
Helping Single Mother Students at Triangle-area Community Colleges Overcome Barriers to
Meeting Their Education Goals

Tessa Delgo

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Introduction (Framing of Problem and Purpose)

A ‘typical’ undergraduate college student is freshly out of high school, attends school full time, lives on campus, and is dedicated solely to academics and their involvement in campus life (Beeler, 2016). This characterization misses a significant and rapidly growing demographic of undergraduate students: single mothers. College is one of several paths single mothers may take to improve their ability to provide for their families. Many single mothers do choose to pursue the higher education path; about 1.7 million undergraduate students in the United States, or nearly 10% of the national undergraduate student population, are single mothers (Cruse et al., 2019). The term *single mother student* has been used to describe a student who is the primary caregiver of at least one dependent child and identifies as separated, widowed, divorced, or never married (Miller & Gault 2011). Much of the literature on undergraduate students with children is not gender specific. However, as of 2014, women made up the majority — 71% — of the 4.8 million student parents in the United States, with more than 2 million student mothers raising their children without the support of a partner (Gault et al., 2014a). These statistics simultaneously allow for research on ‘single parent students’ to be generalized to single mother students and reveal a need for further research on single mother students as a unique population. In recent years, research specifically on single mothers and single mother students has gained some traction, allowing for a better understanding of this population. This literature review presents a summary of the existing literature on single mother students at community colleges to illuminate the gaps in information and resources that need to be filled to properly address these students’ specific needs. Specifically, this literature review provides an in-depth examination of the existing literature on:

- the characteristics of single mother students;

- the unique barriers faced by single mother students at community colleges;
- programs that have been implemented to address the needs of single mother students; and
- recommendations for policies and programs that can be set up in the Research Triangle area of North Carolina to support single mother students attending community college in their pursuit of a college education.

Background

Single Mother Students at Community Colleges

Forty-four percent of single mother students in the United States are enrolled at community colleges, compared to 30% enrolled at for-profit institutions, 19% at four-year institutions, and 7% who attend more than one kind of institution within a school year (Kruvelis et al., 2017). Community colleges' open-access environment makes them the most inviting option for many students, particularly those from historically marginalized groups; a "disproportionate number of low-income, immigrant, first-generation, and ethnic minority students" (Bailey et al., 2015, p. 1) are enrolled at this kind of institution. This, in turn, makes community college a popular choice for single mother students, many of whom belong to historically marginalized groups. Compared to their married and/or childless peers, single mother students are more likely to be financially independent from their parents, older than 24, more likely to attend college part-time, more likely to be responsible for juggling a job in addition to school and family life, and more likely to be first-generation college students (Beeler, 2016). Research conducted by the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) indicates that single mother students are likely to be women of color, as well as to be socioeconomically

disadvantaged; nearly 9 in 10 single mothers pursuing a college degree have incomes at or near the federal poverty line (Cruse et al., 2019).

Benefits of College Education for Single Mothers

Single mothers have many unique reasons for pursuing further education compared to their childless peers, including setting a positive example for their children, instilling in them values of hard work and responsibility, and wanting to prove to themselves and others that they are “good mothers” (Duquaine-Watson, 2017). However, like many other postsecondary students, some single mothers pursue postsecondary education primarily to increase their chances of obtaining financial security by pursuing careers that require a college degree. Research has shown that achieving any level of postsecondary education can significantly improve single mothers’ economic situations (Cruse et al., 2019). Single mothers holding an associate degree are 1.8 times less likely to live in poverty than single mothers whose highest level of education is a high school diploma; single mothers with a bachelor’s degree are 3 times less likely to live in poverty than their counterparts who do not attend college. Those single mothers who obtain their associate degree can expect to earn roughly \$256,000 more over their lifetimes than what they would have earned with only a high school diploma.

In addition to the benefits for single mothers and their children, national and state economies benefit significantly from single mothers obtaining postsecondary degrees because they are less likely to require public assistance and more likely to contribute more to taxes than a single mother with only a high school diploma. The cohort of single mother students enrolled in college during the 2015-16 school year was expected to save the United States \$19.9 billion in public assistance spending. Within that cohort, those who earn a bachelor’s degree are

anticipated to contribute around \$6.6 billion more in taxes over their lifetimes than single mothers with only high school credentials (Cruse et al., 2019).

Barriers to College Education for Single Mothers

Despite the noted benefits of postsecondary education for single mothers, they are less likely than other women to obtain postsecondary credentials — only 30% of single mothers in the United States have earned a degree at the associate level or higher, compared to 54% of married mothers (Cruse et al., 2019). This low proportion of single mothers with postsecondary degrees is not for lack of trying; nearly one in five undergraduate women students are unmarried mothers with dependent children (Radwin et al., 2018). However, while college enrollments rates among single mothers continually increase, graduation rates remain low (Goldrick-Rab & Sorenson, 2010). Getting students through graduation has proven to be a struggle for community colleges at large, with only about 40% of students who enroll in these institutions obtaining a degree or certificate within six years (Bailey et al., 2015). This proportion is even smaller for single mother students, only 33% of whom graduate with a degree or certificate within that time (Gault et al., 2014a).

Much of the existing literature concerning single mother students has focused on identifying specific barriers single mothers face that impede their ability to persist in school. It is posited that institutions of higher education have been tailored to the needs of ‘traditional’ students whose “primary focus is the pursuit of a college degree,” making single mother students and their needs less visible (Manze et al., 2021). Many institutions do not collect the necessary demographic data from students to facilitate the identification of unique subpopulations of students such as single mothers, who would benefit from individualized policies and programs suited to their needs. Research from the Wellesley Centers for Women posits that this paucity of

data is “part of what makes it challenging to advocate for” single mothers (“Transforming Data into Action,” 2022).

This lacuna is evident in North Carolina’s Research Triangle-area community colleges. There are a significant number of single mothers in the Research Triangle area, with nearly 40% of Durham households with children and nearly 25% of Raleigh households with children helmed by a single parent (“Single-Parent Households with Children - Durham,” 2020; “Single-Parent Households with Children - Wake,” 2020). However, no data on single mother student populations could be found from either of the region’s two major community college systems, Durham Technical Community College and Raleigh’s Wake Technical Community College.

Methodology

The recommendations made in this paper are the product of a literature review conducted of both peer-reviewed and gray literature published between 1993 and 2022. The purpose of the review was to identify both a) barriers that single mother students are facing and b) proposed solutions combatting those barriers. This search utilized Google Scholar, Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), and the Duke University Libraries research database. The primary search terms employed were “single mothers community colleges,” “single mother students,” and “student parents community college.”

Barriers Faced by Single Mother Students

Findings from research on single mother students suggest that “predictors of success ... are not invariant personal characteristics that lie outside of the influence of intervention,” but

instead seem to be “behaviors well within the scope of influence of programs that can be created by institutions, non-profits, scholarship funders, and others.” (p. 128). A review of the literature identified four areas that can be targeted by state and local programs to improve the graduation rates among single mother students. Specifically, financial constraints, time constraints, childcare, and lacking a sense of community and belonging are common challenges for single mother students attending community colleges. Each of these barriers is discussed in-depth below.

Financial Constraints and Challenges Accessing Financial Aid

Many single mothers view postsecondary education as a pathway out of poverty, but it is often the very financial precarity they are trying to escape that challenges their scholarly pursuits (Goldrick-Rab & Sorenson, 2010; Pearson, 2019; Madden, 2019; Freeman; 2020). Economic instability has been identified as the primary challenge facing single mother students (Duquaine-Watson, 2006). Though many single mother students meet eligibility requirements for federal student aid and public assistance programs that could ostensibly combat this instability, researchers have identified that these programs are often disorganized to the point of inaccessibility, meaning single mothers face a variety of obstacles in obtaining and utilizing this aid (Duquaine-Watson, 2006; Wilson, 2008; Hayes-Nelson, 2009; Goldrick-Rab & Sorenson; 2010; Long, 2017).

Single mother students seeking to use the current Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) system to receive financial aid frequently find that the program’s financial-aid formula fails to adequately account for the specific financial needs of parenting students. FAFSA does not consider the cost childcare when calculating student need (Long, 2017), leaving single mother students to pay for it themselves. As a result, many single mothers take on paid jobs on

top of schoolwork and childcare duties. Popular aid sources such as the Pell Grant, a grant that all students who meet income qualifications are entitled to, appear accessible for single mother students but often penalize students who take on paid jobs. Students' earned income is automatically counted as money they can put entirely towards their education and thus subtracted from their calculated need (Goldrick-Rab & Sorenson, 2010), but many single mother students are financially independent and must put their income towards living and childcare expenses. Additionally, students receiving Pell Grants must maintain a certain GPA, typically around a C average, to remain eligible for the aid, which can prove difficult for single mother students juggling multiple priorities (Goldrick-Rab & Sorenson, 2010).

On average, students with children accrue higher levels of student debt than their childless peers — a student mothers' average undergraduate debt one year post graduation is nearly \$4,000 more than that of a female student with no children (Gault et al., 2014b). Single mother students often turn to jobs and loans as a path of least resistance during their undergraduate pursuits (Goldrick-Rab & Sorenson, 2010). Ultimately, these financial circumstances leave single mothers with less time to devote to schoolwork during their education and saddle them with debt, making it harder to overcome poverty even if they obtain a degree.

Time Constraints

Time constraints are another significant challenge facing single mother students (Duquaine-Watson, 2006; Wladis et al., 2018). A survey studying student parents in the City University of New York system (Wladis et al., 2018) found that the disparity in available time between students parenting young children and their childless peers directly connected to differences in their academic progress. Specifically, in the time that childless students could devote solely to their studies, parenting students had to split their time between childcare, taking

on more paid work to support their families, and schoolwork, which often led to higher dropout rates and longer times to graduation (Wladis et al., 2018). Other research has shown that out accommodating common out-of-class academic requirements, such as service-learning and group projects, is difficult for single mother students who have little flexibility in their schedules, but not completing these requirements negatively reflects in their academic record (Hayes-Nelson 2009).

Childcare

Access to affordable and high-quality childcare is another long-held and oft-repeated barrier identified in the literature pertaining to single mothers' postsecondary pursuits (Hagen & Lurie, 1993; Austin & McDermott, 2003; Duquaine-Watson, 2006; Hayes-Nelson, 2009; Miller & Gault, 2011; Long, 2017; Madden, 2018; Sallee & Cox, 2019; Freeman, 2020; Manze et al., 2021). Some single mothers can rely fully on family and friends for childcare, but the majority that need to find alternative options have trouble finding it: as of 2016, only 5% of need for on-campus childcare was being met (Eckerson et al., 2016). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many existing campus childcare centers saw reductions in operating hours or complete closures, exacerbating the problem (Manze et al., 2021).

Off-campus childcare is no easier to locate and finance. At some institutions, vouchers are available to assist pay for off-campus childcare, but they are few and often inaccessible owing to eligibility requirements, such as asking students to choose between working or attending school full-time rather than doing both part-time (Freeman, 2020).

Lack of a Sense of Community and Belonging

Researchers have identified that most campus environments are generally "care-blind," designed without regard for students who have caregiving responsibilities (Sallee & Cox, 2019).

This care-blindness results in obstacles such as a lack of dedicated student organizations for parenting students (Sallee & Cox, 2019), inadequate campus facilities for breastfeeding (Sallee & Cox, 2019) and support services such as career counseling and limited tutoring hours that are not conducive to students with jobs and caregiving responsibilities (Richardson & Harrington, 2022). These issues are non-existent for most child-free students, the population for whom institutional policies are usually targeted. However, as Goldrick-Rab & Sorenson (2010) identify, the composition of the national undergraduate population is perpetually becoming more diverse, making one-size-fits-all policies largely insufficient.

But there is also a danger in going too far in the other direction — singling out single mother students for their differences from ‘normal’ students (Duquaine-Watson, 2007). Some single mother students in Duquaine-Watson’s study (2007) noted having experiences of faculty members acknowledging their status as single mothers in class discussions, creating superficial interest in their experiences while also defining them in terms of their stigma. In most cases, students who had these experiences acknowledged that these faculty members were likely attempting to show their support and valuation of single mother students’ experiences, they also felt “kind of uncomfortable” (Duquaine-Watson, 2007, p. 234). Some of these students identified receiving similar treatment from classmates. One stated that her peers never asked about her academic pursuits, seemingly interested only in children and her experiences as a mom. Some single-mother students found this emphasis on their position as a mother to be reductive and prevented them from feeling like they belonged (Duquaine-Watson, 2007).

Lindsay & Gillum (2018) and Askelson et al. (2020) posit that part of what makes it so difficult for institutions to integrate single-mother students into campus life is that they are not collecting data that would identify the existence of student parents on their campuses.

Programs Set Up to Alleviate Barriers Facing Single Mother Students

Most of the academic literature studying single mother students has served to illuminate the barriers these women face throughout their educational journeys. However, recent research has pointed to a need to move beyond studying these educational paths and shift focus to understanding of the applicability of their findings for single mother students more broadly (Freeman, 2020). Below is a review of the existing literature that delves into evaluating programs and policies that have been put into place to help ameliorate single mothers' educational barriers.

Financial Support

Offering targeted financial support to single parent students, whether for childcare, tuition costs, or other living expenses, is a common recommendation to support single mother students (Carpenter et al., 2018; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018, Askelson et al., 2020). Some institutions have created scholarship programs specifically for single parent students which include financial support and additional layers of social and institutional support (Carpenter et al., 2018).

Alternatively, Texas' Austin Community College (ACC) launched a guaranteed income pilot program in 2021, which provided participants with \$500 a month for two years (Mader, 2022). In the pilot, the only stipulations were that participants enroll in nine credits per semester and attend monthly meetings with fellow student parents. Several other institutions have begun piloting similar programs, such as Santa Fe Community College in New Mexico (Pollard, 2022) and Magnolia Mother's Trust in Mississippi (Nyandoro, 2022).

Childcare

On-campus childcare centers have, predictably and overwhelmingly, been recommended as a crucial support for single mother students (Beeler, 2016; Freeman, 2020; Richardson & Harrington, 2022). This idea has been seemingly well-received by community colleges, with

many opening institutional childcare centers or partnering with third-party services to provide care for students' children. A review of both the Durham Tech and Wake Tech community colleges reveals that both institutions have established programs aimed at addressing parenting students' childcare needs. In January 2022, Durham Tech began offering free childcare assistance through a partnership with an existing local childcare center. Wake Tech, which currently does not offer on-campus childcare services, offers a Child Care Funding program providing up to \$650 per month for parents returning to school.

Community and Belonging

In Austin & McDermott's (2003) exploratory study of single mother students' college experiences, a campus office sponsored a weekly family dinner and parent workshop for students with young children, allowing them to learn about resources and meet fellow parenting students. Some of these student parents went on to organize a single-parent, low-income student subgroup, which advocated for more family-friendly programs.

To combat the paucity of institutional data on single mother students, the Wellesley Centers for Women recently launched the Data-to-Action Campaign for Pregnant and Parenting Student Success, which aims to identify the best strategies for implementing data tracking and reporting systems that identify pregnant and parenting students enrolled at postsecondary institutions as well as tracking their educational outcomes like retention and graduation ("Transforming Data into Action," 2022). The pilot will support four community colleges and one community college system through the process of collecting and utilizing data on student parents and partnership status, and these colleges will in turn develop new strategies for improving student parents' academic outcomes.

Discussion and Recommendations

Concentrating only on single-solution strategies undervalues the importance of addressing single mother students' numerous roles and identities holistically. As Wilson (2011) argues, single mothers “do not need another program initiative that pays for the occasional broken muffler or a new printer, rather, they need policy leaders to clean out the pathway to college,” (p. 74). Recent statewide and local efforts demonstrate North Carolina leaders’ increased prioritization of issues that affect single-mother students at Triangle-area community colleges. In August 2022, North Carolina Governor Roy Cooper allocated \$7.5 million of new federal funding to the statewide Finish Line Grant program, which provides grants to community college students facing unexpected emergencies, including loss of childcare, that might prevent them from continuing coursework (“Governor Cooper Directs Federal Funding,” 2022). N.C. Community College System’s interim president Bill Carver noted that Governor Cooper has provided “continued support for the community college system” throughout the entirety of his time in office (“Governor Cooper Directs Federal Funding,” 2022). In 2021, a pilot program called N.C. Reconnect, dedicated to recruiting adult learners, was established at five community colleges across the state, one of which was Durham Tech (Thomas, 2021). These efforts prove that the importance of supporting single mother students at community colleges is becoming more and more visible to local policymakers.

With North Carolina turning more attention to single mother students at community colleges, right now is a critical moment to ensure that the support systems put into place address single mothers’ needs comprehensively. Analysis of the programs implemented at peer institutions across the United States reveals strengths that Triangle-area institutions might benefit from replicating as well as weaknesses to be avoided.

Summary - Financial Constraints and Accessing Financial Aid

Across North Carolina, over 124,000 single mothers are living below the federal poverty line (Grubb, 2022), indicating a need to financially support single mother students. In their study of a scholarship program targeted at single-parent students, Carpenter et al. (2018) found that participants obtained more credits toward graduation, reported greater GPAs, and finished degrees at a higher rate than single parent students at the institution who were not in the program. However, as the researchers note, the scholarship participants also had access to extra campus support resources as part of the program. It is impossible to know, at least from this study, whether the financial support had any more effect on students than the other forms of aid, but these results indicate that financial support is beneficial as part of holistic support systems for single mother students. It is also important to note that participation in the program required students to attend school full-time, maintain a GPA of at least 2.5, and pass a minimum of 24 credit hours per year, requirements that would disqualify many single mother students.

While a full program evaluation has yet to be published, participants in ACC's guaranteed income pilot, which had few stipulations for participation, seemed to benefit from the stipend. After starting an advanced 14-week manufacturing program at ACC, one participant found himself struggling to balance rent, bills, and afterschool care for his son with earnings from the low-wage internship his program required he participate in. For this student parent, the added \$500 allowed the necessary flexibility to stay on track for graduation (Mader, 2022).

Summary - Childcare

Despite the popularity and benefits of campus childcare centers, evaluations of existing centers reveal limitations that necessitate additional programming and support. In Sallee & Cox's (2019) study, interviewees touted the relative affordable and high quality of their campus

childcare centers, but still came up against obstacles such as long waitlists for entry into the center — at one school, students needed to add their names to the waitlist two years in advance to have care by the start of their program — and restrictive hours, with childcare limited to hours that students were in class as opposed to providing all-day care, a strategy centers used to be able to accommodate more children. At both institutions, childcare centers were effectively the only targeted support for parenting students (Sallee & Cox, 2019). Madden (2018) found similar issues at the three community colleges in her study. While all three campuses had childcare centers, two out of the three had no available openings, and the third only accepted children over three years of age, excluding mothers with infant and toddler-aged children.

Through interviews with campus childcare center directors, Richardson (2022) found that the common issues of limited hours and long waitlists can largely be attributed to these centers being underfunded and understaffed. The majority of directors recognized Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) grants as a means of ameliorating these issues. CCAMPIS grants enable on-campus childcare centers to offset tuition costs and pay for childcare at external centers if need be (Richardson, 2022). Long (2017) once pointed out the insufficiency of the CCAMPIS program to adequately meet the funding needs of campus childcare centers across the United States, but in the last five years, the amount of funding allocated for CCAMPIS grants and the number of institutions supported by the grants have more than tripled (“Funding Status,” 2022). For 2023, Senate has proposed a \$30 million increase in CCAMPIS grant funding from FY2022 (“Senate Releases Proposed Funding,” 2022). However, Triangle-area community colleges have yet to be recipients of this funding; neither Durham Tech nor Wake Tech appeared on a list of CCAMPIS funding awardees in 2022, despite three other North Carolina community colleges receiving awards ranging from \$30,000 to almost \$373,000 (“Awards,” 2022).

Summary - Community and Belonging

Austin & McDermott's study (2003) found that social integration into a school's environment was a boon to single mother students' motivation to persist. Though the single parent organization had limited success in its advocacy efforts, members found that the group gave them a social network that helped foster their scholastic success. Only one of the seven research participants in the group dropped out of school before meeting their academic goal (Austin & McDermott, 2003). Durham Tech publicly advertises the existence of their Student Parent Success Network on the school's website, but it does not appear to be sponsored by a campus office specifically dedicated to student parents, meaning students are left to organize for themselves. Other than that, student parents at Durham Tech are directed to plug into existing campus services such as career counseling and academic tutoring, which are not specific to student parents. No information on a student parent organization at Wake Tech could be found. Lacking dedicated community-building spaces is especially detrimental for single mother students, whose ability to independently build community through attendance at campus activities such as clubs and sporting events is often prohibited by time constraints (Richardson & Harrington, 2022).

It is likely that, more than anything, the absence of sufficient community support at any given campus is due to a lack of data that demonstrates a need for supporting single mother students. Researchers evaluating the implementation of a program that provided expecting and parenting students at a rural Midwestern community college with concrete financial support (Askelson et al., 2020) found that students lacked knowledge of the program. This lack of awareness was attributed to the lack of institutional data on parenting students, making it difficult for program staff to identify and reach out to students in their target population. In this

case, staff were expected to do one-on-one outreach to identify expecting and parenting students, which proved to be time consuming and ultimately inefficient (Askelson et al., 2020).

Due to the lack of publicly available data on student parents, let alone single mothers, at Durham Tech and Wake Tech, it has been assumed for the purposes of this analysis that these institutions are not collecting data on students' parenting or partnership status. Without obtaining this information, single mothers continue to be marginalized on campuses, and the normative idea of a childless undergraduate persists. According to the Wellesley Centers for Women researchers behind the Data-to-Action campaign, their primary objective is to help institutions effectively implement data collection processes, instilling "a mindset that data are not only collected for compliance but are seen as a valuable resource" for improving supports for student parents ("Transforming Data into Action," 2022).

Conclusions

The groundswell of changemaking effort on the part of North Carolina institutions is heartening. Sallee & Cox (2019), who conducted an evaluation of on-campus childcare centers across two U.S. community colleges, concluded that "the assumption that a single unit targeted at student-parents ... can address the needs of student-parents discounts the importance of attending holistically to students' multiple roles and identities," (p. 642). This is a particularly salient reminder during this moment of avid interest in supporting single mother students — while it might feel necessary to fund and execute initiatives as quickly as possible, it is important to remember that thoughtful, holistic approaches will have a more sustainable impact.

Recommendations

Below are several recommendations that can be enacted as part of a program to improve and increase holistic support for single-mother students at Triangle-area community colleges, based on key findings from the literature review conducted above.

1. *Improve on-campus childcare.* Currently, Durham Tech's campus childcare center is only available to children over the age of three and only allows part time attendance. Wake Tech does not have on campus childcare, and according to their website, childcare assistance funding is only provided to 8-12 students per year. Both institutions would benefit from applying for CCAMPIS grant funding to expand their childcare offerings. Additionally, Durham Tech could follow peer institutions by employing early education majors to staff the childcare center (Madden, 2018), ameliorating staffing issues.
2. *Establish a guaranteed income pilot for single mother students.* Single mother students would benefit from a guaranteed stipend to ease their financial burden. Restrictive stipulations may prevent those most in need from getting aid, so these programs must have low barriers to entry. Governor Cooper's office has set a precedent for this practice. In his office's recommended practices for local partners administering emergency grant funding, institutions are advised not to require "unnecessary" application stipulations due to the urgency of the funding (North Carolina Office of Strategic Partnerships, 2022).
3. *Hire single mother navigators.* Community colleges would benefit from hiring student support staff trained specifically in the nuanced needs of single mother students. These professionals are known as single mother navigators. These navigators could guide instructors and administrators in institutionalizing support for single mother students. Initiatives could include creating classroom policies and/or syllabi that acknowledge the

specific needs of single mother students and opening child-friendly spaces for single mothers to complete assignments and group work outside of childcare hours.

4. *Pilot a data collection program.* Triangle-area institutions, or even the state, should pilot a study aimed at determining the best methods for adopting data tracking and reporting systems that identify parents of college students and follow their academic performance, such as grades, retention, and graduation. To collect these data could be as simple as obtaining a figure of how many students are parenting children, but could also get more granular, such as identifying student parents' marital status, statistics that would allow for the identification of a specific single mother student population.

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