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Public and Private Lives: Institutional Structures and Personal Supports in Low-Income Single Mothers' Educational Pursuits¹

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Abstract: Drawing on a case study of 60 low-income single mothers in California, I present a grounded account of the barriers and supports single mothers encounter in their pursuit of postsecondary education (PSE) and detail what the women themselves attributed to their success. I highlight the role both significant others (peers, family, friends) and institutional structures (the county welfare department and a community college district) played in their access and persistence

¹ The data used for this article is from the UC/ACCORD's *Pathways to Postsecondary Success: Maximizing Opportunities for Youth in Poverty* project. The project is a five-year, mixed method set of studies, directed by Principle Investigators Daniel Solorzano and Amanda Datnow and funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The aims of the project are to advance research on poverty, produce useful tools that improve educational opportunities, and shape the U.S. policy agenda on the relationships between education and poverty.

within a community college district. In doing so, I provide a rich portrait of single mothers' pursuits of postsecondary education to inform the empirical research gaps in the literature on the effects of welfare reform on the pursuit of PSE. I find that not only does the support of significant others play an important role in single mothers' access of PSE, but that referrals to PSE from the county welfare department were as equally important—a finding that counters the dominant discussion in scholarly work on the barriers welfare departments pose to welfare recipients' pursuit of PSE. Supportive significant others remained an important factor in the women's abilities to persist in their postsecondary pursuits, but the women also cited student support programs designed to address the needs of low-income students as facilitating their persistence. The implications for the impact of welfare department practices, community college support structures and close networks of significant others on low-income single mothers' access and persistence in a community college district are discussed.

Keywords: community college; access; persistence; welfare; nontraditional student; single mother; grounded theory.

Vidas públicas y privadas: estructuras institucionales y apoyos personales en las búsquedas educativas de madres solteras con bajos ingresos.

Resumen: A partir de un estudio de caso de 60 madres solteras con bajos ingresos en California, presento un estudio en profundidad de las barreras y apoyos que las madres solteras encuentran en su búsqueda por acceso a la educación post-secundaria (PSE) y explicó los factores que las mujeres identifican como exitosos. Se destacan el papel de los seres queridos (compañeros, familiares, amigos) y las estructuras institucionales (el departamento de bienestar del condado y un distrito de universidades comunitarias community colleges) que facilitaron el acceso y persistencia en sus estudios. Al hacer esto, ofrezco un retrato de actividades madres solteras en procura de educación post-secundaria para avanzar en las brechas en la literatura sobre los efectos de las reformas a las políticas de “estado de bienestar social” en la búsqueda del PSE. No sólo el apoyo de seres queridos, sino que las referencias a PSE del departamento de bienestar del condado fueron de igual importancia. Esta conclusión contradice la perspectiva dominante en las investigaciones sobre las barreras sociales que representan los apoyos institucionales para las personas que reciben asistencia social. El apoyo de seres queridos sigue siendo un factor importante en la capacidad de las mujeres para persistir en sus actividades de educación superior, pero las mujeres también mencionaron programas de apoyo al estudiante diseñados para atender las necesidades de estudiantes de bajos ingresos para facilitar su persistencia. También se discuten las prácticas agencias estatales de apoyo social, estructuras de apoyo de las universidades comunitarias y las redes cercanas de seres queridos en el acceso de madres solteras con bajos ingresos y su persistencia en una universidad comunitaria.

Palabras clave: universidades comunitarias; acceso; persistencia; estado de bienestar social”; estudiante no tradicional; madre soltera.

Vida pública e privada: estruturas institucionais e apoio pessoal em atividades educacionais de mães solteiras de baixa renda

Resumo: Com base em um estudo de caso de 60 mães de baixa renda na Califórnia, apresento um estudo em profundidade sobre as barreiras e apoios que mães solteiras encontraram na procura de acesso a educação pós-secundária (PSE) e detalho os fatores que as mulheres atribuíram para seu sucesso. Destaco o papel dos seres queridos (pares, família, amigos) tanto como das estruturas institucionais (do departamento de assistência social de uma universidade comunitária) jogaram no acesso e permanência na universidade.. Ao fazer isso, apresento um retrato rico das atividades das mães solteiras na educação pós-secundária para avançar sobre as lacunas na literatura de pesquisa

sobre os efeitos das reformas das políticas de “estado de bem-estar social” na busca ao PSE. Eu descobri que não só o apoio de pessoas queridas desempenha um papel importante no acesso das mães solteiras ao PSE mas as ações institucionais dos departamentos foram igualmente importantes. A minha perspectiva contradisse a perspectiva dominante no trabalho acadêmico sobre o barreiras que departamentos de assistência social impõem na procura de PSE. Apoio dos entes queridos permaneceu um fator importante na capacidade das mulheres de permanecer em suas atividades educativas, mas as mulheres também citaram programas de apoio ao estudante projetados para facilitar a sua permanência. Também se discutem as práticas dos departamentos de assistência social, estruturas de apoio das faculdades e redes próximas dos entes queridos sobre o acesso e permanência de mães solteiras de baixa renda em uma faculdade.

Palavras-chave: universidades comunitárias; acesso; permanência, assistência social; estudantes não-tradicionais; mãe solteira.

Introduction

At a time with ever-increasing focus on higher educational completion and its implications for social mobility and economic security in the United States, issues related to postsecondary educational equity, access, and persistence must be attended to. Community colleges, as institutions with a philosophy and mission of open access, have become a focal point in the nation’s higher education agenda for providing educational access to a diverse, first-generation college-going population. The recent first community college summit held by White House officials in 2010 exemplifies the increasing recognition by policymakers of community colleges as institutions that play a critical role in providing students of diverse social and economic backgrounds with opportunities for educational experiences and social advancement (White House, 2010).

Because community colleges serve more diverse student populations, with large numbers being low-income students of color (Provasnik & Planty, 2008), they are often cast as the great democratizing agents of higher education (Dowd, 2007; Levin, 2007). In line with this characterization, Bragg & Durham (2012) highlight that “[i]f not for community colleges, the overall higher education system would enroll fewer racial and ethnic minorities and fewer low-income, immigrant, and first-generation students,” explaining the central role they play in the national debate on college access, equity, and completion (p. 108). However, they are also the object of scrutiny regarding their effectiveness in supporting student retention and success due to their consistent history of low completion rates in comparison to other postsecondary educational institutions. Indeed, community colleges are also characterized as institutions of social reproduction where students are effectively primed for low-wage labor, diverted away from four-year colleges, and/or their aspirations are “cooled out” (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Clark, 1960). It is understandable why the American community college is often characterized as “the contradictory college” (Dougherty, 1994) because it has “a commitment to open access [that] celebrates the small positive steps that individuals make” while larger success outcomes such as completion remain somewhat elusive (Dowd, 2007, pp. 410-11, as cited in Bragg & Durham, 2012).

Single parents are a specific subset of the increasing “nontraditional” student population served by community colleges and comprise 16.4 percent of the student body, with the majority of them being single mothers (Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010). The access to education that community colleges provide is important because households headed by single women continue to have the highest poverty rates in the U.S. among all household types. In 2010, 31.6 percent of single-female headed households were poor, compared to 15.8 percent of single-male headed households

and 6.2 percent of married couple households (National Poverty Center, n.d.). For many low-income women, higher education offers the only viable route to economic and social mobility, especially those with children who are often hit hardest by poverty.

In this exploratory case study, I provide an account of the educational pursuits of low-income single mothers that is grounded in their everyday lived realities as I present what they attributed to their ability to successfully access and persist within a community college district. Access refers to a student's ability to meaningfully enter and successfully enroll in a postsecondary education institution at any point during the year (Mullin, 2012), while persistence is understood to be a student's desire and action to stay within a postsecondary educational institution until certificate/degree completion (Pascarella, Smart, & Ethington, 1986; Seidman, 2005; Tinto, 1987). These are important factors to address in research on community colleges because access represents the critical juncture of successful entry into a postsecondary educational system and persistence represents the critical action needed to ensure postsecondary educational completion.

Literature Review

The majority of studies focusing on single mothers and their relationship to postsecondary education: a) focus on the detrimental effects of federal welfare reform and its "work-first" orientation on welfare recipients' ability to meaningfully access postsecondary education, b) are primarily concerned with labor market and economic outcomes that result from PSE completion, and c) overwhelmingly utilize quantitative methods to examine such outcomes (Cerven, Nielsen, Nations, Meghani, & Park, 2010). The following section presents an overview each of these three trends in the literature.

Welfare Reform and the Detrimental Effects of a "Work First" Orientation

With the passage of federal welfare reform in 1996, expedient employment, regardless of level of pay or health benefits, is understood as the primary solution to an individual's ability to achieve mobility and thereby considerably ignores or undercuts the role of education and training in achieving economic independence. In this way, welfare reform of the 1990s was oriented toward a "work-first" agenda that decoupled education from work in the process of achieving social mobility and it is this shift in emphasis that studies routinely cite as the general barrier to earning postsecondary credentials (Butler, Deprez, & Smith, 2002, 2003; Kahn & Polakow, 2000; Katsinas, Banachowski, Bliss, & Short, 1999; Marx, 2002; Mazzeo, Rab, & Eachus, 2003; Shaw, Goldrick-Rab, Mazzeo, & Jacobs, 2006; Wolf & Tucker, 2001).

These underlying expectations embedded in welfare reform policy create a "double standard" for low-income and better-off individuals as many federal policies are designed to assist postsecondary educational access for Americans generally, whereas welfare reform policies act as barriers to access for those hit hardest by poverty (Shaw et al., 2006). These policy changes disadvantage single mothers, who tend to be disproportionately represented in welfare programs.² Indeed, subsequent to the passage of welfare reform legislation, studies found a decline in the postsecondary enrollments of welfare recipients (Cox & Spriggs, 2002; Jacobs & Winslow, 2003). Within two years, college enrollments for welfare recipients dropped 20 percent relative to other

² In 2009, 4,401,252 people in the United States received TANF assistance. Families where no adult is receiving benefits, or "zero-parent families," comprise roughly 18 percent (800,746) of welfare rolls and roughly 2 percent (95,312) comprise two-parent families. The remaining 80 percent of welfare recipients come from one-parent families.

poor individuals where a minimum of 13 percent of this decline was attributed to work-first state policies (Cox & Spriggs, 2002).

Preoccupation with Labor Market Outcomes and Quantitative Methods

The rationale for conducting research on low-income single mothers and postsecondary education is almost exclusively related to economic and labor market outcomes. The justifications of many studies rest on general outcomes such as financial benefits, improved economic outcomes, and the escape from poverty (Adair, 2001; Bloom, 2009; Kates, 1991; Mathur, Reichle, Wiseley, & Strawn, 2002). Additionally, economic self-sufficiency is tied to greater educational attainment for low-income mothers where postsecondary education is identified as a viable pathway for many welfare recipients to find work that will remove them permanently from the welfare system and ensure their financial independence (Brock, Matus-Grossman, & Hamilton, 2002; Butler et al., 2003; Cox & Spriggs, 2002; Mazzeo et al., 2003; Wolfe & Tucker, 2001).

In other studies, rationales are more explicit. In these cases, studies examine low-income single mothers' low academic achievement rates and the development of more effective ways to increase their postsecondary educational attainment to inform how they may more successfully compete in the labor market (Lower-Basch, 2008), experience greater job mobility and retention (Lee & Oyserman, 2007; Matus-Grossman, Gooden, Wavelet, Diaz, & Seupersad, 2002), develop increased earning potential (Butler et al., 2003), and adapt to changes in the labor market that require increasingly lengthy and job-specific training (Gatta, 2003). The work of Marx (2002) on college access programs contains the underlying assumption that postsecondary education is a path out of poverty and identifies consequent labor market outcomes as bases for economic security. Moreover, Gruber (1998) argues that postsecondary education is the best *long-term* solution for reducing single mothers' dependency on state aid. In part or in whole, these outcomes are regarded as necessary, if not entirely sufficient, conditions for escaping poverty and ending welfare dependency (Cerven et al., 2010).

The most prevalent methodology employed in understanding welfare recipients and the outcomes of their pursuit of postsecondary education is quantitative data analysis (Kates, 2004). The majority of these studies report descriptive statistics such as trends in earnings, educational completion rates, and other such outcomes of interest (Dilger, Blakely, Latimer, Locke, Plein, Potter, & Williams, 2004; Goldrick-Rab & Shaw, 2005; Gruber 1998; Horn, Nevill, & Griffith, 2006; McSwain & Davis, 2007; Mathur et al., 2002; Meléndez, Falcón, & Bivens, 2003; Katsinas et al., 1999; Butler et al., 2003). A small portion of these studies utilized statistical tests of significance for variables of interest on a range of outcomes such as college completion and/or employment outcomes (Astone, Schoen, Ensminger, & Rothert, 2000; Cox & Spriggs, 2002; Greenberg, Ashworth, Cebulla, & Walker, 2005; Horn et al., 2006; Lee & Oyserman, 2007; London, 2006). Experimental methods, while less common, are also used to ascertain the effects of welfare recipients' random assignment to different community college assistance programs with differing learning and counseling approaches on educational completion rates (Brock et al., 2002; Hotz, Imbens, & Klerman, 2000; Richburg-Hayes, 2008).

While qualitative studies do exist in this literature, they are far less common but provide invaluable insights into the process by which low-income mothers attain postsecondary education (Kates, 2004). These studies often examine the effects of community-based organizational programs on the educational endeavors of welfare recipients (Bloom, 2009; Jones-DeWeever & Gault, 2006; Marx, 2002) or how welfare policy and practice impede these women's pursuit of postsecondary education (Kahn & Polakow, 2000; Kates, 1991). While this work actively gives a voice to welfare recipients and their experiences and concerns, they varied widely in methodological rigor ranging

from observed personal interactions with colleagues or students (Adair, 2001) to questionnaire guided interviews where data was coded and systematically analyzed (Wolfe & Tucker, 2001). Because of the narrow range of research methods within this literature, Kates (2004) argues that researchers “need to continue to reach across the research divide and share the strengths of different methods and perspectives, so that we frame policy options that are *grounded in reality* and offer more promise for the future” (emphasis added, p. 38).

Framing Lived Experiences

On the whole, researchers’ preoccupation with welfare reform policy, labor market outcomes, and the use of quantitative methodologies leaves little attention paid to the *lived experiences* of welfare recipients navigating both welfare and community college structures as told by welfare recipients themselves. This grounded account serves to provide scholars with an understanding of how both the *private and public* nature of low income single mothers’ day-to-day lives affect their pursuits of PSE as they interact with the significant people (i.e. peers, family, children) as well as institutional structures (i.e. their experiences with the welfare department and community college) in their lives. In this analysis, low-income single mothers’ personal relationships with friends, family, and close peers represent their private lives while their experiences with the institutional structures of the community college and welfare department constitute their public lives.

This analysis sheds light on the contradictory effects personal relationships and the welfare department have on low-income single mothers’ ability to pursue PSE where, in some cases, these private and public aspects of their lives both facilitated and hindered their movement to and through a community college district. However, while these contradictory influences exist, they on the whole show to be more helpful than harmful in these women’s educational pursuits. Moreover, this grounded account presents a more robust portrayal of how issues related to educational equity, access and persistence play out in the mothers’ pursuit of higher education and how these democratic ideals are intertwined with the private (e.g. personal relationships) and public (i.e. institutional structures) aspects of their lives.

Methodology

This study is part of the *Pathways to Postsecondary Success Project*, a five-year, mixed-method set of studies focused on maximizing opportunities for low-income women to earn higher education credentials. The data presented here are drawn from a larger qualitative case study of 96 low-income women (60 single mothers and 36 single women without children) that focuses on how low-income women interpret and make decisions about their educational pathways as they interact with their institutional and personal contexts. To better understand the unique case of single mothers and the role of welfare and motherhood in the pursuit of PSE, this study focuses its analysis on the subset of 60 women in the study who were single mothers.

Data Sources

The data utilized in this paper draw from semi-structured in-depth interviews lasting between 1.5 to 2.5 hours with 60 low-income single mothers, a participant background survey, and document review. The interview covered topics regarding their general backgrounds (where they grew up, who they live with, where they went to school), their courses of study, what led them to enroll at LCCD, their interactions with college and welfare department personnel, and what facilitated or hindered their persistence in college.

Sampling Process

Purposive sampling was used to identify participants that were uniquely positioned to answer research questions regarding the educational experiences of low-income single mothers and to better understand the role of context in their educational pursuits (Merriam, 1998). Women were included in the study if they: a) were low-income³; b) were between the ages of 18 and 30 at the start of the study; c) had at least one child; d) attended or had attended the case study community college; e) lived within the case study site; and, f) identified themselves as being single.

To recruit low-income single mothers, the research team requested that staff members of programs that supported low-income students send out letters and emails about the study, posted flyers on campuses and relied on referrals from other participants. The vast majority of the case's single mother participants were involved in at least one of three programs: a) the college's on site welfare-to-work program which is intricately connected to the state of California's welfare program known as California Work Opportunities and Responsibilities to Kids (CalWORKs), b) the support program for low-income students known as Extended Opportunities and Program Services (EOPS) which also offers supplemental services to single mothers via a branch of the program known as Cooperative Agencies Resources for Education (CARE), or c) the learning community program known as Academic Learning Community (ALC)⁴

Site: Landmark Community College District

Landmark Community College District (LCCD) is located in California, with three main campuses that serve approximately 60,000 students annually.⁵ The district's diverse student body mirrors the demographics of the state. The majority of the students are female (55 percent), under the age of 25 (65 percent), students of color (50 percent Latina/o, 10 percent African American/Black, 10 percent Asian/Pacific Islander, and 30 percent White), and low-income (approximately 65-70 percent of students qualified for California's Board of Governors Fee Waiver which waves college enrollment fees based on student financial need).⁶ Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics and educational background of this study's sample of single mothers, which largely reflects the demographics of the district's general student population. Additionally, the vast majority of this sample are young women between the ages of 18-24 (65 percent of sample), have never been married (86 percent), and have one child (72 percent of sample). Interviews and observations began in April 2010 and completed in July 2012. Table 1

Interviews were conducted at a place that was most convenient for the participant. In some cases, the research team visited the women's homes because participants lacked transportation or could not get childcare. In other cases the team conducted one-on-one interviews on college campuses or other public places such as park benches and coffee shops.

³ Defined as women who qualify for or receive student financial aid based on financial need, were eligible for needs-based welfare assistance, and/or reported income as 185 percent below the poverty line which is the federal designation that determines a child's qualification for free or reduced-price school lunch programs.

⁴ Pseudonyms are used to preserve the anonymity of the case study location.

⁵ All names of schools and participants are pseudonyms.

⁶ Figures are approximate to ensure confidentiality and are from the 2010-2011 academic year.

Table 1
Participant Characteristics (N = 60)

Characteristics	N	%
Single mothers	60	100
Age		
18-24	39	65
25-31	21	35
Number of Children		
1	43	72
2	11	18
3	6	10
Race/Ethnicity		
African American/Black	17	28
Asian American/Pacific Islander	1	2
Latina	20	34
Multiracial	8	13
White	14	23
Enrollment		
Full-time	21	35
Part-time	29	48
Stopped-out	10	17
Participant Highest Level of Education		
Junior High	4	7
High School Diploma	34	58
GED	5	8
Certificate	15	25
AA/AS Degree	1	2
Qualified for Free or Reduced Lunch as Child		
Yes	43	72
No	16	26
Do not know	1	2
Ever Homeless		
Yes	25	42
No	35	58
Born in US		
Yes	60	100

Analysis

From these data sources, the research team developed interview notes, reflections on interactions with the women we interviewed, participant profiles, and program overviews. For data analysis, the team developed a coding scheme regarding what participants identified to be the barriers and supports in their educational pursuits and applied these codes to the first wave of interview transcripts. Commonly applied codes pertained to participant background, educational experiences, critical junctures in college access, persistence and completion and interactions with college and welfare personnel.

Once transcripts were coded, I then analyzed the coded transcripts and developed categories of themes regarding access and persistence that arose out of participants' narratives. For each emerging category, tallies were created to reveal the most prominent themes regarding what participants attributed to their ability to access and persist in the community college district as well as what they identified as hindering their educational pursuits. The use of grounded theory (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2002) to guide this analysis was intended to allow for a more inductive understanding of college access and persistence and produce findings that are derived directly from the voices of the women themselves and what they considered to be the primary supports and barriers in their educational pursuits.

Findings

I first present the private (close relationships with immediate social networks of peers and family members) and public (institutional) factors low-income single mothers credited to their ability to successfully access and enroll in Landmark Community College. Help from significant others (close family and friends) was the factor that single mothers most frequently attributed to their successful access to and enrollment in LCCD where they not only provided emotional and motivational support, but, in some cases, they *facilitated* access to LCCD through the provision of guidance, insider tips, and help filling out bureaucratic enrollment and financial aid forms. Following this is a discussion of the importance of the county welfare department's referral of single mothers to PSE as it acted as one of their primary means of access to LCCD.

Next, I outline the factors that participants attributed to their ability to persist within LCCD. Again, emotional and motivational support provided by close family members and peers served an important role in low-income single mothers' retention in the college as did student support programs and the support provided by their associated staff and counselors. However, participants' children had an undeniable influence on their mothers' persistence either by serving as motivational forces in their need to support or act as a role model for their child(ren) or through mothers' pragmatic need to find quality childcare while attending class—a finding well-documented in the literature (Shaw et al., 2006). Finally, I conclude by discussing the need to account for both the private and public lives of low-income single mothers when considering their successful engagement in postsecondary education and provide policy recommendations that concern student support program structures and how they may better promote persistence.

Postsecondary Access

The role of significant others in accessing college

A close significant other in form of family members, friends of the family, and/or a peer was the most frequently mentioned factor low-income single mothers (among 25 percent) attributed to their ability to successfully access Landmark Community College. Significant others acted as a major support encouraging participants to enroll and/or actually facilitated the process either through helping the participant fill out application forms, financial aid forms, answering questions, and/or guiding them to the appropriate college staff member for support.

In the quote below, Clara, a 26-year-old White mother of three (ages 7, 6, and 1) discussed how her ex-mother-in-law guided her through the multiple steps she needed to take to successfully enter LCCD and its new environment. When asked what led her to enroll at LCCD she replied:

It was my [ex-]mother-in-law. She was actually coming here and...you know there's a process to come to school, and it was kind of scary for me...My mom never did it. She couldn't help me. She's like I don't know, so my dad never did it and...he couldn't help me. So my mother-in-law, she did the process and she ... was the one

that helped me and showed me [S]he was coming to [LCCD] and she liked it and so that's why I was interested...She told me step by step what I needed to do and ... what was the next step. When I went to take the orientation it was easy for me...to find. I've never really gone to any colleges ...so I know that they can be huge...but she told me the directions and it was easy to find. She just basically showed me.

In this example, Clara points out the fear she experienced as she considered attending school and how because they had no postsecondary experience, members of her immediate family were not able to provide her with the information and support she needed. Instead, it was her ex-mother-in-law who provided her with the knowledge of how to successfully access Landmark Community College which, in turn, reassured her as she began the process of enrollment.

Similarly, Sandra, a 21-year-old African American mother of one child discussed how her sister, friend, and the friend's mother played pivotal roles in her ability to access LCCD. When asked if there was any specific event or person that was influential in her decision to go to LCCD, she responded:

Well, my sister helped me get enrolled and stuff, and then I had a friend who attended right after ...she graduated early and then she started right after that. And so she helped me with any questions that I had. Her mom helped me with applying...and all that stuff. So I mean she kinda encouraged me a little bit 'cause I would always call her and ask her things. But yeah, just knowing that I needed to get my foot in the door some way...

In this example, Sandra's sister and friend's mother helped her apply to LCCD and enroll in classes while her friend was available to clarify any questions she had about the logistics of attending college. Such supports were vital to her successful entry into the community college system.

In sum, significant others that participants encountered regularly in their daily lives were pivotal actors that influenced not only a participant's decision to attend college but also facilitated her access of the local community college. Having a close knowledgeable other to turn to when confronted with the uncertainty and ambiguity that results from little to no exposure to higher education served to facilitate low-income single mothers' college attendance.

This finding demonstrates the powerful role that significant others can play in single mothers' pursuit of higher education. These women's unfamiliarity with college and their intimidation of it acted as a barrier that they overcame with the support, encouragement, and facilitation of a close significant other and speaks volumes to the supportive role that peer and kin networks often play in low-income women's access to higher education.

Exception: significant others blocking college access

There were also exceptions to this pattern. Seven single mother students (12 percent of the sample) cited a close significant other as acting as a major *barrier* to their ability to successfully access the college. Five of the seven specifically mentioned a boyfriend or partner that forbade them from attending college which demonstrates how the dynamics of gender, dominance, and control in their personal lives may affect the degree of equity they can achieve in their ability to pursue higher education. The following quotes from two participants serve as examples of the kind of control a husband or partner had over their ability to access postsecondary education. In the first, Deb, a 25-year-old mother of two (ages 5 and 3) who identified as being Multiracial (Mexican American on one side and Filipino on the other) discussed the freedom she felt when her ex-husband went to jail and was no longer able to exert the control he had on her life and her ability to attend college:

So he was making a really good paycheck. And I wanted to go back to school, but he was kinda like, "No, you need to be home with the kids." So my [ex-]husband went to prison in 2007, and I felt free. You know, I was like, "Yes, I can go back to school. Now I can go do this and I can do that."

Similarly, Iris, a 25-year-old Mexican American mother of two (ages 5 and 3) discussed how her ex-husband prevented her from attending college; an action that she felt was denying her the ability to 'be herself.'

...[W]hen I was with my ex, I was very depressed because I wasn't me. He was trying to make me be someone who ...wasn't me... I wanted an education, he d[idn't] want to let me get one,... that's not me.

These experiences relayed by Deb and Iris demonstrate how their former partners invoked traditional gender roles and engaged in controlling behavior by restricting their ability to go to college and requiring them to act as the primary caretakers for their children. Such experiences serve as examples of how equity in educational access may be blocked due to one's gender and the prescription of traditional gender roles in domestic partnerships.

Partners were not the only significant others that participants mentioned that impeded their college attendance. Two of the seven participants also specifically mentioned the discouraging role their mothers played in this process. In the following quote, Becca, a 22-year-old single mother of a 4 year-old boy commented:

During the last four years I guess you'd say when I put off school I let my mom influence me a lot, because she always told me like college, no, no, no, no, it's not good, it's not gonna get you [any]where, how are you gonna pay your bills, how are you gonna do this? I can honestly say that's why I put it off a lot because I always had that negativity like telling me no college is not good. Why are you gonna go to college for?

While significant others can serve as powerful supports and facilitate low-income women's access to postsecondary education, these experiences suggest that they may also have the power to restrict their ability to attend college.

This finding speaks to the relative powerlessness these women may experience in their educational endeavors. The vast majority of the single mothers in the study received welfare, which may be indicative of the low levels of autonomy these women have to make decisions and take actions regarding their pursuits of higher education and, likely, other aspects of their lives. This limited autonomy may be due to the scarcity of financial resources available to them which could increase the degree to which they need to depend on others for their livelihoods (the county as well as partners/family) and constrains their ability to make decisions independently. Such constraints may reduce the control they could exert over their lives and make them particularly vulnerable to power imbalances and the object of control by another.

Welfare department referrals and college access

Another important factor that was a catalyst for low-income single mothers' access to LCCD was their referral to the college by their county welfare-to-work program. Despite its long tradition of being identified as a major barrier to single mothers' access to higher education (Shaw et al., 2006), the participants in this study spoke of how the county institutional structure *promoted* and *facilitated* their postsecondary access. Rather than blocking access to postsecondary training (as documented throughout the literature on welfare and higher education), twenty percent of the single mothers in the sample identified the Department of Social Services' welfare-to-work program (CalWORKs) as the primary reason they were able to access higher education.

The California Work Opportunities and Responsibilities to Kids (CalWORKs) program is California's state welfare program that provides cash aid and services to eligible, needy families. CalWORKs mandates that welfare recipients participate in 18 to 24 months of welfare-to-work activities, followed by work or community service, to remain eligible for up to 60 months of cash aid. As part of this program, education/training is understood as an allowable work activity in

combination with work for up to 24 months. The creation of a welfare recipients welfare-to-work plan first involves meeting with an employment service counselor to help clients find an unsubsidized job that would help meet the goal of engaging in work activities for 20 hours per week. In the second phase of the plan's development, case managers discuss what other activities may be suitable for the welfare recipients. Other such activities include enrolling in an education/training program for up to an additional 12 hours per week for a combined total of 32 hours in welfare-to-work sponsored activities.⁷

While this new welfare legislation offers dual pathways of development for low-income people (work and education/training), the primary expectation placed on welfare recipients is to obtain and maintain employment to achieve economic independence and largely deemphasizes the role of education in an individual's ability to achieve self-sufficiency (i.e. its "work-first" orientation). However, while many individual states have adopted a work-first policy regarding welfare recipients' approved activities, the state of California has one of the more educationally leaning welfare-to-work policies in the nation as schooling is a common approved activity available to welfare recipients.

Additionally, the nation's economic downturn in 2008 had a notable effect on the state of California. As a result, in 2009, California welfare policy eliminated the job search requirement for welfare recipients who were single parents with a child of 1 to 2 years old or with two children under the age of six.⁸ This temporary change "...reflects the intersection of a recession, the worst fiscal crisis in the state's modern history, a governor [former Governor Schwarzenegger] determined to slash social services and the unplanned effects of federal stimulus money" (Eckholm, 2009). As such, to save money, the state pared down portions of the welfare-to-work program that were not eligible for extra federal money under the stimulus act (such as employment assistance programs and subsidized child care), which resulted in the suspension of the work requirements for a large portion of welfare recipients.

As a result of this change in policy, schooling and volunteer work became the primary options of approved "work" activity for welfare recipients and a greater number of welfare recipients were referred to schooling as part of their approved activities. This may also explain why many (20 percent) of the single-mother participants of this study reported that they gained access to LCCD via their participation in California's welfare-to-work program (CalWORKs). In the following quote, Chantelle, a 27-year-old Mexican American mother of a 7-year-old child discussed how she originally had only a vague familiarity with LCCD until her caseworker at the county referred her to the college as part of her approved activities. When asked how she knew about LCCD she responded:

I never knew about it until... I never really remember if this was a college or not, I really never paid attention... [S]o I think they [the county welfare department] just told me [to] go to college at [LCCD], and... so I went down here.

In this way, the county welfare department institutional structure acted as the primary means of access to postsecondary education for Chantelle.

Likewise, Valerie, a 23-year-old White mother of two (a 5 year-old son and 2 year-old daughter), discussed the options she was given as approvable work hours when she became a participant in the CalWORKs program. When asked what led Valerie to enroll in LCCD she replied:

⁷ Work-study, employment, on-the-job training, and community service can count toward the 32-hour work/education requirement for the welfare recipients. Class preparation (study-time) may or may not be an allowable welfare-to-work activity, depending on each county's policy.

⁸ This change in policy was originally intended to last until July 2011 but has since been extended through the end of 2012 and is in addition to parents with special hardships or the youngest babies who are already exempt from employment searches under California's welfare policy.

Val: Well Welfare to Work...when I got onto Cash Aid. I got on and they said ok you need to have 32 or 35 hours either job searching... and I said well I can easily get a job, I don't want to get a job, I want something better....you could do volunteer work or you can start going to school. That's when I said ok well where can I go to school at? Then in the back of the book it says they have a contract through [Landmark] Adult School or [LCCD]. Then I was thinking about it...welfare's gonna pay for it so go big or go home. I have a diploma...[I]f you had two certificates in front of you and you had one from [LCCD] or the adult school, you'd probably go with the [LCCD] one because they're credible and...you know you went through all these requirements and they're more in-depth... so I said go big or go home. It's being paid for so take advantage of it....[Y]ou know it was just me and [participant's daughter], and I was working at Target and I was thinking I wanted something different you know. Then I said well I'll go to [LCCD]. That's when I went to [LCCD] one time and got this business card and then I said screw it, I'm just gonna keep working. I'm just gonna keep working at Target.

INT: Ok. Then you ended up going back later?

Val: Because of Cash Aid.

In Valerie's experience, she had already sought out and made contact with Landmark Community College once, but the informality of her experience and the difficulty she had knowing where to begin in independently navigating LCCD led her to discontinue any further pursuit of her education. It was not until she was referred to LCCD by the institutional structure of Landmark County's Department of Social Services that she registered, enrolled, and began taking courses leading to a certificate in office assistance. Her referral to a specific counselor in the CalWORKs program on the college campus served to better anchor her in the college as she felt she had someone she could turn to for guidance and support as she began to navigate the unfamiliar terrain of the college.

In addition to providing low-income single mothers with initial exposure to postsecondary education, the county's welfare-to-work program also served to support some welfare recipients' loosely defined goals. In the following example, Tara (a 24-year-old White mother of a 1 year-old child) described how she got to LCCD:

I wanted to pursue auto because I really like cars and I figured I could do that as a part time [work] and take care of the baby at the same time, and then [CalWORKs] actually helped me with that... [T]hey were telling me that I should either go to school or try to get a job, and I was like well I might as well go to school to get a better job.

In this example, because the welfare-to-work program made education an option for Tara, she opted to pursue coursework in auto mechanics at LCCD to enable her to get a better job in the auto industry rather than immediately entering the workforce.

Exception: welfare department limiting college access

There were also instances (11 percent of single mothers) in which the county institutional structure hindered welfare recipients' equity in access to certain forms of postsecondary education. For example, the county originally approved of the following participant's pursuit of the nursing program at LCCD, but later rescinded its support thus leaving her on her own to figure out how she will attain her Registered Nurse (RN) degree. When asked what led her to initially enroll at LCCD, Janice, a 26-year-old Mexican American mother of three (ages 9, 6 and 2), replied:

It's right here; it's local and it's more convenient. What helped me out was when I had CalWORKs. They put me for the RN program, but then they took that back. As soon as you got - I did the phlebotomy [certificate to draw blood], and soon as I got the certificate,

they said that's it. So, yeah, then they made me find something in that [line of work], so I got exempt and I kept on going maybe five more classes, until I could register, [and] apply for the RN program.

In this case, the work-first orientation of welfare policy and its embedded time limits for postsecondary education appears to have affected Janice's ability to extend her postsecondary pursuits and continue her educational endeavors beyond the achievement of a certificate. Because she had completed a postsecondary education credential and was operating under the time limits for PSE embedded in welfare policy (maximum of 24 months), county welfare officials expected her to find employment instead of continuing on in her long-term educational goals.

In another example, Betty, a 24-year-old mother of one who identifies as being Multiracial (White on one side and Black on the other), discussed how her referral to LCCD granted her access to the college but that she was limited in the educational goals she would be able to pursue there.

So they [the county welfare department] told me to come to the school and speak to this lady named [name of CalWORKs counselor at LCCD] and she let me know about the human services program. In [CalWORKs] you don't get qualified for like educational...to get your degree, you only get qualified for vocational studies so you have to be in a certificate program. So that's why I'm here is for the human services certificate.

Both Betty and Janice's experiences are examples of how the county institutional structure may facilitate single mothers' initial access to postsecondary education, but restrict their ability to persist beyond an initial credential and pursue further education.

Postsecondary Persistence

Regarding their persistence at LCCD, participants credited a variety of factors as supporting their ability to return and reenroll in LCCD term after term. Two of the top three most frequently cited reasons for single mothers' persistence at LCCD were related to their children either through finding quality childcare (24 percent of sample) or the need to support/act as a role model for one's child(ren) (19 percent of sample). Clearly children are an important variable for a variety of reasons ranging from the practical (the need to provide for one's child), to the logistical (finding quality childcare) to the inspirational (wanting to serve as a role model or "doing school" for one's child). Yet, the support provided by close significant others (e.g. family, friends, peers) as well as student support programs are also factors single mothers cited as encouraging their persistence at LCCD. An elaboration of these themes follows below.

The Critical Role of Children in Postsecondary Persistence

Attaining quality childcare

The most prominent theme participants cited as affecting their persistence was their ability to find regular quality childcare (among 24 percent of the sample) that freed up their time, making class attendance and homework completion more feasible. For example, Tina, a 25-year-old Latina mother of a 5-year-old child explained:

...helping me stay in school? I mean I guess his [participant's boyfriend] mom because if I didn't have his mom to watch my daughter you know at those times I probably wouldn't even be here [at LCCD]. So his family helps me out so much.

Finding affordable, reliable, and quality childcare is well documented in the literature on women who receive welfare and their ability to attend college and the participants of this study highlighted this importance (Butler et al., 2003; Cerven et al., 2010).

Need to provide for child

Two other prominent themes identified in low-income single mothers' accounts were the role their children played in their motivation to return to school and persist in their educational endeavors. The responsibility the women felt for providing for their child(ren) was apparent. When asked what helps her return to school, Clara, a 26-year-old mother of three (quoted above) answered:

My kids. Just seeing that I still don't have my own place and they're seven, and I remember being like my kids' age and having my own room, my own place, my own...you know my two parents supporting me, and I need help everywhere I can right now with three kids....So yeah my kids are...every time I look at them or like we talk about school or they'll bring it up; are you gonna study or are you going to school? Like it's them that gives me that drive to...even if I don't want to go to school or I don't want to open my book to study because its stressful I do because of them.

Similarly, Deb, a 25-year-old mother of two (quoted above) discussed how the birth of her son was a central event that led to her increased focus on school and her persistence through it.

DEB: ...I don't want my son to be raised like I was.

INT: In what way?

DEB: Poverty. ...[N]ow I feel like I need to go back to school even though I do have a job...even if you have a job it's not guaranteed. If you have a degree or something you always have a better chance of getting a higher position...[rather] than just starting off like way at the bottom like for nothing.

INT: Before you had your son did you still have that same... attitude?

DEB: No I didn't. I actually didn't...So when I had him I was more...determin[ed], like oh I gotta do this, I can't think of myself [any]more.

Likewise, Lilly, a 27-year-old African American mother of three (ages 9, 8, and 1) echoed the importance of caring for her children and the role education plays in her ability to provide for them:

I want a better living for my kids. My kids keep me going. My kids pretty much got me through all of it....I don't want them to feel deprived. ...[J]ust as long as they [are taken] care of.

Overall, the need to support and provide for one's child(ren) was a salient issue for the participants of this study and was often identified (among 19 percent of the sample) as a major motivational force for the women to continue their pursuit of their educational goals.

Be role model for child

Participants also frequently spoke of a desire to act as a role model and set an example for their children by attending college. As Tara (quoted above) noted:

It's very important to me to get an education. That way I could have a good example, set a good example for my son. When he's going to school and be like I don't want to go to school I'll be like well I did it. Now I can be that...be like, you know, make something of yourself one day.

These participants derived inspiration for their postsecondary pursuits from their desire to set an example for their children, which in turn, encouraged their persistence at LCCD.

The role of children in low-income single mothers' pursuit of higher education is well documented. Scholars such as Sharon Hays (2003) discuss how single mother welfare recipients' ability to properly mother their children "is central to [their] image of [themselves] as a worthwhile [people]" and that children serve as a "primary connection the larger world and [one's] sense of membership in it" (p. 187). Thus, it is easy to see how children and the existential meaning a mother

derives from her role as a mother surfaced in participants' descriptions of the purpose of postsecondary education in their lives.

The important role of support from significant others

Aside from factors related to their children, 22 percent of participants spoke of the importance of having emotional support and guidance from significant others such as family and/or peers and attributed such support to their ability to persist at LCCD. In the following example, Brandy, a 25-year-old Mexican American mother of a 7-year-old girl, discussed how she stopped-out after initially enrolling at LCCD but was able to reenroll and persist once she had guidance and support from her boyfriend.

BRANDY: ...I enrolled like a year or two ago and never ended up turning anything in or going. I wussed out.

INT: Why?

BRANDY: I don't know. I guess because I was working and stuff and I just didn't know how to figure out the time and stuff. So this time when I enrolled I also enrolled my boyfriend. So by me enrolling him he made sure that I...he was like ok we gotta turn this stuff in by this time and we gotta do this. I'm like I got all the stuff together but he like pushed me to do that. So when I'm confused about something I have somebody else because I don't know anybody else on campus. All my friends graduated. They're gone. I'm 25. Everybody left a couple of years ago. So I do know like 2 people here but they're not in any of the beginning classes or anything, so that kind of pushed me; having somebody else here. If my friend lived in [Landmark] still I probably would have gone with her.

INT: So it's like having that person to help you...

BRANDY: Yeah and I was tired of not having my high school diploma and the adult school was full. And [boyfriend's name] just kept on telling me you just need to go to LCCD because then you'll get high school and college credits, and I'm like yeah you're right. So he kind of pushed me into doing it because I've been talking about it for a long time. So now I'm here.

Many women of this study highlighted the importance of receiving encouragement, assurance, and support from a significant other that helped them to persist at LCCD. They frequently attributed their successful progress in school to the help and emotional support they received from close others.

The important role of student support programs and counseling

Student support programs and the services they provide to low-income students served as the only educational structure within the college that participants frequently attributed to their persistence at LCCD. In the following quote, Rosa, a 23-year-old Asian American mother of a 2-year-old son discussed how college would not be an option for her if she did not have the support from the Extended Opportunity Program and Services (EOPS) program on the LCCD campus.

It was after I had [son's name] that I, like, really got into school. And I was just like I've really got to do this – and I did it...and then I got into it [EOPS]. And I just – I honestly did not believe that they were gonna have so many different benefits with EOPS....They have a ton of stuff I had no idea about. I was like super tripping out 'cause I didn't – you know I did not believe that there were any services outside of the county...And so at EOPS is one of the biggest blessings. I don't think I could have – I can't go through school without that.

Participants of this study noted the importance of the resources made available to them via student support programs for low-income students, which included counseling services, priority registration and book vouchers they received through these programs. They also frequently highlighted how the support and guidance provided by student support program staff and counselors were central to their persistence at LCCD.

In general, the women of this study credited the student support program counselors with giving them greater attention than they received elsewhere and providing more concrete feedback and critical information that they felt they needed. They appreciated how the counselors in the student support programs helped them identify the best educational pathways they could take to move toward achieving their educational goals. In the following example, Christina, a 22 year-old African American mother of a newborn baby elaborated on what she found particularly useful in her counseling session with the CalWORKs counselor:

They actually sit there and they help you figure out your goal plan and everything. When you go to admissions and you see those [general] counselors they just sit there and look at you and ask you what do you want to do? It's like well I'm a first time student; that's why I'm here for you to help me figure out what I want to do and help me get in that direction that I'm trying to go in instead of just looking at me like so what do you want to do? It's like when I worked with the people at [the CalWORKs program] it was just like well you can do this and this and this, and I was like oh my gosh I have options? They're giving me options? It's like oh my goodness, it's like they didn't tell me all this when I was up there. Then she [the CalWORKs counselor] was like yes they never do.

Given she was a first-time student at LCCD, it was important for Christina to learn how to navigate this new and unfamiliar educational terrain. The counselor in the CalWORKs program did not automatically assume that she knew the options available to her and took the time to explain the different pathways she may take to reach her postsecondary goals.

In another example of a helpful encounter, Stacy, a 26-year-old White single mother of two children (ages 3 and 2) highlighted how her counselor in the EOPS program had been exceptionally helpful to her and her progress in college:

One of the counselors has [been helpful], just 'cause he has kids himself, so he knows how difficult it is, and I can go to him...like I've seen other counselors, but they don't...for...it seems like they don't give me all the information that I need to know, but if I go to him and ask the same thing, I'm getting like completely different answers and he's like, this is what you have, this is what you need to do, here's, you know, what I think you should do, these classes now, then kind of do this class with a couple like fun classes that don't...you don't have homework, so that way you can really study on these ones and just...he explains it more.

In this case, Stacy's interactions with her EOPS counselor helped her understand how she can navigate the college terrain and best execute her educational pursuits. When she presented the same questions to different counselors, she found her EOPS counselor the most helpful in that the counselor provided her with greater detail about classes, which pathways are available to her, and advice on how to balance it all in addition to being a parent so she can be more successful in her studies. Overall, student support programs for low-income students were the primary educational structure within the LCCD that students attributed to their abilities to persist in college.

Conclusion

This study sheds light on how equity, access, and persistence in postsecondary education are intertwined with both the personal relationships (i.e. the private lives) and the institutional structures (i.e. the public lives) low-income single mothers encounter in their day-to-day lives. Its grounded approach not only allowed for the development of more holistic understanding of the pursuit of PSE among low-income single mothers but also illuminated how gender equity in these efforts may be stunted via the invocation of traditional gender roles in personal relationships (i.e. one's private life) and/or welfare policy prescriptions limiting their attainment of degrees that require lengthier time-to-degree (i.e. one's public life).

The use of grounded theory in this study's design and analysis also revealed a complex story of single mothers' access and persistence in PSE where the public and private components of their lives were found to both promote and hinder their PSE pursuits. However, while exceptions to these prominent themes did exist, these factors overall served to be more helpful than harmful. This grounded approach made possible a more sophisticated and detailed understanding of the somewhat contradictory nature of supports and barriers in low-income single mothers' educational pursuits and allowed for a richer account of how they successfully accessed and persisted in PSE. Such an understanding would be lost if not for this grounded approach. Table 2 presents a complete listing of the emerging themes participants identified to promote their access and persistence at LCCD.

It is undeniable the important role of support from significant others in single mothers' abilities to access and persist at LCCD. These friends, family and/or peers served as cushions and beacons of support for the mothers as they attempted to navigate their way through the various bureaucratic hurdles and unfamiliar structures of the community college. Many participants spoke of the intimidation they felt in not only attending college but also in successfully sticking with school and noted how their lack of exposure to the system (the vast majority were first generation students) made them feel timid and unsure of their abilities to perform in their courses. It was these significant that provided not only the critical encouragement and support to overcome their fears of attending college, but in many cases, they facilitated single mothers' enrollment by helping them fill out forms, speak to the right people, meet deadlines and stay on track. Because this was the most frequently mentioned factor low-income single mothers attributed to their ability to successfully access college, it speaks volumes to how much social networks continue to affect the likelihood a low-income single mother will go to college and her success in her educational endeavors.

While some institutional structures such as the county welfare department and its embedded welfare policy are well-documented in the literature as hindering low-income single mothers' educational pursuits, this study paints a more complex picture that highlights both the supportive and limiting effects of welfare practices on their educational pursuits. Because welfare departments served as an important means through which the low-income single mothers of this study were able to successfully access and enroll in the community college, this counters the dominant discussion on welfare policy and its negative effect on low-income single mothers' educational pursuits.

The co-occurrence of California's educationally leaning welfare policy and the unique historical time period in which this case study took place (where the effects of the nation's economic downturn softened the work requirements of welfare policy) help explain why the participants in this study credited the welfare department with their ability to successfully access LCCD. As such, both events shaped welfare policy to be more favorable toward the pursuit of PSE. However, the finding that the pursuit of educational goals that require lengthier time-to-degree is not only unsupported, but actively discouraged, affirms existing arguments of the detrimental effects of welfare policy's "work-first" orientation on postsecondary educational pursuits. Therefore, it may be

concluded that California's recent welfare policy has served as a means for initial access to PSE but continues to act as a barrier to single mothers' ability to pursue degrees which require more time and investment for completion, which suggest that the welfare system plays a contradictory role in low-income single mothers' pursuit of PSE.

Table 2

Factors Related to Access and Persistence at Landmark Community College Among Low-income Single Mothers (N = 60)*

ACCESS			PERSISTENCE		
	N	%		N	%
1. Family/Peers facilitated and/or encouraged access	15	25	1. Attaining quality childcare	14	24
- <i>Exception</i> : Sig other denied access	7	12			
2. Poor work options	13	22	2. Peer/Family support	13	22
3. Via DPSS**	12	20	3. Need to provide for/act as role-model for child	11	19
- <i>Exception</i> : DPSS both allows & restricts access	6	11			
4. Via staff personnel at LCCD or DPSS	4	7	4. Support from school programs (e.g. EOPS, CalWORKs)	8	14
5. Proximity to home	4	7	5. Support from teacher/counselor at LCCD	4	7
6. Access facilitated via support program	3	5	6. Support from DPSS for education	3	7
7. Pursue occupational goal	2	3	7. Bad relationship ended	2	3
8. Less expensive than university	2	3	8. Had the finances/financial aid	2	3
9. Wanted away from hometown area	2	3	9. Material motivation	1	2
10. Family member illness inspired study	1	2	10. Strong will/discipline	1	2
11. LCCD offered program	1	2	11. Nothing else to do	1	2
12. Got steady childcare	1	2	12. Want to pursue specific program	1	2
			13. Flexible work schedule	1	2
			14. No available work	1	2
			15. Being pregnant	1	2

* *Note*: Themes are not mutually exclusive; participants cited a number of factors to be significant to their access and persistence at LCCD

** *Note*: Department of Social Services (DPSS)

One particular organizational structure of the community college also played a pivotal role in promoting single mothers' persistence in PSE. As noted above, participants frequently mentioned LCCD's student support programs (CalWORKs, EOPS-CARE, and ALC) to be particularly helpful in their ability to return to college and progress in their educational pathways. Within these

programs, participants most frequently cited: a) their counseling experiences, b) the receipt of priority registration which enabled them to enroll in high demand courses, and c) the provision of book vouchers and stipends that better ensured they would be able to purchase the books and supplies.

Counseling services at LCCD exemplify a component of the college that may be characterized as ‘contradictory’ in nature. Participants frequently mentioned that the counseling via the CalWORKs, EOPS-CARE and ALC student support programs served to supplement or make-up for the shortcomings of their experiences with general counselors on campus. While some participants found the general campus counselors to be agreeable and on the whole helpful, the majority of participants considered general academic advising at LCCD to be either difficult to access or not very helpful. For many participants, the general counseling services of the college served to effectively ‘cool out’ or stunt their educational progress via the lack of personal attention and useful guidance they received in their interactions with its counselors⁹.

While participants spoke of the confusion they felt when leaving general counseling sessions, they also spoke of how they turned to the counselors of the student support programs to gain better clarity on their educational pursuits. It was their consistent interactions with these counselors that led participants to have a clearer idea of how to approach their educational goals while feeling a sense of support in both their academic and personal lives. The individualized attention and meaningful interpersonal relationships that developed between students and advisors were foundational in helping them clarify and persist toward their educational goals. This finding exemplifies the mixed nature of counseling services at LCCD where, on the one hand, general counseling services generally hindered single-mothers’ educational progress while on the other, counseling in student support programs promoted it.

Recommendations to Community College Student Services Leadership

There is more that the community college can do to better ensure college access and persistence for low-income single mothers and reduce this idiosyncratic nature of college success. The following is a list of recommendations that community college student services leaders may enact to better serve low-income single mothers and promote their success.

Counseling services

1. Mandate students attend at least one regular counseling meeting per term.

Scholars have suggested that counseling be made mandatory so that students do not aimlessly take courses or get lost while navigating bureaucratic hurdles (Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006). Receiving regular and consistent guidance would help ensure students stay on track and progress toward their educational goals. However, as discussed by the participants of this study, attending a counseling session does not necessarily mean it will be helpful. Many participants spoke of how the meaningful and helpful counseling experiences found in one counseling session (with student support program counselors) often served to make up for what was lacking or confusing in the other (with general campus counselors). It is necessary that students find what is discussed in their counseling encounters to be *meaningful* to them and their lives if it is going to be helpful. Therefore, I propose the next recommendation:

2. Provide opportunities for professional development and training for counselors so they may be more aware of the complexities of the lives of single mothers and are able advise them accordingly.

⁹ For a more theoretical discussion on the role of counseling in low-income single women’s postsecondary educational pursuits, see Cerven, 2012.

When counselors are aware of the day-to-day lives of a student who is also a mother, worker, and/or welfare recipient (among other things), they can personalize or craft the guidance they provide in the counseling session according to the everyday lived reality of the single mother so that plans created for her schooling are more realistic. Childcare is a large component of a mother's life and not only acknowledging this fact, but helping the student plan her schooling around childcare would better assist her in her educational endeavors. Another factor the participants of this study identified as promoting a more meaningful counseling session was the counselors' ability to identify the degree of knowledge and exposure the student had to PSE and advise the student according to that understanding. The counselors that were more effective in this respect did not operate under the assumption that the student knew how to navigate the college (e.g. plan course sequences, enroll in classes, successfully complete FAFSA forms, etc.) and as a result, they were able to provide the student with information that resonated with her and allowed for a more productive and meaningful counseling session.

3. Assign students to the same counselor for each counseling meeting.

The participants of this study who spoke of the positive impact of counseling on their persistence often described developing a familiarity and a relationship with their counselor. Such familiarity not only serves to build trust between the counselor and student but also provides a counselor with a working knowledge of the student's context that, in turn, enables the counselor to be a more effective advisor by providing guidance that accounts for the particularities of her life as a mother among other responsibilities. Such advising would be more effective for single mother students in that it would be based on her everyday lived reality where she can plan how school will realistically fit in with her other day-to-day responsibilities.

Student support programs for low-income students

While participants credited student support programs that target low-income students as facilitating their progress toward their educational goals, they have great potential to do even more for these students. The following is a list of recommendations for student support program leadership to better facilitate low-income single mothers' exposure and connection to the supports available to them on community college campuses.

4. Establish a collaborative working relationship between the county welfare department and all campus support programs designed to aid low-income single mothers.

While an established relationship between the county welfare department and the CalWORKs program on community college campuses already exists, establishing a working relationship between *all* programs that serve low-income single mothers as well as the county would facilitate their exposure to and transition between the welfare department, the college and its embedded programs designed to support their educational endeavors. For example, linking the EOPS-CARE program to the CalWORKs program at LCCD would facilitate low-income single mothers' movement between the programs and better expose them to all the campus resources available to them such as financial aid (e.g. book vouchers, stipends for school supplies, supplemental funds for childcare) and counseling. Moreover, a working relationship between the county welfare department and the EOPS-CARE program (in addition to CalWORKs) would serve to more systematically connect these women to available support programs and ensure they are consistently informed of what services are available to them.

5. Provide affordable high quality childcare on campus.

Given motherhood is a primary characteristic that distinguishes low-income single mothers from other "nontraditional" community college students, childcare must be attended to if there is to be a meaningful impact on their ability to access and persist in college. The provision of reliable, affordable (if not subsidized), and high quality childcare on campus would likely have the most wide-

reaching impact on low-income single mothers educational pursuits as it would allow them to combine education with their lives as mothers thus helping education to come into greater focus. All recommendations aside, California's postsecondary educational institutions continue to undergo drastic budget cuts of which the community college is not immune. The programs highlighted in this study have experienced multiple funding cuts that have negatively impacted the LCCD's most vulnerable students. Even before California's budget crisis, the college and these three programs were forced to contend with stretched resources and a high student to counselor ratio. Therefore, much remains to be learned about California's policy context and its funding structure's impact on community colleges' abilities to improve student success.

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Christine Cerven received her Ph.D. in Sociology is currently a Postdoctoral Scholar at the University of California, San Diego co-managing a study that examines the educational pathways of low-income youth. Her work is situated between the fields of Sociology and Higher Education and examines the ways in which gender, class and race shape opportunities for mobility and self-development among young women living in poverty. Specifically, this work aims to uncover the ways in which postsecondary education (e.g. the community college) may serve as a vehicle for social mobility and identity development for women from low-income backgrounds.

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