A PHENOMENOLOGY EXAMINING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF STUDENT MOTHERS AT COMMUNITY COLLEGE

by

Christine Simon

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Liberty University

2020
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2020

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of student mothers in the community college learning environment. Nationally, there are almost five million college students who are parenting a child under age 18, and in Texas, the number is one in four (Galasso, Harris & Sasser-Bray, 2018; Institute for Women’s Policy Research [IWPR], 2017; Noll, Reichlin, & Gault, 2017). Self-determination theory (SDT) by Deci and Ryan (2000, 2008) guided this inquiry by providing the lens to examine the lived experiences of student mothers. The central research question was: What is the lived experience of student mothers in the learning environment at community colleges in Texas? Participants were ten adult women community college students who were fulfilling parenting roles for their children under age 18. The settings were a large city, midsize city, and suburb-size community colleges located in Texas. Data collection consisted of individual interviews, a focus group, a self-report survey and were analyzed according to Moustakas’ (1994) methods. The three themes that emerged were: (a) access to and utilization of resources and services contribute to the ability to persist, (b) student-faculty interactions influence perceptions of the learning environment, (c) student services departments provide needed information to persist in college, and (d) student peer interactions are limited for student mothers with younger children but increase in program specific courses. Findings indicated the learning environment at community college is encouraging and supportive of student mothers. Implications from the results corroborate: the expanded use of SDT in developing supportive learning environments for student mothers, the need for resources and programs that assist with reducing nonacademic barriers, and finally student-faculty interactions were most influential on perceptions of the learning environment and on academic persistence.
Keywords: student mothers, persistence, community college, learning environment
Table of Contents

ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................................................ 3

List of Tables ...................................................................................................................................... 11

List of Figures .................................................................................................................................... 12

List of Abbreviations .......................................................................................................................... 13

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................ 14

Overview ........................................................................................................................................... 14

Background ......................................................................................................................................... 15

  Historical ........................................................................................................................................ 17

  Social ............................................................................................................................................. 20

  Theoretical .................................................................................................................................... 23

Situation to Self ................................................................................................................................. 24

  Ontological ................................................................................................................................. 25

  Epistemological .......................................................................................................................... 25

  Rhetorical ..................................................................................................................................... 26

  Axiological .................................................................................................................................... 26

  Paradigm ....................................................................................................................................... 27

Problem Statement ............................................................................................................................ 27

Purpose Statement ............................................................................................................................ 29

Significance of the Study ................................................................................................................... 29

  Empirical .................................................................................................................................... 29

  Theoretical ................................................................................................................................... 30

  Practical ....................................................................................................................................... 30

Research Questions ........................................................................................................................... 31
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Definitions</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Determination Theory</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult Learning</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Related Literature</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Environment (LE)</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional and Nontraditional Students</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Mothers</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Parents and Single Mothers</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Mothers and Persistence</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Mothers and the Learning Environment (LE)</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER THREE: METHODS</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Research Question</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subsequent Research Questions</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participants.......................................................................................................................... 78

Procedures.............................................................................................................................. 80

The Researcher’s Role ............................................................................................................. 81

Data Collection ........................................................................................................................ 82

Learning Climate Questionnaire (LCQ) .................................................................................... 83

Interviews................................................................................................................................. 84

Focus Group.............................................................................................................................. 87

Data Analysis ........................................................................................................................... 89

Trustworthiness......................................................................................................................... 91

Credibility ................................................................................................................................. 92

Dependability and Confirmability ............................................................................................ 92

Transferability........................................................................................................................... 93

Ethical Considerations ............................................................................................................ 93

Summary .................................................................................................................................. 94

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS .................................................................................................... 97

Overview .................................................................................................................................. 97

Participants ............................................................................................................................... 97

Aliyah .......................................................................................................................................... 98

Brianna ...................................................................................................................................... 99

Diamond .................................................................................................................................. 100

Chloe ........................................................................................................................................ 101

Olivia ........................................................................................................................................ 102

Jessica ...................................................................................................................................... 103
Access to and Utilization of Resources and Services Contribute to the Ability to Persist

Student-Faculty Interactions Influence Perceptions of the LE

Student Services Departments Provide Information that is Needed to Persist in College

Student Peer Interactions are Limited for Student Mothers with Younger Children but Increase in Program Specific Courses

Research Question Responses

Research Question One

Research Question Two

Research Question Three

Research Question Four

Research Question Five

Summary

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

Summary of Findings

Research Question One
Research Question Two ................................................................. 134
Research Question Three .............................................................. 135
Research Question Four ................................................................. 135
Research Question Five ................................................................. 136
Discussion ...................................................................................... 136
Self-Determination Theory .............................................................. 137
Persistence ..................................................................................... 139
Adult Learning ............................................................................... 143
Implications .................................................................................. 143
  Theoretical Implications ............................................................... 143
  Empirical Implications ................................................................. 145
  Practical Implications ................................................................. 145
Delimitations and Limitations .......................................................... 150
Recommendations for Future Research ............................................ 151
Summary ....................................................................................... 151
REFERENCES .............................................................................. 154
APPENDIX A: SETTING CHARACTERISTICS ...................................... 187
APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS ................................ 188
APPENDIX C: RESOURCES AND SERVICES .................................... 189
APPENDIX D: STUDENT-FACULTY INTERACTIONS ............................. 190
APPENDIX E: COLLEGE DEPARTMENTS AND STAFF ...................... 191
APPENDIX F: STUDENT PEER INTERACTION .................................... 192
APPENDIX G: UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT MOTHERS BY RACE ........ 193
List of Tables

Table 1: Setting Characteristics......................................................................................... 78
Table 2: Participant Characteristics.................................................................................. 79
Table 3: Resources and Services...................................................................................... 109
Table 4: Student-Faculty Interactions............................................................................... 110
Table 5: College Departments and Staff.......................................................................... 111
Table 6: Student Peer Interaction..................................................................................... 112
Table A1: Setting Characteristics..................................................................................... 189
Table B1: Participant Characteristics............................................................................... 190
Table C1: Resources and Services: Labeling, Initial and Final Themes............................ 191
Table D1: Student-Faculty Interactions: Labeling, Initial and Final Themes....................... 192
Table E1: College Departments and Staff Interactions: Labeling, Initial and Final Themes..... 193
Table F1: Student Peers: Labeling, Initial and Final Themes............................................. 194
List of Figures

Figure 1: Learning Climate Questionnaire Results.......................................................... 117
Figure 2: Word Cloud Resources and Services............................................................... 91
Figure 3: Word Cloud Student-Faculty Interactions....................................................... 91
Figure 4: Word Cloud Student Services Departments.................................................... 91
Figure 5: Word Cloud Student Peer Interactions.......................................................... 91
Figure G1: Undergraduate Single Student Mothers by Race........................................ 195
Figure H1: Learning climate questionnaire results........................................................ 196
Figure I1: Word tree resources and services................................................................. 197
Figure I2: Word trees student-faculty interactions......................................................... 198
Figure I3: Word trees student services departments...................................................... 198
Figure I4: Word trees student peer interactions............................................................ 198
Figure J1: Word Cloud Resources and Services............................................................ 199
Figure J2: Word Cloud Student-Faculty Interactions.................................................... 199
Figure J3: Word Cloud Student Services Departments.................................................. 199
Figure J4: Word Cloud Student Peer Interactions........................................................ 199
List of Abbreviations

American Association of Community Colleges (AACC)
Certified Medical Assistant (CMA)
Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA)
Competence-based education (CBE)
Grade Point Average (GPA)
Higher Education (HE)
Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS)
Institute for Women’s Policy Research (IWPR)
Institutional Review Board (IRB)
Learning Climate Questionnaire
Learning Environment (LE)
Licensed vocational nurse (LVN)
National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)
National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (NSCRC)
Self-determination theory (SDT)
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC)
Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB)
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

This chapter provides the background for this transcendental phenomenological study designed to describe the lived experiences of student mothers in the community college learning environment (LE) in Texas. Student parents make up a growing number of the undergraduate college student population (Galasso et al., 2018; IWPR, 2017). Nationally, one in five students are parents, many of them low-income, single mothers with limited access to basic needs like transportation, healthcare, and childcare (Clark, 2018; Galasso et al., 2018; IWPR, 2017). In Texas, one in four students in college are single mothers (Galasso et al., 2018; IWPR, 2017; Noll et al., 2017). Many low-income, single mothers start their higher education (HE) at community colleges that may not have services to support their success (Beeler, 2016; Bombardieri, 2018; Gault & Zeisler, 2019; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Lenette, McDonald & Fowler, 2014).

Student mothers are highly motivated and maintain high grade point averages (GPAs) but have low completion rates (Clark, 2018; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2018a; Nielsen, 2015). The experience in the LE is one factor that can influence college persistence that was examined in this study (Brown & Nichols, 2013; Chavez, 2015; Duquaine-Watson, 2017).

There is no research on how student mothers experience the LE while attending community college through the lens of self-determination theory (SDT). This research study describes the lived experiences of student mothers in the community college LE to understand what factors are perceived as supports or barriers to persistence. Understanding these experiences can inform community colleges on effective practices that may influence persistence and completion rates for student mothers. In this chapter, I provide my motivation for this
research, background, the problem and purpose statements, the significance of the study, and the research questions. I conclude with relevant definitions and a chapter summary.

**Background**

Providing open-door access to HE is an important mission of the 1,100 public community colleges in the U.S. (NCES, 2001; Strikwerda, 2018). Community colleges have opportunities to partner with the local workforce and create training and certification programs that meet the needs of the community (Jepsen, Troske, & Coomes, 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Texas ranks number two among states with the most public two-year institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Community colleges can reach diverse and underrepresented populations that may not have access to four-year institutions because of the inability to relocate, affordability, or other adult responsibilities (Bailey, 2012; Strikwerda, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2016a). In HE, any student who attends class while fulfilling another adult role like parenting or working is considered nontraditional (Markle, 2015; Luke & Justice, 2016). Student parents are considered a subgroup of nontraditional students (Beeler, 2016). Currently, the average age of a community college student is 28, which also places them in the nontraditional category (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2018, 2019; Gulley, 2016; NCES, 2018a). A traditional college student is referred to as a student who enters HE immediately after high school, relies on family for support, and is between the ages of 18-24 (Gulley, 2016; Zerquera, Ziskin & Torres, 2018).

There are 16.8 million undergraduate students enrolled at degree-granting institutions in the U.S., with seven million of those enrolled at community colleges (AACC, 2018; NCES, 2019). Nationally, 4.8 million college students are parenting young children and approximately 45%, or 2.2 million student parents, are enrolled at community colleges (Clark, 2018; Gault,
Community colleges have the largest student parent enrollment and they represent 30% of the total student body compared to only 23% at four-year institutions (Noll et al., 2017). Overall, enrollment at two-year public community colleges is declining while the number of student mothers is increasing (Beeler, 2016; Bombardieri, 2018; Clark, 2018; Gault et al., 2014; IWPR, 2017; Kolodner, 2017; Snyder, 2017). For the fall 2010 cohort, only 25% of students who enrolled at community college full time completed a degree or certificate within three years (AACC, 2018; NCES, 2019). About 61% of students enrolled at community college are enrolled part time (NCES, 2018a). Because of the multiple roles of student parents, many enroll part time, and part-time enrollment can further delay completion (NCES, 2018a, 2018b). Sadly, at six years from enrollment, student parents graduate at lower rates, 32%, as compared to all students at 49% (Noll et al., 2017).

Obtaining a certificate or a degree is necessary to remain competitive in the labor market (Jepsen et al., 2014; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). Access to HE for women with children is a factor in reducing risks related to low income, income inequality, and the effects of poverty, but the pursuit of HE can be challenging and costly for low-income mothers (Augustine, Prickett, & Negraia, 2018; Hernandez & Abu Rabia, 2017; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Nelson, Froehner, & Gault, 2013; Nielsen, 2015). For example, student parents will complete community college with more debt than students who are not parents (Bombardieri, 2018; Gault & Zeisler, 2019; Pattillo, 2016). Student mothers are challenged by the competing demands of caring for children, course work, and part-time or full-time jobs (Beeler, 2016; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018). Yet with all the challenges of multiple roles and demands, student mothers remain motivated by their goal commitment to education, employment opportunities, and self-
improvement, and they persist in college (Cerven, 2013; Chavez, 2015; Karp & Cruse, 2019; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Nielsen, 2015).

**Historical**

The community college, formerly known as junior college, has an important role in American HE (Bailey, 2012; Coley, 2000; Drury, 2003; Scott, 2017; Strikwerda, 2018; Trainor, 2015). Community college has its origin in the Morrill Act of 1862, also known as the Land Grant Act, that provided federal land to states for the establishment of public colleges and universities (Drury, 2003; National Archives Catalog, 1862). This made HE accessible to more American people because of more locations. The first public college, Joliet Junior College, opened in 1901 as a two-year extension of the public high school in Joliet, Illinois (Coley, 2000; Drury, 2003). Junior colleges shared the public high school physical spaces and were usually administered as part of the local public-school district board (Drury, 2003; Tuttle, 2010). This six-year high school model was borrowed from the German model of higher education (Drury, 2003; Trainor, 2015). One of the driving forces behind the extension of public high school was a prevalent, elitist view at the time that the university should provide upper-level courses and graduate schools that focused on research while the freshman and sophomore general education courses should be completed at the junior college (Coley, 2000; Drury, 2003). The elitist of the time believed that not all people who entered higher education were intellectually prepared to be at the university level (Coley, 2000; Drury, 2003).

In Texas, the first two-year colleges were supported by church denominations. For example, Decatur Baptist College, established in 1891, is credited as the first junior college in Texas and is now known as Dallas Baptist University (Tuttle, 2010). In 1965, the administration of public junior colleges in Texas was placed under the Texas Higher Education Coordinating
Board (THECB, Tuttle, 2010). From 1901 to 1998, community college numbers grew from one institution to 1,600, and enrollment grew from 1.5 million in 1965 to 5.5 million in 1996 (Coley, 2000). A driving force in the community college movement was the need of skilled workers to fill positions for growing industries in the United States (Drury, 2003; Scott, 2017; Trainor, 2015). This gained more importance during the 1930s amid the Great Depression (Trainor, 2015). Advancing social mobility for average Americans was another factor that influenced community college development (Drury, 2003). Attending a college or university was a way to gain economic stability and mobility (Trainor, 2015).

Community colleges created educational access for people who did not live near a university, and those communities developed a connection and pride in helping to build the colleges (Drury, 2003; Trainor, 2015). Thus, the name was changed from junior college to community college and for this reason, community college students mirror the racial and ethnic population of their communities (Coley, 2000; Drury, 2003; Tuttle, 2010). For example, North Carolina and Vermont community colleges “bring higher education to within a 30-minute commute of all their citizens” (Coley, 2000, p. 6). Other social and political factors that influenced the growth of community colleges include the cultural emphasis on social equality, education benefits for returning World War II veterans, and the baby-boom generation coming of age (Bailey, 2012; Drury, 2003; Trainor, 2015). Community colleges continue to provide accessibility to diverse populations, open admissions, short programs or certificates in preparation to enter the workforce, community service needs, transfer credits to a four-year university, continuing adult education, developmental courses, and low-cost tuition (Bailey, 2012; Coley, 2000; Scott, 2017; Strikwerda, 2018).
Today, community colleges do not have acceptable completion rates, which have been the subject of state and national attention (NCES, 2018b; U.S. Department of Education, 2016a). Many states have adopted legislation for funding community colleges that are performance-based. For example, Texas adopted a performance-based model that began in the 2014-15 academic year where a percentage of the state funding was based on student achievement (McKinney & Hagedorn, 2015). The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB, 2017) adopted a strategic plan, 60x30TX, to improve HE completion rates. The overall goal is that by the year 2030, 60% of Texas adults ages 25-34 will have earned a certificate or degree (THECB, 2017). In Tennessee, a similar plan to improve HE completion rates is named Drive to 55, where the goal is 55% of residents will obtain a degree or certificate by the year 2025 (Ippolito, 2018). Colleges across the United States continue to evolve in developing programs and interventions to address the issues of retention and completion (Bonet & Walters, 2016; Ippolito, 2018; Karp, 2016). With community college funding from state and federal sources tied to completion rates and state education strategic goals, it is of growing importance that increasing the completion rates of the high enrollment of student mothers be addressed (Arcand, 2015; Beeler, 2016; Bonet & Walters, 2016; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018; THECB, 2017).

In 1972, President Nixon signed the Title IX section of the Education Amendments into law prohibiting sex discrimination in federally-funded education programs (U.S. Department of Justice, 2015). Generally, when Title IX is mentioned, most think of it as applying to nondiscrimination in sports programs in HE. Title IX also prohibits discrimination based on pregnancy and parenting status (U.S. Department of Justice, 2015). At an institution that receives federal funding:
Title IX prohibits a recipient from discriminating on the basis of sex: student admissions, scholarship awards and tuition assistance, recruitment of students and employees, the provision of courses and other academic offerings, the provision of and participation in athletics and extracurricular activities. (Federal Register, 2000, p. 52859)

Colleges and universities are mandated to designate a Title IX coordinator and to have policies implemented across the institution to support pregnant and parenting students (Brown & Nichols, 2013; Madden, 2018; McLaughlin, 2014; Stringer, 2018). Although this is a federal mandate, student mothers continue to report feeling isolated and stigmatized on college campuses (Beeler, 2016; Brown & Nichols, 2013; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Madden, 2018; Nichols, Biederman, & Gringle, 2017). It is important that institutions ensure that the LE is supportive, adult, and family friendly to student mothers as this can influence persistence (Arcand, 2015; Beeler, 2016; Chen, 2017; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Lin, 2016; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018; Roy, Bradecich, & Dayne, 2018).

Social

It is important to understand the social context for student mothers in HE. A male-headed household, with males as the breadwinners and females as the homemakers, is no longer the dominant family model in the U.S. (Chalabi, 2019; Cunningham, 2008; Livingston, 2013; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001; Yarber & Sharp, 2010). Since the 1960s, there has been a steady increase in the number of single mothers and fathers (Livingston, 2013; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). The social cultural gender role expectations society places demand on student mothers to “be both a ‘good mother’ and a ‘good student’” (Lynch, 2008, p. 595) which inherently creates a conflict between the two roles. Each of these roles require 100% devotion and commitment (Beeler, 2016; Garey, 1999; Hays, 1996; Lynch, 2008). These commitments
are “also ‘open-ended’ commitments, as there seems to be always room for becoming a ‘better’ parent or producing ‘better’ academic work” (Moreau & Kerner, 2015, p. 220). Furthermore, student mothers make several “shifts” between roles and responsibilities that create a delicate balancing act in order to manage the complexity of multiple roles (Madden, 2018, p. 385). Student mothers’ competing role demands increase their risk of attrition (Beeler, 2016; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Lin, 2016; Lynch, 2008; Madden, 2018; Pattillo, 2016).

This conflict between roles and pressure to be successful at both can create the need to emphasize the two identities separately by using a strategy called invisibility (Garey, 1999; Hays, 1996; Lynch, 2008; Madden, 2018). To be perceived as a good student, the student mother uses maternal invisibility and downplays her role as a mother, and to be perceived as a good mother, the student mother uses student invisibility to deemphasize her role as a student (Lynch, 2008). In other words, the student mother learns how to hide her motherhood status in educational settings and to hide her student status in other settings. Hiding parenting status “allows student mothers to appear to be just students” (Lynch, 2008, p. 596), allowing them to fit into the college or university environment and appear as though they are 100% committed to their student role.

Student mothers are enrolling in college to improve the stability of their families, yet community colleges struggle to provide necessary services to reduce barriers and support their success (Beeler, 2016; Bombardieri, 2018; Gault & Zeisler, 2019; IWPR, 2017; Kolodner, 2017; Madden, 2018). Educational attainment is critical in lowering risks faced by very young student mothers in middle and high school and in adult student mothers in HE (Hernandez & Abu Rabia, 2017; Jackson, Cadena, Kuti, Duhamel & Tollestrup, 2017). The risk of poverty is considerable for single student mothers (Deterding, 2015). When student mothers complete their education
goals, it positively influences their economic stability and the education outcome of their children (Augustine et al., 2018; Bombardieri, 2018; Gault et al., 2014; Hernandez & Napierala, 2014; IWPR, 2017; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Monaghan, 2017). Perhaps in recognizing the skills and adaptive processes, like multitasking and resilience, that student mothers possess, institutions can be better informed in developing supports and policies that improve or better adapt the LE to increase their persistence (Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Lin, 2016; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018).

Nontraditional college students are often neglected populations who find little support on campuses, which tend to focus on younger traditional students (Markle, 2015; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Luke & Justice, 2016; Chen, 2017). Student parents, a sub group of nontraditional students, require different supports, programs, and policies to be successful, such as flexible class schedules and attendance policies (Bonet & Walters, 2016; Chen, 2017; Cotton, Nash, & Kneale, 2017; Karp, 2016; Kasworm, 2018; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015; Markle, 2015). Many student mothers report feeling that colleges do not accommodate their parent statuses or value their life experiences (Duquaine-Watson, 2007, 2017; Galasso et al., 2018; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018; Stringer, 2018). The institution’s culture can also influence feelings of being ignored and cause student mothers to feel alienated and invisible on campus (Beeler, 2016; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Roy et al., 2018). This perception can cause isolation and creates a barrier to college persistence (Beeler, 2016; Duquaine-Watson, 2007, 2017; Madden, 2018). Student mothers face these barriers and somehow many manage to persist in college.
Theoretical

Early research on human motivation by Maslow (1943) focused on the assumption that basic physiological needs are met prior to psychological needs of self-fulfillment or self-actualization (Maslow, 2012). The assumption in self-determination theory (SDT) is that humans are intrinsically motivated by the drive to fulfill three basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2008). When these basic psychological needs are met, humans are self-determined and intrinsically motivated to attain goals. SDT has been used in research to examine the LE in different educational settings. Conversely, research on student mothers at community college has been conducted but not through the lens of SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2008). An autonomy supportive LE increases intrinsic motivation to learn (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Autonomy supportive LEs are student-centered, provide resources and information to promote decision-making in students, and embrace student diversity (Guay, Ratelle & Chanal, 2008). By examining the lived experiences of student mothers in the community college LE, factors that support their persistence can be identified, and the research will add to existing literature on SDT and supportive LEs.

Over the past 40 years, there has been a breadth of research on retaining college students (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993, 2007, 2017a). Causes of student attrition have been blamed on the student as individual shortcomings and on HE for a lack of programs or policies that create barriers to student success (Tinto, 1987, 1993, 2007). To address student attrition, the Department of Education, state higher education boards, and institutions developed various policies, programs, and practices that address student retention, but the problem continues (Bonet & Walters, 2016; Ippolito, 2018; Karp, 2016; McKinney & Hagedorn, 2015; NCES, 2018b; THECB, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2016a). Looking at student attrition from a
student perspective, students “do not seek to be retained” but instead “they seek to persist” (Tinto, 2017a, p. 254). The assumption in Tinto’s model of student motivation and persistence is that “without motivation and the effort it engenders, persistence is unlikely” (Tinto, 2017a, p. 255). Reason naturally asserts that a student motivated to complete college is more likely to persist, especially in the face of challenges, than a student who lacks a foundational motivation to persist (Chavez, 2015; Markle, 2015; Nielsen, 2015; Tinto, 2017b). Persistence is the result and evidence of motivation and motivation is influenced through the interaction of goals, self-efficacy, a sense of belonging, and the student’s perception of curriculum (Tinto, 2017a, 2017b).

Identifying supports to student mother persistence can inform effective practices in HE student retention.

**Situation to Self**

As the first to enter HE in my family, I became interested in student mothers and their drive to complete college by experiencing it firsthand. I started my HE journey at community college part time attending night classes as a mother, as a spouse, and with full-time career responsibilities. I understand the challenges faced by student mothers on college campuses that may not embrace their parenting status. For more than 15 years, I have worked at a community college and observed student mothers who, despite challenges, persist with enthusiasm and self-determination to attain their certificate or degree. I frequently question how the LE influences the persistence decisions of student mothers. I chose a qualitative transcendental phenomenological approach to examine the lived experiences of the LE for student mothers at community college to understand the shared meaning and essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Philosophical assumptions that will guide this research are discussed below.
**Ontological**

Ontological assumptions are concerned with what is real (Mertens, 2015). To conduct qualitative research, I must believe that reality is seen from the different perspectives of the research participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Reality is constructed in the participants’ consciousness as it is experienced. Each participant perspective is equally valuable and contributes to the overall meaning (Mertens, 2015). By examining and understanding the different perspectives “general or universal meanings are derived” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). I focused on understanding the participants’ shared meaning of the phenomenon. This allowed the reality of the shared meaning of the experience of the LE to be revealed.

**Epistemological**

Epistemology is concerned with the nature of knowledge (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The epistemological assumption that guided this study was that the participants hold legitimate knowledge from their viewpoint (Mertens, 2015). It was assumed that the participant has knowledge of the phenomenon, the experience of the LE. I worked to establish genuine rapport and relationships with the participants to understand their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Knowledge was communicated and understood through the established relationship between the researcher and co-researcher. It is through this close relationship between researcher and co-researcher that the in-depth meaning and essence of the experience of the LE was made known. I embraced Moustakas’ (1994) term co-researcher to describe the research participants as they have experienced the LE at community college, making them the expert and also to respect their willingness to participate in this study.
Rhetorical

Rhetorical assumptions are concerned with the structure of the study. The rhetorical structure of this study followed Moustakas’ (1994) recommendations and procedures. These included selecting a topic “rooted in autobiographical meanings and values, as well as involving social meanings and significance” (p. 103). Moustakas (1994) presented a detailed method to produce an organized and meaningful research study. I used the rhetorical assumption that the experience is very personal to me as the researcher and to the participants. What the participants revealed to me through personal individual interviews is reality as they see it. I listened to participant responses and narratives of their experiences, so that the rich descriptions were analyzed to reveal the shared meaning of the experience of the LE. The voice of the participants was revealed through focusing on and analyzing the rich in-depth descriptions of their lived experiences.

Axiological

The axiological assumption is concerned with values or ethics and the value of the research. I believe that understanding the nature of the lived experience of student mothers in the community college LE can add to the literature on effective retention strategies that increase college persistence. I positioned myself in this study as having a lived the experience of being a student mother who attended community college. My assumption was that community colleges serve an important role in HE and maintain a critical position in local communities, and student mothers are a valuable and growing student population with unique needs (Bailey, 2012; Beeler, 2016; Cerven, 2013; Coley, 2000; Drury, 2003; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Scott, 2017; Trainor, 2015). The axiological assumption was used as a “guiding force for conceptualizing subsequent beliefs and research decisions” (Mertens, 2015, p. 29). I
demonstrated respect for participant culture and diversity, bracketing my own experience as a student mother at community college and as a student with experiences of diverse LEs.

**Paradigm**

A paradigm is a lens or “a way of looking at the world” (Mertens, 2015, p. 8). A transformative lens was used to guide this study. This transformative paradigm was used to emphasize the voice of student mothers’ experiences in community college learning environments (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lenette et al., 2014; Madden, 2018; Nielsen, 2015). I chose to be guided by a transformative paradigm because the results will contribute to improvements in how community colleges serve student mothers and remove barriers to their success (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I positioned myself “side by side” with the participants to transform the policies and programs developed to meet the needs of student mothers at community college (Mertens, 2015, p. 21). The results of this research study can bring about changes in policies and practices at community colleges for student mothers.

**Problem Statement**

The problem is that nearly one-third of all community college students are parenting young children, and the majority of those parents are student mothers who face challenges and barriers to persistence and have poor completion rates (Arcand, 2015; Bermea, Toews, & Wood, 2018; Brown & Nichols, 2013; Gault et al., 2014; IWPR, 2017; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Kolodner, 2017; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018; NCES, 2018a; Nichols et al., 2017; Noll et al., 2017; Stringer, 2018). Student mothers experience invisibility, isolation, and perceived discrimination on college and university campuses that have a youth-oriented culture (Beeler, 2016; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Madden, 2018). Federal Title IX policies prohibit discrimination based on parenting status of students, but these policies are not always visible
across the institution (Beeler, 2016; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018). Research supports that persistence improves when college students possess protective factors that reduce the impact of stress such as positive problem-solving strategies and support (Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2016; Cotton et al., 2017; Crisp et al., 2015; First, First, & Houston, 2018; Karp, 2016; Markle, 2015). The life experience that student mothers possess contributes to the LE in college and, therefore, to their persistence to completion (Chavez, 2015; Chung, Turnbull & Chur-Hansen, 2017; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018).

Student mothers need a supportive LE that fosters persistence (Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018). Research suggests that experiences in the LE directly influence student mothers’ perceptions and can impact persistence decisions (Beeler, 2016; Crisp et al., 2016; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018). SDT has been used to measure the effectiveness of diverse learning environments from elementary school to medical school (Behzadnia, Adachi, Deci & Mohammadzadeh, 2018; Filak & Nicolini, 2018; Field & Hoffman, 2012; Guay et al., 2008; Jang, Kim, & Reeve, 2012; Leal, Miranda, & Carmo, 2013; Su & Reeve, 2011; Villarreal & Garcia, 2016). I utilized SDT as a lens to examine the lived experience of the LE and to explore how community college practices and policies support the needs of student mothers. One in four community college students in Texas is parenting while attending classes (Galasso et al., 2018). This number of parenting students warrants continued research on the experiences of student mothers to hopefully identify supports to their persistence. This study examined the lived experiences of student mothers in community colleges in Texas to better understand supports and barriers to their persistence.
Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experience of student mothers in the LE of community colleges in Texas. In this study, the LE was generally defined as an environment that is conducive to learning for the adult learner (Knowles et al., 2015). Deci and Ryan’s (2000, 2008) SDT was used as the primary theory to guide this study and as a lens to examine the lived experiences of student mothers in the LE. SDT’s primary assumption is when LEs are autonomy supportive, students develop intrinsic motivation that fuels the ability to attain goals (Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2008). This study was informed by other theories on college persistence and adult learning (Knowles et al., 2015; Tinto, 1987, 1993).

Significance of the Study

Although there have been studies on student mothers at community college, there is no research on how the LE experiences influence persistence using SDT (Cotton et al., 2017; Crisp, Carales, & Nunez, 2016; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018). The results of this study can contribute to informing best practices for improving the policies and programs that are directed toward this student population. Findings from this study may hold empirical, theoretical, and practical significance for the field.

Empirical

The results of this study yield significant empirical results by giving a voice to student mothers at community college and their experience of the LE. In addition, the results add to the growing body of literature on diverse populations of adult learners at community colleges and how the LE influences persistence and completion (Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2016; Arcand, 2015; Bonet & Walters, 2016; Cotton et al., 2017; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Luke & Justice,
Results support empirical evidence on effective practices to influence the persistence of college students (Browning, McDermott, Scaffa, Booth & Carr, 2018; Demetriou & Schmitz-Scibroski, 2011; Hunter-Johnson, 2017; Johnson, Wasserman, Yildirim & Yonai, 2014).

Theoretical

The theoretical significance of the results may expand previous theories used to explore the topic of college persistence. The student departure theory of Tinto (1987, 1993) has been used as a framework for studies on persistence. In today’s diverse college student population, there are many other factors that influence persistence decisions that were not prevalent 30 years ago. Adult responsibilities, cost and benefit, and workforce opportunities influence the decision to persist in college (Stuart, Rios-Aguilar & Deli-Amen, 2014). There is a need to update past theories to fit the growing student mother population. Research on student mothers at community college suggest that experiences in the LE are a factor in persistence (Anderson, 2019; Beeler, 2016; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018; Roy et al., 2018). Because SDT has been used to examine the LE in different education levels, it was useful as the theoretical framework for this study, and the results may add to the theory (Behzadnia et al., 2018; Filak & Nicolini, 2018; Field & Hoffman, 2012; Guay et al., 2008; Jang et al., 2012; Leal et al., 2013; Su & Reeve, 2011; Villarreal & Garcia, 2016). Understanding the lived experiences of student mothers adds to existing theories about what works and what contributes to or is a barrier to persistence.

Practical

The practical significance of the results contributes to the body of literature on best practices in HE for student retention and persistence policies. Effective and timely interventions
have been found to have a positive influence on persistence in HE (Daniels, Billingsley, Billingsley, Long & Young, 2015; Dualeh, Diaz-Mendoza, Son, & Luperon, 2018; First et al., 2018; Joyce et al., 2018; Shatkin et al., 2016). Leaders and administrators at community colleges can use the results to develop or improve services and intervention programs that improve the LE of student mothers and thereby increase retention, persistence, and completion rates for student mothers. Student mothers can use the results to implement strategies to strengthen their existing will to persist and reach their academic goals.

**Research Questions**

The central research question that guided this study was: What is the lived experience of student mothers in the LE of community colleges in Texas? This question was stated “to explore a central phenomenon” (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The question sought to understand the “essences and meanings of human experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 105). I developed the following subsequent research questions to further explore the phenomenon of the LE of student mothers.

1. How do student mothers describe their overall experience at community college in Texas?

Overall, women graduates from community colleges in Texas outnumber men who graduate (NCES, 2018b). Despite having lower completion rates, student mothers have strong motivation to complete college and achieve higher GPAs than non-parenting students (Clark, 2018; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018). Understanding how participants perceive and describe their experience contributed to the rich description of their lived experiences at community college (Beeler, 2016; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018). These descriptions “keep a phenomenon alive, illuminate its presence” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 59) so that the meanings appeared.
2. How do student mothers at community college in Texas describe experiences with faculty and college staff?

This question assisted in obtaining descriptions of lived experiences with faculty and how this influenced the LE for student mothers. Faculty-student interactions influence the experience in the LE (Beeler, 2016; Brown & Nichols, 2012; Duquaine-Watson, 2017; Madden, 2018). Rich descriptions of the faculty-student experience contributed to the examination of the phenomenon “from many sides, angles, and perspectives until a unified vision of the essences” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 58) was achieved. Interactions with the institution are often between students and college staff in advising and financial aid departments. These interactions demonstrate the climate and culture of the institution and for student mothers; this can influence the LE at community college (Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018).

Participants identified positive and supportive experiences with campus staff that influenced their persistence.

3. How do student mothers at community college in Texas describe experiences with student peers?

Experiences in the classroom influence persistence decisions (Tinto, 1987, 1993). Making connections with student peers can influence the need for connectedness or relatedness in SDT (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991). For student mothers, supportive peers assist with providing social support to complete college goals (Beeler, 2016; Field & Hoffman, 2012; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018). Student mothers may “benefit from having a personal network that enables them to obtain information about college services, along with academic and social support” (Chavez, 2015, p. 219). Participants identified
positive experiences with student peers in the classroom and on campus that were supportive to
their persistence.

4. What do student mothers describe as not supportive to their academic persistence at
community college in Texas?

Researchers identify many college and university policies that are not supportive to
student mothers’ persistence (Arcand, 2015; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018;
Madden, 2018; Nichols et al., 2017). Understanding what student mothers perceived as not
supportive to their parenting role added to the in-depth descriptions of their overall experience at
community college.

5. What do student mothers describe as supportive to their academic persistence at
community college in Texas?

Supportive networks on and off campus have been found to influence persistence of adult
learners and underrepresented populations (Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2016; Arcand, 2015;
Bonet & Walters, 2016; Chavez, 2015; Cotton et al., 2017; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Luke &
Justice, 2016; Madden, 2018; Nichols et al., 2017). Participants identified what they experienced
as supportive to their persistence at community college (Beeler, 2016; Brown & Nichols, 2013;
Cerven, 2013; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018; Wilsey, 2013).

Definitions

Research studies on college persistence provide a wide range of definitions for the terms
and constructs used. It was necessary to define the terms used in this study in order to narrow
the focus and scope of the research. Terms significant to this research study are listed and
defined below.
1. **Associate degree** – An associate degree is “a degree granted for the successful completion of a sub-baccalaureate program of studies, usually requiring at least 2 years of full-time college level study” (NCES, 2017, para. 3).

2. **Community college** – A community college is a two-year public higher education institution that is accredited to grant associate degrees and certifications in health professions, computer information, and other fields of study (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

3. **For-profit colleges** – A for-profit college is an institution of higher education, sometimes referred to as proprietary colleges, that may offer degrees but is organized like a business. Accreditation may be different than public community colleges and tuition is usually more expensive (IWPR, 2017).

4. **Learning Environment (LE)** – A learning environment is an environment that is conducive to learning for the adult learner (Knowles et al., 2015). The characteristics include physical safety and comfort, accessible quality resources, a climate that encourages and rewards self-improvement, a respect of diversity, and an “atmosphere of adultness” (Knowles et al., 2015, p. 55).

5. **Nontraditional student** – A nontraditional student is a student who enters HE after age 25, with significant adult responsibilities including financial, full-time or part-time employment, life and workforce experience, and responsibilities for dependent children (Chung et al., 2017; Gulley, 2016; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Orgnerno, 2013; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Scott, 2017).

6. **Persistence** – In this study, persistence refers to academic persistence as measured through a student’s continued enrollment in higher education (Braxton, Hirschy &
McClendon, 2011; Roland, Frenay & Boudrenghien, 2016). Persistence is a complex process that results from the long-term academic and social interactions between the institution and the student (Tinto, 1987, 1993).

7. **Self-determination theory (SDT)** – Self-determination theory is a theory of human motivation that contends individuals have intrinsic motivation to meet goals when three psychological needs are met (Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2008; Deci et al., 1991). The three needs are competence, the need to feel efficient, relatedness or connectedness, the need to be connected to others, and autonomy, the need to be empowered to make decisions or to be self-directed (Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2008).

8. **Student mother** – A student mother is a community college student who is a mother of at least one child under the age of 18. Student mothers can be married, divorced, widowed, never married, or separated (IWPR, 2017).

9. **Traditional student** – A traditional student is a student between the ages of 18-24, who enters college immediately after high school, relies on parents for financial support, and is in the emerging adulthood life stage (Balgiu, 2017; Gulley, 2016; Zerquera et al., 2018).

**Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative, transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experience of student mothers in the LE of community colleges in Texas. Community colleges serve an important role by providing accessibility and opportunity for diverse students to participate in HE (Strikwerda, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2016a). With the average age of the community college student at 28, there is a growing number of college students who are fulfilling other roles like parenting while attending classes (AACC, 2018; Markle, 2015;
Community college enrollment has been declining in recent years, but the enrollment of student parents continues to increase (Beeler, 2016; Clark, 2018; Gault et al., 2014; IWPR, 2017). Older adults and student parents are considered nontraditional students mainly because of age and adult responsibilities. Student mothers are considered a subgroup of nontraditional students, and these students have different needs and require different supports to be successful (Arcand, 2015; Beeler, 2016; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018; Markle, 2015; Nichols et al., 2017). Student mothers bring diverse life experiences to community college that interact with the LE (Nichols et al., 2017; Ricco, Sabet & Clough, 2009). Experiences in the LE can influence the ability to persist in HE (Bonet & Walters, 2016; Cotton et al., 2017; Joyce et al., 2018; Luke & Justice, 2016).

The problem is that community college student mothers face challenges unique to their roles as parents and students. Even with Title IX policies in place, student mothers continue to report barriers to persistence in HE (Beeler, 2016; Brown & Nichols, 2013; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Madden, 2018). These barriers to college completion warrant continued research to further examine the needs and supports that could decrease such barriers to persistence and completion (Arcand, 2015; Bermea et al., 2018; Brown & Nichols, 2013; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Kolodner, 2017; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018; Nichols et al., 2017; Stringer, 2018). Researchers have identified some supports and services that student mothers need to be successful, but completion rates continue to be very low (Beeler, 2016; Hernandez & Napierala, 2014; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018; NCES, 2018a, 2018b).

The central research question that guided this study was: What is the lived experience of student mothers in the LE of community colleges in Texas? Examining the lived experience to
obtain rich, in-depth descriptions through qualitative phenomenological methods yielded the meaning and essence of the participants’ experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The results of this study presented significant practical, theoretical, and empirical findings that can contribute to existing literature on the LE for community college students and best practices for supporting their persistence and success.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

A review of the literature was conducted to identify research studies that examine student mothers in HE. This chapter provides a discussion of the recent research on student mothers in college and the theoretical framework that was used to examine the experience of student mothers in the LE of community college. Self-determination theory (SDT) was used as the primary theory and theoretical framework for this study (Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2008). The theoretical framework was informed by propositions from other theorists in college persistence and adult learning (Knowles, et al., 2015; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993). Next, I define academic persistence and its importance to college completion. A discussion on the community college LE that is most conducive to adult learning will complete the theoretical framework section. The related literature section presents a discussion on adult learning theory, descriptions of traditional and nontraditional students, and a discussion on the characteristics of student mothers, single parents, and single mothers (Knowles, 1973; Knowles et al., 2015; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018). The chapter ends with a discussion on LEs suitable and supportive for student mothers and a summary of the literature presented with a focus on the gap in the literature on the study of student mothers in the LE of community colleges in Texas.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework provides the blueprint for this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study. The blueprint is the guide for building, framing, and conceptualizing the constructs and phenomenon of interest (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). The selected theories act as undergirding, forming the foundation and providing strength for the inquiry. This section provides the foundation of how this study was framed in examining the lived experience of
student mothers in the LE at community colleges in Texas. First, I discuss SDT, my primary theory, and how it provided the lens to examine how the LE at community college interacts with the student mother to support their persistence (Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2008). Next, I discuss research on the other theories that informed this study on college persistence and the LE that is most conducive to adult learning (Knowles et al., 2015; Tinto, 1987, 1993).

**Self-Determination Theory**

Self-determination theory (SDT) has its origins in the study of human motivation during the 1970s and 1980s by Deci and Ryan (2008). It is oriented toward humanistic psychology. SDT is considered a theory of motivation that is organismic. Organismic theories of human motivation can be traced back through humanistic psychologists of the 1960s to Dewey, Piaget, and Plato (Sheldon, Williams & Joiner, 2003). There are three assumptions of organismic theories of motivation: (a) humans are proactive, (b) humans have potential, and (c) humans engage life struggles by negotiating, coping, and responding to reach a resolution that prepares them for the next challenge (Sheldon et al., 2003). SDT’s assumption is that all human beings have three innate, human motivations or psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and connectedness or relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2008; Deci et al., 1991; Sheldon et al., 2003; Vallerand, 2000). Humans have a natural tendency and are intrinsically motivated toward learning, growth, and “an organized relation to a larger social structure” (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 262; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Intrinsic motivation is self-directed when people are engaged in something based on their own volition (Deci & Ryan, 1991).

When humans demonstrate intrinsic motivation, they do this by “freely engaging in activities that they find interesting” and challenging (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 235). When students have more self-determined intrinsic motivation, they are more likely to persist in
education and have positive outcomes (Deci et al., 1991). Students demonstrate “a personal commitment to self” (Gipson, Mitchell & McLean, 2018, p. 297) and push themselves to meet their educational goals. Research on SDT supports that a LE that supports self-determination fosters intrinsic motivation in diverse education levels, contexts, and course modalities from elementary school, college, and medical school (Ayllon, Alsina & Colomer, 2019; Behzadnia et al., 2018; Black & Deci, 2000; Deci et al., 1991; Filak & Nicolini, 2018; Guay et al., 2008; Jang et al., 2012; Leal et al., 2013; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Williams, Saizow, Ross & Deci, 1997). LEs that support the three basic needs of competence, autonomy, and connectedness or relatedness will be an environment with self-determined and intrinsically-motivated students.

**The need for relatedness or connectedness.** The need for relatedness or connectedness is satisfied through relationships with others and perceiving a feeling of being heard and valued by others (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In the social context of an educational setting, faculty who value students and provide choices support the need for relatedness (Ayllon et al., 2019; Deci et al., 1991). Faculty have a major influence on the student experience of relatedness or connectedness from elementary school to university (Chatzisarantis & Hagger, 2009; Behzadnia et al., 2018; Black & Deci, 2000; Deci et al., 1991; Guay et al., 2008; Jang et al., 2012; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Williams et al., 1997). When faculty demonstrate respect in the classroom, students are more likely to feel relatedness or connectedness (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Nurturing environments where there is meaningful communication support connectedness in the LE (Eisenman, Pell, Poudel & Pleet-Odle, 2015; Villarreal & Garcia, 2016). In addition, positive peer support is a factor that influences feelings of connectedness (Field & Hoffman, 2012).

**The need for competence.** This need is satisfied when individuals feel effective (Deci & Ryan, 2000). For example, when students receive positive feedback from faculty or when
learning activities are challenging, they feel effective (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Building competence emphasizes student efficacy when faculty provides feedback rather than just evaluation which can be perceived as negative (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). For example, a teacher should provide feedback on a task by “providing relevant information on how to master the tasks” (Niemic & Ryan, 2009, p. 139). This type of feedback can build confidence in students’ ability to master academic tasks and foster feelings of competence.

The need for autonomy. The need for autonomy is found across cultures and social contexts (Deci & Ryan, 2008). The term autonomy in SDT refers to the ability to be self-determined to reach goals: “the more self-determined the motivation, the more positive the outcomes” (Vallerand, 2000, p. 316). Thus, autonomous motivation is desirable because “when people are autonomously motivated, they experience volition, or a self-endorsement of their actions” (Deci & Ryan, 2008, p. 182). Positive outcomes like persistence and completion are associated with educational programs that have autonomy-supportive practices such as providing structure, interesting learning tasks, and positive constructive feedback from instructors (Black & Deci, 2000; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Guay et al., 2008; Means, Bakx, Kilmstra & Denissen, 2018). Satisfying the need for autonomy is “essential for the goal-directed behavior to be self-determined” (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 242). When students are intrinsically motivated or self-determined, they are more likely to have positive educational outcomes (Behzadnia et al., 2018; Deci et al., 1991; Guay et al., 2008; Vallerand, 2000). Autonomy-supportive institutions are dedicated to and invested in student growth and success (Ayllon et al., 2019). Environments that support students’ psychological needs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy will provide challenging academic programs, services that seek to foster connectedness, and resources that allow students to make informed choices (Ayllon et al., 2019; Behzadnia et al., 2018; Jang et al.,
To improve educational outcomes of student mothers, it is important to understand how they experience the LE at community college.

The number of student mothers at community colleges warrants continued research on establishing autonomy supportive LEs that foster their success (Gault & Zeisler, 2019; IWPR, 2017; Kolodner, 2017). SDT informed this research study and provided a lens to examine the lived experiences of student mothers in the LE at community college. SDT framed how the LE supports psychological needs to promote self-determination to persist in college. SDT provided the context to examine how the LE interacted with student mothers to either support or create barriers to college persistence. There is no research on SDT and how it applies to student mothers’ lived experience at community college. Results of this study contribute to SDT as applied to student mothers in higher education.

Persistence

The reasons why college students do not persist or drop out have been researched and theorized to a great degree, but the problem of low retention and completion rates continue. What is persistence in college? In this research study, persistence refers to academic persistence as measured through a student’s continued enrollment or remaining at an institution until completion (Braxton et al., 2011; Roland et al., 2016; Savage, Storm, Hubbard & Aune, 2019; Seidman, 2012). Historically, the blame for a student leaving an institution prior to completion was on the student, but, since the 1990s HE has been forced to examine how the institution contributes to a student’s decision to stay or depart (Braxton et al., 2011; Tinto, 1993). Persistence is a complex process that results from the long-term academic and social interactions between the institution and the student (Tinto, 1987, 1993). Students choose to depart from or persist at an institution for various reasons and under different circumstances and can be
categorized as dropouts, academic dismissals, financial aid dismissals, or stop outs (Seidman, 2012; Tinto, 1993). For nontraditional students, the decision to depart college is a complex, long process that is influenced by many different factors (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Ellis, 2019; Markle, 2015; Metzner & Bean, 1987; Tinto, 1987, 1993).

**Model of student departure.** Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993) focused on academic and social integration of the student into the academic and social systems of the institution in his longitudinal model of student departure. Academic integration is indicated by grade performance, competence, and intellectual development and social integration through social interactions with faculty, staff, student peers, or in participation in other college activities (Tinto, 1975). These processes are overlapping (Eaton & Bean, 1995; Tinto, 1987, 1993). A student’s perception of the level they feel incorporated or integrated into the various academic and social communities at college can vary based on the type of student, traditional or nontraditional, male or female, etc. (Tinto, 1987, 1993). More recently, and relating to SDT, Tinto (2017a) proposed a model that incorporates student motivation in college persistence. In this model, level of motivation influences a student’s ability to persist and it “can be enhanced or diminished by student experiences” at the institution (Tinto, 2017a, p. 255). Student motivation is impacted by self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and student perceptions of the curriculum (Tinto, 2017a). Self-efficacy is having a belief in one’s competence (Bandura, 1977). It is important that students perceive that they are a part the institutional community and develop a sense of belonging as this sense of belonging can serve to “help anchor the student to other students on campus” (Tinto, 2017a, p. 258) and influence persistence. Student perception of the curriculum is an important core principle in adult learning theory as curriculum should be relevant and useful to adult students (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Knowles, 1973; Knowles et al., 2015; Ross-Gordon,
2011). To state this model of student motivation and persistence succinctly, when a student has a goal to attend college, self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and student perceptions of curriculum influence motivation to stay in college, and a demonstration of the level of motivation is college persistence (Tinto, 2017a, 2017b).

**Academic integration, role of self-efficacy and competence.** Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993, 2017a, 2017b) academic integration and the role of self-efficacy can be related to the need for competence in Deci and Ryan’s SDT (2000, 2008). Academic performance, for example GPA, is one indicator of academic integration, which is defined as the “individual’s identification with the norms of the academic system” (Tinto, 1975, p. 104). A LE that promotes learning and confidence can foster feelings of competence and self-efficacy that can influence academic integration by providing students with increased belief in their ability to perform academically and opportunity to develop intellectually (Deci et al., 1991). Bean and Metzner (1985) found that poor academic performance influences a nontraditional student’s decision to leave college. They found that “for nontraditional students, environmental support compensates for weak academic support” (Bean & Metzner, 1985, p. 492). Thus, environmental support appears to be more important for nontraditional students (Bean & Metzner, 1985). In more recent research, lack of academic support has also been found to contribute to traditional student decisions to withdraw (Beer & Lawson, 2017). Experiences in the classroom that cause feelings of inadequacy in intellectual abilities for returning students influence persistence decisions (Tinto, 1987, 1993). College faculty have a key role in reducing barriers to success for nontraditional students (Bonet & Walters, 2016; Crisp et al., 2015; Hunter-Johnson, 2017; Zerquera et al., 2018). Faculty can provide both environmental and academic support, for example, by establishing mentoring relationships with students that foster an autonomy-
supportive LE (Bonet & Walters, 2016; Crisp et al., 2015; Deci et al., 1991; Hunter-Johnson, 2017; Zerquera et al., 2018). These findings speak to the importance of the role of self-efficacy, fulfilling the need for competence and academic integration in the LE at community college.

**Social integration, relatedness or connectedness, and sense of belonging.** In addition to academic integration and competence, Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993, 2017a) social integration and sense of belonging can be related to the need for relatedness or connectedness in Deci and Ryan’s SDT (2000, 2008). Social integration is feeling connected on campus (Tinto, 1993). A traditional measure of social integration is the level of student involvement in the social systems on campus (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993). Social integration into the college community is not a significant factor in persistence decisions of nontraditional college students (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Nontraditional students appear to be more connected with the external environment than the college environment (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Nontraditional students, who commute to campus and have other responsibilities, may have difficulty attending college activities (Tinto, 1993). A measure of social integration that may be more attainable for nontraditional students is through social interactions and involvement with faculty, staff, and peers (Tinto, 1975). When students perceive that they are connected, “they experience a sense of belonging” (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009, p. 139). In the LE, faculty that demonstrate value, care, and respect toward students can influence connectedness or relatedness (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Involvement with faculty and student peers starts in the classroom and student participation can lead to “subsequent involvement in the larger academic and social communities of the college” (Tinto, 1987, 1993, p. 133). Feeling accepted and valued by faculty, staff, and peers can facilitate motivation and increase feelings of connectedness or relatedness, which can influence a sense of belonging (Deci et al., 1991, Tinto, 2017a, 2017b). In adult learning theory, respecting the adulthood of
adult students in the LE is perceived as positive and supportive, and it creates an atmosphere that is conducive to learning (Kasworm, 2010; Knowles et al., 2015). It is important in SDT that faculty and peer involvement in the LE is autonomy supportive as this will increase intrinsic motivation and self-determination (Deci et al., 1991).

**Student goal commitment.** College persistence is related to level of goal commitment (Braxton et al., 2011; Savage et al., 2019, Tinto, 1987, 1993). Individual goal commitment is defined as “the person’s willingness to work toward the attainment” (Tinto, 1993, p. 43) of a goal. A nontraditional college student experiences commitment to personal goals, the institution, and external community (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993). When students experience positive integration it “serves to raise one’s goals and strengthen one’s commitments” (Tinto, 1987, 1993, p. 116) to persist but when students are not committed to their goals or when external commitments prevail, students may struggle to maintain college persistence. Students with a strong commitment to the goal of college graduation are more likely to persist (Chavez, 2015; Fong, Acee, & Weinstein, 2018; Savage et al., 2019). Demands of external commitments influence nontraditional student persistence (Bohl, Haak, & Shrestha, 2017; Karp, 2016; Kasworm, 2014; Markle, 2015). For student mothers, their level of goal commitment to complete college may be largely driven by economic needs or family and career responsibilities (Stuart et al., 2014; Tinto, 1987, 1993). An external commitment is caring for dependent children; for example, available childcare hours and affordability may interfere with the ability to attend classes, which may influence the level of goal commitment to complete college (Beeler, 2016; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Stuart et al., 2014). Some students adjust their goals based on their perception of cost and benefit of their education and value in the labor market (Stuart et al., 2014). Perhaps student mothers’ goal commitment is influenced by
intrinsic motivation that fuels self-determined, autonomous behavior. Colleges may be able to assist nontraditional students in strengthening goal commitment by increasing positive interactions with the campus, faculty, staff, and peers and working with their external commitments to assist in removing or at least reducing barriers to persistence.

**Student parents and persistence.** For student parents, there are other factors that weigh in on persistence decisions like family responsibilities, past experiences, and the workforce market (Fong et al., 2018; Markle, 2015; Nielsen, 2015; Stuart et al., 2014). Student mothers interact with and experience the college differently than traditional students, much like other minority students in higher education who can perceive feeling out of place on campus (Crisp et al., 2015; Hall, 2017; Hunn, 2014; Johnson et al., 2014; Kasworm, 2010, 2018; Lopez, 2015; Savage et al., 2019; Richardson, 2017; Seider, Clark, & Soutter, 2015; Walpole, Chambers, & Goss, 2014). Research findings suggest that when colleges recognize and develop ways to meet the unique needs of their diverse populations, both the students and the institution benefit through increased student persistence (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Hall, 2017; Savage et al., 2019; Seider et al., 2015). Despite the challenging experiences at community colleges, some student mothers persist and eventually graduate college (Arcand, 2015; Beeler, 2016; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018). Community colleges can develop effective ways to support persistence in student mothers and perhaps increase completion rates.

Although Tinto’s (1987, 1993) theory of student departure has influenced best practices in persistence and retention, research that extends the model to understanding the needs of student mothers can add to the existing theory. Using SDT to examine the lived experiences of student mothers can add to the model on human motivation and its importance in college persistence. The importance of completing college for adults can add value to the individual,
their family, and the communities where they live and work (Chavez, 2015; Stuart et al., 2014; Nielsen, 2015; Markle, 2015; Wilsey, 2013). For student mothers, completing college can be a path out of poverty (Beeler, 2016). Results of this study can add to theories on student persistence by identifying factors that influence student mother persistence at community college.

**Adult Learning**

Adult learning theory is known as andragogy (Knowles, 1973, 1980; Knowles et al., 2015; Merriam, 2001). The term andragogy has been used since a German educator introduced it in the 1800s to describe adult learning (Knowles et al., 2015). It was not until the 1920s that “adult education as a professional field of practice” (Merriam, 2001, p. 3) was established in the U.S. Self-directed learning is a concept that has also been associated with adult learning, and it is suggested that adult students are more self-directed in learning than a child student and this increases with age (Knowles, 1973; Merriam, 2001). Self-directed learning involves the adult student taking personal responsibility in his or her learning as well as utilizing critical reflection (Knowles, 1973; Merriam, 2001). Adult learning requires adult educators to take into consideration the differences that adult students bring with them to college (Zerquera et al., 2018). The adult learner at community college today is most likely working, is responsible for the care of at least one dependent child, is age 25 or older, has delayed their enrollment in HE, has a GED or other high school certificate, and is financially independent (Ippolito, 2018). These characteristics, traits, and skills can be incorporated in planning to create rewarding educational experiences in higher education for adult learners. Adult students are poised for “intellectual growth, transformation and change” (Clancy & Holford, 2018, p. 620). Community colleges across the country recognize the valuable experiences of adult students by implementing
special, individualized programs designed to reduce barriers to success (Clancy & Holford, 2018; Money, Littky, & Bush, 2015; Pierce, 2017).

**Different needs of adult learners.** Adult students have different needs than younger students and need to know how learning new skills and knowledge will be relevant, meaningful, and useful in their immediate circumstances (Dirkx, Mezirow, & Cranton, 2006; Knowles, 1973; Knowles et al., 2015; Merriam, 2001; Tough, 1979). Understanding what motivates the adult learner is an important factor in how new knowledge is presented and in student success (Tough, 1979; Zerquera et al., 2018). There are six core assumptions about adult learners: (1) adult learners need to know why, what, and how about what they are learning, (2) adult learners need to learn in a self-directed way, (3) prior experiences of adult learners should be considered, (4) readiness to learn may be related to adult learners work or social roles, (5) adults consider immediate application of the new skills they are learning, and (6) adult learners need to find the new knowledge valuable (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Knowles, 1973; Knowles et al., 2015; Ross-Gordon, 2011). It is important to engage “adults as collaborative partners for learning” (Knowles et al., 2015, p. 169) to meet the needs of the adult college student. Based on these assumptions about adult learners, institutions can develop effective interventions that “embrace the adult learners’ differences” (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011, p. 94) and increase student success.

**Related Literature**

The student mothers that participated in this study were adult students. For this reason, it is important to discuss the LE that is most conducive to the adult learner in this section of the literature review. In this section, I discuss the LE, differences in traditional and nontraditional
college students, characteristics of student mothers, single parents, student mothers and persistence, and the LE that is supportive for student mothers.

**Learning Environment (LE)**

A LE can be any place where learning happens. For this research study, it is defined as an environment that is conducive to learning for the adult learner (Knowles et al., 2015). The LE characteristics considered will include physical safety and comfort, accessible quality resources, a climate that encourages and rewards self-improvement, a respect of diversity, and an “atmosphere of adultness” (Knowles et al., 2015, p. 55). The Texas Education Agency (2019) described a safe and supportive LE as one that fosters safety and promotes a supportive academic atmosphere while “encouraging and maintaining respectful, trusting and caring relationships throughout the school community no matter the setting” (para. 1). This can be online, in the classroom, or a combination of both, but an effective LE recognizes student diversity and engages students in relevant, quality learning activities that tap into and foster intrinsic motivation (Baker & Moyer, 2019; Kinshuk, 2016; Money et al., 2015; Thor & Moreau, 2016). Faculty play a key role in developing a quality-learning atmosphere (Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2018; Knowles et al., 2015). A student-centered environment that provides opportunity for growth and models the value of lifelong learning are some characteristics of an effective LE (Hackmann, Malin & Gilley, 2018). When students experience positive perceptions of the LE, it relates to increased academic achievement (Allan, McKenna & Dominey, 2014; Tempski et al., 2015).

In adult learning theory, an effective LE is characterized by “mutual trust and respect” and “acceptance of differences” (Knowles et al., 2015, p. 129). The LE for adults described by Knowles (1980) must be democratic, meaning that activities are based on student needs, and
innovative, meaning flexible, people-centered, and relevant (Knowles et al., 2015). Because adults are self-directed learners, they exercise autonomy by “taking control of the goals and purposes of learning” (Knowles et al., 2015, p. 171) and assume ownership. An autonomy-supportive LE promotes self-determination and intrinsic motivation (Black & Deci, 2000; Deci et al., 1991). Supports for self-determination include providing information about resources, offering choices to students, and acknowledging student perspectives (Deci et al., 1991). It is assumed that a quality LE for student mothers will include these elements and more. The results of this study will add to the existing theories on effective LEs for student mothers at community college by examining their lived experiences.

The unique position of community colleges in HE permits flexibility in offering courses through different modes like face-to-face, online, or hybrid. Traditional, face-to-face environments where the faculty member lectures also include an online learning system component to the course at most community colleges. Online courses are convenient to students with adult responsibilities, but this method of course delivery lacks availability of the subject expert, the teacher, at the same time the student may be completing learning activities for example on weekends (Deschacht & Goeman, 2015; Kinshuk, 2016). Hybrid classes are a combination of face-to-face and online course delivery and are also referred to as blended learning (Deschacht & Goeman, 2015; Snart, 2017). Community colleges have the ability to customize their course delivery methods to address the needs of their students (Snart, 2017). Faculty training on effective and efficient ways to deliver course materials to meet course-learning outcomes is critical to providing a quality LE. For example, in an online course, faculty need some technological skills to create quality learning activities that foster student success
For this study, the course delivery method was not the focus but did emerge in the participant experience in the LE.

**Academic and non-academic supports for student mothers.** Faculty that work closely with and support student mothers to assist with reaching educational goals is a vital academic support for success at college (Beeler, 2016; Bohl et al., 2017; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Lin, 2016; Roy et al., 2018). Faculty-student interactions have a powerful impact on student perceptions of the LE (Beeler, 2016; Bonet & Walters, 2016; Cotton et al., 2016; Roy et al., 2018; Zerquera et al., 2018). Positive, caring faculty-student relationships are important in supporting student mother success and are an influence on student persistence (Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Lin, 2016). In addition, faculty can promote positive and supportive interactions between student mothers and other student peers that foster a supportive LE such as developing thoughtful group projects (Lin, 2016). Providing engaging learning activities and effective curriculum can increase student academic engagement which can influence persistence (Bonet & Walters, 2016). Community colleges can provide academic support like academic advising and tutoring services after hours, on weekends, or online, which may be more convenient for student mothers and aid in developing connections on campus (Beeler, 2016; Lin, 2016). Community colleges may consider offering a transition course as academic support for student mothers returning to college after a long absence from education to assist with adjusting to and acquiring information about their new role as a college student (Beeler, 2016; Orgnero, 2013). When it comes to providing a LE that fosters student success, colleges can benefit from considering the parenting student when developing course schedules (Lindsay & Gillum, 2018). For example, ensuring that college breaks match up with local school district breaks is important as it can
present childcare issues for student parents when school breaks do not match (Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Roy et al., 2018).

Nonacademic supports like affordable and accessible childcare can impact the student mother’s ability to attend classes or meet strict assignment deadlines and influence their ability to persist (Beeler, 2016; Brown & Nichols, 2012; Lin, 2016; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Roy et al., 2018). Small community colleges may have limited childcare or no childcare options for its parenting students which can contribute to the stress and time pressures experienced by student mothers (Augustine et al., 2018; Beeler, 2016; Bohl et al., 2017; Lin, 2016). The use of on-campus childcare substantially increases the completion and graduation rates of single mothers (Gault, Milli & Cruse, 2018). In addition to providing childcare options, student mothers need a LE that creates child- and family-friendly spaces in areas “that are critical to student success such as the library and computer lab” (Madden, 2018, p. 392). Child- and family-friendly spaces can increase perceptions of a sense of belonging or connectedness, which is an important factor in a supportive LE (Deci et al., 1991). A low-cost way to support student parents is by developing a student-parent organization that provides social and academic support (Beeler, 2016; Karp, 2016; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018). Nontraditional students experience challenges in balancing their academic and family role commitments (Bohl et al., 2017; Wilsey, 2013). Providing access to resources and services such as counseling, case workers, and family education and support programs can support both roles and may foster resilience and overall well-being of student mothers (Augustine et al., 2018; HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002; Lashley, 2014; Roy et al., 2018; Shenoy, Lee & Trieu, 2016). Institutions that strengthen nonacademic supports help to create a supportive LE and may be able to increase the completion rates of its students (Karp, 2016; Lin, 2016; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005).
Traditional and Nontraditional Students

The traditional student in HE has been referred to as a student between the ages of 18-24 who enters college immediately after high school (Gulley, 2016). They typically rely on parents for support and have no other significant adult role responsibilities (Zerquera et al., 2018). Traditional-aged students are in the emerging adulthood stage of the lifespan and may or may not have developed effective life coping skills when they enter college (Balgiu, 2017). Traditional students lack appreciation for faculty and report less overall satisfaction with institution services (Landrum, Hood & McAdams, 2001). They differ from older adult students in their motivation to complete educational goals as older adults appear to have increased levels of motivation and resilience (Chung et al., 2017; Johnson & Kestler, 2013; Johnson, Taasoobshirazi, Clark, Howell, & Breen, 2016).

Adults who enter HE after age 25 have been historically referred to as nontraditional (Ross-Gordon, 2011). They also have other significant adult responsibilities such as financial obligations, full-time employment, and dependent care (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Ross-Gordon, 2011). More adults are entering HE for the first time after age 25, and the average age of a community college student is now age 28 (AACC, 2018; Scott, 2017). Researchers and educators in HE make the argument that the term nontraditional is no longer valid because of this changing age trend (Gulley, 2016; Ross-Gordon, 2011). The nontraditional student now makes up a significant portion of students in HE (Ross-Gordon, 2011).

Age is not the only characteristic that makes nontraditional students different. They typically have a wide range of life and workforce experiences (Chung et al., 2017). Many nontraditional students return to or first enroll in HE during and after service in the armed forces. Institutions sensitive to this population develop special programs that target active duty and
veteran students (Wilson, Smith, Lee, & Stevenson, 2013). Others return to college after a non-
expected termination of a job (Orgnero, 2013). Some nontraditional students return to or enter
college after considerable work experience (Ross-Gordon, 2011; Simi & Matusitz, 2016). For
example, a certified nurse’s assistant may return to community college to earn an associate
degree in nursing. This will increase the ability to earn more income and influence the family’s
socioeconomic status. Adult roles and responsibilities create challenges to academic and social
integration for nontraditional college students.

Nontraditional and traditional students tend to differ in their motivation, self-
determination, and achievement goals for pursuing HE (Eppler & Harju, 1997; Johnson &
Kestler, 2013; Johnson et al., 2016). Nontraditional students report increased self-efficacy,
interest levels, and intrinsic motivation (Quiggins et al., 2016). Nontraditional students are more
focused and deliberate in their learning (Tough, 1979). When a nontraditional student, with
adult roles and responsibilities, is contemplating a return or entry into HE, the economy and
workforce opportunities weigh in on the decision (Ross-Gordon, 2011; Stuart et al., 2014).
Hence, the decision is based on social and economic roles and responsibilities as well. These are
just some of the factors that are differences between traditional and nontraditional students.

Students attend community colleges because of accessibility, low cost, and convenience
(Scott, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2016a). Community colleges can reach diverse
populations that four-year universities are unable to reach (Strikwerda, 2018). Nontraditional
students may enroll part-time due to other roles and responsibilities that must be maintained
while they are pursuing college (Eppler & Hariju, 1997; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). Part-time
students make up over 60% of students at two-year, public institutions and have lower
persistence rates than full-time students (AACC, 2019; NCES, 2018a; National Student
Nontraditional students face several challenges in pursuing college. For example, returning to class after a decade or so is challenging for students. There may be a knowledge gap that results in hours of studying or hours of visiting the writing or math labs (Orgnero, 2013).

Student parents, a subgroup of nontraditional students, identify the need for nonacademic supports like affordable childcare, which may be a challenge for the institution to provide (Lin, 2016). Institutions that strengthen nonacademic supports may be able to increase the completion rates of its part-time students (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). Academic and social integration remain important factors that influence retention of traditional and nontraditional students in HE (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Thompson-Eubanks, 2017). The results of this research study will add to the body of knowledge about nontraditional community college students and can assist in developing effective strategies and interventions to increase persistence and academic achievement.

**Student Mothers**

For the purposes of this research study, a student mother is a community college student of any age who is a mother of at least one child under the age of 18. Student mothers can be married, divorced, widowed, never married, or separated (IWPR, 2017). At community colleges in the U.S., 56% of those enrolled are women, and of that an estimated one in five is a single parent (AACC, 2018; Kolodner, 2017). In Texas, about 61% of students enrolled at public, two-year community colleges are women and one in four are parenting young children (Galasso et al., 2018; NCES, 2018a). Single mothers are more likely to attend college part time due to work and parenting responsibilities (Beeler, 2016). They may have difficulty with continuous enrollment in college due to childcare issues (Beeler, 2016; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018). About
90% of single student mothers experience low-income, and some live below the federal poverty standard (Beeler, 2016; Gault et al., 2014; Gault & Zeisler, 2019; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018). Despite these challenges, single mothers are a highly-motivated group citing that their children are an important source of motivation in the pursuit of a college degree or certificate (Clark, 2018; NCES, 2018a; Nielsen, 2015). Access to HE is a pathway to improve single mothers’ lives and that of their children.

Low-income student mothers are an overrepresented group at for-profit colleges, and these colleges cost about four to five times more than the cost of a public community college (Arcand, 2015; IWPR, 2017). In contrast to public colleges, completion rates are about 60 percent at for-profit colleges (NCES, 2018b, NCES, 2019). For-profit colleges appear to target low-income, single mothers with programs that offer streamlined student services, targeted-skills training, and flexible class schedules (Arcand, 2015; IWPR, 2017). Community colleges should look at these programs at for-profit colleges since they provide services that target single mothers and “better attract and serve low-income, single-mother students” (Arcand, 2015, p. 1189).

Under the Education Amendments of 1972 Title IX, discrimination based on gender, pregnancy, or parenting status is in violation of federal law, and federally-funded higher education institutions are required to comply (U.S. Department of Justice, 2015). Institutions are mandated to provide equal treatment and accommodations to support pregnant and parenting students such as excused absences and the opportunity to make up missed work as a result of the absences (Madden, 2018; McLaughlin, 2014; Stringer, 2018). For example, coaches, trainers and the institution will work to accommodate pregnant student athletes on scholarship during their pregnancy so that these students will not lose their scholarships (Brown & Nichols, 2013; Hogshead-Makar & Sorensen, 2008). Even though Title IX is a federal mandate, institutions do
not fully accommodate pregnant and parenting students, or support is barely visible on campus (Beeler, 2016; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018; McLaughlin, 2014). Student mothers continue to report feeling invisible and stigmatized by the climate on college and university campuses that are not family- or child-friendly (Beeler, 2016; Brown & Nichols, 2013; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Madden, 2018; Nichols et al., 2017).

Many student mothers are first-generation students, meaning that they are the first in their family to attend college, and typically they have trouble navigating HE (Beeler, 2016; Chavez, 2015; Nichols et al., 2017). Second-generation programs designed to provide services and supports for low-income student mothers and their children have experienced success (Augustine, 2016; Augustine et al., 2018; Hernandez & Napierala, 2014). Community colleges have a position in the community to partner with the local workforce organizations to provide programs that train and certify student mothers with the skills needed to fill their positions. Colleges can develop family and children friendly services that not only foster the success of the student mother but that of their children’s motivation to attend college in the future.

**Single Parents and Single Mothers**

The deinstitutionalization of marriage, increased tolerance for divorce, and decisions to have children outside of marriage are factors that have contributed to the rise in single parent households (Livingston, 2013; Thornton, 2009; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001; Ziol-Guest, Duncan & Kalil, 2015). Parents may be single because of divorce, separation, adoption, widowhood, or by choice (DeJean, McGeorge & Carlson, 2012). The single parent double standard still exists (DeJean et al., 2012; Goldscheider & Kaufman, 2006; Haire & McGeorge, 2012). Somehow single fathers are applauded and admired for being a single parent, whereas single mothers are stigmatized and sometimes demonized for it (Conan, 2011; DeJean et al.,
The negative attitude toward single mothers is one of judgment that the single mother has done something wrong, whereas the attitude toward single fathers is one of admiration and that they have overcome a bad situation (Haire & McGeorge, 2011; Haleman, 2004; DeJean et al., 2012). It may take single mothers longer to complete college, but they continue to enroll and persist despite challenges and risks (Beeler, 2016; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Kolodner, 2017).

**Racial disparities in single mothers.** Although the focus of this study is not on the racial disparities of student mothers, it is important to mention this in understanding the impact of supporting the success of single mothers in community colleges in Texas. Community colleges in Texas make up the majority of HE enrollment in the state, and a majority of single mothers start their HE at community college (Galasso et al., 2018; Madden, 2018). Women of color are overrepresented in the population of single student mothers in college (Galasso et al., 2018; Lashley, 2014; Noll et al., 2017). Nationally and in Texas, a single student mother at community college is more likely to be Black, American Indian or Alaskan Native, or Hispanic, as shown in Figure 1 (Galasso et al., 2018; IWPR, 2017; Kolodner, 2017). Low income and racial disparities are factors that place single student mothers at risk for college completion (Arcand, 2015; Beeler, 2016; Cerven, 2013; Deterding, 2015; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Haleman, 2004; Hinton-Smith, 2016; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018; Nelson et al., 2013).

**The strengths of single mothers.** Generally, women across different ethnicities and social classes have positive attitudes toward motherhood (Tichenor et al., 2017). Single mother headed families devote time to social activities with their children to promote connectedness and want to improve the quality of life for their families (Lashley, 2014; Wilsey, 2013). Mothers
adapt to the stresses of attending college while parenting young children like time constraints by developing appropriate time management skills (Augustine et al., 2018; Lashley, 2014). Single mothers must juggle jobs, sometimes more than one, childcare responsibilities, and course work, which leads to role conflicts that influence their level of goal commitment to complete college (Gault & Zeisler, 2019; IWPR, 2017; Stuart et al., 2014; Tinto, 1993). Personal attributes like self-confidence and self-determination appear to be protective factors that help single mothers’ adaptive responses or resilience to conflicting role demands, aiding in their college completion (Dickson & Tennant, 2018; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Lashley, 2014).

An institution’s culture and climate can either encourage the strengths of single mother students or act as a barrier to their success (Arcand, 2015; Beeler, 2016; Campbell, Deli-Amen, & Rios-Aguilar, 2015; Dickson & Tennant, 2018; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018; Moreau & Kerner, 2015; Nichols et al., 2017; Wainwright & Marandet, 2010). The problem is student mothers are enrolling and starting their college career, but only about eight percent of single mothers will graduate within six years of enrolling at a college or university (Gault & Zeisler, 2019; IWPR, 2017).

**Single mothers and motivation, their children.** Single mothers report that their children serve as motivation to complete college (Cerven, 2013; Lashley, 2014; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Markle, 2015). The mother’s success at community college can help close education and economic gaps and set an example for her family and the community (Gault & Zeisler, 2019; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Wainwright & Marandet, 2010). Single mothers will earn more money, approximately $329,000 more over their lifetime, with an associate degree than with a high school certificate (Bombardieri, 2018; Carter, 2019; Gault & Zeisler, 2019; IWPR, 2017). When mothers persist to college completion, it has a positive impact on their
children’s overall well-being and educational outcome (Augustine et al., 2018; Monaghan, 2017; Wainwright & Marandet, 2010; Wilsey, 2013). For example, children’s positive educational outcomes have been linked to their mother’s successful completion in HE (Hernandez & Napierala, 2014; Monaghan, 2017; Ricco et al., 2009; Wilsey, 2013).

Mothers and their children can benefit from an institution that embraces the parenting status of their students (Arcand, 2015; Augustine et al., 2018; Beeler, 2016; Brown & Nichols, 2013; Sullivan, 2018). Institutions should consider single mothers’ sources of motivation, namely their children, and provide supportive services that can not only affect two generations but will go on to influence many generations to come (Arcand, 2015; Augustine et al., 2018; Beeler, 2016; Bombardieri, 2018; IWPR, 2017; Lenette et al., 2014). Community colleges appear to lag behind for-profit colleges that embrace single mothers, providing streamlined services and flexible class schedules (Arcand, 2015; IWPR, 2017). To answer the question of how community colleges can improve retention and completion rates of single mothers, this research study examined the lived experiences of the LE for student mothers to understand the factors that they perceive as supports to their success.

**Student Mothers and Persistence**

Student mothers appear to have the ability to maintain goals and aspirations in the face of challenges, which is related to the level of commitment and is a factor in persisting in college to completion (Browning et al., 2018; Carter, 2019; Hunter-Johnson, 2017). Self-determination, motivation style, self-efficacy, and personal self-improvement goals aid in persistence to complete college (Bowman, Hill, Denson, & Bronkema, 2015; Fong et al., 2018; Hunter-Johnson, 2017; Maltby, Day, & Hall, 2015; Maltby, Day, Flowe, Vostanis, & Chivers, 2017; Nielsen, 2015; Pangallo, Zibarras, Lewis, & Flaxman, 2015). Personal characteristics and
individual personality traits have been found to be related to the ability to persist and endure tough circumstances and attain goals (Edwards, Catling & Parry, 2016; Hagihara & Kato, 2018; Oshio, Taku, Hirano, & Saeed, 2018; Robbins, Kay, & Catling, 2018). An institution’s ability to effectively enhance and foster the growth of personal aspirations can impact persistence. Community colleges can provide mentoring and coaching programs for student mothers that foster personal goal setting by using advising staff and faculty members as mentors and coaches. This can be a low-cost way to impact student mothers.

**Family and institution support.** Positive social systems like family support appear to be related to academic resilience and persistence to completion (Abukari, 2018; Cerven, 2013; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Lashley, 2014). Females struggling between student and parenting responsibilities and obligations develop a “will to persist,” which helps them to meet challenges and achieve academic success (Markle, 2015, p. 281). For some students, perseverance increases throughout the education journey (Bowman et al., 2015; Nielsen, 2015; Watson & Vogel, 2017). HE institutions that adopt a “culture of care” recognize existing strengths and embrace student mothers in a supportive way that increases college persistence (Nichols et al., 2017, p. 79). Since student mothers are a subgroup of what was known as a nontraditional student, looking at other subgroups in HE and how they persist may help in identifying ways to support them.

**Past experiences.** Students who arrive at college with a history of adversity do not equate to a negative outcome. Students, reporting several childhood adversities, credited their adverse experiences as helping them develop skills to meet challenges and develop resilience and grit needed to persist (Bowman et al., 2015; Brogden, & Gregory, 2018; Yew, Siau, & Kwong, 2017). Student will to persist can still exist even with a history of adversity and amid stressful circumstances (Deterding, 2015; Robbins et al., 2018). In others, early adverse experiences are
positively correlated with negative outcomes such as substance abuse (Arnekrans et al., 2018). The effects of adversity vary and cannot be viewed as only affecting negative outcomes. Overcoming adversity is more probable in adult college student mothers as they have more life experiences. For example, they may be more likely to have practiced strategies to reduce stress prior to entering community college. Community colleges can enhance adaptive strategies like resilience to increase persistence in student mothers.

**Underrepresented groups and persistence.** Historically, there are many cultural and socioeconomic barriers to participating in HE for underrepresented minority groups (Hunn, 2014; Jury et al., 2017; Lang, 2002). Diverse supports play a key role in supporting at-risk students to persist and complete their education goals (Abukari, 2018). Family and community resources that provide instrumental support are important for student persistence in HE (Abukari, 2018; Pangallo et al., 2015). Student mothers’ benefit from supportive family that provide the instrumental support of childcare (Cerven, 2013; Lashley, 2014; Lin, 2016; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018). For some students, social relationships play a significant role in the pursuit of HE (Abukari, 2018; Perez-Felkner, 2015). For undergraduate, Hispanic nontraditional college students, support from family was found as a major “source of strength” in student persistence (Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2016, p. 27).

Supportive relationships with family and friends, or a supportive adult mentor, act as protective factors in college persistence (Cotton et al., 2017; Lashley, 2014). African American and Hispanic males are also at risk to persist and complete HE (Abukari, 2018; Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2016; Dualeh et al., 2018; Kim & Hargrove, 2013). Undergraduate Hispanic and African American males who attended a predominately white institution, experienced barriers to success; however, they used the barriers “as inspiration to persist and prove others wrong” (Hall,
Supportive organizations on campus that foster social relationships influenced persistence in this group (Hall, 2017). College students with disabilities are another subgroup in higher education who face challenges to persistence. Some students with disabilities see themselves as capable of facing difficulties and are more likely to adapt to change and persist (Ganguly & Perera, 2018; Stack-Cutler, Parrila, & Torppa, 2015). Institutions can assist underrepresented and at-risk students by enhancing supportive systems that act as protection or insulation against risk factors. Research findings with these underrepresented groups can help to inform strategies that will be effective in supporting persistence in student mothers at community college.

**Reducing poverty barriers to increase persistence.** Unfortunately, college students at any time during their HE career may experience housing insecurity or homelessness, and this includes student mothers (West, 2019). Sadly, homeless students are sometimes “unaware of the support they can receive on campus or do not view the institution as a supportive structure” (Gupton, 2017, p. 208). Collaborations with community agencies that serve housing insecure or homeless populations can be used to increase awareness and to assist in developing appropriate interventions. Despite their homelessness and housing insecurity, students remain committed to their college goals and persist (Gupton, 2017; West, 2019). Colleges are establishing programs to meet the needs of students who face poverty, low income, food insecurity, and homelessness (Cohen, 2019; Golden, 2019; West, 2019). Several colleges across the U.S. have developed programs that specifically address poverty barriers to college persistence. Amarillo Community College in Amarillo, Texas developed a program to address such issues (Amarillo College, 2019). The program provides easily-accessible resources that assist students with overcoming barriers to persistence such as financial assistance with transportation, rent, food, and clothing.
Developing a culture that values caring for students may be useful in increasing the completion rates of student mothers (Nichols et al., 2017; Sullivan, 2018). Students need to feel valued by their institution for their participation in school programs with teachers, administrators, and mentors (Chavez, 2015; Perez-Felkner, 2015).

**Mental well-being and persistence.** College students face challenges in HE that bring with them stress-evoking experiences that can interfere with mental well-being (Eisenberg, Lipson, & Posselt, 2016; Hartley, 2012). Interpersonal factors like self-efficacy and maturity level can aid students in overcoming these challenges and persisting in college (Holdsworth, Turner, & Scott-Young, 2018; Pangallo et al., 2015). Individual personality traits, like positivity, self-esteem, or self-efficacy can be buffers against adversity, negative experiences, and stress (Edwards et al., 2016; Hagihara & Kato, 2018; Robbins et al., 2018). Counseling is a needed support service on community college campuses (Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Shenoy et al., 2016). In nontraditional adult university students, self-determination and being goal-oriented were identified as contributing to academic success in the face of adverse conditions (Hunter-Johnson, 2017). Research findings suggest that optimism and conscientiousness are related to the ability to persist (Maltby et al., 2015; Maltby et al., 2017; Pangallo et al., 2015; Bowman et al., 2015). Hope and gratitude are related to academic integration and “academic integration is associated with institutional commitment” (Browning et al., 2018, p. 623). Integration and commitment are factors that increase college persistence and reduce the risk of departure (Tinto, 1993). These findings can be useful in designing best practices for effective and efficient interventions to address mental well-being to improve and strengthen persistence of community college student mothers.
Student mothers’ children and persistence. Addressing persistence in student mothers requires addressing their children. The increasing number of college student mothers demonstrates this need (AACC, 2018; Beeler, 2016; Kolodner, 2017; NCES, 2018a). Community colleges can address the needs of the student mother’s family role. The culture or climate of the college presents a message to student mothers. The staff, faculty, and administrators are bearers of this message in their interactions with students. Institutional actors like faculty have regular contact with students, and faculty funds of knowledge inform their behaviors toward students (Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018). To be effective with student mothers, faculty need to be knowledgeable to address the unique needs of these adult learners. Negative experiences “serve to weaken intentions” (Tinto, 1993, p. 115) and student commitment to the institution, which can impact student persistence and retention. Faculty perceptions and biases shape faculty-student interactions (Zerquera et al., 2018). Preparing faculty through training and professional development can enhance positive interactions with student mothers and impact their ability to reach academic goals (Zerquera et al., 2018).

Adopting a culture of caring that understands the unique needs of student mothers is essential to supporting this group (Beeler, 2016; Brown & Nichols, 2012; Cerven, 2013; Dickson & Tennant, 2018; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Evenbeck, 2019; Moreau & Kerner, 2015; Nichols et al., 2017). Institutions should consider parenting students when developing class schedules, due dates, and absence policies (Arcand, 2015; Augustine et al., 2018; Beeler, 2016; Brown & Nichols, 2013; Nichols et al., 2017; Sullivan, 2018). Since student mothers report that their children are a major motivation to complete college, developing family-friendly spaces and policies on campus should be considered in a culture of caring environment (Arcand, 2015; Augustine et al., 2018; Beeler, 2016; Bombardieri, 2018; Cerven, 2013; IWPR, 2017; Lashley,
When it comes to persistence and student mothers, the community college must address the needs of the student mother, her children, support systems on and off campus, and the institution.

**Student Mothers and the Learning Environment (LE)**

What does the LE look like to student mothers in community college? What are the best practices for an effective learning environment for student mothers at community college? Title IX mandate specifies that each campus designate a Title IX coordinator who is responsible for compliance across the institution (O’Brien, 2015). The institution ensures that the Title IX coordinator is trained in Title IX issues and procedures (O’Brien, 2015). Title IX policies and procedures are poorly disseminated on most community college campuses, and there is a lack of awareness of resources available to pregnant and parenting students (Beeler, 2016; Madden, 2018; Nichols et al., 2017). For example, many pregnant and parenting students are unaware of their parenting rights and accommodations that they are eligible to receive such as excused absences (U.S. Department of Justice, 2015). First generation and first time in college student mothers may not be aware that these policies exist.

Colleges can create barriers to student mother persistence by creating a climate that is perceived as unfriendly and unwelcoming to student mothers (Anderson, 2019; Roy et al., 2018). Student mothers report feeling invisible on college campuses through interactions with faculty, staff, and institution policies and procedures (Beeler, 2016; Duquaine-Watson, 2007, 2017; Galasso et al., 2018; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018; Roy et al., 2018; Stringer, 2018). Campuses that lack structural support, like parking spaces for pregnant students, contribute to perceptions of invisibility (Brown & Nichols, 2012). Changing
parking spaces to accommodate pregnant and parenting students is a low-cost way to reduce the invisibility of this population.

Community colleges can develop campus cultures that embrace and support student diversity by increasing awareness of Title IX policies and procedures (Sullivan, 2018). Family-friendly campuses provide resources that include family friendly spaces like studying spaces where students can bring their children along, more stations for diaper changing, and spaces dedicated to lactation rooms for nursing mothers (Beeler, 2016; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018). When student mothers are aware of these resources, they may perceive the learning environment as welcoming and friendly and able to meet their needs.

**Children and childcare.** Once again, a top concern for student mothers is their children (Beeler, 2016; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Wilsey, 2013). Student mothers have expressed that they want colleges to “make campus more child oriented” (Lindsay & Gillum, 2018, p. 195). Student mothers are dedicated to their children and to their college goals, they should not have to choose between the two (Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Smith, 2019). It is possible to provide resources to strengthen student mother’s ability to balance role responsibilities (Duquaine-Watson, 2017; Lin, 2016). Community colleges that do have childcare centers are often experienced by student mothers when they try to access them as “always full and too expensive” (Madden, 2018, p. 390). Lack of convenient, affordable childcare continues to be cited among parenting community college students (Beeler, 2016; Brown & Nichols, 2012; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018).

**Classroom and coursework.** Course schedules and sequencing can delay graduation for student mothers (Brown & Nichols, 2013). As a result, some community colleges encourage
student mothers and parenting students to enroll in online courses (Madden, 2018). This may create conditions where the student is unable to be successful, especially if they have no experience with online course work. This may also be perceived by student mothers that they are not welcome in the classroom or that they should keep their motherhood identity separate from their student identity (Madden, 2018). After student registration, advising, and financial aid services, faculty have weekly contact with student mothers and are most influential and representative of the college in faculty-student interactions (Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Madden, 2018). In the classroom or online, faculty-student interactions can either promote barriers or promote success in student mothers (Beeler, 2016; Duquaine-Watson, 2017; Madden, 2018). Parenting students perceive negative interactions with judgmental faculty as a barrier (Nichols et al., 2017). Supportive “mentoring connections between faculty” (Chavez, 2015, p. 215) and students strengthen and encourage students at community college. Understanding the multiple roles and responsibilities of student mothers by faculty “can help create a climate of inclusion on college campuses” (Kensinger & Minnick, 2018, p. 137).

**Student services.** Community colleges should ensure early identification of student mothers by “matching new students with advisors or mentors early in the admission process” (Arcand, 2015, p. 1190) as this can impact perceptions of the learning environment. The climate of the institution is experienced through student mothers’ interactions with student services personnel like advising and financial aid staff (Beeler, 2016; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Madden, 2018). At for profit institutions, student services tend to be streamlined so that students are not directed to different buildings for different services, which can be challenging for students with children in tow (Arcand, 2015). Parenting students face daily challenges that may increase stress and influence mental wellness (Shenoy et al., 2016). Institutions that are sensitive
to the roles and responsibilities of student mothers need to provide access to counseling services and peer support groups to promote mental wellness (Augustine et al., 2018; Shenoy et al., 2016).

Research on parenting students in HE suggests that affordable, convenient childcare is the most needed service (Beeler, 2016; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Lashley, 2014; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018; Pattillo, 2016). Community colleges can support student mothers’ success by promoting Title IX policies across the institution, providing affordable and convenient childcare, creating family friendly spaces on campus, offering resources for peer support groups, and providing access to counseling services (Augustine et al., 2018; Beeler, 2016; Brown & Nichols, 2013; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Kensinger & Minnick, 2015; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018; Pattillo, 2016; Shenoy et al., 2016). By addressing these needs, the institution will benefit through increased retention and completion rates, and student mothers will benefit from the support through increased persistence.

**Summary**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experience of student mothers in the LE of community colleges in Texas. An assumption of SDT is that all humans strive to fulfill three basic psychological needs of competence, relatedness or connectedness, and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2008). Colleges that establish practices that are autonomy supportive may assist with strengthening or at least influencing persistence in student mothers. Academic persistence is measured by a student’s continued enrollment at an institution (Braxton et al., 2011; Tinto, 1993). Focusing on improving positive interactions between the student and the institution can foster academic and social integration and strengthen college persistence (Tinto, 1993). Positive interactions between faculty, staff, and
student mothers influence college persistence (Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Lin, 2016). For student mothers, family responsibilities also weigh in on decisions to persist in college (Fong et al., 2018; Markle, 2015; Nielsen, 2015; Stuart et al., 2014). Colleges and students benefit when the institution addresses the needs of diverse populations to improve persistence, creating a more inclusive LE (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Hall, 2017; Savage et al., 2019; Seider et al., 2015). Student mothers are a diverse group who experience challenges, and many manage to overcome barriers to college persistence (Arcand, 2015; Beeler, 2016; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018).

An effective LE for an adult learner is one that respects the adultness of its learners (Knowles et al., 2015). Adults are self-directed learners who exercise autonomy in their learning environment (Knowles et al., 2015). Autonomy-supportive LEs promote self-determination (Black & Deci, 2000; Deci et al., 1991). The supportive LEs for adult students provide resources and choices for students (Deci et al., 1991). Community colleges can create a quality LE using multiple course delivery methods to meet the needs of adult students and the local workforce market (Snart, 2017). Colleges that consider the needs of their parenting students when scheduling courses and planning physical spaces can have a positive influence on the LE for student mothers (Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018).

Federally-mandated Title IX policies need to be visible throughout the college campus and programs (Beeler, 2016; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018; McLaughlin, 2014). Community colleges need to address changes in practices and policies to increase completion rates for student parents and specifically student mothers. There are roughly one in four Texas community college students parenting young children (Galasso et al., 2018). Student mothers are more likely to attend community colleges and to enroll part-time due to competing roles of
student and parent (Beeler, 2016; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; NCES, 2018a). When student mothers achieve their academic goals in college, their children are more likely to have positive educational and health outcomes (Augustine et al., 2018; Lashley, 2014; Monaghan, 2017; Wainwright & Marandet, 2010; Wilsey, 2013).

An effective, quality LE for student mothers is one where resources are accessible to include affordable childcare options and family-friendly spaces on campus, and where student mothers feel that their role as a parent is respected (Beeler, 2016; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018). Resources such as a peer support group can influence the LE by strengthening social support for student mothers (Duquaine-Watson, 2017; Lin, 2016). The problem is student mothers are a group that continues to grow at community colleges, has poor completion rates, and are largely forgotten when it comes to targeted services and interventions that decrease barriers to persistence and completion (Arcand, 2015; Bermea et al., 2018; Brown & Nichols, 2013; IWPR, 2017; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Kolodner, 2017; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018; NCES, 2018a; Nichols et al., 2017; Stringer, 2018). Despite mandated Title IX policies, student mothers continue to report barriers to persistence in HE (Beeler, 2016; Brown & Nichols, 2013; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Madden, 2018). There is a gap in the literature on the factors that effectively influence persistence and completion of student mothers in the LE of community colleges (Arcand, 2015; Bermea et al., 2018; Brown & Nichols, 2013; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Kolodner, 2017; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018; Nichols et al., 2017; Stringer, 2018). Colleges that recognize the importance of their student mother population can enhance their ability to persist to completion by adopting a culture that supports and cares for both generations, student mothers and their children (Arcand, 2015;
Augustine et al., 2018; Beeler, 2016; Bombardieri, 2018; IWPR, 2017; Lashley, 2014; Lenette et al., 2014).

The problem is that nearly one-third of all community college students are parenting young children, and the majority of those parents are student mothers who face challenges and barriers to persistence and have poor completion rates (Arcand, 2015; Bermea et al., 2018; Brown & Nichols, 2013; Gault et al., 2014; IWPR, 2017; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Kolodner, 2017; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018; NCES, 2018a; Nichols et al., 2017; Noll et al., 2017; Stringer, 2018). The LE directly influences student mothers’ perceptions and can impact persistence decisions (Beeler, 2016; Crisp et al., 2016; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018). There have been studies on student mothers at community college, but there is little to no research on how the LE experiences influence student mother persistence using the lens of SDT (Cotton et al., 2017; Crisp et al., 2016; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018). The results of this study contribute to informing best practices for improving the policies and programs that are directed toward this student population by contributing to the empirical, theoretical, and practical significance for the field of student persistence at community college.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of student mothers in the LE of community colleges in Texas. This chapter describes the design and study procedures. First, I discuss the research design and research questions. Next, I describe the setting and participant characteristics. The details of the research procedures, researcher’s role, steps in data collection and analysis are presented. Lastly, trustworthiness and ethical considerations are discussed, and the chapter ends with a summary.

Design

The qualitative method was used for this research study. This was the best method for this study because qualitative inquiry is suited to yield results that provide detailed descriptions of personal experiences and the meaning of those experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013; Patton, 2015). Qualitative research methods “focus on learning the meaning that the participants hold” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 182) about a specific issue. The nature of qualitative research is to study a phenomenon in the context in which it is experienced by individuals (Hays & Singh, 2012). Qualitative researchers “become immersed” (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 4) as they observe and talk to individuals that experience the phenomenon directly (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). This was the best method to gain a deep understanding of the experience of student mothers in the LE of community college.

I chose the phenomenological design because this design has been used to understand the nature of human experience (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2016). Valid evidence is gathered from detailed “reports of life experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 84). Phenomenology focuses on rich, in-depth descriptions of the participants, and detailed descriptions of lived experiences help
researchers understand the meaning participants ascribe to their experiences (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2016). Phenomenology is used to explore a phenomenon that individuals within a population have experienced and understand at a deep level the shared meaning of the experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To obtain detailed descriptions, the researcher develops relationships with participants through individual interviews and observations (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological methods are best suited to examine the lived experience of student mothers in the LE of community colleges in Texas.

A transcendental phenomenological approach was used because it seeks to understand human experience and this approach allowed me as the researcher to bracket my experience and look at the experiences of the participants with a fresh view (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). In the transcendental approach the researcher sets aside predispositions, to look at the data with “an unfettered stance;” this is known as the Epoche process, to set aside old knowledge in order to gain new knowledge (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). Transparency of the researcher’s position is necessary to permit the viewing of the data with fresh eyes (Moustakas, 1994).

Transcendental phenomenology is an approach to knowledge described by Husserl (1859-1938), a German philosopher (Vincini, 2016). Phenomenology is an approach that describes rather than explains human experience. Intentionality and essence are major concepts of transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). Intentionality refers to the interconnectedness of things; for example, the actual experience is related to the consciousness of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Essence, the meaning of knowledge, is the working out of the explicit experience and the perception of its meaning (Moustakas, 1994). In other words, understanding the intentionality or the interconnectedness of things will bring forth the essences or the meaning. The transcendental phenomenological design is the most appropriate way to
examine the lived experience of student mothers in the LE of community college. In using this design, I describe in an in-depth and rich way the lived experience of participants and the shared meaning or essence.

**Research Questions**

Research questions guide the data collection process and the individual interview and focus group questions. In qualitative research, the research questions are open-ended and begin with why, what, or how (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The central question is the broad purpose of the inquiry, and the subsequent questions break the central question down into parts that assist with “further analyzing the central phenomenon” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 141) the experience of student mothers in the LE of community college.

**Central Research Question**

The central research question that guided this study was: What is the lived experience of student mothers in the learning environment of community college in Texas?

**Subsequent Research Questions**

The subsequent research questions were:

1. How do student mothers describe their overall experience at community college in Texas?

2. How do student mothers at community college in Texas describe experiences with faculty and college staff?

3. How do student mothers at community college in Texas describe experiences with student peers?

4. What do student mothers describe as not supportive to their academic persistence at community college in Texas?
What do student mothers describe as supportive to their academic persistence at community college in Texas?

**Setting**

The settings were three community colleges in Texas: North Community College, Middle Community College, and South Community College (pseudonyms). The settings characteristics are found in Table 1. They are all two-year, public higher education institutions, have large populations of adult students over the age of 25, and have large part-time student enrollment. Each college is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC). They all award associate degrees, have various accreditations for nursing and other health professions, and offer various vocational certificates. These sites were appropriate for this study as they represented three types of community colleges in Texas, large city, midsize city, and suburb. By using the strategy of varying the type of community college in the sample, this meets the goal of maximum variation sampling and thus increased the transferability of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

North Community College is in the city-large category and located in a large city with a population of 1.3 million. Middle Community College is in the city-midsize category and is in a city with a population of 138,000. South Community College is in the suburb-midsize category and is in a city with a population of 149,000. Typically, public colleges have governing bodies, made up of elected members from community citizens called directors or trustees. These governing bodies are accountable to community citizens and state authorities. Traditionally, these higher education institutions use a hierarchical form of leadership (Levin, 2013). College presidents or chancellors are appointed by the governing body to lead the organization according
to the mission, vision, and values. At community colleges, the focus of faculty is teaching and not research, and a majority are part-time (Twombly & Townsend, 2008).

Table 1

**Setting Characteristics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>North Community College</th>
<th>Middle Community College</th>
<th>South Community College</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Enrollment</td>
<td>11,700</td>
<td>9,000</td>
<td>16,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus Setting</td>
<td>City: Large</td>
<td>City: Midsize</td>
<td>Suburb: Midsize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students Part-Time</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students Age 25 and older</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Students</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retention Rate for Part-Time</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Graduation Rate in 3 yrs.</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City Population Estimated 2020</td>
<td>1.3 million</td>
<td>138,000</td>
<td>149,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Participants**

Participants were selected through purposeful sampling. In qualitative research, “purposeful sampling focuses on selecting information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study” (Patton, 2015, p. 264). Operational construct sampling was used to identify participants that have “manifestations of a theoretical construct of interest so as to examine and elaborate the construct and its variations and implications” (Patton, 2015, p. 269). The participants were determined through an online screening survey to be student mothers enrolled at community college. All participants were fulfilling parenting roles for their dependent children while they attended community college (Beeler, 2016; Chung et al., 2017; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Ross-Gordon, 2011).

Sample size in qualitative research is flexible, and the purpose of the inquiry was to collect extensive data from a small number of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). For a phenomenological study, researchers have recommended from three to 10
participants; however, the number of participants is dependent on the type of inquiry, purpose, and what the researcher is investigating (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Patton, 2015). The concept of data saturation influences sample size and is the point in collection and analysis where nothing new is emerging (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Saldana, 2016). The sample size consisted of 10 participants. The sample characteristics can be found in Table 2. This sample provided the appropriate amount of data to understand the shared meaning of the lived experience of the LE.

Table 2

**Participant Characteristics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Child &lt; 18</th>
<th>Work</th>
<th>College</th>
<th>Fed./St. Grants</th>
<th>Student Loan</th>
<th>Scholarship</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Aliyah</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brianna</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>NE</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diamond</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>NE</td>
<td>North</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chloe</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>North</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>Middle</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eisha</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>North</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiara</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>North</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Ethnicity: AA=African American, H=Hispanic/Latina(x), W=White/Caucasian. Work: PT=part-time, FT=full-time, NE=not employed. Fed./St. Grants=Federal/State Grants (i.e., Pell).*

Participants were recruited through recruitment flyers placed on campus that included a link to the seven-question screening survey. Based on the responses to the screening survey, the purposeful sample was selected in order to obtain an operational sample of individuals that had the “manifestation or representation” (Patton, 2015, p. 288) of the lived experience of student mothers in the LE of community colleges. This specific sample was needed and best suited for this research study because “the aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experience into a
textural expression of its essence” (van Manen, 2016, p. 36). Each participant was a student mother and had experienced the LE at community college.

**Procedures**

For protection of participants, I obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Liberty University and each community college site (Patton, 2015). I requested the recruitment flyers be placed on campus bulletin boards. The recruitment flyers contained information about the study and a link to the screening survey that was completed online through SurveyMonkey®. Participants that choose to voluntarily take part in the study provided their email address and telephone number. I reviewed the online screening surveys, and participants that indicated they were an adult and a parent were identified to obtain a purposeful sample that served to “intentionally sample a group of people that can best inform the researcher about the research problem under examination” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 148). A purposeful sample of 10 student mothers was obtained.

Participant informed consent was forwarded through email and signed via Adobe Sign® (Patton, 2015). After review of signed informed consent, I scheduled a time to meet for the individual interview through email or text message. Most of the participants preferred to be contacted through text message. I then forwarded through email the link to a second survey, the Demographic Information and Learning Climate Questionnaire (LCQ) (Black & Deci, 2000). The Learning Climate Questionnaire (LCQ) was completed by participants on average of 3-4 minutes (Black & Deci, 2000). Participants completed this survey prior to the individual interviews to allow a review of the responses and follow-up questions during the interviews. Responses to the LCQ were synthesized with participant responses about the LE.
I conducted the meetings for the individual interviews on campus in the library, study rooms, the cafeteria, or at local public libraries. I audio recorded and transcribed the interviews. I analyzed the transcripts by each question and response to identify significant statements and themes. I provided each participant an opportunity to review the transcripts for member checking (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Next, I conducted a focus group through Zoom©, a video conferencing tool. This platform was most convenient for the student mothers in this study because of scheduling times and childcare. The Zoom© app was free and easily downloaded on participant smart phones. All participants were invited to attend the focus group. One focus group was conducted with four participants, and each site was represented. Once I created the meeting, I then texted the link to the participants so that they could join through their smart phones. During this process, I was aware of my personal experience as a student mother in the LE at community college and consciously set it aside by bracketing it to allow a “fresh perceiving and experiencing” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 87) known as the epoche to emerge in the data. I did this by maintaining a researcher journal. A doctoral candidate peer reviewed the results of the data analysis.

**The Researcher’s Role**

In the researcher’s role, I adopted a social constructivist paradigm relying on the participant descriptions of their lived experience (Moustakas, 1994). Individuals form meaning through interaction with others and “subjective meanings are negotiated socially” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 24). In phenomenological research, “knowledge speaks through our lived experiences” (van Manen, 2016, p. 46). It is impossible for the researcher to “forget or ignore” (van Manen, 2016, p. 47) the knowledge gained through prior experiences. Phenomenological
researchers must be explicit about “understandings, beliefs, biases, assumptions” (van Manen, 2016, p. 47) and clearly state them in the research study.

I have personal experience as a community college student mother. I started attending community college as an adult with two young children and a full-time career. I am familiar with the struggles and challenges of achieving academic goals in adulthood. Currently, I am a faculty member at a community college. I examined the lived experiences of other student mothers at community college to provide rich, in-depth descriptions that can inform college administrators on the supports and policies that may enhance the LE to support and strengthen persistence. I placed myself alongside of the student mother participants to establish rapport and relationships and gain a rich description of their lived experiences. I used my life experiences through reflexivity in the process, which was documented in the researcher journal.

Data Collection

Qualitative research “consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible” to others and, “involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013, p. 6). The transcendental phenomenological approach “seeks meanings from appearances and arrives at essences through intuition and reflection on conscious acts of experience, leading to ideas, concepts, judgments, and understandings” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 58). To obtain rich, in-depth descriptions of participant’s lived experiences, qualitative researchers must get up-close and personal using open-ended questions during individual interviews to gather “data that will lead to a textural and structural description of the experience, and ultimately provide an understanding of the common experiences” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 79). The following data collection methods were used for this study.
Learning Climate Questionnaire (LCQ)

The Learning Climate Questionnaire, developed by Williams and Deci (1996), is a six-item, self-report survey that is used to rate perceived autonomy support in a LE. The LCQ focuses on learner experiences with the instructor, and in this case, the faculty-student interactions at community college (Black & Deci, 2000; Williams & Deci, 1996; Williams et al., 1997). In this six-item survey, student mother participants responded on a Likert-type scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Higher scores represent high levels of perceived autonomy support (Black & Deci, 2000; Williams & Deci, 1996; Williams et al., 1997). The LCQ is reported as having internal consistency and alpha scores ranging from 0.93 to 0.96 (Black & Deci, 2000; Williams & Deci, 1996; Williams et al., 1997). I chose to use this method of data collection because autonomy support is an assumption in SDT and has been found to have a strong influence on student intrinsic motivation to learn and grow in educational LEs (Black & Deci, 2000; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Williams & Deci, 1996; Williams et al., 1997). More recently, SDT has been found to be influential on positive learner outcomes across diverse student populations and course modalities (Behzadnia et al., 2018; Filak & Nicolini, 2018; Guay et al., 2008). Research findings suggest that when students perceive an autonomy-supportive LE, “the higher their grades are” and “the more they persist” (Guay et al., 2008, p. 237).

I used this survey to examine how student mothers rated their lived experiences with faculty at community college. The survey responses assisted with responses to subsequent Research Question Two: How do student mothers at community college in Texas describe experiences with faculty? Experiences with faculty are an important influence in the LE (Beeler, 2016; Brown & Nichols, 2013; Chavez, 2015; Duquaine-Watson, 2017; Madden, 2018; Nichols et al., 2017). Participants completed the LCQ via SurveyMonkey® after they signed the consent
form and prior to the individual interviews. The results are shown in Figure 1. Collection of this data was important because it served to further describe the participants’ lived experience of the LE.

**Interviews**

Gathering detailed descriptions of participants’ lived experience was done through “in-depth” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 161) individual interviews. This method of data collection was appropriate for this qualitative phenomenological study as it yielded rich, in-depth descriptions of the lived experiences of participants. The researcher developed “a set of questions or topics to guide the interview process” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 103). The central research question and the five subsequent research questions were answered through the information collected during the individual interviews. Participant interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using NVivo 12 qualitative software. I began each interview with a “social conversation” that served as an icebreaker by “creating a relaxed and trusting atmosphere” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 114).

**Individual Interview Questions**

1. Please introduce yourself to me.
2. What were the ages of your child/children when you attended community college?
3. Please tell me about your decision to enroll at community college. What influenced your decision? What did you study?
4. What would you describe as a positive experience while you were attending college?
5. How would you describe a negative experience you had while attending college?
6. Who would you describe as a faculty member who was supportive? How would you describe the type of support you received from a faculty member?
7. Think of a time when you received positive feedback from faculty. Describe it.

8. How would you describe a faculty member who was not supportive? Describe it.

9. What would you describe as a staff member or department that was supportive? How would you describe the type of support you received from a staff member?

10. How would you describe a staff member or department that was not supportive? Please describe the experience.

11. What did you experience with your student peers at community college? Please describe your experience.

12. In your opinion, did your college provide opportunity for student peer interactions and support? Please describe.

13. What did you experience as a college policy or procedure that you think was supportive and helpful while you attended college? Please describe.

14. Thank you for your time and consideration. Is there anything else you feel I should know?

Questions one, two, and three were designed to assist with establishing rapport between researcher and participant (Moustakas, 1994). These questions were asked in an open-ended format to allow participants to “respond in their own words” and encourage participants to respond “descriptively” (Patton, 2015, p. 446). This set an atmosphere of sharing that helped “reveal more fully the essences and meanings” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 105) of participant experiences.

Questions four and five are experience questions (Patton, 2015). They were designed to elicit “vivid and accurate renderings of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 105). These questions were designed to elicit responses to answer subsequent Research Question One by
providing descriptions of the overall lived experiences of student mother participants at community college (Beeler, 2016; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018). Experience questions bring out responses that describe the activities of the participant as if the researcher would have “been present” (Patton, 2015, p. 444). Descriptions of the overall lived experience at community college set the stage for the remaining interview questions about different parts of the experience.

Questions six through ten are also experience questions that invited participants to describe how they experienced faculty and staff at the college in their own words (Patton, 2015). These questions were designed to attain responses to subsequent Research Question Two: How do student mothers at community college in Texas describe experiences with faculty and college staff? Experiences with faculty and staff interactions are key factors that influence the LE and college persistence for student mothers (Beeler, 2016; Brown & Nichols, 2013; Duquaine-Watson, 2017; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018). The responses to these questions assisted with obtaining “comprehensive descriptions” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 105) of the LE. Student’s experiences while at an institution influence their decisions to persist (Tinto, 1993).

Question eleven is an experience question, and question twelve is an opinion question (Patton, 2015). These questions were designed to elicit descriptions based on what participants experienced with student peers and how the college supported peer interactions (Beeler, 2016; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Roy et al., 2018). Student-peer interactions influence social integration in Tinto’s (1987, 1993) student departure theory and may influence the need for relatedness or connectedness in Deci and Ryan’s SDT (2000, 2008). These questions were designed to respond
to subsequent Research Question Three: How do student mothers at community college in Texas describe experiences with student peers?

Question thirteen is an experience question (Patton, 2015). Responses to this question elicited descriptions that answered subsequent Research Question Four and Research Question Five. Several college policies have been identified by student mothers as not supportive or challenging to their persistence (Arcand, 2015; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018; Nichols et al., 2017).

**Focus Group**

The focus group as a method of data collection is designed to “draw on our human tendencies as social animals to enjoy interacting with others” (Patton, 2015, p. 478). The purpose is to understand how people with similar characteristics understand a “specific topic of interest” (Krueger & Casey, 2000, p. 10). Appendix O includes all focus group questions. All participants were invited to attend the focus group; however, only four, Aliyah, Olivia, Maria, and Eisha, were able to participate. The focus group was conducted online through a video conferencing app. This was the most convenient method of conducting the focus group for the student mother participants. All three sites were represented in the focus group. I recorded, transcribed, and analyzed the focus group. Results of the analysis assisted with the in-depth understanding of the lived experience of the LE and the essence of the shared experience.

**Focus Group Questions**

1. Please introduce yourselves to each other.

2. How would you describe your overall experience at community college as a student mother? Please talk about and further describe what you experienced and how it affected your ability to stay in college.
3. What did you experience as supportive? From faculty? From staff? From peers? Please talk about and further describe how it affected your ability to stay in college.

4. How did your campuses support you as a parenting student?

5. What would you suggest as policies or procedures that provided support during your time at community college as a student mother?

6. After your experience at community college, what advice would you give to a student mother just starting out?

Question one was designed to establish rapport, trust, and safety in the environment to promote self-disclosure in the group (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Questions two and three were designed to elicit responses to the first three subsequent research questions: (1) How do student mothers describe their overall experience at community college in Texas? (2) How do student mothers at community college in Texas describe experiences with faculty? (3) How do student mothers at community college in Texas describe experiences with college staff? Focus group questions two and three were designed to get responses about how lived experiences of the LE at community college influenced academic persistence for student mothers (Beeler, 2016; Brown & Nichols, 2013; Duquaine-Watson, 2017; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018). The group provided further insight into these topics (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

Questions four, five and six were designed to understand individual differences that resulted from the common lived experience of the LE as a community college student mother. The focus group was “homogeneous” in their lived experience but not in terms of personal attitudes or in how the experience affected them and their families (Patton, 2015). These focus group question responses were designed to address subsequent Research Question Four and Research Question Five: (4) What do student mothers describe as support to their parenting role
at community college in Texas? and (5) What do student mothers describe as not supportive to their parenting role at community college in Texas? Research findings suggested that student mothers require resources that support their parenting role (Arcand, 2015; Beeler, 2016; Cerven, 2013; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018; Nichols et al., 2017; Wilsey, 2013). I analyzed and synthesized the resulting descriptions from this group to form the results of this study.

**Data Analysis**

The data analysis for this study followed Moustakas’ (1994) modified method of van Kaam’s (1959, 1966) model of analysis. I transcribed the individual interviews and the focus group, and I performed the following steps: (1) listing and preliminary grouping, (2) reduction, (3) clustering and labeling themes, (4) final check of themes by review of each participant record, (5) develop individual textural and structural descriptions for member checking by participants, and (6) construct a description of the “meanings and essences of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, pp. 120-121). This analysis strategy assisted in developing a description of the “meanings and essences of the experience, representing the group as a whole” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121).

First, I reviewed transcripts for relevant statements referred to by Moustakas (1994) as horizontalization. For visualization of relevant statements, I utilized word trees using NVivo 12 qualitative software as shown in Figures 3, 4, 5, and 6. The second step involved looking at each statement to determine if it was necessary for understanding the experience and if it was enough to be labeled. All repetitive statements were eliminated at this step, and I organized the data in categories by common expressions and significant statements (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012; Moustakas, 1994; Saldana, 2016). Similar statements were “collected together for more detailed” analysis (Saldana, 2016, p. 98). Using word clouds, shown in Figures 7, 8, 9, and 10,
assisted with visualization of the text (Saldana, 2016). Next, related statements and expressions were clustered “into a thematic label” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). The initial themes were further analyzed in a second cycle where I eliminated repeated themes and identified final themes as shown in Tables 3, 4, 5, and 6. I presented the themes that emerged to participants to review and make comments. Final analysis produced a synthesis of data collection into essences of meaning (Moustakas, 1994). This produced a representation of the experience of the entire group (Hays & Singh, 2012; Moustakas, 1994).

The self-report climate survey, the LCQ, was used to further examine how student mothers described and rated their lived experiences with faculty at community college. The survey responses, shown in Figure 1, assisted with answering subsequent Research Question Two: How do student mothers at community college in Texas describe experiences with faculty? Perceptions about faculty influence student mother perceptions of the LE (Beeler, 2016; Brown & Nichols, 2013; Chavez, 2015; Duquaine-Watson, 2017; Madden, 2018; Nichols et al., 2017). Participant responses provided triangulation of data collected in the interviews and focus group on student mother perceptions of faculty and experiences of student-faculty interactions. Understanding student mother perceptions of faculty assisted with describing their lived experience of the LE at community college. These participant rating scores contributed to data analysis because it was relevant to the LE, which was under examination.
Establishing trustworthiness in qualitative methods is done through incorporating “validity strategies” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 200). In this study, triangulation was used to examine data from different sources to establish and justify themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Additionally, ensuring that the steps in the research study are well documented, taking the time to establish rapport, and building relationships with participants served to increase trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I also discuss other validity strategies in terms of the elements of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
Credibility

Credibility is akin to internal validity, and it is used to determine whether the participant’s views line up with or match the researcher’s description (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To increase the credibility of the findings, I used triangulation, providing rich descriptions, member checking, and self-reflection to examine data from different sources to confirm emerging themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Patton, 2015). Providing in-depth, rich, detailed descriptions added to the credibility of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I used member checking on the transcribed individual interviews to elicit participant feedback (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Hays & Singh, 2012). I used the major themes from the individual interviews at the focus group to provide “an opportunity for them to comment on the findings” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 200). Collaboration between participant and researcher increases the credibility of the research results (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I provided researcher comments that demonstrated self-reflection and reflexivity throughout the study process. Reflexivity is a “core characteristic of qualitative research” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 200) and assists with creating honesty and clarifying researcher bias.

Dependability and Confirmability

In qualitative research, dependability and confirmability are terms that address consistency and reliability. Dependability and reliability were addressed through an established audit trail used to document each step in the data collection process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This also served to document emerging connections and journal reflexivity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I double checked written transcripts for mistakes and ensured the meaning of codes remained consistent during analysis to increase the consistency of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). An external peer, with no investment in the research, audited the research data.
and analysis process. This audit was used to address confirmability. Use of an outside objective qualified peer provided an additional check on the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Transferability**

Transferability is analogous to generalizability in a quantitative study. The concept of generalization carries with it a history of control and prediction and “generalizations are assertions of enduring value that are context-free” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 110) and deterministic. The ability to transfer or generalize the findings of research has limited use in a qualitative study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Transferability in qualitative research refers to applying the “findings to new cases” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 202). For example, transferring the findings of this study to other community college students is transferability. I addressed transferability in this research study by providing in-depth, detailed descriptions of participants’ lived experiences in the LE at community college and by obtaining participants from three types of colleges, large city, midsize city, and suburb (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participant descriptions from different sites and diverse backgrounds increased the ability of others to transfer the findings to student mothers at community colleges with similar characteristics and demographics.

**Ethical Considerations**

Qualitative researchers “are guided by the ethical principles on research with human participants” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 109). I obtained the participants’ informed consent for voluntary participation in the study prior to collecting any data. Ethical practice means that the researcher ensures that participants understand the nature and purpose of the study, participant confidentiality, and roles of the researcher and participant (Moustakas, 1994). This was written as part of the informed consent document and reviewed at the individual interview. I did not
have a supervisory or an authority position over the research participants. Approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was completed prior to data collection from Liberty University and from the highest authority at the three sites. Community colleges do not typically have IRBs because the faculty are teaching and not focused on research.

Recruitment flyers were placed throughout the sites. To address confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for research sites and participants. Data was secured through password-protected electronic files stored on an encrypted external hard drive. The hard drive was locked in a locked cabinet along with any paper files and journals. The locked cabinet was secured in a locked office. Participants were provided appropriate referral resources to include Title IX campus coordinators. I appropriately debriefed research participants to effectively manage the relationship boundaries and termination.

**Summary**

In summary, this chapter described the methods that were used for this research study. A qualitative, transcendental phenomenological approach was used to examine the lived experiences of student mothers in the LE of community colleges in Texas. This design and approach were best suited to understand the shared meaning and essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Research questions that guided this study were provided. The setting was described and the specific setting characteristics for each site are found in Appendix A. The 10 participants were selected through purposeful sampling, and the selection criteria was attendance at community college while parenting at least one child under age 18 (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Patton, 2015). The researcher’s role was discussed, and data collection procedures were explained in detail. Individual interviews and one focus group were conducted, recorded, and
transcribed, and the LCQ, a self-report survey, was administered to each participant as data collection methods. Data analysis followed Moustakas’ (1994) model of analysis.

Trustworthiness in the concepts of credibility, dependability and confirmability, and transferability were addressed. It was critical to establish rapport and set healthy relationship boundaries with participants to facilitate rich, in-depth data gathering (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition to providing rich descriptions, member checking and self-reflection were used in triangulation to examine data from different sources to confirm themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Patton, 2015). An audit trail, researcher journal for reflexivity, and an external peer audit was used to address dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Transferability was addressed by providing detailed descriptions of participants’ lived experiences of the LE at community college (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Finally, ethical considerations, confidentiality, and protection of potential participants were discussed. I was guided by ethical principles that govern research with human research participants (Moustakas, 1994). Informed consent was provided, and confidentiality was explained to obtain an acknowledgement from each participant. Liberty University IRB approval was completed prior to conducting any research or contacting any potential research participant. During data gathering, all data was secured through password-protected, electronic files and stored on an encrypted external hard drive. The hard drive was stored in a locked cabinet in a locked office.

These methods were enough to describe the lived experiences of student mothers in the LE of community colleges in Texas. The methods described in this chapter were suited for the research questions as the results provided the “meanings and essences” (Moustakas, 1994, p.
104) of the group’s lived experience. I believe that understanding the lived experiences of student mothers in the LE of community college can identify supports and barriers to college persistence. Understanding how to meet the needs of this student population at community college can strengthen the support services and campus policies to improve persistence and therefore increase completion rates of student mothers.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of student mothers in the learning environment (LE) of community colleges in Texas. This chapter describes the results of the data analysis. First, I provide participant portraits, then the presentation of themes that emerged during data analysis. The research question responses are presented, and lastly the chapter summary is presented.

Participants

This section presents depictions of the 10 participants who informed this study. Participants ranged in age from 22 to 49 years old. Seven of the participants were single mothers, and three were married mothers. Married participants identified as White or Caucasian, and single participants identified as African American and one Hispanic or Latina. Three student mothers had infants or toddlers under age two. This was the first college experience for two of the participants, Kiara and Susan, and the remaining eight had attempted more than once to complete higher education at a college or university. Three single mother participants, Diamond, Eisha, and Brianna attempted or completed a certificate program at a for-profit school prior to their current enrollment at community college. All participants qualified to participate in programs at their college that assisted low-income, first-generation college students, first-time in college students, students with disabilities, or single-mother populations.

Participants received state and federal grants due to low-income status. Six participants utilized student loans to help pay for college. These student mothers were highly motivated, hardworking, and exuded confidence and a positive attitude toward higher education. Noteworthy was their ability to continue in college with their educational goals despite
difficulties and challenges. This ability can be described as resilience. This was demonstrated in their life stories. Life-altering events such as losing a partner or loss of a job appeared to strengthen their persistence to reach goals. All participants described how they believed staying in college to completion demonstrated an example for and was motivated by their children. They shared a mixture of positive and negative experiences at the colleges they attended, but in general, they agreed that their overall experiences at the current community colleges were positive and supportive.

Aliyah

A single mother of two children, ages one and 11, Aliyah is African American, 28-years-old, and she worked three part-time jobs. We met for the individual interview at the public library and Aliyah, between jobs that day, brought her children along. Aliyah’s toddler was very busy during the interview with toys Aliyah brought along to keep her attention. She attended South Community College and was enrolled full-time in online science classes in order to complete prerequisites and apply to the nursing program. Aliyah shared that taking online classes was suggested by an advisor at her college because she was nursing her one year old, “it is more convenient” and “I need that right now.” This was her third attempt at completing higher education with the first following high school graduation and the second attempt following the birth of her first child.

Aliyah is a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA), which she earned in her high school career program, and one of her part-time jobs was working on the weekends as needed assisting in the homes of elder adult patients. Her other part-time jobs consist of food delivery from restaurants to homes and a driver for hire service. The latter jobs are most convenient because “it makes it easier cause I take them (her children) with me.” She negotiated her schedule and
worked three jobs to have the available funds so that she will not need to use student loans to pay for college. Childcare has been a challenge for Aliyah. Aliyah attended summer classes last year, and for childcare she relied on “a group on Facebook to look up babysitters; it’s just a bunch of moms like me, and they are looking for help.” She shared having found “a young lady and she came to my house every morning and helped me out from 8:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.” so that she could attend classes. Aliyah always wanted to be a nurse and enjoys taking care of people. She described how positive feedback and encouragement by faculty has been important to her remaining in college.

**Brianna**

Brianna is 33, African American, and a single mother of a 12-year-old daughter who attends middle school. Brianna attends South Community College. She was not working and was taking online classes toward her degree in early childhood development. Brianna has a history of working for several years as a teacher at a daycare center and wants to open her own daycare center one day, “because all the kids that I had working in daycares and seeing their situation and seeing how I can help.” Brianna likes taking online classes and shared that this has been helpful for remaining enrolled. She is thankful for the advisor who “let me know how much that would help for me to continue.” Brianna had no computer or Internet service at home and said,

I can do a whole lot of my work on my phone, on my smart phone. You can go to McDonald’s or walk around Walmart using their free Wi-Fi because there’s a lot of ways you can get it done.
This was her third attempt at completing higher education. Her first attempt was at a four-year university following high school graduation in 2005. Brianna dropped out when she came home for a break from the university and never returned because “life happened.”

Brianna attended a for-profit college, graduated in 2017, and earned a Certified Medical Assistant (CMA) certificate, but she never worked in this career. When she graduated there were no CMA positions locally, so she took a job at a business unrelated to the medical field because “I had to take care of my daughter.” When she applied to community college this time, her enrollment was delayed a semester due to defaulted student loans from the for-profit college she attended previously. The community college financial aid department worked with her to “get that taken care of” with “the Department of Education” so that she could enroll. She was striving to complete college and shared “I’ve always wanted to finish my education and I will have a degree before she (daughter) graduates (high school).” Brianna and her daughter lived with a relative and relied on rides from friends and family because she did not have a car. Public transportation had limited bus routes in her city, which prevented her from taking face-to-face classes. Online classes for Brianna were “convenient” and especially because “I didn’t have the transportation.” Her academic advisor was an important factor in staying in college. Brianna described him as motivating because “he’s always checking on me” by email and text message.

**Diamond**

A single mother of three children, ages 18, 16, and 13, Diamond is African American, 38 years old, and majoring in computer science. We met in a conference room at her college. She attends North Community College. Diamond has been at this college for four years, and she was excited about graduating at the end of this semester with her associate degree. She shared that it had taken her a while to complete college because her partner “died a couple of years ago,” and
this made it “hard to focus on school.” In addition to this loss, Diamond experienced periods of academic probation and financial aid probation due to not maintaining the required progress and grades. Diamond shared an inconsistent work history with many part-time jobs, mostly in retail. Diamond and her three children shared a residence with a relative, and she used public transportation, which is extensive in her city, to get to and from school since her college provided a “free bus card” while she was enrolled. This was “a benefit” because she had no computer or Internet at home, and she completed her schoolwork at the college computer labs.

Diamond attended several for-profit institutions but was not able to receive help with her learning disability which she said is the reason why she could not complete the programs because “I had the worst experience with them.” Diamond made numerous attempts to complete college since high school, more than she could count at our interview. She credited her mentors at the college, disability services, and involvement in clubs and activities on campus for getting her to completion this time. Diamond was involved in several clubs on campus and held officer positions in three of them. She was a mentor to freshman students, and she shared knowledge about the available programs and “resources.”

**Chloe**

Chloe is a full-time student who also works part time at her college in student services. She is 34, African American, and a single mother of two children ages three and eight. Chloe attends North Community College. We met for the individual interview in her college’s student services area. Chloe was taking a mixture of courses online and face-to-face in the classroom to attain her associate degree in general studies so that she can transfer to a four-year university and study political science. She originally sought a certificate to qualify as a paralegal but because of advice from a mentor at the college that told her “you can take the associates anywhere,” and “a
paralegal certificate is not going to go that far;” Chloe changed her degree plan and program to general studies. The interest in legal studies came from her work history. Chloe worked in the criminal justice system for “over seven years” prior to deciding to enroll in community college in 2017. She shared how she “couldn’t get promoted” and was continually “looked over because I didn’t possess a higher education diploma or degree.” She enjoys helping other students and encouraging them to succeed.

Chloe described an experience in a government class where the instructor deferred questions about the legal system to her for answers she said, “because I worked in the field for over seven years the whole class would shift their attention to me.” The instructor would ask Chloe “to explain how a plea agreement works and so on.” Chloe said that she did not mind sharing the information because “they needed it for the exam” but “I am not on the clock sir and this is what you get paid to do.” She credited her mentors at the college for encouraging her to complete college and setting the example for her children and creating better opportunities for them as motivating factors. Chloe shared, “I have made it my life mission right now to stay in school.”

**Olivia**

Olivia is a 27-year-old married, Caucasian mother of three boys ages seven, six, and three. We met in the closed cafeteria at her college after her classes and prior to her leaving to pick up her youngest son at daycare. Olivia attends Middle Community College. She described how her husband is being supportive so that she could stop working to attend college full-time. Olivia shared “we are considered a low-income family, so it took everything that was in me to decide to come to school versus work,” and “cause I’m not working while I go to school.” She was excited about being able to attend college full-time because originally “my plan was to wait
until all of my kids were in public school and not daycare,” but things worked out and “now is the time more than ever we’ll just have to make some sacrifices.” Olivia’s courses consisted of prerequisites for application to the college’s nursing program. Olivia wanted to complete the licensed vocational nurse (LVN) program, go on to a bachelor’s degree in nursing, and eventually become a nurse practitioner.

Olivia worked part time as a work study on campus in student services helping and mentoring other students. Olivia credited her ability to stay in college to the support of her husband, success coach, and a program that is designated to help low-income, first-generation students called TRIO. Success coaches at community colleges provide support, encouragement, and accountability that focuses on students’ goals. TRIO programs are federal student services programs that provide services for disadvantaged individuals; this includes low-income, first-generation college students, and students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). These programs assist students from middle school through higher education.

Jessica

At 33, Jessica attends Middle Community College and is completing classes because she wants to work in the mental health field. She is Caucasian, married, and mother to two children ages one and eight. Jessica brought her two children to the individual interview, and we met on campus in the cafeteria that was closed for services. Her toddler was very busy during the interview walking and crawling around the cafeteria exploring. She shared that her husband was working that day and that she “takes care of more of the child rearing and stuff like that.” During the interview, her toddler soiled his diaper and there was no changing table in the bathrooms, so she was forced to go out to her vehicle to change his diaper. Jessica dropped out of high school due to several negative experiences, “teachers give up on me and I dropped out.”
Many years later, she attained a high school diploma, GED, at the college she now attends. She shared, “I was valedictorian for the graduation for GED,” and “I felt like it was so enriching the experiences I got here and when I found out it was one of the best colleges I thought that I would come here,” and “I just felt like I belonged here.” Jessica attributed this feeling of belonging to her experience in her GED program.

Jessica likes the experience of taking classes on campus because she experienced too much stress taking online classes last semester because, she clarified “I just wasn’t really prepared for that, all the work.” She explained that she received support from her “teachers” because “I think a lot of them are actually passionate and you can tell.” For Jessica, that support was demonstrated by an instructor that “found out I needed a planner” and “she actually went out and to the bookstore and bought me a really nice planner.” This was her second attempt at completing community college. Jessica wants to help other women who may be struggling with relationships and specifically women who experience family violence. She credited her husband and utilizing the counseling services on campus as encouragement and support to stay in college.

Susan

Susan is 49, Caucasian, and a mother of five children, three of which are under age 18, all teenagers. She attends Middle Community College. Susan is married and works part time, and she cares for an elderly parent who resides with her family. She recalled, “when I graduated high school many moons ago, college was not an option,” and “I met my husband, we had children so here I am.” Susan and her family moved to Texas a few years ago. This was her first attempt at community college, and she will be graduating as a medical assistant with an associate degree in general studies. She said, “it shows my children that no matter how old you are, you can always go back.” The advice from her advisor was that having the associate degree, “will let
me take the bachelor’s degree classes and allow me to seek that degree if I choose to,” and “I am getting two degrees and my world is open,” and “It’s like my grandmother always said, don’t leave all your eggs in one basket.”

Susan was completing college now because “I need retirement and entry level is not an option.” Her most recent employment history was working for over seven years in a pharmacy prior to moving to Texas. She wanted to stay in the medical field and hoped to get a job at a clinic or hospital. Susan was involved in the TRIO program on campus that provided services to first-generation college students which had been helpful in completing her degree. Susan participated in field trips and other activities provided by the TRIO program because, “you get to meet other students that are just like you.” Susan liked assignment to the same advisor, her TRIO advisor, for her entire time at the college.

Maria

Maria is a single mother who worked full-time as a licensed vocational nurse (LVN), at a local medical facility. Maria is 27, Hispanic, and the mother of two children, a boy age eight and a girl age six. She met me at the coffee shop with her two children. She shared that her youngest had a basketball game earlier and that “they play sports year-round, so we stay pretty busy.” Her youngest child expressed an interest in the interview and would politely interrupt to share or ask me questions. It was quite enjoyable. Maria has completed several programs in the medical field. The first was a certificate to be a phlebotomist (people trained to draw blood from a patient) in her high school technical program. The second was an associate degree in respiratory care technician six years ago. She never worked in respiratory care because her employer at the time offered her a management position, and she stayed in that position for several years. The most recent was last year when she completed the LVN program.
Maria started again last semester taking classes online that are prerequisites to apply for the bachelor’s degree in nursing or BSN. She wants to eventually be a nurse practitioner. She shared that she had to quit her full time job as a retail store manager to complete the LVN program and how she made use of her tax refund and “baking a lot like selling stuff online just anything to get through because I wanted to do something I really loved,” and “I like being a nurse.” Maria explained how she does not want the debt of student loans and “I just put myself through school.” She owns her own home and “now I have steady income; I work 9-5 every day, and I have regular hours.” The TRIO program at her college has been instrumental in her success. She stated, “they have books you can rent [borrow], calculators you can rent [borrow], you can go there and print for free, they have tutors and they take us to do extra activities off campus,” Maria elaborated. Regarding the student services at her college, Maria stated, “they paid my light bill for about a year while I finished my LVN.” She credited making a better life for her children, wanting a steady income and stability, and setting an example as motivating factors for her completion of prior programs and degrees and current return to college.

Eisha

Eisha is African American, 27, and a single mother of an 18-month-old son. We met at the college library in a study room for the individual interview. She attended North Community College full time to complete prerequisite courses in anticipation of application to a nursing program. Her long-term goal was to become a nurse practitioner. Eisha shared that she received a job offer the day before our interview and was scheduled to start a full-time job at a large hospital next week. She intended on staying in college while she worked. Eisha has had quite a journey so far in higher education. This is her second attempt at completing community college; her first attempt was after high school, but she said, “I didn’t have a mom or dad there to turn to
for rescue or any type of assistance,” and “I realized that I can’t attend school and you know try to pay bills on my own, so let me go and invest in some type of certification that pays me more money.” Eisha attended a for-profit career school in 2016, and she stated that she “attained my medical assistant license.” Eisha found “some financial stability after I completed that program and went to work for a company;” however, the company “went out of business while I was on maternity leave after the birth of my son in 2018.” She then obtained employment in another medical company, which she enjoyed but missed too many days due to lack of stable childcare and she was let go.

Eisha had experienced housing insecurity since enrollment at North Community College and shared “when I decided to ask for help” at the student services program “I went there and it was just a really (long pause) they were awesome and they helped with food, hygiene, they helped with a program that provided shelter and just a lot more.” Eisha said, “this is somewhere I can just come and not be ashamed to ask for help.” When Eisha experienced housing insecurity, her professors, she explained, were “all so willing to help which was a good thing.” Eisha credited her role models at church as motivators to start college and now with the responsibility of her son she emphasized, “I need to try to get something established so I can make more income to be able to take care of me and my son and I don’t have to worry about struggling.”

**Kiara**

Kiara attended North Community College, is 22, and the mother of a 15-month-old daughter. Kiara is African American, single, and lives with a parent. She explained that she attended orientation for a new part-time job that starts next week but will continue to take classes full time. Kiara wanted to eventually apply to a nursing program because “I want a career,” and
“so that I can take care of both of us.” She takes her daughter to daycare when she is in class since she was approved for “government assistance for childcare.” Kiara utilized the college food pantry “often,” located in the student services area. This was Kiara’s first time in college except for enrollment in dual credit classes when she was in high school. In high school, Kiara shared, “I was like in ninth grade, so I didn’t know like it was going to go against me trying to go as an adult.” She did not do well in those classes, and when she tried to start college last summer, Kiara learned that she was on academic probation. Kiara was not permitted to start until last semester after this was resolved. She described her college experience as “warm and like friendly,” and the “most positive thing is the connection with the teachers.” Kiara shared, “I have teachers they like engage with the students and make it entertaining to learn.” She would like to set an example for her daughter and be “something that she can look up to.”

Results

This section presents the results of the data analysis described in Chapter Three that followed Moustakas’ (1994) method. I present the themes as they were developed through the data analysis. Next, I present the participant responses that answered the research questions. The themes emerged from the data analysis of individual interviews, focus group, the LCQ, and the researcher journal, and they were labeled to reflect the lived experience of student mothers as shown in Tables 3-6, Appendices C-F. In this section I discuss the four themes: (a) access to and utilization of resources and services contribute to the ability to persist, (b) student-faculty interactions influence perceptions of the LE, (c) student services departments provide information that is needed to persist in college, and (d) student peer interactions are limited for student mothers with younger children but increase in program specific courses.

Table 3
**Resources and Services: Labeling, Initial and Final Themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Labeling of Common Expressions</th>
<th>Initial Themes</th>
<th>Final Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assistance with what is necessary to live (food, gas, utility bills, housing) and attend classes.</td>
<td>Help with necessities is needed to support persistence.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programs for low-income, first time in college, first generation students were utilized and helpful.</td>
<td>Programs that target at-risk groups when utilized are helpful.</td>
<td>Access to and utilizing resources and services helps student mothers persist in college.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single-parent programs on campus provide support and cash scholarships to help with childcare costs.</td>
<td>Programs for single parents provide support.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coaching, guiding, and mentoring are encouraging to stay in college. Services on campus are used to stay in college.</td>
<td>Coaching, guiding, and mentoring is supportive.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links and referrals to other resources on and off campus.</td>
<td>Resources on campus.</td>
<td>Community resources linked to campus.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Student-Faculty Interactions: Labeling, Initial and Final Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Labeling of Common Expressions</th>
<th>Initial Themes</th>
<th>Final Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feel connected with the teachers.</td>
<td>Instructors are concerned about me.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professors are here for me. Encourages me. Motivating.</td>
<td>Teachers here want me to be successful. They check my progress.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Showed genuine concern. She took the time out to help me. Rented it for me. Bought me a planner. Motivated me. You are doing a good job. Keep up the good work. You are a good writer.</td>
<td>They listen to me. Positive feedback acknowledges me.</td>
<td>Student-faculty interactions had the most influence on perceptions of the learning environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helpful advice Friendly, warm.</td>
<td>Instructors are attentive. Instructors are supportive.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers engage with their students. Bring me up to speed.</td>
<td>They work with me. Instructors communicate with me.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pushing me for the real world.</td>
<td>Communicate often.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pushed me to do better.</td>
<td>Faculty encourages me.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5

*College Departments and Staff Interactions: Labeling, Initial and Final Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Labeling of Common Expressions</th>
<th>Initial Themes</th>
<th>Final Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Financial Aid a young lady helped me quite a lot.</td>
<td>Financial aid helped me.</td>
<td>They stayed on top of it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Told me what I needed to do.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Financial aid informed me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All the steps.</td>
<td></td>
<td>They tell me things I need to know to stay in college.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial aid is the bomb.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get you in, get you out with what you need.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Let you know what’s available.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial aid told me about work study program</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advising that's how I found out.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advisors told me about that.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It would be best to do these classes for this semester.</td>
<td>Advising provides necessary information to stay on the right path.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lots of good advice.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Advisors are supportive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advisor gave me information.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They are very supportive.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advisors help you map out.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advising gave me a checklist.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advising gave me the information.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are a lot of people around here and departments that help you.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Without my success coach I would not have known.</td>
<td>Staff and departments perceived as supportive overall.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success coach guided me towards the resources on campus.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always checking on me.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stayed on top of that with me.</td>
<td>Success coaches check in with students and help with attaining goals.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Told me I could do it</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very supportive</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stay on track with</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counseling department helped me.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability services for help.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Map out a plan.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They are all very supportive.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

College student services departments are supportive and provide information that is needed to stay in college.
### Table 6

**Student Peers: Labeling, Initial and Final Themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Labeling of Common Expressions</th>
<th>Initial Themes</th>
<th>Final Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I’m so like really busy.</td>
<td>Student mothers would like to make friends, but they are too busy, have limited time.</td>
<td>Student peer interactions are limited but increase in health science programs at community college.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t talk to anyone; I don’t have time.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am very busy.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t have time.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel like I would love to make friends.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m not here to make friends.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They have a calendar on social events.</td>
<td>Student mothers want to participate in campus activities do not have childcare.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want to be involved on campus.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’ve always felt like an outsider.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRIO has field trips.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not kid friendly. (events on campus)</td>
<td>Campus provides activities but they are not kid friendly.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Find a babysitter to go to an event on campus.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructors make sure you participate in the discussion.</td>
<td>Student mothers experience peer support in classes.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You have to participate in group projects.</td>
<td>Instructors provide opportunities in class.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s part of your grade to get involved.</td>
<td>Peer interactions increase in specific programs (health science programs).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study groups in your program.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the program you get to be like family.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s like your family (nursing).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close in your program.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same peers each semester (program).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We can relate because we have kids the same age.</td>
<td>Student mothers communicate through text, phone, email with peers.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text messages</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exchange phone numbers.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email back and forth.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You can email them.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Access to and Utilization of Resources and Services Contribute to the Ability to Persist

Each participant described using support services on campus that included food pantry, financial assistance with childcare, transportation, housing and utility bills, TRIO program, success coaches, disability services, and counseling services. TRIO is not an acronym but refers to a number, originally three, of federal programs developed to improve access to higher education for disadvantaged youth. It now consists of eight programs, but the label is still used to refer to student support services and programs that help disadvantaged students. Experiences with these resources and services provided the needed support to persist for these student mothers and contributed to the positive experience of the LE. The campuses varied in their ability to provide these services; however, each campus provided some form of support services that addressed non-academic barriers.

The food pantries at all three community college sites appeared to be the most used resource based on the participants’ shared experience. Kiara explained, “I go to the food pantry at the center” regularly. Regular use of food pantries was echoed in the focus group; “people need help with that,” described Aliyah, and “that is needed for food, it really helps out,” described Olivia. At my visit to North Community College, I was offered a tour of the services center and was amazed at the items available to students from diapers, personal hygiene, to food that included fresh produce. The food pantry served customers during my visit. I recorded this experience in the researcher journal. Eisha described how the food pantry provided for her family; “I felt comfortable asking for help.” Middle and North Community Colleges are both partnered with a community food bank organization. They received food deliveries on a regular basis. It is notable that not only students used this resource, but food pantries on campus were also open to and used by staff and faculty.
Maria explained how the support program for single mothers at her college assisted with paying her utility bills, and “they would give me money for gas.” At Middle Community College, the single parent support program provided a scholarship for childcare expenses, and “they give you like three checks a semester,” explained Maria. Brianna shared how her college is “helping with housing like if you want to live closer to the campus.” When Eisha experienced housing insecurity, the student services “helped with a program that provided shelter.” All three campuses kept a list of community resources that they provided to students. Jessica described how she used the counseling services on campus, “I think it like really helped me sort out my feelings and give me practical advice.” Childcare assistance was available, if qualified, for student mothers at North and Middle community colleges; however, none of the sites housed an actual daycare center. Susan said, “they have limited funding, and it’s on a first-come, first-served basis.” At North Community College, Kiara explained, “there is a waiting list” for childcare assistance.

Success coaches work to support students to reach their goals. Olivia discussed experiences with her success coach, “I love using that source cause whenever I’m feeling frustrated or trying to conquer something, I can just go talk my plans out with them and it makes me feel much better.” Two participants received services from the disability office, which helped them with accommodations to be successful in their classes. Diamond described how the disability services at her campus “helps me register for classes,” serving an advising role. Chloe also used disability services for advising and to register for classes because they take time to understand “what works with your work schedule.” Susan reflected that her college housed programs for first-time in college students “all under one roof.” Maria said, “my advisor at TRIO was awesome,” and Olivia stated, “they are all programs that help you succeed.”
Responses in the focus group reflected how these resources and services were vital to student mother persistence at community college.

**Student-Faculty Interactions Influence Perceptions of the LE**

The student mothers in this study had very busy schedules, and time was both valuable and limited. Those with younger children did not spend much time on campus. However, they did have regular interactions with faculty, and these student-faculty interactions influenced perceptions of the LE. Most participants experienced supportive faculty interactions, but a few experienced negative and discouraging interactions that created a barrier to successful completion of a class. For example, Chloe recollected an experience when an instructor responded to her email questions with “look at your notes” or “read the syllabus,” and Maria experienced arriving at a scheduled appointment with an instructor, “and when I got there she was not there and nobody told me anything; I mean I took off work to be there.” Susan recalled experiencing inconsistent classroom instruction that did not prepare her for an English class, and the instructor had to “bring me up to speed on what I didn’t get from the first (other) instructor.” Some part-time instructors “want to be our best friend instead of our teacher,” Susan said, “we sat in there for 16 weeks most days and we chit chatted for the whole entire class period.” Jessica suggested leniency on due dates for assignments, “some instructors could be more lenient on taking late assignments especially if you have sick child; that kind of like really discouraged me to be like I don’t care what your situation is.”

In addition to the above negative experiences with faculty, many participants and faculty were not aware of Title IX policies and procedures for pregnant and parenting students. Maria discussed her experience with an instructor who did not understand Title IX policies.
I know when I had her (pointing to her daughter), I had a c-section and I was taking a course and I had to miss some of the assignments because I was in the hospital having her, and I emailed my professor and I explained to her you know this is what happened and can I make up the work and she didn’t let me make it up so I ended up failing the course. I ended up failing that course. She wasn’t very nice either. She was like you know as an adult you have to make other arrangements. Which I understand but not with a C-section because if it was up to me, I wouldn’t have had a C-section. You can’t just get up and walk around the next day.

Jessica had a slightly similar experience when her infant was sick, and the instructor, she explained, “was like oh I never accept late work.” In this study, there were four participants with a child from age one to 18-months. During our individual interviews, I provided information about Title IX guidelines and the contact information for the Title IX coordinator on campuses.

Despite these negative incidents, the overall experience in the LE was described as positive and supportive with faculty. Participants with negative experiences, shared above, also reported more than one positive experience with faculty. The availability of instructors, which was demonstrated by quick responses to emails and messages and interactions in the classrooms, face to face or online, was perceived as supportive and fostered mutual respect. This was the shared experience of all the participants. In online classes, instructor availability through phone calls, emails, and text messages was perceived as positive and supportive. Aliyah recalled how her pharmacology instructor scheduled phone conferences to review exams, “she was able to take that time and walk me through each question and help me get it, so that when I took the next exam that I would get those next questions correct.” The focus group interaction evoked a discussion on how most of faculty experiences at the current colleges had been positive. Maria
elaborated on this, “we were like a family” in her respiratory care program. Olivia brought to mind how encouraging her pharmacology instructor had been, “motivating me to go beyond the LVN to BSN and something along the lines of a practitioner.” Positive experiences outweighed the negative experiences in the individual interviews, focus group, and the Learning Climate Questionnaire (LCQ). Responses to the LCQ, shown in Figure 1, suggested that participants on average agree that instructors were encouraging, understood them, and demonstrated confidence in their ability to be successful. This was most demonstrated through faculty communications with the student mothers through email, text, and phone and positive feedback from faculty on course progress. In addition, participant responses to the instructor listening to how they like to do things and understanding how they see things was slightly lower but still rated as somewhat agree on average. The positive experience with faculty reflected in the interviews, focus group, and the LCQ support the importance of student-faculty interaction and how these interactions influence perceptions of the LE.

![Learning Climate Questionnaire](image)

**Figure 1.** Learning climate questionnaire results. This self-report survey was used to assist with describing the lived experience with faculty at community college. Likert scale score ranged from 7-strongly agree to 1-strongly disagree.
Participants described how transparent and frequent communication with instructors about class work impacted their academic success. Chloe explained her current instructor, “is personable and very eager to help” students in the classroom and through email. Aliyah, who was taking online classes this semester, believed that “all of my instructors online are very supportive and they let me know that if I need any help to contact them,” and “if I message them, they get back to me right away.” Brianna elaborated, “I love the fact that how they stay connected with us” about her instructors through email and her academic advisor through phone text messages, “he knows me so he always checking on me.” These experiences were echoed in the focus group discussion about perceived support from faculty. Eisha added that faculty interactions contributed to her positive experience she explained, “this is such a turn from the first college I attended.” Maria excitedly told the group about how her instructors “checked on me” when she was in the hospital. Frequent communication, attentiveness, and quick responses of the instructors contributed to positive perceptions of the LE.

Positive feedback from instructors was an additional shared experience of all the participants. Positive feedback about assignments or about progress in the course contributed to feeling engaged, competent, and connected. Olivia explained as part of the TRIO program, instructors complete progress reports that are sent to TRIO advisors, and feedback from her English instructor included “I was the most motivated in the class,” as he was “talking about how determined I was.” Maria said, “it’s nice to hear you are doing a good job.” Kiara said positive feedback “it made me feel good,” and Susan and Jessica both shared feeling “validated.” Eisha recalled about her teacher, “she’ll give like good feedback like I agree with you on this or I see where you’re coming from so that’s really good.”
Student Services Departments Provide Information that is Needed to Persist in College

Experiences with student services departments and staff were perceived as supportive and positive by participants. As with student-faculty experiences, there were a few negative experiences; however, overall experiences with student services were positive based on analysis of data from the interviews, focus group, and in my experience, visiting the campuses. The departments that were most often experienced by these student mothers were advising and financial aid.

Advising is an important first stop for students, and Aliyah found that “she (an advisor) gave me a checklist and told me that it would be best to do these classes this semester” and “she said never take two science classes at the same time.” Chloe preferred to go to disability services for advising due to a negative experience in “the advising center, that’s a monster up there.” Advisors “help you map out your whole degree plan,” explained Eisha to the focus group. Maria discussed a negative experience with the advising department on her campus. Maria shared how nursing students need an advisor “certified in the field of what you want to go into” instead of seeing “any general advisor.” The focus group echoed that having the same advisor or a specialized advisor may avoid repeated or unneeded classes. Overall the group’s shared experience reflected how important the advising department is in influencing perceptions of the LE.

Financial aid departments are important first experiences at the college. All participants in the study shared positive experiences with this department and its staff members across multiple institutions. This was echoed in both the interviews and the focus group. In addition, I made naturalistic observations when I visited the college sites, and I experienced a positive atmosphere and friendly staff at each site’s financial aid department. Brianna’s experience with
the financial aid department staff was encouraging, she explained, because “they get you in and out quickly with what you need.” Brianna shared difficulties with defaulted student loans. She said, “they stayed on top of it with me with the Department of Education,” and “they let me know that I could start classes.” Financial aid departments safeguard information on student eligibility to participate in work study programs on campus. Olivia explained, “that’s how I found out about” work study. This information provided options for student mothers. For example, Olivia attended classes from 8:00 a.m. until 2:00 p.m., then to her work-study position in student services until she collected her son from daycare. Aliyah described how after she left the financial aid office, a staff member called her and “told me what I needed to do, all the steps.” Kiara said that financial aid, “they just helped me.” Student mothers are keenly aware of maintaining continued qualification to receive federal and state grants; “with financial aid you have to be careful about passing,” explained Jessica. Helpful staff at financial aid departments presented a positive and friendly atmosphere to student mothers and the experience influenced the perception of the college LE.

**Student Peer Interactions are Limited for Student Mothers with Younger Children but Increase in Program Specific Courses**

Student-peer interactions for student mothers in this study were experienced as limited by the ages of their children and childcare availability. Student mothers with younger children described how they desired to participate with peers outside of the classroom, but role conflicts limited interactions. Eisha, the mother of an 18-month-old said, “I’m too busy to get involved.” Student mothers with older children participated in on-campus activities with student peers that were sponsored by the college. Jessica shared, “it’s hard for me to get back out because we only have one car.” As I walked through the campuses, I observed campus bulletin boards with listed
activities and meetings and recorded this in my journal. Susan, mother to older children, described her experience with a field trip that was sponsored by the TRIO program; “it breaks us out of the school mode, and we get off campus and we get to have fun,” and “we get to decompress together.” Susan’s youngest child was a teenager who attends high school, so she did not need childcare. This was the case with Diamond, mother to teenagers in high school, who had more available time to participate on campus and said, “I am in eight clubs now.” On the other hand, Maria, with younger children who need childcare, described her experience as the activities on campus were “not kid friendly.” Student mothers’ multiple roles interfere with their ability to participate in activities on campus. Chloe, with younger children in elementary school, explained how her campus provided numerous opportunities, but “I have to help my kids with their homework.” The student mothers expressed that they are open to developing relationships with student peers. This interest was reflected in the focus group and the interviews. In addition, my experience with the student mothers, as recorded in my researcher journal, reflected an eagerness to get involved and support each other.

The most student-peer interactions were experienced by student mothers in the classroom in the form of group projects. “Instructors make us do stuff in groups,” elaborated Olivia in the focus group. Kiara echoed this in her interview, “I have a group project in all of my classes.” In online courses, peer interaction was experienced mostly through discussion board assignments. Brianna, who enrolled in online courses this semester, explained that peer interaction, “it’s part of your grade to be involved with your peers.” Participants exchanged numbers to text peers if they had questions or comments, or they used email. Maria described her experiences with peers while completing the respiratory program and LVN, as “these people become your family for
two years,” and “you see them more than you see your own family.” Susan, who was in the medical assistant program, shared how she related to her peers.

If you are in a specific program, you and the other students, um, semester to semester. You have that relationship that you bond over several semesters. You are building that relationship because you know that you will see them again, It’s awesome!

Older student mothers bring work force and life experience to the classroom. Chloe worked in the criminal justice system for over seven years, and she recalled how the instructor in her Texas government class said, “I’m not real well versed in this knowledge, so I will ask Chloe to explain” when it came to explaining Texas laws. Brianna worked for years at daycare centers and is studying early childhood education. Susan discussed the value of her past work experience concerning a pharmacy math class. She said, “I was a pharmacy technician for like six years, so I honestly did not need this class, but it was a prerequisite for my program.”

Student mothers bring valuable work experience to the classroom, and it influences student peer interactions.

**Research Question Responses**

This section presents findings to the research questions this study was designed to answer: (1) How do student mothers describe their overall experience at community college in Texas? (2) How do student mothers describe experiences with faculty and college staff? (3) How do student mothers at community college in Texas describe experiences with student peers? (4) What do student mothers describe as not supportive to their academic persistence at community college in Texas? and (5) What do student mothers describe as supportive to their academic persistence at community college in Texas?
**Research Question One**

All participants described their overall experience as positive and supportive at their respective community colleges. Because of this overall positive experience, these women, who experienced role conflicts almost daily, managed to stay motivated to remain enrolled and persist. Olivia recalled, “I have experienced all positive so far I haven’t really found a negative here.” Olivia is in the honor society at her college and is a work study on campus this semester, so she is on campus a lot more during the day. Diamond recalled that signing up for disability services “helped me to be successful and that’s a positive experience for me.” Olivia shared with the focus group, “I love the experience here, period,” which elicited agreement in the group altogether. I recorded, in the researcher journal, that the positive experiences outnumbered the negative experiences; however, I do want to briefly mention the negative experiences. A few participants did mention isolated, negative experiences, for example poor or rude customer service at the library or seeing a different advisor each time they go to the advising center, but overall, all participants described experiencing a positive environment at the colleges they now attend. When participants took advantage of the college programs and services, it contributed to the overall positive experience. Participants commented to the group on the shared experience of support and Eisha shared, “everyone here is willing to help you be successful,” which was echoed by the group.

**Research Question Two**

Participants referred to faculty as instructors, professors, and teachers and viewed the student-faculty relationship as representing the college and the most influential on their perceptions of the LE. Most participants looked up to faculty as mentors and were sensitive to faculty impressions and attitudes, viewing them as either supportive, passionate, and caring or as
inconsistent, unprofessional, and inattentive to their needs as a student. There was a combination of mixed, positive and negative, experiences with faculty and staff. They ranged from “very supportive” experienced by Aliyah, to no communication or “clear instructions” experienced by Chloe with one instructor. The experiences with faculty reflected in the Learning Climate Questionnaire (LCQ) indicated participants on average agreed or somewhat agreed that instructors provided choices, conveyed confidence in participant abilities, felt understood, and felt listened to by instructors. Eisha explained, “to me it feels like the instructors are here for me.” Although Chloe shared a negative experience with a past instructor, “the current instructor I have now is very eager to help.”

Receiving positive, constructive feedback from faculty is encouraging for college students. Eisha remembered, “I recently received an email, hey you’re doing good, keep up the good work” from her psychology professor and was encouraged “because like you are being acknowledged.” The group agreed with her and shared feelings they experienced when they received encouragement from faculty. Kiara recalled “she (faculty) gave me positive feedback so I don’t know, it made me feel good and I made an A in her class.” Maria said that while in the LVN program, she “would text her (faculty) with a question and she would answer me” right away. Olivia explained her English teacher “would take my papers before they were due,” and “put comments and help me edit” before submitting the final draft. Jessica shared, “when we do the discussion board, he (faculty) writes us a little summary telling us what he liked about our post.” Other participants recounted similar experiences with faculty providing positive feedback on assignments and progress in courses.

Experiences with college staff were similar for participants, but more positive experiences outweighed the few negative interactions. Kiara and Eisha recalled a negative
interaction with library staff at North Community College where they perceived poor customer service. In a naturalistic observation during a site visit to North Community College, upon arrival I was directed to sign in. The campus police officer questioned my purpose, and I presented my identification and permission letter and briefly talked about my research. The police officer responded, “you mean unwed mothers,” and “in my day we would just send them home to their mothers.” Interactions between student and staff can influence perceptions of the college learning environment. Aliyah shared in group that the “financial aid department was helpful” and “a young lady helped me, she told me all the steps of what I needed to do.” This ignited another conversation about financial aid departments and staff in general and customer service. The group shared the experience of coping with defaulted student loans, for-profit colleges, and how to avoid student loan debt. It was a lively conversation. All participants were receiving federal or state assistance in the form of grant(s). They imparted new information to me about how things work for single and low-income mothers going to college. Advising departments are at the forefront of the college experience since this may be one of the first steps to registration for classes. Participant experiences with advising departments were recalled in an overall positive way. Brianna shared in advising at one community college, “she called me back on her own and told me that I didn’t have to go to this school and that I could go to another school to get off of academic probation.” Aliyah recalled that an advisor at her college was helpful providing information about where she “can take classes online” and “transfer them back here to finish up.”

Diamond and Chloe used the disabilities and accommodation departments as their regular advisors, “she asks what is your degree plan, what works with your schedule, what works for your children at home, and how can we keep you in class,” Chloe elaborated. Maria was advised
by a special nursing advisor since she graduated last year as an LVN. Eisha plans on meeting with the same advisor during her program; however, Susan’s and Chloe’s previous experience with the general advising office had been negative because they did not see the same advisor each visit. Olivia used the TRIO program and a TRIO advisor; “we have to meet in the middle of the semester.”

Some participants in this study acknowledged the need for more information about the processes and procedures at the institution and in higher education in general. Understanding the classes needed to complete the degree desired was shared by Diamond: “I was taking classes that I didn’t need” but” now I’m on the right track.” Brianna shared when she tried to enroll last year, “I didn’t understand that I had that much student loans” from the for-profit school she attended three years ago. Two participants were unaware of the federal TRIO programs that assist first-time in college, low-income, and first-generation college students. I walked through the campuses on my visits and observed bulletin boards and signage with information about upcoming events and available student services and recorded this in my journal. As stated previously, student mothers of younger children may not observe this on campus if they do not spend much time there. This may also be true of student mothers who are enrolled primarily in online classes. The college websites post upcoming events, and student services departments do send regular emails about events and services.

**Research Question Three**

Student mothers shared experiences with peers that ranged from positive peer interactions to no peer interactions. All participants recalled peer interaction in classroom group projects and online in discussion board assignments. Aliyah explained about online classes it is, “part of your grade to communicate with your peers,” and “meet up for tutoring, text message each other”
about the course. Brianna says she developed relationships with her peers at the for-profit school she attended previously, “we were all trying to accomplish the same thing,” “we helped each other out,” and there was “a lot of student mothers” attending classes. Chloe shared that student peers “don’t communicate with me, they don’t speak to me.” However, Diamond, who attends the same college as Chloe, shared a different experience. Diamond is very involved on campus as a mentor to new students and as a member and officer of eight different student clubs. Eisha acknowledged that she sees the bulletin board and the activities that are available but “I’m so like really busy” and “I don’t talk to anyone.” Eisha did talk to a peer in a current class because they have a child about the same age. Kiara experienced “it’s kind of like uncomfortable,” and “it’s like everybody is in groups, everybody is just like in their phone.” But in classes, “my instructor was like she made us get into groups” in the classroom. Maria shared “actually from my respiratory program, I still have friends that I talk to from there.” Olivia felt, “I seem to be one of the older ones in my classes,” and experienced “a lot of students coming to me asking hey do you want to study together?” Olivia has made friends since starting college and “we plan on doing the LVN together, so we are getting together and studying” for the entrance exam. Susan has made friends as well with her peers at college and believed “sometimes you have to seek out the club, but you also have to be willing to get involved.” Jessica shared, “in the first semester I kind of made a friend for a while but it didn’t last.”

Most participants were knowledgeable about opportunities and activities on campus, but conflicting role responsibilities made it challenging to attend, especially for participants with younger children. Participants shared in the focus group and individual interviews that it is difficult for student mothers, married or single, to attend classes, work, parent their children, and then participate in campus activities.
Research Question Four

As expected, the availability of affordable, convenient, reliable childcare was shared by participants with younger children as a barrier to their ability to complete coursework and persist in their college goals. Mothers of younger children, not school age, shared the desire to have childcare or daycare on campus. Several mothers did not have family close by to help with childcare and depended on local babysitters to supervise children while they were in class. Aliyah shared “it was one time she (babysitter) couldn’t come, and I had to go to class because I had a test.” Olivia “had to bring two of my kids here while I was doing my work study.” Maria recalled an experience with missing classes due to lack of childcare for a sick child “I was missing some classes so I contacted her (instructor) and she was like write me a short paragraph on why I shouldn’t drop you” and “she let me stay in the class.” Jessica shared, “the attendance policy is pretty lenient to me” and “some instructors are understanding cause I think they have kids, too.” Reliable childcare services on campus or close to campus would support student mother persistence and completion. Two colleges, North and Middle Community College, provide a program for childcare assistance through reimbursement. Student mothers need to meet the qualifications, and they have waiting lists and limited funds.

Lack of knowledge of federal Title IX policies and procedures for pregnant and parenting students was a barrier to college persistence for student mothers. Maria experienced failing a class when she gave birth to her second child, hospitalized for a c-section, because the instructor refused to allow her to make up assignments. Maria was unaware of her parenting rights and accommodations and so was the faculty member. Jessica was also unaware of these parenting rights when a faculty member refused late work due to a sick infant. In my observations on these campus sites, I recorded the visible campus offices and the location of the information on the
college websites. I asked college personnel and students the location of the office. There was a lack of awareness of Title IX information in college faculty and staff and in parenting students.

In addition to lack of childcare for younger children and lack of awareness of Title IX policies, lack of Internet access at home was a slight barrier. All courses have an online component, and students must complete assignments as part of the course requirements. There is Internet access on campus, but campuses do not have spaces that are child friendly. I was unable to locate child-friendly spaces on the campuses I visited as part of this research study as recorded in my journal. I used slight to describe the barrier of Internet access, because several mothers figured out a way to use other places to complete their course work online because they did not have Internet access at home. Brianna used her smart phone to complete assignments online via Internet access through free wi-fi at restaurants and stores. Maria used the free wi-fi at coffee shops, because they are more “kid friendly,” and other participants reported the same. Diamond and Kiara did not have a computer at home but came to campus to complete online work in the college’s computer labs and library. Student mothers reduce this barrier to Internet access by searching for and utilizing free wi-fi access throughout their cities. Designating child-friendly spaces on campus can serve to bring more mothers on campus, which can assist with academic and social integration.

Starting college or returning to college after a long absence from an educational setting was indicated as a barrier to completing college. Susan had been absent from a formal learning environment for almost three decades. When she eventually started college, she was required to enroll in developmental or co-requisite courses to develop college-level writing and algebra skills. This knowledge gap increased the length of time needed to complete her program.
Research Question Five

The student mothers in this study described several factors as supportive to their academic persistence. As stated earlier, student-faculty interactions are an important influencer of student mother perceptions of the LE. Positive feedback from faculty encouraged student mothers to feel competent and confident about their education experience. Academic advisors helped guide student mothers through their higher education journey at community college, and success coaches were experienced as positive support to set and maintain academic goals. Special programs like TRIO and single-parent support programs were experienced by the student mothers in this study as helping them to stay involved and motivated to continue in higher education. All participants utilized one or more of the non-academic supports available on campus and viewed these resources as contributing to their overall positive experience in college and helping them to stay in classes and persist. Food pantries, financial assistance, hygiene items, and other supports were described by the participants as supportive to academic persistence.

Family support was experienced by the student mothers as necessary for continued coursework and progress at community college. This was described by the three married participants, Olivia, Susan, and Jessica, as a spouse that worked more hours so that the family could afford full-time college enrollment for the student mother. In addition, three participants, Brianna, Diamond, and Kiara and their children lived with a parent or other adult relative. Kiara shared, “I live with my Dad,” for now. Family support was described as needed to persist in college.

Summary

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of student mothers in the LE of community colleges in Texas. Data collection
consisted of individual interviews, a focus group, and a learning climate survey (LCQ). In addition, I recorded naturalistic observations made at my college site visits. This chapter presented the results of the data analysis. I provided participant portraits of the 10 student mothers that informed this study: Aliyah, Brianna, Chloe, Diamond, Eisha, Kiara, Maria, Olivia, Susan, and Jessica. Eight student mothers experienced more than one attempt at completing higher education and more than one community college campus. Three experienced programs at for-profit or career colleges. All participants qualified to participate in programs that assisted low-income, first-generation college students, first-time in college students, students with disabilities, or single-mother populations.

Next, I presented the themes that emerged during data analysis and labeled to reflect the shared experience of the student mothers. I discussed the themes: (a) access to and utilization of resources and services contribute to the ability to persist, (b) student-faculty interactions influence perceptions of the LE, (c) student services departments provide information that is needed to persist in college, and (d) student peer interactions are limited for student mothers with younger children but increase in program specific courses.

I presented the subsequent research question responses based on the analysis of data presented in the interviews, focus group, and LCQ. All participants described their overall experience as positive and supportive at their respective community colleges. Participants referred to faculty as instructors, professors, and teachers and view the student-faculty relationship most influential on their perceptions of the LE. They described positive, caring, supportive relationships with most faculty members, and this had a powerful impact. Student mothers in this study shared experiences with peers ranged from positive peer interactions to no peer interactions. All participants recalled peer interaction in classroom group projects and
online in discussion board assignments. Availability of affordable, convenient, reliable childcare was described by participants as a barrier to their ability to complete coursework and persist in college. In addition, the lack of Internet service and a computer at home may be considered a slight barrier to persistence in college. The student mothers in this study described several factors as supportive to their academic persistence. These included faculty, staff, family support, and non-academic supports on campus (i.e., food pantries, etc.).

In general, these student mothers were motivated and excited about college and expressed plans and goals to continue in higher education beyond community college. They were challenged with conflicting role responsibilities of parent, student, worker, but through self-determination fueled by their intrinsic motivation to complete college, they persisted. Student mothers possess a powerful level of goal commitment to providing a better life for their children. They push themselves forward with great effort and strategic planning and manage to complete assignments, complete courses, and register for the next semester. They are an inspiring group, and I admire their enthusiasm about education and their persistence.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of student mothers in the learning environment (LE) of community colleges in Texas. This chapter describes the findings and implications as related to the research questions. First, I present a summary of the findings. Next, I discuss implications through the lens of self-determination theory (SDT) and related theories that informed this study, considering the relevant literature presented in Chapter Two. I describe practical implications, and then I discuss limitations of the findings. Last, I describe future recommendations for research with student mothers. The chapter ends with a summary.

Summary of Findings

This section presents a summary of the findings as related to the research questions: (1) How do student mothers describe their overall experience at community college in Texas? (2) How do student mothers describe experiences with faculty and college staff? (3) How do student mothers at community college in Texas describe experiences with student peers? (4) What do student mothers describe as not supportive to their academic persistence at community college in Texas? and (5) What do student mothers describe as supportive to their academic persistence at community college in Texas?

Research Question One

The in-depth descriptions provided by the student mothers that participated in this study generally characterized the learning environment (LE) at community college as an encouraging, supportive, positive, motivating, and an enriching lived experience. The LE was perceived as supportive for adult learners and autonomy supportive. This shared experience fueled the
individual initiative and intrinsic motivation to persist in college despite the challenges of role
conflicts and non-academic barriers. The positive depictions of the lived experiences illustrated
the possibilities that community colleges provided to the student mothers who may have
otherwise not had access to higher education. These community college sites provided resources
and services to reduce academic and non-academic barriers that when used, assisted student
mothers in persistence to completion.

Research Question Two

Collectively, participants experienced student-faculty interactions as most influential on
their experiences in the LE. Experiences with faculty and staff were portrayed as supportive to
academic persistence in college. Student-faculty interactions were experienced as most
influential when it came to perceptions of the LE. This was found in interviews, the focus group,
and the self-report survey. Mixed negative and positive interactions were described with faculty,
but each participant had experienced at least one positive interaction. These interactions were so
important that students experienced a sensitivity to faculty attitudes and behaviors. This
influenced relatedness or connectedness of student mothers. Frequent communication between
student mothers and faculty was perceived as attentive and genuine concern. Faculty positive
feedback was experienced as validating and acknowledging, which served to build confidence
and competence in participants.

Experiences with student services department staff, particularly with advising and
financial aid departments, were depicted as positive and supportive. However, inconsistency
with different advisors at each visit was a negative experience. Student mothers coped with this
by seeking advising from the disability services department or the TRIO program. The
information provided by these two departments was perceived as necessary to remain in college.
Student mothers received this information that empowered them to make choices about classes, degree plans, work study programs, etc. Participants perceived student services departments as autonomy supportive and as fostering mutual respect. Student mothers that participated in programs designated for at-risk populations, low-income students, single-parent students, first-time in college students, first-generation college students, or students with disabilities strengthened their college persistence.

**Research Question Three**

Student peer interactions, described as positive, were experienced in varying degrees, which was dependent on the age of the student mother’s children. The younger the children, the less likely the student mother was to have time to build friendships or participate in college sponsored activities with peers. When the student mothers’ children were older and did not require childcare, the more likely the student mother was involved in college activities or club organizations. Student mothers that participated in activities outside of the classroom experienced positive peer interactions and felt that their campuses provided opportunities for peer interaction. These interactions assisted with feelings of connectedness or relatedness. Most peer interactions happened as part of a class or group project or as part of a group discussion board in online classes.

**Research Question Four**

Lack of childcare on campus was described in the lived experience of student mothers as a barrier to persist in college. Financial assistance in the form of reimbursement existed on two of the campuses, but these programs have limited funds, required qualification, and maintained waiting lists. In addition, several student mothers’ experiences with due dates for assignments, college attendance policies when their children are sick, and lack of kid friendly spaces on
campus were not supportive to their persistence in college. The lack of knowledge in faculty and student mothers of federal Title IX policies and procedures was a barrier to persistence. No Internet access and no computer at home was also described as a barrier, but student mothers in this study found a way to work around this barrier. Inconsistency in advising staff and the lack of program-specific advisors presented barriers to persistence and college completion. Knowledge gaps that develop as a result of an extended absence from an educational setting was experienced as a barrier to persistence.

**Research Question Five**

Supports to academic persistence were experienced as positive student-faculty interactions, positive feedback from faculty, academic advising, and other departments that helped with providing needed information or guiding and coaching student mothers. Special programs like TRIO, single-parent support programs, and success coaches kept student mothers engaged and assisted with fueling motivation to persist in college. Family support was a needed support for participants. This group of student mothers experienced needs with nonacademic barriers and were helped through their campus resources. This included the use of food pantries, free hygiene items, housing assistance, and other financial assistance. Reducing these nonacademic barriers strengthened their ability to persist.

**Discussion**

This section presents a discussion on the findings as related to the literature review in Chapter Two. I discuss the findings in relation to self-determination theory (SDT), my primary theory that provided the lens to examine the LE (Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2008). I also discuss how the findings relate to the other theories on college persistence and adult learning that informed this study.
Self-Determination Theory

Findings suggest student mothers are characterized by intrinsic motivation that fuels their self-determination to persist in college. They are, as described in SDT, more likely to have positive outcomes in college (Behzadnia et al., 2018; Deci et al., 1991; Guay et al., 2008; Vallerand, 2000). Through the positive and meaningful student-faculty interactions, helpful college staff, and positive campus environments, the sites in this study created autonomy-supportive learning environments that fostered student success (Ayllon et al., 2019; Gault & Zeisler, 2019; IWPR, 2017; Kolodner, 2017). The assumption in SDT is that when human needs of competence, autonomy, and connectedness or relatedness are met, individuals have self-directed intrinsic motivation to persist and have positive outcomes (Deci et al., 1991). The findings implicate these needs were met in the LE at the community colleges for the student mother participants.

Need for connectedness or relatedness. Findings corroborated the importance of the need for connectedness or relatedness for student-mother participants (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). The positive college environment was found to be nurturing and caring, which supports connectedness (Eisenman et al., 2015; Villarreal & Garcia, 2016). This was particularly evident on campuses that offered TRIO programs and other supports that provided activities and mentorship. A sense of belonging influences student motivation to persist (Tinto, 2017a). Student-faculty interactions and positive feedback from faculty was perceived as feeling acknowledged and validated, which is a characteristic of autonomy-supportive LEs (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Student intrinsic motivation is inspired by feeling valued by faculty (Ayllon et al., 2019; Deci et al., 1991).
Need for competence. Through positive and constructive feedback from faculty about progress in courses, student efficacy and confidence were perceived as strengthened, and the need for competence was satisfied (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Positive and constructive feedback is important for building and maintaining the motivation to persist (Black & Deci, 2000; Deci & Ryan, 2000). The level of motivation is influenced by self-efficacy and strengthens the ability to persist to completion (Tinto, 2017a). In addition, deferral of instructors in the classroom to student mothers as experts in a field of study fueled feelings of competence (Knowles et al., 2015). These actions by faculty and staff assisted in creating a student-centered environment which is a characteristic of an effective LE (Hackmann, Malin & Gilley, 2018).

Need for autonomy. One indication that implied the need for autonomy was satisfied for research participants was self-determination to attain their educational goals despite challenges and barriers (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Vallerand, 2000). This supports research on the importance of goal commitment to persistence in college (Chavez, 2015; Fong et al., 2018; Savage et al., 2019; Tinto, 1993). Student mothers utilized available resources that allowed them to make informed choices (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). The study found that for many student mothers, enrollment in college was part of their goal to seek stability. Student mothers found structure and stability in the LE at community college, which is a characteristic of an autonomy supportive LE (Black & Deci, 2000; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Guay et al., 2008; Means et al., 2018).

The autonomy-supportive LEs experienced by participants in this study contribute to previous research that used SDT in diverse educational settings and populations (Ayllon et al., 2019; Behzadnia et al., 2018; Black & Deci, 2000; Deci et al., 1991; Filak & Nicolini, 2018; Guay et al., 2008; Jang et al., 2012; Leal et al., 2013; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Williams et al., 1997). The results extend the use of SDT with student mother populations at community
colleges. Use of SDT illuminated the importance of meeting the psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and connectedness or relatedness and their potential role in student mother persistence. The findings confirm that when colleges create an autonomy supportive LE, it strengthens student mother persistence.

**Persistence**

Research on persistence decisions of nontraditional students was supported in the findings of this study (Fong et al., 2018; Markle, 2015; Nielsen, 2015). Most participants experienced more than one attempt at community college. The findings corroborate previous research on how persistence decisions are influenced by challenges of multiple roles, demands of external commitments, and financial responsibilities (Bohl et al., 2017; Fong et al., 2018; Karp, 2016; Kasworm, 2014; Markle, 2015; Nielsen, 2015; Stuart et al., 2014). Results support research findings on the importance of environmental supports in mediating external commitments (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Student mothers who did not work or worked part time lived with an older family member, a parent, or a spouse. This was an important financial support to their college commitment. Family members and spouses provided necessary instrumental support of childcare and preparing meals which was helpful in reducing role commitments (Moreau & Kerner, 2015). The study’s findings endorse research on how student mothers overcome barriers and obstacles and persist to college completion, namely, by self-determination, self-improvement goals, level of commitment, and resilience (Bowman et al., 2015; Browning et al., 2018; Carter, 2019; Edwards et al., 2016; Fong et al., 2018; Hunter-Johnson, 2017; Nielsen, 2015; Pangallo et al., 2015).

**Barriers to persistence.** Results support previous research on barriers to persistence for student mothers (Beeler, 2016; Gault et al., 2014; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018). Findings indicate
student mothers have trouble with continued enrollment, childcare issues, work responsibilities, low income, and poverty (Beeler, 2016; Gault et al., 2014; Gualt & Zeisler, 2019; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018). Research on the challenges of knowledge gaps for student mothers that occur after a long period away from education settings was supported (Orgnero, 2013). Working can be viewed as a barrier, but it is also a necessity for student mothers in college, especially single mothers who must provide for their families while they pursue college (Eppler & Hariju, 1997; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011).

Findings confirm previous research results that Title IX policies and procedures for pregnant and parenting students were unknown by student mothers and some faculty members (Beeler, 2016; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018; McLaughlin, 2014). Research that identified contributions to student mother invisibility such as the lack of child-friendly spaces, changing tables in female and male bathrooms, new mother parking spaces, and lactation rooms was supported by the findings (Beeler, 2016; Brown & Nichols, 2013; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Madden, 2018; Nichols et al., 2017). Findings suggest the single parent double standard and negative attitudes toward single mothers continues to exist (Conan, 2011; DeJean et al., 2012; Haire & McGeorge, 2011). Staff training in culture inclusivity is warranted. Previous research on institutions’ failure to embrace the parenting status of their students was endorsed (Arcand, 2015; Augustine et al., 2018; Beeler, 2016; Brown & Nichols, 2013; Sullivan, 2018).

**Supports to persistence.** Results endorse previous research on supports to college persistence for student parents. College campuses provided student services and referrals to community resources that addressed non-academic barriers. This provided instrumental support that influenced the ability to persist (Abukari, 2018; Pangallo et al., 2015). North Community College’s student services department adapted a caring culture, which was experienced as
support to college persistence for student mothers (Arcand, 2015; Beeler, 2016; Campbell et al., 2015; Dickson & Tennant, 2018; Madden, 2018; Nichols et al., 2017). For example, at North College, I recorded naturalistic observations of helpful directions and positive attitudes from college staff and students as I walked around campus to meet with participants. In addition, even though there were no designated, child-friendly spaces on the campuses, there were a few children located in the adult resource center when I visited. Institutions that adopt a caring culture toward student mothers can support college persistence (Nichols et al., 2017). Online class modality was implicated in the findings as a support to persistence in college. The convenience and flexibility of online classes was indicated as a support to persistence and reduced the barrier of lack of transportation and childcare.

Finally, findings indicate that environmental support beyond the college campus strengthens the ability to persist (Abukari, 2018; Cerven, 2013; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Lashley, 2014). For example, family members who provide childcare provide instrumental support that strengthens persistence (Cerven, 2013; Lashley, 2014; Lin, 2016; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018). Married student mothers rely on their spouses for financial support, and this enabled them to be a full-time student, which strengthens persistence to completion. Student mothers without family support utilized community and college resources for environmental supports. For example, a social media group for mothers of young children to find childcare and a college program connected with community resources for housing were examples of resources participants used.

**Academic and social integration.** Results support previous findings that academic and social integration are overlapping processes (Eaton & Bean, 1995; Tinto, 1987, 1993). The student mother participants indicated academic integration through competence and intellectual
growth and social integration through student-faculty and staff interactions (Tinto, 1975).

Findings suggest that the level of student mother peer interactions in activities on campus were dependent on other factors like available childcare and transportation. Available childcare was a barrier to student mothers with younger children. Student mothers in this study remained focused on college completion and not peer interaction or the social culture as found in research on nontraditional students (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Mallman & Lee, 2016; Markle, 2015; Tough, 1979). Interactions with faculty and staff were perceived as more significant influencers on academic and social integration as compared to peer interactions. The level of social integration was found to be best measured by the level and frequency of student-faculty and staff interactions and use of resources and services on campus. Student mothers utilized the food pantry and other resources on campus like the TRIO program, which strengthened their ability to persist. 

Utilization of resources and services on campus was found to provide a sense of belonging to “anchor the student to other students” (Tinto, 2017a, p. 258) indicating social integration. Counseling services were a valuable resource for student mothers who experienced increased stress (Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Shenoy et al., 2016). Each campus maintained a food pantry that was utilized by the student mothers (Cohen, 2019; Golden, 2019; West, 2019). Availability of these resources indicated that student mothers did not need to exercise invisibility, hiding their mother role while at college (Beeler, 2016; Madden, 2018). Perhaps these resources and other services helped reduce the level of role conflict for student mothers (Madden, 2018; Moreau & Kerner, 2015). The participant identity as a student mother was welcomed and embraced by the college communities. Providing services and resources to meet the needs of student mothers supported and strengthened their ability to persist in college.
Adult Learning

Findings support previous research on adult learning. Student mothers are self-directed, take personal responsibility in their learning at college, and present themselves as ready for growth and change (Clancy & Holford, 2018; Knowles, 1973; Knowles et al., 2015; Merriam, 2001). Participants implicated the value of past work experiences in the classroom to faculty and peers. Faculty deferred to experienced student mothers for answers because of their relevant work experience. This demonstrated how past experiences of adult learners continue to be “a resource for learning” (Knowles et al., 2015, p. 178). Community college faculty can increase feelings of competence and connectedness or relatedness by considering these valuable experiences in lesson planning (Clancy & Holford, 2018; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Knowles, 1973; Knowles et al., 2015; Money et al., 2015; Pierce, 2017; Ross-Gordon, 2011).

Implications

There are no studies on student mother lived experiences in the LE at community colleges through the lens of SDT. This section presents the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications of the findings.

Theoretical Implications

There are two theoretical implications for the results of this study. First, the results can be used to expand the use of SDT to the student mother population at community colleges to strengthen persistence. The use of SDT can be adapted to create an autonomy-supportive learning environment that targets and strengthens the intrinsic motivation that student mothers already possess. Fulfilling the human needs of competence, autonomy, and connectedness or relatedness in SDT will provide an effective LE that is student-centered and empowers student mothers to succeed supporting their persistence (Anderson, 2019; Beeler, 2016; Kensinger &
Minnick, 2018; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018; Roy et al., 2018). Competence and autonomy can be satisfied by providing positive and constructive feedback from faculty that builds student efficacy and interesting, challenging, and valuable learning activities (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Connectedness or relatedness can be satisfied by establishing a nurturing environment that demonstrates respect through meaningful communication and interactions between student faculty and staff (Ayllon et al., 2019; Deci et al., 1991; Eisenman et al., 2015; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Villarreal & Garcia, 2016). Programs like TRIO, student parent support programs, and kid-friendly spaces can help foster a sense of belonging for student mothers.

The second theoretical implication for the results of this study is in persistence theories. Tinto’s (2017a, 2017b) recent reformulation of Tinto’s previous theory of student departure was updated to address human needs reflected in Deci and Ryan’s (2008) SDT. However, through the results of this study, Tinto’s persistence theory can be extended to address the growing population of student mothers at community colleges. Results of this study can contribute to the expanded use of SDT in designing supports for student mothers’ persistence at community college (Guay et al., 2008; Villarreal & Garcia, 2016). Student mothers possess intrinsic motivation and demonstrate self-determination when they arrive at college. Using SDT to focus on these existing traits will help design effective resources, services, and learning activities. Tapping into these traits through the theoretical framework of SDT will assist with developing an autonomy-supportive LE that strengthens existing abilities and thereby strengthens the ability to persist in college to completion (Ayllon et al., 2019; Behzadnia et al., 2018; Jang et al., 2012; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).
Empirical Implications

The results of this study yielded significant empirical results by corroborating the continued challenges and barriers to college persistence for student mothers. The findings add to the literature on diverse population of nontraditional adult students at community colleges and how perceptions of the LE impact a student’s ability to persist to completion (Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2016; Arcand, 2015; Bonet & Walters, 2016; Cotton et al., 2017; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Luke & Justice, 2016; Madden, 2018; Nichols et al., 2017). Results on supports for student mothers add to the existing literature on effective practices that strengthen college persistence (Browning et al., 2018; Demetriou & Schmitz-Scibroski, 2011; Hunter-Johnson, 2017; Johnson et al., 2014). For example, results endorse the development of programs that address student-faculty mentoring relationships that strengthen persistence (Chavez, 2015). This can be produced at very little cost to the institution. Findings corroborate research on institution attendance policies that create barriers to persistence because they do not recognize or value the adult learner’s differences (Clancy & Holford, 2018; Knowles, 1973; Merriam, 2001; Money et al., 2015; Pierce, 2017; Zerquera et al., 2018). Student mothers experience high levels of role conflict due to competing demands of student, mother, and worker that produce stress and may be addressed through extended counseling services with online availability (Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Markle, 2015). This will help address mental well-being, make services accessible to student mothers with busy schedules, and increase the ability to persist (Beeler, 2016; Eisenberg et al., 2016; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018).

Practical Implications

The practical implications of the findings can be used to develop effective interventions for student mothers who are struggling with persistence decisions. Practical implications of the
results contribute to previous research with diverse student populations on the influence of timely, effective interventions on strengthening student’s ability to persist (Daniels et al., 2015; Dualeh et al., 2018; First et al., 2018; Joyce et al., 2018; Shatkin et al., 2016). Findings can contribute in college departments and staff by assisting in the developing of new programs or and improving existing programs that target at-risk student populations.

**Implications for institutions.** Results indicate that revisions are needed in institutional policies previously developed for traditional college students to reflect the student mother and other adult learners at community colleges (Beeler, 2016; Karp, 2016; Lin, 2016). This is particularly important for attendance policies that conflict with the student mother’s ability to maintain employment and financial stability for her family and for a student mother whose child experiences an illness (Bohl et al., 2017; Wilsey, 2013). Community colleges should develop effective strategies that increase awareness of federal Title IX policies specifically related to pregnant and parenting students. Title IX protects student mothers from discriminatory practices concerning absences and medical leave (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

Procedures used to develop semester schedules or academic calendars need to consider parenting students and include college breaks that match local school district breaks for school-aged children (Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Roy et al., 2018). Online classes increase student mother ability to persist as indicated in the findings. The availability of online courses reduces transportation and childcare barriers to physical classroom attendance. Findings indicate the need for wi-fi access creates a barrier to course access and completion of online assignments. Institutions should investigate ways to provide wi-fi access beyond the campus through community partners and stakeholders at a discounted rate that could be shared with students for a
low-cost fee. Providing increased access to wi-fi or creating child-friendly spaces on campus can impact student mother persistence.

The results of this study indicated the importance of student academic supports such as the TRIO program. Findings show this program was utilized by the participants at North and Middle community colleges and was supportive to their academic persistence. However, South Community College did not have a TRIO program. These student services programs are federally funded to provide academic support services to first-generation students, low-income students, and students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2016b). Community college leadership should ensure that institutions meet requirements to participate in TRIO programs so they can provide necessary student support services to student mother populations. When these institutional services are not available, they present a barrier to persistence for disadvantaged students. Findings implicate that student mothers meet at least one of the qualifying criteria to participate. Utilizing these services can strengthen the ability to persist to college completion (Beeler, 2016; Lin, 2016). State coordinating boards should consider mandated participation in TRIO programs at institutions that serve disadvantaged populations because this can increase completion rates.

When college leaders and administrators adopt and demonstrate a caring culture toward student mothers, this influences student mothers’ ability to persist and complete college (Chavez, 2015; Nichols et al., 2017; Perez-Felkner, 2015; Sullivan, 2018). Institutions can create a welcoming environment on campus by providing parking spaces for expectant and new mothers that are closer to buildings, diaper changing stations, and lactation rooms (Beeler, 2016; Brown & Nichols, 2013; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018). Findings suggest the need to create child-friendly spaces on campus to facilitate the parenting
role of community college students (Duquaine-Watson, 2017; Lin, 2016; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018). Findings confirm previous research on the impact of affordable childcare to academic persistence of parenting students (Beeler, 2016; Brown & Nichols, 2012; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Madden, 2018). Institutions need to revisit funding for childcare and create collaborations with community partners to address this issue. Affordable childcare is a major concern for student mothers, especially single mothers (Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Smith, 2019).

Institutions should consider offering competence-based education (CBE) for adult students as a strategy to increase persistence and completion rates (Chen, 2017; Person & Thibeault, 2016). For example, a student mother had seven years work experience as a pharmacy technician. Therefore, it was not necessary for her to take a pharmacy course. A student mother had over seven years work experience in the justice system in Texas. Therefore, it was not necessary for her to take a semester of Texas government. CBE can strengthen persistence and accelerate completion rates at community college for student mothers with years of work experience (Chen, 2017; Nodine & Johnstone, 2015; Person & Thibeault, 2016).

Community colleges should consider special academic advising for student mothers that supports consistency and stability (Beeler, 2016; Lin, 2016). Findings indicate student mothers desire the consistency of an assigned advisor who is sensitive to their needs and qualified to advise them on their chosen field of study. Institutions need to ensure targeted communication of available supports offered that address academic and nonacademic barriers to persistence for student mothers. Early identification of student mothers and effective intervention can facilitate a positive experience of the LE at community college.

**Implications for faculty.** Findings suggest autonomy-supportive LEs influence student mother persistence. Faculty are positioned to create a mentoring connection with student
mothers that fosters persistence (Chavez, 2015). Student-faculty interactions were most influential in student mother perceptions of the LE. Particularly influential was perceived availability of faculty or instructor immediacy, which is found to impact student motivation (Frisby & Housley Gaffney, 2015; Violanti, Kelly, Garland, & Christen, 2018). Student mothers perceive frequent communication and positive feedback from faculty as support, encouragement, and motivation to persist. Institutions should provide training for all faculty, permanent and adjunct, promoting the success of parenting students including training on creating inclusion in the classroom (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Hall, 2017; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Madden, 2018). Creating quality, multiple course and content delivery methods will require faculty training with new systems. For example, faculty recording lectures and posting them online can create an inclusive and autonomy-supportive LE for the parenting student who missed class due to a sick child or work obligation. Customization of course delivery to meet the needs of diverse student populations is deemed necessary as a result of this study (Snart, 2017; Lynch, 2002). Online course delivery was found to be convenient and flexible for student mothers (Deschacht & Goeman, 2015; Kinshuk, 2016; Snart, 2017). Faculty need to consider increasing online offerings to meet the needs of parenting students. Results endorse the need for ongoing faculty training that include federal Title IX policies and procedures (Beeler, 2016; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018; McLaughlin, 2014). Colleges need to provide student training on these policies and procedures and identification of the institution’s Title IX coordinator (Beeler, 2016; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018).

**Implications for student mothers.** Implications for student mothers suggest acquiring knowledge of and accessing existing programs and services to address academic and nonacademic needs is imperative to academic persistence and college completion. Findings
indicate student mothers who utilize support services and resources strengthen their ability to persist in college. Resources including food pantry, success coaches, tutoring, programs like TRIO designed to assist disadvantaged students, disability services, single parent support programs, and counseling services support student success and strengthen persistence (Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Shenoy et al., 2016). Student mothers can provide support by creating a parent support group on campus or virtually through social media (Beeler, 2016; Karp, 2016; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018). These self-determined actions to create or increase support networks provide academic and instrumental support and strengthen ability to persist.

**Delimitations and Limitations**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of student mothers in the LE of community colleges in Texas. Delimitations I created when conducting this study were utilizing a purposeful sample, site selection, and the scope of the study. I used purposeful sampling because this was the best method to select “information-rich cases” (Patton, 2015, p. 264). I used operational construct sampling to help identify appropriate participants who were current students at community college, were age 18 or older, and fulfilled a parenting role for a child or children under age 18 (Patton, 2015). Potential participants followed a link to an online screening survey that was part of the recruitment flyers placed on campuses. Screening survey questions are found in Appendix J. Potential participants that responded “no” to the request to participate in the individual interview were not contacted. There are limitations to the results of this study. The purpose of this qualitative research was to collect in-depth descriptions of the lived experience from a small number of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data saturation was achieved with 10 participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Saldana, 2016). Participant ethnicity was limited to African American, White or
Caucasian, and Hispanic. This sample may not be representative of the average student mother who attends community college. All participants reported above average grades and progress in their respective programs of study. Therefore, they probably were more inclined to voluntarily participate in this study. Meanwhile, student mothers who were having trouble or struggling with progress may have been less likely to volunteer. The sites were limited to community colleges. Geographical location presents a limitation to the results because the colleges were only located in Texas.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Based on the implications of the results of this study and the increasing number of student mothers at community colleges, further research is recommended to provide a voice for the struggles and challenges that student mothers face that influence their persistence in college. Findings implicated the current need on college campuses for basic items such as food, hygiene, housing, etc. Food and housing insecurity are barriers to persistence for all college students, and future research should focus on how institutions address these basic needs (Beeler, 2016; Hallett & Freas, 2018; Karp, 2016). Research on established interventions is needed to determine what is working for student mothers and what needs to be upgraded to meet needs. Research on the exposure of federal Title IX policies and procedures for pregnant and parenting women on college campuses and training of staff and faculty on these policies is implicated in the results of this study. Future research should include single mothers, married mothers, and a larger number of research participants and research sites across the country in different states.

**Summary**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of student mothers in the LE of community colleges in Texas. Student mothers who
were enrolled at community college and parenting a child or children under age 18 participated in this study. The participants were selected through purposeful sampling from three community colleges sites located in Texas. The participant sample ranged in ages from 22-49. Data collection consisted of individual interviews, one focus group, a learning climate survey (LCQ), and a research journal that was maintained by the researcher during this study to facilitate triangulation of data. Data was analyzed following Moustakas’ (1994) methods presented in Chapter Three. Common expressions and significant statements were organized, and initial themes were developed. Final themes were emailed to participants for member checking. The final themes that emerged from the data analysis were: (a) access to and utilization of resources and services contribute to the ability to persist, (b) student-faculty interactions influence perceptions of the learning environment (LE), (c) student services departments provide information that is needed to persist in college, and (d) student peer interactions are limited for student mothers with younger children but increase in program-specific courses. Participant responses to subsequent research questions were provided in Chapter Four.

Student mother participants provided rich descriptions of their lived experiences in the LE at community college. This facilitated the shared meaning as enriching their lives through encouraging faculty, concerned advisors, knowledgeable financial aid departments, goal-directed success coaches, and an overall supportive positive atmosphere on campus. Despite challenges and barriers, this shared experience ignited their intrinsic motivation to persist in college. The strongest influences on college persistence were the resources and programs on campuses that targeted non-academic barriers like food and student-faculty interactions that influenced perceptions of the LE.
There are three significant implications resulting from this study. First, the results support the expanded use of self-determination theory (SDT) to create autonomy-supportive LEs where student mothers can thrive and strengthen their ability to persist in college (Anderson, 2019; Beeler, 2016; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Madden, 2018; Roy et al., 2018). The second significant implication from the results is corroboration of the existing barriers to college persistence for student mothers. The third significant implication from the results confirms that the impact that faculty and faculty-student interactions have on perceptions of the LEs and how these perceptions of the LE influence a student’s ability to persist in college (Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2016; Arcand, 2015; Bonet & Walters, 2016; Cotton et al., 2017; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Luke & Justice, 2016; Madden, 2018; Nichols et al., 2017).
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Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, 20USCA. Sec. 168, and its implementing regulation at 34 C.F.R. Part 106 (Title IX)


### APPENDIX A: SETTING CHARACTERISTICS

Table A1

*Setting Characteristics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>North Community College</th>
<th>Middle Community College</th>
<th>South Community College</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2018</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Enrollment</td>
<td>11,700</td>
<td>9,000</td>
<td>16,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus Setting</td>
<td>City: Large</td>
<td>City: Midsize</td>
<td>Suburb: Midsize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students Part-Time</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students Age 25 and older</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Students</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retention Rate for Part-Time</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Graduation Rate in 3 yrs.</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City Population Estimated 2020</td>
<td>1.3 million</td>
<td>138,000</td>
<td>149,000</td>
</tr>
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</table>
## APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

Table B1

**Participant Characteristics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Child &lt; 18</th>
<th>Work</th>
<th>College</th>
<th>Fed./St. Grants</th>
<th>Student Loan</th>
<th>Scholarship</th>
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<tr>
<td>Aliyah</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brianna</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>NE</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diamond</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>NE</td>
<td>North</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chloe</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>North</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>Middle</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Susan</td>
<td>49</td>
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<td>PT</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
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<td>H</td>
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<td>FT</td>
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<td>Eisha</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kiara</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>North</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

# APPENDIX C: RESOURCES AND SERVICES

Table C1

*Resources and Services: Labeling, Initial and Final Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Labeling of Common Expressions</th>
<th>Initial Themes</th>
<th>Final Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assistance with what is necessary to live (food, gas, utility bills, housing) and attend classes.</td>
<td>Help with necessities is needed to support persistence.</td>
<td>Access to and utilizing resources and services helps student mothers persist in college.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programs for low-income, first time in college, first generation students were utilized and helpful.</td>
<td>Programs that target at-risk groups when utilized are helpful.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single-parent programs on campus provide support and cash scholarships to help with childcare costs.</td>
<td>Programs for single parents provide support.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coaching, guiding, and mentoring are encouraging to stay in college. Services on campus are used to stay in college.</td>
<td>Coaching, guiding, and mentoring is supportive.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links and referrals to other resources on and off campus.</td>
<td>Resources on campus.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community resources linked to campus.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## APPENDIX D: STUDENT-FACULTY INTERACTIONS

Table D1

*Student-Faculty Interactions: Labeling, Initial and Final Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Labeling of Common Expressions</th>
<th>Initial Themes</th>
<th>Final Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feel connected with the teachers.</td>
<td>Instructors are concerned about me.</td>
<td>Student-faculty interactions had the most influence on perceptions of the learning environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professors are here for me. Encourages me. Motivating.</td>
<td>Teachers here want me to be successful. They check my progress.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Showed genuine concern. She took the time out to help me. Rented it for me. Bought me a planner. Motivated me. You are doing a good job. Keep up the good work. You are a good writer.</td>
<td>They listen to me. Positive feedback acknowledges me.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helpful advice Friendly, warm. Teachers engage with their students. Bring me up to speed. Pushing me for the real world. Pushed me to do better.</td>
<td>Instructors are attentive. Instructors are supportive. They work with me. Instructors communicate with me. Communicate often. Faculty encourages me.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table E1

**College Departments and Staff Interactions: Labeling, Initial and Final Themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Labeling of Common Expressions</th>
<th>Initial Themes</th>
<th>Final Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Financial Aid a young lady helped me quite a lot.</td>
<td>Financial aid helped me.</td>
<td>They stayed on top of it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Told me what I needed to do.</td>
<td>Financial aid informed me.</td>
<td>They tell me things I need to know to stay in college.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All the steps.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial aid is the bomb.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get you in, get you out with what you need.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Let you know what’s available.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial aid told me about work study program</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advising that's how I found out.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advisors told me about that.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It would be best to do these classes for this semester.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lots of good advice.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advisor gave me information.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They are very supportive.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advisors help you map out.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advising gave me a checklist.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advising gave me the information.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are a lot of people around here and departments that help you.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Without my success coach I would not have known.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success coach guided me towards the resources on campus.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always checking on me.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stayed on top of that with me.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Told me I could do it</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very supportive</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stay on track with</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counseling department helped me.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability services for help.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Map out a plan.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They are all very supportive.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

College student services departments are supportive and provide information that is needed to stay in college.

Staff and departments perceived as supportive overall.

Success coaches check in with students and help with attaining goals.

Other departments support student success.
APPENDIX F: STUDENT PEER INTERACTION

Table F1

Student Peers: Labeling, Initial and Final Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Labeling of Common Expressions</th>
<th>Initial Themes</th>
<th>Final Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I’m so like really busy.</td>
<td>Student mothers would like to make friends, but they are too busy, have limited time.</td>
<td>student peer interactions are limited but increase in health science programs at community college.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t talk to anyone; I don’t have time.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am very busy.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t have time.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel like I would love to make friends.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m not here to make friends.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They have a calendar on social events.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want to be involved on campus.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’ve always felt like an outsider.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRIO has field trips.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not kid friendly. (events on campus)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Find a babysitter to go to an event on campus.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructors make sure you participate in the discussion.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You have to participate in group projects.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s part of your grade to get involved.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study groups in your program.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the program you get to be like family.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s like your family (nursing).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close in your program.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same peers each semester (program).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We can relate because we have kids the same age.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text messages</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exchange phone numbers.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email back and forth.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You can email them.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX G: UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT MOTHERS BY RACE

APPENDIX H: LEARNING CLIMATE QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

Figure H1. Learning climate questionnaire results. This self-report survey was used to assist with describing the lived experience with faculty at community college. Likert scale score ranged from 7-strongly agree to 1-strongly disagree.
APPENDIX I: WORD TREES

Figure II. Word tree resources and services.
**Figure I2.** Word trees student-faculty interactions.

**Figure I3.** Word trees student services departments.

**Figure I4.** Word trees student peer interactions.
APPENDIX J: WORD CLOUDS

**Figure J1.** Resources and services.

**Figure J2.** Student-faculty interactions.

**Figure J3.** Colleges departments and staff.

**Figure J4.** Student-peer interactions.
APPENDIX K: SCREENING SURVEY

Screening Survey Questions

1. I would like to participate in the research study about student mothers at community college. Yes/No

2. Do you attend community college? Yes/No

3. Are you a mother? Yes/No

4. Are you age 18 or older? Yes/No

5. Will you participate in an individual interview and a focus group, at your convenience, about your experience at community college? Yes/No

6. My email is __________.

7. My phone number is __________.
APPENDIX L: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION QUESTIONS

Demographic Information Questions

1. How many children, in your household are under age 18?

2. What is your relationship status?

3. Are you employed?

4. Did you receive scholarships?

5. Did you receive federal or state grants, i.e., Pell Grants?

6. Did you receive student loans? Yes/No

7. What is your yearly household income?

8. How do you identify your gender identity?

9. What is your ethnicity?

10. What was your field of study when you attended community college?
APPENDIX M: LEARNING CLIMATE QUESTIONNAIRE

The Learning Climate Questionnaire (LCQ)

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APPENDIX N: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions

1. Please introduce yourself to me.

2. What were the ages of your child/children when you attended community college?

3. Please tell me about your decision to enroll at community college. What influenced your decision? What did you study?

4. What would you describe as a positive experience while you were attending college?

5. How would you describe a negative experience you had while attending college?

6. Who would you describe as a faculty member that was supportive? How would you describe the type of support you received from a faculty member?

7. Think of a time when you received positive feedback from faculty. Describe it.

8. How would you describe a faculty member that was not supportive? Describe it.

9. What would you describe as a staff member or department that was supportive? How would you describe the type of support you received from a staff member?

10. How would you describe a staff member or department that was not supportive? Please describe the experience.

11. What did you experience with your student peers at community college? Please describe your experience.

12. In your opinion, did your college provide opportunity for student peer interactions and support? Please describe.

13. What did you experience as a college policy or procedure that you think was supportive and helpful while you attended college? Please describe.
14. Thank you for your time and consideration. Is there anything else you feel I should know?
APPENDIX O: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Focus Group Questions

1. Please introduce yourselves to each other.

2. How would you describe your overall experience at community college as a student mother? Please talk about and further describe what you experienced and how it affected your college completion.

3. What did you experience as supportive? From faculty? From staff? From peers? Please talk about and further describe how it affected your college completion.

4. How did your campuses support you as a parenting student?

5. What would you suggest as policies or procedures that would have provided support during your time at community college as a student mother?

6. In your opinion, what can community colleges do to recruit and retain more student mothers?
APPENDIX P: PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT

CONSENT FORM
A Phenomenology Examining the Lived Experiences of Student Mothers at Community College
Christine Simon
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study of student mothers’ experiences at community colleges. The purpose of my research is to describe the experiences of student mothers to determine supports and barriers to their success at community college. You were selected as a possible participant because you attended a community college while parenting at least one child under age 18. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Christine Simon, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this study is to describe the experiences of student mothers to determine supports and barriers to their persistence at community college. The central research question that will guide this study is: What is the lived experience of student mothers in the learning environment of community colleges in Texas.

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Complete a screening survey. This will take approximately 2 minutes.
2. Complete a 17-question demographic information and learning climate questionnaire on the environment at community college. This survey will take approximately 3-5 minutes.
3. Participate in an individual interview. The interview will take approximately 1 hour. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed.
4. Participate in a 1-hour focus group. This will be audio recorded and transcribed.

Risks: There are risks involved in any research study. To minimize the risk to participants, the following information is provided.

If, during the course of your participation, you disclose that there has been a violation of Title IX section of the Education Amendments law prohibiting sex discrimination in federally funded education programs, I will encourage you to report the violation to the college Title IX coordinator or to the Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (OCR) at https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/complaintintro.html.

I am a mandatory reporter, which means that any information you provide that meets the criteria for child abuse or neglect, elder abuse, disabled persons abuse, or intent to harm self or others, must be reported to the appropriate authorities to include DFPS, child protective services, adult protective services, or local law enforcement.
Depending on your experiences at community college, you may remember a negative experience that my cause you some discomfort or distress. If you experience psychological stress or distress while participating in this study, your participation will be terminated, and you will be referred to your local community services organization for professional counseling.

**Benefits:** Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include assisting with informing policies and programs at community colleges that help student mothers be successful and complete their educational goals.

**Compensation:** Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

**Confidentiality:** The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report, I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a participant. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participants will be assigned a pseudonym, a fake name. I will conduct the individual interviews in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password locked computer and will be destroyed three years after completion of the study.
- Interviews and focus groups will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- I cannot assure participants that other members of the focus group will not share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:** Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University, or the community college you attended. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**How to Withdraw from the Study:** If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

**Contacts and Questions:** The researcher conducting this study is Christine Simon. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at 254-718-3887, csimon5@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher’s faculty chair, Dr. Lucinda Spaulding, at lsspaulding@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.
Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.

**Statement of Consent:** I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signature of Participant</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signature of Investigator</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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</tbody>
</table>
December 16, 2019

Christine Simon  
IRB Approval 4046.121619: A Phenomenology Examining the Lived Experiences of Student Mothers at Community College

Dear Christine Simon,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies. (NOTE: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects. 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) and (b)(3). This listing refers only to research that is not exempt.)

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP  
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research  
Research Ethics Office

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