and meaningful perceptions shared by each participant. Three themes emerged during the analysis that provided a full understanding of the narratives and the accounts of the participants' lived experiences: Self-Sacrifice, Motivation, and Barriers. Each theme has multiple subthemes that could be identified based on the frequency of their occurrence within the interview.

Table 4.1

### *Themes and Subthemes from the Interviews*

Theme	Subthemes	Number of Occurrences	Total Number of Occurrences
1. Self-Sacrifice	Relationship Time	8 5	13
2. Motivation	Children Financial Stability	8 6	14
3. Barriers	Support System School Culture	5 6	11

## Themes

The themes were derived from interviews with single African American and Latino mothers of various ages who were in different stages of their lives. Many of the participants had similarities with each other, which helps to paint a picture of what these participants endured and the reasons they persisted in a UCC. They also have differences from each other that demonstrate their abilities to be successful, despite their different challenges.

The research questions were designed to solicit descriptions of participants' experiences as single African American and Latina parents who persisted to stay enrolled in a UCC. The single overarching focus for this study was to document the lived experiences of single African American and Latina parents who were motivated to persist to stay enrolled in the UCC. The three main themes and their subthemes that emerged from analyzing the transcripts are presented below.

### ***Theme 1. Self-Sacrifice***

The participants believed that the sacrifices made were necessary to assure and secure their chance of being a successful college student. The participants discussed sacrificing their needs, time, and funds to be successful in college. Many perceived self-sacrifices as not a choice but as a way of life during their experiences. When choosing to return or continue their education, the participants knew they would have to sacrifice time and change their lives drastically to enter into a college program. The sacrifice came with a price, according to the participants, which they described as not being able to have relationship with a partner who understood their college journey and their time for their children, themselves, and the extended family. They reported the need to be successful in their studies while also being a supportive mother to their children.

All the participants in the study identified with experiencing some type of self-sacrifice. Participants discussed having to sacrifice time with their partners or even just choose to be single during the process to stay focused; perhaps it was also that they did not have time to get into a relationship.

**Subtheme 1.A: Self-Sacrifice—Relationships.** For the first theme, Self-sacrifice, there were two subthemes. Subtheme A was Relationships. Three voices described the role relationships played in their decisions to persist and stay enrolled. Participant 2 reported that:

Moving out of my extended family house was a necessary decision for me to be focus on my classes and to help my children. It was time to leave and to start fresh and I think if I didn't do that I wouldn't be where I am now.

Participant 5 described a similar situation when she needed to sacrifice her relationship with her extended family. She explained, "Removing myself from my extended family was necessary because they did not support me going back to school."

The next excerpt presents the sacrifice of relationships with their partners. Participant 8 portrays the challenge of having a life partner:

I was in a relationship for over ten years and I had four children with my partner. I could not go to school nor finish because the expectation was that I had to work and take care of him and the children. I put my life on pause, and it was killing me every time I wanted to finish school or go back, he would do something to discourage me. So, I had to leave him and come back to school because my success and children's future was more important.

Participant 6 described a similar situation regarding the challenges of taking care of her children, with the additional concern of personal/physical safety:

So, I think it was maybe two years back when I first started. I got into an intimate relationship and we had a fight that cause me to have a severe concussion, and it was very challenging for me to remember things at the time. I was in therapy for it. I loved him, but I had to leave the situation for my health and for my children and to especially do well in school.

**Subtheme 1.B: Self-Sacrifice—Time.** Participants mentioned sacrificing their time as something required for their longevity in their educational experience. Entering a college program allowed limited opportunities to participate or engage in self-care. Their time was now consumed with their studies, but it paid large dividends at the end. The participants knew that for the next 2-3 years, this would be their way of life and they had to come to terms with their academic journey, especially when they had long 15-18 hours days of school, commuting, and taking care of their children.

Participant 1 described the challenge of providing “childcare most of the time and trying to study while taking care of two- and four-year-old.” Participant 7 also shared similar instances that their time was shared between childcare and commuting:

For me, it would be childcare and transportation. I live in an area that is two hours commute from the UCC. It takes two hours to depending on how fast the train works. A lot of the classes that are required only have a specific time that it functions, which is unfortunate for a lot of parents that take care of kids and may not have a vehicle. Like for me, I probably spend almost twenty-five hours a week on traveling alone, just to make it to my nine o’clock class that is essential for my graduation.

Participant 3 described her self-sacrifice in terms of time by stating: “I couldn’t go out as much because my time was spent on traveling to school, my children, and doing schoolwork.”



Participant 2 had a similar reflection about having little time for self-care:

I wanted to do things for myself like get my nails done or even go get something to eat or even buy something nice for myself. But I couldn't, my time was limited, and I had to sacrifice it through my time at UCC, and this is the reason I think I have been moving along this journey.

In summary, the participants described instances in which they felt their only option to succeed in college was to sacrifice their time and relationships. Their time was limited and had to be accounted for and factor in things like time to travel, childcare, and time for themselves. Relationships and time were the two recurring subthemes that the participants believed involved necessary sacrifices; some even believed it was their reason for their success in college.

### ***Theme 2: Motivation***

The participants mentioned motivation and their purpose to be the key leading factors for the reason they remain enrolled and persisted in college. They used their motivation and purpose as the driving forces to encourage them be successful in their lived experiences. Their identity was defined by their "whys" and the participants used this as an undeniable force to carry them through the challenges in their lives and in college. The participants in the study showed a high ability to persist in the midst of challenges that, at some point, threatened their success and tenure in college. The participants, in the face of their challenges, used all their tools available to obtain their education. They believed motivation was key to their drive and the completion of their degree. The students used their motivation to be the catalyst that propelled them through difficult and challenging times during their experience. Many of the participants' motivations were their children, financial stability, or being the first in their family to get a college degree.

**Subtheme 2.A: Motivation—Financial stability.** When asked what their motivation was to persist and stay enroll, Participant 3 mentioned her living conditions:

I don't want to live like this...in this poor environment. And I don't want my daughter to live like this, so that's why I said it was no option for me but to go to college and graduate.

Participant 6 also mentioned similar reasons that her lived experience and drive for a college degree was her motivation:

I grew up in a neighborhood where no one was really that successful. Everybody was in the streets, you know. It was just like I knew my life wasn't going to end there. I knew that I have a purpose and I must live it, you know? So when I got my GED, it took me a while, but the more I kept sticking to it, I went to like five different GED programs, but I actually took the test one time and passed it, and then when I got the results of the GED in my mail, I said what's next. And then I said, you know what? I came this far, why not go to college.

Participant 8 implied a college degree would help change her life and help put her in a financially stable position: "I needed my life to be better and be in a better position." Participant 3 added: "I don't ever want to be in the position again to feel like I cannot take care of myself or my children. It's not a good feeling."

**Subtheme 2.B: Motivation—Children.** Participant 5 said it simply when it came to her motivation: "My children and God." According to Participant 3:

My kids. Yeah, my life is all about challenges and you got to be determined. You won't see results until you are determined. Everything is not going to come to you easily.

You've got to work hard. So, my kids gave me the drive. I have to always keep thinking

back on them and their life and their future, you know.... So, when they follow me, they could actually see that I made it and it's for them.

Participant 8 stated:

And my kids, of course. You know, I have my daughter who is fourteen now, so for her I can't fail, I have to set an example. I have to set an example for her and show her that, you know, although it is hard, we could continue to do it. We'll strive through it; we'll get through it.

Participant 2 echoed these sentiments: "The biggest reason, like I said, is my children."

Participant 1 noted: "So yeah. I prevailed by just pushing through and putting my children as my motivation."

In summary, the participants used the most influential underlying factor of wanting to provide a better life for their children and financial stability to motivate them. These two motivation factors were synonymous with their success. It can be argued that one cannot occur without the other; for instance, people need financial stability to support and care for their children, which can then put them in a better living situation. The participants did not waver from pointing out the obvious: others may see children as an extra burden or responsibility. Instead, these participants saw their children as an opportunity to become better people and, in turn, be better mothers.

### ***Theme 3: Barriers***

The participants discussed barriers that were impeding their success. The two most frequently mentioned subthemes were lack of support and school culture. Participants shared their experiences of times when these barriers were the reason for them to stop pursuing their degrees. An analysis of these barriers will help better portray their lived experiences. The

previous themes of Self-Sacrifice and Motivation were described as the tools used to overcome these barriers. While the barriers could have been good reasons to leave college, they also helped to shape and transform the participants into students who stayed enrolled and persisted until graduation.

**Subtheme 3.A: Barriers—No support system.** Extended family support is usually seen as a meaningful resource to being successful; however, the lack of support was mentioned during the interviews. Extended family support can be seen as coming from friends or relatives. When asked about extended family support and how it plays a role in their success, participants mentioned the following:

It was just me and my children. I'm a single mom on my own. It's just me and them. It was my biggest support. (Participant 1)

I was having a hard time with childcare for my daughter, and I was trying to get childcare voluntary so that I can have her enrolled in school because if she's not in school or in daycare, then it—pretty much a roadblock. I can't continue with me going to school. (Participant 2)

Support right now, no, not really. I mean, at first, I had my extended family if I needed them, they were there, you know. But like every day, daily support? No. You know, I went through it alone, all with my kids. (Participant 3)

Well, I'm a single parent. I haven't talked to my extended family, so for me, it's important to graduate. Me and my children right now is my support. (Participant 7)

I had no extended family support, and I was living in shelters and renting rooms with individuals. I was living in an unstable situation and no one to rely on but myself. It

was hard to deal with all of this and still be there for my children and be successful in college. (Participant 8)

**Subtheme 3.B: Barriers—School culture.** Participants described instances of how school culture was a barrier for them when entering college and throughout their college experiences. They also mentioned situations of frustration and the lack of help they received from professors, staff, and even classmates. The participants felt as if they were not just fighting to get into school but were also fighting stay in school. They expected a more supportive environment, but at times were reminded of how the school culture can be unsupportive.

Participant 5 mentioned her experiences of transferring into the UCC:

I came over to, to go to an urban community college, I filled out a transfer application and I got accepted, I was so excited I got the call. But when I went to the school, they said it wasn't valid because I wasn't considered a transfer student because I had been there prior in 2003 and I had to appeal it, I had to appeal with what is called a forgiveness clause. I had to fight it, I had to fill out another application, provide documentation as to why I left when I did. It was a headache and I almost didn't do it, but just something inside of me didn't let me give up you know. How I felt made me feel like I couldn't give up. I didn't feel at peace like just not doing anything about it. So, you know, I slept on it, but it was a headache because I was going back and forth with registrar and financial aid.... Why do I have to pay another application fee? You know, and it was all this thing because—I had to pay another fee to apply again on their forgiveness clause. So, I almost didn't do it because I also felt offended at the fact that why do I have to provide documentation from 2003? So, you know, it was really difficult. But I kept pushing

through. It just, didn't sit well with me. I kept pushing through and I kept sticking to until I got accepted into the Urban Community College.

Participant 3 mentioned a lived experience of dealing with her major's department:

There's this one lady that works in the nursing office, and I don't know what it is about her, like maybe it's something personal with me and her, like maybe our energies just doesn't match or whatever, but we always seem to butt heads. And she has a way of speaking to people, and it's not just me, but she has a way of speaking to people which sounds very condescending to me. So, you know, I was trying to take care of my paperwork, bringing in, you know, for the nursing program, which you have to bring all these things to satisfy all of these requirements. It's crazy. So, you have an allotted space of time, which is not very long, to get all these documents in. It had to be done by like Friday the end of that the week. So, it's already stressful trying to get all these things done. So, you come in there now, and then this lady's talking to you like, you know, with no respect. So of course, me being older, I'm not going to stand for that. Like, I'm not here for this today. Please don't speak to me like that and be respectful. If you want me to do anything you have to be respectful to me, it's a two-way street.

Participant 6 mentioned an experience dealing with a professor:

I remember attending to Bio 11 and I am feeling was going to fail. This was an issue for me because I need this course to join the nursing program, and I wasn't understanding the material as much. I wasn't grabbing onto it, and once I'd see my score on the first test, I started to feel discouraged. I felt like I was not worthy. I approach the professor to ask for help and the professor did not help me but told me to withdraw out of the course and try again next semester. This made be doubt my ability and I went to complain to the

department head, and they took the side of the professor and gave me no help. With my back against the wall I had no choice but to go to tutoring and create study groups to pass the course with a B average.

In summary, barriers were the third prevalent theme which showed how subthemes of support systems and school culture played a part to either help or hinder their success as both college students and mothers. Barriers are usually seen as setbacks, but these participants had the innate ability to view them as a way to rise to the occasion and persevere through or above the obstacles presented to them. The participants wanted to share the difficulties and ugliness of their journey in what seemed as a way to normalize it, thus relinquishing the power of the barriers and instead empowering themselves and other single-parent college students. The single parents found strength and discovered attributes that helped them to be successful during this process. They also hoped their stories may be used to help others in similar predicaments.

### **Summary**

Throughout the research, there were three themes which the participants raised during their journey: (a) Motivation, (b) Self-Sacrifice, and (c) Barriers. The participants utilized their experiences as incentives to propel themselves to their success as students while being single mothers. The utilization of each participant's academic journey exposed the impact of having their stories voiced in order to gain a deeper understanding of their lived experiences. The thematic analysis allowed the formation of the themes and patterns of the participants' lived experiences as single mothers while attending a UCC. In addition to the interpretative phenomenological analysis of the interviews, themes and subthemes were discovered and discussed for the perceptions of the participants' lived experiences. Overall, three themes and six subthemes emerged from the lived experiences of the student participants. The themes were: (a)

Self-Sacrifice, with the subthemes of Relationship and Time; (b) Motivation, with the subthemes of Children and Financial Stability; and (c) Barriers, with the subthemes of Support System and School Culture.

The Relationship and Time subthemes received 13 occurrences from the eight participants. The participants stated that they felt sacrificing their relationship was necessary to stay enrolled and persist. They mentioned instances in which family and relationships with their partners were a distraction, and they struggled to prosper in both school and relationships. Participants understood time and how valuable and limited it was to their success. They sacrificed their time in different aspects of their lives—time for themselves, time for their partners and family, and time with their children—to propel themselves into a better position for success.

The Children and Financial Stability subthemes received 14 occurrences from the eight participants. The participants believed their motivation was their children and financial stability. They used these as tools to motivate them through their community college experiences. Some believed without these, they would not have entered college or been successful.

The Support System and School Culture subthemes received 11 occurrences from the eight participants. The participants believed the barriers they faced, such as not having a support system or not being welcome in a school setting, were challenges that forced them to build a level of resilience to persevere through these obstacles. Participants mentioned moments of feeling defeated and wanting to leave their pursuit of a degree.

Chapter 5 discusses the themes and findings in relation to the literature, while also discussing the study's limitations, implications, recommendations, and conclusions.



## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISCUSSION**

This chapter discusses the interpretation of the critical findings of this study, and their implications, conclusions, and recommendations for future research. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to gain a better understanding of the experiences of single African American and Latina mothers who persisted and stayed enrolled in an urban community college (UCC). The one-on-one semi-structured interviews highlighted the participants' lived experiences. Due to the lack of research on the study of single-mother African Americans and Latinas in a UCC, this study sought to capture the authentic stories of the participants regarding their experiences around these questions:

1. What is the motivational orientation of single parents who persist and stay enrolled through one year of a community college degree program?
2. What type of program interactions have single parents reported that have helped them persist and remain enrolled?

The exploration of the lived experience of the participants helped the researcher to understand how they balanced single motherhood and became successful students. The study highlighted critical components and attributes of the students who proved to keep a GPA of 3.0 and are on the verge of graduating while also being single mothers. Their descriptions of lived experiences informed the findings and conclusions. The researcher and the field have new understandings about how these attributes impacted the women's journey as successful students at an urban community college.

The study used a phenomenological approach to gather the qualitative data via a semi-structured interview format. The information was coded and analyzed using themes derived from the research questions and the conceptual framework of this study. The themes and coded data were presented in Chapter 4. When analyzing the data, the researcher looked for any emerging patterns within the themes. The literature of this study was then used to further analyze the themes from the data.

The data analysis provided themes that portrayed the reasons why the participants stayed enrolled and persisted in community college. The analysis allowed the formation of themes and patterns relating to the participants' experiences of being single mothers while attending a UCC. With the interpretative phenomenological analysis of the interviews, themes and subthemes were discovered from the discussions of the perceptions of participants' lived experiences. Overall, three themes and six subthemes emerged from the lived experiences of the student participants. The themes were: (a) Self-Sacrifice, with the subthemes of Relationship and Time; (b) Motivation, with the subthemes of Children and Financial Stability; and (c) Barriers, with the subthemes of Support System and School Culture. The next section discusses themes and findings in relation to the literature.

## **Overview of Results**

### **Self-Sacrifice**

The first main theme was Self-Sacrifice, with two subthemes of Relationship and Time. Those subthemes received 13 occurrences out of eight participants. The participants stated that they felt sacrificing their relationship with their partners was necessary to stay enrolled and persist. Participants mentioned instances in which family and relationships with their partners were a distraction, and they felt at times they could not both do school and sustain their

relationships because of the demands placed on them. Participants also understood time to be valuable and limited and how it can impact their success. The participants believed that, to maximize their chances of success in school, they needed to sacrifice their time in almost every area of their lives—for instance, time for themselves, time for their partners and family, and time with their children to better position themselves to be successful.

Relationship was a vital subtheme when analyzing self-sacrifice. At the onset of their educational journey, seven of the eight participants were in an intimate relationship with their partners. As they continued on their journey, only one participant remained with a partner. Participants voiced issues about the relationship because they could not be present in their relationship while taking care of their children and pursuing their degrees. The participants had to decide to continue on their education journey alone because it was difficult for them to balance being a successful student and a mother with commitment to a partner.

### **Motivation**

The second main theme was Motivation. The Children and Financial stability subthemes received 14 occurrences from the eight participants. The participants believed the most effective motivation to stay and persist were their children and financial stability. They used their children as a reason to pursue their degree and as a way to motivate them through their lived experiences. Some believed without that motivation, they would not have entered college or been successful. The participants viewed their children as a way to start a legacy and put their children in a better economic situation than they themselves had.

The second subtheme was financial stability. Participants shared experiences when they could not secure gainful employment due to not having a 2-year degree. A participant recalled a period in her life when she could not provide food for her children due to the lack of finances.

Another participant voiced a situation where she could not afford rent and relocated to a shelter and was exposed to hazardous conditions. One participant, in particular, discussed living in a shared apartment where her suitemate stole her identity and funds. Financial stability was a recurring theme that motivated the participants to obtain college degrees to put them in a better economic position to provide for themselves and their family.

### **Barriers**

The participants experienced success by persisting with their college careers, even though they faced barriers in their journey. The emerging subthemes were Support System and School Culture, which received 11 occurrences from the eight participants. The participants viewed the barriers of lack of a support system and school culture as challenges that heightened their resilience level. Participants mentioned moments of feeling defeated and wanting to leave their pursuit of a degree.

One participant described an instance in which the school culture was not conducive to helping them be successful. One participant voiced issues they had with a professor, a department head, and a staff member. The participant felt she was not being helped but, in fact, were being attacked and targeted because she brought a complaint about one of the staff's colleagues. Another participant described instances where she felt alone when advocating against an unfair grade on the assignment. Participants also voiced the school culture to be confusing and very frustrating when dealing with offices such as the bursar office, registrar, or academic departments.

In addition, the participants voiced not having support systems specifically from their family members and friends. This was a recurrent theme that the participants shared when discussing family and friend support. They described not having a connection with their family

members and felt they were alone. The participants relied on support from their children, which could also be viewed as no support at times. They described instances of not having any childcare or anyone to care for their children when they were in class.

The participants believed their experiences with barriers were essential to highlight. Their stories showed the ups and downs of their journey and how they prevailed and made it to the other side. There is a connection between the motivation orientation framework and the motivation factors that the participant used to help them, which are their children and financial stability. Although the participants voiced other forms of motivation, only these were recurring subthemes and are supported with the motivation orientation framework of professional advancement and family togetherness. As a result, it is imperative to understand what type of orientation motivation single-parent students should foster to position themselves for a higher possibility to be successful while also helping them understand how to navigate through the process of using their motivation as a tool to stay enrolled and persist. Understanding the attributes of successful single-parent students can be a way to help those who are not as successful. Understanding professional advancement and financial stability are key factors to use to help motivate single-parent students. The idea that a college degree can be a sure way to keep their family unit together and gain employment for financial stability seems to have a better chance for motivating single mothers to pursue a college degree.

The next section presents limitations, implications, recommendations, and conclusions of the study.

### **Limitations**

The researcher utilized semi-structured interviews for this study. A conversational interview technique could have been a better option to utilize, which would have allowed the

participants to share more in-depth experiences with the phenomena without being restrained with a set of interview questions (Marshall & Rossman, 2015). The study was limited to single African American and Latina mothers who had similar experiences and characteristics in style. The participant children could have been interviewed to hear their voices and perspectives. Finally, urban community college leaders, staff, and faculty could have been interviewed to highlight their perspectives on the experiences of single mother African American and Latina students.

### **Recommendation for Practice**

The participants' responses led to the study's findings and align with the theories in the literature review. The findings suggested the need to continue to have policies and programs in place to support single-mother African American and Latina students. According to the findings, the majority of the participants in this study shared similar perceptions of the need for self-sacrifice, motivation factors that they used to help them persist and stay enrolled despite the challenges in their personal life, and institutional barriers to their educational career. Implications for institutional support are the following: provide remote learning, change course attendance policies, change school culture, and create opportunity for course selections.

The recommendation for actions derived from the study that can address self-sacrifice, motivation, and barriers are listed below.

#### **Self-Sacrifice: Provide Remote Learning Opportunities**

Having the flexibility to choose between in-person and remote learning did not emerge in the literature; however, many participants believed that having the ability to choose could be a viable option to help with balancing motherhood and being a successful student. The participants discussed not factoring in the demands of commuting to a UCC when enrolling in school. The

decision to pursue their college degree was not deterred, but it did put a strain on their decision to continue to enroll and persist at a UCC.

### **Motivation: Change Institutional Policies**

The participants in this study wanted the UCC to consider them when making policies with in-class attendance (Albers 2006). Markle (2015) shared the suggestion that classroom and institutional policies are believed to be more supportive in the education journey—for instance, creating policies that offer more times in course offerings, specifically during times when daycare is not open. There is a need to create opportunities for students to receive college credits from prior learning and experiences while creating more opportunities for specialized degree programs. UCCs could also implement spaces where single-mother students can occasionally allow children to come into the classroom setting, to avoid deadlines during holidays, and to have more compassion and understanding when they miss class because of closed daycare or children's sickness.

Policies can be used to enhance single-mother students' college experience. For instance, single-mother students should have the ability to view each semester's coursework schedule before the general population. This will help single-mother students plan their school schedules around their lives. The college can also have spaces to support single-mother students on campus, such as lactation rooms, changing stations, parking spaces, and spaces for parents to have sole access to study with their children (Wainwright & Marandet, 2010). Further, the results of the study suggested that UCCs should promote and foster an environment that helps single African American and Latina mothers stay enrolled and persist. It is recommended that UCCs allocate funding and professional development training that do more to remove the barriers to the women's success and change the culture of the school.

**Barriers: School Culture**

For incoming single-mother African American and Latina students, a supportive and understanding school culture is necessary for their success in a UCC. For administrators, staff, and professors, it is recommended they let go of preconceived notions of single African American and Latina mothers who are receiving public assistance and focus on creating spaces and opportunities for success. Additionally, it is essential to allow for accommodations for students who are balancing being a single mother on public assistance while also being a student. For instance, seven of the eight single-mother African American and Latina students in this study had no support systems in place if a child fell ill or if they had issues with their living arrangements, so school personnel should consider the challenges and barriers when providing services and support to single-mother students. This recommendation is consistent with the literature that suggests the importance of school culture and how it can affect a student's success (Tinto, 2017). Higher education leaders have a responsibility to develop and foster cultures and spaces that promote and help to increase and maintain students' success (McClelland, 2001). Colleges and universities that promote systemic changes can help develop intrinsic motivation for students to achieve college degrees, resulting in academic persistence and graduation (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). Leadership and professors should have an understanding of what motivates single-mother African American and Latina students and help them advance and persist to graduation (Beach & Lindahl, 2004).

**Flexibility and More Opportunities**

The barriers for single African American and Latina mothers in the UCC must be eliminated to foster growth and an environment of connectedness. This recommendation is consistent with the literature that indicated that single African American and Latina mothers who



want to persist and stay enrolled at a UCC faces barriers when trying to be successful students (Perrakis & Hagedorn, 2010), thereby creating a diverse atmosphere and spaces in UCCs that provide opportunities for single African American and Latina mothers to grow and develop. Also, single-mother students should be allowed more opportunity to do remote learning that has both synchronous and asynchronous options and to make policies that implement more time to complete their assignments.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

Further qualitative research should be conducted with successful single mothers who are pursuing a degree in a community college. It is necessary to understand the motivation factors of African American and Hispanic single-mother students, despite balancing school and motherhood and the complexity of the situation as a sole provider. Specifically, researchers can look further into what supports and resources should be provided to help maintain the balance of being a student and a mother. Understanding how to manage and balance being a student and a mother is a topic worth future research, especially when talking about single African American and Latina mothers in UCCs. Researchers also can look further into theories on Intrinsic, A-motivation, Self Sabotage, and Goal oriented, and how they influence single parent student's success.

There should be similar studies of single-father African American and Hispanic students' experiences which could lead to comparisons between single mothers' and fathers' motivation orientation. More specifically, researchers can examine the difference in how fathers deal with barriers and challenges when dealing with childcare, financial constraints, and being successful in college. Analyzing how gender can lead to different experiences can also provide a better understanding of how each gender sustains a successful college career while being a sole

providing parent. Using a comparative research study may also help understand how each gender views itself as not only single parents but also single-parent students.

Additionally, researchers need to highlight the children's voices of the single-mother African American and Latina students in UCCs. Further research is required not only to study the mothers but also to study the lived experiences of the children and how their parents' college journey impacted their lives either positively or negatively. The study also requires further analysis on the children's parent choices to pursue a college degree and to see if that has any effect on the children's motivation to do well in school or even aspire them to obtain a college degree. Finally, future studies can look at how the absence of fathers impacts single-mother students and their children.

### **Conclusion**

Single-mother students may have similar philosophies, values, and motivational orientations while dealing with barriers, yet very few have been as successful as these African American and Latina mothers in this study. These single mothers have an innate ability to persevere through barriers while balancing being a mother and a student. The participants recalled various ways they used motivation factors to sustain their success; one of the unanimous responses was "My child(ren) is the reason for pursuing this college degree." The participants demonstrated an unwavering belief that they could be successful while being a single mother, no matter what hurdles and barriers came their way.

From their individual stories, these eight women helped paint a picture of their journey depicting the purest form of resilience and persistence attributes, especially when faced with challenges in their relationships, living conditions, school culture, and lack of finances and support systems. Further, the stories showed the details of their choices to pursue a college

degree in urban community colleges, which resulted in the absence of quality time with their partners and children.

The lived experiences of these eight participants provided a sense of encouragement and hope to other single-mother African American and Latina students who desire to pursue a college degree at an urban community college. Their stories were captured to show others that they are not alone in their experiences, feelings, and circumstances. With self-sacrifice, motivation, and ability to overcome barriers, it is possible to be successful at an urban community college while being a single African American and Latina mother.

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APPENDIX A  
RECRUITMENT EMAIL

**Recruitment Letter or Email**

Dear CUNY EDGE students,

My name is Gerald Maître and I am a Director from the CUNY EDGE program at Kingsborough Community College. I am writing to invite you to participate in my research study about your experience as a single parent nontraditional student in the CUNY EDGE program. You're eligible to be in this study because you are a CUNY EDGE student. I obtained your contact information from our internal database system

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be interviewed one on one about your experiences as a single parent nontraditional CUNY EDGE student in a Community College. *Each participant will receive a \$10 gift card.* I would like to audio record your answers during the interviews and then we'll use the information to create or develop programs and or policies.

Remember, this is completely voluntary. You can choose to be in the study or not. If you'd like to participate or have any questions about the study, please email or contact me at [Gerald.Maitre@kbcc.cuny.edu](mailto:Gerald.Maitre@kbcc.cuny.edu) or 718-368-4660.

Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

## APPENDIX B

## TELEPHONE REMINDER

Hey, this is Gerald, and I am calling to confirm of the upcoming interview we have schedule via telephone. I will call you on (date) at (time). I will see you then. Please let me know if you need to reschedule this interview call at your earliest convenience.

APPENDIX C:  
INFORMED CONSENT

UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND  
CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

**Project Title:** Perceptions of institutional support by African American and Hispanic non-traditional single parents who persist into year two at an urban community college

**Principal Investigator(s):** Gerald Maitre

**Introduction:**

- Please read this form. You may also request that the form is read to you. The purpose of this form is to give you information about this research study, and if you choose to participate, document that choice.
- You are encouraged to ask any questions that you may have about this study, now, during or after the project is complete. You can take as much time as you need to decide whether or not you want to participate. Your participation is voluntary.

**Why is this research study being done?**

To hear students' experiences as a non-tradition parent who participate in the CUNY EDGE program at a Community College.

**Who will be in this study?**

CUNY EDGE Students.

**What will I be asked to do?**

Participate in an interview and answer questions pertaining to their experience as a CUNY EDGE student in a Community College.

**What are the possible risks of taking part in this study?**

There are no foreseeable risks to participation in this study. Each student's materials will be identified under an alias.

**What are the possible benefits of taking part in this study?**

Students' experiences persisting in community college will potentially be used to develop and improve programming and policies.

**What will it cost me?**

It will cost you nothing.

**How will my privacy be protected?**

Your interview content will be transcribed and stored in a password protected database. Any digital or print material will not contain identifying information.

**How will my data be kept confidential?**

Each student will receive an alias, all materials will be created and stored without identifying information, and the data will be destroyed after the study is completed.

**What are my rights as a research participant?**

- Your participation is voluntary. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your current or future relations with the University.
- Your decision to participate will not affect your relationship with Gerald Maitre.
- You may skip or refuse to answer any question for any reason.
- If you choose not to participate there is no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive.
- You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time, for any reason.
  - If you choose to withdraw from the research there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive.
- You will be informed of any significant findings developed during the course of the research that may affect your willingness to participate in the research.
- If you sustain an injury while participating in this study, your participation may be ended.

**What other options do I have?**

- You may choose not to participate.

**Whom may I contact with questions?**

- The researchers conducting this study are Gerald Maitre
  - For more information regarding this study, please contact Gerald Maitre



- If you choose to participate in this research study and believe you may have suffered a research related injury, please contact the committee chair Michelle Collay, Ph.D., at [mcollay@une.edu](mailto:mcollay@une.edu) or 207.602.2010.
- If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may call Mary Bachman DeSilva, Sc.D., Chair of the UNE Institutional Review Board at (207) 221-4567 or [irb@une.edu](mailto:irb@une.edu).

**Will I receive a copy of this consent form?**

- You will be given a copy of this consent form.
- 

**Participant's Statement**

**I understand the above description of this research and the risks and benefits associated with my participation as a research subject. I agree to take part in the research and do so voluntarily.**

---

Participant's signature or

Date

Legally authorized representative \_\_\_\_\_

Printed name

**Researcher's Statement**

**The participant named above had sufficient time to consider the information, had an opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to be in this study.**

---

Researcher's signature

Date

---

Printed name

APPENDIX D  
INTERVIEW GUIDE

**Interview protocol and questions**

After confirming their participation, each participant will be scheduled for an interview. The interview protocol: Interviewee will answer question in an interview. The interview will be audiotaped, and the participants will be able review the audiotape per request.

**Interview Questions:**

- i. What are your experiences of school and education prior to entering college?
- ii. Have your family or friends supported your decision to enroll in college?
- iii. What challenges do you face?
- iv. Why do you persist despite the challenges?
- v. What are your support systems?
- vi. What programs did you take advantage of and which ones do you find beneficial?
- vii. Have you benefited from other federal or state programs?
- viii. What motivates you to persist in community college?
- ix. Can you describe a time when a barrier or challenge threatened your enrollment or successful course completion and how did you prevail?