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Overlooked and Overshadowed: Exploring the Multiple Dimensions of Identity in Traditionally-Aged Undergraduate Student-Parents

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Overlooked and Overshadowed: Exploring the Multiple Dimensions of Identity in

Traditionally-Aged Undergraduate Student-Parents

by

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Overlooked and Overshadowed: Exploring the Multiple Dimensions of Identity in

Traditionally-Aged Undergraduate Student-Parents

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Student-parents are a rapidly growing student population, consisting of more than 20% of undergraduate college students today (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Research about student-parents has historically focused on graduate students and adult learners, yet these studies overlook traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents who constitute over one-quarter of the student-parent population. Traditional four-year institutions continue to dismiss the needs and experiences of student-parents as these colleges are primarily designed to serve traditional undergraduate students with no major external responsibilities. As such, the traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parent population is left underserved and unsupported in their pursuit of education. This study contributes to the limited research on undergraduate student-parents by filling a gap and discussing the meaning-making and experiences of traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents within a four-year institution.

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the meaning that four traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents made of their student-parent identity while also considering the potential impact that attending a public research institution may have had on their identity development and academic success. Qualitative interviews were conducted utilizing a semi-structured, informal interview

protocol with four undergraduate student-parents. The findings indicated that identifying

as a parent significantly impacted the identity of traditionally-aged undergraduate

student-parents. Additionally, findings indicated that traditionally-aged undergraduate

student-parents found it challenging to navigate the four-year collegiate environment at

Great Midwestern University, but utilized strategies and systems of support to find

academic success. Practical recommendations for serving traditionally-aged

undergraduate student-parents at a four-year research institution are provided and

recommendations for future research are offered.

Dedication

To the many traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents whose stories need to be heard. Your journey is inspiring. I write to show you that despite the challenges you may face while navigating multiple identities in your pursuit of education, there is hope.

To Hayden, my precious son, who is the reason that I care so deeply about traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents. I cannot imagine my collegiate experience without you, and I am glad that you were able to be there for all of it. I would never change a thing. You inspire me to do better, to be better, on a daily basis. You are my heart.

Acknowledgements

To the four participants of this study who so willingly agreed to share their stories with me and the rest of the world, I thank you. I appreciate your openness to disclose your successes and challenges to provide insight to college administrators and future traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents who may attend Great Midwestern University. Your desire to push past obstacles to achieve your goals inspires me every day. I wish you all the best, and I can only hope that I honored your stories through this work.

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To Katie: thank you for being such an amazing supervisor and friend. I am beyond blessed to have been able to spend this past year working with you and learning from you. You support and challenge me, both personally and professionally.

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Finally, to my husband, Jeremy: thank you for forever supporting me through my undergraduate and graduate degrees. I could never have embarked on the experience of being a traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parent without your unconditional love and support. Your encouragement has gotten me through many times when I did not think I had anything left to give. You are my rock. Words cannot express how much you mean to me. Thank you for being you.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Undergraduate students who are considered nontraditional have become a prevalent facet on college campuses across the nation in recent decades, in part due to the increase of open access in higher education and in part due to the economy and governmental pressures to increase the number of college graduates. While a nontraditional student is typically defined as a student who is age 24 or older (U.S. Department of Education, 2009), the term *nontraditional* has been recently expanded in order to encompass a broader picture of the undergraduate student population. These recent characteristics added to the definition of the nontraditional student population are: (a) delayed entry to college by at least one year following high school graduation, (b) having dependents, (c) being a single parent, and (d) being employed full time (Ross-Gordon, 2011). By labeling a student population with the term *nontraditional*, it could be inferred that these students do not constitute a large percentage of the overall number of undergraduate students; however, evidence shows that this is an untrue assumption. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, approximately 71% of the 2011 enrollment of college students was considered nontraditional (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). This number is anticipated to increase by an additional 20% by 2020 (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Because of the growing number of nontraditional students on college campuses, it is vital that administrators and other educators in higher education understand the unique challenges that nontraditional students face in order to make this population feel welcomed on campus.

This study examines a subset of nontraditional students, traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents. Traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents are generally a hidden student population. They are not easily identifiable by higher education professionals unless students decide to self-disclose that they are student-parents. Research focused on graduate and adult students who have children in higher education is vast, yet there is little empirical research that specifically addresses the invisible population of undergraduate student-parents who are of a traditional college age (i.e., 19-23 years old). This concentration on graduate students and nontraditional, adult learners neglects a large portion of undergraduate students enrolled in institutions who also have roles as parents—thus leaving traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents to be underserved in higher education. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2012), 20% of undergraduate students enrolled in higher education are parents. More specifically, of those undergraduate students enrolled in higher education who are parents, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that in the 2011-2012 academic year, nearly 28% of those students were between the ages of 18-24 (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Percentages of this size are astonishing considering the lack of attention given to this population in research studies and the lack of resources provided for these students on many college campuses. In particular, the needs of traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents at many four-year institutions have not been addressed with programming and services. If educators in higher education remain unaware of the unique challenges traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents face, this student population will be unlikely to have access to resources needed for their

continued academic success which could therefore affect their retention and persistence rates.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to examine the meaning traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents made of their student-parent identity while also considering the potential impact that attending a public research institution might have had on their identity development. Numerous studies had previously explored the experiences of nontraditional students in higher education—some venturing to explore the experiences of student-parents. These studies generally indicated that there was an extensive role strain that existed between the roles of student and parent (Brooks, 2012; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Home 1998; Marandet & Wainwright, 2010). However, these studies were conducted primarily using adult student-parents whose experiences differ from those of traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents. Adult learners and students who are older than 25-years-old are more likely to be identified by institutions as nontraditional. Many institutions have recognized the necessity of providing support for adult learners and offer resources such as similar age peer support groups, but traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents may not feel comfortable utilizing these same resources because their experiences and their age make them different from adult learners. This study will explore whether these previous findings about adult learners who are parents apply to the unique experiences of traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents at a public research institution that is primarily geared toward their traditionally-aged peers without children.

Qualitative Design

This study was conducted using a constructivist paradigm. Based on the ideas of Schwandt, Mertens (2010) explained that ideas and knowledge are socially constructed by those taking part in the research process. The goal of this study was to work to understand the world through the lived experiences of participants. Within the constructivist paradigm, a phenomenological methodology was used, which focused on the lived experiences of individuals as they related to a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). In this study, the phenomenon being explored was being a traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parent.

Two semi-structured interviews took place one-on-one with each participant. Participants also engaged in a journaling process. This supported the phenomenological research design by allowing for multiple conversations regarding the participants' interpretation of their identities and the perceptions they had about the support they received to assist in managing their identities. As is foundational with the constructivist paradigm, all interview protocols included open-ended questions that allowed for individuals to share their own interpretations of their experiences. The first interview focused on how participants formulated and made meaning of their identities using Abes, Jones, and McEwen's (2007) reconceptualized model of multiple dimensions of identity. The second interview addressed how participants managed their identity using Schlossberg's theory of transition as explored in Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson (2006). Each participant was viewed as an expert on the topic due to the lived experiences they could provide relating to the phenomenon at hand. Meaning was then drawn from the participants' answers, which allowed participants to explain in their own voices the patterns within the phenomenon of being traditionally-aged undergraduate

student-parents. Overall, this study was formulated in hopes of giving traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents an opportunity to share their experiences. From this, those working in higher education can gain additional knowledge about how to interact with and better serve this growing student population. The research questions explored below were devised in order to best glean the information needed to meet this goal.

Research Questions

Two main research questions guided this study, with three sub-questions between the two. The first question was: What meaning do traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents make of their student-parent identity? This question was then broken down into two sub-questions: (a) How does the four-year college environment shape the identity of participants? and (b) What impact does being perceived as a traditional student have on participants' identity? The second guiding research question of this study was: How do traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents manage their identity? The sub-question of this research question was: What resources for supporting their student-parent identity do participants utilize?

Significance

Traditionally-aged undergraduate (TAU) student-parents are generally a hidden student population, not easily identifiable by professionals in higher education unless students decide to self-disclose that they identify as student-parents. Research on student-parents has primarily been focused on graduate students and adult learners with children, with an occasional traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parent included in the data. However, the deficiency in the literature is that no study focuses primarily on the unique needs and experiences of traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents.

This study serves to fill a gap in the literature regarding the broad term *nontraditional* undergraduate students by examining the perceptions that TAU student-parents hold about themselves and the university. As a result of this study, higher education professionals will be able to better understand and serve the TAU student-parents at a four-year public research institution in the Midwest, henceforth called Great Midwestern University. Without learning more about the challenges this student population faces, TAU student-parents will continue to exist on campus as a hidden, but growing, population.

Definition of Terms

The following term is used throughout this paper. As such, it is import to provide precise definitions in order to understand the previous literature and these research findings.

TAU student-parents: This term is used to refer to traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents. For the purpose of this research, TAU student-parents were defined as those students between the ages of 19-23, who were enrolled at least part-time at Great Midwestern University, and who had at least one child. Some TAU student-parents might identify with the nontraditional student population while others might identify with their traditionally-aged peers. This population of students is also referred to simultaneously as "traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents" and "student-parents."

Delimitations

Several boundaries for this study were set that served as delimitations of the research. Participant eligibility was determined by three primary factors: age, enrollment,

and the fact that they had dependent children. The age range of eligible participants was limited to 19-23 for two specific reasons. This study focused on TAU student-parents, which meant that adult learners with children were intentionally excluded from the study. Additionally, TAU student-parents who were 18 were also deliberately excluded from this study. This decision was made primarily because the age of majority for Great Midwestern University is 19. Furthermore, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) identified the age range of 19-23 as its own category, so this kept the grouping of student-parents by age consistent with governmental reporting systems.

Another boundary that was set for this study was that participants had to self-disclose their identity as student-parents, which implies that they have significant contact with their child(ren). Significant contact did not mean that potential participants were required to be the primary care-giver of their child(ren), but it did mean that they had to interact with their dependents on a regular basis. This choice in research design was intended to demonstrate the experiences of TAU student-parents who most likely would identify with the role strain examined in previous research on adult learners. Other delimitations included the fact that all participants were students at the same public research university in the Midwest and the study took place over one semester. Thus, this study does not address how participants' identities might change over time or how participants might experience being a student-parent at another institution.

Limitations

This study included the voices of four traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents. The small participant sample featured in this study may be viewed by some as a limitation, but the purpose of this study was not to oversimplify the complex identities

held by TAU undergraduate-student parents. Additionally, the purpose of this study was

not to generalize or speak to every traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parent's

experience. The intention of this study was to highlight this overlooked student

population and allow participants a platform through which they could have their voices

heard by others.

Time was also a limitation that affected this study. I was pursuing a master's

degree at Great Midwestern University and this study was a graduation requirement. As

such, the study needed to be completed and defended within one academic year. This

limited the number of potential participants that could be recruited as well as the type of

relationship that could be established between myself and the participants. Because I

only directly interacted with each participant twice over the course of a month, it is

possible that participants were selective in the information they shared with me. If time

was not a limitation of this study, it is possible that I would have been able to interact

with participants more often and form a stronger relationship with them.

Assumptions

I approached this study with the assumption that TAU student-parents would be

affected by the opinions of others when trying to make meaning of their own student-

parent identity. This assumption was made in part because of the fact that students of a

traditional age are still discovering aspects of themselves, particularly when in engaged in

higher education environments. Additionally, I believed that TAU student-parents would

have difficulty managing their student-parent identity. Stemming from the belief that

TAU student-parents would be less likely to pursue supports offered by the institution,

rather turning to family or friends for support in their struggles, I expected for

participants to speak primarily about the challenges they faced when trying to manage their student-parent identities.

These beliefs were formed by existing literature about student-parents and my personal experiences. I identified as a TAU student-parent during my undergraduate degree program because I had my son shortly after the end of my first-year of college. While I did not face issues of direct discrimination, I did struggle with the lack of resources available for me to utilize at the four-year public state institution that I attended. Additionally, it was challenging to find like-minded peers who could understand my unique experiences or other systems of support on campus. The few other TAU student-parents with whom I interacted voiced challenges similar to mine, which reinforced my assumptions. In Chapter Three I discuss how these I addressed these assumptions to ensure the quality of this research.

Conclusion

This study explores the meaning traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents make of their student-parent identity while also considering the potential impact that attending a public research institution may have on their identity development. This student population is often overlooked because, while they may fit the category of traditional students in terms of age, there is no easy way for professionals in higher education to identify this population unless these students self-disclose their student-parent identities. TAU student-parents face many challenges, particularly when navigating the collegiate environment at a four-year institution. The intent of this study was to better understand the ways in which TAU student-parents view and develop their own sense of identity while also determining the specific needs of this student population.

Doing so will help higher education professionals better understand and serve an often

hidden student population.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Introduction

Student-parents are a growing student population in colleges across the country. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 20% of undergraduate students enrolled in higher education are parents (2012). Specifically, the National Center for Education Statistics reports that in the 2011-2012 academic year, nearly 28% of those students were between the ages of 18-24 (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Despite the fact that traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents make up over one-quarter of the student-parent population in higher education, studies about these students are nearly nonexistent. Their experiences are only addressed through research about nontraditional students in higher education and teenage parents. Since there is little research specifically focused on traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents, I present the literature available on student-parents of any age and literature about teenage parents. This is provided to better understand the context of this study. Additionally, I present identity development theories used to understand college student development. These were used as the theoretical framework for the study and helped me make sense of participants' experiences. First, I will explain what is known about student-parents in higher education.

Student-Parents in Higher Education

Motivation for pursuing higher education. This section explains how student-parents' motivation for attending college compares to traditional students. Traditional college students are likely to have their parents encouraging or pressuring them to attend

college. However, student-parents generally have other motivational factors that encourage them to pursue a college degree. This is not to say that encouragement from their parents would not impact student-parents' decisions to pursue higher education, but student-parents are generally motivated to pursue a college degree due to a combination of intrinsic and economic factors.

Marandet and Wainwright (2010) best summarized the body of research related to nontraditional student motivation to (re)enroll in education in their study during which they noted that the "main motivation for students entering university was to gain qualification and to improve chances of getting a good/better job" (p. 791). As Huff (1997) noted, a large percentage of student-parents are at or below the poverty line of the economy. While the economy has changed since 1997, Huff's findings were still relevant to this study because the number of people enrolling in and graduating from college has greatly increased in the past decade and a half. Thus, the education level of those in the workforce is increasing, and student-parents are pursuing college degrees in order to increase their socioeconomic standing.

Evidence has also pointed to another less obvious reason why student-parents wish to remain in college: to become a role model for their children (Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; Mohney & Anderson, 1988). Part of this desire is related to the economy because student-parents wish to provide a financially sound future for their children. However, the other reason behind wanting to be a role model for their children relates much more to the phrase *role model*. Student-parents want to "foster positive identity [development] based on values such as independence and fulfillment" (Marandet

& Wainwright, 2010, p. 793) for their young children to actively show that everyone is capable of achieving their goals.

Educators could infer that because most of student-parents' motivations to stay in college are external rather than internal, this population of students is not as likely to do well in college. Professionals could jump to the assumption that student-parents are simply enrolled to get a degree but do not care about the educational component of college. While this may be true for some students, multiple research studies have implied that student-parents engaged in college may actually have a greater level of dedication to their education because of they have sacrificed time with their children to pursue their degree (Johnson & Kestler, 2013; Scott & Lewis, 2012). This suggests that student-parents have meaningful reasons to do well in college.

Challenges affecting collegiate experience. Nontraditional students as a whole have often been perceived as an uninvolved group on campus. This is often because nontraditional students are unable to engage in the normative college experience due their multiple responsibilities such as parenting, working, and pursuing their degree. Within the higher education setting it may be assumed that these life experiences will cause conflict in the learning process of nontraditional students, particularly student-parents, because they will not be able to dedicate an adequate amount of time devoted solely to their studies due to their other role as parent. Identifying as a student-parent differentiates students from the traditional undergraduate student population and not necessarily in an idealized way. Previous research about student-parents has identified three primary challenges that this population may face: (1) identity and role strain, (2)

childcare and class scheduling, and (3) housing. Each of these will be discussed in detail below.

Identity and role strain. One common challenge faced by student-parents is identity and role strain. The picture of a typical college student is a traditionally-aged student (i.e., 18-24 years old) with no major outside responsibilities. Traditionally-aged students are able to take advantage of everything that the university has to offer—from classes to extracurricular activities. While this may fit a portion of the undergraduate student population, it excludes and therefore marginalizes a number of students who may be struggling to balance multiple roles. Students who are navigating between multiple identities may find it difficult to publicly identify as parents while on campus as they do not want to be singled out or othered. At the same time, student-parents may feel the need to put aside their academic work while caring for their families at home (Brooks, 2012; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Home, 1998; Van Meter & Agronow, 1982). For student-parents there is a constant battle to adequately fulfill each of the roles that are held—juggling between finding time to attend class while having arranged care for a child, studying and completing homework for classes, taking care of dependents, and meeting other domestic responsibilities (Marandet & Wainwright, 2010).

Identifying as a parent can lead to college peers and faculty members stigmatizing and making assumptions about student-parents (Duquaine-Watson, 2007). These assumptions could range from the fact that student-parents neglect their parent identity because they are enrolled in school to the fact that student-parents do not prioritize their education because they are too busy with their family. For this reason, many research studies have shown that student-parents downplay their parent identity while attending

university in order to maintain relationships with their peers—feeling as though they

must choose to be either a good student or a good parent (Brooks, 2012; Duquaine-

Watson, 2007; Home, 1998; Van Meter & Agronow, 1982). Brooks (2012) perhaps best

embodied this idea in the findings of her research study, particularly through a quotation

made by one of her participants during an interview:

> I just don't want to talk about it [being a parent] while I'm at school. This is my
> time for being a student, not a mom. So I don't tell many people, usually only my
> instructors. And I know that might sound hypocritical or dishonest, but I don't
> want other students to always see me as a mom and only see me as a mom. Once
> they find out, I don't fit in anymore. They can't relate to me anymore. (Brooks,
> 2012, p. 235)

Student-parents are cognizant of their otherness in the context of university life because

they do not meet the traditional mold of a college student—they do not need to feel as

though their peers will ostracize them if they reveal an aspect of their lives outside of the

university (Kasworm, 2010).

Being othered on campus is not the only identity strain that student-parents face

while attending university. The amount of time that a student-parent is able to spend with

their family also suffers while student-parents are enrolled in courses (Brooks, 2012;

Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010; Marandet & Wainwright, 2010). As Goldrick-Rab &

Sorensen (2010) indicated, part of this stress came from the fact that student-parents often

juggle more than just their role as student and parent. Most student-parents must work to

make ends meet (Brown & Nichols, 2012). In fact, approximately one-third of student

parents spend at least thirty hours per week working and an additional 17% work between

twenty-one and thirty hours (Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010). Research indicates that

student-parents often feel guilty for neglecting their responsibilities as parents when they

need to work either part- or full-time and then complete homework after returning to their

residence (Brooks, 2012; Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010; Marandet & Wainwright, 2010). When attempting to balance a full- or part-time work schedule on top of all their other responsibilities in order to provide financially for their family, it is no surprise that some student-parents do not persist toward the completion of their degree because they feel overwhelmed while navigating multiple responsibilities at one time (Scott, Burns, & Cooney, 1996).

Additionally, it has been frequently cited that nontraditional students are not as actively engaged in on-campus activities and organizations as their traditionally-aged peers (Brown & Nichols, 2012; Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007; Johnson & Kestler, 2013; Yakaboski, 2010). Part of the reason behind this is related to the identity and role strain that many parenting undergraduate students feel. Student-parents, particularly student-mothers, who balance multiple roles often feel as though they cannot take time away from their family or other external responsibilities to participate in such activities. Mohney and Anderson (1988) described the idea that women are inherently attentive to the needs of others and are extremely relationship based. As such, the fact that student-mothers must occasionally put aside their relationships with their family for their education is extremely hard for them. Furthermore, evidence has shown that female nontraditional students formulate their decisions with a different set of values than their peers (Mohney & Anderson, 1988). However, a study by Fletcher and Wolfe (2012) indicates that young fathers are more likely to enter cohabitation or marriage with a partner earlier than their same age peers. An implication of this is that student-parents as a whole, not just student-mothers, formulate their decisions with a different set of values than their same age peers. Research studies have indicated that student-parents often

experience guilt for being enrolled in college while feeling as though they are neglecting their parental roles (Brooks, 2012). The concern of maintaining personal familial relationships exceeds the motivation that student-parents may have to be actively involved in campus activities.

While the occurrence of identity and role strain can be found in many student populations, it is particularly important to note in TAU student-parents. Simply observing a TAU student-parent in class or on campus does not reveal their student-parent status. Thus, it is easy for university faculty and staff to assume that these students have the time to be involved in activities on-campus, go to events, and participate in group projects. However, role strain can cause too much stress for student-parents— stress that often leads to a lack of retention of this population (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007; Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010; Home; 1998). In order to combat this issue, services must be provided that will assist student-parents in navigating and managing their multiple identities and roles in order to reduce role strain and promote student success and retention (Van Meter & Agronow, 1982; Yakaboski, 2010).

Childcare and class scheduling. One concern frequently cited by many parenting students about being involved in higher education is the issue of childcare (Brown & Nichols, 2012; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Yakaboski, 2010). Most student-parents indicated stress related to the availability, affordability, and proximity of childcare options near their institution (Yakaboski, 2010).

The availability of childcare in and of itself was a major challenge that student-parents faced as there are specific hours that most daycare centers provide services. Generally daycare centers open at either 6:00 or 7:00 AM and close approximately 12

hours later. While this may be adequate for parents who work full-time jobs within the community, it does not necessarily provide ample services for student-parents. Parenting students have specific hours of need for childcare due to their multiple role identities. Not only do these students take courses working toward degree completion and care for their dependents, some also work full- or part-time (Marandet & Wainwright, 2010). These responsibilities might limit the time that students can take classes, making evenings one of the only options for pursuing coursework. However, evening classes generally leave student-parents without childcare options (Yakaboski, 2010).

Student-parents who are unable to enroll their dependents in on-campus childcare centers or whose universities do not offer on-campus childcare centers must find alternative options for dependent care. These alternative childcare options may be located much further from campus and be much more expensive than college sponsored programs (Brown & Nichols, 2012; Scott, Burns & Cooney, 1996). In cases such as this, student-parents must commute from home to daycare centers to class and then back again. When childcare centers are located off-campus, parenting students must add additional time to their commutes before heading to class. Furthermore, Duquaine-Watson (2007) found that there is more lost than time during lengthy commutes:

> Those who were unable to enroll their children at Kids on Kampus [on-campus childcare facility] reported that reliance on off-campus child care reduces the amount of time they are able to spend studying, doing research in the library, and conducting other class-related activities. (Duquaine-Watson, 2007, p. 233)

Because many student-parents cannot afford to send their children to on-campus childcare centers, they must sacrifice time to commute their children off-campus, which then cuts into the time that they can spend on class-related activities. This finding indicates an interconnectedness of challenges faced by undergraduate student-parents

such as the identity and role strain that this population encounters by needing to divide time between their academic and personal lives.

 Housing. On-campus housing resources, or lack thereof, was a challenge that student-parents have often said impacts their collegiate experience. While not every student-parent needs to utilize on-campus housing due to living arrangements off-campus or with family, it has been expressed by many that on-campus housing is desired (Brown & Nichols, 2012). Participants in one research study expressed the lack of "nice, affordable housing near campus, requiring them to pay a large rent for a 'dump' just around the corner" (Brown & Nichols, 2012, p. 518). Feeling safe and comfortable in an apartment or home of a decent size while living near campus is uncommon. Thus, student-parents often feel pressured to live far away from campus in order to provide a safe environment for their children. Long commutes from off-campus housing to campus cut into the amount of time that student-parents can spend with their family, on their homework, or working, which then increases their chances of identity and role strain.

 In George Washington (GW) University's newspaper, the *GW Hatchet*, McCormack (2007) published an article that implied that George Washington University was failing pregnant and parenting students by not providing on-campus housing alternatives. He made the argument that students who need seeing-eye dogs were allowed to live on-campus because to prohibit this would be considered discriminatory; yet the same courtesy is not often given to parenting students (McCormack, 2007). This idea was further supported by the fact that one pregnant participant of Brown and Nichols' (2012) study knew that once she gave birth, she would no longer be permitted to

live on campus. The authors of this study additionally explained this participant's

situation after their research was completed:

> At the time of publication, she was forced to transfer to a community college and move back home because of the lack of student family housing. A follow-up phone interview with her revealed that if family housing was available on campus, she would have stayed at the university. (Brown & Nichols, 2012, p. 518)

It is hard enough to become a parent while attending college and balance the conflicting

roles of student and parent. By requiring student-parents to find outside housing sources

off-campus, universities are disserving these students and may be condemning them to

drop out of school if they cannot find affordable housing options elsewhere.

Teenage Parents

While there is little literature specifically focusing on TAU student-parents, there

is an abundance of research that discusses the implications of teenage pregnancy and

parenting on individuals—particularly in regards to implications about pursuing further

education and identity development. It is important to consider these studies when

examining the meaning TAU student-parents make of their identities because a portion of

the 28% of student-parents identified by the National Center for Education Statistics

report in the 2011-2012 academic year were teenagers (U.S. Department of Education,

2012). Approximately 1.4% of all undergraduate student-parents in 2011-2012 were

eighteen years of age or younger; it was not possible to separate out the percentage of

undergraduate student-parents who were nineteen years old (U.S. Department of

Education, 2012). However, as a trend, the percentage of undergraduates who are also

parents tends to increase as the age of students increase. Thus one could infer that the

percentage of undergraduate student-parents who are nineteen years old is greater than

1.4%. As such, although teenage parents are probably only a small fraction of undergraduate student-parents, further examining the research on teenage parents can lend insight to the understudied population of TAU student-parents. Currently, this is the literature that is most likely to overlap with TAU student-parents' experiences due to the similarity of the teen's age and role as a parent.

While not all traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents are teenage parents, some college students who identity as members of this population may fall within this category. Whether the undergraduate student came into college as a student-parent or whether they had their child(ren) while attending college could impact the way in which these individuals make meaning of their identities. However, since there is such a lack of research regarding TAU student-parents, it is necessary to examine the research that is available regarding the teenage portion of this population.

Overview of teenage parents. The issue of teen parenting has emerged in recent decades as one of America's most prolific social issues (Furstenberg, 2010). In fact, in his 1995 State of the Union address, President Bill Clinton went so far as to single as teenage pregnancy and parenting as "our most serious social problem." Teen childbearing had been a social problem long before Clinton took office. Teenage childbearing truly emerged as an issue in the 1950s and 1960s, when teenage pregnancy rates were at their highest (Furstenberg, 2010). During this time period, teenage pregnancy brought shame to the mothers, and the most common response of public schools was expulsion of the pregnant teen under the pretense of not wanting them to be able to negatively influence their peers (Scholl, 2007).

According to the Office of Adolescent Health (OAH) within the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), there were approximately 26.6 births for every 1,000 females aged fifteen to nineteen in 2013 ("Trends in Teen Pregnancy," 2014). Most of these pregnancies were unplanned. Data indicated that failure to use contraception was the primary reason behind teenage pregnancies ("Trends in Teen Pregnancy," 2014). Thus, teenage pregnancy prevention has been labeled one of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's top six priorities ("About Teen Pregnancy," 2014).

While there is certainly still a stigma attached to being a teenage parent, the apparent commonness of this issue has seemingly lessened the shame associated with the problem. The phenomenon of teen pregnancy and parenting even led to a reality television show called *16 and Pregnant*, which was developed by MTV in 2009. This television show has aired for five seasons and has spawned three spin-off series. When *16 and Pregnant* originally aired, critics were vocal about their fear that the series glamorized teen pregnancy because the teenage girls who were featured on the show were also paid for their appearances. Teenage mothers who were selected to star in one of the spin-off series were paid per episode for their appearances. However, evidence now shows that these series may help with deterring young people from having unprotected sex and therefore lead to a reduction in teen pregnancy and births (Goldstein, 2014). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicated that birth rates seem to be down because "teens seem less sexually active, and more of those who are sexually active seem to be using birth control than in previous years" ("About Teen Pregnancy,"

2014). Nevertheless, the ongoing popularity of these shows indicates the fascination that the current generation has with the social issue of teen pregnancy.

Even though there is a current fascination with teenage pregnancy and parenting, and the stigma attached to being a young, unwed parent has decreased, the label of "teen mom" still calls up a certain image in the minds of those around. Luttrell (2003) explained, "the dominant image of the pregnant teen: a black, urban, and poor female who is more than likely herself the daughter of a teenage mother" (p. 4). The OAH's data shows that Hispanic adolescent females had the highest birth rate, followed by black females, and then white females ("Trends in Teen Pregnancy," 2014). Regardless of whether the societal stigma surrounding teenage or unwed pregnancy has decreased in terms of the overall issue, there are still racial and socioeconomic stigmas that many attach to the idea—particularly in terms of the potential futures that these teenage parents may have. Next, research about teenage parents and their pursuit about education will be explored.

Teenage parents and the pursuit of education. One of the largest concerns attached to teenage pregnancy and parenting is the belief that children are throwing away their potential futures to raise a child when they may not be financially or emotionally ready to do so. As Barcelos and Gubrium (2014) explained, a dominant perception of the teenage parent is that both the parent and child will live a life of poverty. In fact, the younger that a teenage parent is, the less likely they are to continue with their education (Scholl, 2007). While this stigma certainly proves to be true for some individuals, some research studies have discussed that because of their pregnancy some teenage parents decided to move forward in their pursuit of education (secondary and/or post-secondary)

in order to provide a better life for their child (Barcelos & Gubrium, 2014; Hallman, 2007; Hanson, 1992; Rolfe, 2008). For the purpose of this study, it is important to examine two things about the teen parent connection to education: the challenges teenage parents face in pursuing further education and the support necessary for these students to engage in educational institutions. By better understanding these aspects of the teenage parent experience, educators and administrators should be able to gain insight into the experiences and needs of young student-parents in college.

When teenagers become pregnant while still enrolled in high school, it is commonly assumed that they will drop out (Scholl, 2007). This is quite problematic, because in a society where it is virtually required to have a G.E.D. or high school diploma to get a job, it is extremely important to provide teenage parents with the opportunity to get an education. However, some students must drop out because of the lack of support available at their high schools. A participant in Hallman's (2007) study supported this fact by stating that high schools often assume that teen parents are limited in their ability to learn. Thus, even if a school provided the necessary support systems for teen parents, many find it difficult to engage in the environment because they are singled out and viewed as outsiders (Hallman, 2007). Even though teenage parents have been granted the right to stay enrolled in school through Title IX, the law does not require that programs to support this population are created (Scholl, 2007). Finances, childcare, and transportation are just some of the issues that teenage parents have cited as challenges they face in the pursuit of their education (Hallman, 2007; Scholl, 2007). Thus, it is no surprise that many teen parents feel as though they have no other option than to

discontinue their study because of the lack of support they receive from their high schools (Scholl, 2007).

Special programs and support systems are necessary to increase the retention and high school graduation rates of teenage parents. The primary support system for pregnant and parenting teenagers is their family. According to Hanson (1992), between 65% and 85% of teenage parents live with their families. While not every teen parent has this support system available to them, evidence has shown that family support is very important to teenage parents successfully completing their education (Hallman, 2007; Hanson, 1992). However, another reality of teen parenting is that often these teenagers come from families who have some sort of problem (Hallman, 1992). Even if the teenager's family is not available to provide support, it is necessary that teen parents find someone to advocate for them if they are to succeed. Student records do not often indicate if a student is also a parent, meaning that most teenage parents can fly under the radar and be easily overlooked (Scholl, 2007).

Most often, if a teenage student-parent plans to complete high school, they will choose to enroll in an alternative program that has the necessary supports in place to help them obtain a degree (Hallman, 2007; Hanson, 1992; Scholl, 2007). Programs such as these help school officials advocate for the needs of their students—particularly because teenage parents are not lost in the general population. Some of these programs are specifically made for teenage parents, which means that the faculty and officials are acutely aware and understanding of the various needs of the student-parent population (Hallman, 2007; Hanson, 1992; Scholl, 2007). While the needs of teenage parents may

vary from one community to another, Scholl (2007) proposes a five-step analysis that

school districts should undergo to determine the best way to support teen student-parents:

1. Gather pertinent data such as actual numbers of pregnant and parenting teens known to the school system during the past 5 years, as well as the actual numbers according to state statistics.
2. Identify interested stakeholders in the school and community, including parents, and determine what role(s) they are willing to play.
3. Develop policies, programs, and activities regarding educating adolescent parents, designating someone to be responsible or in charge of program delivery, and get School Board approval.
4. Develop partnerships with other agencies and organizations such as hospitals, health department, Cooperative Extension Service, March of Dimes, and local churches.
5. Develop and implement programs and services designed to meet local needs, evaluating and making appropriate improvements on an annual basis. (Scholl, 2007, p. 31)

By following an analysis such as this, school districts can ensure that they are providing

the necessary programs and support to teenage parents in order to help them persist

toward the completion of high school. Teen parents who receive a high school degree are

less likely to live in poverty or stay on welfare for an extended period of time (Hallman,

1992; Scholl, 2007). Additionally, teenage parents who complete high school may be

more willing to pursue higher education.

In the next section, I will explain some identity development theories, which are

primary tools that college student educators use to make sense of many college student

experiences. I used them to inform my interview protocol and help make sense of

participants' responses.

Exploring the Identity Development of College Students

The transition to college often plays a large role in the identity development of

college-age students. Prior to attending college, most of an individual's identity is

defined by their interactions with their immediate family members. However, these early

prescribed identities may not match the way that an individual views himself or herself.

As individuals move through life from childhood to adulthood, their various experiences

and interactions will impact their development and how they eventually come to define

themselves. Examining the way in which college students negotiate their identity

development is particularly important to the purpose of this study because traditionally-

aged undergraduate student-parents must balance numerous identities while enrolled in

college—some of which may be exceptionally salient to the student, yet go overlooked

by educators and administrators on campus.

Identity can be defined as "a developmental progression from simple, conferred

ideas about oneself to more complex understandings of what makes up identity" (Torres,

Jones, & Renn, 2009, p. 582). A major component of identity development is the idea

that it is "socially constructed and reconstructed" (Torres et al., 2009, p. 582). This

means that the perceptions and opinions of others have a large impact on the identity

development of individuals. Torres et al. (2009) described these contextual influences as

"an intricate web of unstated expectations on the individual. As society changes, this

web may expand or change, but it is always present" (p. 583). Thus, educators and

administrators must determine the context in which a student develops in order to

understand the way in which students define their own identity.

Examining the multiple dimensions of identity. The model of multiple

dimensions of identity (MMDI) is described as "a fluid and dynamic one, representing

the ongoing construction of identities and the influence of changing contexts on the

experience of identity development" (Jones & McEwen, 2000, p. 408). This model helps

to distinguish between a student's core sense of self (e.g., personal attributes,

characteristics, and identity), their social identities (e.g., race, class, gender), and the contextual or social influences that impact their holistic development (e.g., family background, sociocultural conditions, current experiences) (Jones & McEwen, 2000). It is the relative salience among these various elements of an individual's identity dimensions that plays an important role in understanding how students view themselves. Jones & McEwen (2000) expounded that the rings shown in the MMDI denoted that "no one dimension may be understood singularly; it can be understood only in relation to other dimensions" (p. 410). Thus, the role of student does not singularly define the identity of those enrolled in college. The college experience will be different for each individual based on the other identity dimensions that they hold salient to their definition of self.

Identity is not constant. It is a fluid process that allows for individuals to reconstruct their identity based on their own individual experiences and the constructions of society (Torres et al., 2009). The concept of intersectionality can be credited in part for the notion that identity is a fluid process. Jones (2009) explained that intersectionality "explicitly situates identity as multiple and layered and existing at once within systems of both oppression and privilege" (p. 289). Because intersectionality encourages individuals to explore the relationships between their various identities, it is not surprising that shifts might occur in relation to how one views their own identity at a particular moment in time. Within a certain experience an individual might identify more strongly with one aspect of their identity, whereas in another experience they might hold another element of their identity with more salience. For example, a student-parent may strongly identify with their parent identity when they are at home with their family, but may identify more

strongly with their student identity when they are working on homework or sitting in class. However, these different aspects of an individual's identity still interact to form an individual with a unique lived experience. Jones and McEwen (2000) explored the circles that interact within the MMDI:

> The intersecting circles and the various locations indicating salience of particular identity dimensions also represent that more than one identity dimension can be engaged by the individual at any one time. Identity dimensions then may be experienced simultaneously as well as more or less salient than other dimensions. (Jones & McEwen, 2000, p. 410)

Consequently, intersectionality allows for individuals to better explore "individual differences and larger social systems of inequality and thus illuminates the complexities of the lived experience" (Jones, 2009, p. 289). These concepts prove important for the purpose of this study because traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents have numerous, intersecting identities that come together to form the way that they are viewed by others at the institution and the way they view themselves. In particular, TAU student-parents attending a four-year institution face the challenge of navigating an environment that typically assumes that school will be the primary priority of its students. Student-parents do not necessarily have this luxury because they are often conflicted when they feel they need to choose between their parent and student identity.

Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) revised the MMDI in order to explore the significance of the meaning-making capacity to "more thoroughly depict the relationship between context and salience (and self perceptions) of identity dimensions, as well as the relationship between social identities and the core of identity" (p. 6). It is exponentially important for educators to understand the transition that college students undergo when entering into higher education because their transition is "dominated by tensions and

unresolved conflicts between their developing internal voices and external influences"
(Abes et al., 2007, p. 5). Students entering college are just beginning to examine what
their identity could be outside of the opinions of external parties; therefore it is important
for students to feel as though they have a voice to express their salient identities versus
having stereotypical assumptions thrust on them. The revised MMDI explains how
students begin to do this through the inclusion of a meaning-making filter that allows
examination of "not only *what* relationships students perceive among their personal and
social identities, but also *how* they come to perceive them as they do" (Abes et al., 2007,
p. 13; italics in original). This filter can either allow external opinions through to impact
the way that a student defines their identity or block them out to allow the student to
define their identity on their own.

Identity development and renegotiation in teenage parents. Some
traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents enrolled in higher education are still in
their teenage years. Therefore, it is important to consider the identity development and
renegotiation process for teenage parents. Identity development and renegotiation in
teenage parents is slightly more complex than it might be for older student-parents
because oftentimes teenagers are still profoundly impacted by the perceptions of others
and may still be in the process of figuring out who they are as individuals (Hallman,
2007). Thus, the meaning-making filter of teenage parents is still being formed. This can
allow for negative perceptions of others and stereotypes prevalent in society to impact the
way that teenage parents think of their identity and ability. For this reason, teenage
parents face a unique form of identity and role strain in which they show different aspects
of their identity to others based on the context in which they find themselves (Hallman,

2007). It can be challenging for teenage parents to determine who they are or who they

want to be when they have a child whom they must take care of.

A common theme amongst teenage parents is the belief that they must prove

themselves. Part of this is related to the assumptions that society holds about teenage

parents—the idea of children raising children. A seventeen-year-old participant in

Rolfe's (2008) study commented:

> But it's like, people automatically think, oh, […] if you have a child, you won't
> be able to cope. From family, to friends, to, to the guy next *door*, you know, like,
> I have to prove to myself, that I *am* capable. (Rolfe, 2008, p. 305; italics in
> original)

This is a common perception, leaving the teen parents to prove to society that they are

capable of being a parent, even at a young age. For teenage parents, the meaning-making

filter explored by Abes et al. (2007) is quite permeable, allowing for the perspectives and

opinions of others to make a large impact on how teen parents view themselves. Thus,

the perceptions that society has about teen parents is profoundly important to them—both

in terms of how they see themselves as individuals and how they see themselves as

parents.

Because of the impact that the opinions of others have on their meaning-making,

teenage parents often solely identify with their parenting role (Rolfe, 2008). For some

teenage parents it is difficult to separate their views of themselves as an individual from

their view of themselves as a parent. As Rolfe (2008) explored, for some of her

participants the identity of mother was most central and that was the only thing they

viewed themselves as because "it takes all of their time and energy, leaving little physical

or emotional energy for themselves" (p. 307). Participants in Hallman's (2007) study

also supported this idea. When prompted to journal about what they were good at, one

teenage parent could not think of anything that she identified as being good at other than "babysitting" (Hallman, 2007, p. 87).

Regardless of the perceptions of others, most teenagers who become parents indicate that they feel as though they had no other option but to grow up and become responsible adults despite their young age (Rolfe, 2008). Many teenage parents feel as though becoming a parent forced them to automatically become more mature than their same-age peers. After having children, teenage parents do not believe that they can continue identifying as a typical teenager:

> [Having children] is difficult because you can't live your life. You know what I mean? I'm 21, I don't go out to the clubs. I want to have fun, but I can't. I got the responsibilities at home waiting for me right after school. Right after school I go pick [my kids] up. I have to go home. I cook, I clean, I give them a bath, time to go to bed. (Barcelos & Gubrium, 2014, p. 473)

For most teen parents, the responsibilities that come with being a parent supersede their desire to continue identifying with their teenage peers. The dominant narrative of the teen parent, however, is the one that does not appear to put the responsibilities of being a parent first—the ones who continue to go out every weekend and pass off their parental obligations on family or friends (Barcelos & Gubrium, 2014). Because of this narrative, even teen parents who hold their parental role at the center of their identity feel guilt when they are not upholding those roles. Society might view a single night out as neglect, and teen parents would find it difficult to block out these perceptions from their meaning-making filter (Abes et al., 2007; Barcelos & Gubrium, 2014).

An additional struggle that teen parents face in their identity development is education. While not all teenage parents are able to stay enrolled in high school, those who do often find it challenging to strongly identify as students (Hallman, 2007). Part of

this is because of the salience with which they hold their identity as a parent, while it may also be related to the perceptions of others (Rolfe, 2008). Hallman (2007) detailed her participants' reactions to a letter to the editor in which the author stated that teenagers who had children out-of-wedlock and then continued to pursue education rather than work were irresponsible. Society's view of those on welfare is not a positive one, and many hold the belief that some people avoid work in order to continue collecting a check (Barcelos & Gubrium, 2014; Rolfe, 2008). Thus, teen parents struggle to determine which is the better course of action: continuing their education and perhaps being deemed a bad parent because they are not working, or working and potentially be stuck in a dead end job. These differing perceptions make it difficult for teenage parents to determine their best course of action—particularly because they are susceptible to the perceptions of others in determining their view of themselves.

Identity construction and renegotiation in nontraditional students. As mentioned earlier, TAU student-parents may be considered nontraditional students because they have dependents. Therefore, it is important to also examine what is known about nontraditional student identity development. Nontraditional students are an excellent example of the MMDI in use because of the many intersecting attributes that define this student population. These intersecting attributes that define nontraditional students are not well represented in the higher education environment and thus make their experiences unique. Ross-Gordon (2011) explained that the identifying attributes of nontraditional students include, but are not limited to:

- Entry to college delayed by at least one year following high school
- Having dependents
- Being a single parent
- Being employed full time

- Being financially independent
- Attending part time
- Not having a high school diploma (Ross-Gordon, 2011, p. 26)

Students could hold a singular attribute from the defining characteristics of nontraditional or multiple, intersecting identities. Regardless of the number of nontraditional attributes that students may hold, all of their identities, traditional or nontraditional, will interact with one another to inform how students perceive themselves. However, nontraditional students often feel *othered* on college campuses because their most salient identities differ from those of the general population. This causes their identity construction to slightly vary from many of their traditionally college-aged peers.

Traditional college students often have an identity that is externally defined based on the environments with which an individual is engaged (Abes et al., 2007; Baxter-Magolda, 1999; Torres et al., 2009). As individuals develop through lived experiences, they often become keenly aware of an internal voice emerging inside them (Baxter-Magolda, 1999). While this voice may remain suppressed for some time because of the same external influences that impacted an individual's development up to that point, Baxter-Magolda (1999) extrapolated in a study on adult learners that "tension [within participants] increased as the internal voice emerged and participants realized the need to construct an internal identity" (p. 634).

Kasworm (2010) explained that the negotiation of adult identity is "a dynamic process of making meaning through adult students' experiences both within the social interface of the dominant youth-oriented, academically competitive ethos of the research institution and through complex life biography and current competing life roles" (p. 156). While identity development is generally a complex process, the added life experiences

that nontraditional students must navigate while enrolled in college forces them to view both their experiences and themselves differently than their traditional peers. Nontraditional students have typically had the opportunity to move through the developmental progression from simple to complex ideas about which elements of their identity are most salient because they are further removed from external influences that occur in adolescence (Torres et al., 2009).

Traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents typically fall somewhere on the spectrum between traditional and nontraditional, meaning that their lived experiences often force them to reconsider how they view their own multiple identities (Abes et al., 2007; Kasworm, 2010) in the midst of being labeled by the institution and their peers. TAU student-parents are defined as *nontraditional* by the university due to the fact that they have children—a label that overlooks TAU student-parents' lived experiences of being *traditionally*-aged undergraduate student-parent. Thus, it is important for higher education officials to consider the TAU student-parent population as a *both-and* group: both traditional *and* nontraditional. If this is not done, a large portion of a TAU student-parent's identity is overlooked, causing them to be overshadowed and to feel isolated on the campus.

The Transition Process

Schlossberg's theory of transition (Goodman et al., 2006) was also used as a theoretical framework for this study, particularly to think about the way that traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents navigate and manage their identity. This theory of transition explores the idea that transitions in one's life can be anticipated, unanticipated, or nonevents. Anticipated events are transitions that individuals expect to occur that

come to fruition while unanticipated events are ones that individuals do not expect to occur that eventually come to pass. Nonevents are transitions that individuals expect to occur that never happen. Previous research studies indicate that becoming a student-parent is generally an unanticipated event for teenagers and undergraduate students (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Hallman, 2007). Since becoming a parent and then becoming a student-parent are both transitions, Schlossberg's transition theory can be useful in understanding the transition process that the four participants of this study went through when becoming student-parents, the way they made sense of their identity, and participants' lived experiences as TAU student-parents.

The 4 S's. A large part of Schlossberg's transition theory discusses how the 4 S's (self, situation, strategies, and support) impact an individual's ability to cope with transitional situations. Self refers to the characteristics that affect how individuals navigate their lives. These characteristics come together to determine how well equipped a person might be to handle the situation in which they are placed. Situation refers to the degree to which a person's functioning is affected by a transition. Strategies are the ways in which an individual handles a transition and the tools they use to do so. Support, which Schlossberg's transition theory specifically outlines as social support, references the resources in a person's life that make the transition process easier or more difficult.

Conclusion

Research focused on traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents is extraordinarily limited. There are no studies specifically focused on TAU student-parents. Instead, the voices of this student population are often incorporated into research studies about nontraditional students or teenage parents. For this reason, examining

previous research about student-parents in higher education as well as teenage parents is

important to understanding the experiences that TAU student-parents might encounter

while enrolled at Great Midwestern University. While student-parents may be motivated

to enroll at the university to complete their college degree to better their future

opportunities, the challenges that they encounter when engaged in the four-year college

environment often stem from educators and administrators not recognizing the multiple

identities that these students balance. By seeking to understand the challenges TAU

student-parents face when entering college and the meaning that TAU student-parents

make of their own identity, educators can better support this population in their transition

to college life. This study fills a gap in the literature by addressing these issues. Chapter

Three will explain the methods employed in this research study.

Chapter Three

Methodology

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to examine the meaning traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents made of their student-parent identity while also considering the potential impact that attending a public research institution could have on their identity development. There is an unexplored area of research in the experiences of TAU student-parents because most previous studies about student-parents have previously been conducted using adult student-parents. The participants of this study self-identify as traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents based on their personal, lived experiences.

Research Paradigm

While the exploration of factors impacting the identity of TAU student-parents and the way in which this population navigates the transition of being engaged in the higher education environment could have been investigated through a quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods design, I selected a qualitative design in order to provide a rich and detailed account of TAU student-parent experiences which quantitative methods would not have allowed. Therefore, this research was conducted under a constructivist worldview. Constructivists operate under the belief that "reality is socially constructed" (Mertens, 2010, p. 16) and that researchers can only understand lived experiences from the perception of those who have lived it. An important aspect of the constructivist paradigm is the idea that the research acts as a "product of the values of the researchers and cannot be independent of them" (Mertens, 2010, p. 16). Therefore, it is important for

researchers to be continuously reflective throughout the research process in order to identify potential areas of bias.

As Crotty (1998) explained, "all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context" (p. 42). Consequently, it was the goal of this research to study the phenomena of TAU student-parent in terms of their perceptions of their identity and their experiences at a four-year institution by listening to those directly impacted. By recognizing the fact that there will be multiple realities that could explain this phenomenon, this research served as an avenue for the representation of multiple voices.

Research Approach

Within the constructivist paradigm, this research was approached as a phenomenological study. This particular type of study is characterized by investigating the "lived experience of a small number of people" (Rossman, 2003, p. 97). As TAU student-parents, each of the participants had a shared identity that may have varied in salience depending on other factors in their lives. In order to explore how each participant's experience at Great Midwestern University was impacted by their identity as TAU student-parents, I used a qualitative methodology that studied the way individuals interpret the world around them (Mertens, 2010).

According to Mertens (2010), a key component of phenomenology is that "the researcher does not make assumptions about an objective reality that exists apart from the individual. Rather, the focus is on understanding how individuals create and understand their own life spaces" (p. 235). Since the focus of phenomenology is on understanding

participant experiences, it is vital for researchers using this approach to be both caring and intentional (Rossman, 2003). Researchers cannot hope for participants to share intimate details about their personal perceptions of the world without being open-minded and intentional in their approach.

Research Questions

The following research questions framed this study:

1. What meaning do traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents make of their student-parent identity?

   a. How does the four-year college environment shape the identity of participants?

   b. What impact does being perceived as traditional students have on participants' identity?

2. How do traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents manage their identity?

   a. What resources for support do participants utilize?

Research Setting

To support the possible transferability of this study to other institutions, a thorough examination of the research setting is provided. As Mertens (2010) indicated, it is the duty of the researcher to provide specific details about the setting of the study so readers can gauge whether the findings could be applicable to their own situations and institutions. Thus, it is important to give readers of this study the background and context that informs some of the experiences of this study's participants.

This study took place at a large, Midwestern research-intensive institution, henceforth referred to as Great Midwestern University (GMU). GMU is primarily a

residential campus and is a predominantly White institution (PWI). In Fall 2014, Great

Midwestern University reported a total enrollment of about 25,000, a number comprised

of about 20,000 undergraduate students, 5,000 graduate students, and 500 professional

students. The majority of students enrolled at GMU in Fall 2014—approximately 13,000

to 14,500—were considered traditionally-aged undergraduates between ages 19 and 23.

Participant interviews took place in quiet, semi-private locations. As the

researcher, I recognized the fact that TAU student-parents often have multiple

responsibilities and might not be able to meet at specific locations during certain times in

the day depending on their school, work, and childcare schedules. Therefore, when

arranging the interviews, I left the selection of the interview location up to the

participants so they could feel comfortable sharing their experiences. One participant

chose to be interviewed at her apartment complex. Two participants wanted to be

interviewed at a coffee house in the local community. The final participant chose to be

interviewed in a meeting room on campus.

Participant Selection

Purposeful, criterion-based sampling (Maxwell, 2013) was used to find students

who were likely to identify as TAU student-parents. A recruitment letter was sent via

email to all advisors registered as members of Great Midwestern University's advising

association, detailing that participants should meet the following criteria: (1) be an

undergraduate student enrolled at least part-time, (2) be between the ages of 19 and 23,

and (3) have at least one dependent under the age of 18 with whom they had significant

contact. The advising association at GMU had advisors from across campus engaged in

its membership, therefore allowing potential access to students from all majors and

backgrounds. Additionally, recruitment flyers were posted outside of the Counseling and Psychological Services office and the Women's Center.

One of Maxwell's (2013) main goals for purposeful selection was to achieve a representative sampling of the full population of "cases, individuals, or situations" (p. 98). The population of students being examined in this study was challenging to identify unless students self-disclosed their student-parent identity, so the criteria for participants was left quite open in order to allow the highest number of potential participants. It was also assumed that the majority of respondents would identity as female. However, with the intent of being purposeful in the recruitment and selection of participants, I took care to include at least one male voice into the data collected. In an effort to avoid a biased sample, participants were selected on a first-response bias provided they met all the specified criteria. Basic demographic information for each of the participants is listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Demographic Information

Interview	Pseudonym	Age	Sex	Race	Year	Major
1	Teresa	23	Female	Black	Senior	Business
2	Melissa	23	Female	White	Junior	Psychology
3	John	22	Male	White	Senior	Business
4	Amanda	23	Female	White	Junior	Psychology

Participants were given the opportunity during the interview to describe themselves and their salient social identities including age, sex, race, and major. Most participants identified their year in school based on their number of credit hours because many had a

lot of transfer credit from other institutions. Thus, their year in school is not actually an accurate representation of when they anticipate graduating with their bachelor's degree.

In addition to their personal demographic background, it was also important to recognize the multiple roles that traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents often balance. Several of the participants were in some type of relationship during the study, one identified as single, and one participant was in a relationship with their partner at the time of their children's birth and for most of the duration of this study before separating shortly before the second interview. Furthermore, many participants also worked either part- or full-time while pursuing their degree. Table 2 includes each participants various roles and statuses in more detail.

Table 2. Participant Roles

Interview	Pseudonym	# of Children	Age of Children	Relationship Status	Employment Status
1	Teresa	1	18 months	Long-term relationship	Part-time
2	Melissa	1	3 years	Single	Full-time
3	John	2	6 month-old twins	Separated	None
4	Amanda	1	3 years	Married	Part-time

Interview Protocol

Two interview protocols were used for this research study. The first interview lasted an approximate average of thirty minutes and focused on how participants formulated and made meaning of their identities. It was informed by Abes, Jones, and McEwen's (2007) reconceptualized model of multiple dimensions of identity. The second interview lasted approximately sixty minutes with each participant and addressed

how participants managed their identity based on Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory. Both of these interview protocols can be viewed in the Appendix.

The first interview focused on two things: understanding how each participant personally defined their own identity while also considering the impact that the perceptions and opinions of others could have on participants' identity formation. The reconceptualized model of multiple dimensions of identity emphasized that the salience of each identity to the core sense of self would be shaped by contextual influences (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). Prior to becoming a student-parent, participants may have had a very different perception of self that was validated by society. While their current identities as TAU student-parents were not necessarily spurned by society, participants participated in a collegiate environment at GMU that was geared primarily toward traditional undergraduate students who were not parents. GMU was not designed to support student-parents. Therefore, it was important to examine the ways that individuals made meaning of their identities in this context.

To begin the interview, the interview protocol simply asked for participants to tell me about themselves. From there, the protocol requested that participants tell about their previous perceptions of self before becoming a student-parent as well as their current salient identities. This reflected Abes, Jones, and McEwen's (2007) description of self-authorship as a "transitional period dominated by tensions and unresolved conflicts between their developing internal voices and external influences, [since] students gradually question formulas increasingly incongruent with developing internal values" (p. 5). By looking at participants' previous and current perceptions of self as well as their

interpretations of how others perceive them, a clear picture of these tensions described by Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) was formed.

The second interview focused primarily on understanding the impact that being a TAU student-parent had on each participant's daily life as well as how they were able to cope with the transition of being student-parents. Many of the questions in the second interview built upon questions from the first interview, specifically analyzing how individuals moved through the 4 S's of Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory: situation, self, support, and strategies. Many of the questions in the second interview focused on the ideas of support and strategies for coping with the transition of becoming student-parents, while questions relating to situation and self were found throughout both interview protocols.

Researcher Reflexivity

In order to understand this research it is important to understand the positionality and lens of the researcher. I am a 24-year-old married, Caucasian female who was born and raised in a small rural community in north-central Iowa. Despite the fact that I was raised between two Christian denominations (Lutheran and Christian Reformed), I currently identify as a non-denominational Christian who is also socially liberal. My personal experiences have helped to shape me into an individual who is caring and empathetic of the situations of others, recognizing that in our society there are various levels of power and privilege that impact those around us.

As an undergraduate student at a four-year public university, I personally identified as a TAU student-parent. I aligned myself with the nontraditional student population on campus despite the fact that I had taken the traditional route of education

and was of a traditional age because I found it challenging to relate to my similar-aged undergraduate peers. I gave birth to my son at the end of my first-year of college and married a year later. Because of my own lived experiences, I recognize that I came into this research with my own opinions of how TAU student-parents' identities are shaped from being in a four-year college environment. From my experience, the four-year college environment was very isolating and I believed that other TAU student-parents would feel similarly. Regardless of my personal opinions and experiences, I have a deep respect for TAU student-parents who choose to continue in their education after having a child and I want to fully honor their experiences. For this reason, I instituted member checks to ensure that my analysis and interpretation of the data was an accurate representation of their stories. Moreover, I strongly believe that our shared identity as TAU student-parents helped create an authentic relationship with participants that made them feel comfortable sharing their experiences.

Storing and Managing Data

Interviews were audio recorded per participant agreement using a smartphone and then transferred to my password-protected laptop computer. As soon as the recordings were successfully transferred to the computer, the recordings were deleted from the smartphone to protect participant identities. After I completed transcribing the interviews, the audio recordings were deleted from the laptop computer. During the transcription process, participant names were replaced with pseudonyms to protect participant identity. Participants had the option to select their own pseudonym. Transcripts were also stored on my password protected computer until the research had been concluded. No records were kept longer than June 2015.

Data Collection

Interviews were the primary method of data selection for this research. Since this research was based in a constructivist paradigm, one aim of the research was to better understand the complexity of this human phenomena—something that would not be able to occur without directly interacting with each participant. Denzin and Lincoln (2000), provide a definition of a qualitative interview:

> The interview is a conversation—the art of asking questions and listening. It is a not a neutral tool, for at least two people create the reality of the interview situation. In this situation, answers are given. Thus, the interview produces situated understandings grounded in specific interactional episodes. This method is influence by the personal characteristics of the interviewer. (p. 643)

Through interview interaction, I was able to form a relationship with each participant—a relationship in which participants felt comfortable sharing their personal stories and experiences. These experiences, and my interpretation of them, created a version of social reality.

Specifically, two semi-structured interviews with each participant were used to gather data for this study. By utilizing this type of interview, I was able to engage in a dialogue with the participants. Rossman (2003) indicated the importance of in-depth interviews in phenomenological studies, "assuming that through dialogue and reflection, the quintessential meaning of the experience will be revealed" (p. 97). This dialogue, and the flexibility allowed in semi-structured interviews, permitted a better relationship-building experience, and the participants felt comfortable recognizing that I could identify with and understand many of their experiences as TAU student-parents. Another benefit to using semi-structured interviews was described by Esterberg (2002):

> In semistructured or in-depth interviewing, the researcher needs to listen carefully to the participant's responses and follow his or her lead. The process resembles a

dance, in which one partner (the interviewer) must be carefully attuned to the other's movements. Because the interviews are not prescribed, they can sometimes take surprising turns. Thus, in-depth interviews are particularly useful for exploring a topic in detail or in constructing theory. (p. 87)

Because there was little preexisting research about TAU student-parents, it was important to engage in semi-structured interviews with participants to explore this topic in detail.

Another method of data collection that was utilized in this research was document review. Participants were asked to create at least one journal entry per week over the course of one month. On average, participants completed a total of three to four journal entries that were approximately half a page in length. Understanding that these journals were requested as a part of the data collection process and not of the participants' own accord, the journals are considered elicited texts (Mertens, 2010). No specific prompts were given to the participants, other than requiring that the journals related to their experiences and perceptions of their own identity as TAU student-parents. The purpose of asking participants to engage in these journaling activities was to gain insight into the daily or weekly experiences of TAU student-parents.

Data Analysis

I completed the transcription of all interviews myself in order to be directly immersed in the data. Many researchers suggested that becoming immersed in the data, particularly in terms of the transcription process, is an important part of data analysis (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; Mertens, 2010). In fact, Hesse-Biber advocated that,

Transcribing research data is interactive and engages the reader in the process of deep listening, analysis, and interpretation. Transcription is not a passive act, but instead provides the researcher with a valuable opportunity to actively engage with his or her research materials right from the beginning of data collection. It also ensures that early on, the researcher is aware of his or her own impact on the data gathering process and he or she has an opportunity to connect with this data

in a grounded manner that provides for the possibility of enhancing the trustworthiness and validity of his or her data gathering techniques. (p. 347)

As such, engaging in the transcription process was a way to keep my assumptions in check. During transcription, I wrote notes on the side of the transcripts if I had an assumption about the potential deeper meaning of something a participant had stated as well as if a particular statement left me with questions that needed further clarification.

When interpreting the transcripts and the journal entries, I used open coding. Open coding is used when researchers approach the data without previously established themes. This allowed for themes to naturally emerge—therefore not needing to attempt to force participant experiences into a preconceived "box" of themes. Charmaz (2006) presented the following suggestions to engage in the initial open coding process: remain open, stay close to the data, keep your codes simple and precise, construct short codes, preserve actions, compare data with data, and move quickly through the data (p. 49). After the initial coding process, I used colored highlighters to organize the data into similar themes that formed the basis for the subsequent findings chapter.

Data Credibility

In hopes of ensuring credibility of the data, each participant of this study was sent a copy of the transcripts of their recorded interviews as well as the findings chapter in order to provide member checks verifying that an accurate portrayal of their experiences were detailed in the findings. Participants were able to respond to the researcher with any necessary changes or clarifications to a statement they previously made during the interviews or journaling process. While I only received feedback from one of the four participants in this study, her clarifications were incorporated into the data analysis process.

Additionally, during the revision process, two individuals provided a peer debrief of the analysis processes. One of these individuals was a first-year master's student pursuing a degree in Educational Administration with a specialization in Student Affairs. The other individual was an English teacher in the local community who I have known for years. The purpose of this peer debriefing was to assure the plausibility of the findings based on the data. The peer debriefers were chosen because of one's growing familiarity with the research process and the other's personal relationship with me, including the ability to critically question why certain elements of the data were interpreted in a specific way.

I also wrote journal entries about my assumptions throughout the research process in order to monitor my own progressive subjectivity. Mertens (2010) explained that "because researchers are the instruments in qualitative research, they need to monitor their own developing constructions and document the process of change from the beginning of the study until it ends" (p. 258). At the beginning of the research process, I wrote journal entries about my assumptions as they arose from my own personal experiences. I also included information in these journal entries about my assumptions as I read previous literature about the experiences of student-parents in higher education. Once actually beginning the data collection process, I wrote entries about my assumptions from each interview with participants and then shared that information with them for verification. Participants verified that they did not believe my assumptions biased my analysis of the data.

Institutional Review Board Approval and Other Ethical Considerations

Prior to beginning this research, I completed the Consortium for IRB Training Initiative in Human Subjects Protection (CITI), a training that upon its completion certified me to conduct research on human subjects. I then submitted the initial research proposal, including the research questions, protocol, and all other related materials to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval on October 28, 2014. Participant recruitment began after the project was certified as exempt on November 21, 2014.

Research participants were given an informed consent form detailing the purpose and procedures of this study to review and sign before the interviews were conducted. Participants were able to indicate their agreement to be audio recorded, and each participant was reminded that they had the right to ask questions or withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. A copy of the informed consent form can be found in the Appendix. To protect the confidentiality of participants, all personal information was stored on my password-protected laptop computer. Participants were given the option to select their own pseudonym or to be assigned one at random to protect their identity. These pseudonyms then replaced identifying information in both transcriptions of the interviews as well as the final published thesis.

Additionally, as a graduate student employed with both Career Services and the Academic Advising office in the College of Business Administration, who could potentially interact with some of the participants in a professional context, additional steps were taken to ensure participant confidentiality. Some colleagues passed along information about this study to potential participants or forwarded me the names of individuals who they had previous relationships with. However, that was the extent of

their contribution. All emails from participants were only opened outside of the work environment and I only emailed participants from my personal laptop.

Conclusion

Because this study was based in the constructivist paradigm and used a phenomenological design, the focus of the research was to understand the meaning participants made of being TAU student-parents within the context of a four-year research institution. Four participants from across Great Midwestern University's campus participated in two semi-structured interviews. The interviews were transcribed by the primary researcher, and open coding was utilized to find emerging themes. Various methods to ensure data credibility were also undertaken, including member checks and peer debriefs.

Chapter Four

Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the meaning traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents make of their student-parent identity while also considering the potential impact that attending a public research institution may have on their identity development. There is an unexplored area of research in the experiences of TAU student-parents, especially those who partake in a traditional four-year college environment. Participants of this study were recruited from across one institution's campus with the assistance of academic advisors. Overall, the conditions to be a participant were left open, only requiring that participants met the following criteria: (1) be currently enrolled at the university at the start of the study, (2) be between 19-23 years of age, and (3) be substantially involved with parenting at least one dependent child under the age of 18.

In order to explore the meaning that traditionally-aged undergraduate students-parents make of their student-parent identity, I developed the following research questions.

1. What meaning do traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents make of their student-parent identity?
   a. How does the four-year college environment shape the identity of participants?
   b. What impact does being perceived as traditional students have on participants' identity?

2. How do traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents manage their identity?

   a. What resources for support are participants aware of and which supports do participants utilize?

The data gathered from four TAU student-parents at Great Midwestern University provided several themes related to TAU student-parent identity and their collegiate experience at a four-year research institution. These themes offer insights into the challenges TAU student-parents face while balancing multiple identities and the important role that various systems of support play in determining their collegiate success.

Participant Profiles

The four participants in this study were all considered traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents based on the fact that they were between the ages of 19 and 23. Three women and one man volunteered to participate in the research. While there was no specific data available about the gender composition of TAU student-parents enrolled at Great Midwestern University, previous literature shows that female student-parents greatly outnumber male student-parents because of their likelihood to be single mothers.

Despite the differences in personality and experience, the participants had several shared traits. At various times throughout the interview process, participants would mention that they were very excited about participating in the study. One participant (Teresa) mentioned her excitement during the first interview as the purpose of the study was being explained. She, like each of the other participants, was extremely excited that someone was discussing the topic of TAU student-parents because they are often

overlooked on traditional college campuses. Each participant spoke of their desire to be involved in the research because they wanted a chance to share their stories and experiences.

Before the primary themes that emerged from conversations with these four participants are shared, I feel as though it is important to share a summary of each participant. In these four summaries, I hope to provide the following information: (a) participants' previous social identities prior to having children, (b) background about each participants' transition into becoming student-parents, and (c) others factors that participants discussed that were particularly meaningful to them.

Teresa. At 23 years old, Teresa was classified as a senior student. When asked to give a brief introduction about herself, Teresa explained that she originally came from West Africa to the city in which Great Midwestern University is located when she was sixteen in order to reunite with her biological father. The reunion was not necessarily what she had anticipated, and Teresa wound up in foster care. Prior to attending Great Midwestern University, Teresa attended the local community college in order to take a foreign language course that the university required for admission. Teresa shared that before she entered college, the most salient identities she held were being a foster kid and being a "good girl." She expanded on what the idea of being a "good girl" meant to her:

> My life was really simple. Since I was a foster kid, I was basically puttin' myself through school. I had like three scholarships when I graduated high school. I had like a 3.8 GPA. I was a *really* good student and then started college.

After starting college, Teresa indicated that she got in with a bad group of friends. She drank and partied a lot, and she considered herself to be a "party girl." Eventually something clicked, and Teresa decided to enroll in the military in order to get her life

back on track—a decision that Teresa hoped would bring her back to the "good girl"

identity that she had held previously. Approximately three months before she was

supposed to leave for Basic Training and Advanced Individual Training (AIT), Teresa

met her current partner, and a month or two later she discovered she was pregnant.

Finding out she was pregnant was an unexpected transition. Teresa mentioned that she

never anticipated becoming a parent and even initially contemplated having an abortion

before her mother and partner talked her out of it. Finding out that she was pregnant and

about to become a parent put unanticipated strain on her relationship with her partner,

and they were forced to figure out how to navigate not only their new relationship with

one another but also experience parenthood for the first time.

At the time of this study, Teresa's daughter was approximately eighteen months

old. Her partner had recently transitioned to working full-time in order to support their

family, and Teresa also worked two jobs. One job was a consulting position and

therefore it did not take up a great amount of time, but the other was a steady job where

she worked approximately twenty hours per week. She described what a typical day or

week in her life looked like:

> Now my work schedule is Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays – basically from
> 9:00am to 4:00pm. And then Tuesdays and Thursdays I have school all day from
> 8:00am to 3:15pm. So by the time I get done, I'm just like really exhausted and I
> just wanna come home and sleep. But, you know, that-that doesn't work. I have
> to come home and cook and clean and do all that other stuff. Yeah. It-it's like
> I'm used to it now, you know?

Managing the multiple identities of student, parent, and employee was something that

Teresa indicated struggling with often. She even mentioned that she was originally

hesitant to volunteer for this study because she was worried about it taking up too much

of her time. However, during both interviews Teresa explained that her excitement about

participating in a study about TAU student-parents eventually won out because she wanted to be able to share her story with those at Great Midwestern University. Teresa was very open in sharing about her experiences, because she felt that "people are most likely to help if they know what's going on." Having the opportunity to share her story with others at Great Midwestern University was something that Teresa deeply desired because she hoped to improve the experiences of other TAU student-parents at the institution.

Melissa. Recently single, Melissa was a 23-year-old parent going through numerous transitions as this study was conducted. When reflecting on her salient social identities prior to becoming a parent, Melissa responded: "I've always identified as White even though I am, I am Native American and White… When I was younger I was Christian, so that's what I identified as before I became a parent. Before I really became a-a-an adult." Melissa also described herself as immature. She stated, "I was 17 when I graduated [high school] and the whole not having attendance, not having someone, you know, breathing down your neck about going to school—it was just too much freedom for me. I-I didn't use it wisely." Her feelings of immaturity played a role in Melissa's decision to take a break from college for some time. She did not return until after she had her son at age 20. She indicated that her son gave her renewed motivation to return to higher education and become invested in getting her degree. In addition to salient social identities as both student and parent, Melissa also found herself strongly identifying as Mahayana Buddhist. She explained the transition:

> I'm now Mahayana Buddhist and that's been like, over the past like year and a half, that's been something I've been like, working harder to get a better understanding of what it is truly and what that means for my life and what I

> should be doing. They don't say to become a better Buddhist, but just become a better person.

Her newly salient religious identity impacted the way that Melissa moved about her life after having her son. Other than those three identities, Melissa indicated that she had been through a lot of transitions around the time of this study that were making her rethink who she was: "I'm single now, I'm 23, and I'm just trying to figure out who I am at this point." Attending college also played a large role in Melissa figuring out her salient identities. However, Melissa's path to getting a degree was extremely complicated.

> I started college when I was 17, and I really didn't take it seriously. I had a below the 2.0 GPA, so I got put on academic probation and then while I was pregnant I didn't do well, so then I actually got technically kicked out of the university.

Melissa had just reenrolled at Great Midwestern University for the spring 2015 semester. When following up with Melissa to arrange our initial interview in January, I received an apology email that stated she would no longer be able to participate in this research study because she was not eligible to receive financial aid. Approximately a week later I received another email in which Melissa explained that she ended up getting her funding to work out and she would be enrolled in classes later that week. We arranged a time for our first interview. When I emailed Melissa to set up our second interview, she indicated that she was no longer enrolled in classes at Great Midwestern University because her financial aid was revoked. Melissa's complicated financial situation was something that she discussed quite often during interviews, and this experience provided a unique perspective to her life as a TAU student-parent.

John. John was a 22-year-old student who transferred to Great Midwestern University for the 2014-2015 academic year in order to be with his partner and twin boys.

Prior to attending the university, John had attended two different collegiate institutions.

When asked about his salient social identities before becoming a parent, John indicated

that he did not strongly identify in any particular way. The closest salient social identity

that John discussed was the fact that in high school and college he might have considered

himself to be a jock. John played college baseball at one of his previous institutions and

described what his life looked life while he was a college athlete.

> They [baseball coaches] required study hall. We were required to be in like this st
> – if you were a new student, so like new on the team, or didn't have a 3.35 or
> higher you had study hall eight hours a week. So like, I would, it was just pretty
> much mapped out – like, my day was mapped out for me, like I'd get up to go to
> class, go to study hall, go to lunch, go home, play video games, watch TV, go to
> practice, go to dinner, go to the library. Like our team, like, at [previous
> institution] it was kinda weird our team like liked getting good grades.

While John did not necessarily have a deep desire to do well academically, he was

required to have good grades to continue playing baseball. However, when enrolling in

Great Midwestern University, John definitely seemed to have a renewed sense of

motivation.

As the father of six-month old twin boys, one of whom had recently had heart

surgery to correct a heart murmur, John had been balancing many stressful situations

during the process of this research study. To give some context to the challenges John

had faced during the course of this study while being a student, I share the following

information. Scheduling the initial interview for this study was complicated because

John's son had just completed his surgery and was recovering. When it came time to

meet for our second interview, we had to reschedule four times. The first day that we

were supposed to meet for our second interview, John contacted me to say that his partner

had the flu. We rescheduled, but had to postpone again because my son was ill. On the

third day that we were supposed to meet, John reached out saying that he had forgotten

that his son had a follow-up appointment for his heart surgery and asked if we could

reschedule. The fourth time that we were supposed to meet, John did not show up. I

reached out to him to check if everything was okay, and he indicated that he and his

partner had gotten into a fight and she had left him. John ended up completing his second

interview with me electronically so he could indulge in the self-care necessary to handle

his stressful and unexpected separation. All of these examples give just a small amount

of insight into John's situation at the time this study was published, which is vital to

understanding the context of his responses.

Amanda. As the only participant who was married, Amanda's experiences were

quite a bit different than the other three participants. At 22 years old, Amanda was

classified as a junior at Great Midwestern University. When asked about her salient

social identities before becoming a parent, Amanda shared that her identity centered

around three main things: being a scholar, becoming independent of her parents, and

forging a relationship with her husband that was not viewed as puppy-love. In addition to

these, Amanda also indicated that her identity prior to becoming a parent strongly

centered around the Juggalo culture: "I think I just sought out other people who happened

to have the same, similar home background and they just all happened to be Juggalos and

that really brought me into the culture." When asked to explain more about this culture,

Amanda shared:

> You're really supposed to look out for each other. If somebody, you know, you
> see somebody getting picked on and they have that same shirt on with the hatchet
> man on it, you're supposed to just like jump in. And even if you don't know the
> person, help them out—which I think can extend to any social group. I think it
> was more so because we identified that we didn't really have anybody to fall back
> on, or, you know, our parents – we didn't really get along with them. We got

> picked on a lot at school. You know, and this is kinda generalized to everybody in the group.

Even as this study was being conducted, Amanda still identified with the Juggalo culture. However, she indicated that the salience of this identity was not as strong as it had been before she became a parent. Amanda attended school in Colorado for her first-year of college prior to returning to the city in which Great Midwestern University is located. After returning to the city, Amanda discovered she was pregnant. She decided to take a break from her education and did not enroll at the institution right away. Even though she was not enrolled in classes, Amanda often found herself reading books and seeking out information on her own after having her son. She decided to enroll at Great Midwestern University and to get her undergraduate degree in order to achieve her goal of obtaining a Ph.D. down the road.

Amanda reached out to participate in this study later than the first three participants because she did not have a strong connection with any of the academic advisors at Great Midwestern University who actively assisted in the recruitment process. However, she shared during our interviews how excited she was about the study:

> I'm really glad you're doing this. I really hope that-that will, like your research can change campus and kind of how people treat student-parents. Um, I-I definitely feel that there is not a lot of support on campus for student-parents.

Having the opportunity to share her story with others at Great Midwestern University was extremely important to Amanda because she hoped to bring visibility to the TAU student-parent on campus. It was very important to Amanda that the TAU student-parent population be heard.

Overview of Themes

Five central themes emerged from the data as participants shared the experiences, challenges, and successes that impacted their education at Great Midwestern University. The first two themes were (a) becoming a parent creates an immediate salient identity for TAU student-parents and (b) navigating conflicting identities causes role strain that complicates the experiences of TAU student-parents. These themes directly related to the primary research question of how traditionally-aged undergraduate students made meaning of their identities as student-parents. The third theme that emerged was (c) it is hard for TAU student-parents to navigate a traditional four-year institution when their experiences are not traditional, which addressed the first two sub-questions of how the four-year college environment at Great Midwestern University impacted TAU student-parents' identities and the impact that being perceived as traditional students had on TAU student-parents' perceptions of self. The fourth theme that emerged from the data was (d) TAU student-parents must plan ahead in order to effectively navigate and manage their multiple, intersecting identities. This theme tied into the second guiding research question of how TAU student-parents managed their identities. The final theme answered the last sub-question of the systems of support that participants utilized and was (e) emotional and financial support as well as validation of experiences are vital to the academic and personal success of TAU student-parents. These themes and subthemes are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Research Themes and Subthemes

Theme I: Becoming a parent creates an immediate salient identity for TAU student-parents.
• **Change in perspective and/or lifestyle** • **Perceptions of others** • **Perception of self**
Theme II: Navigating conflicting identities causes role strain that complicates the

experiences of TAU student-parents.
- **Student identity**
- **Parent identity**

Theme III: It is hard for TAU student-parents to navigate a traditional four-year institution when their experiences are not traditional.
- **Academic challenges**
- **Lack of peers with similar experiences**
- **Inability to be involved on campus**
- **Identifying as both traditional and nontraditional**

Theme IV: TAU student-parents must plan ahead in order to effectively navigate and manage their multiple, intersecting identities.
- **Setting priorities**
- **Time management**

Theme V: Emotional and financial support as well as validation of experiences are vital to the academic and personal success of TAU student-parents.
- **Family and partners**
- **Friends**
- **Governmental**
- **Institutional**

Theme I: Becoming a parent creates an immediate salient identity for TAU student-parents. The first major theme that emerged from the data tied directly into the primary research question of how traditionally-aged undergraduate students make meaning of their identity as a student-parent. As participants considered their identities before and after having their children, the data suggested that having children considerably impacted the way students thought about their own identity. In particular, three factors seemed to significantly contribute to the way that TAU student-parents thought about their identity: (a) change in perspective and lifestyle, (b) the perceptions of others, and (c) TAU student-parents' perception of self.

Change in perspective and/or lifestyle. According to all four participants, having children was a life-altering experience that impacted not only the way they viewed their own identity but also the way that they viewed the world. Participants described their initial reactions to discovering that they were about to become parents and the way they

view their parenting identity now. For many the transition was a complete 180° change from what they originally anticipated of their lives. Teresa explained, "I didn't think I could get pregnant… I just thought I would be one of those people that never have a child… So when I found out, I was shocked." John shared this thought process and indicated that before finding out that his partner was pregnant, he never anticipated having children. He, like all the participants in this study, was shocked when finding out that he was about to become a parent.

> She [his partner] came down to visit right before we started season last year. She would come up on weekends, but like, one of the times she came up, she was like "Would you break up with me if I told you I was pregnant?" And I was like "What are you talking about?" And she's like "I'm pregnant" and she told me and obviously I was like "No, I'm not gonna break up with you" cuz I'm really not like that… And then she said that there was twins and that's when I was like "Holy shit!"

For Teresa and John, moving away from the idea that they would never have children to unexpectedly becoming parents was an intense, emotional transition. It forced them to think about things that they had never previously considered.

Melissa described her life prior to having her son as quite carefree. Upon discovering that she was pregnant, Melissa was determined to change the course of her life. She elaborated:

> I was a really free-spirit. I didn't have a lot of responsibilities. I was taking a break from college when I found out I was pregnant, so I didn't have a whole lot on my plate besides work. I just kinda was selfish and did like my own thing and hung out with my friends. And, uh, when I got pregnant, that's when I realized that I was like okay I need to go back to school. I need to hurry up and finish this degree cuz (laughing) this is more than just myself now.

For Melissa, having a child gave her the needed motivation to take more responsibility in her life by returning to school. Teresa echoed this idea when she stated that having her daughter was "a wake-up call." She explained, "I woke up right away like, wow. I'm

about to bring another human being into this world. I have to get my shit together." John

also shared his thoughts on the idea of maturity and growing up:

> Cuz I had to, I guess I had to grow up pretty fast. And I guess I lived away from
> home for school most of the time too, so you kinda grow up dong that too, but
> when you have kids you really really grow up. So I'd say maturity-wise I'm a lot
> older [than I was before having children].

The need to grow up after having children seemed to be a consistent theme between

Melissa, Teresa, and John. While Amanda did not speak directly about growing up or

maturing after having her son, all participants agreed that after having their children, their

lives were no longer just their own. Suddenly, there was another human in their lives that

solely depended on them for care—the prospect of which prompted participants to begin

getting their collective "shit" together.

Despite the fact that having children completely altered the participants'

anticipated life trajectories, each one was grateful for their parenting identity. John made

statements such as "it's kinda nice actually now. Actually don't mind it [being a parent]

at all." Amanda indicated that she felt as though her identity as a parent helped her to

make connections between the material she was learning in classes and real life a little

better because she was always looking for connections between what she was learning

and her son. For Teresa, having her daughter was the best thing that could have ever

happened to her.

> It was the best thing to ever happen to me because I don't even know where I
> would be right now if I wasn't, ya know, if I didn't have a child… So I just
> wanted the best for my child and it really just changed my life for the better. So
> I'm thankful.

Like many of the participants, Teresa was unable to imagine what her life would be like

without her child. Even though all the participants' children were the result of

unexpected pregnancies, having children forced the participants of this study to

reconsider their identities and the trajectory of their lives. All participants indicated that

having their children was the best thing to ever happen to them because it made them

rethink who they were and created an immediate identity of *parent*.

    Perceptions of others. The way in which individuals view their own identity is

often impacted by the way that others perceive them. When asked to discuss the way that

they felt they were perceived by peers, faculty, staff, and others in society, nearly all

participants spoke of a split between positive and negative perceptions of their identity as

student-parents. In many cases the split was formed with family and friends on the

positive side of the divide with college peers and society on the negative side of the

spectrum. Melissa described the way that she believed her friends perceived her by

stating that because of her identity as a student-parent, "I think my friends really respect

me and they think highly of me." Many participants could only recall positive perceptions

of their student-parent identity from family and friends close to them. Amanda was the

only participant who also expressed the positive perception that others outside of her

direct friend group had about her identity.

> I don't think it's [the perceptions of others] necessarily negative. The people that
> I tend um, to get closer with as far as faculty and staff know of my abilities and I
> don't like, I tend to be really organized and more of a go-getter. So, um, they see
> that I'm a hard-worker and I think if anything it [being a parent] just kinda adds to
> it. They're like "Oh, and she's a parent? Damn!" You know?

For Amanda, having a strong relationship with faculty was very important because of her

desire to pursue further education in her field of study. Many of the other participants,

however, simply indicated that they did not think faculty perceived them in a positive or

negative light due to their identity as parents because they had not shared their parent

identity unless absolutely necessary.

Teresa shared that she often received a mixed response from her peers when she

chose to reveal that she has a daughter. One instance that particularly stood out to her

was the fact that many of her friends disappeared after she became pregnant and gave

birth. As she explained, "the girl I was roommates with… um, she just basically

disappeared and she didn't really care about it." This was a challenge for Teresa because

she, along with Melissa and John, felt as though others often judged them for their

identity as student-parents—although primarily for their identity as parents. John

described an example of this.

> We were at [local restaurant] a couple weekends ago with [partner's] parents and
> her dad's parents. And we walked in, we had both boys or whatever, and uh, I
> guess people just kinda like watch ya and the thought is like "Oh look at the cute
> little babies!" But in your head you're like, they're probably like (sneering) "Look
> at that!" You know what I mean? It's like, white trash, which I'm not. But I
> mean… it's how I feel.

The idea that young parents are not as good of parents as those who might be more

established was a concept that most participants felt they could relate to. Stereotypes that

abound in society have been a constant struggle for participants to overcome. As the only

male participant in this study, John was able to provide some perspective about societal

stereotypes. When asked about whether the perceptions that society had about young

fathers impacted the way that he thought about himself as a father, John said that it did

play a role.

> I guess, uh, the whole aspect of like, umm, the dads not being there. Like young
> dads always leaving and then paying child support, and that's basically how it
> goes. I didn't want to be like that. I guess that changed how I acted cuz I
> definitely would've, or I have, tried to make my relationship work more than I
> ever would've.

John was able to offer a unique perspective about how society's perceptions of young fathers had an impact on him. Because of societal stereotypes, John indicated that he felt the need to push back against what others might think about him to prove that not all young fathers are alike.

Despite others viewing participants in both a positive and negative manner, nearly all participants indicated that the perceptions of others did not have a very strong impact on how they viewed their own identity. Teresa, Melissa, and John mentioned that they did not care about the negative perceptions that others had of them. John simply explained, "I guess I more so don't really care what people think about me" while both Teresa and Melissa, respectively, elaborated on the fact that they are not impacted by the negative perceptions of others.

> I mean, if they're negative about it… I could care less because it's my life. You know? Um, so it doesn't really affect me. I mean, if people are nice about it, you know, fine… I just, I stopped caring what people think like a long time ago. It's just, if you continue to dwell on that honestly you will never move forward. (Teresa)

> It's kinda one of those things where it's like your opinion of me is none of my business. Unless you're in my direct social group, I don't really reach out to understand what you think about me cuz it's probably not relevant. It's probably not something I care to know. (Melissa)

The ability of participants to separate themselves from the perceptions of others helped Teresa, Melissa, and John feel more positively about themselves as student-parents.

On the contrary, Amanda spoke of the fact that her identity was slightly impacted by the perceptions of others.

> Well I definitely think that if people were to, when they talked about me being a parent more or something, if they were to be negative about it or just… kind of associate negative things when they talk, um, that I would see my identity as a student-parent a lot more negatively. Like "Oh, I shouldn't have done this." But

>people tend to be pretty neutral about it, so I'm pretty neutral or more positive about it for the most part. I just feel like whatever they would, whatever they would give off would kinda feed into what I see of myself.

While Amanda did not necessarily feel more negative about herself as a student-parent than the other participants, the fact that her identity was still somewhat defined by the perceptions of others did leave a door open for her to hold a negative perception of herself when she felt as though others might be judging her. Regardless of their interactions with others, each participant expressed finding comfort in affirmation and validation from their close family and friends. The affirmation that participants received about their ability as student-parents from those close to them played a large role in how they defined their identity. Participants indicated that if they did not have these positive affirmations about their ability to navigate their roles of student and parent, they would have potentially succumbed to being impacted by negative stereotypes.

Perception of self. For the four participants at Great Midwestern University, the way in which they perceived their own ability as student-parents played an essential role in how these TAU student-parents defined their identity. Most participants seemed to have an extremely well-formed perception of self that was not dissuaded by negative experiences or interactions with others. Teresa summarized the strong perception that she had about her own ability as a TAU student-parent when she stated, "I know I'm not doin' anything wrong. I'm taking care of my child, I'm a great mom, and I'm goin' to school. I'm workin'. … I'm good with me." All participants also said things such as "I'm proud of myself," "this experience made me stronger," or "it becomes normal." This concept of being at peace with one's own ability was something that was often expressed by the four participants of this study.

Several participants mentioned a shifting in friend groups after having their children, yet they were rarely hurt when losing a friend. For Melissa, Teresa, and Amanda, the idea of setting expectations for the people in their lives so as to not be brought down by constant negative interactions was important to maintaining their positive perception of self. Melissa explained, "If you're not gonna treat me a certain way or if you're not gonna be, um, someone that's gonna help me achieve my goals, then you're probably not someone that's gonna be beneficial in my life." While participants were not necessarily strongly impacted by the negative perceptions of others, feeling as though they had a certain amount of selectivity in choosing friends who would be understanding of their experiences helped many participants retain their positive perception of their identity.

Participants also indicated the importance that being involved in an academic environment such as Great Midwestern University had on their perception of self. When asked if they would feel different about who they were if they were not in college, all participants mentioned the role that education played in their perception of self. John stated that he would struggle if he was not enrolled in college because "I would probably not think as highly of myself cuz it was like, I gave up on it." Both Amanda and Melissa described a feeling of fulfillment that they gained from their student identity because they were learning and bettering their futures—not only for themselves, but also for their children. Teresa felt the same way as Amanda and Melissa. She explained, "I always say this. Um, I don't wanna just live, I wanna thrive. So I don't wanna survive, I wanna just (pause) have a good life for me and my family." Overall, the participants' strong

perceptions of self seemed to be enhanced by their involvement in the college environment.

Theme II: Navigating conflicting identities causes role strain that complicates the experiences of TAU student-parents. The second major theme that arose from participant interviews and journal entries helped to explore the complex experiences of TAU student-parents and the challenges they face as a direct result of their multiple, intersecting identities. Participants defined their identities in different ways, including but not limited to parent, student, partner, employee, friend, daughter/son, and Juggalo. The multiple and intersecting ways in which participants identified often created role strain that negatively impacted their collegiate experience at Great Midwestern University. The most salient identities for the TAU student-parents in this study were their student identity and their parent identity. Navigating the intersections of these two identities seemed to pose a challenge for participants as they found it difficult to determine when to identify as a student and when to identify as a parent. In the subthemes below, this challenge of navigating multiple, conflicting identities is examined by exploring the moments in which participants indicated one identity taking salience over another.

Student identity. It is impossible to fully separate a TAU student-parent's student identity from their parent identity as they often interact to inform the participant's perspective of a situation. Thus, this subtheme explores the moments in which participants felt as though their student identity needed to precede that of their parent identity. Teresa gave advice to other TAU student-parents that showed how much she valued education and her identity as a student: "If they're [student-parents] not already in

college, you should definitely go to college because you learn so much… You want them

to know, no matter, no matter how hard it is, I feel like getting an education is very

important." For Teresa and the other participants of this study, getting a degree was the

ultimate goal. When first explaining the purpose of the study and my background to

Melissa, she stated that one day she hoped to be where I was. Upon prompting her to

elaborate, Melissa said, "I really want to do a graduate program. My ultimate goal is to

get my Ph.D." The desire to pursue further education was a goal that Amanda also

shared. She stated, "Part of the reason I do research, um, I mean, I like research, but it's

also so I can get, um, experience so I can go onto grad school. I wanna get my Ph.D. in

Clinical Pysch and my, um, JD – my law degree." In her journal, Amanda even wrote

about putting the desire to grow her family on hold in order to pursue her academic goals.

> It is very frustrating to me that I cannot choose to have another baby with my
> husband due to my academic life. I do not know if other women, who have
> careers, get to just 'up and have a baby,' but when you are planning on going to
> graduate school there is *no way* that you can squeeze having another baby into
> your schedule. I even asked a professor, who is also my mentor and whose
> opinion I value very much, if it would be possible for me to have another child
> while I was in graduate school. Her response indicated that I should wait until I
> finish school. Because I want to further my education by going to graduate
> school, I have to put off continuing to build my family. I suppose life is all about
> give and take, and my goals are worth it, but it is very frustrating.

While John did not discuss his future plans in terms of education, he did often mention

that he understood the importance of getting an education and working hard in his classes

to maintain a strong, competitive GPA.

When asked about how being a student-parent impacted her education, Amanda

discussed a particular instance in which she felt guilty for needing to put her parent

identity on hold while working on something for school.

> Like the other day I was doing homework and I felt really bad because I had to say "No, Mommy's working now" and he [her son] kinda, you know, cried and whimpered a little bit. And he went and sat there on the couch and sulked, but then he went to sleep. And it's like, okay, that's the last thing I said to you tonight. That felt really bad, cuz I did – I had to put off my parent identity and just focus on being a student and studying, and then all of a sudden it's like, and now I missed out on that chance tonight. I don't get to be a parent – well I'm always a parent – but I got, I missed out on that interaction. That parent/child interaction. And it's like, well if I had put off studying in those five to ten minutes, I could have studied later.

The primary challenge that the TAU student-parents in this study expressed was determining when they can and should act as students. John explained that because he and his partner were both full-time students at the university during the course of the study, they had to organize their schedules to make sure that none of their class times overlapped so one of them could stay home with the twins. This created an extra challenge for John because he and his partner had to collaboratively work out study times. He explained, "I'm expected to do homework late at night and early into the morning" while his partner worked on her homework primarily during the day. However, John also mentioned that he had become much more motivated to succeed in his academics than he was prior to having children. This idea strongly resonated with both Teresa and Melissa, whereas Amanda seemed to be highly motivated to succeed in academics even before having a child.

    Parent identity. Likewise, it is impossible to fully separate a TAU student-parent's parent identity from their student identity since they often identify as both. Amanda elaborated on this idea when she explained that she attempted to unsuccessfully incorporate her son into her academic life, but she felt frustrated about the fact that others did not seem to understand her identity as a parent. She stated:

I think my identity as a parent comes out more when I'm like doing something student related but with my son. And then when, um, I'm at home being a parent, but I'm also doing homework, my student kind of identity becomes more salient and I notice it more. I think they [my identities] just kinda play off each other… My first semester or two at [Great Midwestern University] I really tried to bring more of my parent identity with me on campus. Like I said, I tried to bring my son with me to things. I wanted him to be exposed to that as well… But I had to scrap that really quick, and I think I'm still kinda upset about that. I'd like to bring him on campus more.

Other participants agreed with Amanda's stated irritation. It was a common theme amongst participants' experiences and statements of needs that they wished Great Midwestern University was more accepting of TAU student-parents bringing their parent identity to campus.

Participants spoke a lot about the challenge of balancing multiple roles and identities while pursuing their degrees. When asked about how he perceived the salience of his student and parent identities and whether one outweighed the other, John responded:

Um, parent. Obviously… I mean, it's not equal though. Cuz probably if, say one of 'em started choking and had to go to the hospital and [my partner] called me and I was on my way to class or at class, I would leave… You know? Um, so in that aspect of things I care more about them than I ever would school.

Despite the fact that John valued his student identity and his education, he explained that "It's kinda one of those things where like in the now, if something were to happen, it's like, I would give up school to make sure they're okay." In this way, John indicated that his parent identity took priority over his student identity most of the time. Teresa agreed with this. She stated, "But now that I have a kid… you can't just push them away. You gotta take care of them." Trying to effectively balance their student and parent identity was something that each participant admitted they struggled with on a daily basis. When thinking about how she determined which identity should take priority, Teresa explained,

"I face like really hard choices sometimes… So it's like, I weigh my options I guess."

Melissa described this same concept by stating, "It's like when your, your self-identity

doesn't match your actions." She explained that she would like to identify as a good

student, but oftentimes her parent identity requires her to make sacrifices in her

academics. For many of the participants in this study, their parent identity often won out

when they weighed which identity would take precedence in a particular situation, yet

this left them with feelings of guilt or disappointment because they were not able to fully

apply themselves to their student identities. At Great Midwestern University, holding

their parent identity as more salient than their student identity was particularly

challenging for participants because a traditional four-year institution generally works

under the assumption that undergraduates are primarily students with few other

responsibilities.

 Theme III: It is hard for TAU student-parents to navigate a traditional four-year institution when their experiences are not traditional. The third theme that

developed from the research was tied to the first sub-question of how the identity of

participants is impacted by the four-year college environment. Also related to this theme

is the second sub-question about the impact of being viewed only as traditional students

because there is not an outward way through which to determine who on campus is a

TAU student-parent. All of the subthemes within this theme are challenges that

participants indicated they faced while attending Great Midwestern University. The

factors that appeared to have the most impact on the four TAU student-parent participants

in this study were: academic challenges, lack of peers on campus with similar

experiences, the inability to be involved on campus, and identifying as both traditional

and nontraditional at the same time. Each of these factors is explored in more detail below.

Academic challenges. While the four participants of this study all indicated that their identity as a student was extremely important to them, many felt as though faculty and staff on campus did not perceive this to be true. Because they were constantly balancing multiple roles, their academic coursework was not always able to take precedence. All participants felt as though they struggled to succeed academically at times, and many spoke about the challenges that they have faced while trying to navigate the four-year college environment of Great Midwestern University in comparison to other colleges that they had previously attended. The primary academic challenge that all participants addressed was occasionally missing class because they needed to care for their children. Teresa elaborated on this idea in her journal.

> [Child] is not feeling very well today so I'll be staying home to keep an eye on her. She's coughing and also running a fever. I'm gonna miss quite a few in class quizzes and attendance points in class, but my daughter comes first. My [class] gives extra credit for attendance and I'll be missing out on 20 points because I've missed two days of class. It's frustrating that some professors don't work with you even when you have a doctor's note or a good reason to miss class.

When invited to speak about how she managed her life as a student-parent, Melissa also spoke about needing to stay home with her son when he was ill even though she hated to miss class.

> And then it's like you have to put, like, (pause) your job or your classes on hold. And it's like, sometimes that doesn't really work. … If you have an exam and your kid can't go to daycare. … I haven't had it happen for an exam. I have had it happen for like, just regular classes that I pr- like I probably should have been at. Especially if it had like math or anything involved. I don't like missing anything with formulas.

Teresa and Melissa's children were both enrolled in a traditional daycare setting whereas

John and Amanda's children had alternative childcare. John's partner watched their

twins when he was in class, and he watched the twins when she had class. Amanda's

extended family watched her son when she had to go to class or conduct research.

However, John could also speak to the experience of needing to miss classes because one

of his sons had recently had heart surgery, which necessitated numerous follow-up

appointments he needed to attend with his partner. He discussed an experience that he

recently had with a professor during which the faculty member did not believe his reason

for missing class.

> Many of my instructors don't believe me when I tell them I have to miss class
> because my sons have developmental class. One instructor even asked me if I
> thought that was an excuse to miss class. Last time I checked, taking care of your
> children is more important… This semester I will lose 6% total on my grade in
> one class because I have missed class three times all related to health issues with
> my son.

Since Amanda's son did not attend a traditional daycare like Teresa and Melissa's

children and had not experienced major health issues like John's children, she indicated

that she was grateful that her family watches her son. When discussing the reason why

she chose family care over a traditional daycare, Amanda mentioned that part of her

decision was because of the fact that her family can still watch her son even when he is

not feeling well. However, Amanda mentioned that she still has encountered situations

where her family is unavailable to watch her son.

> I had a babysitting issue the other day on-campus, and so I had to miss a class and
> it's like… I always sit in the front, and so I talk with the professor sometimes, and
> so they, you know, they know me… Well if they notice that I'm not there, they're
> just gonna think that oh, I'm skipping class or – I mean, they don't know I have a
> child, so it's, they're not necessarily gonna be like, oh she had a babysitting
> conflict.

When asked whether she felt as though she should reach out to her professors in situations where she needed to miss class because she was caring for her child, Amanda responded that she did not feel as though she had that relationship with her professors. Other participants echoed the same sentiment. While some participants felt as though they could share their parent identity with certain professors, they did not want to have to justify their experience or have their professors treat them differently because of their student-parent identity.

When asked to share about resources that participants wished had been available to them on-campus to assist in navigating their lives as TAU student-parents, John voiced that he wished for some kind of attendance forgiveness. He explained, " I don't ever miss class on purpose." Participants felt that their faculty at previous colleges, particularly the local community college, had been much more understanding of their situation as student-parents. Teresa stated, "I feel like the university needs to work more on that, like not everybody's able to. That's one thing I like about [local community college]. They [were] really flexible with that, but [Great Midwestern University] is not as flexible." All participants echoed the desire for Great Midwestern University to be more flexible around the unique needs and experiences of TAU student-parents.

Lack of peers with similar experiences. For many participants, the idea of enrolling at Great Midwestern University was intimidating. When asked about some of the challenges or dilemmas participants experienced in their identity when transitioning into their role as student-parents, many spoke about being uncertain about how the process of being a TAU student-parent worked. Teresa explained the uncertainty she felt about going back to school.

> Like how does this work? That was my biggest question. Like, I didn't really know anyone that, you know, had a child and was going to school at the same time because most of my friends that have kids, they already dropped out of college… And so like, I-I didn't have anyone to relate to. Like I didn't have anyone to guide me, like "Oh hey, since you have a kid now, you know, it's a lot different. You can't do xyz." You know?

As Teresa mentioned, there was no guidebook to being a TAU student-parent. Thus John, Teresa, Amanda, and Melissa spoke of figuring out strategies to manage their student and parent identities (discussed more in Theme IV, below) through a process of trial-and-error because of the fact that they did not know anyone else on campus that identified as a TAU student-parent.

Each participant spoke of their deep desire to find someone who could truly understand their experiences. John described some of his interactions with friends from high school after he became a father and their lack of understanding about his parent identity.

> I'd say that I went from always being around my friends, really sociable to now not so much. Like some of my friends have been like, "Dude, I haven't seen you forever." And I'm like, "Dude, my bad, come see the kids."

This experience that John explored was not singular in nature. While similar, Melissa had a slightly different experience. Her friends from high school who had been with her through the process of becoming a student-parent understood her identity as a parent, but she was unable to make friends with anyone at Great Midwestern University. She shared:

> I see a lot of people like meeting people in class and like hanging out with them outside of class, and I've never done that. Like, I've never made a friend at the university. I always have friends outside of the university or friends that I had prior… So it's like, that's one thing I kinda wish was different. I wish I could meet more people, but I don't have a lot of freedom as far as like 'Oh, let's go get coffee after class' or you know, 'Let's study tonight.' Things like that [are difficult].

Participants often spoke of traditional college students making last minute plans, yet their peers did not realize that as TAU student-parents they could not drop their other responsibilities for something that had not been prearranged.

For Teresa, Melissa, John, and Amanda it was not enough for someone to just empathize with their experiences as TAU student-parents. Participants found it very important to build a relationship with peers who had similar experiences to their own. Amanda elaborated on the need to find other TAU student-parents in her journal.

> When you meet another student-parent, there is almost an instant understanding of one another's school-life, more or less. A student who is not a parent cannot even imagine the ways that you must give-and-take in your schedule to time manage and cope with stress, but another student-parent does and may even have tips and advice or could become a potential study partner.

Melissa agreed that it would be nice if there were a way to find out if there were more TAU student-parents on campus. In a four-year institution like Great Midwestern University, participants indicated that there was no way to tell which students might also be student-parents. Unlike the local community college where nontraditional students were more common and it might be a more common occurrence to see a student bring their child with them to campus, this did not happen at Great Midwestern University. As a result, all four participants indicated that they often felt lonely or isolated on campus because of their inability to find peers with similar experiences.

Inability to be involved on campus. When invited to share how their salient social identities impacted their experience at Great Midwestern University, nearly all of the participants spoke about their inability to have a "normal" college experience. For the group of TAU student-parents participating in this study, it was very difficult to be perceived as traditional students on-campus because they were not able to take advantage

of the same opportunities that traditional undergraduate college students could. Teresa

explained:

> Like I go, basically go to school just to get my degree and just [feel] really bored.
> I feel like I'm not able to like be in clubs and all that other stuff that comes with
> it. … And I can't study abroad, which was part of my plan. You know, like, just,
> like, stuff like that I can't do anymore.

While it once had been important to her to get involved in different ways on campus,

Teresa no longer felt she was able to do so after becoming a parent. Melissa agreed that

it was challenging to be involved at Great Midwestern University, especially as a single

parent, because she did not have time to get involved between working and caring for her

son. The only participant who indicated that they had tried to continue being actively

involved at Great Midwestern University after having their child was Amanda.

> Before I was involved in a lot of student activities… especially getting into
> college, I got involved in more student activities. My freshman year, you know, I
> could do that as a normal student. But when I became a parent, I wasn't, um, able
> to take my son with me. I learned that *very* quickly. Um, I would get looks or,
> you know, people would have to stop talking if they were giving a presentation,
> even if I would ask [if I could my bring my son], you know. I-I remember I went
> to this Psi-Chi presentation once and… I asked the president, "Hey, can my son
> come with?" And, uh, they said that would be fine, I bet the people would love it.
> You know, they love kids. And um, many of the present – like the presenters did
> have kids. But I could feel like the other students just weren't happy that my son
> was there cuz I mean, he-he was two. He does make noise. But, um, we ended
> up having to leave. We did that about twice. Um, we-we did that about twice,
> um, before I learned pretty quickly, you know, that I can't do that.

The frustration and resentment that Amanda felt toward the institution when retelling this

experience was almost palpable. She voiced that she was still hurt that she could not

bring her son with her to campus activities because she thought it was good for his

development to see her in a student role.

On the contrary, John spoke about the fact that he felt as though he could still be

somewhat involved in the university, although to a lesser extent than he was previously.

In his first interview, John stated, "You can still do all the things, um, study, doing group functions and stuff, um, as long as you're with the other person still." By the time this research study was published, John and his partner had separated. Because of how recently the split had occurred, John's emotions were still quite raw. Thus, he did not feel comfortable addressing how his perspective on this topic may have changed. Regardless of their opinions about their ability to be involved in activities at Great Midwestern University, all participants indicated that there had been a decline in their involvement since becoming parents.

   Identifying as both traditional and nontraditional. Most participants indicated that they identified as both traditional and nontraditional students, which made it challenging to be perceived solely as traditional students at Great Midwestern University based on their age. Teresa discussed the dichotomy of feeling as though she identified as both traditional and nontraditional when asked if she identified more strongly with one segment of the population.

> I would say probably a little bit of both. Just because, um, nontraditional students are a lot older and, um, I'm on the younger side I guess. But I can relate to them [nontraditional students] with, like, that most of them have kids and, you know, they have to provide for their family… I don't know if it's the same way for other people, but I feel like I can relate to both… in certain ways. And in other ways I feel like I just, I'm just like right in the middle.

John appeared to mostly agree with Teresa's analysis of how she defined her identity as both a traditional and a nontraditional student. While he seemed to personally identify a little closer to the traditional side of the spectrum, John mentioned, "I'm definitely not only a nontraditional based student, but I would say that you can be traditional based too." Amanda described the way she identified in a slightly different manner. Amanda indicated that she always identified primarily as nontraditional; Melissa agreed. Both

Amanda and Melissa had taken breaks from school prior to becoming student-parents, so it was possible that impacted the way they viewed their identity as being traditional or nontraditional. However, Amanda expanded on her identity a little bit more when she made a clear distinction that "I guess in the social aspects of like the university life I don't identify as traditional. But as far as academics go, I would say I'm pretty traditional." Despite the fact that Amanda had identified as solely a nontraditional student when originally describing her identity, it emerged through reflection on her experiences that she did in fact consider herself to be both traditional and nontraditional. While Melissa never indicated that she felt as though she was in fact a traditional student, she did express excitement that, "this semester will be the first time I'll actually be able to go to like those out-of-class study review sessions and things that they hold at night." All participants believed that institutions should not be so apt to define someone as solely traditional or solely nontraditional. Even though some of their other life experiences or responsibilities may have pushed them a little further to one side of the traditional/nontraditional spectrum, participants believed that their identities as both traditionally-aged undergraduate students and parents put them somewhere more in the middle of the spectrum and not necessarily at a particular end.

Theme IV: TAU student-parents must plan ahead in order to effectively navigate and manage their multiple, intersecting identities. Each of the four participants discussed the importance of developing strategies in order to successfully navigate their multiple, intersecting identities and succeed in college. While everyone had their own unique approach to balancing these multiple roles, there were a few common themes that emerged from interviews and participant journals. The strategies

that seemed to be most effective in helping TAU student-parents manage their intersecting identities were ones that involved planning ahead, such as (a) setting priorities and (b) time management. These two strategies are explored in the subthemes below. While support from others also played an integral role as a strategy to navigate intersecting identities, this will be discussed in more depth in Theme V.

    Setting priorities. Three of the four participants specifically mentioned that setting priorities was vital to navigating their intersecting identities of student and parent. When Melissa was asked how she navigated her life as a student-parent, she responded by stating, "I'm trying to prioritize first and then make moves based on that." Amanda agreed that setting priorities was important to her success. She explained that her approach to setting priorities was making lists. By making lists, Amanda was able to see the big picture of what tasks needed to be completed and then she approached it by tackling the one with the highest priority first. In some cases that might be an assignment that was due the following day, while in other cases it might be that she had no homework due in the immediate future and could take some extra time to clean her house or play with her son. Setting priorities was also important to Teresa, who said that she had to write everything done in order to get things done. A priority that Teresa identified was making sure that she did not fail any classes because she would lose her eligibility for financial aid if she did.

> I can't fail any classes. Like I have to get a *C* and above…. And also I'm trying to raise my GPA to like a 3.5 or a 3.7 before I graduate. So like, I'm tryin' to get *A*'s and *B*'s. So in order to get that, I *have* to study, you know? So I-I do stay up a lot. I stay up late a lot.

After picking up her daughter from daycare, Teresa mentioned that her focus would shift and that her daughter became her number one priority. Yet her desire to do well in

school would often force Teresa to make difficult sacrifices in order to get everything completed in a timely fashion. At one point she expanded upon the difficulty of sacrificing certain aspects of her life in order to balance everything: "It is challenging, you know. But usually, um, I just do what I have to do, you know. Like if I have to stay up all night, so be it." The TAU student-parents involved in this study indicated that they did not have the luxury to just hope that everything worked out. Planning ahead by setting priorities was vital to the success of TAU student-parent participants at Great Midwestern University.

Time management. Time management and planning ahead was another strategy that three participants indicated they used when navigating their identities as TAU student-parents at Great Midwestern University. John mentioned that he and his partner kept their twins on "a strict schedule as far as eating and sleeping." He explained that this helped him to plan his study time around their nap schedules so he did not always have to stay up extremely late. Similar to this, Amanda described the importance of having routines. She explained that she uses "a lot of routines… As far as homework and scheduling goes, it's pretty much the same. So I try to keep everything the same, um, at least week-to-week if not day-to-day." Like Amanda and John, Teresa talked about the importance of scheduling in her day-to-day life. She also discussed using resources like a planner to help her with time management and planning ahead. She explained:

> Basically I have a schedule and I write everything down. If I don't write it down, I forget, you know. So with so much going on, I-I-I remembered something and then like five minutes later I don't know what it was. So like, I write everything down and I have a list every day that I have to check to make sure that I get everything done. Um, I keep a planner, a daily planner, where I write everything like appointments and all that good stuff to make sure, yeah, to make sure I have, you know, something to look at and get everything done on time.

By sticking to a strict routine or following some sort of schedule, John, Amanda, and Teresa were able to determine trends in time management that worked for them and trends that did not. Amanda and Teresa also mentioned that having a routine helped them quite a bit more now than it used to because they have toddlers. Toddlers, they believed, were able to better understand that there were times when participants need to be studying at home and could not spend that time playing. Participants believed that out of a force of habit their children would begin to automatically associate a particular time of the day with their study time after it had become a set routine.

Theme V: Emotional and financial support as well as validation of experiences are vital to the academic and personal success of TAU student-parents. The final theme that emerged from participant interviews and journals helped to pinpoint the reason that TAU student-parents felt as though they were able to pursue their desire to get an education while raising children. Being a student-parent and raising a child while attending college at Great Midwestern University was something that participants described from lived experience as drastically different than being a traditional undergraduate student who did not have a child, and therefore participants constantly referenced the meaningfulness of finding support from others—both outside and within the institution. The elements of support that participants express as having the greatest impact on their needs and experiences as TAU student-parents at Great Midwestern University were: (a) family and partners, (b) friends, (c) government, and (d) institutional. In some cases, participants indicated that they had a strong system of support from one of these resources, while in other situations participants desired to have

more support. Each of these systems of support is examined in detail in the below

subsections.

   Family and partners. Family and partners were the largest system of support that

each participant identified as positively influencing their ability to successfully manage

their student identities and parent identities. When John explained his parents' reaction

to finding out that he was about to become a father, he said, "At first they were kinda

concerned, but not for very long. Um, they started buying stuff like three weeks after I

told them." Like John's parents, all of the other participants indicated that their parents

were originally disappointed to discover that their children were unexpectedly going to

become parents, but they have since come around and now provide an essential level of

support.

   Teresa and Melissa both explained the financial support that they occasionally

received from their parents while pursuing their undergraduate degrees. In Teresa's

situation, her mother lived overseas. Yet she explained, "When I was, uh, I think I

wasn't workin', they send me money. My whole family, like they all came together and

they, um, put some money together… Even though they're not here, they are an amazing

support." Melissa echoed her gratefulness for her mother's willingness to help her

financially. After being forced to withdraw from classes at Great Midwestern University

partway through the spring semester, Melissa called her mother.

> She's like, "Well, I guess we'll have to have you go to the [local community
> college]." And then she said she's gonna help me pay for it, which I'm so
> thankful for because if she didn't do that, I would not be able to go back to school
> for a long time. And I don't know if I can get approved for financial aid at [local
> community college] right now, even though I'm not at [Great Midwestern
> University]. I don't know how that works. So I'm gonna look into that, but if I
> don't have financial aid at all, my mom's gonna help me pay for those classes out
> of pocket.

Even though Teresa and Melissa both worked twenty-hours or more while pursuing their undergraduate degrees and raising their children, they were extremely grateful for the financial and emotional support that they receive from their family.

Emotional support was another element of support that participants indicated they received from their family and partners. Amanda explained that her son was not enrolled in a traditional daycare setting and was instead watched by family members. She also discussed the support that she had received from her partner: "When I made my transition into student… he became the full-time, stay-at-home dad." Without this support from her partner, Amanda did not know if she would have been able to return to school. Teresa did not go into detail about the type of support that she received from her partner, but she did indicate that he had been one of her biggest sources of support. As the only student-parent of multiple children, John mentioned the importance of having his partner's help raising their twin boys:

> It definitely helps that [my partner] is still with me. So that's like another motivation to try to stay with the person you're with, because even if like in the long run it doesn't work out, at the time they're definitely there to help. And like, you need to like – it takes two to parent two kids.

John and his partner separated between the first and second interview. He was not comfortable discussing the emotional transition of becoming a single student-parent, so he simply stated that the separation from his partner "has torn me apart." Losing one of his greatest sources of support was emotionally taxing.

While she was no longer in a relationship with her partner, tough love was an aspect of support that Melissa indicated she received from her mother.

> My mom always demands better from people, even me. Like, if I'm not living up to my potential, she's like 'You're better than this. Like you should not be

settling for anything less than what you're capable of' and all those things. So um, to have someone that loves you enough to give you the tough love, that's very important.

All participants seemed to be able to find this love and support from someone in their family, whether it was parents or partners. Regardless of the party, family support emerged as a necessity for these TAU student-parents to feel as though it was possible to pursue an education at Great Midwestern University.

Friends. A vital system of support for many of the participants of this study was friends. For most participants, the friends that they discussed as sources of support were relationships that they had maintained for some time—whether they were friends from high school or from their workplace. Melissa explained that her friends could take a rough day and help to completely turn it around: "My friends, they always, like if I'm having a hard day, they're like 'You're doing such a good job! Like, you're, look how for you've come!' Like they give those little pep talks, so that's always nice." This affirmation and validation from friends really helped Melissa to get through moments when she was feeling down about herself and her abilities as a student-parent.

Teresa found support from a former supervisor turned friend. When she discovered that she was pregnant, she had already moved out of her apartment and was about to leave for Basic Training.

> I found out I was pregnant and so I told her… We started talking and, um, when she knew I didn't really have a place, she took me in. I was sleeping in her house for like almost four months. And I had really bad morning sickness. I couldn't even get up off the bed. I was just sick. Oh my gosh, I felt like death. (laughing) And she really took care of me like her own, so I was really thankful for that.

Without the support from this friend, Teresa indicated that she did not know what she would have done after finding out that she was pregnant. Amanda shared a similar

feeling of thankfulness and often discussed how grateful she was that her best friend

shared her experience of being a student-parent.

> I mean, it's always nice to have support there—especially when it's one of your
> main support sources that takes the journey with you. Um, and then she's also a
> student at [local community college], and so we kinda, sometimes we used to get
> our sons together and we would try to do homework. It didn't really work out
> cuz, you know, we ended up talking and stuff… It's somebody I can vent to who
> shares my almost identical experience.

Thus, Amanda and her best friend were able to understand each other's experiences and

support one another through challenging times. Participants explained that the emotional

rollercoaster of life transitions as one becomes a parent is only intensified if student-

parents do not have friends who will support their decision to parent and pursue

education. Having close friends with whom they felt comfortable sharing their

experiences and venting proved to be absolutely essential to the participants' feelings of

emotional well-being.

     Governmental. For Amanda, Teresa, and Melissa, the ability to utilize

government resources and sources of support was a large reason why they were able to

stay enrolled at the university. Melissa elaborated on this when she said, "If it wasn't for,

um, the SNAP program or the daycare assistance, like, I would not be able to make it

because I can't work [a high-paying job]." Without the daycare assistance that Melissa

used to help pay for her son's childcare, she would be forced to work full-time. Even

working full-time, however, she indicated that she would barely be making enough to

afford everything she needed to survive because she does not yet have the skills or degree

to earn a high-paying job. Teresa credited the food stamp program as a major source of

support for her family to balance out their limited income with their high expenses.

Amanda also indicated that the government had played a positive and negative role in her

support system. While she agreed with Teresa and Melissa that she likely would not be

able to pursue her degree without the resources the government had to offer, she also

indicated how frustrating it was to depend on this resource.

> I had to like document my hours that I was doing things and I went through this
> big nightmare about tryin' to figure out if my research hours counted for childcare
> or not. I got told they did, then they didn't, then they did, then they didn't. And
> they said, um, well no. Eventually they went through the books and they found
> out they [the research hours] don't. And I said, 'Well I can't get into grad school
> unless I'm, you know, doing something. Um, you know, either an internship or
> volunteer work' – cuz volunteer work, internships, all that doesn't count for
> childcare.

The challenge of determining whether she would be eligible to receive childcare

assistance while doing the work needed to eventually be accepted into graduate school

left Amanda feeling confused about whether or not the government was actually a

support system for student-parents. In the end, however, it seemed as though the

positives of governmental support outweighed the negative experiences.

In addition to the financial support that the three female participants of this study

utilized, Melissa also indicated that she received emotional support through the

Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS).

> They have, like, nurses that go to different homes. I had to apply and be
> interviewed for it—they obviously don't have enough for every single person,
> but-but it's been helpful. And they always check to make sure that you're doing
> like mentally okay. Like postpartum depression, like they check for all that stuff.
> They have little surveys that you just fill out to see how you're doing. It just felt
> nice knowing that somebody was there if I needed them.

Even though none of the other participants indicated receiving a similar service from

DHHS, Melissa explained that this source of emotional support had a huge impact on

her—especially during the first few months postpartum when she was adjusting to her

new role as a parent.

Institutional. While participants indicated that their experiences at Great

Midwestern University had been complicated because of their student-parent identity,

many still indicated the importance of finding support from an individual within the

campus community—primarily in the form of academic advisors. For John, who

transferred to Great Midwestern University in the 2014-2015 academic year to be with

his partner and children, the transition to GMU was not necessarily seamless. Despite the

rocky transition of getting his academic credits to transfer from his previous institution to

GMU, he said that his academic advisor had been a great support in ensuring that he did

not take unneeded courses.

> So like, just looking at a degree audit and seeing that like your counselor – or
> advisor – um, does things for you to like help you out and whatnot cuz it's always
> nice to see total credits remaining go down when it's like I've already had those
> credits.

Teresa had similar feelings toward her advisor, who also helped her transition back into

Great Midwestern University after attending a local community college. She explained

that her advisor basically laid everything out for her and indicated what she needed to do

to get re-enrolled in the university. Despite feeling as though Great Midwestern

University was not as flexible or understanding of her needs as a TAU student-parent,

Teresa said that her advisor had played an influential role in her education.

> Some of them [administrators and staff at GMU] do listen to you and they hear
> you out. So I think that's, you know, I think that's amazing honestly. If it wasn't
> for like [my advisor], I seriously wouldn't be in school right now.

The importance of having an academic advisor who was willing to listen was a theme

that Melissa echoed when she explained that her academic advisor was the only faculty or

staff member at Great Midwestern University who knew of her identity as a student-

parent: "My advisor knows because I was pregnant when I first started back at the

university and I talked to her about that. And we've discussed a lot of the challenges that I've faced." As positive as John, Teresa, and Melissa's interactions were with their academic advisors, Amanda indicated a lack of connection with her academic advisor. She explained, "I guess I've met with my, like, Psych advisor once or twice, but not enough that they know my name or I know theirs." While she did not necessarily seem upset about this fact, it did appear as though Amanda was disappointed that she did not view her academic advisor as an advocate willing to help her reach her goals.

Even though these sources of support within the institution played a crucial role in participants feeling as though they were able to continue pursuing their education, participants indicated that Great Midwestern University still had a lot to do in order to meet the needs of TAU student-parents and support them in their quest for education. Participants mentioned the challenge of socially connecting with peers at Great Midwestern University as explored in Theme III. For this reason, Amanda mentioned a desire for the institution to provide some space in which these social interactions could occur.

> I wish they [the institution] would offer some sort of way to socially connect with other student-parents. Almost like, I know there's like a process you go through for creating an organization or a club, but I wish like there was one of those or something.

Melissa agreed with this idea. Additionally, she desired a forum at the institution that would bring other student-parents together to talk about their shared experiences. Through this, Melissa hoped that TAU student-parents would be able to support one another through their educational journeys and provide one another with potential strategies for successfully navigating a four-year environment geared primarily toward the needs of traditional undergraduate students with limited outside responsibilities.

Conclusion

This research study explored the multiple dimensions of identity in traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents, the meaning that participants made of their student-parent identity, and the impact that attending a four-year public research institution had on the identity development and renegotiation of participants. Five primary themes emerged from interviews and the journal entries of four self-identified TAU student-parents. These themes explored the intersecting identities of participants, how participants think about their own identity, the challenges participants face while attending Great Midwestern University, as well as the strategies and support that participants utilize to be successful in their pursuit of education. The next chapter will discuss the meaning and implications of these findings. Potential best practices for working with TAU student-parents will be explored and ideas for future research will be suggested.

Chapter Five

Discussion

Introduction

Traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents are an overlooked student population on college campuses, often because they comprise a moderately small portion of the undergraduate student population. Professionals in higher education cannot easily identify TAU student-parents unless these students decide to self-report as members of the population. This is because TAU student-parents visibly appear to be traditional undergraduate students with no major responsibilities other than their academics—thus fitting the general student demographic toward which Great Midwestern University's resources cater. However, TAU student-parents are a growing student population on college campuses with needs and goals that differ from other traditional undergraduate students without children. As traditionally-aged undergraduate students are drawn to college to improve their human capital and socioeconomic status, understanding the way that the four-year college environment may impact the identity development and renegotiation of TAU student-parents and the support these students need in order to be successful academically is essential to retaining this population.

Summary of Research

In order to explore the meaning that four traditionally-aged undergraduate students-parents at Great Midwestern University made of their student-parent identity, this study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What meaning do traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents make of their student-parent identity?

a. How does the four-year college environment shape the identity of

participants?

b. What impact does being perceived as traditional students have on

participants' identity?

2. How do traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents manage their identity?

a. What resources for support do participants utilize?

Four participants took part in two semi-structured interviews and wrote brief journal entries about their experiences as TAU student-parents during the three to four weeks between interviews. Both of these methods of data collection allowed for participants to share their unique lived experiences in their own voices.

This chapter will discuss the five central themes explored in chapter four and make connections to previous literature about student-parents in higher education and teenage parents. Additionally, recommendations for practice and future research will be provided.

Summary of Findings

Five central themes emerged from the data gathered in this study: (a) becoming a parent creates an immediate salient identity for TAU student-parents; (b) navigating conflicting identities causes role strain that complicates the experiences of TAU student-parents; (c) it is hard for TAU student-parents to navigate a traditional four-year institution when their experiences are not traditional; (d) TAU student-parents must plan ahead in order to effectively navigate and manage their multiple, intersecting identities; and (e) emotional and financial support as well as validation of experiences are vital to the academic and personal success of TAU student-parents. Subthemes for each of these

central themes were developed to more fully explore the lived experiences of participants at Great Midwestern University. Factors that contributed to participants' need to reconsider their identity were *changes in perspective and/or lifestyle,* the impact of the *perceptions of others*, and finally the *perception of self.* Participants mentioned their *student identity* and *parent identity* were most salient to their definition of self and the conflict caused by these two identities impacted their college experience at Great Midwestern University. Factors that impacted the way that participants navigated GMU included *academic challenges,* a *lack of peers with similar experiences,* the *inability to be involved on campus,* and *identifying as both traditional and nontraditional.* Strategies that participants used to plan ahead in order to navigate their intersecting identities while in college were *setting priorities* and *time management.* Finally, the systems of support that participants thought were vital to achieving academic and personal success were *family and partners, friends, government,* and *institutional.* Regardless of the fact that all participants had different backgrounds and different lived experiences, each of themes and subthemes seemed to resonate with at least three out of the four participants.

Discussion and Connections to Literature

As explored in Chapter Two, numerous research studies have been conducted about teenage and adult student-parents. This study helped to fill a gap within the existing literature by exploring the needs of traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents at a four-year institution in the Midwest. Thematic connections between the research findings of this study and previous literature are discussed below.

Becoming a parent creates an immediate salient identity for TAU student-parents. Not only did becoming a parent create an immediate salient identity for the

participants of this study, it also helped them to mature and assisted in the creation of a

well-developed meaning-making filter. Having an immediate salient identity of *parent*

forced participants to reconsider the direction of their lives. Participants reported that it

was important for them to believe that they would be successful in their parent identities

in order to effectively navigate the four-year collegiate environment at Great Midwestern

University. The strong perception of self that was explored in Chapter Four helped

participants to filter out what they perceived to be negative perceptions from others.

Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) discussed the importance of individuals moving toward

determining their own identities instead of basing their identities on the assumptions of

others. Being involved in the four-year environment at GMU helped in strengthening

participants' meaning-making filter as participants indicated that they would feel

differently about their identities and their abilities as parents if they were not enrolled at

the institution. Pursuing a four-year degree while balancing multiple roles helped

participants to feel that they were able to accomplish anything and that the societal

stereotypes of young parents were false.

Navigating conflicting identities causes role strain that complicates the

experiences of TAU student-parents. All participants strongly identified as both

students and parents, which caused a role strain when they were forced to act in one

identity instead of the other. Identifying as parents was the primary cause of this role

strain, as their parent identity was what primarily separated participants from their

similar-aged traditional undergraduate peers at Great Midwestern University. Despite

this, participants described that by actively engaging in the roles of student and parent,

they realized they were capable of more than they had previously imagined. This helped

participants feel as though it was feasible to be successful as TAU student-parents even though balancing the two roles was challenging.

Furthermore, identifying as parents was something that motivated participants to persist in their education. This finding aligns with previous research (Huff, 1997; Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; Mohney & Anderson, 1988), and leads to the assumption that TAU student-parents are generally motivated to do well academically because of their identity as parents. Higher education professionals should be conscious of the fact that identifying as a parent often creates a drive for student-parents to pursue education instead of assuming that student-parents do not care about their studies. Additionally, this study shows that TAU student-parents may be more motivated to receive a degree than their similar-aged peers who do not have major external responsibilities since participants spoke highly about the importance of completing their education after having their children.

It is hard for TAU student-parents to navigate a traditional four-year institution when their experiences are not traditional. Participants indicated that it was very challenging to be enrolled at an institution that did not seem to understand or accommodate their unique needs as student-parents—something that profoundly affected their ability to successfully transition into the role of being TAU student-parents at Great Midwestern University. Academic challenges, particularly needing to miss class to care for a child, was something each participant had previously encountered and anticipated encountering in the future as well. Previous research studies have explored the role strain caused by needing to miss class to care for a child because childcare was unavailable (Brown & Nichols, 2012; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Yakaboski, 2010). Participants of

this study echoed previous research findings and felt as though the role strain caused by choosing their parent identities over their student identities negatively impacted their academic success. With the growing population of TAU student-parents at four-year institutions, it is important for higher education professionals to consider how they can help reduce the role strain that student-parents feel, particularly when these students feel forced to choose between their student identities and parent identities.

It was particularly challenging for participants to feel welcomed at Great Midwestern University since the institution was primarily focused on the needs of traditional undergraduate students with no major external responsibilities. As previous research studies indicate, there is a role strain caused by feeling judged by traditional undergraduate peers and university staff (Brooks, 2012; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Home, 1998; Van Meter & Agronow, 1982). The participants of this study also felt judged by their traditional undergraduate peers and university staff at GMU. Additionally, the perceived lack of peers with similar experiences at Great Midwestern University was a challenge faced by participants. Not knowing anyone at GMU who shared the experience of being a TAU student-parent left participants feeling extremely isolated on a campus that they already perceived as unwelcoming. Higher education professionals should work to make four-year institutions inclusive of student populations whose primary focus might not be their academics in order to help student-parents successfully navigate the four-year collegiate environment and achieve a degree.

TAU student-parents must plan ahead in order to effectively navigate and manage their multiple, intersecting identities. Participants seemed to primarily use two strategies to assist them in their transition of becoming traditionally-aged

undergraduate student-parents at Great Midwestern University: setting priorities and time management. Being engaged in a four-year collegiate environment and the desire to be successful in their student identities necessitated that participants change the way they had previously approached managing their academic lives prior to becoming parents.

Previous research studies about student-parents in higher education do not thoroughly explore the strategies that student-parents feel they need to utilize in order to be successful in the collegiate environment. This study suggests that planning ahead through setting priorities and having a strategy for time management are key factors for TAU student-parent success in college. Thus, it is important for higher education professionals to consider that TAU student-parents depend on planning ahead and use strict routines to navigate their multiple identities. Being placed in work groups with traditional undergraduate students or being required to attend an event for class can complicate the routines of student-parents, making it more challenging for TAU student-parents to be successful in both their parent identities and student identities. By being conscious of TAU student-parents' need to plan ahead, higher education professionals can help student-parents reduce the role strain that is caused when their student and parent identities are in conflict.

Emotional and financial support as well as validation of experiences are vital to the academic and personal success of TAU student-parents. Support played a vital role in helping the participants of this study navigate their student-parent identities and their transition to being traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents at Great Midwestern University. Goodman et al. (2006) described support in terms of social support. Four primary types of support were explored: intimate relationships, family

units, networks of friends, and institutions and communities (Goodman et al., 2006).

Among the four participants of this study, they described sources of support filling all

four types of support identified by Goodman et al. Participants in this study described the

importance of support from family and partners, friends, the government, and the

institution. This study sheds light on the support systems needed for TAU student-

parents to be successful at a four-year institution.

Additionally, it is significant to note that each participant indicated that their

primary systems of support were external from Great Midwestern University with the

exception of academic advisors. This is problematic for the four participants of this study

who indicated that they did not feel as though GMU cared about their unique experiences

as TAU student-parents. Four-year institutions like GMU are primarily geared toward

the needs of traditional undergraduate students with limited external responsibilities

outside of their academics, so most higher education professionals and educators are used

to primarily considering the needs of traditional undergraduate students. As a result, the

participants of this study felt unwelcome at GMU because they did not feel supported by

the institution as a whole. This coincides with previous literature about the lack of

support adult student-parents enrolled in four-year institutions were able to find within

the institutional environment (Brown & Nichols, 2012; Duquaine-Watson, 2007;

Marandet & Wainwright, 2010).

According to participants, family and partners were the key sources of support

that helped them to navigate their identity as student-parents at Great Midwestern

University. Participants all mentioned that they would not be able to be enrolled at GMU

if they did not have the emotional and financial support of their families and partners.

This finding supports previous literature about the importance of familial support for the success of teenage parents (Hallman, 2007; Hanson, 1992) and adult student-parents (Brooks, 2012; Mohney & Anderson, 1988) who choose to continue their education after having children. While all the participants of this study had the emotional and sometimes financial support from their families and partners, it is important for higher education professionals to consider the implications of interacting with a single student-parent without familial support. These student-parents would lack the essential support that participants of this and previous research studies indicate is vital to their ability to successfully navigate their student-parent identities and the four-year collegiate environment.

Similarly, participants found support in their network of friends. The affirmation and validation that participants received from their friends about their ability to successfully balance the roles of student and parent helped support them in their transition to Great Midwestern University. This finding was unique, as previous research studies about student-parents did not pay particular attention to the importance of finding support from friends. Thus, it is important for TAU student-parents enrolled in four-year institutions primarily focused on the needs of traditional undergraduate students to maintain a strong network of friends that will validate their unique experiences as student-parents.

Implications for Practice

This study explored the meaning that traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents at a four-year public research institution made of their identities as well as the strategies and support these student-parents needed to be successful at Great Midwestern

University. As a result of this study it appears as though the experiences of TAU student-parents generally align with previous research on adult student-parents, yet TAU student-parents do have unique strategies and systems of support on which they depend. Additionally, it is suggested that while being a TAU student-parent at a four-year research institution like Great Midwestern University may help to strengthen the meaning-making filter of student-parents, there are also numerous challenges within this environment that could negatively impact the experiences and success of student-parents.

Historically it has been noted that higher education administrators did not believe that there would be a permanence of undergraduate student-parents and therefore they believed no changes needed to be made to accommodate the population (Busselen & Busselen, 1975). As time has passed, however, it has become evident that the overlooked population of traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents is not going anywhere and will likely increase (NCES, 2012). The four participants of this study shared the successes and the challenges they have faced while enrolled Great Midwestern University, a four-year research institution that seemingly caters to the needs of a traditional undergraduate population without accounting for the various lived experiences of student-parents enrolled at the institution. As a result of this study, the following recommendations for future practice are suggested.

Missing classes due to a child being ill or because of issues with childcare is a common challenge that student-parents in higher education face. This research study and previous research studies have had participants discuss childcare as a primary difficulty facing student-parents (Brown & Nichols, 2012; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Yakaboski, 2010). Creating an attendance forgiveness policy for TAU student-parents in classes that

give attendance points could help alleviate the role strain that TAU student-parents feel when forced to choose their parent identity over their student identity.

Creating an inclusive environment where TAU student-parents feel comfortable bringing their children to organization meetings or social events on campus is something that institutions should work toward. This was evident in the themes about navigating a traditional four-year collegiate environment when participants' experiences were not traditional. Being involved the typical college experience was something that many of the TAU student-parent participants in this study felt they could not do. Holding events earlier in the day when childcare centers are still open would help TAU student-parents be involved in campus activities. Additionally, student-parents would be more likely to feel comfortable bringing their children to organization meetings if they did not feel judged by the staff, presenters, and their peers. Creating an inclusive environment where student-parents are encouraged to bring their children to events would allow TAU student-parents to feel as though they were truly able to be involved in the typical college experience.

In light of participants experiencing isolation from their peers because of their real and perceived differences as student-parents, they sought to interact with other TAU student-parents at Great Midwestern University. While GMU does offer an orientation session for incoming students geared particularly toward the nontraditional student population, the fact is that TAU student-parents often identify as both traditional and nontraditional students. Thus, a TAU student-parent at Great Midwestern University might not get all the information that they need from the nontraditional student session. In order to provide more than just one opportunity for traditionally-aged undergraduate

student-parents to meet same-age peers with similar experiences, it would be beneficial to create a student organization centered specifically around student-parents and avoid grouping them into a nontraditional student organization. The sharing of challenges and successes can help to support the identity development and renegotiation of TAU student-parents as well as provide them with strategies for navigating an environment that is not necessarily built for their lived experiences (Hallman, 2007; Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; Scott & Lewis; 2012).

The support of academic advisors was also essential for participants in their success at Great Midwestern University. Since all of the participants had originally attended a different college prior to enrolling at GMU, they indicated that having someone willing to assist in the transition to GMU was vital to making sure that they were on the right track in the transfer process. While an advisor might typically question why a student's grades are low, why a student is not on a typical four-year plan, and would not generally encourage a traditional student to work 20+ hours while taking a full load of courses, these were common situations for the TAU student-parents involved in this study. Thus, it is important that academic advisors be open-minded when working with students and conscious of the fact that every person has a unique lived experience.

Recommendations for Future Research

Research on student-parents, particularly traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents, at four-year research institutions is extremely limited. The lack of current research on the topic of TAU student-parents demands that more research studies be conducted in order to explore the experiences of this student population within different collegiate environments. Additionally, the eagerness of participants to share

their stories indicates that there is a lack of knowledge about the way in which TAU student-parents identify and the lived experiences that they have while attending college.

Most of the previous research about the student-parent population has been qualitative in nature in order to explore participants' lived experiences. While more qualitative research focused specifically on traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents is necessary because there is very limited research on this particular segment of the student-parent population, it is also important to incorporate quantitative research studies into the picture. Quantitative research studies about the TAU student-parent population could assist in determining the actual prevalence of this phenomenon on college campuses.

Future research studies about traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents should work to incorporate a diverse group of participants into their sample. Due to the constraints of this study, I was limited in the amount of time that I was able to recruit participants. In the future, research studies should work to incorporate the voices of more student-fathers because these voices are severely lacking in previous research. This would allow for educators interested in learning more about TAU student-parents to know if the experiences of student-mothers differ from their male counterparts. Studies should also examine the experiences of people from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. This study included primarily TAU student-parents who identified as White and one participant who identified as Black. Student-parents with various backgrounds and cultural values may have differing experiences as student-parents and within four-year institutions. They may also have different approaches to negotiating and managing their identities.

As research about TAU student-parents continues to expand, it will be important for studies to explore the best ways to support this population within the context of different types of campus environments. Future research about traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents, should further investigate the ways to support this student population within the four-year college environment—an environment that is not necessarily built to accommodate the needs of student-parents. For example, participants mentioned that the community colleges they had previously attended did a better job of meeting their needs as student-parents. Future studies could examine the supports available at community colleges and offer explanations for why these same supports are not prevalent at four-year institutions like Great Midwestern University. Determining best practices to support TAU student-parents through their collegiate experience can help to increase the retention and completion rates. By better serving the student-parent population at four-year institutions, it is likely that parents without a college degree would choose to enroll in these institutions to increase their human capital and socioeconomic statuses.

Conclusion

This study sought to explore the meaning that traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents make of their student-parent identity while attending Great Midwestern University, a four-year research institution. Four traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents, three female and one male, at the institution excitedly volunteered to share their stories in a desire to improve the experiences of future TAU student-parents at Great Midwestern University. Participants indicated that the transition of becoming a parent made them reconsider their identity in order to make room for their immediate

salient identity as parents. Additionally, it is suggested that while being a TAU student-parent at a four-year research institution like Great Midwestern University may help to strengthen the meaning-making filter of student-parents, there are also numerous challenges within this environment that could negatively impact the experiences and success of student-parents. The findings of this study indicated that participants often had a difficult time navigating the four-year college environment, but they developed strategies and had support systems to assist them in their transition. Implications for practice include creating an attendance forgiveness policy for student-parents who must stay home with a sick child, creating an inclusive environment for student-parents within the four-year institution, and creating a student organization for student-parents through which they could easily connect with other student-parents. Recommendations for future research include continuing to explore the traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parent population through both quantitative and qualitative research studies, particularly focusing on how four-year institutions can best serve this student population. Incorporating a more diverse group of participants into the research sample will also be important in order to explore whether various backgrounds and cultural values create differing experiences and challenges for student-parents.

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Appendix A

Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

November 21, 2014

Paula Caldwell
Department of Educational Administration

Stephanie Bondi
Department of Educational Administration
117 TEAC, UNL, 68588-0360

IRB Number: 20141114827 EX
Project ID: 14827
Project Title: Overlooked and Overshadowed: Exploring the Multiple Dimensions of Identity in Traditionally-Aged Undergraduate Student-Parents

Dear Paula:

This letter is to officially notify you of the certification of exemption of your project by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects. It is the Board's opinion that you have provided adequate safeguards for the rights and welfare of the participants in this study based on the information provided. Your proposal is in compliance with this institution's Federal Wide Assurance 00002258 and the DHHS Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects (45 CFR 46) and has been classified as Exempt Category 2.

You are authorized to implement this study as of the Date of Exemption Determination: 11/21/2014.

1. Your stamped and approved informed consent document has been uploaded to NUgrant (files with Ã¢Â €Â"Approved.pdf in the file name). Please use this document to distribute to participants. If you need to make changes to the informed consent document, please submit the revised document to the IRB for review and approval prior to using it.

We wish to remind you that the principal investigator is responsible for reporting to this Board any of the following events within 48 hours of the event:
* Any serious event (including on-site and off-site adverse events, injuries, side effects, deaths, or other problems) which in the opinion of the local investigator was unanticipated, involved risk to subjects or others, and was possibly related to the research procedures;
* Any serious accidental or unintentional change to the IRB-approved protocol that involves risk or has the potential to recur;
* Any publication in the literature, safety monitoring report, interim result or other finding that indicates an unexpected change to the risk/benefit ratio of the research;
* Any breach in confidentiality or compromise in data privacy related to the subject or others; or
* Any complaint of a subject that indicates an unanticipated risk or that cannot be resolved by the research staff.

This project should be conducted in full accordance with all applicable sections of the IRB Guidelines and you should notify the IRB immediately of any proposed changes that may affect the exempt status of your research project. You should report any unanticipated problems involving risks to the participants or others to the Board.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office at 472-6965.

Sincerely,
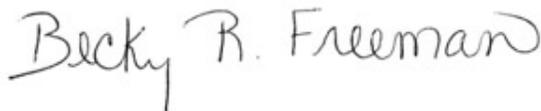
Becky R. Freeman

Becky R. Freeman, CIP
for the IRB

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF Nebraska Lincoln

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN SCIENCES
Department of Educational Administration

Participant Informed Consent Form

Title: Overlooked and Overshadowed: Exploring the Multiple Dimensions of Identity in Traditionally-Aged Undergraduate Student-Parents

Purpose:
The purpose of this study is to examine the meaning traditionally-aged undergraduate student parents make of their student-parent identity. You are invited to participate in this study because you are an undergraduate student-parent between the ages of 19-23 who is enrolled in a four-year institution at least part-time.

Procedures:
You will be asked to participate in two interviews. The interviews are anticipated to last approximately 30-60 minutes each and will be conducted in a private or semi-private location, depending on the preference of the participant. The questions within the first interview focus on how you perceive your identity while the questions within the second interview focus on the how you manage your identity as a student-parent. The interviewer intends to audio-record these interviews. Additionally, a 60-90 minute focus group will occur in which you can interact and share your experiences with other undergraduate student-parents. There will also brief journaling assignments not anticipated to take you longer than 10 minutes each week over the course of one month.

Benefits:
This study will give you the opportunity to reflect on your unique experiences as a traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parent. This may allow you to make greater meaning of this experience and to share your experience with others for the benefit of institutions and future student-parents in higher education.

Risks and/or Discomforts:
There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research.

Confidentiality:
Any information obtained during this study which could identify you will be kept strictly confidential. Pseudonyms will be used for all participants. The data will be stored on a password-protected flash drive and will only be seen by the investigator and thesis advisor(s) during the study. The information obtained in this study may be published in scientific journals or presented at professional conferences, but the data will be unidentifiable.

Opportunity to Ask Questions:
You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study. Or, you may contact the investigator(s) at the phone numbers listed below. Please contact the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review Board at (402) 472-6965 to voice concerns about the research or if you have any questions about your rights as a research participant.

Freedom to Withdraw:
Participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without harming your relationship with the researchers or the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, or in any other way receive a penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Consent, Right to Receive a Copy:
You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that you have decided to participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Signature of Participant:

I give consent to be audio-recorded for this study.   I do not give consent to be audio-recorded for this study.

_____   _____
             Signature of Research Participant   Date

Name and Phone number of investigator(s)
Paula Caldwell, Principal Investigator   Cell: (641) 590-5082
Stephanie Bondi, Ph.D., Secondary Investigator   Office: (402) 472-8977

Appendix C

Recruitment Email

First Recruitment Email: *First email to potential participant pool, through various campus listservs*

Dear UNL advisers:

My name is Paula Caldwell, and I am completing a research study on how traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents understand and make meaning of their student-parent identity. If you know of undergraduate students at your institution who have children, I would appreciate your assistance in recruiting participants for my study. Below is a copy of a recruitment email to send to potential participants whom you may know, and a copy of the Informed Consent form is attached. Please let me know if you have any questions about the research, which has been approved by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln IRB.

Thank you,
Paula Caldwell, Principal Investigator

Dear Student:

A colleague of mine who is a graduate student pursuing her Master's degree at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Paula Caldwell, is conducting a research study on how traditionally-aged undergraduate student-parents understand and make meaning of their student-parent identity.

You are receiving this email because you have been identified as a potential participant for this study. The time requirement would be two 30-60 minute interviews, a 60-90 minute focus group, and brief journaling assignments not anticipated to take you longer than 10 minutes each week over the course of one month.

In order to participate, you must:
1. Be an undergraduate student;
2. Be between the ages of 19-23;
3. Have a least one dependent under the age of 18.

If you are interested in participating, please reply to Paula Caldwell by December 10. There are no known risks involved in this research. If you have any questions about the research, please feel free to contact either Paula or myself through the contact information listed below.

Paula Caldwell, Principal Investigator

Stephanie Bondi, Ph.D., Secondary Investigator

Regards,

[name], [title]

Appendix D

Semi-structured Interview Protocol

Semi-structured Interview Protocol

The purpose of this study is to examine the meaning traditionally-aged undergraduate student parents make of their student-parent identity. Numerous students have explored the experiences of nontraditional student-parents in higher education, all which indicate that there is a role strain between the student and parent identities that this population holds. However, the researcher wants to narrow this focus from nontraditional student-parents to those specifically of a traditional age (19-23).

First Interview Protocol
1. Tell me about yourself.
2. Tell me about a typical day or week in your life.
3. Tell me about your perception of yourself prior to becoming a student-parent? What were your salient social identities?
4. Please describe what the transition was like for you becoming a student-parent (i.e., academically, socially, relationships).
5. What are currently your most salient social identities? How do you feel these identities impact your experience at this university as a student-parent?
6. How do you feel you are perceived by faculty and staff at the institution?
7. How do you feel you are perceived by your peers?
8. How do you think these perceptions held by others impact your own perception of your identity? Do the perceptions that others hold of you make you re-think who you are?
9. Do you think that you would feel different about who you are if you weren't in college?
10. Do you identify with the nontraditional or traditional student population? Tell how you came to this conclusion.

Second Interview Protocol
1. As it has been nearly a month since our last meeting, is there any information that you thought of after our conversation ended which you would like to discuss now?
2. How do you go about navigating life as a student-parent?
3. What is your approach to managing life as a student-parent?
4. What were some of the challenges or dilemmas you experienced in your identity as a student-parent when transitioning to college?
5. What roles did various college offices play during your experience as a student-parent? What resources were available to you? On-campus or off-campus.
6. What has the transition been like for you? What have been your sources of support, institutional or otherwise?
7. How has being a student-parent impacted your education?
8. What advice would you give to another student-parent who was considering enrolling in college?