ADULT WOMEN IN HIGHER EDUCATION:
THE PERCEIVED INFLUENCE OF FAMILIES

A Dissertation in
Adult Education

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the influence of both the family of origin and the current family on the adult female undergraduate student’s educational experience. The theoretical frameworks that informed this study are a combination of social constructionism and the life course theory. The focus of the study was the participant’s perceptions of how this influence was experienced in regard to bachelor degree pursuit and attainment. Of special interest was the examination of why these adult learners did not attend college as traditionally-aged students, what made them decide to attend currently, and how their attendance has been influenced by their family members. Data primarily consisted of transcripts of in-depth one-on-one interviews with 13 participants who are currently attending, or who recently graduated from college, within the past year, were female and at least 25 years old, and who have a current family in addition to their family of origin. Data were analyzed using manual thematic analysis.

The study findings are grouped into four categories. First, issues associated with the family of origin negatively impacted college attendance for the vast majority of the participants. Second, despite a general lack of support for higher educational attainment from their families, the majority of the participants dreamed of going to college. Third, the current family significantly influenced the women’s educational experiences primarily due to the integration of their daily lives with their current family members. Last, the institution was found to in-directly influence the women’s educational experiences as it related to her family because the structure of the programming made attendance possible. The study ends with a discussion of the findings, implications for institutions who work with this student population, limitations of the study, ideas for future research, and some final reflections.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2002b), adult learners, nontraditional students in some literature, are defined as individuals who are aged twenty-five years and above, or have a variety of life situations, which set them apart from the traditionally-aged student. This population now comprises 44% of the undergraduate student population in the United States (Kazis, 2007). Despite recent increases (KewalRamani, Gilbertson, Fox, & Provasnik, 2007), more people with postsecondary education are needed for the workforce (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). With the current emphasis placed on increasing the number of college educated adults (Lederman, 2008), there is a need to better understand who these learners are, why they have come, and what can help them persist to graduation (Hadfield, 2003; Kazis, 2007; McGivney, 2004; Sandler, 2000).

Although adult learners have been characterized as tending to be financially independent, parents of dependents, full-time workers and part-time students, researchers agree that there is not a typical adult learner (Kasworm, 2003; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007; NCES, 2002b). Studies regarding participation of adult learners, sometimes referred to as reentry students, report that family, community, institutional and financial support are all beneficial in helping adult learners to reach their educational goals (Bauer and Mott, 1990; Coker, 2003; Leavitt, 1989; Padula, 1994). Persistence of adult learners has been found to be a complex issue due to the many aspects of adult learners’ lives and, difficult to quantify because of the variability between individuals (Hensley & Kinser, 2001; Malin, Bray, Dougherty, & Skinner, 1980; McGivney, 2004; Sandler, 2000). Many findings are contradictory in that barriers to successful degree attainment can also become motivating factors to achieve. Gender differences
have been shown to be significant with regard to the decision to attend college and support to persist. Despite these differences, the number of females receiving all levels of degrees has increased at higher rates than that of men (NCES, 2008b).

When an adult female undergraduate student begins work towards a bachelor’s degree, there is typically a story, or reason, why she did not pursue or complete higher education studies as a traditionally-aged student. These stories will likely be influenced by the historical time period in which she was raised, family values and expectations, individual perspectives, and cultural expectations which will likely be impacted by race, class, gender, sexuality, and ethnic background (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003; Keen & Valley-Fox, 1989; Leeder, 2004). Gender role socialization begins in infancy, permeates individual’s lives, and is significantly impacted by family members (Leeder, 2004). Expectations based on roles and responsibilities for males and females are modeled, or normalized, by family, community members, and institutions in day-to-day living situations. Although these expectations are historically and contextually situated, changes to these norms tend to occur slowly.

Because women’s lives are so intricately woven into the fabric of their families, big decisions such as those related to career options or college attendance are likely influenced by family members. In fact, research finds that the foundational aspects of being, such as “who we are and what we know is very much a result of the relationships in which we participate” (Bougher, Davis, & Mims, 1998). It follows that an individual’s worldview is likely to be significantly influenced by those individuals who they have the most day-to-day interactions with, namely the family. With the current emphasis on increasing the number of college-educated adults, there is the need to understand how women are making the decision to return to
school from the perspective of the influence of their families and the role the family plays in persistence.

**Defining Family**

Although the term “family” is widely used and integrally bound to our everyday lives, it is surprisingly difficult to define. Historically, the term family included people who lived together and were married, blood relatives, or adopted. The biological purpose of the family was reproduction or rearing children (Aulette, 2002; Leeder, 2004). The fields of sociology and anthropology broadened the description to include social groupings who shared a residence and economic cooperation but were still limited to adults of both sexes (Leeder, 2004). Current definitions tend to be more inclusive and allow for non-kin family members that many non-European families use to describe family membership (Aulette, 2002).

Changes in the way people define family have likely occurred as a result of societal changes in recent history including increasing divorce and remarriage rates and increasing numbers of single parent households (Aulette, 2002). Whiston and Keller (2004) define family of origin as “the family in which one spent his or her formative years or the family in which one was raised” (p. 295). Skolnick and Skolnick (2003) address the difficulty of defining family with the following words, “to say that the family is the same everywhere is in some sense true. Yet families vary in organization, membership, life cycles, emotional environments, ideologies, social and kinship networks, and economic and other functions” (p. 5). What is lacking in these definitions is the relational aspect that being part of a family provides.

A definition that encompasses not only the structural but the emotional aspects of family membership comes from Carter and McGoldrick (1999), “families comprise people who have a shared history and a shared future. They encompass the entire emotional system of at least three,
and frequently now four or even five, generations held together by blood, legal, and /or historical ties” (p. 1). This definition will be used as the definition of family for the current study because it recognizes the diversity of possible family structures as well as the importance of the emotional system within the family. For the purposes of this study, several definitions of family will be required. There is the idea of the family as an entity that is made up of membership where individuals have emotional ties and connections. Family of origin will include the people the participants were raised with. Current family will encompass either a spouse/partner, children, or both. Individuals who do not have a current family, other than their family of origin, will not be included in the study.

**Family Influence**

The study of the influence of the family on an individual is a broad topic. As a woman goes through her life she is likely to be impacted by the people, events, and situations in her life and her perceptions of them. The meaning we make of these experiences will often impact how we think, feel, and respond to new stimuli. A woman’s position within her family and the lessons she learns from her family, become part of how information is processed, meaning is made and knowledge is constructed (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003). This impact will likely be dependent upon the life course position of her family and her position within her family. Expectations, role responsibilities and resource allocation, which could impact college enrollment, may be time sensitive and will likely change based on individual and family need. This is consistent with the idea that “family experiences, perhaps more than any other set of experiences, influence the attitudes, perceptions, and values of an individual” (Canfield, Hovestadt, & Fenell, 1992, p. 55). These attitudes, perceptions, and values may play a pivotal role in the decision to attend as well as impact the perceived level of
support for degree attainment. Although individuals may be aware of these perceived influences from their families; more often, these influences tend to be invisible to them.

Family influence seems to become even more compelling when considering some of the research on adult learner persistence. Persistence is used to describe students who remain in school for consecutive semesters and is used by NCES (2009) as a way to measure retention rates. Adult women are more likely to drop out of school for nonacademic reasons than men (Home, 1997). Family and the institution are considered greedy entities because neither one of them want to have to sacrifice the time or talent of the adult female student (Home, 1997). As a result, nontraditional students often interrupt their studies for a variety of reasons such as to, “have a baby, change jobs, close on a house, care for an ailing or dying parent, get a divorce, get married, have bypass surgery, start a business, or simply catch their breath” (Hadfield, 2003, p. 19). It is these day-to-day influences, which appear to significantly impact the adult female student population. Although it is widely believed that families have a large degree of influence on academic achievement, exactly what characteristics are most influential is not well established (Morales & Trotman, 2004).

**Gender Role Transmission**

Researchers have found that families are significant transmitters of gender expectations, that these expectations are impacted by culture, and that these expectations will influence decision-making (Gold, Rotter, & Evans, 2002; Vondracek, Lerner, & Schulenberg, 1986; Walsh, 1993). Gendered expectations influence behaviors and one way they are manifested is in role responsibilities. Role responsibilities are often quite different for adult learners compared to traditionally-aged students and tend to be internalized, gendered, and normalized. Adult women often have a variety of life roles including but not limited to spouse/partner, mother, daughter,
worker, and in the current study, student. Role responsibilities, such as those associated with
wife and mother, tend to be sanctioned by the family and community (Jackman, 1999). Other
roles, such as worker or student may or may not have this same level of endorsement. Family
and home life have a significant impact on how people construct gendered identities and develop
beliefs about the sexual division of labor, thus influencing individual perceptions of such things
as role expectations and norms (MacMillan & Copher, 2005). The variety of time demands
women face are often cited in regards to the impact on the family and the woman herself when
adding the role of student to her life. This impact may be felt from both a woman’s current
family and her family of origin.

Much of the transmission of these responsibilities may come from the family of origin. Canfield, Hovestadt, and Fenell (1992), write that “an individual acquires from early family
experiences a set of explicit and implicit expectations, values, attitudes, and beliefs which serve
as points of reference for the evaluation of many subsequent interpersonal experiences” (p. 55).
Expectations about role responsibilities impact individuals, particularly adult women, in many
aspects of their lives, and levels of support for school attendance and persistence are likely by-
products of these expectations. These expectations become embodied in the women’s lived
experience often as stress or strain as was documented by Wiebe and Harvey (1997) in their
description of mothers as students:

As students entered university, the addition of a student role to the demands of other
areas of life caused the greatest unease. Strains were related to decreased time for family
and friends, decreased organization of home and personal activities, demands of
household tasks, and issues related to child care. Most strain, however, occurred in
coping with the demands of the university itself. (p. 157)
As the previous quote expresses, the running of the household and each family member will likely be affected by the adult woman’s return to school. The value placed on degree attainment is likely to impact perceived levels of support to persist to degree attainment.

**Family Support to Persist**

Support and perceived support are important because of the primary position so many woman hold in their families for taking care of the home and children. In considering how integral women typically are to their families, it would seem to follow that the perceived influence of the family of origin and current family would have a significant impact on the female adult undergraduate student’s original decision to seek out higher education as well as her ability to persist towards degree attainment. Support from family members, as a variable impacting persistence for adult female undergraduate students, is a construct, which has been researched in a number of studies. In an attempt to quantify support, it has been divided into two spheres, emotional and instrumental. Emotional support is defined as acceptance, encouragement, and praise, which encompasses being available on a relational level meaning being willing to listen, talk, care, support, and empathize while instrumental support is typically considered to be hands-on help with such things as finances, childcare, or household responsibilities (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002). Adult learners have been found to benefit from both emotional and instrumental support (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Pearson & Bieschke, 2001; Suitor, 1988). Support has also been studied from a holistic perspective looking at who it comes from, what is offered, and how available it is perceived to be (Home, 1997). This author found that 57% of respondents reported receiving high support from family and friends and women who felt more supported by family and friends experienced less stress than those who did not.
The high level of importance placed on family support is highlighted in the following quote, “the need for support, unambiguous approval, and practical assistance was voiced over and over” (Redding & Dowling, 1992, p. 234). While these types of support have been shown to impact adult undergraduate women, they do not address the perceived influence of the family of origin or the current family. For example, how does support or lack of support impact adult female undergraduate students on a day-to-day basis? Interestingly, much housework is still broken down along gender lines with women taking more responsibility for the daily chores associated with meal preparation and childcare and men for outside work and household repairs (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 2007; U.S. Department of Labor Statistics, 2008). So how does this need to feel supported impact perceived support? How do early family expectations and norms impact current functioning? How do the adult female undergraduate students or recent graduates experience the influence of her family (current or family of origin) in the initial decision-making process and as she works through her program of study?

**Problem Statement**

Despite broad societal changes in family structures and the increasing number of women who now work outside the home, as well as the increasing need for higher education, there is a question as to whether adult women feel that they are supported by their families in their initial decision to attend college and their ability to persist towards bachelor’s degree attainment. Despite increasing numbers of women obtaining degrees, women are more likely than men or traditionally-aged students to interrupt their studies due to family responsibilities (Gandara, 1982; Jacobs & King, 2002; Robertson, 1991; Rodriguez, 1996). In fact, full-time adult female students complete degree requirements at an average rate of 20% while the part-time rate of this population is between 7%-9% (Jacobs & King, 2002). This lack of degree completion is actually
a complex issue for all adult learners (Hensley & Kinser, 2001; Malin, Bray, Dougherty, & Skinner, 1980; McGivney, 2004; Sandler, 2000).

Adult learners bring with them a unique set of strengths and barriers with regard to successful undergraduate degree attainment. Also, adult learners are less likely than traditionally-aged students to persist to degree attainment (Horn & Carroll, 1997). Although there is limited research examining the differences between adult male and adult female undergraduate degree completion rates, what is available suggests that family influence has a significantly stronger impact on female completion patterns than male completion patterns (Home, 1997; Kasworm, 2003). In order to more adequately serve the adult female undergraduate student population, it is important to understand how the family may influence the adult female undergraduate student. The idea of influence is very broad and may incorporate aspects related to expectations, family and cultural norms, as well as personal beliefs and motivation. Each of these aspects is likely to be impacted by both family of origin and current family members and experiences.

**Purpose of Research**

The purpose of this research study is to explore the perceived influence of the family of origin as well as the current family on adult female undergraduate students as it relates to her educational experiences.

**Research Questions**

1. Do adult women perceive family members as having a significant influence on their higher educational experience?

2. Does the perception of this influence significantly impact participation and/or persistence?
Theoretical Framework

The current study uses the foundations of social constructionism as a basis and incorporates the life course perspective as the framework for the project and to examine the findings. The study of the perception of the influence of family members on an adult female undergraduate student or recent graduate assumes that both past and present family history will significantly impact current life. However, there are many aspects of an individual’s life that will influence them. It is important to consider what theories have been used to examine the perceived influence of families. Many researchers, from a variety of disciplines, have described the family as being a system, such as family systems theory (Sharf, 1996) and the family life cycle (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999). These theories consider families as systems, this means the unit of analysis is the whole family and makes each individual family member part of an interactive process rather than individual components. Family systems theorists believe the whole is more important to examine than the sum of each individual part (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2000). In other words, although each family member is an individual, each individual impacts the system and should not be considered in isolation because changes in any part of the system will impact the entire system. The idea of systems theory comes from the biological term homeostasis, which is used to describe the need for an organism to maintain a balance. According to the theory of homeostasis, movement occurs as a result of imbalance and the system is encouraged to return to a state of constancy. The idea is that all systems are scientifically based, can be measured, and have this innate tendency to return to a state of normalcy, even families (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2000).

Many people within the social sciences field have questioned these biological assumptions which originated from the physical sciences world because of being too rigid. For
example, a postmodern view of families emphasizes the freewill of each of the individual family members and views the systems theory as too mechanical and positivist. Feminist perspectives also question these assumptions, not because of the positivist constructs, but rather because of the lack of recognition of how influential social, historical, economic and political contexts are to both individuals and families (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2000). An additional limitation of family systems theory for the current study is that family members may not be examined individually; instead, each person is part of the system so that when one person makes a significant life change, such as returning to school as an adult learner, systems theory mandates that the unit of measure be the entire family. That will not work with the current study since this study will be limited to how the perceived influence of the family impacts the individual woman. So, while it is important to look at the family as a whole system, each individual needs to be considered from a unique perspective. Further, it is important to examine family functioning in regards to societal expectations because families transmit societal norms and this transmission of expectations is likely to result in the perceived influence of the study participants.

Individuals are socialized by society and their family from the very moment they enter the world. This socialization, or acculturation, is often so embedded that there is no recognition of the knowledge or norms that are being transmitted. This phenomenon is explained by social constructionism which explains that knowledge acquisition is a product of the environment and that the self and others have an interactive effect (Puig, Koro-Ljungberg, & Echevarria-Doan, 2008). Social constructionists hold that meaning making and knowledge are created at the individual level, but influenced by society, so each individual’s perception of reality will be different (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Perceptions are based on past and present experiences which then also shape future experiences (Tennant, 2000). It is the examination of the unique
differences in perception of adult women undergraduate students, or recent graduates, in regards to family influence that are important to this research study.

This perspective is based on the belief that meaning is created through social interaction and this social interaction will be profoundly influenced by context (Burr, 1995). Further, all knowledge is historically and culturally relative and is based on the particular social and economic arrangements which are prominent during that time period (Burr, 1995). That said, the family is integral to society and the socialization process (Oliveri & Reiss, 1981). So many aspects of the family experience such as structure, dynamics, and situatedness in regard to socioeconomic status (SES) and race, are all likely to impact the individual in unique ways. For it is in the day-to-day interactions that individuals use to build knowledge and make meaning and from these, thoughts, actions, and behaviors will follow (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 1995).

“Social constructionist inquiry is principally concerned with explicating the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live” (Gergen, 2003, p. 15). Although, social constructionism is used as my first theoretical framework because it explains the importance of context, and it includes the family from the contextual perspective, it does not account for the influence the family is likely to have on processes such as decision-making that occur over a period of time. Nor does social constructionism focus on the prominence of the family in regard to close interpersonal relationships. For this reason, a second theoretical construct, the life course perspective, is necessary to provide a more complete explanation of the importance of the level of influence family members are likely to have on study participants. The idea of linked lives, which is part of the life course perspective theory, provides a framework which recognizes that lives are
interdependent, especially in regard to the family, they are impacted by socio-historical influences, and they are expressed through networks of shared relationships (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003).

Life course perspective is a theoretical orientation that uses age, historical time frames, and developmental trajectories to gain insight into individual’s lives (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003). Specifically, this theory is used to study life paths across multiple stages from a contextual perspective, which is impacted by macro and micro level constructs. Macro level constructs are cultural, historical, and may be institutional whereas micro level constructs are those over which the individual has more direct control through their own decision-making (Aulette, 2002). In other words, the life course theory looks at the individual’s unique perspective recognizing that it will be influenced by everything from characteristics within the individual to time period in history. This theory adds meaning to the current study because it is founded on the belief that no one period of life can be fully understood in isolation; rather, past experiences and future aspirations are integrally bound to people’s perceptions and behaviors.

Specifically, this theory is relevant to the current study because the perceived influence of the family on the adult female undergraduate student is likely to be influenced by macro issues related to gender, culture, and the time period in which they were raised and by micro issues such as each individual’s unique perspective based on more personal characteristics and how and where they are situated within their family (Aulette, 2002). Using the intersection of social pathways, which include intersections of education, work, family and residence, developmental trajectories, which are sequences of roles and experiences, and social change, which are impacted by time and events in society, this theory has been used to study aggregate change based on cohort and time period as well as individual change based on unique life experience
(Elder et al., 2003). This theory also provides a rationale to examine the decision-making process retrospectively because of looking at the life trajectory as a continuum. The life course theory provides a framework from which to examine how family influence may have impacted these individuals in the areas related to college attendance and persistence.

As a theory, the life course perspective will allow for the examination of a combination of socio-historical, age, and developmental aspects of female adult undergraduate students within the context of both the family of origin and the current family. This theory recognizes that personal growth and development occur beyond the age of 18, people make choices based on opportunities and constraints imposed by society and individual families, this influence occurs over time, the timing of events impacts level of influence, and lives are linked both currently and generationally. Taken together, these constructs, which make up life course theory, provide a framework for understanding the meaning people have created through their lived experiences. Life decisions associated with returning to school and support to persist are likely to be impacted in a variety of ways. This theory will help to not only ground the study but will provide guidance in formulating interview questions as well as offer ideas for how to categorize the findings.

**Methodology**

This research study is designed to increase understanding into how the influence of the family is perceived by adult female undergraduate students or recent graduates. The participants in this study have two families, their family of origin and their current family. This study examined the perceived influence of any of these family members who the participant felt was relevant and would like to include. In order to gain an in-depth understanding of the perceived influence of family members, a qualitative methodology was employed using a basic interpretive
research design. This research framework complements the research questions by providing a format of study designed to provide insight and understanding into the perceptions of the influence of the family. A basic interpretive approach has been chosen because it is important to understand both the decision to attend and ability to persist as a process that occurs over time and the desired information is the perspectives and worldviews of the study participants. It was these findings which provided insight and understanding about the perceived influence of family members to the researcher. Participant selection is a crucial aspect of qualitative studies. Because of this, purposeful sampling based on selection criteria has been found to be an effective means of studying the phenomenon. The current study used purposeful sampling, defined as using a small number of cases which provide rich, detailed information in order to gain an understanding about the meaning people have made from their experience (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002).

In order to be included in the study, participants needed to be female, at least 25 years of age, currently pursuing their first undergraduate degree, or graduated within the last year with their first undergraduate degree. They must also have a current family. Questions I will use to determine final eligibility will include: if they are currently in an intimate relationship with a spouse or partner and/or if they have a child or children, or others whom they would consider to be family and are dependent on them in some way. In addition to purposeful sampling, snowball sampling will be employed. Snowball sampling involves asking participants for recommendations about whom they think would also be good for the study (Patton, 2002). This method was used to increase the potential participant pool and is based on the theory that people who share similar likes and activities are likely to know each other. With qualitative research, there is not a rule of thumb for sample size. Rather the researcher is encouraged to determine the
sample size based on the needs of the research project (Patton, 2002). For the current study, the researcher had a pool of 13 participants, conducted interviews that lasted between one to two hours, and did follow-ups electronically and by phone for clarification and verification of the interview transcripts.

In qualitative research, the researcher is a key element to the depth of information provided. It is important to the credibility of the research to use more than one method of data collection, also known as triangulation. For the current study, the researcher did interviews, kept a reflective research journal and took field notes following each interview. In addition, each interview was digitally-recorded and transcribed for the purpose of data analysis. The interviews were semi-structured using open-ended questions. This allowed the researcher to “build upon and explore their participants’ responses to those questions” (Seidman, 2006, p. 15). It was important for the participants to be given the freedom to express themselves without major constraints.

The ultimate quality of the qualitative analysis is going to come down to the “skills, training, insights, and capabilities of the inquirer” (Patton, 2002, p. 433). In qualitative research, the researcher is the both the greatest strength and the greatest weakness in the analysis and reporting of qualitative data. Constructs from the life course theory were used as a guide to gain insight into the perceptions and meanings the individual participants experienced in regards to college attendance and persistence. Using this broad framework, the researcher used content analysis, which means to reduce the data in ways that core meanings and consistencies can be identified (Patton, 2002) of the transcripts, the reflective journal, and the field notes. Analytic coding was also used as defined by Richards and Morse (2007) which is building on differences established through topic coding in order to develop categories.
It is imperative that qualitative researchers document and address verification of the study findings. A major paradigm of qualitative researchers is that all findings are contextually based. Thus truth is considered to be relativistic and is assumed to change over time (Schwandt, 2000). Therefore, providing transparency to the study and its findings will add credibility to the overall product. Recognizing the importance, planning for it, and incorporating aspects of the verification process throughout the research project should yield a stronger finished product. Consequently, issues associated with confirmability, credibility, authenticity, and dependability were incorporated into the study design. This research project used the idea of triangulation by reviewing and synthesizing transcripts of interview data, fieldnotes, and a reflective journal of the entire research process. By including each of these throughout the research process, it should assist with research transparency and validity. It is hoped that by intending to provide clear rationale with established procedures, the final product will be considered verifiable. It is also important to keep in mind that the whole purpose is to increase understanding of the influence family may have on the adult female student’s educational experiences.

**Significance**

Broad societal changes have occurred in the United States which has significantly impacted the family. Increases in the number of women who work outside the home combined with the increasing numbers of single parent households headed by women have likely impacted many women in their day-to-day lives (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999). Because women tend to be centrally located within their families due to their traditional roles as caretakers and nurtures in society, these changes in women’s lives have probably impacted their families as well. Research is needed to more clearly understand how these changes impact the perceived influence of the family from the perspective of the adult female undergraduate student or recent graduate. This
research is designed to examine how women view the support of their families in relation to their desire to obtain a bachelor’s degree. Although research tells us that higher education is becoming increasingly more important, do family members believe it is important for the adult women in their own families to return to school? The beliefs the family members have about the adult learner pursuing a college degree, will likely impact the perception of support experienced by the woman. Pursuing degree attainment takes time, money and resources, all of which could potentially be spent on other areas of family life; therefore, the impact of this decision and how the adult female undergraduate student perceives her families’ response to this goal will be foundational. This study will look at how these influences have impacted her life and how they are manifested in day-to-day living.

The profound influence that families have on an individual’s life is an area rich with anecdotal life stories, but is difficult to quantify analytically. This is significant for a number of reasons. First, it will be important to add to the literature on how family of origin and current family may impact female adult decision-making. Although, there has been research into family influence on career decision-making, this research does not specifically address the decision to attend an institution of higher education. In addition, once an adult female student has begun work towards her bachelor’s degree, it is important to learn about variables which may impact how she perceives the families’ level of support. As stated earlier, although it is widely believed that families have a large degree of influence on academic achievement, exactly what those influences may be has not been well established (Morales & Trotman, 2004). In fact, there is a paucity of research examining family influence from the perspective of the adult female undergraduate student. A goal of this research is to gain insight into this influence.
Another area of significance is the examination of family expectations. According to the life course perspective these expectations occur through the intersection of a variety of variables. The life course perspective provides a framework for examining how family members, time in history, and age all intersect with a focus on perceived support for adult female undergraduate students to initially pursue and then to persist towards degree completion. The goal of this study is to provide an in-depth examination of the perceptions of family influence. Variables to be considered will include emotional and instrumental support, but will also encompass socio-cultural and historical time frames, place in the family, needs of the family, and how women were impacted by these variables in regard to pursuing higher education. This will extend life course research, specifically as it relates to the idea of linked lives because of examining the perceived influences of both the family of origin and current family members.

It was noted that much of the research done in the United States using life course theory has been based on quantitative studies (Giele & Elder, Jr., 1998). This qualitative study will extend the life course theory by providing the framework to gain greater insight into the lived experience of the study participants. This information may be useful for administrators of higher education institutions who plan programs and provide support programming to adult women. This information could also assist individuals such as academic advisors and counselors who work with this student population to increase sensitivity to the importance of this issue and how profoundly it may impact the female adult learners’ ability to successfully achieve degree attainment. Further, this information could be used by instructors who work with adult women because learning experiences can be created to enhance women’s insight into the ways they may be influenced by their families and therefore be more aware of how this may be impacting them in their day-to-day lives.
This study is also designed to further inform the field of adult education about how significant the influence of family members may be. Women in particular tend to hold central roles within their families for nurturing, care giving, and household maintenance (Mohney & Anderson, 1988; Shaw & Lee, 2009). In fact, these role responsibilities cause women to interrupt their programs of study more frequently than either men or traditionally-aged college students (Gandara, 1982; Jacobs & King, 2002; Robertson, 1991; Rodriguez, 1996). Institutions interested in assisting these female adult learners persist to degree attainment in higher numbers need to consider ways they can offer programs and support services designed to meet the needs of this unique student population.

In addition, since many adult female undergraduate students work and have household responsibilities, institutions interested in serving these students are likely to benefit by offering flexibility in admissions policies, course scheduling, and student administrative policies designed to accommodate their needs. Offering administrative office hours and services, such as advising and counseling while classes are being offered could be helpful.

Additionally, it is important to have institutional personnel such as instructors, advisors, and counselors who are knowledgeable about working with this student population. Instructors are in a unique position because for adult students, their time in the classroom makes up the majority of time that is spent on campus. Instructors who are interested in assisting adult learners to reach their educational goals tend to be very much appreciated by the adult learners. Designing a syllabus which identifies due dates and project expectations allows the adult learner to plan their time accordingly. Instructors of these students can offer support by incorporating readings and discussion that are inclusive in nature specifically in regard to age and life stage. Another way that instructors can make a big difference is by being available to meet either prior...
to or following class. Recognizing the level of importance women place on the influence of their families will be beneficial in providing support, guidance, and suggestions to both advisors and counselors. Offering adult learners assistance through the admissions process and providing support during that first transitional year, by recognizing and incorporating the importance of family support could be a way to help to increase the retention rates of this student population and assist them to graduate with less interruptions as they progress towards degree attainment.

Assumptions of the Study

The following assumptions are embedded in this research:

1. No period of life can be fully understood in isolation; rather, peoples’ past experiences impact current decisions and future aspirations.

2. There are age-graded socially defined roles and events that people move through over the course of their lives which are influenced by the historical time period and place they occur. These norms impact the perceived influence felt by the study participants.

3. Human development and aging are life-long processes so that adults experience fundamental biological, psychological, and social changes throughout their life span. Adult female students will be able to identify how these changes impacted their educational trajectory.

4. Individuals act as their own agents by constructing their life course through choices and actions which are impacted by opportunities and constraints based on history and social circumstance. Adult female students will identify how these impacts affected them retrospectively as well as currently.

5. Lives are lived interdependently and large social change is felt by individuals through a network of shared relationships on a day-to-day basis.

Limitations of the Study
Some of the potential limitations of this study include:

1. This study will be dependent upon voluntary participation of adult female undergraduate students. There may be bias in the results due to the self-selection process and voluntary nature of the participants.

2. This study will be limited to the adult learners’ perspective of the perceived influence of family members, family members will not be interviewed.

3. Participants may be negatively influenced by family members in ways they are not comfortable sharing with the researcher. This influence may or may not impact their academic endeavors.

4. The life course perspective may be too reliant on the normalization of social role sequences when considering individuals who do not follow a typical life role trajectory.

**Definitions of Terms**

Adult Learners - students 25 years old and over, or have characteristics such as being financially independent or a parent which set them apart from traditionally-aged students (NCES, 2002b).

Current Family – having a spouse or partner and/or dependent children, or another individual, for whom they are financially and/or emotionally responsible.

Emotional support - acceptance, encouragement, and praise, which includes being available on a relational level meaning being willing to listen, talk, care, support, and empathize (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002).

Family – is comprised of people who have a shared history and a shared future. It encompasses the entire emotional system of at least three, and frequently now four or even five, generations held together by blood, legal, and/or historical ties (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999).
Family of origin - the family in which one spent his or her formative years or the family in which one was raised (Whiston and Keller, 2004, p. 295).

Homeostasis - movement occurs as a result of imbalance and the system is encouraged to return to a state of constancy or balance (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2000).

Institutional Environment – the way life is shaped based on structural constraints of the institutions that are part of the individual’s life course including educational and work organizations.

Instrumental support - typically considered to be hands-on help with such things as finances, child care, or household responsibilities (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002).

Life Course Perspective – a theoretical orientation that uses age, historical time frames, and developmental trajectories to gain insight into the phenomenon being studied (Elder et al., 2003).

Linked Lives – lives are lived interdependently and large social change is most often felt by individuals through a network of shared relationships (Elder et al., 2003).

Macro level constructs – Focuses on social structures including ideologies, technologies, and social institutions like the government, economy, and social class (Aulette, 2002). These are cultural, historical, and may be institutional issues which impact individuals and for the most part are out of their control.

Micro level constructs – Examine society in its smallest expression, this means an individual’s family life and their daily face-to-face interactions (Aulette, 2002). It is these issues which individuals tend to have more direct control over through their own decision-making.

Persistence – Students who continue to return to school in consecutive semesters until degree completion. This is the term used by NCES to measure retention rates (2009).
Social Pathways – connecting changes in social life with the biographical and historical time period variables which are unique to each to individual including trajectories of education, work, family, and residences that are followed by individuals and groups through society (Elder et al., 2003).

Trajectories – an individual’s life path made up of the sequences of their roles and behaviors (Elder et al., 2003).

In summary, the current research study will use the constructs of social constructionism and the life course perspective to examine the perceived influence of both the family of origin and the current family on the adult female undergraduate student’s higher educational experience. Points of reference to examine this phenomenon will include the initial decision to attend school and the support for her to persist. The second chapter will review several important components of this subject including a more in-depth explanation of the theoretical constructs being used. Additionally, the areas of adult development, family, and women in higher education will be explored in more detail. This will be followed by an explanation of the methodology. Next are brief biographical sketches of each participant. Chapter five provides an in-depth look at the study findings. Chapter six includes discussion, limitations, ideas for future research, and some final remarks. References are included as well as appendix A, which is possible interview questions, and appendix B, which is the list of demographic variables along with the interview format.
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

As a person goes through life he or she is impacted by events, people, and situations. The meanings we make from these experiences will often influence how we think about, feel, and respond to new stimuli. As people contemplate and then act on decisions these influences become part of their lived experience. When an individual has made the decision to attend college this is the likely culmination of much thought and deliberation. Attending college requires time, money, access, ability, and desire. When an adult learner decides to attend college, he/she often bring with them many other life roles and responsibilities. With an increasing number of women joining the work force, the increasing need for higher education, and higher percentages of single female headed households, it is important to study who this population is and how their needs can be served in regard to assisting them with academic achievement. The emphasis of this study is to look at one aspect of influence, and that is of the family.

Specifically, what influence do the family of origin and current family have on an adult undergraduate woman’s educational experience? This study will examine how the influence of family members was perceived by the individual participants over their life course and how this impacted their ultimate enrollment as an undergraduate student. Further, family of origin and current family support towards degree attainment will be researched. Examining family influence assumes that no decisions are ever made in a vacuum, that the influence of family may be profound, and that decisions are often a cumulative effect of life experiences. Social constructionism explains that knowledge occurs and meanings are made based on the integration
of self with interpersonal interactions within the environment (Puig, Koro-Ljungberg & Echevarria-Doan, 2008). Further, family membership is an integral component of life experience (Atwood, 1996; Carter & McGoldrick, 1999; Sullivan, 2006). The life course perspective is a theory that lives are linked in socio-historical ways and that the impact of life events is profoundly impacted by the timing which they occur in a person’s life (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2004; Pratt & Fiese, 2004). Capturing the essence of the perceived influence of the family will be the focus of this research project.

This literature review begins with an examination of how the ideas of social constructionism coupled with the life course perspective can be used to examine family influence of female adult learners. Once the theoretical orientation has been established, there are three main areas of research this literature review focuses on including adult development, family, and women in higher education. Adult development is important to the current study because it examines how individuals grow and change throughout their lives. The decision to attend college and ability to persist are likely important components of individual participant’s developmental trajectories. An introduction to women’s developmental processes is next and this is followed by a theoretical review of women’s identity development. This leads to a discussion of family. It is important to address the difficulty in defining what family means what family structures look like and to consider how this may impact expectations of family members. From there it is important to consider issues associated with the differences between an adult female who pursues an undergraduate degree from an adult male or traditionally-aged student. Family influence is examined and a brief look at the impact on the family concludes this section.

The process of selecting a theoretical framework forces the researcher to be aware of many assumptions underlying the study because this is the framework which will be used to
drive the study. To be more specific, the theoretical framework is used to plan the study, create the research questions, make sense of the data, provide a coherent explanation for why people are doing or saying what they are doing or saying, and to move the project from descriptive to explanatory (Anfara & Mertz, 2006). In short, the theoretical orientation is the lens used to view, explain, and understand the phenomenon under study.

**Theoretical Orientation**

The purpose of this research project is to examine how family influence may have impacted decision-making and persistence of undergraduate female adult learners in regards to higher educational attainment. A big decision such as returning to school is typically made over a period of time, tends to be influenced by life events, and particularly for the adult students, is likely to be impacted by the family in significant ways. It will be important to consider the meaning people have made from the influence of their family since each participant in this study did ultimately make the decision to come to school. What is needed is an examination of how people have made meaning from their experiences, with regard to pursuing and persisting in undergraduate degree studies over the course of their lives from the perspective of the influence of their families.

**Social Constructionism**

Individuals are socialized by society and their family from the very moment they enter the world. This socialization, or acculturation, is often so embedded that there is no recognition of the knowledge or norms that are being transmitted. This phenomenon is explained by social constructivism which explains that knowledge acquisition is a product of the environment and that the self and others have an interactive effect (Puig, Koro-Ljungberg & Echevarria-Doan, 2008). Social constructionists hold that meaning making and knowledge are created at the
individual level, but influenced by society, so each individual’s perception of reality will be different (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Perceptions are based on past and present experiences which then also shape future experiences (Tennant, 2000). It is the examination of the unique differences in perception of adult women undergraduate students or recent graduates in regards to family influence that are important to this research study.

“Social constructionist inquiry is principally concerned with explicating the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live” (Gergen, 2003, p. 15). It is built on the premise that each individual has a situated reality in which they exist. This reality occurs through everyday experiences but is processed through a lens based on social structures (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The shared meanings that become part of commonsense knowledge result from words, thoughts, and actions, that are taken for granted within society (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). However, new situations will arise and according to social constructionism insight and ideas will result from personal interactions which create a new worldview for the individual. Berger and Luckmann (1966) point out that part of this change will also result from the temporal nature of reality. This means perceptions and experiences tend to be significantly impacted by the time in history in which they occur in people’s lives.

Social constructionism questions foundational beliefs associated with identifying reality and truth. It questions the idea of a rational self-directed individual knower and places emphasis on knowledge created through relational interactions (Gergen & Gergen, 2003). The assumption of a communal view of knowledge challenges the idea of a fixed truth due to difficulty in determining which version of truth is most accurate (Gergen & Gergen, 2003). According to social constructionism, individuals make meaning from their life experiences and each person’s
perspective is valid and worthy of respect (Merriam, et al., 2007; Patton, 2002). This perspective is based on the belief that meaning is created through social interaction and this social interaction will be profoundly influenced by context. The idea of using social context as a basis for more clearly understanding knowledge construction has come from many areas of study.

For example, Gergen (1985) highlights several of these areas of research including gender, emotion, and beliefs as he builds the case for the importance of examining phenomena from social constructivist perspective. In examining the perceived influence of the family, gender, emotion, and beliefs are likely to impact individual perceptions. The belief that our understanding of the world, and thus the meaning we make of it, is historically and culturally situated is also a foundational aspect of social constructionism (Burr, 1995; Gergen 1985). Social constructionism explains that our choices and actions are dependent upon the meaning which individuals make based on their perceptions (Fisher, 1991). An underlying assumption of social constructionism is that human nature is subjective and will be influenced by social interactions (Boughner, Davis, & Mims, 1998). It is based on the interplay between self and others, subject and object, individual experience, social context, and situational past (Puig, Koro-Ljungberg, & Echevarria-Doan, 2008). Due to the unique combination that each individual experiences, the outlook, beliefs, and perceptions will be different for every person. In other words, reality becomes socially constructed based on our interactions with other people and our life experiences.

This interplay is very likely impacted by an individual’s family of origin. According to the theory of social constructionism, “who we are and what we know is very much a result of the relationships in which we participate” (Boughner, Davis, & Mims, 1998). It follows that an individual’s worldview is likely to be significantly impacted by the people they are closest to and
have the most interaction with. Taking this one step further, Oliveri and Reiss (1981) argue that families also establish expectations and beliefs as a group. These authors refer to a *family paradigm* which is made up of a set of shared assumptions based on the family’s place in society. The family paradigm is shaped by “lengthy, intimate, face-to-face relationships” (Oliveri & Reiss, 1981, p. 392) that occur day-in and day-out as part of everyday family living. It is these interactions which will create reality for each individual family member. Boughner, Davis, and Mims (1998) write “family life is a tapestry of intertwined stories” (p. 13) and each family creates stories about “how to be a family, how to love, how to work, what is worthwhile” (p. 14).

Using social constructionism to examine family influence on the decision to attend college and support to persist, allows for the incorporation of the beliefs, values, and attitudes that have been formed during the life course of the participant.

Considering the family from a social constructionist position provides a useful framework from which to examine the structure, purpose and dynamics of the family and its members. This idea is highlighted by Holstein and Gubrium (1999) as they search for the variety of ways in which people answer the following questions: “How is family defined and experienced? Who or what defines the substance and organization of domestic life? How are the parameters of family meaning established?” (p. 4). For example, if you ask people to list the criterion for who is in a family they may use residence, care, biology, history, or legal status as a means to clarify membership (Peters, 1999). Peters explains it this way:

Theoretically the person at 22 may not identify parents and siblings as family because there is no co-residence, no financial exchange and no overt emotional bond. Similarly teenagers may recognize peers as family above biological ties because of the time and
quality of emotional exchange. The older person living alone may identify a pet dog as family. (p. 61)

This variety of responses is contingent upon experience and context based on the individual’s socially constructed views of what constitutes family from their perspective and place in their life course. Thus, recognizing that knowledge and meaning are the result of socially constructed beliefs, allows for how the examination of an individual’s life course will impact their ultimate perceptions and experiences.

**The Life Course Perspective**

The life course theoretical orientation considers age, historical time frames, and developmental trajectories to gain insight into individual’s lives (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003). Specifically, this theory is used to study life paths across multiple stages from a contextual perspective. This theory seeks to gain insight into how aspects, such as individual decision-making, are influenced by the “sequence of stages or status-configurations and transitions in life which are culturally and institutionally framed from birth to death” (Heinz & Kruger, 2001, p. 33). This theory is appropriate for this research project because of its emphasis on the connection between individual and societal forces which impact people’s lives over their life course. As Macmillan and Copher (2005) write “families are central in the unfolding life course” (p. 858). The life course perspective was developed as a result of recognizing the importance of studying how people live their lives from birth through death based on individual circumstance, social and historical contexts, and the age and timing of events over the life course (Elder et al., 2003). Two constructs, social pathways and life course trajectories, are foundational to this theory. The first construct, “social pathways are the trajectories of education and work, family and residences that are followed by individuals and groups through society” (p.
The second construct, life course trajectories, is more individually based and incorporates the sequence of life roles and experiences that result from life changes. This theory has been used across multiple disciplines including sociology, psychology and history. It has been used extensively to examine cohort patterns as well as individual life trajectories and it is used worldwide as a prominent theoretical orientation.

It is interesting to note that prior to the 1960’s there was little to no research in the area of life course trajectories or how an individual’s life experience impacted their future decisions and behaviors. Through societal events such as the Great Depression and the World Wars coupled with social and political changes including civil rights and the women’s movement it became apparent that there was a lack of knowledge regarding how people’s lives were impacted as a result of these major changes (Elder et al., 2003). The confluence of vast amounts of longitudinal data becoming available for analysis, coupled with the then new ideas that adults continue to develop over the course of their lives, coalesced to bring about an explosion of research and analysis into life course trajectories (Elder et al., 2003; Giele & Elder, 1998; Heinz & Kruger, 2001).

While the life course theory offers an organized structural framework from which to view the individual, and families, it does not explicitly explain how the individual actually makes meaning from their perceptions of their life experiences as the meta-theory of social constructionism does. The life course perspective looks at people’s lives from both macro and micro level perspectives and allows for the use of both current and retrospective data in researching individual’s life histories (Elder et al., 2003; Giele & Elder, 1998). From a broad perspective this theory considers the interplay between institutional and personal dynamics and is “framed by a system of social order which is based on temporal sequences of social participation
and status related rights and duties” (Heinz & Kruger, 2001, p. 29). Socialization, or social construction of time, refers to age expected behaviors which are sanctioned by the family or community members (Elder et al., 2003; Marshall & Mueller, 2003; Pratt & Fiese, 2004). These expectations or patterns of behavior establish the cultural norms.

Cultural norms are often the result of institutional policies. “There also exist clear generalized expectations for when certain events should occur, and normative sanctions for not following the socially prescribed timetable” (Marshall & Mueller, 2003). For instance, a very broad and normative look at the cultural prescription for American life tends to have childhood focus on education, adults focus on work, and those of old age retiring and enjoying more leisure (Uhlenberg & Mueller, 2004). These authors posit that “successful outcomes typically mean completing one’s education, obtaining suitable employment, entering into a stable and satisfying relationship, and enjoying good health” (p. 130) because often people who stray from this course are questioned about their decisions. That said, these researchers are quick to point out there is a large amount of diversity to these cultural expectations (Uhlenberg & Mueller, 2004). It is important to note that many researchers report that broad societal expectations have been changing and becoming more fluid with time (Giele & Elder, 1998; Heinz & Kruger, 2001; Hostetler, Sweet & Moen, 2006).

Researchers who use the life course perspective often focus on different aspects of influence. According to Heinz and Kruger (2001), there are three main research perspectives associated with life course theory: “historical time (generations and cohorts), individual time (life history, biography), and institutional time (careers, sequences, transitions)” (p. 33). Studies from both the historical and institutional sequencing tend to be quantitative; whereas, those from the life history and biographical are more likely to be qualitative studies. In fact, Giele and Elder
(1998) call for the need for both quantitative and qualitative analysis of life course research in order to provide the most comprehensive information possible. Since this research project will focus on individual lives and use qualitative analysis, this theory will help guide the process as the life history will focus on family member relationships and their influence on the participant’s academic trajectory. This will include individual development through social pathways from a historical context across the life course.

**Principles of the Life Course Perspective**

The tenets of social constructionism seem to be implied within the principles of life course perspective. According to Elder et al., (2003), there are five paradigmatic principles associated with the life course perspective. Although each of these tenets is important, the fifth principle, that of linked lives, is the most pertinent construct from this research project. I begin with a brief review of each of the paradigmatic principles. First, “human development and aging are lifelong processes” (p. 11). This means that adults continue to grow and experience fundamental change on biological, psychological and social fronts beyond the age of 18 years old. The experiences we have and the meanings we attach to them will be carried over into our perceptions and thus the way we respond to future stimuli (Marshall & Mueller, 2003). This is important in that it is likely to help explain not only the desire to return to school but the ability to persist as well due to the fact that the female adult undergraduate students have made a change by adding a substantially new role into their lives which was most likely intentionally done.

The second principle is, “individuals construct their own life course through the choices and actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstance” (p. 11). This principal accounts for personal agency which is individual freewill because human beings can not be measured from a strictly deterministic or rational vantage point because there
are too many variables and too much individualism (Marshall & Mueller, 2003). This construct may help to make meaning of the reasons why these adult women are currently pursuing a bachelor’s degree. There is likely to be a story or reason why they did not pursue or persist towards bachelor’s degree attainment as a traditionally-aged student. According to this theory, it is important to examine these stories from the context of personal history and social circumstance.

The next principle is, “the life course of individuals is embedded and shaped by the historical times and places they experience over their lifetime” (p. 12). This is an interesting concept because while it accounts for specific time periods in history, it recognizes that life situations will make each person’s perceptions of the events, and thus their stories, unique. These historical changes have been measured from a cohort perspective, in which all of the individuals were born within the same period of time, or by period effect in which a major event or social policy was rather uniform across the population (Marshall & Mueller, 2003). Currently, it is expected that most women will work and will need higher education (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2000; McGoldrick, 1999b) and these cultural norms have changed substantially in the last several decades (Aulette, 2002; Skolnick & Skolnick, 2003).

The fourth principle states that, “the developmental antecedents and consequences of life transitions, events, and behavioral patterns vary according to their timing in a person’s life” (p. 12). This aspect of the theory draws attention to the importance of an individual’s age, when the event occurs, as well as the sequencing pattern, the order in which the event occurs, in determining how the impact may be experienced (Marshall & Mueller, 2003). From a family perspective, individuals will be affected differently by each of these variables depending upon their age and place within the family.
Finally, and most important to the current study is the idea of linked lives in which, “lives are lived interdependently and socio-historical influences are expressed through this network of shared relationships” (p. 13). Linked lives means that individuals are involved in a salient relationship with each other. Often this is parents, partners, and/or children, but does not have to be. What is most important about the idea of linked lives is that they occupy mutually influential and intersecting developmental trajectories (Elder et al., 2003). This means that the effects of broad social and historical changes will often be most profoundly felt by how they impact an individual in her/his day-to-day life. A central theme of this study is interdependency between individuals and the consequent influence of family members which is then perceived by the adult female’s decision to return to school as well as her ability to persist towards degree completion.

What the life course perspective offers is a theory that accounts for the many aspects which impact individuals as they live their day-to-day lives. Fundamentally, the theoretical orientation of the life course theory consists of “age-graded patterns that are embedded in social institutions and history” (Elder et al., 2003, p. 4). This theory recognizes that issues and events that occur at various life stages have significant influence which become part of a belief system that includes thoughts and feelings. Additionally, this theory offers a lens from which to view the individual’s life that encompasses both social pathways and developmental trajectories. This impact is most often felt as a result of the multiple roles individuals hold during the course of their lives. The life course perspective follows role trajectories in areas related to social institutions that include schooling, paid employment, marriage and parenthood (MacMillan & Copher, 2005). Role trajectories tend to be more flexible in the family setting than in institutional settings making the family context more fluid (MacMillan & Copher, 2005).

**The Life Course Perspective and the Family**
According to Elder (1992) and Pallas (2004), there are three main models of the life course. They are the kinship model, the age-based model, and the social role model which combines the kinship and age-based models. The kinship model examines generations and intergenerational transmissions. Basically, this is the family cycle in which individuals are socialized throughout the life course and in this way societies reproduce themselves. Age-based models of development examine data related to age cohorts, strata, norms, and age-graded events or transitions. Elder (1992) notes that both the kinship and age models are needed to help explain achievement and that these models are both tied to socioeconomic status (SES) and the life cycle. The final model is based on social roles and combines the kin-based and aged-based models. People form multiple social roles that are specific to their families, school, and work and it is these roles, and the way they change over the life course, that are emphasized from this perspective (Pallas, 2004). This focus has been used to examine career trajectories and offers a shift away from the traditional line of reasoning which looks at a linear career trajectory to encompass “the concept of multiple, interlocking careers or pathways and to the notion of interdependent lives” (Elder, 1992, p. 634). Research repeatedly finds that adult women’s educational and career trajectories tend to be much less linear than men and this is often due to family commitments (Jacobs & King, 2002; McGoldrick, 1999b; Pallas, 2004; Robertson, 1991). Thus, these social roles will likely be an important variable to consider in this study.

There are some special considerations needed when using the life course perspective to study families (MacMillan & Copher, 2005). First, role configurations and pathways, within the family, tend to be more complex and interdependent than in the work or school realm. For instance, marriage and parenting can occur in a variety of sequences and be lived in a variety of ways. Second, family role configurations and pathways will impact and are impacted by the
roles of work and school. For example, a woman who works part-time may have more time to devote to studies than one who works full-time depending upon her other family commitments such as child or elder care. Third is embeddedness, the way family members lives are intertwined, in considering the construct of linked lives. This embeddedness accounts for the influence of current family members as well as the family of origin. In fact these authors state, “features of parents’ lives set the stage for their children’s experiences deep into the life course” (p. 862). This is apparent when adult partners make a commitment to each other because their two lives become interwoven which affects issues of parenting, working, earnings, and career decision-making because decisions about these issues are often not made independently. Even when a final decision is made independently, the family situation is often taken into account as a main consideration. Taken together, this intersection of variables creates an important dynamic that is unique to the examination of families.

Each family creates its own environment which includes family structure, family dynamics, and family resources (Uhlenberg & Mueller, 2004). In this way, families play a pivotal role in the socialization process of individuals over the course of their lives by acting as an intermediary between the individual and their experience of the world (Pratt & Fiese, 2004). Individuals from families of different races and SES are likely to have profoundly different experiences. It is important to note that even within families of similar SES and race, there are large differences between individual experiences. Another aspect which will impact experience and perception is family structure. Family structure of both the family of origin and the current family is important to consider. Family structures are becoming more fluid; thus, such things as interactions, level of influence, and role expectations are likely to change over the life course. In addition, although it has been accepted for many years that family influence is integral to the
development of young children, it is now recognized that families impact individual development throughout the life course (Pratt & Fiese, 2004). This connection and possible influence is highlighted in the following quote, “The relationships we have with kin are complex and variable, but they are also life-long and indeed enduring across generations; families are the places where these enduring bonds grow, develop, and are often tested” (Pratt & Fiese, 2004, p. 3).

As can be seen, although the life course theoretical perspective is a sociological theory, it offers a framework that includes many of the most important constructs for this research study. Namely, it allows for the examination of individual lives from the individual’s perspective while integrating institutional and structural boundaries which are impacted by social structures, time in history, and the individual’s age at pivotal life events. College attendance is considered to be a pivotal life event (Elder et al., 2003). An individual’s age during college matriculation is likely to impact their educational experience. The life course theory offers a framework which can assist the researcher to more clearly understand how and why each student arrives with a unique sense of self, set of expectations, academic preparation, knowledge base, and skill set. It is now time to examine literature related to adult undergraduate learners.

**Adult Development**

The developmental process occurs over the entire life course of individuals. Personal attributes, experience, and life events contribute to this development. Education opens the door to new ways of thinking. When a female adult learner makes the decision to return to school, she is making a commitment to change her life to the extent that incorporating being a student requires. In addition, it takes time and persistence to complete degree requirements and this is likely to impact development as choices about time, resources, and money will likely need to be
re-assessed. This process is likely to impact the developmental trajectory of the female adult undergraduate student thus it is important to look briefly at some adult developmental models.

The fact that adults continue to grow, develop, and change over the course of their entire lives has been well documented in research (LeFrancios, 1996). There is an abundance of research that looks at adult development from many different perspectives. Specifically, developmental stages, with typical thoughts and behaviors during established time periods are often used as a guide. With time, it has become clear that individual development is not only a unique process but also a never-ending one (LeFrancois, 1996). Development is generally considered to be the growth, maturation, and learning of the individual which occurs over the life course (LeFrancis, 1996). Psychologists and sociologists have long recognized that age alone does not provide complete information, rather, time in history, cohort effects, and larger structural issues all combine as integral components when considering adult development.

**Adult Development Theories**

Adults are faced with new situations every day. The childhood they experienced, the responsibilities they have, their hopes and dreams for the future are all integrated into how they perceive and experience life. Theorists work to establish ways of making meaning from examining individuals lives. Age is an important construct in the life course theory. Normal age trajectories have been included in many of the developmental models offered. I will briefly review some of the broadly accepted stages that are based on age. Age is typically considered from three main time periods with early adulthood spanning the ages of 20 to 40 or 45, middle adulthood, generally considered to be from 40-45 to 65-70, and later adulthood as 65-70 years old and above (Baumgartner & Merriam, 2000; LeFrancois, 1996).
Early adults typically face life issues related to transitioning from being a child to an adult and taking on adult responsibilities. Many lifestyle choices are made during this period, particularly in regard to relationships, living arrangements, family situation, educational attainment, and career trajectories.

There is a lot of variety between individuals considered to be in middle adulthood. Choices made during early adulthood will profoundly influence perceptions and experiences in this time period. For many, the middle adulthood years tend to be very productive both career wise and personally and include opportunities for many interpersonal relationships with significant others, children, grandchildren, parents, siblings, and friends (LeFrancois, 1996). From the perspective of the family, the middle years offer a large variety of possible family structures. This is due to the fact that middle adults can have young children of their own, have children who have children, have parents with different levels of need, or may live independently with many or few family connections.

Older adults are actually the most diverse group. Each person ages differently, and there are substantial differences between a 65 year old and a 90 year old. Work and family involvement will be dependent upon desire, need, availability, and many other factors. So much of this is dependent upon each individual’s unique life situation. Theories based on age alone have been criticized as not incorporating contextual differences which can profoundly impact individual lives and perceptions (Cavanaugh, 1997; Goodman et al., 2006; LeFrancois, 1996).

Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson (2006) classified four main categories of adult developmental theories based on life stage models including: developmental, contextual, lifespan, and transitional. I briefly describe each category because combined they offer a variety of lens from which to view development and can be used to inform this study. Broadly, the
developmental perspective is based on the belief that individuals pass through a sequence of stages. Theorists such as Erikson, Peck, Levinson, Sheehy, and Gould created models to describe the developmental stages of adults, or included adults in their model of development, across the lifespan (LeFrancois, 1996). Age, or the resolution of crucial issues and/or completion of tasks were the main criteria used to measure movement through each stage (Goodman et al., 2006; LeFrancois, 1996). Early models were typically based on white middle class men. However, Gilligan (1982) and Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) found that women also appear to move through developmental trajectories, but that they are based more on relationships to and connections with others. Developmental theories in which people pass through stages have been criticized as being unidirectional, hierarchical, positivistic, and lacking the flexibility to account for the diversity in individuals, families, communities, and societies (Cavanaugh, 1997; Goodman et al., 2006; LeFrancois, 1996).

Contextual models were established by theorists such as Hawley, Kanter, Levinson, and Neugarten and Neugarten. These theorists look at issues associated with biological forces, psychological forces, and socio-cultural forces which are all impacted by time period in history (Cavanaugh, 1997). The idea of context is that it will influence and impact all aspects of the individual’s lived experience (Baumgartner & Merriam, 2000; Goodman et al., 2006). In each society “unique characteristics and behaviors have been ascribed to each age group” (Neugarten, 1979, p. 888) and at each age there are roles that include different responsibilities. Thus, adult development from the contextual perspective places importance on the meaning people make from their lives as a result of their lived experiences and it incorporates many of the assumptions of the life course perspective. These theories rely on age-graded societal expectations and tend to look at norms rather than individual trajectories.
A third perspective is the life span perspective which focuses on the path individual’s create as they navigate through the continuity and change that are the only givens in our lives (Goodman et al., 2006). The major theorists are Helson and Srivastava, Kagan, Pearlin, and Whitbourne. According to Goodman et al. (2006) a key role of the life span perspective is the way people adapt to the continuity and change they experience. Development, from this perspective, examines how people respond to growth, which is defined as “adding new characteristics, understandings, and skills” (Goodman et al., 2006, p. 21), maintenance/resilience which is how people respond to challenges and suffering, and regulation of loss, which requires the acceptance of changing expectations of self and others. It is the ability to adapt that is a focus of the life span perspective. Rather than age, these theorists believe it is the life events that determine the course of adult development. College attendance and completion would be a life event to consider from this perspective. An aspect this perspective does not address is structural differences that may impact people’s options for how they respond to specific life events.

The final perspective, transition, as explained by Goodman et al. (2006), looks at how people respond to changes which occur between life phases and stages. Some of the major theorists are Bridges, Folkman and Moskowitz, Goodman and Waters, Hudson, Lazarus and Folkman, and Schlossberg. It is the contention of these theorists that change is a catalyst, or turning point, which pushes people towards growth. Effectively moving through a transition is described as “letting go of aspects of the self, letting go of former roles, and learning new roles” (Goodman et al., 2006, p. 21). These transitions may occur as a result of a crisis or may be a developmental adjustment, the emphasis is on the change that occurs and how the individual responds to it. Analysis from this perspective is likely to include information pertinent to before, during and after the change the individual experienced. This method of conceptualization may
be important to the current study depending upon the reason for attending college. This aspect of developmental theory looks at how individuals respond to the significant events that occur over the course of their lives.

There is increased recognition that it is not only psychological factors which impact development but sociological factors, which are more structural as well (Baumgartner & Merriam, 2000). Women tend to show more diversity as they move through their developmental trajectories than men do (Goodman et al., 2006; LeFrancois, 1996). Research indicates that the identity development of women is often tied to issues of relational connections along a continuum that has been described as either moving from passively accepting patriarchal authority to a complex identity allowing for independent rationale thought which effectively integrates the woman with community (Belenky et al., 1986) or from a position providing selfless care based on low self-worth to a more egalitarian sense of self (Gilligan, 1982). These foundational issues have been found to make the developmental trajectory of women vary significantly from that of men. The perceived influence of the family will very likely be tied to the developmental perspective of the individual and there are several ways that women’s identity development has been conceptualized.

**Women’s Identity Development**

This section examines several proposed models of women’s identity development. Information about how they interact with the family is incorporated. Highlights and critiques of the models are included and the section ends with a discussion of how characteristics based on gender are often the result of socialization.

Research has established that women’s development is both similar to but also very different from that of men and it is important to recognize identity from a gendered perspective.
Belenky et al., 1986; Gilligan, 1982). Gilligan (1982) examined differences in identity development and decision-making between men and women. She found that men tended to identify themselves by their abilities, beliefs, and physical characteristics whereas women were more likely to describe themselves through their connections with and ability to help others. She found that a central moral dilemma faced by most women is the dichotomy between serving themselves versus caring for others. This model was evident in the decision-making process because whereas men tended to make deductive decisions based on logic and the law, women were more likely to rely on communication with others that takes into account situational factors. Her proposed model of female development was based on level of personal autonomy as it was related to serving the needs of others. She found that there was a fusion between life roles which made it difficult for women to separate their identity from the roles that they served, particularly in regards to servings others needs. In the almost three decades since publication, societal norms have changed so that most women now expect to fulfill work and home responsibilities which have been increasing both their independence and interdependence within interpersonal relationships (McGoldrick, 1999b, Skolnick & Skolnick, 2003).

Another model proposed by Belenky et al., (1986) used five epistemological categories to describe the development of women from the combination of their self, voice, and mind. Although these categories were not referred to as a developmental continuum, each level shows a greater level of confidence, self-esteem, and self-worth. *Silent women* were described as “the youngest, and the most socially, economically, and educationally deprived” (p. 24). This group of women experienced an extreme absence of voice as evidenced by their blind obedience and unquestioned submission to authority. Life was viewed from a polarized perspective and tended to be unstable and chaotic. Socioeconomic variables significantly impacted this population and
women born into more privilege were more likely to transcend this category than women who had lower class origins.

Received knowers learn by listening to the voices of others, the words they hear are concrete and dualistic. Answers are right or wrong, true or false, good or bad. There is no gray and contrary views are immediately assumed to be wrong. These women put all of their faith in the authority of others and lack confidence in speaking for themselves. Women in this group tend toward conformist thinking and live in environments where they are considered to have subordinate status and primary responsibility of caring for others. Families of these women expect obedience and prefer an essentially voiceless and selfless individual. Women who live in this type of environment may not have the belief in themselves to consider college and if they did, may not receive much family support for their academic endeavors.

There are two strands to the subjective knower framework and they are the inner voice and the quest for self. Women who are experiencing their inner voice see knowledge as personal, private, subjective, and intuitive. Although it is still a dualistic perspective, the truth is now found within the individual rather than outside them. The second strand of this epistemological perspective occurs when subjective knowers begin to integrate their own inner truth with those of others. Women from this framework described learning as inward listening and watching. Self definition was difficult because these women tended to be in the process of withdrawing from ways the family and community had always defined them but they were still searching for how they would define themselves. Belenky et al. (1986) note that for subjective knowers, both the family environment and the educational environment impact the woman’s path. Women from this perspective may have decided that continuing their education was very important to them and they were willing to do what they needed to in order to be successful.
The next category Belenky et al. (1986) describes is a change from strictly subjectivist knowledge to what they call *procedural knowledge*. This change in thinking involves rational thought which typically results from recognizing the conflicts between the authoritarian absolutist thinking with the women’s own subjective thinking of the earlier stages. Women going through this stage engage in “conscious, deliberate, systematic analysis” (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 93). Knowledge is recognized as being more complex than initially thought and includes both objective and subjective information. This way of thinking is beneficial at the college level.

As a result of these new thought patterns, women tend towards either *separate knowing*, that is an orientation towards impersonal rules and autonomy, or *connected knowing*, which is more of a relational framework, that recognizes the importance of individual context (Belenky et al., 1986; Gilligan, 1982). Separate knowers work to develop objective analytic thought processes in their analysis and evaluation of information. Connected knowers believe that personal experience is a more trustworthy source for information than an authoritarian expert (Belenky et al., 1986). The connected knower is interested in learning about the other person’s perspective because they believe truth to be “personal, particular, and grounded in firsthand experience” (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 113). Connected knowers strive to examine information from the perspective of the other person. The purpose is to understand the material, not to judge it, and this is based on understanding the reasoning behind it.

*Constructed knowledge* is the term used by Belenky et al. (1986) to describe knowledge gained by integrating reason, intuition, and the expertise of others. Women at this level of thought struggle with issues related to inclusion and exclusion, separation and connection, and balance in their lives. This constructed knowledge is based on the belief that, “all knowledge is
constructed, and the knower is an intimate part of the known” (p. 137). It incorporates an awareness that “questions and answers vary throughout history, across cultures, from discipline to discipline, and from individual to individual” (p. 138). Women at this stage tended to come from families whose relationships were characterized by connection, care, mutuality, and reciprocity (Belenky et al., 1986).

Although Belenky et al. (1986) specifically say this is not a developmental model, there does appear to be a developmental progression through each of the perspectives which is significantly impacted by a woman’s family. The work of both Gilligan (1982) and Belenky et al. (1986) concluded that woman traverse a developmental path that is more variable than men and that much of that variability is due to personal relationships. This finding was highlighted in a literature review on the psychosocial development of women by Caffarella and Olson (1993) which found that:

Diverse and non-linear patterns of development characterized by discontinuities and periods of stability and transition are the norm for women; intimacy and identity are key issues throughout women’s lives; and importance of relationships and a sense of connectedness to others are central to the overall developmental process.” (p. 125)

What each of these models purport is that the trajectory that a woman’s life follows will be variable, will be dependent to some extent upon relationships, and is often based on their connections with other people. What is also highlighted is the capacity for growth as life events and experiences occur. Using these perspectives as a lens highlights how integral family, and the close interpersonal relationships within them, is to woman’s development and decision-making. Since the time of the original work, the findings of Gilligan (1982) and Belenky et al. (1986) have been challenged because of not addressing issues of otherness except for gender.
In response, Downing and Rousch (1985) created a more inclusive model entitled feminist identity development which closely parallels the work of Moradi (2005) who proposed womanist identity model. Moradi (2005) identified the similarities and differences between these two models. To begin, each of these models shares a similar trajectory of stages that moves from external definitions of women to more internal definitions. The first stage in the feminist identity model is passive acceptance and the first stage in the womanist identity model is pre-encounter. In each of these stages there is a denial of any prejudice towards women and men are seen as superior. These women maintain traditional roles and there is an unexamined acceptance of gender inequality. The second stages are revelation and encounter respectively. In these stages women begin to become angry at men and the status quo. They tend to think very dualistically, question values and beliefs, and men are generally perceived as negative. Third is embeddedness-emanation and immersion-emersion meaning women make strong connections with other women by expanding self definitions of what it means to be a woman and share these new emerging values. These women tend to have strong relationships with other women but will continue to have cautious interactions with males. Fourth is synthesis and internalization. In this stage women are able to incorporate both internal and external definitions of a woman to become more authentic to themselves and others. Interestingly one main difference is that the Downing and Roush (1985) model had a fifth stage of active commitment, or social justice, which is about actively advocating for more egalitarian relationships and role expectations for all women.

An important difference between these two models is the ideology behind them. Feminist scholars tend to come from a political perspective that constantly compares women to men whereas the womanist perspective is more focused on an integration of women’s strengths and experiences with particular attention paid to race/ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation,
and other issues of diversity (Moradi, 2005). Because racial differences often lead to greater marginalization of some populations, any model of identity development that does not address issues related to race, gender, and class leave large populations of individuals for which the model is not valid. Taken together all of these models discuss the importance of the woman’s place within her family and her interactions with them as a way of assessing identity development. It is likely that both the decision to attend college and family support to persist are related to her identity.

An adult woman who has made the decision to pursue an undergraduate degree has established an identity with an accompanying sense of self-worth allowing her to pursue this timely and expensive endeavor. Women must have a strong enough sense of self and belief in their ability to be academically successful to even consider enrolling in college. Identity formation as explained by Kirk and Okazawa-Rey (2007) is “the result of a complex interplay among a range of factors: individual decisions and choices, particular life events, community recognition and expectations, societal categorization, classification and socialization, and key national or international events” (p. 61). It is a unique path which is impacted internally and externally for each individual. According to Kirk and Okazawa-Rey (2007), a woman’s perception of her identity is the result of micro, meso, macro, and global influences. Micro level influences are at the individual level, they identify who we are by our characteristics and roles. This is the area we have the most control over and it includes interpersonal and family relationships. The meso level of influence includes school, the workplace, and the community. Meso consists of background, how we look, how we are responded to, group standards, expectations, obligations, responsibilities, and demands. Finally, macro and global levels are controlled by the social order and encompass variables such as physical, biological, or genetic
differences. It is these structural differences which determine who is included and excluded, who is privileged, and who is oppressed (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 2007). Each of these levels will impact women in unique ways because gender is constantly recreated out of human interactions (Lorber, 1991). The integration between identity and gender impacts development and self perception and will likely influence decision-making in regards to educational and career goals.

Gender is such an integral part of daily life that it is difficult to examine. The process of gendering, like identity formation, begins at birth through names, clothing, and interactions and continues throughout the lifespan (Aronson & Buchholz, 2001). Gender socialization organizes individual’s lives and is impacted by family, community, and society. Within many social groups men are advantaged over women and this is done deliberately and purposefully (Lorber, 1991). The family is one of the main vehicles used to pass on gender role expectations (Leeder, 2004). Expectations are passed down through the family and through generations (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2000). Traditionally, marriage and motherhood were thought to be essential parts of an adult woman’s life and those who did not follow that path, were often marginalized because of their life choices (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 2007). Women’s identity is thus formed as the integrated result of internal and external influence. Decisions made are the result of the confluence of these many variables.

**Societal Trends Impacting Women’s Development**

Many women are choosing to pursue education, work towards career goals and are more often postponing or forgoing marriage and mothering until they are older (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 2007). Today there are more women working than ever before and that number is projected to continue to increase. According to the U.S. Department of Labor (2008), 59.5% of women are labor force participants with 75% of these women employed full-time and 25% employed part-
time. Reasons for this increase include falling birth rates, labor saving household devices, and increasing demand for positions traditionally filled by women such as secretaries, nurses, and waitresses (Aulette, 2002). Additionally, Aulette (2002) notes that improved birth control and increased life spans have made working not only possible but often times necessary. Add to this the dramatic changes from the traditionally held views of family structures and roles in the last several decades. The impact of societal trends on women’s development is incomplete without an understanding of the complex role of the family in a woman’s life and the changes that have occurred within families in recent history which have profoundly impacted societal expectations of women.

**Family**

Families are recognized as being foundational to society because they provide for the basic needs of individuals. Additionally, this is the place where individuals typically experience love, long term relationships, power, and conflict (Shaw & Lee, 2009). These authors define family as:

> The social unit where most people are raised, learn systems of belief, experience love and perhaps abuse and neglect, and generally grow to be a part of social communities. It is in the family where most of us internalize messages about ourselves, about others, and about our place in the world. (p. 385)

The word family is value-laden and brings to mind many thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. If you ask any individual who they consider to be in their family, their answer is likely to change over the course of their life. Family is both an individual and institutional construct. Because family is so embedded into society this section begins with an examination of the family from a societal, or institutional, perspective. This is followed by a brief look at historical perspectives of a variety of American families. This then leads to defining what family is considered to be as
well as who is considered to be members. The next important topic is family structures and that is followed by a discussion about gender socialization. Women and families, women’s roles, and family influence on education bring this section to a close.

When people consider the idea of family they often have an idea in their mind of what this means. They also have an idea about whether they believe their family fits the norm or may be lacking in some way. Despite the most recent feminist movement which was spear-headed in the 1960’s to increase equality in relationships as well as tolerance of a variety of family structures (Aronson & Buchholz, 2001), the view of an ideal family is often based on a patriarchal framework that includes a breadwinner husband, a homemaker wife and two children who care for and support each other. According to U.S. Census Bureau (2009) families with this structure only account for 22.6% of U.S. households. This is actually a slight increase from 2000 when families with this structure accounted for 21% of the population.

Further, this ideal assumes that family members are treated fairly, respectfully, and caringly and, further, that home is a respite or haven (Skolnick & Skolnick, 2003). Interestingly, these ideals, particularly as far as family structure is concerned, do not often portray reality for the majority of individuals or households (Giddens, 2003). In fact, this view of the family, popularized in the 1950’s and 1960’s is really only based on that specific time period in U.S. history (Coontz, 2008). Despite this discrepancy, societal norms are strong and tend to essentialize and marginalize many family constellations that do not fit the idealized description (Skolnick & Skolnick, 2003). It is interesting to note that current statistics related to lower marriage rates, higher divorce rates, and lower fertility rates more closely mirror time periods in both the nineteenth and twentieth century’s that occurred prior to the 1940’s and
1950’s signaling that these societal ideals are historically and contextually situated as well as fairly recent (Skolnick & Skolnick, 2003).

Families play a vital role in society because it is in this unit where the basic needs of most individuals are met in their day-to-day lives (Shaw & Lee, 2009). From an institutional level, families serve to support patterns of privilege and inequity and are fundamentally interconnected to the economy, the political system, religion and education (Shaw & Lee, 2009). In a capitalist society, families provide much free labor in caring for children and elderly who are not able to live independently or be productive.

Families have been studied based on unit of measure, formations, membership, relationships and functions. It has been theorized that families should be considered from an individual perspective, as dyads, in family units, or by membership based on legal, biological, or emotional ties (Aulette, 2002; Skolnick & Skolnick, 2003). It has also been put forth that families will change over time so that rather than being a static entity, they are an evolving phenomena based on the life course of the individuals’ involved (Holstein & Gubrium, 1999; Moxnes, 1999; Uhlenberg & Mueller, 2004). The idea of incorporating the realities of the changes that occur over the life course of individuals and families allows for the incorporation of many aspects of individual’s lived experiences that are influenced by age, historical time and place, and cultural norms and expectations. It recognizes that families, and the people within families, do not exist in a vacuum, but rather are impacted by all of these aspects in their lives.

Terminology is important. The terms family and the family have been identified as conceptually different by Holstein and Gubrium (1999). These authors refer to the social form of family as family, meaning, they look at how individuals designate their social relationships as a result of their day-to-day interactions. This definition allows for the increased diversity in how
families are viewed and view themselves (Holstein & Gubrium, 1999). Additionally, this definition allows for the fluidity that occurs over time in families and family structures. In contrast, the term “the family” implies a more static interpretation of family as an entity (Holstein & Gubrium, 1999). When this term is used, it tends to be an objectification of the construct, as though it is an actual entity, and implies more general characteristics as opposed to more personal ones. It does not typically include the changes that everyday dynamics can produce. Put simply, rather than being a group that is described or explained as in “the family,” the term family allows for an interpretive practice that looks for the meaning making as a result of the social relations (Holstein & Gubrium, 1999).

For the current research project there are two other terms which need clarification and they are family of origin and current family. In their literature review, Whiston and Keller (2004) defined family of origin as “the family in which one spent his or her formative years or the family in which one was raised” (p. 295). This family is the one that individuals will be asked about in reference to any experiences they consider relevant to their academic history in regard to bachelor degree attainment. Current family is a term created for the use of this research project to identify membership in a family in addition to the participant’s family of origin. In the current study, participants will be instructed to include any individuals they consider to be part of either family.

In an attempt to give an overview of broad concepts associated with family Skolnick and Skolnick (2003) discuss four myths associated with the family. First is the myth of the universality of the term family. These authors recognize that families vary in “organization, membership, life cycles, emotional environments, ideologies, social and kinship networks, and economic and other functions” (p. 5). In our society, the assumption of universality is used to
define what is normal and natural and thus implies that deviations from the nuclear family are not normal or natural. Thus, when people live in arrangements other than with a nuclear family they may feel marginalized at times.

The second myth is that of the perpetually happy and harmonious families. Families can be a place for love, joy, connectedness, and care; however, families can also be places of antagonism, negative emotions, and sometimes violence. By not recognizing and addressing the many possible dynamics, individuals may gain distorted views of families. Skolnick and Skolnick (2003) note that as family systems were researched, more and more family patterns of interactions were recognized as within the realm of normal family behavior.

A third myth Skolnick and Skolnick (2003) highlight is that of parental determinism. Parental determinism is based on the belief that the type of family a child grows up in will make a profound life-long impact which can-not be altered or changed. Research has found that there are many variables to consider and although family experience is important, individuals will respond to their circumstances both currently and in the future in their own ways. This is not only due to individual temperament and characteristics but to the fact that interactions with parents and others in the environment are a two-way process and children can also influence their families and the people in them.

The myth of a stable and harmonious past in the history of families is the final myth that Skolnick and Skolnick (2003) debunk. According to these authors, there does not readily appear to be an earlier time in which family life was continuously stable and harmonious. These authors report that there have always been many issues and problems faced by families in society. They question the current media portrayal of families being in crisis. Further, they question the conservative perspective, which purports that strengthening the ideal family structure, defined by
them as the patriarchal led family with a bread winner husband and dependent wife and children, as the way to alleviate the current situation. From their perspective, representing this family constellation as the average majority is not only historically inaccurate but unattainable and has many shortcomings. In short, as society has changed, families and the individuals within them have been forced to change as well. At this point, it is important to take a brief look at families from a historical perspective.

**Historical Perspective of the Family**

This brief overview of the history the American family is summarized from the work of Aulette (2002) and Cherlin (1999). Prior to the industrial revolution, the United States was more of an agrarian society in which people and communities tended to be relatively self-sufficient. However, the industrial revolution changed many aspects of American life. It caused people, particularly men, to leave their homes and go to work. Rather than growing and creating what they needed to live, individuals began to pay for more foods and products. These changes impacted families so that post-industrial family functions increasingly focused on procreation, consumption, and child-rearing rather than on production. As more production occurred outside of the home, American society became more patriarchal because men were the primary economic force in the country. This was particularly true for white American families. Immigrant and African American families often faced prejudice and discrimination within society which impacted educational and career opportunities. As a result, gender roles were typically not as rigid because many women worked outside the home. In addition, often extended family members shared the residence as well as the responsibility for childcare.

In addition to race, individual roles and responsibilities were very much tied to class. In both the middle and upper classes, husbands were designated as the wage earners and wives
stayed home to care for the household (Aulette, 2002; Cherlin, 1999). During the 19th century upper and middle class women tended to be judged by four criteria including their piety (religious submission), purity (maintain virginity until marriage), submissiveness, and the domesticity of maintaining the household (Aulette, 2002; Skolnick & Skolnick, 2003). In this way, women went from having more egalitarian partnerships which were needed when the majority of work was done by individual households to becoming more marginalized citizens.

Women from working class origins did not live by the same criteria because one wage earner was not typically sufficient to support the family. In fact, wages of women and children were often needed to sustain the family (Cherlin, 1999). Family structure also tended to be more diverse because of including kin and many times boarders who would sometimes come to be considered family. These generalizations make clear that while there were well documented expectations and family structures for white upper middle class families, immigrant families and those from a lower socioeconomic class experienced much more variability in their family structures. The typical structure of African American families during the time of slavery has been debated. Researchers have documented a strong family influence from both men and women despite the selling of individuals in families and the sexual exploitation of black women by slave owners (Cherlin, 1999).

What it means to be a family has undergone significant change. Social class continues to be an important component when considering family structures and expectations. The women’s movement has also impacted families because of its emphasis on increasing independence of female family members. Currently a diverse array of structures are being recognized and it is argued that the more flexible and inclusive family norms that tend to be more typical of racial
and ethnic groups other than white people of European descent are being incorporated into
American mainstream (Coontz, 2008).

As this country moves through the 21st century, and families continue their foundational
contributions to society, it is important to look at how they are currently viewed. That view is
going to be based on personal perceptions, experiences, and beliefs. Broadly, families are
viewed from either a conservative, liberal, or feminist perspective (Aulette, 2002; Coontz, 1997;
Giele, 2003). Conservative individuals view the family as being the primary social institution
which is necessary for economic growth and stability. However, family structure is specifically
prescribed and includes having a wage earner father coupled with a stay at home mother who
cares for the house and nurtures family members (Aulette, 2002; Giele, 2003). Although
idealized as the norm, this type of family structure is not the way the majority of families have
been structured either historically or currently, further this view is limited by and heavily
influenced by race and class. The conservative perspective marginalizes many families.

The liberal perspective of a family allows for more flexibility in family membership,
structure, and responsibilities. Individuals from a liberal perspective are more concerned about
the economic context of the family. They believe the focus should be on making sure
individuals are making a living wage in order to be able to provide sufficient support for children
and dependents in areas related to health, housing, and education (Aulette, 2002; Giele, 2003).
These two broad categories serve as a way to describe how people make meaning from societal
trends and further helps to explain their positions as far as what they believe needs to be done for
the benefit of individual family members.

These two convergent perspectives impact how individuals respond to change. For
example, during the 1990’s there were several significant issues that occurred which impacted
families including increases in divorce rates, teenage suicide, teen births, issues related to
addictions and violence, single parent households, and childhood poverty (Giele, 2003).
Conservatives view these changes with concern because they believe it signifies a “cultural and
moral weakening” (Giele, 2003, p. 57) that is causing breakdown of families due to father
absence, school failures, poverty, crime, and drug use. This group of individuals believes that the
way to change these trends is to increase the number and strength of heterosexual married
couples who provide financial and emotional support for their children (Giele, 2003).

The liberal perspective on these societal changes is that the economic structure of society
has forced change on the family impacting gender roles resulting in fundamental change to
individual families. Proponents of this ideology argue that rapid technological change,
increasing forced mobility, increased variability in career trajectories, as well as families having
less of an individual impact on their local communities and having less time to spend at home
with family members are the reasons for these societal issues (Giele, 2003). Proponents of the
liberal view believe the government is responsible for providing a safety net which will help
facilitate employment and care programs designed to assure that the basic needs of all citizens
are being protected.

The third perspective has been identified as using a feminist lens (Aulette, 2002; Giele,
2003). Feminist perspective believes that both the conservative and liberal ideologies are too
rigid in their beliefs (Coontz, 1997). Instead, there needs to be some compromise and flexibility
in order to best serve the needs of individuals and society. Proponents of feminist ideology
recognize the importance of family, but value the many forms these families can take. This
perspective recognizes and values much of the invisible work that women do and do not get paid
for and they actively work towards more equality for women in all the aspects of their lives.
(Aulette, 2002; Coontz, 1997; Giele, 2003). The feminist perspective respects the value of the interconnectedness between people and how important these connections are especially to women. Additionally, this perspective makes clear that although men’s development is viewed as increasing in independence and autonomy, this ideology purports that they have been able to do this because of the physical and emotional support provided by women along the way. The feminist perspective views effective family functioning from a position of promoting human satisfaction and development of family members (Giele, 2003).

Three waves of feminism have resulted in increasing equality for women in areas related to the right to vote, the right to own property, and the right to education. Women today have many more educational and career opportunities than were available to them in the past. These options are likely to impact the amount of school they desire, career aspirations, level of independence, and issues associated with relationships, care of the household, and parenting. Choices that are made are likely to be the result of expectations based on upbringing as well as knowledge and experience gained as an adult. An important component of consideration for women with families is likely to be their families. It is now time to turn to an examination of the many definitions of families today.

**Defining Family**

What is a family? Who should be included in membership? What is the purpose of families? The answers to these questions will be very contextually based. Researchers from a diverse array of fields have researched these questions. Psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, biologists, politicians, and business analysts have wanted to quantify the answer to these questions for a variety of purposes. The centrality of the place of families within society is not questioned as highlighted in the following quote by Shaw and Lee (2009):
At the institutional level, the family maintains patterns of privilege and inequity and is intimately connected to other institutions in society such as the economy, the political system, religion, and education. At the level of experience, the family fulfills basic human needs and provides most of us with our first experiences of love and relationship as well as power and conflict. (p. 378)

However, what is debated is who should be considered as members because, from a governmental or institutional perspective, family membership determines who gets benefits, who is included in taxes, even, who is allowed to receive personal information. From an individual perspective the determination of who is a family and who is not, may be a straightforward easy to answer question, but, then again, it may not.

Although family is an integral component of most people’s lives, it is a surprisingly difficult construct to define. There are many definitions of family in the literature and these definitions have changed over time (Skolnick & Skolnick, 2003; Weigel, 2008). These definitions tend to be categorized based on structure, function, or interpersonal communication styles which are reflective of power differentials. Early definitions are more structural and typically include specific references to heterosexual couples who share a residence, economic interdependence and the duties of parenthood (Aulette, 2002). These definitions tend to be biologically based with membership limited to blood or marriage.

Definitions from the fields of sociology and anthropology look at families from a more functional perspective. This perspective is more of an institutional perspective and focuses on the societal functions that families perform such as “maintaining the household, socializing children, providing emotional and material support, and fulfilling roles” (Weigel, 2008, p. 1428). As an example, Leeder (2004) defines families as “social groupings in which there is common
residence, economic cooperation, and reproduction, and which includes adults of both sexes” (p. 22). Although this definition is more inclusive than the biologically based definitions, it is still restrictive in that one of the major purposes listed is procreation and it specifically identifies having adults of both sexes. A broader definition of family includes others who may not necessarily have a blood relationship but are “a kinship group providing the nurturant socialization of its children (natural or adopted)” (Ingoldsby & Smith, 2006, p. 76). Similarly, Leeder (2004) defined the term kin as “people who consider themselves related” (p. 28). Taken together these functional definitions describe the variety of roles that families play within society.

For many, the most defining aspect of families is relational. This perspective provides for the network of support and an environment where many people experience love, long term relationships, power and conflict and begin to establish their system of beliefs (Shaw & Lee, 2009). This definition bears similarity to the definition of family from a feminist perspective as reported by Giele (2003):

The goal of the family is not only to bring up a healthy and productive new generation; families also provide the intimate and supportive group of kin or fictive kin that foster the health and well-being of every person – young or old, male or female, heterosexual, homosexual, or celibate. (p. 68)

This broad statement includes many of the personal aspects individuals equate with family and healthy family functioning. Unfortunately, not all families are functional and healthy. The family is also a place where abuse and neglect may be experienced (Shaw & Lee, 2009). As an adult, extended family needs may hold people back from higher education, career advancement, or financial stability because of the time, energy, resources and emotional ties that they require
(Leeder, 2004). The long-lasting impact of family influence is evident in the following quote, “it is in the family where most of us internalize messages about ourselves, about others, and about our place in the world” (Shaw & Lee, 2009, p. 385).

In an attempt to help define exactly what a family is Leeder (2004) offers a broad explanation of variables, which are important to consider. In families today, not all members live together, members may not necessarily be economically dependent upon each other, members may not include children or plans for children, members may include same sex partners who may not be married, and members do not necessarily need to be related by blood. Holstein and Gubrium (1999) recognize the diversity in today’s families by purporting that family is socially constructed, will change from person to person, and changes over time. Skolnick and Skolnick (2003) address the difficulty of defining family with the following words, “to say that the family is the same everywhere is in some sense true. Yet families vary in organization, membership, life cycles, emotional environments, ideologies, social and kinship networks, and economic and other functions” (p. 5). Further, families are not static objective units with universal formats that can be easily quantified and neither are they situated ahistorically (Moxnes, 1999). This makes context extremely important when considering family structure and membership. To summarize, family membership is subjective, diverse, and is historically and contextually situated. In fact, one idea researchers seem to be able to agree on is the difficulty of finding one definition of family that meets all of the needs. As a result, researchers are left in a position in which although families are foundational to most people’s lives, defining them for research purposes is at best an ambiguous process.

**Family Structure**
Family structure can be considered in a variety of ways. For the purposes of this research project it will be important to look at both who is in the family as well as the power structure within the family. Family membership will be determined by the individual participant. Due to divorce, re-marriage and the many technological advances in child creation and bearing, these lists may be quite extensive and complex. Family structure can also be considered by examining the power differentials between family members. Power differentials have been studied with regard to how decisions get made within families. The decision-making process “is quite intricate and its dynamics are usually the result of extended interaction, discussion, and accommodation between family members, especially between spouses” (Safilios-Rothschild, 1969, p. 7). From this perspective, family structure focuses on the interpersonal interactions that result from power differentials within the relationship that affect how decisions get made.

Looking at family membership and structure, or power differentials, will be important in order to gain a more holistic understanding of each participant’s family and their place within the family. Regardless of how family structure is conceptualized, the actual point in time when family structure is assessed will play a prominent role in the findings. This is due to the fact that family structures are fluid and change throughout the life course of the family (Uhlenberg & Mueller, 2004). This means that changes in family structures are difficult to track due to the passage of time. For example, if you examine the family structure of a family who is parenting teenagers the list will include at the very least, the individual(s) who are caring for the teenagers as well as the teenagers themselves. If you were to return 10 years later, the family structure is likely to be radically different, perhaps including the same family members, but the dynamics are likely to have shifted considerably.
Family functioning is also impacted by changes to the structure. Families tend to develop preferred methods for interacting, which are often based on unspoken rules that control the roles and functions of family members (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2000). These interactions are complex and often include micro negotiations between family members on a daily basis (Sullivan, 2006). Once established, the structure of these interactions, along with embedded power differentials can be difficult to change (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2000; Sullivan, 2006), even as family structure changes due to individual development of family members or unexpected or unplanned for events (Uhlenberg & Mueller, 2004). A families’ ability to manage these changes is likely to be influenced by the balance of power within the family as well as the experiences, expectations, and adaptability of the individual members. Although there is a greater variability in family structures today, Uhlenberg and Mueller (2004) posit that with strong interpersonal relationships and an equal sharing of resources that all family structures can be positive.

Adult female students come from a wide variety of family structures each one with a unique power differential. The power structure in the family will be important in regards to how decisions are made because the decision to attend college is a costly one and the ability to persist is a time consuming one. The woman’s position in her current family is very likely to impact both the decision to attend college as well as her ability to persist. When you consider that 90% of Americans marry at some point in their lives (Skolnick & Skolnick, 2003), it is important to examine how a marital relationship may impact an adult female undergraduate student. Further, it is important to explore power differentials within marital relationships because of the potential impact this may have in the woman’s ability to pursue higher education as well as her support to persist.
Today, individuals are marrying later and postponing childbearing longer than in previous generations, although most people still get married before the age of 30 (McGoldrick, 1999a). Many women are interested in the ability to pursue a career while also having a family (Hoffnung, 2004; McGoldrick, 1999a). This means that many women want partners who are willing to have a more egalitarian partnership in which both individuals share the household and childcare responsibilities (Hoffnung, 2004; McGoldrick, 1999a). McGoldrick (1999a) points out that when two people get married they begin to redefine decisions previously made at the individual level which were most likely influenced by the family of origin on such things as “when and how to eat, sleep, talk, have sex, fight, work, and relax” (p. 233). The way that these decisions are made will be indicative of the power structure within the new union. In this way, the model for the relationship becomes established.

The balance of power in marital relationships has been the focus of study for quite some time. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to address the variety of ways this construct has been studied, what is important to the current study is that over the life course, the dynamics of the relationship will evolve as couples negotiate the everyday demands of day-to-day living (Baker, Kiger, & Riley, 1996). Shaw and Lee (2009) offer a broad conceptual overview which can be used to inform the current study. These authors categorized the balance of power in relationships as head/complement, junior partner/senior partner, or equal. A marriage in which the man is the head of the household and the woman is primarily responsible for home and child-raising is an example of the head/complement category. In this type of relationship women are typically financially dependent upon their spouse/partner which may place her at risk of staying in a relationship that is detrimental to her mental or physical well-being (McGoldrick, 1999b). Increasing the educational level of the woman may impact the current functioning of the
relationship particularly in regard to power differentials and levels of dependence. This shift may impact perceived support of the woman’s ability to persist towards degree attainment.

The next category of relationship is the junior partner/senior partner paradigm. In the junior/senior partner paradigm, although both members typically work outside the home, one member, usually the wife or female domestic partner, considers her work to be secondary to the senior partner. As a result, the junior partner also takes on primary responsibility for the house and childcare. Women in this position find themselves working countless hours every week trying to keep up with all of their responsibilities (Shaw & Lee, 2009). Dual-earner couples may portray either the junior partner/senior partner paradigm or they may share responsibilities more equally.

Having an equal partnership is a situation in which neither partner is more likely to perform provider or domestic roles. Both roles are seen as equally important to maintaining the household. Financial power is shared. Interestingly, “when women are employed in full-time jobs, with higher earning power relative to their partners, it appears that their male partners are likely to contribute more to domestic work” (Sullivan, 2006, p. 62). Sullivan also reports that in households where partners cohabitate, there is more of an equitable distribution of household chores than in homes of couples who are married. Although this model is becoming more commonplace, there are still many socialized expectations and structural barriers that obstruct true equality in the division of household labor.

Recent research documents increases in equality of performance of household tasks (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2000; McGoldrick, 1999b; Sullivan, 2006). Sullivan (2006) posits that this signifies true changes in values, ideology, and consciousness of rights. He believes that it is within the family that change begins to occur such as roles of mothers and fathers, attitudes
about gender equality, even changes in power despite existing structural gender inequalities. His belief is that these changes at the micro level will begin to influence broader societal norms on the macro level.

**Gender Socialization**

“Socialization teaches the norms and values of a society, the status and roles that we each take on in that society, how the institutions function, and our roles within them” (Leeder, 2004, p. 37). The process of socialization is often of utmost importance because it is a way to maintain the norms and values of the society (Liao & Cai, 1995). Put another way, gender socialization is the combination of expectations that individuals are supposed to conform to based on societal norms. As one of the primary socialization units of society, the family is in a unique position to generally accept or reject these expectations and this will likely influence not only any children that may be in the household but other family members as well (Oliveri & Reiss, 1981; Liao & Cai, 1995; Sullivan, 2006). The prominence of this position is due in part to the fact that “the family is the place in society where race, class, gender, and ethnicity come together” (Leeder, 2004, p. 43) that is because the family we are born into often affects the basic aspects of “where we live, how we earn a living, who our friends are, and what access we have to healthcare and education” (Nesbit, 2005, p. 6). Family processes have been found to be “pliant and conformable” (p. 391) based on societal forces which impact norms in regard to areas associated with culture, social class, occupational experience, neighborhood structure, marital relationships, parent-child bonds, and family interaction patterns (Oliveri & Reiss, 1981).

That said, Oliveri and Reiss (1981) state that families can also be viewed as units who integrate these expectations to different extents and in their own ways. Each family is likely to have different attitudes and expectations based on openness to new experiences, maintaining
family traditions, and succumbing to societal pressures to change which are often based on family history and cohesiveness (Oliveri & Reiss, 1981). It is in these day-to-day interactions that family members have the unique opportunity to be influential and this influence is likely to be felt in areas related to educational and career goals by the individual. In fact, Sullivan (2006) believes that thoughts and behaviors are significantly influenced by family members due to the social construction of knowledge and meaning and the integral relationships between family members. For it is within the family that socialization and personal experience become integrated into everyday thoughts, lives, and experiences (Liao & Cai, 1995).

Research shows that families and home life have a significant impact on how people construct norms based on gender and develop beliefs about the sexual division of labor, thus influencing individual perceptions of such things as role expectations (MacMillan & Copher, 2005) put another way, “family history is a primary vehicle for the acquisition of gender role attitudes and behavior” (Ivey, 1995, p. 214). Gendered expectations begin in infancy and continue through adulthood (Aronson & Buchholz, 2001). For girls and women this socialization process often focuses on appearance and behaviors designed to be more passive and accepting while boys and men are encouraged to be more independent and autonomous (Aronson & Buchholz, 2001). These differences in sex-role messages often result in distinct behavioral expectations, differing opportunities, and gender specific perceptions of experiences which can lead to difficulties in communicating, problem-solving, and expectations about relationships (Aronson & Buchholz, 2001; Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2000). These differences are even more pronounced when gender role expectations are rigid.

For women in America, much has changed in regard to access to such things as higher education, business and property opportunities, and career advancement. However, change
typically requires challenges to the status quo, tends to occur slowly, and tends to be very dependent upon race, class, SES, and gender (Goldberger, 1996; Johnson, 2005; McGoldrick, 1999b). Expectations about what it means to be a woman and the resulting responsibilities are embedded in societal and cultural norms and transmitted from generation to generation by the family (Leeder, 2004; Liao & Cai, 1995; McGoldrick, 1999b; Oliveri & Reiss, 1981; Shaw & Lee, 2009). Adult women will typically experience this from both their family of origin and current family. In this way, woman’s decisions to attend and persist in postsecondary education may often be profoundly influenced by her family.

For women, gender socialization is likely to influence issues related to education, career, marriage and parenthood (Hoffnung, 2004; Marks, Huston, Johnson, & MacDermid, 2001). The beliefs and values that a woman holds tend to be significantly impacted by demographic factors such as race and class (Hoffnung, 2004). For example, research found that not only was there a more intense commitment to career goals of college-educated black women than there was for white women but that the black women saw less conflict between the two roles (Murrell, Frieze, & Frost, 1991). SES was not as clearly differentiated because while higher educational attainment encouraged participation in non-traditional careers, participants in this study reported pressure due to the conflict between work demands and family roles (Rank, 2000). What is clear is that individual circumstances are impacted by structural constructs. For the current study it is important for the researcher to be aware of structural issues associated with gender socialization that may have affected the participants and will help to explain why they decided to go to school and what helps or helped them to persist in regard to their families.

Women, Work and Families
Today, women expect to work, and the higher the education level of the woman, the more likely they are to be employed (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2000; Hoffnung, 2004; McGoldrick, 1999b). Although women are in the workforce in increasing numbers, the positions and pay they receive place them at an economic disadvantage when compared to the male population (Hoffnung, 2004; McGoldrick, 1999b). Additionally, although men traditionally feel supported in their efforts to combine work with family life, women often experience a conflict between the needs of the family with the responsibilities of work (Kasworm, 2003; McGoldrick, 1999b).

According to Hoffnung (2004), when women want to have both a career and a family there are typically three main components they consider. First is the career itself, is it going to be a traditionally female career which may offer more flexibility and are they planning on working on a full-time or part-time basis. Second is the relational component, are they interested in a long-term live-in relationship with a partner, if yes, how will household responsibilities be divided. Third, will she want to have children, if yes, when and how many. The results of Hoffnung’s (2004) study found that 98% of study participants planned to have a career while 80% and 89% of respondents from a national university and regional university respectively expected to combine this with homemaker roles. Additionally, 86% of respondents expected to marry. In a seven year follow-up, 76% of study participants were employed full-time; 43% were married, 11% were engaged, and 19% were in committed relationships; and interestingly, only 15% were mothers. These findings are supported by Kirk & Okazawa-Rey (2007) who found that women are increasingly, putting off marriage and parenting in lieu of career advancement.

Women are going to be particularly vulnerable to family influences because they are often the ones who have primary responsibility for the caretaking of family members. In fact, Mohney and Anderson (1988) found that “it seemed to be necessary for her [the female adult
undergraduate student] to believe that her decision to continue her education would not adversely affect the lives of those she cared about or had responsibilities toward” (p. 273). As previously stated, family messages will often control an individual’s view of themselves and their life roles. Life roles and expectations develop through a complex interaction of extended family, neighborhood, institutional, class, ethnic, and cultural systems (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2000).

One of the foundational roles a woman may have is that of being a mother. There is perhaps no other area in which cultural norms and expectations are so clearly passed on from one generation to the next than in the parenting of children. The impact of having a child on all aspects of life is hard to quantify. From the point of conception on, there is no longer one person to consider, but two in almost every decision that gets made at least until the child is of an age where they can begin to care for themselves in a meaningful way and in reality, much longer than that. Both historically and culturally women are expected to want to be mothers (Shaw & Lee, 2009). In the United States, women are often expected to be nurturing, comforting, and caretaking and willing to sacrifice for their children (Shaw & Lee, 2009). The transmission of these gendered expectations, or roles, is so insidious it is often not recognized or questioned.

Women tend to be happier when they have a variety of life roles (Kopp & Ruzicka, 1993). McGoldrick (1999) writes “the more roles a woman occupies, the healthier she is likely to be” (p. 111). Many young women today expect to have a career, marriage, and children (Hoffnung, 2004). The problem with multiple roles is balancing them. Role strain occurs when an individual has so many roles that they are not able to keep up with the responsibilities associated with each of them (Marks & MacDermid, 1996). These authors suggest that rather than arranging role responsibilities hierarchically, a system of self-organization is used with the
outcome being role balance. Positive role balance is defined as “the tendency to become fully engaged in the performance of every role in one’s total role system, to approach every typical role and role partner with an attitude of attentiveness and care” (Marks & MacDermid, 1996, p. 421). This theory is based on the premise that “role ease and role strain appear to be more a function of how people organize their lives than or what (or how much) they do” (Marks & MacDermid, 1996, p. 429). This is an important idea and may add insight into how these women structure their responsibilities.

An aspect that sets adult female students apart from both traditionally-aged female students and male adult learners is role responsibilities. Roles responsibilities tend to be internalized, gendered, and normalized and are typically impacted by such things as individual experience and expectations, family, culture, and community (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 2007; Shaw & Lee, 2009). Role responsibilities, such as those associated with wife and mother, are often sanctioned and supported by the family and the community (Jackman, 1999). Whereas, other roles, such as that of worker or student, may or may not receive the same level of endorsement and support for female adult students from family and community members. Much of the transmission of these responsibilities may come from the family of origin. Canfield, Hovestadt, and Fenell (1992) write that “an individual acquires from early family experiences a set of explicit and implicit expectations, values, attitudes, and beliefs which serve as points of reference for the evaluation of many subsequent interpersonal experiences” (p. 55). Expectations about role responsibilities impact individuals, particularly adult women, in many aspects of their lives and levels of support for school attendance and persistence are likely by-products of these expectations. These expectations become embodied in the women’s lived experience often as
stress or strain. This was documented by Wiebe and Harvey (1997) in their description of mothers as students:

As students entered university, the addition of a student role to the demands of other areas of life caused the greatest unease. Strains were related to decreased time for family and friends, decreased organization of home and personal activities, demands of household tasks, and issues related to child care. Most strain, however, occurred in coping with the demands of the university itself. (p. 157)

This quote clearly expresses some of the major challenges and potential family impact, which is often felt by female adult undergraduate students who decide to return to school.

There is conflicting information in regard to the current distribution of household responsibilities. According to Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2000) and Sullivan (2006), as higher percentages of women are gainfully employed, at-home responsibilities are being redefined. However, according to Aulette (2002), women continue to be responsible for the majority of household chores. This inconsistency may be due to the specific chores designated as household responsibilities. Women still tend to do more of the time-bound daily activities like shopping and preparing food, cleaning, and laundry while men tend to have household responsibilities for outside and maintenance which can often be done as schedules allow (Aulette, 2002; Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 2007; U.S. Department of Labor Statistics, 2008). Surprisingly, social class had little systematic effect on the division of labor in households (Aulette, 2002). Sweet and Moen (2007) found that although there is often a significant shift in role responsibilities when a first child is born, there was no significant change in household or childcare responsibilities when the wife took on the role of student.
Interestingly, time devoted to household responsibilities has only decreased by a couple of hours in the last 50 years; however, the tasks themselves have changed (Aulette, 2002). Today one of the most time consuming tasks is the transportation of children and goods. Another task is the increasing need for more care of the elderly for longer periods of time. Both of these responsibilities highlight the fact that the distribution of household responsibilities changes over the life course because of its dependence upon family need. In fact, while both men and women are spending significantly more time on shopping, traveling, and childcare, men are still only spending 25% of the time that women do on household tasks (Sullivan, 2006). He also reported that negotiation, communication and commitment were necessary components in creating change in the division of labor of established relationships. This is a realm in which family support of the adult female student may make the difference between persisting towards degree attainment or having to stop out.

**Family Influence on Education**

People in our day-to-day lives such as family members or close friends tend to have a great deal of influence, which is likely to impact decisions involving the pursuit of higher education (Goto & Martin, 2009). Although it is widely believed that families have a large degree of influence on academic achievement, exactly what characteristics are most influential has not been well established (Morales & Trotman, 2004). Currently, there are mixed findings in the literature with regard to the influence the family may have. Most of the research that addresses family influence on education is on children. On a general level, all children tend to be stronger academically when they come from a stable family life (Uhlenberg & Mueller, 2004). This makes sense, when children are cared about and have their basic needs met on a regular basis, they are more able to concentrate on the activities they are involved in and for most
children, school is a big part of their lives. Parents from these families are able to provide resources, social networks, and social capital that often guide children to pursue higher education (Uhlenberg & Mueller, 2004). Additional research supporting these findings was done by Hill (2008), she writes, “on average, white and Asian-American students and those from higher income backgrounds – both boys and girls – do better on standardized tests and are more likely to attend college than their African American, Hispanic, and lower-income peers” (p. 5). Family influence can be examined from both the likelihood of pursuing higher education and the influence on the ability to persist. Uhlenberg and Mueller (2004) state that:

Many of the same family factors that predict whether or not a child will graduate from high school also are relevant for attending college. Family, SES, parental divorce, mother’s and father’s education, and embeddedness in social networks all contribute to the probability that a high school graduate will attend college. (p. 135)

These variables make logical sense, but there is more to it than that. Family context matters meaning emphasis placed on educational attainment within the family is likely to positively influence children to be academically successful (Gandara, 1982; Uhlenberg & Mueller, 2004). Further, research documents that when families emphasize strong academic performance those family members are more likely to pursue higher education (Pearson & Bieschke, 2001).

Studies examining the likelihood of children attending college have examined family demographics as a way to try to predict college attendance. Recently, it has been documented that a parent’s education positively impacts the academic attainment of their children (Hauser-Cram, 2009). However, in a three-generation study of a primarily white sample of females, parental level of education did not have a significant impact on chance of degree completion
(Jacobs & King, 2002); although it did seem to impact whether students initially enroll in higher education (King & Jacobs, 1999).

A woman’s role within her family may also impact not only her educational achievement but those in her family as well. Specifically what has been found is that mother’s status within the family is particularly important to the educational attainment of children in the household (Gandara, 1982; Updegraff, McHale, & Crouter, 1996). Women who hold more egalitarian roles in the family and with higher educational and occupational status tend to have higher achieving daughters and sons (Updegraff, McHale & Crouter, 1996). Further, mothers were more likely to positively influence not only educational aspirations but nontraditional roles for daughters than fathers (Gandara, 1982). From a first person perspective, African American women, who were students themselves, frequently report that educational attainment is important to them on both an individual and community level because of the importance of being role models for their children and their community (Aiken, Cervero, & Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Coker, 2003). Taken together this implies there is a complex interaction of variables which may impact educational attainment of the adult female undergraduate student population.

Family influence may also impact student expectations and opportunities in a negative way. A model known as the Matthew Effect, examines how initial disadvantages may continue to multiply thus continuing a downward spiral of opportunity. This model “emphasizes the increasingly divergent trajectories that develop over the life course, in which initial advantages or disadvantages cumulate over time, resulting in greater inequality in opportunity and outcomes” (Pallas, 2004, p. 176). This is an area in which race and SES may be important because children who are raised in the inner-city or working class neighborhoods may be expected to find work right out of high school in order to help financially sustain the family.
Another finding that has been widely reported is that family size seems to negatively impact school achievement, so the larger the size of the family, the lower the overall average educational level of each family member (Uhlenberg & Mueller, 2004). According to Pallas (2004), empirical research in the United States supports these possible negative effects on the educational transitions and trajectories of adult women. Undergraduate adult female students may be wrestling with these issues on an individual basis or be getting pressure from a family member who is not supportive of her educational attainment or career advancement goals.

Since much of the research on family influence has been done on children, the question remains what impact the family of origin or current family may have on an adult female undergraduate student, or a recent graduate. For adult undergraduate women or recent graduates, this influence is likely to be impacted by age, work, and family roles. Race, SES, and number and age of children have also been shown to significantly impact a woman’s decision to enroll and persist towards degree attainment. This issue when examined from a life course perspective found that “an individual’s age and both work and family roles are likely to influence the dynamics of educational trajectories” (Pallas, 2004, p. 170). Further, he notes, that gender is also likely to affect educational trajectories because responsibilities associated with childcare are more likely to impact women than men. Prior life course research on adult women’s return to school has offered limited results due to the size and scope of the original research projects with one exception, the more schooling an adult woman has, the more likely they are to participate in some form of adult education (Pallas, 2004). In fact, this author states that what is missing from the literature is theories related to individual choice in regards to educational and occupational attainment. The present study is designed to examine these issues from an individual perspective.
using qualitative methodology to gain more in-depth understanding of the influence of the family on these constructs.

Women are now working at close to the same percentages as men meaning their need for higher education is equal to that of men. This study focused on adult women who are returning to school or recently graduated with a bachelor’s degree. Research has found that a family’s life course position significantly influences whether a woman will decide to initially enroll in higher education. Questions that remain are how is this perception of the influence of the family experienced by the woman? How much influence does the family have in regard to initial enrollment? Also, how does the perception of the influence of the family impact the woman’s ability to persist to degree completion? Obviously, understanding family contexts will be foundational to this study. However, examining other constructs that impact female adult undergraduate students is also important and will be the focus of the next section.

**Women in Higher Education**

Examining gender differences is important in areas related to the female adult learner in higher education because many of these gender differences can be traced to the woman’s position within her family. Issues associated with characteristics, participation, barriers, and persistence of adult female undergraduate students as compared to male adult learners and traditionally-aged students are discussed. From there a discussion about female adult learners and their families with regard to the process of attending school and the support to persist will be included. This section ends with how increases in education for adult female undergraduate students or recent graduates may impact their families.

First, it is important to note that much of the research done on adult learners is not gender specific. In fact, information pertaining to such things as retention and persistence rates has been
difficult to obtain because for large research institutions using the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System established by the U.S. Department of Education those numbers are based on cohorts of first-time full-time freshmen. Adult learners are much more likely to be part-time and re-entry students (Donaldson et al., 1999; Jacobs & King, 2002), thus they are often not included in an institution's statistics in regards to participation and persistence. Despite the difficulty in retrieving data, individual researchers have examined adult learners from multiple perspectives and a synthesis of their findings is useful in providing insight into this student population.

**Characteristics of Adult Female Undergraduate Students**

Despite the increasing numbers of adult female undergraduate students who obtain degrees, research shows that these women are different in significant ways from traditionally-aged students as well as male adult learners. First, the major differences between traditionally-aged students and adult learners is that adult learners, which includes both women and men, often have work responsibilities, financial responsibilities, and parenting responsibilities as well (Kasworm, 2003; Lumina, 2007; NCESb; Spanard, 1990). These additional life roles tend to impact women and men differently. Another difference is that female adult learners often have higher grade point averages than traditionally-aged students (Merriam, Cafferella, & Baumgartner, 2007; Padula, 1994; Spitzer, 2000). This has been supported by findings reporting that re-entry women, defined as women reentering educational institutions or the labor force after an absence of a number of years (Padula, 1994), were more self-motivated and had higher educational goals than students who were not identified as re-entry (Badenhoop & Johansen, 1980). Although adult learners share some characteristics, how life roles are impacted is affected by gender. A primary difference between men and women is that women are much more likely
to interrupt their studies more frequently than either traditionally-aged or adult male students. Predictors of this behavior include part-time enrollment status and number of competing life roles (Gandara, 1982; Jacobs & King, 2002; Robertson, 1991; Rodriguez, 1996). On average, as a result of breaks from school, it has been found that adult women take longer to complete their degrees than men (Robertson, 1991).

**Participation**

Participation in college is determined by enrollment of each student. College enrollment is expected to increase through Fall 2017 with a projected increase of 19% in enrollments of people over the age of 25 (NCES, 2008b). The number of females receiving degrees of all types has increased at a higher rate than for males. Summary results from NCES (2008b) show that between 1996-1997 and 2006-2007 the number of bachelor degrees awarded to men increased by 25% while bachelor degrees awarded to women increased by 34%. Increasing participation rates of all adult students and women in particular begs the question of why these individuals are returning to college.

There have been a number of studies that have looked at specific reasons why adult learners return to school. The term return to school is used extensively in the literature when referring to adult learners. As will be shown in the next section, a large percentage of adult learners participated in higher education prior to their current experience. Several common themes have emerged to explain this phenomenon including career advancement or change, personal fulfillment, and family. Career advancement is the number one reason most adult learners return (Bauer & Mott, 1990; Bauman et al., 2004; Kasworm, 2003; Padula, 1994). The influence of the family appears to impact female adult undergraduate students differently than males. For female populations from a lower socioeconomic level, higher educational attainment
may be viewed as an opportunity for social mobility because it can be tied to career advancement (Aiken, Cervero, & Johnson-Bailey, 2001). This is important for women whose goal is economic self-sufficiency. Many adults, particularly females, feel strongly about modeling the value of higher education for children and other community members (Bauman et al., 2004; Coker, 2003). It is their belief that as their children, family members, and community members see them successfully progressing towards degree attainment, it will serve as motivating factors for others to participate as well. Another way that family influence appears to affect female adult learner participation is in the event of a major transition in the family such as divorce or widowhood. This may cause the woman to have to reassess her current situation and make lifestyle changes accordingly which could include the decision to pursue higher education (Kasworm, 2003; Minor, 1989). Taken together, women’s participation in higher education appears to be more closely tied to the family than adult male participation.

When examining adult female students, or recent graduates, one variable seems very significant and yet it is often overlooked. Research done by Jacobs and King (2002) found that 82% of adult female undergraduate students were returning, rather than entering as first-time students. These findings closely mirror those of Plageman and Sabina (2010) which found that 84% of their sample identified themselves as returning students. This supports what a number of researchers have found, namely that female educational and career trajectories do not tend to follow linear paths but rather paths that are interrupted and change along the way (McGoldrick, 1999b; Robertson, 1991; Spanard, 1990). The reasons for interruptions to study are as varied as the adult learner population. Hadfield (2003) points out that “nontraditional students often interrupt their studies for a variety of reasons such as to, have a baby, change jobs, close on a house, care for an ailing or dying parent, get divorced, get married, have bypass surgery, start a
business, or simply catch their breath” (p. 19). Just because female adult learners are more likely to interrupt their studies, doesn’t mean they will not complete their degrees. In fact, women who do re-enter, each time they re-enter they are 22% more likely to complete their degree (Jacobs & King, 2002). That said, it is important to more closely examine why such a large percentage of adult female undergraduate students are returning. This implies that many women do not successfully complete degree requirements the first time they try.

There is another issue that has been identified as being more specific to female adult participation in higher education from a gendered perspective and that is of women who have a profound lack of voice which acts as an embedded internal barrier (Hall & Donaldson, 1997):

At the heart of nonparticipation lies a ‘deterrent’ so deeply embedded in some women that no theory can fully capture its meaning. The way a woman feels about herself, her self-esteem and self-confidence, and the way she can express herself are significant elements in her decision about whether to participate in adult education. (p. 98)

This “lack of voice” is important because a woman’s identity is likely to be very closely tied to her position, her autonomy, and her power of decision-making within her family. Once a woman has made the decision to attend college, there are many reasons they may not be able to persist towards degree completion.

**Barriers**

Barriers to degree completion are considered to be forces that inhibit participation in higher educational endeavors (Valentine & Darkenwald, 1990). Some of the most typical barriers to adult undergraduate student participation are that adult learners tend to be financially independent, work part-time or full-time, and have dependents (U.S. Department of Labor [DOL], 2007). Further, traditionally structured programs that are designed for the traditionally-
aged student may act as a significant barrier to both access and persistence in higher education (DOL, 2007). A summary of some of the most commonly cited reasons for non-degree completion include family responsibilities, lack of self-confidence, educational costs, and lack of availability of courses of interest (Hensley & Kinser, 2001; Valentine & Darkenwald, 1990). In addition, confounding variables including gender, SES, race, and age of children (if any) impact women in different ways based on their life situation and act as barriers in women’s lives, particularly those who come from lower SES and who are not white (Aiken, Cervero, & Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Coker, 2003; Rodriguez, 1996). The more children a woman has and the younger they are, the more likely they are to not be enrolled (Shields, 1994).

A framework for understanding barriers experienced by adult learners identifies three categories institutional, situational, and psychosocial (Spanard, 1990). Institutional barriers are more structural but could be changed based on student need and include such things as the admission process, class locations, schedules, fee structures, and the helpfulness of the administrators and faculty members at the campus. Situational barriers were described as job commitments, home responsibility, lack of money, lack of child care, and transportation problems. Although relevant to all adult learners, these are particularly relevant for female adult learners who are typically primarily responsible for the day-to-day operations of the family (Home, 1998). The final barrier, psychosocial includes attitudes, beliefs and values that the individual student holds, self-esteem of the student, opinions of others, and past experiences as a student.

Feminist methodology, which focuses on gender differences, has identified basic structural inequities experienced by women. Bowl (2001) states that “women have been systematically disadvantaged by educational and occupational structures. They experience
barriers which relate to their gender position – as mothers, frequently as lone carers and as workers directed towards particular occupational roles with poor wage and career structures” (p. 143). This method of conceptualization is based on societal statistics which show increasing numbers of single-headed households, headed by women, who struggle with lower average salaries than men (Bowl, 2001). Looking at barriers among men and women, men are more likely to report premature withdrawal due to course, financial, or work related issues whereas women were more likely to report early withdrawal because of family commitments or childcare issues (McGivney, 2004). These difficulties, felt by many women when they incorporate the role of student into their lives, were expressed by Rodriguez (1996):

They [adult women] generally have primary responsibility for child-rearing and other family matters; they suffer a disproportionate amount of stress, guilt, and anxiety over their myriad responsibilities; their success is often dependent on behavioral and emotional support from spouses and other family members; and, at some postsecondary institutions, there is a lack of support services to help re-entry women overcome the barriers to furthering their education. (p. 1/2)

This finding is supported by research which documents that for adult undergraduate women with children, the time devoted to them, is a significant barrier to degree completion (Badenhoop & Johansen, 1980; Home, 1998).

Racial differences identified as barriers for African American women were very different from those of white women and included discrimination, negative stereotypes, injustice, prejudice, cultural misunderstandings, and denial of these differences (Aiken, Cervero, & Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Coker, 2003). As a result of these experiences participants reported feelings of marginalization in terms of abilities, relationships with faculty members, and with
relationships to other learners. As a result of these feelings of marginalization these women felt as though they needed to behave in ways that were not authentic to themselves. In learning how to negotiate the system, they found they were forced to appear more compliant and passive than they would normally be (Coker, 2003).

The barriers that have been identified are a combination of institutionally controlled variables as well as those more germane to each individual student. Although the influence of the family is highlighted as an important barrier, specific information about how a family may actually be influential in whether the adult female undergraduate student is able to persist, or not, is not made clear. The current study is designed to gain greater insight into this phenomena.

**Persistence and Completion**

Persistence is when students continue to return to school in consecutive semesters until degree completion. Full-time adult female students completed degree requirements at an average rate of 20% whereas part-time students had completion rates of between 7% and 9% (Jacobs & King, 2002). A question arises as to how other role responsibilities impact these students' ability to persist. Surprisingly, these authors found that being married did not significantly impact degree completion. Divorce on the other hand was found to have a negative effect on completion. Since these findings are based on students currently enrolled, rather than someone considering enrollment, it makes sense that a significant transition in the family structure could cause a disruption in the educational progress of the adult woman as in the case of a divorce. Other barriers to persistence included either part-time or full-time employment. Although having pre-school aged children negatively impacted younger women’s ability to successfully obtain a degree, the findings for older mothers were not statistically significant (Jacobs & King, 2002).
Among older women who return to college full-time and who are childless, the chances of completing college are similar to those who enrolled in their early 20s. On the other hand, older women who are enrolled part-time, who delayed their entry into college, and who have become mothers are much less likely to complete their degrees than are younger women. (p. 222)

From a life course perspective, age of student and life situation will also affect persistence. Through sequential persistence, degree completion occurs. Completion patterns differ between women and men. Overall adult female undergraduate students are much more likely to report non-academic reasons for withdrawal than men (Home, 1997; McGivney, 2004). The most frequently cited variables related to non-degree completion for adult women are part-time enrollment status, being a parent of young children, lack of support and encouragement from spouse/partner or other family members, and lack of study time (Jacobs & King, 2002; Kasworm, 2003; Leavitt, 1989; McGivney, 2004). This finding is verified in the work done by Suitor (1987) who has found that part-time students are more likely to withdraw when there are serious conflicts between student and family life roles than full-time students.

An important aspect of being a successful student is having enough time to devote to school work. Creating this time from a life that is typically already full of responsibilities, especially in regard to family needs, can lead to conflict that is both internal and external. This is the aspect of being a female student which requires time away from other life responsibilities. Many women have learned, from their families, to sacrifice their needs for the good of others (Hayes, 2002). In fact, both families and educational institutions were referred to by Home (1997) as being “greedy institutions” because of the time and energy that they each require. The beliefs women have about what they should be responsible for are ingrained and can lead to
feelings of guilt when they feel as though they are not fulfilling their obligations (Home, 1998; McGivney, 2004; Wiebe & Harvey, 1997). The result of these beliefs may be profound in regard to persistence if the female adult student does not take the time that is necessary for class attendance and studying.

**The Decision to Enroll**

Women decide to enter college for many reasons. Increasing educational levels opens doors and opportunities and women who return to pursue an undergraduate degree feel that degree attainment is going to assist them. It is important to recognize that participation means the decision to participate has already been made. Decisions about attending college appear to be impacted by the influence of the family. For instance, the most frequently cited reason for the delayed entry of adult woman into higher education was role demands (Mohney & Anderson, 1988). In fact, the perception that role demands had decreased, with regard to family responsibilities, was the most frequently cited enabling factor for these adult women to decide to attend an institution of higher education (Mohney & Anderson, 1988). Additionally, having older children has been cited as a significant variable in a woman’s initial decision to enroll in school (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Jacobs & King, 2002; McGivney, 2004).

Spanard (1990) offers a model, though not gender specific that provides a framework for examining the decision-making process to re-enter college with the intention of completing the degree. The model is entitled *The Intent to Re-enter* and is made up of three separate actions. First, the adult will establish the initial desire and intent to return. This phase is likely to be highly dependent upon the life course of the family, the career goals of the student, and the level of support she is likely to receive from family members. For adult women this intention is likely the result of a variety of factors including identity, age, and family needs. Second, the
adult will determine, to the best of her ability, if the benefits of program involvement will justify the time and resources the program will cost. These structural considerations will include issues related to other role responsibilities, access to either financial resources or financial aid, and a belief in the value of the resulting degree. The third is the actual perseverance needed for degree completion. As much of the research documents, this perseverance is likely to be linked to family circumstances and levels of support for adult female students or recent graduates (Jacobs & King, 2002; McGoldrick, 1999b).

The initial decision-making process was also broken down by Stein and Wanstreet (2006). Underlying assumptions of their model are that the decision to return to school occurs over a period of time and in a non-linear fashion. This process is said to start with the belief that a higher education will secure a higher level of employment. While males tend to assess the opportunity costs of attending higher education against the benefits of a future job compared to their current position, women are more likely to enroll to become more economically self-sufficient. The second level of this model is called *The Reflective Learner* and includes the participants beliefs about their past academic experience and current academic readiness. For women struggling with low self-esteem or concerns about being academically successful, this is an important cognitive barrier to surpass in order to move onto the next level of consideration. The next level in this model is entitled *Synchronizing Learning, Earning, and Living*. This aspect of the model recognizes the importance of the life course of the individual and the family and the specific timing for returning back to college. These authors note that particularly for working class women, there is significant influence from husbands and significant others in both the decision to attend and ability to stay enrolled. The final aspect of this model is known as *Match with an Academic Life* and has to do with the student institution fit. The student’s
perception of program usefulness, institutional flexibility, and program demands and requirements are measured against current life situations. This last level has more to do with institutions meeting the needs of the adult learner population. Stein and Wanstreet (2006) further state that “the decision to enroll is a cognitive, emotional, and relational decision considered within the web of family, work, social, financial class, gender, institutional support, and program delivery considerations” (p. 7). Women may have family support which allows them the option to talk about these aspects of the decision-making process, or they may not.

What both of these models offer is a window from which to view the complexity involved in this type of decision. While The Intent to Reenter model is a good starting point, there are two problems with using this framework exclusively. First, it lacks any differentiation between genders in the decision-making process. Second, it incorporates the process of persistence which is different from the initial decision to attend. The second model is much more comprehensive but it begins with the assumption that adult learners who return to school do it simply to secure higher levels of employment. Although research shows that is the reason the majority of individuals pursue higher education, there is also a large percentage of individuals who return for other reasons. Both of these frameworks offer a way to conceptualize the decision-making process but it is important to recognize each individual’s unique situation and be open to how they navigated their own decision-making process.

**Family Support to Persist**

Recognizing that while families socialize individuals, each family does this in unique ways through encouragement and setting expectations thus creating individual outcomes. These family expectations are likely to influence level of support for academic achievement. Family support has been found to be an important component of persistence for adult female
undergraduate students (Chartrand, 1992; Dill & Henley, 1998; Sciarra & Whitson, 2007). Research has documented that support by mothers can be very important (Gandara, 1982), while support from community members has also been shown to be beneficial (Aiken, Cervero, & Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Coker, 2003).

Family influence on degree attainment is often measured using the constructs of emotional and instrumental support. Emotional support encompasses being available at a relational level and thus willing to listen, talk, care, support, and empathize. Instrumental support is typically considered to be hands-on help with such things as finances, child care, or household chores (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002). Although nontraditional students reported less emotional and instrumental support than traditional students, the nontraditional students were as satisfied with the level of support they received as the traditionally-aged students (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002). This could be directly related to the fact that the nontraditional students were more likely to have direct family and household responsibilities as compared to the traditionally-aged student whose “job” was to be a student. When asked about levels of instrumental support received from family members and friends, participants rated strongly agree or agree by 74% and 66% respectively (Bauman et al., 2004). This means the majority of study participants felt as though they were being supported with hands-on assistance by those who are closest to them. Reentry women reported that family, community, and financial support were all important components in helping them to achieve degree attainment (Padula, 1994).

Support from family members, as a variable impacting persistence for adult female undergraduate students, is a construct which has been researched in a number of studies. Support and perceived support are important because of the primary position so many woman
hold in their families for taking care of the house and children. Home (1997) considers the idea of support from a holistic perspective which includes who it comes from, what is offered, and how available it is perceived to be. Her study reports that 57% of respondents reported receiving high support from family and friends while 19% reported strong support from their workplace and 13% reported strong institutional support. Similar studies have confirmed that the strongest sources of support came from husbands, lovers, and friends (Badenhoop & Johansen, 1980; Bauman et al., 2004; McGivney, 2004). Plageman and Sabina (2010) found that highest levels of support came from other family members, mothers, and spouse/partners. In summary, it appears that those individuals who are closest to the student provide the most support and that this support is both acknowledged and appreciated.

The importance of support received is highlighted in the following quote, “the need for support, unambiguous approval, and practical assistance was voiced over and over” (Redding & Dowling, 1992, p. 234). Even perceptions of support can be helpful, although women reported their husbands were supportive of them, the husbands did not necessarily offer additional help and there was little change in the management of the household responsibilities (Leavitt, 1989). An interesting finding is that husbands who had a college degree provided somewhat less instrumental support than less educated husbands (Suitor, 1988). This author theorized that the less educated husbands anticipated higher family earnings based on their wife’s degree attainment and that this influenced them to offer more household support.

In addition to the previously reported findings on gender differences, adult male students tended to feel more support from their spouse and family than female adult students (Kasworm, 2003). This may be due to the fact that the family relies more on the woman for its day-to-day operations so the woman may perceive less support of her academic endeavors because of the
interference caused by school responsibilities. Although findings are not consistent, other research has found that men reported less family support in regards to time and money spent on college than women did (Kasworm, 2003; Malin, Bray, Dougherty, & Skinner, 1980). The perception of support reported by men and women is likely a combination of family experience and cultural expectations which could explain the discrepancy between these findings. As previously stated, families, the life stage of the family, and a woman’s position within her family are likely to impact the female adult undergraduate student.

Women report nurturing supportive behaviors from family members by a number of means. As an example, women like to incorporate their worlds of home and school. One way of incorporating a woman’s family into her educational process is by bringing family members to campus. Women who brought spouses, partners, and children to campus felt that the family members became more familiar with and connected to the woman’s university experience (Redding & Dowling, 1992). Adult women also bring their children and families figuratively into the classroom through their writing and participation in classroom discussions (Jackman, 1999). Another way adult women connect their family members to their university experience is through daily dialog. By sharing stories, successes, challenges, and outcomes, it connects family members and friends to the experience the woman is going through and can make them feel like they are more part of the process (Redding & Dowling, 1992; Shields, 1994). This is likely to lead to more support of the adult learner by family members and friends.

One way to assess levels of support is through an examination of how and when women study and read for classes. There are a variety of ways that women carve out time to study. Of course, when a woman has children, the age of those children will impact study time. However, strategies employed include: studying on specific days, having specific times set aside, having
support from someone who takes over the household or childcare responsibilities, or waiting until everyone is in bed for the night before beginning to study (Redding & Dowling, 1992). An underlying theme of these findings was that the women are interested in working towards a balance of family and school responsibilities. These women reported that it was important to them to nurture interdependence within the family system as opposed to independence and that carving out special time for the different areas of responsibility seemed to be a good way to make it work (Redding & Dowling, 1992). Family members may respond in any number of ways to women as they pursue higher education. Although family support has been found to have a significantly positive effect on an adult learners’ ability to persist, some women persist despite difficult family situations.

An aspect of support that it is important to spend some time examining is a lack of support or perhaps resentment of family members. This lack of support may be from members of either family of origin or current family. Although support was conceptualized as emotional or instrumental earlier in this paper, it also needs to include non-verbal cues or rhetoric which is not supported by action (Hall & Donaldson, 1997). The term countersupporters is used to describe individuals who are not supportive and it was actually subdivided into two levels (Redding & Dowling, 1992). Constants were identified as individuals who preferred that the female adult students stay the way they are, and not increase their levels of knowledge and education, while toxics aggressively demean and inhibit academic endeavors. For some adult women this lack of support is substantial. For example, one woman described her husband in the following way, “my husband would rip up my books, put them in the toilet, keep me up all night fighting so I would be too tired to concentrate in class the next day” (Rodriguez, 1996, p. 4).
Another example is illustrated by a male student who described the experience of a female student he attended school with (Lunneborg, 1997):

A lot of the women students I met had partners who were very threatened. They had to deal with violence, marriage break-ups, being a single parent. One woman in her 50’s who was going to graduate the following year hadn’t told her family (that she was studying) in all those years because of ridicule. (p. 32)

While family support has been shown to be important, these women show that despite a significant lack of family support, they continued to persist in college. These findings make the current research project even more significant in that greater insight is needed to help establish how much influence the family has and how important it is towards degree completion.

For single parents, while they may not be dealing with aggressive non-support, they are still likely to find themselves with very limited study time due to household responsibilities. When families are non-supportive of academic endeavors women often begin to experience conflict as they begin to learn more and begin to development more confidence in themselves and their abilities (Belenky et al., 1986). However, even in families which support academic achievement, there are likely changes that impact women as they proceed through their program of study and these changes are likely to be experienced by the family.

Each of these studies places the woman in a prominent position in regard to her place in the family and the responsibilities associated with running a household. What is missing from the scope of these findings is the in-depth nuances that make up the lived experiences of these women on a day-to-day basis, the living of their lives while incorporating the role of student. While support has been highlighted as being important and helpful, not all women receive support from their families for their academic endeavors. In order to have a broader
understanding of the continuum of support, it is important to consider the impact of non-support or even obstruction.

Increased education can lead to new ideas and expectations which differ from those of the family and this could lead to conflicts between a woman’s current life position and a position she begins to work towards as a result of her educational experience. Tension can occur as a result of an adult returning for more education and it can impact the student’s perception or view of their family (Rossiter & Clark, 2007). This issue could have a profound impact on female adult learners who return to school depending upon how they are situated within their families. This may be particularly relevant for those women who come from a marital relationship that can be described as either head/complement or junior partner/senior partner. Furthermore, it is an important issue for the student, faculty members and institutional administrators to be aware of because of the possibility for life changing decisions which could occur as a result of this tension.

By using qualitative methodology, woman’s voices can be listened to and individual circumstances can be accounted for. This literature review has described how family of origin influence can be felt throughout life from both an educational and career perspective because it impacts expectations, aspirations, increased self-efficacy, and a sense of commitment (Whiston & Keller, 2004). It has also been explained that it is not only the family of origin but current family which can significantly impact an individual’s life experience and that this influence is likely to impact educational decision-making (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2000). It would seem that the people we are closest too are most likely to have the most influence on us. This idea, coupled with those of the life course perspective which purports that decisions and actions result from the confluence of age, socio-cultural, and historical contexts provides a framework from
which to view this influence. Influence is also considered to be affected by expectations based on culture, age, race, SES, gender, and historical context and is likely to impact roles, responsibilities, and expectations.

With increasing numbers of women entering and completing bachelor degree requirements understanding this unique student population is important. Adult women have unique characteristics compared to adult males or the traditionally-aged student population. One of the biggest differences is the role of primary care provider and director of household maintenance which many women are responsible for. As a result of these responsibilities, family support has been shown to be important, and negative support a barrier, to successful degree completion. What is not clearly demonstrated is the influence the family has on the female adult learner or recently graduated woman’s decision to attend college or her ability to persist towards graduation. The current study is designed to add to the literature by offering a qualitative analysis of how family members have influenced the academic experience of the study participants.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

This section begins with a brief introduction and includes a review of the purpose statement and research questions. It is followed by an overview of some of the significant differences between theoretical assumptions between qualitative and quantitative methodologies. This chapter then moves into types of qualitative research in order to establish a rationale for research type. One of the assumptions of qualitative study is that the researcher is an integral component of the research process; thus, the researcher’s background, experience, and personal interest in the subject is discussed. The criteria and method for participant selection is established. This is followed by an explanation of the data collection process which includes the interview method chosen, information about question development, and information about conducting the interviews. The data analysis section identifies how the findings will be established. Finally, data verification explains how the aspects of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were incorporated into the planning and implementation of the research study.

Purpose of Research

The purpose of this research study is to explore the influence of family on female adult undergraduate students, or recent graduates, as it relates to her educational experiences.

Research Questions

1. Do adult women perceive family members as having a significant influence on their higher educational experience?

2. Does the perception of this influence significantly impact participation and/or persistence?
Qualitative Research

Studies in the social sciences tend to have a different focus and ask different types of questions than physical science research simply because of the nature of human behavior. We, as human beings, think, talk, and can change our minds, attitudes, and behaviors very quickly. When researchers are interested in learning in-depth information about a specific phenomenon, rather than a measure of general tendency, qualitative research methodology is employed. In general, qualitative inquiry is based on smaller sample sizes and uses interviews in order to reveal in-depth detail that focuses on individual perception (Patton, 2002); whereas, quantitative research is based on the scientific method, uses inductive reasoning, and uses larger sample sizes with random participant selection as a means of ensuring generalizability of the results (Patton, 2002). Since the current study is designed to examine the perceptions of the influence of the family, the use of qualitative methodology provided the most effective framework for data collection and analysis. The sample size was small, consisting of 13 participants to allow the researcher to gain in-depth information into the participant’s perceptions.

Qualitative methodology assumes that the meaning people make of their lives is a result of the interactions they have with the people in their environment (Merriam & Associates, 2002). These interactions impact beliefs the individual creates; thus, not only is it the interactions with others, but the individual’s perceptions and beliefs about themselves based on those interactions. This idea is not only foundational to the current study but also parallels the importance placed on family in the life course theory. In fact, Pratt and Fiese (2004) state that “families serve as a place for the individual to find and explore new senses of the self and others at all ages, from early childhood into late adulthood” (p. 2). This aspect is important to the current study because interactions with family members often have such profound influences over the life course. This
meaning people make, or perceived reality, rather than being fixed and measurable, as the positivist paradigm posits, allows for a reality that is constantly shifting, changing, and adapting. This worldview considers the importance of historical time and place while incorporating individual voices, thoughts, and actions. It is this attention to the meaning people make of their interactions that necessitates the use of qualitative methods. This focus of qualitative research comes from the desire to understand the meaning people make from their experiences. Qualitative data examines perceptions and experiences in an effort to gain insight into the meaning people have made as a result of these situations. Also, qualitative researchers want to know how these experiences have impacted participants and what they think about it. Because this study is geared towards understanding how the influence of family members has impacted the participants, it is necessary to learn about the participant’s experiences to see what their beliefs are about how the family may or may not have influenced them. This type of research sacrifices generalization to broader populations based on in-depth knowledge of individual perceptions. Thus, the reader of qualitative studies is placed in a position to determine if the results of the study are useful in her/his specific situation (Patton, 2002).

Another assumption of qualitative research is that the researcher is integral to the research process. This means that the researcher is the central instrument of the study. Because qualitative inquiry focuses on the meaning people make from their experiences and embraces the complexity of context, effectively gathering this information is key. As a result, qualitative researchers are encouraged to make their beliefs and assumptions about the study transparent (Patton, 2002). Qualitative researchers believe that it is not possible to be totally removed from the research process; rather, they believe that the original idea for the study, the process of establishing the study, running the study, and writing the results of the study are all profoundly
impacted by the researcher. This does not indicate that findings should be considered from a biased and one-dimensional perspective rather, the researcher’s goal is to add to the knowledge base from a complex perspective that allows for analysis of how the intersection of multiple variables impacts the phenomenon under study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

**Types of Qualitative Research**

The variety of established approaches in qualitative research has been classified in different ways by different authors. Qualitative research types identified by Merriam and Associates, (2002) include: basic interpretive, phenomenological, grounded theory, case study, ethnography, narrative analysis, critical research, and postmodern research. More recently, Richards and Morse (2007) have sorted these research types into three broad categories which include phenomenology, ethnography, and grounded theory. While all qualitative research is designed to create understanding and insight into a phenomenon, each of these different types asks different foundational questions and examines how the information is derived and which sources of information are highlighted. Interpretive research is similar to phenomenology, in that phenomenology is described as, “carefully, and thoroughly capturing and describing how people experience some phenomenon – how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others” (Patton, 2002, p.104). However, it differs from the phenomenological perspective in that it broadens the area of interest beyond the “essence or structure of an experience” to include an understanding of not just the experience of the phenomenon, but the “process, the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved, or a combination of these” (Merriam & Associates, 2002, p. 6-7).

Put another way, interpretive research is a broad methodology, which is solely concerned with understanding the participant’s perception of the study phenomenon. Interpretive
researchers recognize distinct differences between people, situations, and perceptions about all stimuli. In addition, the ideas of time and place in history as well as other structural and institutional constraints offered through the lens of the life course perspective require a methodology that recognizes an individual’s unique context and how this will translate into perceptions of experience. The current study is designed to gain an understanding into the in-depth perceptions of the study participants. Although it will examine the phenomenon of the decision to return to school and ability to persist from the perspective of the adult female undergraduate student, the researcher is interested in gaining an understanding about how the perceptions of family influence have been impacted over the life time bringing them to where they currently are. This study will use an interpretive design because of the emphasis on understanding each participant’s individual perspective.

The interpretive paradigm is culture bound and recognizes that people construct knowledge both individually and in groups. An aspect of this study is that individuals may or may not be cognizant of the messages they have received from their families. The profound influence that families have on an individual’s life is an area rich with anecdotal life stories, but is difficult to quantify analytically. While a survey may not be able to shed light on the impact that individual and familial expectations as well as cultural norms would have on the perception of influence, in-depth interviews may offer a vehicle to gain insight into this experience. Basic interpretive methodology will provide the necessary framework to address the research questions.

**Designing a Qualitative Methodology**

In creating a research design, the researcher must first determine the purpose of her research. In consideration of this purpose, there needs to be congruence between the
philosophical perspective, the theoretical framework, the research paradigm, and the methodology. The type of research questions being asked will depend upon the research paradigm that has been selected. The following is a brief summary of some types of research that qualitative inquiry is designed to answer: when the purpose is understanding and there is little known about the subject; when there are complex situations or the phenomenon are shifting and changing; when the purpose is to learn the way phenomenon were experienced by the participants and/or the meaning they associated with it; or when the researcher wants to construct a theory, or to understand phenomenon in a detailed way (Richards & Morse, 2007).

To explain this in a different way, Patton (2002) reports that qualitative methodology is ontologically relativistic, epistemologically subjective, and methodologically hermeneutic, meaning reality is situationally based, knowledge is constructed based on experience and perception, and findings are subject to interpretations which are contextually based. To summarize, the current qualitative research study is designed to understand the adult female’s perspective about the influence of members of her family of origin and current family on her educational experiences. The goal is to gain insight into these perceptions which will assist the researcher in gaining an understanding about the impact of these influences.

**Researcher’s Background**

Although I have not had experience being an adult learner at the undergraduate level, I have returned to school for a master’s degree as an adult learner and am currently a doctoral student. Like so many of the women I have read about, I returned when my children were older and as a part-time student. I returned to school for career enhancement. I was and am privileged in many ways from my upbringing to my current life situation. My husband has always been supportive of my academic endeavors financially, emotionally, and instrumentally.
I always felt as though my education was a shared endeavor that would help our family be more financially secure in our future.

While education has always been a priority for me, I have a sister who never obtained her bachelor’s degree. She is a single mom who holds a professional position working for a national corporation. Although it doesn’t appear as though her lack of a degree has held her back, it is something that would be very helpful for her to have because of the position she holds. The people she supervises have at least a bachelor’s degree and she has expressed a desire to have a similar educational level. Over the years she has talked about going back to school, and she even began an on-line course of study more than once. She said it was just too time-consuming. With a full-time job and a son, she does not feel that she has the time, money, or support to begin work towards an undergraduate degree. Although we came from the same family, we have taken very different paths educationally. I am interested in learning more about how life paths of women seeking undergraduate degrees are influenced by the family. This information may help to shed light on ways to assist women who may not feel able to undertake this challenge.

Professionally, I am the director of a program that provides support services to undergraduate students who enter the university academically underprepared and economically disadvantaged. Each year the percentage of adult learners who are eligible for program participation increases. Over the years, I have had the privilege of working closely with this dedicated population as they pursue degree attainment. Part of my job responsibility includes counseling and advising these students. I am often the person who hears about their academic struggles, financial stress, relational difficulties, and the challenge of incorporating their variety of life roles. Overall, these students tend to show a dogged persistence toward degree attainment.
Personal life experience, family needs, and expectations regarding higher education have been recurring themes. Messages from family of origin as well as previous educational experiences have shaped many of the beliefs these students have about themselves as well as their hopes for the future. Additionally, current family situations can be pivotal in determining some of these students ability to persist. Learning more about what messages they have received and how they currently perceive those influences could help educators assist these students be more focused, confident, and future-oriented. Finally, many times these women report that they are not only doing this for themselves but for others in their lives, families, and communities. They wish to be a good role model for their children in making positive choices and putting an emphasis on education.

My research experience to date has been limited to projects involving surveys coupled with quantitative analysis. Those types of methods did not yield the information I am seeking. This research will require the in-depth interviews of a qualitative methodology. Although I will be new to interviewing as a qualitative researcher, my experience as a licensed professional counselor will serve me well in meeting with and interviewing study participants. Many counseling strategies such as active listening and questioning to gain clarification of ideas are similar to the skills necessary for effective interviewing. In addition, through my professional work experience, I have met and worked with many adult female undergraduate students and am familiar, through personal stories and extensive reading, with many of the issues they struggle with. It is my hope to glean more in-depth information about this process in order to shed additional light about the experiences of this unique student population.

Participant Selection
Establishing criteria for participant selection is an important part of the research process. Since using information rich cases in qualitative studies is so central to the process, selecting individual participants who have clear recollections and strong feelings, and are willing to share their experiences will be vital to effective data collection. Creswell (2007) states that, “the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (p. 125).

Determining where the participants will come from and how they will be recruited will impact the final participant pool. One method of participant selection is purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is a method which focuses on a small number of cases which provide in-depth understanding into the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002). The present research study will use purposeful sampling in order to gain insight and understanding into the adult female learner’ educational experiences as they relate to her family of origin and current family.

For purposeful sampling individuals need to meet specific criteria in order to be eligible to participate. There are two types of purposeful sampling procedures that were used for this study. Criterion sampling establishes specific criteria for participant eligibility and then the researcher can examine results from the cases that fit the criteria (Patton, 2002). A second method, snowball sampling, also called chain sampling, involves asking participants for recommendations about whom they think would be good participants for the study (Patton). This is a way to increase the possible pool of participants. The current study begins with criterion sampling and will incorporate snowball sampling as a way to increase the sample size while working towards the saturation point of findings. Recommended sample sizes vary, so much will be dependent upon the specific study being done (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002).
Patton (2002) shares that “sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what’s at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources” (p. 244). For the current study, the researcher had 13 participants, she conducted interviews that lasted between one to two hours, and followed-up electronically and by phone for clarification and verification of the interview transcripts. For me, it was important to continue to interview participants until I felt as though I was not learning anything new, also known as the point of saturation.

Choosing the criteria for possible program participants requires careful thought and must be compatible with the theoretical framework. The principle of linked lives within the life course theory recognizes that individuals live their lives interdependently and these lives are impacted by the network of shared relationships within them (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003). germane to this research study are the perceptions that occur as a result of these shared relationships with family members both past and present. With the pre-established difficulty of defining exactly what the terms “family of origin” and “current family” represent, the selection criteria became slightly more nebulous. Nonetheless, the following criteria were selected based on a review of the literature, specifically, current literature on who and what constitutes families.

Demographically, participants needed to be female, at least 25 years of age, currently pursuing or recently obtained a bachelor’s degree (within the last year), and have a current family in addition to at least a memory of a family of origin. Having a family history with both a current family and a family of origin was established. For the purposes of this study, family of origin included people the participants were raised with or related to while current family included a spouse/partner, children, or others whom they considered to be family and who depended on them in some way and were separate from members of their family of origin.
Participants were recruited in a number of ways. Several were approached on an individual basis by the researcher. Others were solicited by a request from the researcher to faculty and staff members at the university who then passed the information along to perspective participants. The participants then contacted the researcher and I was able to explain the study and verify eligibility. Several of the participants were part of an adult women’s support group which was sponsored by the Women’s Center on campus. These women were contacted by the program coordinator and sent information explaining the project electronically. My contact information was listed and the women who were interested and willing to participate contacted me. I then spoke with them over the phone to verify that they were eligible to participate. In addition, I was able to increase the participant pool by asking participants if they knew anyone who might be willing to be part of the research project. Then, the participant passed the researcher’s contact information along to the next potential participant. All participants were recruited through face to face interactions, email, or by phone.

Following the initial screening of women who are 25 years old and older and are pursuing an undergraduate degree, the researcher contacted possible participants to determine final eligibility for inclusion in the research project. Questions that were used to determine current family status included: are you currently in an intimate relationship with a spouse or partner and/or do you have a child or children, or others who you consider to be family who depend on you in some way other than family of origin members. If it was established that they have a current family, which is separate from their family of origin, they were asked to participate in the research study.

I studied individuals from the mid-size state-related institution where I previously worked; although any adult female 25 years of age and older who were pursuing a bachelor’s
degree or recently graduated could have been included. The tuition is lower at the state institution than the smaller public and private schools in the area, but the differences in the structure of the programs that are offered are substantial. For instance, at the institution where I did my research, adult learners attend traditional higher education programs meaning there are not any undergraduate degrees that are offered exclusively evenings, weekends, or on-line. This means that students need to have the flexibility to attend classes on weekdays. Readers of these results will need to determine for themselves if they think the findings could be generalized to their student population.

Data Collection

The basic interpretive design of this research project was based on in-depth interviews of the study participants. The purpose of qualitative interviews is, “to capture how those being interviewed view their world, to learn their terminology and judgments, and to capture the complexities of their individual perceptions and experiences” (Patton, 2002, p. 348).

Interview Methods

Specific interview methodology is another primary aspect of qualitative research which needs to be done intentionally. According to Patton (2002), the purpose of interviewing is to enter into another person’s perspective. Seidman (2006) expands on Patton’s work by describing the purpose of interviewing as truly “understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 9). Both of these researchers emphasize the importance of the quality of information gained during an interview and note that quality is often dependent upon the skill of the interviewer. Fontana and Frey (2000) add that quality of the findings are also profoundly impacted by the rapport, or trust, established between the interviewer and interviewee
Seidman (2006) uses a phenomenologically based interview style. His approach is made up of mostly open-ended questions. The researcher’s task is to “build upon and explore their participants’ responses to those questions and the goal is to have the participant reconstruct his or her experience within the topic under study” (p. 15). This is the type of interview which will provide the best information for my research topic because of the numerous ways a family’s influence may be felt and perceived. These perceptions will likely impact behaviors and I wanted participants to have the opportunity to fully tell their story without being limited to answering a set of predetermined questions. Although I had a couple standardized questions, I believe to truly understand the meaning people have made from their experiences; they need to be given the freedom to talk. This allowed the researcher the ability to not only clarify but to build upon the shared information.

Interviews can be structured in a number of ways but the most recognized types of interviews are structured, semi-structured, or unstructured (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Patton, 2002). The level of structure is determined by the level of prescription, or directiveness, of the questions being asked. Interviews that are conversational without preconceived questions would be considered unstructured or informal. Unstructured interviews offer the most flexibility in gaining in-depth information based on the context of the information being offered. The interview is guided by the purpose of the research, but each interview will be unique because it will be lead by the respondent (Patton, 2002). Because of this freedom, this type of interview is susceptible to interviewer bias and leading questions (Patton, 2002).

Interviews that use some open-ended questions with the freedom to expand on issues raised based on responses during the interview are considered semi-structured. This is the interview format, which was used for the current study because it offered the researcher the
opportunity to initially direct the interview, but allowed the participant the freedom to express
themselves without being limited by a standardized set of questions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003;
Richards & Morse, 2007; Seidman, 2006). It also provided the researcher the freedom to follow-
up on comments made during the interview process. Interviews that only follow a pre-scripted
list of questions would be highly structured, or standardized, meaning each participant would
answer the same questions in the same order. This method does not allow for expansion of ideas
that occur during the interview, but makes it easier to compare answers among all study
participants. On the other hand, it limits the researcher’s ability to gain in-depth information
about individual cases that come up from the interview questions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

The structure of the research project, the number of researchers involved, and the desired
information will all impact the type of interviews used. In creating the interview questions for
the current study, it was important to not be too structured because a basic interpretive design is
dependent upon the researcher having the flexibility to probe deeper and to listen to individual
stories. Less structured interviews allows individual stories to unfold. The current study used a
semi-structured interview format. This is an ideal format because, I, as the sole researcher, was
able to control the focus of the interviews and ask questions based on the interview context. In
addition, this type of format allowed for comparisons between responses to specific questions
while allowing for more of an in-depth understanding based on individual responses and
experiences. Finally, this method allowed the interviewee to tell, in her own words, about her
experiences and thoughts about the study phenomenon.

According to Patton (2002), “asking questions is an art” (p. 353), and he goes on to
explain that good qualitative questions should be “open-ended, neutral, singular, and clear” (p.
of gaining more information-rich data. Patton (2002) builds on this by including what questions as well. In an open-ended question, the respondent should have the freedom to respond in whatever direction and wording that they chose. It is interesting to consider different categories of questions, for example, Patton (2002) categorizes them as experience/behavior, opinion/value, feeling, knowledge, sensory, and background. He also reminds researchers that all types of questions can be addressed from a past, present, or future perspective and that they should be strategic in the order of questioning and the time frames used. My plan was to ask how and what questions that cover time from childhood to current in regard to academic expectations. The series of possible open-ended questions is attached. Because the interviews were semi-structured, these questions offered the framework for the interview but were deviated from based on the information shared during the interview process.

**Interview Process**

There are many aspects of the interview process, which need to be considered to ensure optimal conditions for data gathering. Seidman (2006) outlines some excellent points to keep in mind, which I implemented. He recommends that researchers: listen more and talk less; ask follow-up questions for clarification and increased understanding; avoid leading questions; and don’t interrupt. Often interview questions are of a personal nature and it will be incumbent upon the researcher to create an atmosphere in which the participant is comfortable enough to really think about what is being asked and answer in a genuine way. Rapport refers to a professional relationship which is designed to create an environment of trust, interest, and safety, and it is important to establish with the study participants as soon as possible. Having participants complete the informed consent and discuss some of the aspects of the study that were highlighted in the consent form was a first step in this important process. Often, if the researcher and
participant do not know each other it is important to start with some small talk in order to become more familiar and comfortable with each other before beginning the formal interview (Bogden & Biklen, 2003). Because the goal is to have the participants explain as fully as they can the meaning they have made from the phenomenon under study, the researcher is key to the depth of information provided.

Researchers who are trained in active listening and reflective questioning are likely to facilitate interviews that lead to information rich cases. Active listening conveys to the interviewee that the interviewer is genuinely interested in what they are saying. The interviewer is fully attentive to both the verbal and non-verbal messages that are occurring. Active listening can also be an important component of establishing rapport (Hackney & Cormier, 1996; Richards & Morse, 2007). Reflective questioning, or paraphrasing, involves the researcher rephrasing what the interviewee has said but in a different way that may have a slightly different meaning and then asking the interviewee if that is a correct interpretation. This is a counseling technique which can be very useful in providing insight that the interviewee may not have consciously been aware of and yet helps to explain the feelings or perceptions. This interview skill can lead to increased understanding for both the interviewer and interviewee (Hackney & Cormier, 1996). I incorporated both active listening and reflective questioning techniques into the interview process.

Length of interviews, number of interviews, and where they are located are all important to the planning process of a research project. Interviews may be as fast as a five minute informal meeting in a hallway or could be formal meetings with pre-established dates and times. Again, these specifics need to be based on the information being sought, the methodology being used, and the framework the research is situated in. For the current research study, allowing
participants the freedom to discuss their perceptions in ways that made sense to them helped to elicit a deeper understanding of their perceptions about the influence of their families. In order to facilitate this, there were some structural recommendations in the literature. For instance, Richards and Morse (2007) recommend that interviews be private, held in a quiet and comfortable setting, and be scheduled for two hours. Bogden and Biklen (2003) are much less prescriptive, although not offering clear structural guidelines, these authors discuss the importance of the final product. In their words, “good interviews are those in which the subjects are at ease and talk freely about their points of view” (p. 96). I conducted private interviews in places that were convenient to the participant and the researcher. Interviews were done in participant’s homes, at parks, and in a meeting room of the local campus library. Each interview lasted approximately two hours.

Number of interviews is also an important issue related to gaining in-depth interviewing as well as getting verification of findings. Recommendations from the literature state that number of interviews needs to be determined based on the study goals. There are many views regarding the duration and frequency of interviews required for data collection. Most of the literature points to single in-depth interviews with follow up discussions for clarification. In a review of interview methodologies, numerous qualitative researchers use a single interview (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Creswell, 2007; Fontana & Frey, 2000; Patton, 2002). I believe that individuals are more likely to provide more detail, understanding, and context when they focus on one story at a time and incorporate all its aspects. To me, it makes sense that this would occur in one meeting because the train of thought will not be broken or changed. In addition, both personal experience and the literature review suggest that adult female students are extremely busy individuals. It is important to respect the time and effort participants are willing to offer. I
did not want this project to become a hardship for them. Thus, I planned to have one interview with each participant and then followed-up with electronic communication for question clarification as well as content verification.

There are several remaining details that need to be addressed including number of participants and time line for the project. The emphasis in qualitative research is on the in-depth understanding of the meaning people make from their experiences that are being studied. In purposeful sampling, the sample participants and size should be judged based on the purpose and rationale of the study (Patton, 2002). It will be important to ensure that there is a fair representation of ideas. One recommendation from the literature is to include participants until there are no longer new topics that are being brought up for discussion, also known as the point of saturation or redundancy (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). I believe a minimum sample size of 12 respondents would be a representative place to start. This will provide numerous perspectives while offering the opportunity to begin to identify if there are any patterns in responses emerging. The time line for the project will be sensitive to the needs of the researcher as well as the participants. The researcher did all of the interviews during the summer of 2010.

To summarize, I used a semi-structured interview format, I allowed two hours for each interview, and the interviews were conducted in a variety of private places. The interviews occurred during the summer of 2010. I started with a minimum of 10 to 12 participants and reached a point of saturation of data with the thirteenth interview. I focused on creating environments that conveyed trust and confidentiality and worked towards establishing rapport with each of the study participants from the beginning of our meeting. I began each meeting by reviewing the informed consent with each study participant. Each interview was digitally
recorded and transcribed for data analysis. Two other documents were used for this research process, a reflection journal and fieldnotes. The journal was used to record thoughts and ideas related to the research throughout the project. In addition, I kept field notes to record thoughts and observations about each interview that included comments on special conditions, verbal cues, non-verbal cues, or anything else that particularly stood out following each interview. Both the reflective journal and the field notes were used for data analysis and verification.

**Data Analysis**

The ultimate quality of the qualitative analysis is going to come down to the “skills, training, insights, and capabilities of the inquirer” (Patton, 2002, p. 433). In qualitative research, the researcher is the both the greatest strength and the greatest weakness in the analysis and reporting of qualitative data. Data analysis is the final and perhaps most important aspect to address. This is the greatest challenge of working with qualitative data and requires “reducing the volume of raw information, sifting trivia from significance, identifying significant patterns, and constructing a framework for communicating the essence of what the data reveal” (Patton, 2002, p. 432). Unfortunately, there are no absolute rules. There are only guidelines that the data needs to be fairly and accurately represented. Researchers are encouraged to use their creativity and judgment to the best of their ability. The researcher wants to weave the stories together while recognizing and highlighting individual differences. Each interview was transcribed and the transcriptions were verified by listening to the tape recorded interview while reading the manuscript. Additionally, each transcript as well as the summary of chapter five was sent electronically to the participants for transcript verification and member checking for accuracy of the summary findings. Every participant responded back at least one time and those comments were added to the transcripts.
Clandinin and Connelly (2000) constructed a model, called three-dimensional inquiry space, to assist researchers to interpret their findings. It is designed as a triangle. The personal and social side examines inward interactions that encompass feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions (reactions which can be both intellectual and instinctual), and moral disposition (the feeling of what is right or one’s duty) with outward interactions which encompasses the environment. The second dimension of this proposed model is time. This situates the event or the story in the present but considers it from the past and future perspectives. The third aspect is place. This is the physical location of where the story happened. A knowledgeable interviewer will make use of all of these aspects in their search for the meaning the individual gained from the experience. This framework for data analysis parallels the major theoretical constructs of the life course theory and should be a very effective tool to begin to make sense of the data.

Using this broad framework, I used content analysis of the interview transcripts, field notes, and the reflection journal to look for patterns and themes that emerged. Content analysis means reducing the data in a way that core meanings and consistencies are identified (Patton, 2002). Patton goes on to explain that these core meanings are often referred to as themes or patterns. Themes can be differentiated from patterns in that a theme is typically a category and a pattern is more often a description. This process begins using deductive reasoning based on the broad categories that encompass time and place in history as important to situating the findings, but then becomes inductive through the process of identifying themes and patterns in the interview transcripts, field notes, and the reflection journal.

Some type of coding is a very typical part of the process for most qualitative studies and there are numerous ways for that to be accomplished. For the current project, the coding process was done in two ways. Initially, all of the data was color-coded using 13 characteristics which
were categorized by using the text within each transcript. Following that, each transcript was analyzed for words and phrases that lent meaning to the subject. Once those words and phrases were identified they were grouped and classified. It was in this way that the main themes of family of origin, the dream of attending college, current family matters, and the institution as a factor emerged. The transcripts, words, phrases, categories, and grouping were reviewed with my dissertation advisor.

**Data Verification**

Last, but certainly not least is verification of the study results. The criteria for addressing validation should be congruent with the purpose of the study (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002). A main issue is whether the study will contribute to our understanding of the important questions being asked (Creswell, 2007). Terminology regarding verification or validation continues to be contested among qualitative researchers; however, the following vocabulary has been used to describe the process of establishing the strength of a study by a number of authors: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Patton, 2002). In fact, Lincoln and Guba (1986) suggest “credibility as an analog to internal validity, transferability as an analog to external validity, dependability as an analog to reliability, and confirmability as an analog to objectivity” (pp. 76-77). That said, these terms require a broader definition than what is typically accepted in a positivistic framework. What this highlights is the importance of having a system in place, which addresses the trustworthiness or authenticity of the study.

It is imperative that qualitative researchers document and address verification of the study findings. A major paradigm of qualitative researchers is that all findings are contextually based. Thus, truth is considered to be relativistic and is assumed to change over time (Schwandt, 2000).
Therefore, providing transparency to the study and its findings will add credibility to the overall product. It is important to consider the four constructs of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The level of a study’s credibility is often dependent upon the criteria that are established for it, and this should be based on the research framework (Patton, 2002). This places the reader in a position to determine for themselves if they believe the criteria fits the purpose of the study. Transferability is described as “a direct function of the similarity between the two contexts” (Patton, 2002, p. 584). This is important to the reader because it will establish whether they think the results will be generalizable to their population. Transferability basically addresses the question of whether the results are determined to be valid for a certain population by the reader. The term dependability is closely related to the term reliability because it refers to the similarity of findings between different people or situations. It is used to determine if other researchers would come up with similar findings. Dependability means coming up with similar findings in different situations. Creswell (2007) addresses dependability as it relates to intercoder agreement, which is the level of similarity between coders when more than one person is doing the coding. It is important to have a high level of intercoder agreement because it will show that the categorization process was effective. Finally, confirmability, requires that the researcher consider the appropriateness of their categories especially in regard to outlying cases (Patton, 2002). This is where good analysis and comprehensive categorization is important. It is interesting to consider how similar many of these are to quantitative methods. Obviously, with qualitative studies the researcher wants to get to the essence of the participants’ lived experience to begin to truly understand the phenomenon from their perspective. That is why transparency and clear explanations about the methods used in all aspects of the research process are so important.
Although there is no set way to establish verification, there are a number of methods available to qualitative researchers. Creswell (2007) identifies eight procedures including: prolonged engagement, triangulation, peer review, refining hypothesis due to negative case analyses, clarifying researcher bias from the beginning, member checking, providing rich thick description, and external audits. He recommends that researchers incorporate at least two of these methods into their study design. Further, he suggests that the use of “triangulating among different sources (assuming that the investigator collects more than one), writing with detailed and thick description, and taking the entire written narrative back to participants in member checking” (p. 209) are all economical and efficient ways to establish verification of the results. Each of these methods will be used in the current study in an effort to provide a research study that can be validated and will now be explained in detail.

Triangulation means combining several types of methods or data. The idea is to look at the topic of study from at least a couple of different perspectives. Diagrammatically, the idea is based on the shape of a triangle with three independent sides which intersect. This allows for at least one more source of data than the transcript between the interviewer and interviewee. Patton (2002) states that it is an ideal method since each source of data will reveal a unique reality. Effective analysis of this intersection of perspectives will make the research more valid. There are four types of triangulation: data triangulation, which uses a variety of data sources; investigator triangulation, which uses several different researchers; theory triangulation, which examines the data through multiple theoretical perspectives and methodological triangulation, which uses multiple methods to study the problem (Denzin, 1978). I used triangulation of data sources as a way to establish validity of the findings. Triangulation is important to qualitative research because it clarifies the recognition that no one source can provide a comprehensive view
of the phenomenon under study. By using methodological combinations, multiple realities are acknowledged and ideally accounted for as part of the data analysis. As stated earlier, I used interview data, fieldnotes, reflection research journal entries, and member checks to triangulate the data.

Fieldnotes are a “written account of what the researcher hears, sees, experiences, and thinks in the course of collecting and reflecting on the data” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, pp. 110-111). The value of fieldnotes will be based on their level of detail and accuracy. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) recommend composing the fieldnotes directly after the interview. Fieldnotes are important because they can contain “sights, smells, impressions, and extra remarks” (Bogdan & Biklen, p. 111) from before and after the interview. In addition to writing the notes as quickly as possible following the interview, I followed other recommendations by Bogdan and Biklen including: not talking with anyone about my observations before recording them, finding a quiet place to work, setting aside time to write them, trying to recall the interview chronologically, and adding notes as I remembered them. This is an important step for the verification process because it offers additional data about the interview that may not be visible from the transcript of the interview. It was a way to ensure that the feel and nuance of the interview was incorporated into the findings from a non-verbal perspective.

Reflection journals provide a formal way to incorporate reflective practice into the research project (Ortlipp, 2008). Keeping and using a reflective journal allows the researcher to be more transparent because it helps to bring decisions, thinking, values, and experiences to the forefront so they can be recorded and examined (Ortlipp). In addition to experiences, a reflective journal allows the researcher the opportunity to write about feelings and opinions which may increase awareness of personal influence in areas related to research design, implementation, and
analysis (Ortlipp). Finally, this is also a place where biases and underlying assumptions may be identified and can be acknowledged.

The final type of evidence will be checking in with the participants. In member checking the researcher takes the findings back to the participants to see if they feel as though it as an accurate representation of what they shared. This was important to this research project because accurately portraying the participant’s lived experience with how their families have influenced them is central. This process ensures that the words, thoughts, and beliefs, are truly what the participant chose to share.

In order to be done properly, the verification process needs to be considered from the very beginning of the research project because it requires careful planning, documentation, and ethical decision-making, not to mention the accurate synthesis of the data every step of the way. The current research study will plan to use several of the methods suggested by Creswell (2007) including triangulation, clarifying researcher bias from the beginning, member checking, and providing thick and rich descriptive material. These methods will be used with the following data sources: interview data, field notes, reflective journal entries, and member checks as they are needed during the research process. Verifying that the participant’s perceptions, or member checks, of the experiences are being accurately portrayed was a priority for me. I followed-up with them either electronically or by phone for this verification process. Participants were initially asked to review the initial transcripts and were then contacted a second time to review and respond to a summary of the findings. In addition, it is clearly understood that researchers must approach all phases of the research process with great integrity and a high regard for ethical conduct. I will comply with all legal and ethical standards that have been established by the Institutional Review Board of The Pennsylvania State University.
To summarize, it is important for research studies based on qualitative methodologies to address issues related to verification or trustworthiness. Recognizing the importance, planning for it, and incorporating aspects of the verification process throughout the research project should yield a stronger finished product. Consequently, issues associated with confirmability, credibility, authenticity, and dependability were incorporated into the current study design. There were numerous ways this was accomplished. This research project used the idea of triangulation by reviewing and synthesizing transcripts of interview data, fieldnotes, a reflective journal of the entire research process, and feedback from participants. By including each of these throughout the research process, it assisted with research transparency and validity. It is hoped that by providing clear rationale with established procedures, the final product is considered verifiable. It is also important to keep in mind that the whole purpose was to increase understanding into the influence the family may have on the adult female student’s higher educational experience.

When an adult female undergraduate student begins work towards a bachelor’s degree, there is typically a story, or reason, why they did not pursue or complete higher education studies as a traditionally-aged student. Expectations based on roles and responsibilities for males and females are modeled, or normalized, by family, community members, and institutions in day-to-day living situations. Because women’s lives are so intricately woven into the fabric of their families, big decisions such as those related to career options or college attendance are likely influenced by family members. This research study was designed to more clearly understand how the influence of the family (of origin and current) was perceived by adult female undergraduate students and how this influence affected the female students or recent graduates’ educational experience. Qualitative methodology was employed using a basic interpretive
research design because it was important to understand perspectives and worldviews of the study participant’s decision to attend as well as their ability to persist as a process that occurs over time. It was these findings, which provided insight and understanding about the perceived influence of family members to the researcher.
CHAPTER FOUR

INTRODUCTION OF THE PARTICIPANTS

This basic interpretive research study included 13 adult women, defined as being 25 years of age or older who are pursuing a bachelor’s degree or completed it within the last year. In order to be eligible to participate, each of these women was screened to see if they have a current family in addition to their family of origin. This was determined by asking each person if they had a spouse or significant other or a child or children who live with them. Each person agreed to participate in a one-on-one in-depth interview with the researcher. Of the 13 participants, 10 identified themselves as Caucasian, two were Hispanic and one was African American. Chapter four begins with a brief explanation for the inclusion of biographical summaries of each participant. This is followed by a brief biographical sketch of each participant. Following the individual summaries, demographic data on all of the participants is summarized in order to contextualize this particular group of women.

The study of the influence of an individual’s family is an extremely broad topic which covers life times. Although this research project is limited to examining this influence from the perspective of the participant’s educational experience, it is important to have an understanding of the family constellations and how they may impact dynamics. Also, this project is examining experiences and perceptions from both earlier educational years, which would have occurred within the family of origin along with more recent experiences which are more likely to be impacted by a woman’s current family. Including a brief biographical sketch of each participant helps to set the context which is needed to get a broader sense of each individual. This allows
the reader to become familiar with each woman’s place within her family before proceeding into
the findings.

Nikki

Nikki is a 25 year old female who has been attending college almost every semester since
graduating from high school. She lives with her husband in the house she was raised in. They
share it with their two young children and she is pregnant with their third. Her great-
grandmother lived next door and her grandmother still lives just a couple doors away. Nikki
described the income level of her family of origin as low and her ethnic heritage as German.
Nikki’s family of origin consisted of her mother, father, and younger brother. Her father was
physically and verbally abusive to her. He moved out when she was 12 years old and her parents
divorced. Several years later, Nikki’s mother became involved in a live-in relationship resulting
in the addition of two step-brothers into the household when she was 15. Nikki reported that
during high school she spent as much time away from her house as she could. She was very
involved in school activities and worked at two jobs.

Although higher education was never emphasized by her nuclear family, completing high
school was expected. While Nikki struggled with reading, she did well enough to pass her
classes and not stand out. She really felt like once her parent’s divorce occurred that her mother
didn’t have educational expectations of her. The support for Nikki’s education came from other
sources. Nikki’s great grandmother, who went to college, and grandmother were both strong
supportive women. In addition, she had a close girlfriend whose parents were very supportive
and she was very involved with her youth group at church and received adult support from those
individuals as well. She continues to have a very close relationship with her grandmother and
relies on her for advice and support. Nikki experienced another significant loss shortly after her father moved out of the house. Her great-grandmother, who was truly an advocate for higher education, passed away.

Nikki, her mother, and her grandmother all had children at young ages. Nikki grew up with the message that her mother was not able to go to college because of having Nikki at such a young age. Nikki knew that she wanted to be different from her mother. She knew that she wanted to go to college “no matter what.” She actually went to a local branch of a four-year college as a traditionally-aged college student but became pregnant during her first semester and dropped out. However, college was very important to Nikki so that spring she went to community college, started work on her Associates degree, and four years, a marriage, and two children later, graduated. She immediately began work on attaining a bachelor’s degree.

Nikki appreciates the support she receives from both her husband and grandmother in her educational endeavors. She is currently a senior and struggles with being a student in addition to working weekends and taking care of her home and family. During the past year she was a full-time student, but with the impending birth of her third child, she will only take one class in the next semester. She talked about the hands-on support provided by her grandmother who watches the children during times that she has to work or study. She also spoke about the support her husband offers by taking care of the children as well as editing her papers and being there for her emotionally.

Completing her education is more important than ever. She wants to do it for herself, her family, the people she is close to in the community, but mostly for her children. They have grown up having a Mom who is going to college. These are the words she used to describe this
belief. “It’s like I have to finish. I have to show them that, like quitting isn’t an option and that you just keep pushing forward.” These words are reinforced by Nikki’s cultural beliefs. She describes German people as being thick-headed, stubborn, and not willing to give up on something until it is done. She believes that the time, effort, and economic resources they are using towards her degree, will help to create a better life for her children and her husband.

Kacey

Kacey was raised by her mother and father and was the middle of three children and the only daughter. From her recollection, grades and academic achievement were never emphasized by her parents. For Kacey, simply graduating from high school was her goal; although, she reports that her brothers were both straight “A” students. She spoke about not getting into trouble for bringing home poor grades. She also described herself as “the party girl.” Kacey’s father worked a long hours in a factory and she describes her mother as being emotionally unavailable during her teenage years. Her mother struggled with depression and did not provide much guidance or hold expectations for her daughter. Following high school, Kacey got a job at a local bank where she worked for 15 years. It was a good job that paid well and she enjoyed it. Kacey did not have plans to pursue higher education because she was happy with her job and the money she made. She became the mother of two children during this time period. Her son was her first born followed by a daughter five years later.

Kacey’s life took a couple dramatic turns 10 years ago. Her first major loss was of her daughter’s father. They had a close relationship and she reports he is the only man who she thinks she may have married. He was murdered. Within a year of his death, Kacey’s mother died of congestive heart failure. Kacey did not cope well with either of those deaths. Although
drugs and alcohol had been part of her life for a long time, at this point they began to take over. She got laid off of work, did not have stable housing, and lived the life of an addict for a full five years before deciding she really wanted to get clean and stay clean.

Currently, Kacey has been clean for three years, is the single mother of two teenage children and she shares a home with her widowed father. She began her college career at the local community college. Initially, she did not share the news of going back to school with either her father or her children. Her initial plan was some sort of short certification program. Once she began, she realized she wanted to learn more. She became very interested in working with people struggling with addictions. As a result, she changed her major and geared her educational trajectory towards a transfer degree. She described her children as being proud of her when she graduated with her Associates degree. Although supported by her father physically, his response to her graduation was that she was not graduating from a “real college.” She said, even now as she pursues her bachelor’s degree, she feels like he doesn’t understand the purpose or benefits of achieving a higher education.

Kacey feels very good to now be operating as a role model for both of her children. Her daughter is a strong student and Kacey makes a conscientious effort to emphasize academic achievement, and the idea of going to college, as being very important. She struggles with her son because although she would love to see him using education to help him move forward, she recognizes that he needs to make those decisions for himself. In the meantime, she puts a tremendous amount of her time and energy into her schoolwork. At this point in her life, aside from caring for her children, completing her education is her priority. She is majoring in social work and is considering going right for her master’s degree. When asked about the support she receives now as a student, she mentioned a close girl friend and her younger brother as really
supporting her educational pursuits. She also stated that she doesn’t want to disappoint her father or herself. She really wants to achieve this degree as a way to rectify many years and instances of disappointments. Kacey wants to be able to “make a difference” in other people’s lives. She wants to help people and be there to support them. It is now the driving force in her life and she is looking forward to the time when she will join the work force in this helping capacity.

**Naomi**

Naomi is a first-generation college student neither of whose parents completed elementary school. Her mother was a guiding force because she always encouraged her to work hard at school so that she could have a professional career. Her mother named her after the only woman, besides a nun, who she knew had gone to college. Naomi always loved going to school. Her mother enrolled her in pre-kindergarten and that was the first time she was exposed to the English language even though she lived in the United States. Her parents divorced when she was seven and she lived with her mother. When she turned seventeen she moved to Pennsylvania to live with her father, without completing high school. By the time she turned eighteen she was working, had her own apartment, and had her younger brother living with her. A year later they purchased a large six bedroom home in a very cheap section of a major city and rented out the rooms they didn’t live in.

She met her first husband by teaching him how to speak English. She was attracted to him because he was completing work on a Master’s degree at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. Marriage to her first husband was difficult. While he continued his schooling here in the United States she was left to not only work full-time, but run the household
and care for their children. He was abusive attacking both her intelligence and self confidence. She divorced him and became a single parent of two boys for 10 years. During this time, she waited for the opportunity to go back to school. Following her divorce, her mother came and lived with her and helped her take care of the children. While her mother was there, Naomi completed an Associate’s degree at the local community college.

Eight years ago Naomi met the man who became her second husband. Although she loves him dearly and feels supported by him, he does not value higher education the way she does. From his perspective, she would be better off to take a well paying office job and not spend the time and money necessary for bachelor degree attainment. However, Naomi is determined to obtain her bachelor’s degree so despite the fact that he does not really understand why it is so important to her, she perseveres and as a family they have made the necessary adjustments so that she is able to do this. Also, he supports her in other ways like helping out with grocery shopping and being non-judgmental when the house gets messy.

It has been a struggle and the family relies on her for much of the care-taking responsibilities. It is her hope that one day they will recognize the strength, determination, and patience that it has taken Naomi to get to where she is today. She receives emotional support for her work from her mother, but her mother has mixed feelings about it because it means that Naomi does not have as much time available to help her with her needs. Another area of struggle for Naomi is the fact that because her children are college age now, she feels guilty about using family resources for her education. This is not stopping her children or her husband’s children from pursuing degrees. In fact, this fall, they will have three people in the household attending college. Naomi is already working on increasing the amount of shared household responsibilities.
Naomi has a belief about the underlying importance of higher education. For her it is empowering in that individuals can “improve themselves” and, she believes education is the path towards developing into a “better human being.” Because of this belief, she does not feel a lot of pressure about finding a well paying career position, if she does, it will be icing on the cake! Rather, this is an important personal journey and Naomi believes it is important to herself and her mother that she complete her degree.

Christina

Christina was raised in a close knit nuclear family with extended family nearby. She was the youngest of five children, second generation German, and that was the language spoken in her home and neighborhood. She learned English from her siblings and when she began school. Education was always a priority in her family of origin. All of the children attended Catholic School and homework was completed immediately after school. The children were not allowed to go out and play until their homework had been completed. Her grandparents paid them for good grades. Although doing well in school was always important, attendance at college was not emphasized or subsidized. The children were supported in that they were free to apply and Christina remembers being taken to an out-of-state college tour, but it was clearly understood that if they wanted to go to college, they would have to pay for it themselves.

Christina describes her parent’s expectations for her as being able to live independently. She explained that her German heritage influenced her upbringing by emphasizing individualism, self-sufficiency, and a high level of persistence. Although she always did okay in school, she did not particularly enjoy it and was happy to join the work force following her high school graduation. She worked full-time until she became a mother. It was important to her and
her husband that she stay home to take care of their child. During her sons early years she worked on and off, finding positions that allowed her and her husband to share childcare responsibilities. When her son was in elementary school she began working in a preschool. It was this experience coupled with her older sister returning to school as a non-traditional student which spurred her to seriously consider going to school to pursue a degree in Elementary Education with an emphasis on Special Education. It was a lengthy process because she applied several times, wanting to be accepted into the major, but also very unsure of herself academically.

When she finally went to college, it was an adjustment for everyone. She spoke about having to use financial aid for all of her school expenses and not being able to take some early summer courses because financial aid would not be available for them. When she spoke about incorporating her school work into her other weekly responsibilities it was truly a balancing act. Her husband supported her by taking care of their son and his needs, but she would orchestrate everything so that a lot of the work was done. As she says, “there were a lot of nights that I was up writing papers until 2:00 in the morning.” She tried to minimize the impact of her college attendance on her family.

Christina relied on the support of her husband and their marriage to help her successfully complete her degree. She spoke about different instances over the course of their marriage when each one of them went out of their way to support the other in order to help the other achieve their goals. In addition to the support of her husband, Christina reported feeling emotionally supported by her siblings and her father-in-law. Although she felt supported by her son, she also believes that her college attendance was the hardest on him. She enjoyed incorporating her life at home and her life at school when it was possible. She would bring her son up before the
semester started to help her find all of the buildings and classrooms in her schedule. She also brought her son and husband to several university functions. She feels good that her son is now comfortable on a college campus and feels that this may help him to be a little more inclined to pursue higher education for himself.

**Andrea**

Andrea always wanted to go to college. She went to business school, received training in graphic design, got work as a secretary, and decided to apply to all of the colleges that were within driving distance to her home with the hopes that she could get a secretarial position and be eligible for a tuition waiver. Her plan worked and today she is pursuing a degree in Art Education at the school where she works. Over the years her academic journey has taken many turns. As a child she struggled with all of her academic subjects. At one point, according to her mother, her parents were called into a meeting with a reading specialist and were told she was never likely to amount to anything because she would be lucky to graduate from high school due to her difficulty with reading, writing, and mathematics. Her parents were very angry and wound up moving out of the school district; however, this message was passed on to Andrea and it was very damaging.

Andrea was the eldest of three children and was raised by both her mother and father. As an elementary school child academics were important to her family. The family moved when Andrea started junior high and at that point alcohol abuse became an issue for her mother. The results of this are that Andrea has had a strained relationship with her mother since that point in time. In addition, the children’s academic achievements were no longer emphasized as the
household was struggling under the weight of an alcoholic mother and a father who ran his own business and was absent a lot.

However, the move turned out to be pivotal for Andrea. Although she had always struggled with academic subjects, she loved art. At her new junior high school there was an after school art program that she became very involved with. It was this program that influenced Andrea to want to one day become an Art teacher. Andrea did not have clear guidance about what to do if she was interested in attending college and she did not take college prep classes in high school. Business school seemed like a good option to her following her high school graduation. She completed her training and has been working in a business environment since then. She is currently still using her business school training but is looking forward to the day when she will have her bachelor’s degree completed. Her participation in this club and the smaller classrooms which this new school offered positively impacted Andrea’s academic progress.

Currently, Andrea works full-time, has a husband who works third shift, has a five year old son who started kindergarten this year, and is carrying six college credits each semester. Her husband supports her by helping with childcare and providing some emotional support but it is her drive and desire that are making this happen. Obtaining a college degree has been a life long dream for her. She feels good about having her son exposed to the new ideas and thoughts that are brought into the household due to her school attendance. Although she has a long way to go, she feels very good about being on a path that she feels is sustainable in the pursuit of her dream.

Miriam
Miriam spoke more about the support she received from her extended family, particularly on her father’s side, than she did about her family of origin. Her mother was German, her father Native American and she had two older brothers and a younger sister. Her father died when she was twelve years old. She spoke about spending a lot of time with her father’s family, and in particular one Aunt and Uncle. She spoke about growing up in households that lived off the land. There was little to no encouragement academically. Her mother’s expectation for her daughters is that they would get married. According to her mother, women were not supposed to go to school for higher education. Miriam is also a first-generation college student. All of her family members were blue collar workers. Growing up, her father’s family encouraged her academically. They also provided support in that one uncle bought her a new pair of shoes each year and sometimes her Aunts would buy her some clothing. Although Miriam was always an avid reader and loved to learn, she did not like school. Her recollection of school was of being picked on, she often had to wear her brother’s hand-me-downs.

Miriam’s high school graduation was at once non-descript and also truly pivotal. She attended her high school graduation with friends wearing a dress borrowed from her mother. No family members were present at the ceremony. Following graduation Miriam moved out, as she explains it, alcoholism is a thread that has run through her family history and she moved out of her family home when she was seventeen to get away. She married a young man and one year later had a daughter. He was an alcoholic and abusive. She moved away from him when her daughter was two years old and found herself in the position of being a single parent with no financial assistance. With the help of a family friend, she moved into a room in a house and learned how to do some remodeling and rental management. She began working for other
people who also owned rental units and was ultimately able to purchase her first home, dilapidated though it was, she loved it.

There were two dreams Miriam had, one was to build her own home and the other was to go back to school. Her love of learning was the impetus for continuing her education over many years, although until recently, it was all very job specific. Funding for school was always a barrier. She sought out and used scholarships and grant-funded programs for her educational pursuits. Because of this, she did not have the freedom to major in the subject she was passionate about which was writing. However, her education, strong work ethic, and desire to always learn new things served her well in the job market. She had a stable job that paid a good wage and it was enough to purchase land and to build the home she had always dreamed about. Because of her home, when the company she worked for closed down and she had a choice between accepting severance pay or moving to a new state, she took the severance pay.

This was the beginning of yet another big change in Miriam’s life. For a number of years she was the sole proprietor of several businesses while being a single parent. Due to some health issues she faced she had to let go of the last of her businesses. By this time her daughter had transitioned out of the house and she met a man who encouraged her to pursue her bachelor’s degree. This was a big leap of faith which took a lot of courage. She was very afraid of not being academically strong enough to be successful. In fact, she shared that she continues to be frightened at the beginning of each semester until she gets a feel for what the class requirements will be.

She began to do research and applied to several schools. She was accepted and made her decision based on cost, no admission contingencies, and an expedient admission process right into
her major program of study. At this point she is heading into her third semester at the school and has also picked up a minor program of study. She was happy to report that she has made the dean’s list both semesters. Interestingly, for the first time, she does not have a clear career goal in mind with degree completion. She is considering law school, but does not know if she will go that route or not.

It has always been important to her to stress the importance of education to her daughter and now her granddaughter. Her daughter is also currently a student. The emphasis on education is also apparent in her relationship with her granddaughter. For Miriam, education was always something she had to fight for. It was something that was not valued. It is also a path which she feels has led her further away from her family of origin. She feels like it is harder to relate to the family members who are left and she spoke about an awkwardness of finding things to talk about with them. The life choices she has made are so very different from the environment she was raised in. When she describes her close family relationships now, they include her significant other, his mother, her daughter and her granddaughter. She described feeling very disconnected from her family of origin and that this feeling has intensified since increasing her level of education. She feels very emotionally supported by her spouse/partner and revels in the genuine interest he has in her and her academic journey.

CeCe

CeCe’s life has revolved around children and family since she became an adult. She is first-generation German and her parents offered their children every opportunity to pursue their interests. CeCe had a privileged upbringing with a mother who stayed home and cared for her husband, the children, and their home. Her father became a master electrician despite the fact
that he only had a third grade education. It was a home that was for the most part stable and secure. CeCe’s parent’s expected their children to do the best that they could do and she remembers not wanting them to be disappointed in her on report card day. She explained that she was a mediocre student because she was really not interested in school. In fact, after meeting her husband to be in high school, all she wanted to do was to get married and start a family. So she did.

CeCe was married at 18 and had her first child when she was nineteen. Two others followed closely behind. During her fourth pregnancy, which was not successful, she was diagnosed with Lupus disease. The manifestation of this disease many years later was truly a transformational event in her life. CeCe was happy staying home and raising her children maintaining the tradition of how she was raised. CeCe’s life profoundly changed once her children were out of high school. She and her husband of 22 years got divorced. Shortly after that relationship ended she entered into another one and has been happily committed to her partner for the past 15 years.

The Lupus disease attacked CeCe’s immune system about nine years ago and she was so sick that the doctor’s didn’t know if she was going to survive. They actually called the family together because of the dire situation. CeCe rebounded and as a result of that experience determined that she wanted to move forward with her life and go back to school. Her family has been a major source of support from the very beginning. This plan was begun at the local community college with the goal of becoming a nurse. CeCe had her heart set on nursing, but when she got to the clinical portion of her training, she realized that she was jeopardizing her health by being exposed to the hospital environment. She began to question her decision and was not sure what she wanted to do or even if she wanted to continue with her education. The
guidance of a well respected instructor helped her to decide that social work was the direction her life should take and the decision has felt perfect since it was made.

CeCe’s family has continued to play a central role in her life. In addition to being a full-time student, CeCe works part time, watches her grandchildren several times a week, and plays an active roll in their lives by sharing meals and events with them on a regular basis. CeCe feels really good about being a positive role model for her children and grandchildren. They are also the motivation for her to keep moving forward towards her goal. She also expressed the physical support offered by her partner as being an integral component of her college success.

**Tessa**

Tessa is a full-time student and the divorced mother of three adult children. She stayed home raising her children and found that in order to be self-sufficient, she was going to need a college education. At this point, her oldest child is 30 and living independently, her 22 year old daughter is transitioning out of the household and is getting married in a couple months and her 21 year old son is currently living with his father. Tessa’s third generation Italian heritage played a prominent role in her upbringing. She grew up in an affluent neighborhood and they had large family dinners at her grandparent’s house every Sunday. Her grandparents immigrated to the United States and it was expected that each person would have a career which would serve the family needs in some way.

Educational achievement was emphasized from a young age. The children all went to Catholic school and received cash payments when they brought home high grades on their report cards. Her parent’s expected that Tessa would pursue secondary education and as the eldest female granddaughter, the family was hoping that she would go to law school. She recalled a
conversation between herself and her father where he was trying to make clear how the decision to not pursue a bachelor’s degree would really limit her career potential. However, Tessa had other interests and priorities at that time in her life. She speaks about partying a lot and not having any financial concerns. In fact, Tessa said that it has really only been since her divorce that she has learned the value of and developed an appreciation for money.

Tessa’s mother was a stay at home mom and Tessa felt strongly about staying home to raise her children as well. She spoke to the socio-cultural norms during the mid to late 1960’s as a time when many men, especially in her world, were the sole income providers for their families and the women stayed home to raise the children. She reports that both she and her now ex-husband were happy to have her stay home so that their children would have the same type of upbringing they had both had. During this time, she occasionally worked part-time, but her family responsibilities were always her main priority. She immersed herself in her children’s upbringing and describes herself as a “helicopter parent.”

A number of years ago, she attended community college for a couple years to study nursing, but she discovered that was not what she wanted to do. It was 15 years before she returned to school again. As she says, “I had no idea when I went back to school what I was going to do. Ya know, I just knew I had to do something.” This time she considered law school, but has incurred such a high amount of debt already that she does not feel like it is a viable option. She is currently a senior and still does not have a clear idea of what she would like to do once she graduates.

At this point, she describes the support she receives as emotional, meaning individuals who express interest in her classes and her educational experiences with most of this support
coming from her mother and daughter. She also spoke about getting reconnected with family and friends through the internet social network Facebook. Tessa feels strongly about successfully completing this degree because of being a role model for her children. She wants them to see her be successful. She is disheartened that her daughter is taking a break from school because she doesn’t want her to end up like her mother with no real job experience and no bachelor’s degree to fall back on. Tessa spoke about her large debt several times during the interview. She feels very weighted down by it and as a result has made completing her degree the top priority in her life. She says she has about 25 years to work and that it will probably take that long to pay off all of her student loans.

Claudia

Claudia was the youngest of three children born to a Pennsylvania Dutch family in which neither parent graduated from high school. School work and grades were never strongly emphasized. In this family they didn’t get paid for good grades nor punished for poor ones; rather, the expectation was that the children were doing the best that they could in school. Her father owned his own business and worked a lot, her mother stayed home and raised the children. There was a 10 year spread between the three children and her parents tried to keep everything even between them. This meant that because her oldest sister did not go to college, her brother and herself were not allowed to go to college. When Claudia was graduating from high school she wanted to go to college to become either a physical education teacher or a physical therapist. Her guidance teacher recommended a trade school since she wasn’t allowed to go to college. She wound up getting a full scholarship to beauty school and in this way her parents couldn’t say no. In her words, she was “breaking the mold.”
Shortly after Claudia completed beauty school she got married and over the next several
years had three children. She worked on and off while her kids were young but primarily was
home with them. She began working for a bank part-time and went through a divorce when her
oldest child was in high school. This was a big change for her and the children because she had
primary custody of the kids and also began to work full-time. Time passed and she was filling
out financial aid paperwork for her youngest son, when she thought, “they are talking about
layoffs at the bank….so I decided to apply and did everything I had to for my FAFSA.” Without
telling anyone, she applied to college and got accepted and then she found out she was getting
laid off. This was the opportunity she had been waiting for.

She was finally going to have the chance to go to college. Her children were shocked to
learn the news and her youngest son a little dismayed, because he was a student at the same
university. All three of her children went to college, she always encouraged them to do things
she was never allowed to do. She has since remarried and her second husband has been very
supportive of her desire to go to college. At this point, Claudia has completed her freshman year.
She is very happy to be in college and has been trying to take advantage of any support services
that are available to her. She is doing well academically and feels invigorated being in the
classroom situation. She does not have a clear career goal in mind but has been interviewing
individuals and conscientiously networking and connecting with each opportunity that presents
itself.

Claudia’s next year at school will present its own challenges. She will be combining her
school and work schedules with babysitting for her first grandchild several times a week. In
addition, her husband has been laid off of his job. This is putting a major strain on the family
finances because he was the main breadwinner so that Claudia could focus on school. Her finishing school is a priority for both of them and they hope to find a way to make that happen.

**Alice**

Alice grew up in a poor family with a mother and father who emphasized education and Christian values. Alice’s father had no formal schooling after the third grade. He was a self-taught man who taught his daughter to read when she was four using the local newspaper. He had her read articles and when she got stuck he would help her to sound out the words. Alice actually tested into the gifted program as a kindergartener. Alice reported that her parents had very high expectations for her academically. Report card day was important because they wanted her to do well.

Alice really liked school. She also loved attending Sunday school. She likened it to an academic environment because people were supportive and it was learning centered. As she said, the learning was just focused on the Bible rather than all of the other subjects offered at school. Alice had a younger brother and academic expectations were very different for the two siblings. He had behavioral issues, so as long as he wasn’t getting suspended from school and was passing from one year to the next, his parents were satisfied with his academic achievement. When I asked Alice about this she responded by saying she believes her father really nurtured her academic endeavors and that he would have been happy to do that with her brother if that had been his inclination. Alice had a very close relationship with her father. He was disabled and was the one who stayed home and cared for the children. Alice’s mother worked full time, often second shift meaning there would be stretches of days that Alice wouldn’t get to see her.
There were several events over the course of Alice’s life which really impacted her expectations about higher educational attainment. All during elementary school she had been groomed as college material. During middle school she took a test, and was told that the results said she was not college material. Despite her parent’s angry response to those findings, Alice began to question her own ability for the first time. During her early high school years, she continued to be academically focused and eagerly signed up for free college visits and to meet with admissions representatives when they came to her school. In 11th grade, she took the PSATs. Although she scored in the 90th percentile in the subject areas, she does not remember having anyone explain the results to her.

Several weeks later, she began getting letters of interest from colleges asking her to apply and saying they believed she would be a good candidate for their school. By this time her parents were divorced, she was not in contact with her father, and her mother was focused on working to provide for the family. So, Alice went and spoke to her guidance counselor about this she was told that she was only being recruited because she was a minority and there was no point in applying because she wouldn’t be able to keep up with the work. It is hard to say why this occurred. Perhaps it was because she lived in low income housing and went to an inner city school. Unfortunately, that was the part of the conversation she remembered. She became very disillusioned with the school system and all of the hard work she had put into it over the years. She wound up dropping out of school prior to graduating from high school.

Alice was always a hard worker. She delivered papers at 11 years of age and at 15 began work in the fast food industry. Later, she got a full time job in a city that was about an hour away to which she would commute every day. During this time period she married, had two
children, a daughter and a son, and got divorced. She has been a single mom and the main breadwinner for all of her children’s lives.

When she became a manager, she returned to school to complete her GED. She took some classes but ultimately bought a book, studied at home, went and took the test, and received a very high score. Because of the high score, she was offered a small scholarship to the local community college. This event made her remember how happy she had been to be a student and how much she enjoyed learning. She spent almost a year thinking about going back to school. When she made the decision to do it, she jumped in with both feet. She was afraid that if she didn’t make a 100% commitment, she would not be successful. She gave up her good paying job with benefits so that she could go to school full-time. It was a leap of faith. At that point, her goal was an associate’s degree. She majored in Psychology and graduated in two years. She started work on a bachelor’s degree immediately after graduation in a health career field. She discovered that she didn’t have an interest in the subject matter and again took time to reassess what she really liked. She decided to major in English Literature, a subject she was always passionate about, and she also transferred from a small private college to a larger public university.

She flourished at the university. She excelled academically, took classes year round, and graduated in a year and a half. She began work on her Master’s degree during that same year. When I asked her about her families’ response to her quitting her job and becoming a full time student she laughingly responded that they thought she was crazy. They were happy she was going to school, but very concerned about her giving up her full-time employment. Her mother is very proud of her. She has actually moved into a home on the same block making it easier to help with the children. Alice also talked about balancing her time between school and her
household responsibilities. She went to school and studied during the day while her children were at school. Typically from 3:00 until bedtime, she would spend time with them, unless she had to work. Once the kids went to bed, she would stay up, often late into the night doing her reading, writing, and studying. She would give up sleep before giving up time with her children. She does not recommend this path for everyone, but for her it continues to work. Her goal is a doctorate and she is hoping to teach at the college level.

**Elaine**

Elaine was born the youngest in a family of four children and the only girl. She began kindergarten at four years of age and remembers always feeling smaller and not quite at the same pace as her peers. She noted that she has always had trouble with focus and has often wondered if she had an undiagnosed learning disability. This concern stayed with her and seems to be partially the reason why it took her so long to return to school. She does know that she was diagnosed with dyslexia when she was in first grade. She also reported that she didn’t receive positive support in her ability to be academically successful from the people in her life and world as she was growing up.

When Elaine was in middle school, her mother returned to school to become a nurse. Despite the fact that she was going to school as a part-time student, Elaine reported that her mother spent all of her time studying and she felt very cut off from her. She remembers thinking that she would never want to do that to her children. In addition, her three older brothers were very rebellious and Elaine embodied the role of being the good little girl. She tried to maintain peace in the household and not create any waves. As a result, her parent’s didn’t need to worry about her, and so they didn’t. They did not have high academic expectations for her.
Elaine reported that during the time she was growing up there was alcohol addiction within her family system and that as a result of that she was emotionally abused and neglected. She spoke about her difficulty in being able to focus at school and believes she had an undiagnosed learning disability. She has suffered from low self-esteem for most of her life. Although she always felt she was intelligent, she described feeling as though it was always “locked up” in some way. She used words such as “airhead”, “sociable”, and dumb blonde” to describe herself as a young adult. She never believed in her ability to be a serious student and that affected her interest in getting an education. She also reported that part of the reason she was so committed to being a stay-at-home mom is due to the fact that she did not feel supported by her mother and she wanted to be both emotionally and physically available to her children.

Elaine’s support really came from her grandparents. She believed that they were going to help pay for her to go to college, but when the time came, they were not willing to make the financial commitment. Following her high school graduation, her parents and she moved out to California. Elaine began community college out there but due to her parent’s problems with alcohol, she was unable to continue. She quit school and began working full-time so that she could move out and live independently. Once she began working, college entered her mind occasionally, but it never seemed like it was the right time. Elaine got married, had two sons, and she and her husband moved back to the east coast.

The years went quickly and Elaine worked from home raising her sons and maintaining the household. The desire for a college education continued to come up occasionally throughout the years. It was actually her husband who finally encouraged her to go back to school. It was his belief in her academic ability that was her catalyst. She began at community college and then transferred to a four-year institution. Currently, she attends school part-time and spends a lot of
time on her class material. She enjoys learning and makes a practice of really taking the time to learn the material that is being taught.

When she began this journey it was more for personal fulfillment than with a specific career goal. Now that she is about halfway through the process, she is beginning to really think about what type of career she would like to get when she graduates. Elaine is paying for her college education out of money she has made being a business woman. She is enjoying being a student, feels connected to the university, and enjoys a high level of support from her husband. Her sons are proud of her and she feels emotionally supported from them as well. In some ways she feels as though she put her life on hold for a long time and now this is a gift to herself.

**Lori**

Lori was the eldest of two girls. Throughout her childhood she struggled academically due to undiagnosed learning disabilities. Learning disabilities were not clearly understood or accommodated in the way they are today. When Lori was in elementary school she would often be physically punished because of her lack of understanding of the material being covered. She enjoyed the social aspects of school and was very involved both athletically and socially but by the time high school arrived was not interested in academic pursuits. Her parents saw her struggles and let her know that they just wanted her to get through. For Lori, this was a free pass to not have to work hard on her academics. She did well enough to pass and graduated from high school. She actually went right to a summer program at a four-year university, but was not academically successful so she left shortly thereafter.

From that point on life took over, she started working, met her husband, got married, and then became a mother. It was her first-born son who ultimately provided the impetus which has
directed Lori’s educational trajectory. Lori had two sons and her oldest son seemed to suffer from the same types of learning disabilities that Lori had struggled with for her entire life. As he reached school age, these disabilities became more apparent. Due to these learning disabilities Lori had always been very shy, suffered from low self-esteem, and felt like everyone else was more intelligent than she was. In her interactions with people she tended to be very submissive and non-questioning. She did not want her son to suffer as she had. It was the love for her son that pushed her to want to learn and become an effective advocate for him.

Lori was diagnosed with several learning disabilities as an adult. When she learned this she felt as though “the weight of the world had been taken off of her shoulders” because it meant that her struggles had a name they could be accommodated for and they didn’t need to hold her back. As a result of her volunteer experience at her children’s elementary school, Lori learned that what she really wanted to do was to become an elementary education reading specialist. With her husband’s emotional and financial support, and blessing she went to community college and earned an associate’s degree in elementary education. Unfortunately, due to her learning disability, she has not been able to pass the Praxis exam, which is an exam that measures basic skills in reading, writing, and math and is a requirement to become eligible to gain teacher certification in the state of Pennsylvania. This has resulted in the need to reassess her career goals.

Lori reports that she has learned so much along this journey. She has grown to become more assertive and confident than she ever dreamed possible. She knows that she has many gifts to offer and has been considering what she may be able to do once she completes her bachelor’s degree. She plans to use her interest in education, knowledge of advocacy for children with special needs, and her innate nature to want to help others who are struggling as her guides
Frances grew up in two totally different worlds. She spent her first 15 years living with her grandparents in the Dominican Republic along with their 11 children. She was surrounded by cousins, who she considered to be her siblings, in a home that was run by her grandmother. In this household, all of the children went to Catholic School, the children were taught to read at an early age, and school work, grades, and educational attainment were emphasized. Frances recalls learning to read by reading aloud to her Grandmother as she worked on sewing that she took in for pay. When asked about report card day, Frances responded by saying that it was usually fine for her because she always did well, but that her brothers sometimes suffered consequences of not performing up to academic expectations. Due to the size of the family, all of the children were treated equally inside the home, meaning they all had chores regardless of gender. Gender really only became an issue when Frances was in her early teens because she had a lot less personal freedom outside the home than her “brothers” did.

Everything changed the year that Frances turned 15. That year, she moved to the United States to live with her mother. She found herself in a large public city high school, in an ESL class, with a mother who valued work over educational attainment. In this household there was no support for academic endeavors. Her mother never attended parent teacher conferences, she never checked to see if homework was completed, and report card day was a non-issue. She had more freedom, but was lonelier than she had ever been. Although she had aspirations of attending college, she didn’t know what to do or how she would pay for it. During her senior
year she sought help from a guidance counselor who told her if she wasn’t happy at the school, she was old enough to withdraw, so she did.

Frances went to work full-time and it was there that she met her husband to be. Following a short period of engagement they got married and it wasn’t long after that she became pregnant with their first child. She completed her GED and actually took a couple classes at the local community college, but dropped out when she experienced difficulties with her pregnancy. She then completed cosmetology school but after several years was not happy with the work. It was at this point in time that she seriously considered going to college to become a Secondary Education English teacher. It is a subject she always enjoyed and she wants to help students who may not be getting the support they need at home to pursue their dreams.

She discussed this dream with her husband and he promised his full support. She began by taking one class at a time at the community college and has now transferred to a four-year institution and is going to school full time to complete her degree. Frances feels fortunate because she does not currently need to work, both of her sons are in elementary school, and her husband continues to support her financially, emotionally, and physically. It is a family commitment. She is proud to be a role model for her sons and sees them working to excel academically as well. Frances believes that it was the combination of her Grandmother instilling the importance of education during her early years along with her husband supporting her and encouraging her in her bachelor’s degree attainment that has brought her to the place where she is today academically. Specifically, according to Frances, “I think family is the most important thing when it comes to education because if you don’t have that support you’re never going to do it.”
Summary of Demographic Data

Thirteen women who are over age 25, have a current family, identified as having a significant other and/or at least one child, and either pursuing or graduated with their bachelor’s degree in the past year participated in one-on-one in-depth interviews with the researcher. All of these women were attending the same university. The average age of the participant was 42 with a range of 25 to 52. GPA average was 3.27 with a range of 2.09 to 4.0. These women were slightly skewed to upper level classmen with one freshman, three sophomores, three juniors, four seniors, and two who had graduated the previous December. Study participants were asked to broadly categorize family of origin level of income as high, middle, or low. Seven participants reported the level of income in their family of origin was low, four reported they were at the middle income level, and two reported they came from families who had a high level of income. The participants were asked the same question about their current family and income levels were skewed lower with eight respondents reporting a low level of family income and five respondents reporting a middle level of current family income.

It is interesting to consider some demographics from a family perspective. Eight respondents reported that they attend or attended school on a full-time basis while five respondents attend as part-time students. Participants were asked if they have a spouse or significant other, ten respondents answered affirmatively that they have a significant other while three do not. All of the participants had children. Ten participants have children who live at home with them. Of the three who have adult children, two have had grandchildren for a number of years and one is eagerly anticipating the arrival of her first one. Five participants have children living at home who are younger than 13 years old. In addition to being parents and students, ten of these women work at least part-time. Only one is employed full-time and three
do not currently work. Interestingly, all but one of the participants reported being raised for most of their childhood in a family with two parents. Also, 12 of the 13 participants were first-generation college students. These participants have an average of 1.77 siblings. Taken together, these women were almost exclusively first-generation college students, tended to live at a lower income level than their family of origin, to be upper classmen, to have a fairly strong GPA, work part-time, and have children who are older than 13.
CHAPTER FIVE

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The results of this research study have been synthesized into four categories. This chapter begins by examining the perceptions of the variety of beliefs about and responses to education in the family of origin. Specific topics to be examined include when the participants’ kindergarten through twelfth grade education (K-12) was emphasized, when education was not emphasized, and when higher education was not understood by parents. From there, participants’ personal experiences of the desire for higher education are examined. Next, the perceptions about the current family are used to describe how family matters. Within this construct, themes that emerged include seizing the opportunity for higher education, how the academic experience is a family affair and the tapestry between parent and child with regard to higher educational attainment. As a last note, this section examines how the institution affects the participants and thus their families. The chapter concludes with a summary of the findings.

The Thread of Family of Origin Expectations

Women tend to hold a special place in their families both functionally and emotionally. Belief systems based on life experience and interaction are strongly influenced by day-to-day family life. The term the thread of family of origin expectation is a term chosen to symbolize the interdependent web between women and their families. It is based on the idea that from birth to death, family norms and expectations impact women’s lives. This section examines how this thread of influence may have influenced the participant’s during their kindergarten through twelfth grade (K-12) education as well as experiences the participants had when their parents did not have an understanding of steps needed in order to pursue a higher education or even consider it as an option for their children. This section begins with an examination of when education was
emphasized in the family of origin. It is followed by a discussion of when education was not emphasized and concludes with a discussion of the impact when higher education was not understood by parents. The combination of each of these sections provides the details needed to appreciate how integral these experiences were in these women’s lives.

**Educational Attainment Was Emphasized at an Early Age**

The theme “when education was emphasized” reflected family support for educational endeavors as well as an emphasis on academic expectations from members of the family of origin. These values were typically instilled at an early age, in one instance, at birth. For example, Naomi’s mother immigrated to the United States and wanted her daughter to have a professional career. These words from Naomi about her mother expresses this idea: “when I was born, she decided that she was going to name me after the only women she had ever heard of that had gotten a college education that wasn’t a nun.” In fact, Naomi’s mother conscientiously chose not to teach her daughter how to speak English for fear that she wouldn’t teach her properly; instead, she was sent to pre-kindergarten when she was four years old and learned English by immersion into an English speaking classroom. Three of the 13 participants, Naomi, Christina, and Frances, were ESL (English as a Second Language) students who learned English at school. When individuals from the participant’s family of origin valued education they described feeling academically supported in a number of ways including coming from a supportive environment, knowing that their family expected them to be doing their best, and having the belief that educational attainment is important for a better future instilled in them as children.

Each participant expressed academic support from at least one source, most typically from their parents, during their childhood. For instance, both Alice and Frances were taught to
read before they even started school, despite the fact that the people who taught them to read had not completed formal education. Alice expressed it in this way:

My father taught me to read when I was four using the [local newspaper]. I would basically read the articles to him and explain to him what the articles meant and if there were words I couldn’t define, he would teach them to me.

Likewise, Frances was taught to read at home sitting by her grandmother’s side as she explains:

I remember growing up, when I learned to read. I learned to read at home. I didn’t learn to read at school. My grandmother would be sitting, because she sewed for other people, and she would be sewing and I would be sitting right next to the sewing machine with a book, reading to her. She would stop for a little bit and tell me how to read it and then she would go back to her sewing and I would read some more, and the same thing with math. I mean we learned our tables with her and all that stuff.

This early exposure to education, and its importance, instilled a sense of confidence in these women with regard to their academic ability even though they each eventually dropped out of high school.

Home life was an important aspect of feeling as though these participants lived in an academically supportive environment. In these families, report card day and general academic achievement tended to be noted and appreciated. There were two families who paid the participants as a reward for good grades. Christina’s and Tessa’s family paid the children cash when they brought home high marks on their report cards. Both of these families were very close knit and had a strong European influence. Tessa remembers report card day fondly at her home, “I remember that we used to get rewarded, yea, like three dollars or something for every A.” In Christina’s family it was her grandparents, “they’d give us five bucks for a report card,
and I think, we never failed anything.” In the family that Frances was a part of for the first fifteen years of her life, report card day and its repercussions could be long lasting:

For my brothers? I call my uncles who were my age. For my brothers, it wasn’t so much fun but for me it was always okay. I always had good grades and I didn’t have to try very hard…. they [her “brothers”] would usually get in trouble. Sometimes they would get a whooping and they would miss vacation. During vacation in the summer we would get to go to the country with our cousins and stuff. We loved to go out to the county because we got to do whatever we wanted and my grandmother wasn’t right there watching us.

So, if they didn’t pass, didn’t get promoted to the next grade, they didn’t go.

Paying for grades and missing vacations were reported by three participants, for others, there was typically a certain level of commitment to academics that was expected.

For a number of participants there was an underlying expectation that the children would do the best that they could. This was clearly expressed by Claudia who described her parent’s response to report card day in the following way: “If you studied and got an A, great! If you studied and got an F, well, maybe we just need to study a little bit harder or at least you tried.” Like Claudia, Christina, Tessa, and Lori came from families who expected that their daughters would put forth their best effort. Typically, this expectation was not verbalized, but rather, a norm that appears to have come from their cultural background and was being transmitted through the family. Each of these participants came from a Northern European heritage in which hard work and best effort were just expected. Christina explains a situation which describes this underlying expectation, “do you remember the bound copy books? I guess it was first grade, having to write a page of numbers 2’s and they [the numbers she had written] weren’t very nice and he [her father] ripped my page out and made me do it again.” This one example serves as an
indicator of how performing to the best of one’s abilities no matter what the task at hand was the expectation.

CeCe described this expectation of a best effort in a different way. She viewed her mother as very supportive of her children. This was made clear by the many opportunities the children had to participate in a variety of activities. CeCe reports that the lesson instilled in her by her parents and all of her siblings were that “we could do whatever we wanted.” CeCe’s father had an eighth grade education but went on to become widely recognized as a master electrician. CeCe shares, “no matter what we wanted to do, we could do. My mom was very much pushy for us to be what we wanted to be.” This translated into many extracurricular activities which for CeCe included: piano, dance, and modeling just to name a few. The “pushiness” that CeCe describes was couched in the underlying expectation that by offering their children all of these opportunities, the children would be able to build on their natural strengths to create a bright future for themselves.

There were a number of families who supported and expected educational attainment culminating in high school graduation but did not necessarily support higher education aspirations. The evidence to support this emphasis on the completion of high school is visible in several ways. First, there was an emphasis on homework completion. Christina shares that “you came home from school, and you got changed into play clothes and did your homework or you did your homework in your school uniform, and then got changed. You did homework before you went out.” The emphasis on educational attainment was experienced every day after school in this family. Assistance with homework is another indicator of educational expectations; Kacey explained that homework assistance typically came from her father and consisted of being reminded to look information up in their full set of encyclopedias or the dictionary, “get the
encyclopedia and read it. Or if you ask what does this word mean? Get the dictionary and look it up. He wouldn’t make it easy.” In this way, the children were taught to be self-sufficient and independent learners. Other examples of supporting education, at least through high school, include the underlying expectation that the participants would graduate. For Andrea this was reinforced even though she had moved out of her family home by the time she was a senior. Her mother received a notice that Andrea was in danger of failing English and possibly not graduating, so she called Andrea and they had an important discussion which helped Andrea to create a plan and successfully graduate from high school.

In Tessa’s family the importance placed on the benefits of higher education was intergenerational. Higher education was very important to her grandparents. Tessa referred to herself and her cousins frequently. They lived close together and shared weekly meals at her grandparent’s house. Tessa described why education was so highly supported within her family, “my grandfather came here from Italy. He had a plan, he had a master plan for the whole family….he wanted the family to be self-sufficient.” His plan included an array of professional positions for the grandchildren in order to meet all of the needs of the family:

The law is something I should have went into originally, that’s what I was geared to go into and what I should have done…. when I was going through high school that was what my path was, my cousin William and I. My cousin William was the first one born. I was the first born girl and they wanted us to go to law school.

When families place value on academic achievement, the participants felt supported in their academic endeavors. Expectations were implied by acts such as being named after a woman who went on for higher education and by being taught to read at home prior to school attendance. In the families who valued K-12 education, report card day was remembered as a
day when participants reported on their academic progress to someone in their families. Some of
them came away richer because of their grades. Another factor that was uncovered was that for
families who placed value on academic achievement, there was typically an underlying
expectation that the participants were performing to the best of their ability. Finally, it was
found that just because families supported these participants in their educational endeavors
during the K-12 years, this did not necessarily translate into support for obtaining higher
education.

**Educational Attainment was Less Emphasized during High School Years**

Each participant spoke at least in a small way about the importance of education to their
family of origin particularly during their younger years at some point during the interview.
However, participants spoke much more about the perceived lack of support for their academic
endeavors, particularly during their high school years than they did about the academic support
they received. This was due to a variety of reasons, but four of the main themes that emerged
were: (1) having parents who did not place priority on the student’s academic progress, (2)
parents who accepted an unquestioned cultural norm that because each of these women were
female, higher education was not really important, (3) families who experienced shifts in the
family of origin structure causing changes in home life, and (4) situations in which there were
issues of drug or alcohol abuse or mental illness within the family. Taken together these
variables seemed to have the most profound influence on the reason these female participants
were attending college as adult learners rather than as traditionally-aged students. It was not that
the families did not value education; rather, there were other issues occurring within the family
that seemed to take precedence over the educational pursuits of these participants, and typically
their siblings as well.
Participants noted a lack of emphasis on educational attainment during their upbringing numerous times, particularly as they grew older. The first several examples of responses are when participants were asked about what expectations were like on report card day. This lack of emphasis on educational attainment, as it related to her report card, was explained by Nikki in the following way, “for me, no, I did pretty well. She [her mother] really didn’t care what I did.” As another example, this is the way Frances, who moved in with her mother at the age of 15, responded to the question about educational expectations from her mother:

My mother never got involved in the school thing, never, she didn’t go to parent teacher conferences, didn’t really look at the grades. If we chose to hide our report cards, she wouldn’t know…cause she wasn’t really involved. She never checked to see if we had done our homework. But my mom was never involved in anything to do with our education. It wasn’t her concern.

Education was not the focus of attention for Frances’s mother, working was:

So school wasn’t the first thing. Work was. Ya know, she always advised me, just get a job. Ya know, once you, once you get out of school you get a job and you go to school part-time if you can.

The response from Miriam’s mother was very similar to the words used by Frances’s in that working for a living was much more heavily emphasized than going on for a higher education. Miriam explained it this way:

No, she [Miriam’s mother] didn’t think anything of it. I mean, she, wanted what was necessary for you to get through [to high school graduation] and that was it. I mean on her side of the family, her brothers and sister, none of them were educated. They just did the basic what was required and that was it. They just did manual labor jobs.
In the next example the family just did not seem to consider higher education as an option, Kacey explains, “my parents never talked about me going to college, it was never even a thought.” Kacey’s example is important to consider since K-12 attendance is mandatory. She reports that there were no expectations other than physically going to school:

Whether I got A’s, B’s, C’s, D’s, F’s, they didn’t, I don’t remember ever getting yelled at for my grades...I’m in the middle and there really wasn’t [any expectations] and I am the only girl too but there wasn’t no real expectations. I don’t remember getting grounded because I had a “D” or something.

The following quote shows that although Lori’s family seemed to be emotionally supportive of their daughter, it implies they did not believe in her ability to be academically successful, “well, we [her parents] were never good students, we don’t expect you to be. And for me, that was a free pass to just not try.” These quotes show how profoundly parental expectations, or lack thereof, may influence academic experience. One of the reasons for this lack of emphasis on academics was reported to be gender based.

The idea that women didn’t need higher education was expressed by several participants. This example is from Miriam speaking about her mother’s educational expectations of her, “no, no, no she just figured, you girls, my sister and I would just get married. You’d just get married. She was very traditional. Oh yea, no school, women don’t go to school.” Although Christina’s family placed a high value on completing a K-12 education, those expectations ended with high school graduation, “I think it was, I don’t even know if it was, ya know, get married, have kids, and buy a house, that kind of thing” Tessa’s family was different in that parent’s and grandparent’s both supported the pursuit of higher education, but there was a family tradition of having the mother stay home to raise the children that was ingrained in her through modeling,
“because I don’t have a problem with the way I was raised, I think my parents did everything correct.” It is the way she and her then husband wanted to raise their children as well. In this case, it was following the behaviors of the previous generation, rather than academic expectations which impacted attendance for this participant. This cultural ideology has shifted with the passing of time as more and more women are entering the workforce.

The passing of time also impacts family membership and this creates change within the family. In some instances when family dynamics change it causes a shift away from the emphasis on children’s academic endeavors. Family membership was based on the participant’s description of the members of their family. Changes in family membership, in this group of participants, occurred as the result of divorce, death, or remarriage. Five participants had parents who divorced each other. In all but one case it had significant repercussions on the educational expectations of the participants. These quotes express some of the experiences of these participants. Nikki said, “I kinda feel like once the divorce happened, she didn’t really care what I did.” She also shared, “my mom worked three jobs, because my dad could never hold a job, so she was never around.”

When her father moved out of the house, Alice lost the parent who had been the one who stayed home with the children, up until Alice reached high school age, “I was eleven, twelve years old, she [mother] worked second shift. So when I came home it was my dad that was home.” However, household membership changed during Alice’s high school years, “at that point my parents had already split up. So my dad wasn’t living in the house anymore and my mom was working second shift and she was pretty much pre-occupied with just working and surviving and paying rent.” Naomi only mentioned in passing that her parents had gotten divorced when she was seven years old, “my mother and father had separated when I was
seven.” She did not speak about changes to academic expectations, but did speak about moving out of the household at the end of her eleventh grade year. She said, “I was seventeen years old and came out to Pennsylvania to meet my father who I hadn’t seen since I was seven years old.” It was different for Frances because as a result of the divorce, Frances lived at her grandparent’s home until the time she was fifteen years old. She explained it this way:

I grew up, with my grandparents and my grandparents had eleven children. So I grew up in a large family until I was close to fifteen then I moved in with my mother. My parents divorced when I was two or three months old. She was single and my brother and I went to live with her. And, so I then went from a really large family with my grandmother and grandfather to a single parent family when I was fifteen and that was pretty tough.

In her grandparent’s household, education was strongly valued and emphasized. All of the children in her grandparent’s home went to a private school, “I lived down in the Dominican Republic with my grandparents and I went to a private school, a Christian school actually.” This was because of the value placed on education by her grandmother, “well, with my grandmother that [education] was very important.” It was when she moved in with her mother at fifteen that the major shift to a lack of educational expectations occurred, “my mother never got involved in the school thing, never.” Similarly, each of the participants who spoke about a parent’s divorce also talked about how their mother’s attention tended to be focused on working in order to maintain the household, thus leaving less time for their daughter’s academic pursuits. Obviously in some families such as for Nikki, Alice, and Frances the divorce was felt much more strongly than in other families. Nonetheless, divorce is a significant change to any family and thus has the ability to influence educational expectations.
In addition to changes caused by divorce, changes to families and support structures sometimes resulted from death or remarriage. In Miriam’s case, her father passed away when she was 12. This totally changed her living situation because she actually went to live with her Uncle and Aunt for a while, “I was 12 when my dad passed away….so, I stayed with him [her Uncle] and my Aunt for awhile. So he kinda took over the fatherly role.” It was very difficult for her, because she had always felt more strongly connected to her father’s side of the family. This change in her life is reflected here, “Once my father died, I started seeing the division [between her mother and father’s side of the family]. I still spent more time on my father’s side of the family like with aunts and relatives and once I was 17 then I moved out on my own.”

Nikki experienced a big change in her living situation when her mother became involved in a live in relationship, “when I was 12 to like 15, she [her mother] remarried, kinda, sorta, not really married, but, then I had two more brothers.” This change was difficult for Nikki and she described not feeling comfortable at home as well as distanced from her mother, “so I think we just don’t have that bond, so she [Nikki’s mother] never really cared. I was never home in high school…this wasn’t really my home, it was just where I slept.” Another loss that Nikki experienced was of her great-grandmother, a woman who had gone to Bible College and had served as an inspiration to her. Nikki’s great-grandmother had passed away shortly after Nikki’s parents were separated, “…we still lived next door to her, so she was really supportive, but she actually passed away a month after my dad was kicked out of the house. So that was really tough for us too.” That was two major losses Nikki experienced in a short period of time.

Occasionally, educational expectations were impacted by other life circumstances as well. In some cases, parent’s inability to be available either physically or mentally also influenced educational expectations.
Of all of the barriers faced by these students, one of the most difficult ones to overcome was the result of either alcohol or drug abuse or mental illness within the family of origin. There were six families which were significantly impacted by this in some way. This issue was hard to discuss for the participants due to its personal nature and participants did not generally go into a lot of detail. Alcohol abuse within the family of origin was the most prevalent issue discussed. Four of the participants reported alcohol abuse as being a significant factor in their family of origin relationships. It affected the living situation of three of them as they neared adulthood. For instance, Andrea shared that “yea, my mom has an alcohol problem and so there’s always been tension between the two of us growing up. It’s why I moved out as soon as I turned 18 and I finished high school living with my husband’s family.” It was similar for Miriam, “that was like a thread through my family was alcoholism. So there was a lot of alcoholism and that’s kinda why I don’t have close ties to my family because of all the alcohol. That was one of the reasons why I left.” Miriam moved out immediately after graduating from high school, “Right after I graduated high school was when I went out on my own.” Naomi did not come right out and say what issues were occurring; rather, she shared, “I left school in eleventh grade, I wasn’t happy with the family dynamic that I had in my home. I felt that it was really unhealthy for me to be there.” Even though Naomi had always felt supported in her educational endeavors by her mother, there was something going on in her family that caused her to want to leave home prior to her senior year in high school and seek out her father. She only lived with him for one year and made no mention of trying to complete high school during that time:

During that year I saved money, I worked and I got myself a car and then I got myself an apartment and my brother moved in with me. And, so, I didn’t have the benefit of having gone through the traditional, the prom, and the walk down the aisle doing the walk at
graduation for high school. So I missed out on that. I was more focused on making
money and paying bills.

As Naomi reached an age close to adulthood she felt the need to become independent from first
her mother’s home and a year later her father’s.

Elaine’s parents both had alcohol issues. She explained that she had “alcoholic parents,”
that during her upbringing she had been “neglected and emotionally abused” and that there was
“addiction in the family system.” She described her older brothers as being very rebellious and
herself as always being the good little girl and peace-maker of the family:

[I was] somewhat overlooked because my brothers were somewhat rebellious as teenage
boys and got into trouble, and there was lots of focus on them. So as a result, I was, my
role in the family was the good little girl trying to keep the peace and order and not make
any waves.

Her world turned upside down following her high school graduation, when she chose to move
three thousand miles away with her parents leaving behind her support system of other family
members and friends. She describes it this way:

So here I was uprooted from my support system, my extended family, my friends, the
community that I knew, my grandparents….so I moved three thousand miles away and
was somewhat isolated with my parents and kind of in the role of having to keep peace.

The move was not a good one for Elaine, after one semester at the local community college she
said, “so that was my plan, take a semester off at twenty years old. I took that semester off, I got
this job, actually, I worked two jobs, moved out of my parent’s house to support myself.” Once
she began working, she did not return to higher education for many years.
So far, each of these participants discussed how they handled these situations as young adults. The responses to these types of issues were necessarily different when the participants were not close to adult age. The last two families to discuss were impacted by alcohol/drug abuse or mental illness occurred when the participants were still children and living independently was not an option. Although Nikki’s parents eventually got a divorce, Nikki was exposed to drugs, physical, verbal, and emotional abuse at a very young age. In her own words, “I was 12 when my dad was kicked out of the house, he was really abusive. He was actually a drug dealer, he used to deal in and out of the house all the time…they [the police] took my Dad away in cuffs.” Compounded to this loss, was the fact that Nikki felt distanced from her mother. Nikki explains that she believes this may have been because she has some characteristics that are similar to her father, not the addictions issue, but she believes that is part of the reason her mother has seemed to be so emotionally distant from her, “once the divorce happened, she [Nikki’s mother] didn’t really care what I did, I think she kinda saw him in me…yea, so which I, I do hold some of his characteristics, I am his daughter, but I am not close to what he is.”

Kacey’s situation was different in that her mother was dealing with mental health issues. Kacey explains “I don’t remember my mom being around. I remember her being in bed. She had depression and all kinds of things so I don’t really remember her, any guidance from her.” Kacey further explained, “my mom had been going through a lot at that point in her life where she had repressed memories that started coming out.” Kacey seemed to respond to this by becoming involved with people outside of her family. She talked about her mother not knowing what she was involved in, “I was drinking, smoking, and smoking pot by the time I was 13… maybe if I had a little more guidance that way, she [Kacey’s mother] didn’t know what I was
doing.” Although Kacey did not physically move out, she mentally checked out by getting into the party scene.

An important aspect of having issues associated with alcohol or drug abuse or mental illness is that while they are occurring the specific individuals who are involved in them are typically very self-absorbed. When families are just trying to survive from one day to the next, how the children are doing in school was typically not a high priority issue from the perspective of these participants. As Andrea stated, “I guess grades kinda, it didn’t really matter to them, or wasn’t like on their agenda as much as it should have been.” This comment sums it up well.

When issues associated with drug or alcohol abuse or mental illness were involved, there was a lack of emphasis on educational attainment of the children.

In many of these families, family structures and relationships became more strained as these individuals grew closer to adulthood. This strain caused a change in living arrangements either during or directly after graduation for several participants particularly when issues of drug or alcohol abuse within the family of origin were revealed. These women often spoke of needing to remove and separate themselves from the households they grew up in. Additionally, as these women reached adult age status, they were expected to take on the responsibility of being economically independent.

It is evident from the previous section that there were many issues associated with parent’s not placing a high level of emphasis on the academic achievement of these participants during their K-12 academic years. The themes which emerged included a general lack of emphasis on educational achievement during upbringing, how changes in family membership tended to shift focus away from an emphasis on children’s academic achievement, or if there were issues associated with alcohol or drug abuse or mental health within the family of origin.
In each of these families, other issues took priority over academics of the children. For the children in these families, attaining higher education was a challenge that they often faced without the support of a parent. Part of the reason for this seems to be a lack of understanding about expectations of and trajectories towards institutions of higher education.

**When Higher Education Was Not Understood by Parents**

This section begins by examining education levels in the family of origin and how this may have impacted educational expectations particularly from a first-generation college student perspective. From there, it is important to look at constructs associated with a lack of knowledge about higher education, a lack of educational preparation for higher education which is conceivably linked to this lack of knowledge, and finally a lack of knowledge of available resources to pursue higher education. Without the knowledge of available resources, individuals may not realize that higher education was even an option for them. Finally, the issue of not being financially supported by the family of origin in order to pursue higher education as a traditionally-aged student is examined. All of these issues are integral to parents not having an understanding of higher education.

Of the 13 participants, only one had a parent who had either an associates or a bachelor’s degree so everyone except Tessa were first-generation college students. As a result of this, there was a genuine lack of understanding about higher education in general. This included everything from not understanding the logistics of what is important for entrance into college, to a lack of educational preparation, to any knowledge of available resources for students who are interested in attending. It was especially problematic when higher education was seen as luxury and working was viewed as the priority. This translated into the students reporting things such as a lack of guidance and not having anyone to speak with about what should be done or how to do it.
What was reported repeatedly was that due to low levels of education of the parent’s, these participants felt as though they did not have any guidance in regard to pursuing higher education. In several instances the level of the educational attainment of the parents was extremely low. This was the case for Miriam, Naomi, Christina, CeCe, Claudia, Alice, Lori, and Andrea. Interestingly, both CeCe and Lori had fathers who dropped out prior to attending high school and yet supported higher educational attainment for their children. Generally though, these students just felt lost, especially when their parents were unable to read or write. Miriam explains:

For more education, I just didn’t know how to do it….My parents didn’t finish school. My dad, I think only had a maybe sixth grade, very little education. He had a hard time writing and reading. I don’t think my mom finished school either.

Andrea explained how this lack of knowledge about education can impact individuals during their academic journey in the following way:

Neither one of my parents have college degrees. And none of us know anything about college, and so I went to the business school thinking I could get out and start at this great job and I wouldn’t have to get a bachelor’s degree.

Having to drop out of school to work was more prevalent during the time period that these participant’s parents would have been in school than it is in today’s world. For many, to drop out of school or not drop out of school was not a choice they had but rather something they had to do in order to work so they could help to support their family. Christina explained her parent’s educational level this way, “my parents didn’t go farther in school because it wasn’t an option for them. In Romania at the time they went to whatever grade and then onto a trade school.” Both Claudia and Alice experienced this in their family of origin. Claudia explains:
Well my parents didn’t have the opportunity to finish high school because like my father had to go out and work. And my mother, her mother passed away when she was twelve so she was in foster care and so she was expected to just work on the farm that she was a foster child of. So she was a little backwards.

Alice’s story is a little different:

So my father had to leave school in the third grade to work on his farm. And my father was disabled, he contracted Polio as a child. He wasn’t able to walk, so his role on the farm was to raise chickens. He basically had a flock of over three hundred chickens that he raised, that was his role on the farm. My mother actually left school in the ninth grade because she became pregnant with me. She had me thirteen days before her sixteenth birthday.

Alice’s father had taught her to read when she was four years old by using the local newspaper. When I asked her about this she explained that he had taught himself to read. Obviously, he recognized its importance and did what he could to pass it on to his daughter. In general, these women reported that this lack of educational attainment by their parent’s left them with no clear guidance, direction, or even in some instances, no encouragement to consider pursuing higher education.

Many of the women spoke about a lack of guidance or assistance in areas related to college preparation such as taking college prep classes in high school and/or learning about colleges, programs, financing, or even pre-admission testing requirements. For Nikki, it was a lack of guidance, “my mom didn’t really have any expectations. She never went to college so she never took me on college visits, she never pushed for my SAT scores, she never pushed for education period.” Miriam navigated obtaining higher education without having people to ask.
The following quote shows that when she had questions that occurred at the community college, she didn’t have anyone to ask for clarification:

Well one thing with me, even though I wanted the higher education and everything, it wasn’t until everything kinda fit into place, as much as I wanted it, I didn’t understand how to get it. I just still didn’t. Even though I went to [local community college], they weren’t much help in that area. Everybody’s like, oh, you can get money for this and you can get money for that. But you still don’t know how to do it.

Andrea also expressed this idea about not understanding the logistics of college entrance requirements:

I didn’t know how to go about applying to a college. I didn’t know. I didn’t take my SAT’s, I took my PSAT’s and did terribly. Then somebody had told me that if you go to business school or community college and get a GPA there then they don’t need your SAT’s.

Andrea’s quote brings up another issue caused by a lack of understanding of higher education and that is a misunderstanding of the difference between accredited universities and business and technical institutes. Without having an individual who can clearly explain the differences between these schools, some students are left with misperceptions about what program completion actually offers as well as the transferability of credits. This was the case for Andrea, she thought that her credits from business school would transfer to a community college or four-year institution, “yea, I had to start all over again because none of my credits transferred.”

Part of the lack of understanding of higher education seemed to be the belief that working was the only option. Alice and Frances both had mothers who viewed work as an essential
aspect of survival. This is Alice speaking about her mother, “for her it wasn’t that education wasn’t important, but her idea was it’s more important to work to make money to survive and education is something you really just can’t afford.” The message that Frances received from her mother was very similar, “so school wasn’t the first thing. Work was. She always advised me just get a job. Once you get out of school you get a job and you go to school part-time, if you can.” Both of these mothers struggled to provide for their family’s basic needs. They had no exposure to or knowledge of financial aid, specifically the grants that are available to assist low-income undergraduate students. For instance, Frances, whose mother stressed the importance of work has this to say:

My mom didn’t know anything about the system and so I didn’t know anything about what I needed to do to go to college. I didn’t know how to prepare myself, what steps to take. I didn’t think that if you didn’t have money, because down in the Dominican Republic if you can pay for it, anybody can go to college. …and here if you don’t have the money to go, you can apply for loans and you can go as long as your grades are at a certain level. I didn’t know that I could ask for loans. I didn’t know that there were grants.

This lack of understanding about the process and available resources translated into a significant barrier for Frances because she truly didn’t know that it was possible for her to attend college.

What many of these quotes express is that these individuals and their families did not have information which could have helped them to perhaps make different choices. It also highlights the fact that without having someone to speak with who understands higher education, there is the possibility for misunderstanding, wrong information, and the lack of an opportunity to even discuss many issues that arise resulting from not knowing enough to even know which
questions to ask. One other important point to mention is that without having a parent who supports higher educational attainment, these students would search out other individuals who might have been able to help them. Following the release of her standardized national exam results, which were very high, Alice began receiving letters of interest from Ivy League colleges stating they thought she would be a good applicant. She went and spoke with her guidance counselor about them. This is the response she received:

I remember he told me not to bother. He says, you should not really apply for these schools, because if you do, you would get accepted only because you’re a minority and you’d be so overwhelmed with work, you wouldn’t be able to stay. You’d drop out. And that really broke my heart. It upset me so much I actually ended up dropping out my senior year, a few months later. I went back and I dropped out again, my senior year. So, I actually dropped out of school twice my senior year. That’s why I didn’t go to college right away cause at that point I was so disillusioned. I was like there’s no point in me trying anymore. Like all this work I did was kinda like for nothing.

This comment was important to share because it highlights how much of an impact just one individual can have, particularly, when there is no one at home to discuss issues associated with higher education attendance. Andrea also had an experience which lead her to believe that not only was she not college material but she would be lucky to graduate from high school. These are the words Andrea’s reading specialist told her parents:

What he told my parents was that I was never going to succeed, I was never going to go beyond this level. I would probably never graduate high school and would most likely amount to nothing, no amount of extra help would help me.
Similar to Andrea learning that her reading teacher never believed she would graduate from high school, Alice learned from a test that she was not college material based on a career assessment:

I remember the test that I took, they told me I was not college material, which was the antithesis of what I was always groomed for since kindergarten. It really surprised me and I was like, I’m not college material, so I’d be better off getting a job like in a factory or something.

These experiences truly left their mark on these women for many years.

For those parents who did not emphasize higher education, financial support to attend school was not even a consideration. Many of the participants were forced to take on the financial responsibilities of an adult when they reached 18 years of age. This appeared to be a significant barrier to higher educational attendance as well. For the seven participant’s who moved out on their own either prior to completing high school or just afterwards, Kacey, Naomi, Andrea, Miriam, Alice, Elaine, and Frances, financial assistance from their family of origin for a college education was never an option. This led to life choices that were more focused on working than on attending college. Naomi explained that when she moved out of her father’s home, she began working and never stopped until she felt able to incorporate school in her life again. This happened twice, once immediately following her divorce:

I was fortunate enough to have my mom come live with me, she lived with me for two years. She helped with the children and I was able to go and get my first two years of general education out of the way…and I was able to graduate.

The second time is currently in progress and she is looking into finding a part-time position to help supplement the family income:
I’m looking for a part-time job right now so that I can supplement and that should be an interesting fall semester. I’ve always been a hard worker, so I feel that I’ll get through it okay. I may not be a 4.0 [GPA] anymore, because I can’t allocate the majority of my time.

For Andrea, Miriam, and Alice, the possibility of receiving any financial support from their parent’s to help offset the costs of college attendance didn’t come up during the interview. These women didn’t speak about not being financially supported, but rather, the financial responsibilities they shouldered once leaving their family of origin. Andrea moved out prior to high school graduation and shares, “I had a full-time job, I had college [business school] that I was paying for, and then I had Justin [her fiancé] who I was still trying to make time for too.” For Miriam the transition happened quickly, she explained, “I graduated from high school and then right after I graduated high school I went out on my own.” Alice spoke about moving out, not graduating from high school, and working full-time from that point on, until she decided to go back to school as an adult. It was a similar situation for Frances, in that she began working full-time as soon as she left home because she had to work in order to survive. Finally, Elaine, who moved with her parents three thousand miles away and started one semester at a community college found that:

Without having that type of backing, not having the resources, I made the decision to take a break from school for one semester to get a part-time, temporary job, or full-time temporary job, move out of my parent’s house, bank some money and then move back to my original home community, where I had a support system in place.

Another two participants lived with families who wouldn’t support higher education financially, but were not opposed to the participants going to school if they could find a way to
pay for it. Christina’s family fell into this category as she said, “it wasn’t like there wasn’t any encouragement there just wasn’t any financial [assistance]”, she goes on to explain, “not that they weren’t willing to help cause I lived at home till, God, I was twenty-four.” Her parent’s expectations were that the children would find jobs so they could support themselves and be self-sufficient. Like Christina, Elaine could have pursued higher education, but chose not to because of a lack of financial support, “without having that type of backing [financial support from her grandparents], not having the resources, I made the decision to take a break from school.” One participant, Claudia, was actually forbidden from attending college. It wasn’t that they wouldn’t pay, which they would not, they would not allow her to attend:

Whatever they [her sister and brother] got to do, that’s what I got to do. So, my sister didn’t go to college, so that meant my brother and I weren’t allowed to go college either, even though the funds were available. It’s that we all had to stay even.

Not receiving financial support from their family of origin as a traditionally-aged student was one of the reasons that each of these participants waited until a later time in their life to pursue their educational goals. Without the financial support for higher education, these participants began to work and live independently. These responsibilities took precedence over higher educational attainment until later in their lives.

A general lack of knowledge about higher education impacted these women in numerous ways. When the parent’s level of education was low, they did not know what was necessary to assist their daughters to prepare for higher education. This was evident by the participants describing their lack of understanding of a college preparatory curriculum, needing to take admissions tests, how to apply to schools, or even how to apply for financial aid. This lack of knowledge precluded them from even considering college attendance as a traditionally-aged
student. Additionally, when the family of origin was not able to provide any financial support for higher education, these participants found themselves in situations in which they too had to work to survive and did not tend to fit school into their life roles during that point in time. Taken together this lack of knowledge about higher education had a significant and negative influence on the participant’s college attendance.

**College Was Often a Dream**

The desire to attend college was a dream for most of the participants from a young age. The path traveled to enrollment was unique to each participant; however, there were several themes, which emerged that together help to explain the journey towards achieving higher education. First, many of the participants spoke about people outside of their family of origin who provided some belief and support for their academic endeavors as they were growing up. Next, many of the participants spoke about a desire to be different in some way from their family of origin. By difference, the participants expressed thoughts about wanting to achieve more and/or have the ability to provide a better life for their families through attaining a college education. The reasons these women provided for actually returning to school included professional development, personal fulfillment, and life experiences. Another important variable to consider is the personal beliefs that the participant’s had about their own ability to successfully negotiate the work required to obtain a college degree. These beliefs were often formed and maintained as a result of experiences within the family of origin but became visible as adults who were then living with their current families. Another aspect that had profound implications for these women were cultural expectations in regard to higher educational attainment they were exposed to as they were being raised. The final variable impacting the dream these women carried was the level of their personal desire to achieve a bachelor’s degree.
Although these dreams were waylaid by life experience, the underlying desire for more education remained.

**Seeking Support from Outside Sources**

When educational attainment was not emphasized in their family of origin, many of these women spoke about support coming from a variety of other sources. In four of the families where educational attainment was not specifically supported, these women received support from at least one of their grandparents. Nikki, Elaine, Claudia and Frances all relied on at least one of their grandparents for support. Miriam’s support came from her aunts and uncles. Additionally, friends, teachers, friend’s parents, and connections from church were mentioned as sources of support by Nikki, Andrea and Alice. This support was felt because these individuals showed an active interest in how the participants were doing academically and by encouraging them in their educational endeavors.

Nikki continues to have a close relationship with her grandmother, “she’s more than just my grandmom, she’s more like a mom to me…so her and I, whenever I have a problem, whenever I have anything, I always go to her, ask her advice and stuff.” One of the most influential people in Frances’s life is her grandmother, “my grandmother is awesome. I love my grandmother and she’s the best example that I’ve had in my life.” Her grandmother also had a strong belief in the value of education:

Education was very important to her cause she knew if you didn’t get an education you weren’t going to get out of poverty. So all my relatives, all her kids went to school. When I was growing up it was expected that I was going to go to college.
This statement made very clear her Grandmother’s belief that higher education offers the opportunity for a better standard of living. That belief is underscored by the words of both Tessa and Elaine’s grandparents as well. These are Tessa’s words:

They wanted, they wanted us to all go to school. My grandfather had a plan, he wanted the family to be self-sufficient…. two people had to work in the law field, we have Frankie the doctor. Do you know what I mean? Everybody was supposed to help take care of the family.

Elaine’s grandparents were more generalized than that, “my father’s parents always urged me to get a college degree…they were very much a support group, a support system to me.”

Miriam’s academic support, on the other hand, came from her Aunts and Uncles. She spoke about their support of her academic endeavors a couple times during the interview. These are the words she shared:

But I did get it on my father’s side. They did talk about it, they would discuss it with me.

Don’t you want to go to school? You should get really good grades. It was something they knew about but they didn’t have a grasp on it.

They believed in the benefits of education despite the fact, that according to Miriam they just didn’t understand, “they were always on me about, finish school, you gotta get an education. Get a good job and get a nice family, stuff like that.” It wasn’t only family that provided support to these then girls but community members as well.

Being involved in their communities was very important to Nikki, Lori and Alice. Both Nikki and Alice spoke about the support they received from the people in their churches. They both specifically mentioned the adult members of their congregations as offering positive support to them. Nikki also talked about a close friend’s parents who were always interested in knowing
how she was doing both academically and personally. Alice shared a story about community influence from her childhood. This occurred while she was in elementary school and was about a reading program. This reading program had a van, which traveled to individual schools and the children who participated in the reading program were able to choose one free book for themselves:

The teachers who were there said, oh my gosh, you can’t pick that book, you’re too smart for that kind of book. Pick a real book that you should read. So I had to put that back [a coloring book with paint] and get a really difficult, like fourth grade book [she was in first grade at the time], to please everyone. That’s when I realized that the expectations for me were different from my classmates.

It is clear these messages had a profound influence on these individuals because of the recollection of these words after all of these years. Between parents, grandparents, other family members, and community members all of the participants reported somebody they remember as being supportive of them in their academic endeavors.

**The Desire to Attend College**

The participant’s desire to attend college and be different from their family of origin was expressed in numerous ways. The underlying themes of wanting to achieve more and have the ability to provide for a better life for their families were the motivating factors towards change. For example, Nikki grew up being told that her mother was unable to go to college because of becoming pregnant with her. Nikki resolved that she would not be like her mother and would attend college no matter what. She stated, “I really was like I’m going to school no matter what. I don’t care where I get into, I just want to go.” Naomi loved going to school after she learned to speak and understand English, “I loved going there to learn.” The experience of thoroughly
enjoying school as a child was mirrored by both Alice and Frances; interestingly, none of these women graduated from high school. Each one of them found that they were working full-time during the ages of being a traditionally-aged student.

Naomi was drawn to her husband because of his education. They met because she was teaching him English:

He was very impressive, he had just come from Mexico and he wanted me to help him learn Spanish, which was something, I mean, to learn English. He was in the midst of completing a master’s degree in Mexico at the time, he was just getting ready to finish up his Master’s Degree…for Public Administration.

He actually defended his thesis during their honeymoon:

We ended up going to [school in Mexico] so he could finish up his Master’s degree that was during our honeymoon time….He did a wonderful job, but I was very impressed with him because he came from a …very economically humble home. For him to come from such an impoverished background and to have such a drive, he left home at 14 to continue his education and for him to, for me to be there, as his new wife and see him get his Master’s degree left a really strong impression, a very positive impression.

Shortly thereafter she became pregnant and wanted to stay home to raise their child. He found that he needed a Master’s degree from the United States so he made a deal with Naomi. She would work and support him so he could complete his degree, and then it would be her turn and he would support her. She stated, “wife, you help husband get his Master’s or finish up this personal educational goal and then when I get a job, we turn around, you finish your educational goal.” Unfortunately that didn’t happen because when he finished and it was her turn to go, he refused to support her either financially or emotionally. After he finished his degree she said,
“my turn, I can finally get my higher education. Then, and, he uh, told, me, he was very abusive and he told me that he would not spend a dime on such a stupid woman.” The marriage did not last and she divorced him. She was a single mom for ten years until she re-married.

Both Andrea and Miriam came from families in which alcohol and or drug abuse were issues. Because of this, they moved out of their family homes at young ages knowing there would not be any emotional or financial support or guidance to assist them in their desire for more education. Andrea had known since eighth grade that she wanted to attend college to become an art teacher. She said:

College was always in my mind, wasn’t always on everybody else’s mind. My high school counselor said that I was not in the right classes to be college bound. I didn’t take college prep courses, so college was not on my agenda.

This did not deter Andrea, she began her higher education career at a business school. This gave her a valuable skill set. From there she found a stable job but the hours were irregular, not conducive to raising a family, and she had a long commute. She explained the sequence of events this way:

I did that, God, for four years, so I was stuck there and then I had my son, I got married.

I got married there. Had my son and then after my son was born I was just like, I had an epiphany and wanted to go back to school and I was just not happy.

She initially considered attending a community college, but was discouraged by her placement exam results because she would have been required to complete a large number of developmental courses. At that point in her life she was not able to justify the time or money it would have required to be able to get to the college level course work at the community college. During the year that her son was born, a friend told her that if she worked for a college she could
be eligible for free tuition, “I was twenty-four when he was born and, this girl was going to college as well she’s my age…and she said, why don’t you apply to [work at a] college and you can go back to school for free?” Andrea liked that suggestion and proceeded to apply to all of the schools within driving distance of her home, she said, “so that’s what I did, cause, I couldn’t afford to go to school on my own at this point.” She wound up obtaining a full-time position at a four-year school, which has a reputation for its Art Education program. This was a way she could go to college without relying on her family of origin or negatively impacting her current family’s finances.

Miriam also struggled to make her dream of higher education a reality, “I was always trying to get on that track for more education.” She reported always having a love of reading, she would read, “anything I could get my hands on.” Unfortunately, she did not consider school to be a safe and fun place, because she was often picked on by other children. Following high school graduation she moved out on her own, got married, and shortly, thereafter, had her daughter. She wound up going to [local technical school] because as she said, “I already had this in my head, you should be getting an education.” The desire for more education continued, even with the degree from [local technical school], “I just didn’t feel like I had enough education. I wanted to do more.”

Claudia also always wanted a college education. Out of all of the participants she was the only one who was not only not financially or emotionally supported but was actually forbidden from going to college. She had wanted to attend college at the traditional age and had a career in mind. It is similar to the major she is currently pursuing as a 47 year old woman. The closest she could get to a college education was beauty school, and that was only due to the fact that she had won a full-scholarship to attend:
I wasn’t allowed to go [to college], but then, my guidance counselor said, well, since you’re not allowed to go, why don’t you pursue something maybe with um, massage therapy, ya know, just dabble in it a little bit. So, I went to beauty school and then I had gotten a, a scholarship to pay for the whole thing, so I kinda broke the mold that they couldn’t say no.

Although she has considered college attendance at a variety of times during her adult life, like the other women in this study, the conditions had to be right. Specifically, family conditions had to be right. She wanted her children to be older and more independent and she had to be able to survive financially, even with financial aid. Each of these women carried the desire for a higher education with them and created the time and space in their lives to make it a reality.

**Turning the Dream of College into a Reality**

Each of the women in this study had a set of life experiences which led them to their current status of either being undergraduate students or recent graduates. Christina, Tessa, and Frances came to the conclusion that in order to have a professional career, they were going to need a bachelor’s degree; whereas for Alice, Elaine, Andrea, Naomi, and Claudia this intention was more the desire for personal fulfillment. Kacey, CeCe, and Lori had specific life experiences which influenced their educational pathway. Taken together the dream of a college education was helped to become a reality due to a desire for professional advancement, personal fulfillment, or life experience. The desire to offer their families a life, which the participants believe will be better because of obtaining higher education, was an extremely motivating factor for these study participants. The belief that professional development would offer these participants and their families a better life was a motivating factor for Christina, Tessa, and Frances. Christina was working as a teacher’s aide because the hours coincided with her son’s
school hours. She enjoyed the work but became frustrated with her work situation. She shares, “I wanted to be in charge, ya know? I wanted the power, I wanted the money, I wanted the education.” This motivation carried her directly to a four-year college where she successfully completed her degree in elementary education with a special education certification in three and a half years. Although as a high school graduate, she had no intention of returning to school, she found that for her career aspirations, a bachelor’s degree was going to be necessary.

Tessa’s story is a little different in that with a divorce from her husband, her belief was that the only way to make a decent living would be to get a college degree. This was the message she had been raised with and when faced with the situation of having to support herself financially, obtaining a bachelor’s degree became imperative for her. She explains it this way:

So when I split up with my ex-husband then I had to go, start going full force and going back to school because I was going to have to go to work, which I had never really thought about before.

Her belief in the necessity of a bachelor’s degree is highlighted in the following statement, “I was not marketable…. I have no skills, ya know what I mean? I had to go back to school, it wasn’t an option.” The pressure she feels to complete her degree is palpable in her words, “school has to absolutely come first cause I’ve got everything on the line, everything is on the line at this point.” So Tessa is moving forward feeling like this is her only option at this point in time.

The story of Frances is a combination of life events as well as career development. As previously mentioned, Frances had lived in a home in which higher education was expected and highly valued until the age of 15. When she moved in with her mother and to a new country, her educational trajectory took a totally different turn. She was no longer enrolled in a private
preparatory school, but a large public urban one. She struggled because she needed to learn
English, and, she was also living with a mother who valued work over education. She explains it
this way:

When I lived down in the Dominican Republic with my grandparents, I went to a private
school, a Christian school actually. When I came here to live with my mom, she couldn’t
afford to pay a private school here, so we had to go to public school….I ended up
dropping out….I hated it so much.

She left school very disheartened, “I dropped out and then I tried to go back to school later on,
but, I married, I got pregnant and all that stuff got derailed.” Now that her children are older, she
decided it is time for her to pursue some type of profession. This is how she describes her
experience of looking for a career:

I started looking around for other jobs and the things that I could find were not
satisfactory to me on a personal level or monetarily, so, I came back and said to my
husband, if I wanna get a good job, I’m gonna have to go back to school. I’m just not
satisfied with this situation. So, I thought about it and I thought about it, and I came to the
conclusion that what I wanted to do was to be a teacher.

The expectation from her childhood coupled with her bad experience at high school, motivated
her to want to become an instructor at the high school. She wants to be there to perhaps help
students who, like her, are struggling, with the hope that she will be able to help them in a way
that she was not helped, “I think that’s the reason I want to be a high school teacher. I just, I
don’t see why, ya know, I was a good student….if I had had that help, I don’t think I would have
dropped out.”
Elaine, Alice, Naomi, Andrea, and Claudia were each in a position of always having wanted a degree, but never getting one. For them, the path towards a bachelor’s degree was paved with the desire for personal fulfillment. Elaine explained it this way:

It never went away. I’d always had the desire to get my education. That was always important to me. But, for various reasons it didn’t fit with my family goals or my life goals at various times, my priorities you might say.

Elaine had begun community college as a traditionally-aged student, but was only enrolled for one semester. Due to the alcohol issues associated with her parents, which were already discussed, she felt as though she needed to leave home and work so that she could live independently. But, as Elaine stated, the desire for a higher education never left, it was just not a high priority item in her life until more recently due to her personal commitment to her family.

Alice’s independence began prior to high school graduation. Following her withdrawal from high school, she began working full-time and didn’t stop until becoming a full-time student. As you may recall, Alice had been groomed since being a young child to be academically successful, but then dropped out during her senior year of high school. Although she had a successful career, it wasn’t enough:

Well I’d actually started going to school in January 2005. I was working at a job at an insurance company, which I hated. Even though it was a well paying job great benefits, great salary, I didn’t like what I was doing. Every day I would go to work and I literally got hives. I didn’t look forward to being there. It was a lot of work. I didn’t mind the work itself, just the environment, the whole corporate environment; I didn’t really care for it. I had to basically re-evaluate myself, what was the moment in my life that I really had the most fun? What did I really enjoy doing? And I realized that the time in my life
when I was really, really happy was when I was in school. So I started in the fall of 2004. I started going on tours of different schools. And I decided I’m gonna go back to school. And my initial thought was to maybe go part time. But then I was afraid if I would go part time, I wouldn’t be totally committed.

For Andrea, who had known for years that she wanted to be an art teacher, the journey towards higher education was also very much about personal fulfillment. In the following quote she is describing a conversation between herself and her husband about what their lives would be like if they won the lottery:

Why do you want to go to school full-time if we’re gonna win the lottery? You don’t need to work. So why would you want a degree? Cause, I just, I need to finish it. I need to finish the one thing that I’ve always wanted to do. And if I don’t finish it, it’s gonna be like hanging over my head the rest of my life.

This quote describes a drive towards personal fulfillment of a life goal. Naomi also feels compelled to complete her degree to fulfill a personal need, “I’m completely committed to finishing up my undergraduate studies.” She waited many years to be able to go to school, “I always thought in the back of my mind, I would love to go and get a college education.” Finally, for Claudia, who was not allowed to attend college as a traditionally-aged student, this is a dream come true, “I know this is bad but, even if I don’t get a job outside of graduating, that’s a major accomplishment.” This internal drive is a motivating factor in making whatever adjustments in her life are necessary to complete her educational goals. For Alice, Elaine, Andrea, and Naomi, the decision to attend college was based on an inner drive to obtain their college education which was due to the personal fulfillment of this life goal they have each established for themselves.
While this desire was carried by these women for most of their lives, several of our participants had no intention of returning to school following their high school years.

As each of these women, Kacey, CeCe, and Lori, reached high school graduation, they had no real desire or intention to carry on with their education past the high school age. These women explained their return to the higher education arena as a result of life experience. The specific life experiences which impacted these women’s decisions to attend college at this particular point in time will now be examined.

Some life experiences have a significant influence on our thoughts, behaviors, and actions. Kacey’s story is one that has unfolded throughout the course of her life. As mentioned previously as she was growing up her mother struggled with depression and was not emotionally available for her. Kacey reported becoming involved in the use of drugs and alcohol as an adolescent. When her husband was killed and a year later her mother died, she turned to drug and alcohol abuse as a way to cope, “yea, he died in 2001 and my mom died in 2002…I went a little nutty for awhile. That’s what got me to college though and the story in between all that is what got me into the social work field.” In her words she lived as an addict for five years, “being an addict that I already am I just went crazy.” During her recovery period, she began attending community college. This is how she describes her experience:

Well a lot in the beginning of me going [to college], I took Human Services, I actually switched to Social Work transfer. But, a lot of it was for my own head. To kinda like, help myself. That’s where it pretty much all started.

At the beginning of her educational process, she had no intention of continuing on for a bachelor’s degree; however, her coursework and the desire to learn more pushed her forward on her educational trajectory:
I mean, my decision to go is based on life experiences that I went through. That’s why I went. At first I wasn’t really even taking it seriously. I never planned that I would be going…to get my Bachelor’s degree, let alone maybe my Master’s degree.

For Kacey, the decision to pursue more education, and her educational path, were significantly influenced by her experiences along the way.

CeCe’s life changing experience was a serious illness during which she faced her own mortality. Immediately following her high school graduation, CeCe had gotten married and stayed home to raise children, in her words, “then I got married, like I said and had children.” Approximately twenty years later she became very ill, and as a result of her illness, decided she wanted to make some life changes:

I got very sick in 2000, they didn’t think I was going to live. I went to John Hopkins and here I am, I’m alive. That’s what made me say, this is now the time for me to push forward go to school and everyone was behind me.

It is very important to CeCe to have the emotional and physical support from all of her family members.

Lori’s life changing experience was the birth of her eldest child. He son was born with a set of learning disabilities, which Lori had been struggling with for her entire life. For her, the life changing experience was her love for her son because she didn’t want him to suffer the way that she had to suffer because of all of the difficulties she had learning while she was growing up. These are her words:

And in my head, I thought to myself, I am not going to let him spend his life thinking he’s not, he’s not adequate, that he’s not worthy of any kind of success. So, I really, that
was maybe the first time I ever truly got serious about anything. Like [I] really wanted to make sure that that kid did not have that, that horrible self-esteem issue.

This passion pushed Lori in ways she had never been pushed before. It forced her to find her voice so that she could advocate for her son. Following her son’s diagnosis, she was also diagnosed with learning disabilities. Learning this opened a door freeing her belief in herself and her own abilities that she never had before:

When he [physician] sat there and he’s like, you definitely have some serious issues with how your brain processes information. And then he said, you look like I just lifted the world off your shoulders and I just thought to myself, well, there it was. It has a name and it doesn’t have to drag me down for the rest of my life. Oh, wow, I will be okay.

This information allowed for opportunities she had never imagined would be possible. Once the diagnosis was made, she was able to learn more about how to learn by making accommodations for both herself and her son. These are the words Lori used to sum up her experience:

But I would actually say, I guess, that this entire journey was just, was truly based on special needs. Um, that we found empowering, or I found empowering. That it was like, just because you have, just because you’re different, you’re hanging out there in left field, doesn’t make you not worthy of success.

A noteworthy aspect of this experience was that for Lori it awoke a passion for learning she had always had, “but for me it was more like the yearning for education itself versus a career, like, I really love learning.” For Kacey, CeCe, and Lori these life changing experiences were the impetus to continue along their educational trajectories. Each of them found that attending college was important in ways they had never imagined.

**Personal Beliefs about Academic Abilities**
One aspect of deciding to return to college is a woman’s belief in her ability to be able to be academically successful. Beliefs about academic ability were formed as a result of a combination between school and life experiences as well as family influence over the course of their lives. Feeling positive about the ability to learn as a child, helped to pave the way for a desire to return as an adult. For this group of participants, it did not seem to matter if that success was experienced academically or socially. One aspect of academic self-efficacy, or the belief in one’s ability to be academically successful, seems to be a genuine pleasure in learning. For instance, Naomi said, “I just love learning, it’s just a natural thing in me.” A similar feeling was shared by Alice, except she was referring to church attendance:

I guess it was a feeling of camaraderie, listening to the teachings and being around other kids and just listening to the adults talk. That to me was a lot of fun. I really enjoyed being in that, it was like an academic environment. But instead of learning, about, reading and arithmetic, it was learning about, the bible.

In Miriam’s life it was her love of reading that seemed to be the significant factor. In fact, although she reported having difficulties at school, because of being picked on, in the working world this interest in reading and excelling became more apparent, “I worked my way up. I never stayed in any department….I kept learning new things.” In the family Frances was raised in, academic achievement was expected and emphasized, she stepped up to the expectation, “but for me it was always okay. I always had good grades and I didn’t have to try very hard.” Each one of these women infer that they had no doubt about their ability to be academically successful.

Nikki, Lori, and Andrea each spoke about enjoying the school environment, but for them, it was from a much more social perspective. Nikki’s involvement centered on school activities, “I was never home in high school. I did musicals, I did SAVE, Students Against Violating the
Earth.” Lori’s life revolved around her involvement in her school, “cheerleading, volleyball, tennis, and then I also played in the band and…I was class secretary, class treasurer, promo committee….I just didn’t care about the academics.” Andrea’s social involvement was the catalyst which pushed her to want to return to the academy:

It really clicked with me and I got into metal-smithing and woodworking and ended up sending, I had one piece that went to the National Scholastic Art & Writing Contest. I made it to nationals, didn’t make it through, but I made it to nationals….I was in eighth grade or ninth grade at that time. And that kinda like really clicked and I really, at that point I knew what I wanted to do. I knew I wanted to be an art teacher.

An interesting fact about each of these participants, and Elaine, is that they each spoke of facing difficulties in learning as a child in school. For Nikki, “I was just mediocre. I was just kinda, I know when I was younger I had some learning disabilities with reading and stuff like that.” Andrea also struggled academically, “my reading and writing and my math is not my strong suites and I always had trouble.” Lori struggled academically and didn’t know why until she was diagnosed with learning disabilities as an adult. She explained what it was like academically for her in school:

I was too shy back then, it was also capital punishment city back then, like if the teacher didn’t like the fact that you didn’t understand. You just didn’t know when your hair was gonna get pulled or you’re gonna get dragged into the hall and get paddled…I spent a lot of time and energy pretending to be invisible…because I was well behaved and quiet, no one bothered with me. But I missed a lot of stuff because I was well behaved and quiet.

Elaine also struggled academically as a child:
So because I was young and because I was small, I always sorta felt like I wasn’t quite at the same pace as my peers in school.” I might actually have a learning disability that’s never been diagnosed. I’ve always kinda struggled, I didn’t focus. That’s always been an issue.

Each of these women truly enjoyed the social aspects of school and their active involvement kept them engaged in the learning environment. They each naturally gravitated towards other means of expressing themselves than through their academics. These positive experiences from their youth, seemed to give them the confidence they needed to want to return to a setting in which the measure of achievement is much more academically based.

**Socio-Cultural Considerations**

Broadly, family is the place where social and cultural expectations are transmitted from one generation to the next. The intersection of gender and culture influenced beliefs these participants had as a result of experiences within their family of origin and acted as guide posts in both their career aspirations and parenting styles. Several familial expectations, experienced by the participants, which were based on gender have already been identified; for instance, the belief the women do not need higher education which was espoused by several of the participant’s parents. Gendered expectations are at once plain to see and identify and yet hidden beneath the cloak of invisibility and hard to pinpoint, and as pointed out in the literature review, are often transmitted by families. The discussion of gendered expectations is complex because just as families and communities have established expectations of behaviors which can differ based on heritage as well as geography, so to, individuals have similar needs but are each unique and distinct. When patterns of behavior or expectations are identified as being indicative of a certain race or culture, these characteristics may be used to categorize all people from that
culture thus creating stereotypes. In the following analysis, the gender expectations were verbalized by the participants as part of their heritage and upbringing. They are not meant to stereotype individuals from specific cultures, or to assume that all people from these cultural backgrounds are that way, but rather, to share how the participants believe their cultural heritage has influenced them as individuals, particularly as it related to their educational trajectory.

A number of participants spoke about how their German heritage was very influential in their upbringing and this group included Nikki, Kacey, Christina, Miriam, and CeCe. With the exception of Miriam, who was one half German and one half American Indian, these women spoke about the way the German influence impacted their lives. One of the most frequently cited traits of a German heritage was one of stubbornness. Nikki describes it, “I think Germans are just thick-headed and stubborn and, we’re, when you want to do something you do it and you don’t give up until it’s done.” These words by Kacey mirror Nikki’s:

I believe that, I’m just so stubborn, I get it from my Dad. I’m just so stubborn…When I put my mind to something, I’m gonna do it and I finish what I start….and that was my Dad. My dad always, he’s such, he’s worse than I am.

Christina echoed these sentiments in a different way, “that was always something that, my father taught us… whatever your problem is, think it through and then go…independence that you can, self-sufficient….pull yourself up by your bootstraps and move on….very German.” Cece’s words spoke about the pride and stubbornness that her mother instilled in them due to their German heritage:

My mom’s family, she’s the only one that did come here from Germany. So my grandparents came over here on the boat and my mom’s, three of my mom’s siblings were born in Germany. So it was a very ethnic type environment. And my mom always
taught us very stubborn German. Hold your head high, you’re just as good as anybody else, and always, whatever we wanted to do.

Tessa’s family heritage was Italian. She spoke about the importance her family placed on assimilating into American culture:

I’m only the third generation. So, my grandparents didn’t speak any English at all. They spoke broken English at the table. My father’s generation it was probably the hardest on because they had to translate and my grandparents knew nothing. But they came here to America and they wanted us to be Americans, so we did not learn to speak Italian. We did have certain things like my grandfather made homemade wine, every Sunday we would go to my grandmother’s. So we kept a lot of the tradition, but back in the day, I was born in the 60’s… like, every Sunday we would eat at my grandmother’s house. I mean the only way you got to the dining room table was if somebody died or went to college, which was rare. When Vietnam hit they put all the kids in college, which was typical of that time.

Issues associated with the level of value placed on education and parenting were influenced by the intersection of culture and personal circumstance. Four participants discussed having their mother stay home while they were being raised, this included Christina, CeCe, Tessa, and Claudia. This role modeling profoundly influenced each of these women who then believed it was in the best interest of their children to stay home as well. Christina said, “but I stayed home with [son] so he [husband] knew [son] was getting, the best of care.” As another example, CeCe, who was home for fifteen years raising children, shared “and I was just in heaven, I loved having babies and I just loved it all. It was good.” Tessa and her then husband carried out the traditional roles, “he went to work and I stayed home.” Added to this list is
Frances who made a conscientious decision to stay home to care for her children as well. Frances was able to stay home, as she explains:

My husband supports the family. He’s okay with me staying at home. I wanted to work because I did, I didn’t feel comfortable just sitting here all day but he didn’t mind. He was okay with that. He wanted me to stay at home with the kids and help raise them the way I was raised [prior to the age of 15] and the way that he was raised.

Claudia spent most of her time at home raising her children, “well I had my second child then, and then I decided to go back and get my teachers in cosmetology so I did that and I was substituting every once in a while but it wasn’t worth the drive.” She began working more when the children got older but was still considered the primary caregiver, “as they got older I started working like second shift at a bank and I just kinda worked around my husband’s schedule.” Each of these wives felt supported by their husbands in this decision. They each believed it was in the best interest of the children.

One aspect to consider in regard to parents who stayed home versus those who did not is ethnicity. Four of the thirteen participants came from groups who are considered to be minorities: Naomi and Frances are Hispanic, Alice is African American, and Miriam was one half, a very influential half, because of the connections with her father’s family, American Indian. Each of these women described the socioeconomic status of their family of origin as being low. Further, Naomi, Alice, and Frances each had mothers who worked to provide the necessities for their families. Unfortunately, as a result of their lived experiences, that was the only real option they could see for their daughter’s futures as well. An additional note is that for Naomi, Christina, and Frances, English was their second language and they each learned it by being immersed into an English speaking classroom. Staying home to raise the family was a
combination of both cultural expectation and personal circumstance. As can be seen, each of these women had to overcome substantial barriers in order to create the time, space, and resources necessary for bachelor degree attainment.

**Personal Drive to Succeed**

As these women moved through their daily lives, which included their roles and responsibilities, they discussed an underlying desire to pursue higher education and displayed a strong personal drive to succeed. This drive to be academically successful was a motivating factor which is integral to the decision to pursue the challenge of attaining a bachelor’s degree and the determination to see it through to completion. During the course of the interview each participant voiced their determination to complete their college education.

Having a strong single-minded focus on completing her college degree was a common theme. Explanations describing this drive included issues that make degree attainment difficult and yet tantalizing to achieve and shows the participant’s strength and determination to be successful. Nikki’s focus is the time involvement, “it doesn’t matter how long it takes, I know I gripe about being in school for six and a half years but, it’s the goal at the end…it’s like you just have to keep your head up and know that you can do it.” Naomi also commented on time requirements, “I’m completely committed to finishing up my undergraduate studies. I’m not a spring chicken anymore.” Andrea is also committed despite the possible time commitment:

I want to graduate with a Bachelor’s of Science in Art Education and maybe a minor in Crafts and I want to start teaching art. That’s my dream. It may take me ten years, but I’ll get there. It’s like, I just, I need to finish it. I need to finish the one thing that I’ve always wanted to do.
Kacey said, “right now, I’m just in the point in my life where I just want to get my career going and then think about me.” Naomi is also totally focused on completing her education, “so I’m working hard and I’m really serious and committed about getting my undergraduate studies done.” This sentiment was shared by Tessa as well, “so I have to put, school has to absolutely come first cause I’ve got everything on the line.” Claudia addressed this sense of purpose from the perspective of if she had gone to school as a traditionally-aged student, “yea, I’m more determined now and I appreciate going to school more now, more than I think I would have back then.” Alice decided to quit her full-time job so that she could pursue her degree full-time. Here she talks about taking that risk:

I told them [her mother and other family members], it’s gonna work out. I said, I’m still gonna work, but, I said, this is what I have to do it this way. I wouldn’t recommend this for everyone. I say that today. I would not recommend the path that I took for everybody. You have to decide which way is best for you. But, I said, I know how I am. I said, I knew that if I did this on a part-time basis, I wouldn’t be fully committed to it. I wouldn’t have as much at stake. But I knew that if I quit my job and was invested in school full time, I had a lot to lose. I had a lot at stake. So that was the motivation I needed to really do well and go to school every day, even if I wasn’t feeling one hundred percent. Even if the weather was bad, if I didn’t feel like driving, ya know? That was the incentive I needed.

The motivation to attend and successfully persist came from a variety of factors. Nikki puts pressure on herself so she can fulfill family and community expectations:

There’s a pressure that keeps me in school as well. I remember when I got pregnant with [son] and we had to tell [husband’s] grandmother that we were pregnant again, and she
goes, that’s it, you’re never going to finish school. And it, like, broke my heart. And I always think of her saying that to me, so, that’s like another thing, I want to prove to her that I can finish school. Might not be the timeline she thinks appropriate, but it’s gonna get done. So that’s like another huge thing. I get comments from people, cause I work in a restaurant, all the time. Like, you’re never gonna do it. You have too much on your plate, like people aren’t very optimistic anymore. They just kinda look down.

The inner drive for Christina and Miriam was a personal recognition about themselves. Christina found through her work experience that she wanted to pursue the degreed position, “it was, ya know, I can do this, type of thing…I see that now.” For Miriam, she felt as though her life was passing her by and she wasn’t doing what she needed to be doing, “I was missing something, I, it, just was in my head like I was missing something. I kept thinking, I’m wasting my life doing this, I know I can, ya know, it really bothered me.” For CeCe, this drive began due to a serious illness as already discussed, but shifted course and required a new examination of her situation and goals, “as hard as it was, it also gave me strength. I had to get that strength and I know the only way I was going to change my life or I was going to make the decisions that need to be made. They had to come from me.”

College was often a dream, and as these women work or worked towards degree attainment the drive and desire to be successful, defined here as degree completion, was influenced by a number of factors. Receiving support from members outside of the family of origin was important, particularly for those women who came from households in which higher education was not emphasized. The reasons these women chose to attend college during this specific time period in their lives could be categorized into three main reasons, for professional development, for personal fulfillment, or based on life experience. Another important factor was
the individual’s personal beliefs about her academic abilities based on experiences during her youth. Cultural norms were shown to have an impact on women especially in regard to expectations about staying home to raise children. Finally, some of the motivations behind the personal drive to succeed academically were explored. It is now time to consider the impact of the woman’s current family on her experience in higher education.

**Current Family Matters**

The next section moves from the dream of higher education to the reality of making it happen. The impact of the current family is integral to this because the day-to-day life of family members is impacted by the decision of the participant to attend college. This section is broken down into three main themes. The first theme is that these women have seized the opportunity at this point in their lives to pursue higher education. Making the decision to attend college seemed to be profoundly impacted by current family need, current family membership make-up, and work responsibilities. The second theme is that the academic experience is a family affair. This theme highlights how the impact of school attendance is impacted by current family members and how they in turn are also impacted, and it is broken down into five main categories. The categories include receiving emotional/physical support from spouse/partner, current support from other family and community members, integrating home and school, managing conflict, and finding a balance. The last main theme of this section is the idea that there is a flow between parent and child, a tapestry, which weaves expectations and dreams for both the participants and their family members based on their higher educational experience. This last theme is broken down into a number of ideas including the importance of being a positive role model, financial implications for the family, and how the importance of persistence impacts the family on a
continuing basis. So, this section examines in detail how the current family influences and is influenced by the higher educational experience of the participant.

**Seizing the Opportunity for Higher Education**

For adult women with families, attending institutions of higher education is significantly impacted by the needs of the current family and the roles that these women have within their families. Three aspects of the participant’s life surfaced in regard to participating in higher education during this point in their lives. One of the most significant influences for these women was the timing of the life cycle of their family because of its impact on the individual needs of the family members. This is due to the fact that these women report feeling as though they are the primary caregivers in their households. Another factor influencing these women in their ability to attend school at this time was the membership make-up of their current families. Finally, combining the roles of spouse/partner, parent, student, and worker, proved to be fairly typical of these study participants. Each of these factors impacted the women’s ability to attend college and influenced the amount of time and energy she had to devote to her academic pursuits.

**Primacy of the Caregiver Role.** One thing was made clear numerous times during all of the interviews, these women by and large considered themselves to be the primary caregivers for their families. This was the responsibly around which all others were organized. The comments to support this idea were woven throughout all of the interviews some of them more obvious than others. These responsibilities were verbalized through descriptions of care provided and schedules maintained. They were often about providing hands-on care, emotional support, and just being available to their family. Being the family caretaker means being responsible to make
sure everyone is taken care of at an age appropriate level. Being the family caretaker requires making sure everything is in place so that family member needs are met.

This belief in the primacy of the caregiver role was made clear through a variety of responses. For instance, Nikki shares, “I didn’t do well cause I was more worried about my sick baby at home than about my classes…I was constantly not able to go to classes.” For Naomi this struggle was voiced as a result of having to go to work as a new mother:

We were having our first baby…and I was heart-broken because I wanted to be home and I wanted to be able to raise the baby…and so, I helped, I worked full-time and put my baby in daycare. And I remember it was just so heart-breaking it was really difficult to take my baby and take him to daycare.

This strongly held belief in the importance of this role in her life did not alleviate with the passage of time or her children getting older as she shares she also now has some responsibility for her mother as well:

I was struggling with my health for many years and when I needed a caregiver I was actually being a caregiver to my twenty year old son, and partial caregiver to my mother. So, it’s funny, here I was disabled, and struggling with my own health issues, and they were pretty monumental. Being a caregiver to both and still at this point, now, I’m not at a point where I need a caregiver for myself. Thank goodness I’m in a good state of health. I still continue to play that role and I only see myself becoming more of that role with my mother as she grows older.

Tessa’s experience was one of choosing to stay home to be the primary caregiver of her children:

I was raising kids for thirty years….I liked being home with my kids. I worked in the school cafeteria for four years. I’m like a helicopter parent….chaperone to all the, I did
everything. I ran a cheerleading program for five years. I did it all. I was a homeroom mother. I was right in there, hands-on with my kids.

Tessa too is looking towards the future and how that may impact her as far as being a daughter:

I don’t know what’s going to happen. I only have one brother so, we’ll see what happens. My mother is pretty self-sufficient but it’s definitely there. I can see with her getting older I need to, this is, I need to finish school.

In this statement by Christina, her expectation that she needs to be available as the primary caregiver for her son is implied in the following quote about her deciding to take a job at a daycare:

Because preschool starts at 9:00 and [her son] would get on the bus, at like, 8:00, 8:10.

So I’d get him on the bus, he would get off at ten of four. Preschool is over at 3:00, I was home by 3:30 so it just fit perfect.

Elaine felt the need to be the primary caregiver and yet needed something more to feel fulfilled, she speaks about this conflict within herself:

When I was in probably middle school, my mother, who did not have a college degree, decided to go to school and become a nurse. She was a very devoted student and she went part-time, but she was very devoted and hid herself away studying all the time. As a result of that, during those critical years as a young, budding teenager, I felt very cut off from her and that was not a good experience for me. So as a result of that, I’ve always told myself that I would never do that to my own children. So, the idea of going back to school was never something I have ever entertained because I’ve been busy rearing children all these years. They were first and because of my experience, I was always committed to being the [stay-at-home] mother of my children. Being very engaged in
their upbringing and their education and their experiences…. I’ve always, I’ve never been what I’d thought I would be. And that was a full-time, devoted stay-at-home mom. That’s really what I had planned. But I guess there was some restlessness in me that I need to be doing something else. Even though I’ve always been the home room mom, volunteering, all that, soccer mom. I’ve done all that as well, but I needed to do something more to nurture my own need to work.

For Lori, being a stay-at-home mom just felt right:

As an adult with child responsibilities a lot of things fell into place. All the things I was good at, I felt that being a mommy was what I was supposed to do. It felt, it made my soul sing. It just felt right.

For these women being the caretaker meant being physically and emotionally available to their children and making sure their needs were met. The previous statements demonstrate that this was the expectation these women held for themselves as far as caring for their children was concerned. In two instances, the future needs of a parent are already being contemplated as well. It has been shown that the role of caregiver is primary to the women in this study and this role required them to ensure that the needs of their family members were being met.

Age of children surfaced as a major factor in college attendance and credit hours attempted because of its impact on individual family member need. Of the 13 participants interviewed, nine had children living in their homes. Six respondents had children aged 14 years or younger and this presented its own challenges. The women who had the youngest children in their families included Nikki, Andrea, Lori, and Frances. For these women ensuring that their child(ren), even those not yet born, are being taken care of all of the time is a life responsibility which overrides everything else. Nikki has two children aged six and three and is pregnant with
a third, she waitresses on the weekends and goes to school during the week. Andrea has a five-year-old son who started kindergarten this fall, she works full-time and attends school part-time. Alice is a single mom of a 13-year-old son and an 11-year-old daughter. She attends school full-time and works part-time. Frances is the mother of two sons aged eight and eleven and she is a stay-at-home mom who is attending college full-time. For each of these women, the ability to attend college and the number of credits taken was based on their current family’s needs.

    Nikki actually started college immediately following high school graduation and has attended most semesters since then. She describes her experiences this way:

    It’s been a very long time. It took me four years to get my Associate’s [degree] between classes that I had to take and classes that they made me take. Taking classes over because [daughter] had medical issues when she was six months and not doing well in those classes because, I was constantly at the doctors and the hospital with her. [I] took a semester off to have my son, then I went back to school over the summer.

    Nikki’s experience included attendance at both a four-year school and a community college during her first year following high school graduation. Her story is a good example because it highlights the fluidity of college attendance based on the needs of her family. Similar to Nikki, Frances addressed how pregnancy significantly impacted her ability to stay enrolled in school:

    I didn’t know what I was doing. I took my GED and I just wanted to go to school. I wanted to do something, but I didn’t know what I was doing. I just enrolled and took a couple of classes and then I married and I got pregnant and I started having some difficulties with my pregnancy so I had to drop out of classes. I didn’t really drop out because I didn’t know what I needed to do. I didn’t even know that I could…withdraw so that ruined my GPA.
This example shows that the needs of a child, even one not born, impacted this participants ability to attend school. Because Frances did not understand the system, her grades were negatively impacted from her first semester of college attendance because she just stopped attending classes and she didn’t speak with anyone about her options or the ability to withdraw.

Not only is attendance impacted by family need, so is credit load, particularly for mothers of young children. It was not just Nikki’s attendance which was impacted by family need, but credit load as well. Here she speaks about the upcoming semester:

One [child] going into first grade next year, another one going into preschool, and a newborn…so, just taking it one step at a time is where I’m at now and that might change once the baby gets a little bit older….Like I need a break, next semester is just one online class and I’ll be breastfeeding and I’ll be able to breastfeed longer because I’m not working and at school. I’ll just be strictly working and studying from home because it’s online.

Andrea also spoke about credit load and family need, she noted, “I don’t think I could handle more than six credits with everything else going on. My son’s starting kindergarten next semester, next fall.” Lori has been going to school for a long time. She began going to school when her youngest son started first grade, “it’s [her school attendance] been going on since [son] was in first grade and he’ll be an eighth grader.” Frances was anxious to be able to go back to school:

When I started going to [local community college], my youngest one was not in school yet. So I took one course at a time at night. When my husband came home then I would go. I didn’t like it cause I didn’t think I was going to get done. I was like, I’m never
going to get done, he [her son] needs to go to school so I can go full-time. But, I had to wait until he was in first grade and then I started going full-time.

Having teenage children provides more freedom for mothers to attend college because they require less direct supervision and assistance. This group included Kacey, Naomi, Claudia, Tessa, and Elaine. According to Kacey, “my kid are teenagers, they really don’t care what I’m doing half the time.” Naomi has three adult-aged children and a husband that she shares a home with, she said that this fall two of her adult-aged sons and herself will be attending college, “he [her youngest son] just graduated from high school. In the fall they’ll be three of us in college.” Naomi has waited a long time for the opportunity to pursue her bachelor’s degree. She was able to obtain an Associate’s degree while her mother was living with her approximately 10 years ago, “she [mother] went back to New York so that’s when I put my studies on hold and dedicated the next couple of years, quite a few years of taking care of my children and working.” Claudia is the mother of a 27 year old, a 23 year old, and a 21 year old. She waited to attend college because she didn’t want to miss her children growing up and now that her youngest child is in college she decided it was a good time for her to go as well. She stated, “I am so happy. I would rather live in a cardboard box and have no running water than give up going to [college].”

Elaine’s children were 19 years old and 16 years old when she came back to college. As a mother, Elaine was committed to caring for her husband and their two children, “I was always committed to being the stay-at-home mother of my children, being very engaged in their upbringing and their education and their experiences.” She worked out of her home in order to be available to them:
Well for the last fifteen years I’ve run my own business and still have my own business. And it’s a home-based business so, it fits in with my commitment to be at home for my family and present for my family.

In the following quote she reflects about her decision to return to school, “it seemed like I had passed through the critical years in child rearing and now would be a time for me to begin the process of being less available at home.” These examples show how integral family need, specifically childcare need, and for the older children the lack of need for hand-on care, are to a woman’s ability to not only attend school but affect the number of credits she takes each semester. Children are not the only ones who can impact school attendance. In the following example, Lori had to stop out for a semester so that she could help her mother care for her father who was ill:

I also ended up taking a semester off because my dad got really sick and my husband got a new job and he travels a lot. So, and as I’ve stated, I didn’t grow up around here, so he and I would flip. When he [husband] was home, I would go home to my parents…to help my mom with my dad and, um, so, that messed [timing of degree completion].

By and large, college attendance for each of these women was based on family needs and responsibilities resulting from the priority each of the participant’s place on being a primary caregiver to their family members. As was reflected, this impact affected not only attendance, but credit load as well. It was shown that having younger children as well as difficulties with pregnancy caused problems for these participants academically. Further, for some, having older children provided an opportunity to pursue higher education because of the increased freedom on a day-to-day basis. Family needs play a primary role in a woman’s ability to attend college,
added to that is the composition of her family. Family membership is another important variable to consider.

**Changes in Current Family Membership.** Out of the 13 participants, seven women no longer live with their original partners. Six of these participants got divorced and one lost her partner due to his death. For each of these women, this change in living arrangements provided more of an opportunity for college attendance and degree completion than when they were with their original partners. Three of the respondents, Kacey, Miriam, and Naomi were originally in living situations which were barriers to completing their educational goals. For example, Kacey was living with a boyfriend while she was attending the local community college and described her experience this way:

He didn’t make me do anything, but he didn’t help either, not at all, even like with school. He’d be coming home at like three o’clock in the morning and have some drugs and I’d be like, look I have school tomorrow and he didn’t care, that didn’t matter to him. So then he’d wake me up and I’d be up all night and I wouldn’t go to class…I mean, he still tells me how proud he is of me, but, it’s just, he wasn’t helping. He didn’t care if I had a paper to write or if I had to study or if I had to get up early, he didn’t care.

Miriam moved out of her family home immediately after high school graduation and shortly thereafter into a house with her husband. The marriage did not last long and although Miriam was always interested in increasing her education, her primary goal was taking care of her daughter after leaving her husband:

Then I got married cause I had my daughter. Well I was living in Lancaster then, back to farming again back to old times like where I grew up, but then I moved away. I had to move away from my husband at the time…It got really violent and he drank, which…I
grew up with it. I didn’t realize I was marrying an alcoholic and he was really, a heavy alcoholic. I mean he did violent things. So, I got away from it and I made a clean break, no family, well like I said, except for my father’s side of the family.

This change in family membership provided Miriam the opportunity to pursue more education through a government sponsored program which she was then eligible to participate in. She stated:

You can get money to go to PACE, was one of the schools listed. So that was one of my first choices. I said, well fine, if I get it, I’ll go there. So I did. So that paid for pretty much everything.

Naomi also went through a divorce, these are her thoughts prior to the divorce, “I was happy he could go to work and the idea of having to grow old and retire with him was something that I thought about a lot and then I decided, no, so we divorced.”

CeCe, Tessa, Claudia, and Alice also all got divorced but they didn’t speak much about their ex-husbands. CeCe only shared the following, “I was married for 22 years and then my husband and I split up. That was fifteen years ago and that’s when I met Jennifer. Jennifer and I have been together for fifteen years.” Tessa shared just a little more detail, “I was married for seventeen years and I’m divorced…. it’s been ten years since we’ve gotten divorced and he’s not gotten past it.” Claudia timed her divorce based on the needs of her children:

Ok, I’m officiating all along and my marriage wasn’t going so well so I got all my ducks in order, made sure that I had everything in alignment before I proceeded with divorce and stuff. And, so, went through the divorce, I had gotten a part-time job at a bank and at this point I was able to go full-time and my children were in high school.
Being a single parent, like Alice, Kacey, Miriam, and Naomi, made enrolling in school even more difficult because of the added responsibility and having no one to help share the burden of the work. Coming to college did not happen immediately following the divorce, except for Naomi’s case, in which she was able to get her Associate’s degree immediately following the divorce because her mother came and lived with her. For each of these women, this change in family membership offered the opportunity for enrollment in school even though it did not typically happen right away. Otherwise, these women worked for at least a couple years before they began their college careers.

**Work an Added Responsibility.** Eight of the study participants combine work with their other life roles; this includes Nikki, Naomi, Christina, Andrea, CeCe, Claudia, Alice, and Elaine. Out of these eight participants, only one works full-time, Andrea, and she attends classes on a part-time basis, “I’m only allowed to take six credits a semester cause of the tuition waiver here on the campus and I don’t think I could handle more than six credits.” The other participants reported working on a part-time basis in order to supplement their family incomes. Most of the participant’s mentioned their work responsibilities in passing as just another responsibility that is part of their day-to-day lives. Nikki shares, “she [her grandmother] watches them while I work cause I have to work weekends, so I can take classes during the week.” Naomi has been out of work for a while but had this to say about the upcoming semester, “I’m looking for a part-time job right now, so that I can supplement [family budget] and that should be interesting for fall semester.” Christina spoke about the logistics of working and going to school, “I worked Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday and scheduled my own classes for Tuesday and Thursday afternoons.” Tessa was speaking about the benefits of being self-employed and
pondering career possibilities post-graduation, “I’ve sold groceries for fifteen, sixteen years now. I’m used to working for myself.”

Alice shares, “my hours fluctuate, but generally between twenty-five and thirty hours per week”, she goes on to say, “and I still had to do my school work.” Claudia reported that she works twice a week assisting in a dental office and supplements that by officiating field hockey games. CeCe also reported that she works, but her number of hours fluctuate weekly, “this week I went to work three days…every week is different.” Elaine also speaks of working on a part-time basis out of her home, “I’ve worked in business twenty-five years, the last fifteen running my own.” For each of these women, with the exception of Andrea, they are working in these part-time positions while they complete their education. Of the seven participants who work part-time, five attend school full-time. Nikki was attending school full-time this past year, but has dropped to part-time status due to her pregnancy and Elaine is currently attending school on a part-time basis as well. The fact that these women all have to work was not note-worthy to them, it was mentioned simply as another responsibility to be taken care of on a regular basis.

What has been shown so far is that creating the time and space in these participant’s lives for higher educational attainment is significantly impacted by their current families. The timing of entry into higher education was often based on family need and this in turn was affected by the age-level of the children. The younger the children, the more difficult it is to maintain consistency of enrollment and number of credits taken each semester. This results from the caretaking responsibilities for family members which each participant addressed during the course of the interview. Another aspect of these women’s lives which influenced both attendance and persistence was family membership. Stable family membership seemed to assist these women because they often reported feeling very supported by the people in their families.
In families which had changes to membership, these women typically reported that these changes were positive and that they were now involved in relationships which were more supportive of their academic endeavors. Additionally, eight of the thirteen participants in this study work at least part-time which adds yet another role to their lives. Each of these aspects has been found to impact these women in regard to participation in higher education. It is time to turn the focus of attention towards the influence of the family now that these women are attending college.

**Academic Experience: A Family Affair**

Although each of the participants came to college as an individual, they all have others in their lives who count on them to take care of their needs on a day-to-day basis. This next section examines how college attendance is a family affair in that it impacts family members on a day-to-day basis. This aspect of the current family impact on the educational experience is examined using five categories. It begins by a look at the emotional and physical support provided by spouse/partners. It then looks at this same type of support which was also found to be provided by mothers, children, and in some instances community members. This is followed by the idea that one of the ways this support is nurtured is by integrating the worlds of home and school. This discussion is followed by an examination of managing conflicts between role responsibilities. Finally, working on finding a balance between life’s responsibilities is examined. It is these aspects which truly show how integral each family member is to the educational experience of the participant.

**Support of Family and Community Members.** Ten of the study participants are involved in a close interpersonal relationship with a significant other including Nikki, Naomi, Christina, Andrea, Miriam, CeCe, Claudia, Elaine, Lori, and Frances. This next section will examine how these partners impact the participant’s experience in higher education. As a whole,
these women report feeling very supported by their husbands/partners; although, the level and type of support differs significantly. For several, their husbands/partners are one of the main reasons they feel they are working towards their degrees during this time period in their lives. This group includes Miriam, CeCe, Elaine, Lori, and Frances. Miriam speaks about her live-in partner in regard to her initial decision to come to school:

It really works. I am so lucky that I got the opportunity to work for him because he said the whole time I should go to school. I shouldn’t be working for him, wasting time I should go to school…. He’s really involved. I mean anything, he’s interested. He’s always asking me, even when I’m off, now, are you studying? Cause I have my Spanish books out. He’s like, well they don’t look like they’ve been opened…. The biggest thing I feel for me was [partner]. It was like having a mentor and relationship and everything rolled into one.

This belief in her ability to be academically successful helped her in her decision to move forward with her education, “[partner] kept saying you can do this and that, he kept behind me saying it. And that’s what it was. It took some time and being genuinely supportive, not surface supportive.” CeCe explained that her partner provides her much needed support so that she can focus on school, [partner] takes care of everything so I can go to school, as far as duties around the house.” She continued:

My family’s very much supportive of me going to school. Anything I would need or want or any kind of emotional support, they’re there for me in every way… it’s awesome to know that it doesn’t have to be totally on your shoulders.

Claudia, who is married for the second time explains her husband’s thoughts about her attending college, “he loves it, he was bragging to everybody he works with,” she continued, “he was
encouraging me that your classes and your school work comes first so, it’s good.” Elaine’s husband took a very proactive and supportive approach to her decision to enroll in school:

My husband would observe me studying, continuously for all these different tours I was giving. He said, look, if you can invest this much time to study for all these tours, you could be going back to school. He’s the one that boosted me along in the process, he put the advisor’s name from my community college on my planner, monday morning and said, call.

When asked what it has been like since she started school, this is how she responded:

He’s my personal advisor. He gets on the internet for the colleges and he researches courses and he produces schedules for me and he has mapped out all of my courses for my entire degree. Oh, he is so into it…. I think that all these years, I kinda wish like, that he encouraged me earlier to do this, but he just picked up on my cue. Whatever it is that, he sensed that I never felt like I could do this. So whenever it came up, when somebody said something, I think I sorta became defensive. No, college isn’t for me because I really didn’t feel that I could be successful.

For Elaine, much like Miriam, it took someone very close to them who believed in them and their ability to be successful, to help them move forward so they could realize their dreams. This was the case for Lori as well. She stated:

He actually got right on board with me. He was a little shocked I wanted to be a teacher and then he said he thought about it for a little while. Then he thought, she’s probably right, she spent all those hours in that hallway, or the hallways of the school. That just made me feel so good inside and I think he saw that…. he’s always been right there. He’s been very supportive. Even though it’s gonna, taken me a very long time to get to the
end of this journey….And I will say, for the record, that he’s the only reason why I passed any of those math classes. Yes, side by side, through the tears and the wailing, and the, I don’t know what you’re talking about. He never had an issue with re-adjusting our family budget so that I could have a math tutor outside of him, when it was necessary. He’s probably been my biggest cheerleader, just letting me do what I need to do cause it feels good. It feels right. It’s what I should have done a long time ago, but I just didn’t have the tools.

A supportive husband has also helped Frances get to where she is right now:

My husband and my kids were very supportive through the whole thing. My husband agreed with me. It was like, when I said that I needed to go back to school if I wanted to get a job that I was proud of, that made me happy and that my children could be proud of and he agreed. He was like, I’ll help you with whatever I can and we’ll do it. Yea, he is wonderful. I think he’s the reason why I’m here and I’ve gotten as far as I have. But, he supports me a lot financially and emotionally. When I don’t feel like studying, he’s there pushing me and making me do it and [telling me] don’t put it off. Just do it. Get on that computer and type that paper now! And he just inspires me to do better cause he’s such a great person and he’s just awesome. So he makes me want to be better. And that’s really why I decided to go to school.

Christina responded differently than the other participants. When asked about what her husband thought about her attending school, she shared, “I don’t know, he never said” and yet she spoke about their partnership over the years as a couple:

Dan, sung the first song at our wedding [and it] was a George Straight song, I promise you whatever and it was…I promise to do everything to make your dreams come true.
Dan had always worked when he got out of Army for his dad as a mechanic and it’s horrible working for family…. I’m like, quit, just, quit. So he did. He sent me off [to work] with packed lunches and I came home and he would have dinner ready. His work was looking for work. He just up and quit his job, so it was my paycheck that was supporting him. Then he worked but I stayed home with [son]. So…he knew [son] was getting the best of care. And then when I went back to school he picked up. And it like hit me that it all goes around. He needed to just quit and he could, and then I needed him to do this stuff so I could go to college and he did.

Nikki, Naomi, and Andrea have spouses who question the usefulness of a college degree but support their wives in their quest to obtain a bachelor’s degree. Nikki knows she can count on her husband to support her in her efforts even though he questions the value of education in general. This is how she describes it:

He’s behind me 100%. He pretty much wants me to do whatever I want to do. He’ll just, he doesn’t push me to do anything…. And he is always kinda negative toward the education system. We have our debates sometimes cause I want go to school to eventually teach at some point but it doesn’t really matter what he thinks, because he’s behind me 100%. He’s probably the only person in my family, other than my grandmother whose actually wants me to do what I want to do and take my time to do it.

Similarly, Naomi feels very supported by her husband, she describes his response to her pursuit of a bachelor’s degree this way:

He is as supportive as he can be, but here my second husband he graduated from high school and he does not believe in higher education…. [he says] I won’t oppose it and I’ll give you some support, but you’re paying for this on your own, this is your decision,
you’re taking care of your educational goals. I won’t get in your way if this is something you want to do but on the other hand, I’m not going to be as supportive as you’d like me to be and he has been true to his word.

Naomi shares that her husband physically supports her in a variety of ways, “he’ll go out and do the grocery shopping” she continues, “he’ll help with the dishes, and if he doesn’t want to do the dishes, or doesn’t have the time for it, he won’t, he won’t say anything to me about it.” She sums up the support that she feels from him in this way, “he is very loving and very non-judgmental.” Andrea also feels supported by her husband even though he doesn’t really understand why this is so important to her:

He tries, he really does. Whatever makes me happy he’ll kinda do….He thinks it’s good, I guess. He doesn’t quite understand it sometimes and sometimes it’s really hard for him…. No, most of the time if it doesn’t, if it’s not too hard on our schedule and I don’t like get stressed out, if the class is hard and I’m getting stressed out, he feels it and it bothers him and, so, it makes things at home a little rough.

These women felt supported in their goal to achieve a bachelor’s degree even though their husbands did not necessarily understand why it was so important to them. Having a significant other who is supportive has been shown to assist these women to be academically successful, but many of them also spoke about others in their lives who are also supportive of their current academic endeavors as they negotiate this additional role in their lives.

For these participants, family members, and in some instances, community members both impact and are impacted by the higher educational experience of these women. This support is displayed in a variety of ways with some of them offering hands-on assistance while others offer emotional support. Nikki and Alice share how the hands-on, or physical, support has been
invaluable to them. Nikki is married and the mother of two young children and in the following quote she is speaking about her grandmother:

She watches my kids when I need her to….It’s awesome, she’ll come pick [daughter] up so when she get’s off the bus she goes right over to [grandmothers]. She watches them while I work cause I have to work weekends, so I can take classes during the week. If I need to study, I can call her and she’ll take the kids for me, there’s no hesitation with her whatsoever. It’s just whatever I need.

Likewise, Alice is a single mother and here she speaks about getting support from the people in her family who help her to get through her day-to-day needs:

I’ve had a lot of support, especially from my mom. My aunts and uncles and cousins, especially the ones that actually go to college, they’re very supportive. They offer support like encouragement, babysitting, if I need it, just pretty much anything I need. If I need money for textbooks until my financial aid comes, they’ll loan me money for my textbooks. The support has been invaluable, it’s been just amazing…. So it really does help having people there willing to assist you.

Whereas physical support is described here as hands-on assistance with childcare and meeting the needs of the household, emotional support is another aspect of support that these participants rely on. Emotional support, defined here as being interested and willing to listen, was discussed much more frequently than the physical hands-on support and any and all support was appreciated. Many of the participants spoke about receiving emotional support from their mothers. In addition to mothers, other family members, friends, and higher institutional personnel were all identified as offering significant support to these students. The emotional support that Andrea received from her mother meant a lot to her. She stated:
I think my mom is kinda proud of me about it now cause she tried it and she found it hard, just taking one class, unaccredited…. and [I am] working full-time. And [she does] not have any real home responsibilities. She said to me last weekend, I just don’t know how you do it. It made me feel good.

Tessa also spoke about her mother as being a supportive person in her life right now:

Oh, she’s happy. She loves it, she just doesn’t understand it. She has no comprehension but she’s going to be seventy-one years old. She did go back to school, she went to the Catherine Gibbs Institute in New York. She took the train everyday into New York while raising kids, her version of going back to school. So in that respect she understands what it’s like to have to go back to school after, as an older person.

Lori reports feeling more supported by her mother than her father but goes on to say that they live so far away, that they are not able to offer the hands-on assistance that could be really helpful:

I think that my mother is more supportive than my father…. they’re thrilled and interestingly enough my father made a comment when I decided to go back, he said, well it’s about time. I’m like, well that’s never the impression I got before. My mom made the comment that it was, I was finally mature enough to handle the work, which I thought that was kinda insulting. But my mom and I are like oil and water anyways, so, they’ve been very supportive. Also, I don’t live anywhere near them, so they can’t, other than verbal support, they can’t help me with anything.

Naomi spoke briefly about feeling supported by her mother, “she’s a great motivator for me having wanted to pursue my studies….she’s thrilled.”
In addition to feeling supported by spouse/partners and mothers, most participants reported feeling supported by their children. Feeling supported by one’s children is also an important motivator for several of these women. Frances spoke with pleasure about her oldest son’s response to her being a student:

He loves it, he likes that I’m going to school and that I’m going to get a really good job and I’m going to be a teacher. He doesn’t like the idea of thinking that I might be his teacher someday. But, he likes it and we have this thing going like a little competition, who can have the highest GPA. So it’s great because it challenges him and it challenges me.

Alice speaks about her daughter being proud of her as evidenced in the following quote, “but my daughter, she’s always telling people I’m in school. So I think they’re both [her daughter and son] very proud of me being a student.” This is what Kacey has to say about her teenage daughter, “she supports me though in my school. I mean, she wants to go to college.” Christina also spoke about feeling very supported by her son, “my support came from [husband] and [son]. I mean everybody else was like a pat on the back, but, that was it.” Alice, Lori, and Frances all spoke about feeling supported by their children, but didn’t elaborate. This makes sense because Christina also shared a common sentiment that was implied but not expressed by most study participants about their children’s experience of having their mother in school, “I think it’s probably been the hardest on him [her son], because of like the stress that I’m under.” So far the examples have been about the participant’s spouse or partner, mother, or children but there are many other people who supported and were thus impacted by these participants in their current academic endeavors who are both family members and friends.
Aside from spouses, partners, and children, a number of respondents spoke about the importance of other people in their lives who they felt inspired or supported by specifically relating to their current academic endeavors. Kacey spoke about two additional people that she feels supported by in her efforts towards obtaining a bachelor’s degree. One of those individuals is her brother, “My little brother would probably be the one that encourages me….but he said, just seeing me going with the Social Work, he’s actually thought about going back to school and doing something in Social Work.” Kacey also mentioned a friend who she feels supported by, “my one friend so, she said, I don’t know how you do it.” Christina felt that her biggest supporters were her husband and her son, but as she reports here, her family was with her in spirit. She stated:

You could say we’re tight knit, but if something bad happens we’re there for the other one. But there wasn’t any helping me get through college…. I mean like, I’d send out an email that I got a 4.0 this semester.

Andrea has been inspired and motivated by several individuals in her life. An important person in Andrea’s life is her father’s younger brother. This is what she says about him:

He owns his own business and he lives in Georgia, and I love his family. I always talk with them. I keep in contact with them. He’s been an inspiration…cause he’s the only one that actually went to college and got a degree and I’m the only one out of my family that went to college and got a degree.

Another individual who has had a significant influence for Andrea is the woman who interviewed her for her current position. This individual completed a bachelor’s degree at the university and she shared with Andrea how it works and exactly how she did it. This is what Andrea has to say, “she’s a really big inspiration for me cause she did it. She graduated, she got
her degree. She’s in the Master’s program, or taking classes towards her Master’s now, so, yea, she’s really great.” Being supported by someone at the school was mentioned by CeCe as being very integral in her decision to continue her education. She explains it this way:

I was at the point of burn out, but then I met this teacher at [local community college] and she’s young and she is the most intelligent person, the most motivating person and she pushed me to limits that I just didn’t know I had in me and to this day I’m still friends with her.

Frances also shares this about her relationship with her brother because they are both attending college now as adults:

I’m a lot closer to my brother now, though because we have something in common. I talk to him about what I’m dealing with in college. He talks to me about what he’s dealing with and he calls me to help him with papers and stuff because I’m a better writer than he is.

This shows that support from spouses/partners, mothers, children, and other family and community members is necessary, appreciated, and important to these participants.

Integrating Family and School. One way that many of these women nurtured this sense of support from family members and friends is by integrating their worlds of home and school as much as possible. This idea was expressed by several participants and was enacted by including close family members in an activity that included their school. The participants who addressed this specifically include Kacey, Christina, Miriam, Alice, and Claudia. Kacey wanted to share her school experience with her family members so they went to a school sponsored activity together, “I took both my dad and daughter with me to the open house and everything last fall.” Christina spoke about events that her husband and son attended, she also brought her son to
campus and he became more comfortable on a college campus himself. In this first example Christina is talking about a play that she went to as part of a class and she was accompanied by her husband and son. She stated:

One of my classmates was in the production of Willie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory and [husband] and [son] went with….and, [class instructor] and I are like at the back of the line going over and [son ] is in with the college kids. He and [friend of hers from school] were like best buds all night long. For me it was two different worlds coming together and that’s why I wanted them to go. Because I would come home and I’d talk about [friend] and I’d talk about [instructor] and this and that and that. And then I’d be talking about [husband] and [son] and this and that with [friend] and [instructor] and stuff and it was like, I had to have them meet, ya know?

Coming to an on-campus event is also the way Miriam described integrating her two worlds of home and school. Here she is speaking about her partner, “he really offers support and everything and every event, you saw how he went to the, the banquet dinner.” For Alice, the integration of school and home is a way to expose her children to higher education:

But I do notice they tell their cousins, oh yea, I went to West Chester with my mom today. I went to Kutztown with my mom, yesterday. I really try to take them on to college campuses to give them that exposure cause I want them to see that this is an option for them.

Claudia’s description of integrating these two worlds is very different from the previous examples because both she and her son are attending the same college. Her son had expressed some concerns about this initially and Claudia wanted to be respectful of her son. She explained:
I think he thought I would cramp his style a little bit. I don’t, I only saw him one time on campus all last year, so. I noticed them and kinda walked away. It was just that we were crossing at the field house and…he came up to me then and he was introducing me to all of his friends.

The integration between family members and the school helps to offset conflicts that can occur when school responsibilities and household responsibilities each need to be addressed.

**Managing Conflict.** The coming together of household needs and school responsibilities occurs on a regular basis and requires a balance to ensure that school work and the needs of the children and the household are being met. The orchestration of making this happen was discussed in some way by each participant. Time was a primary subject of these discussions but it includes the hands-on experiences within these families as they navigate this time period in the family life cycle which includes the role of having an adult learner in the family. One of the main ways of managing this conflict is by sharing and distributing household responsibilities. There were several participants who spoke about the importance of this in their lives.

For example, Naomi is a strong advocate for everyone in the family taking turns and doing their fair share of the work:

Everybody is going to take a turn at the bathroom. …you either contribute or you’re out of there. There’s no reason that we need to be kind enough to put a roof over your head if you’re not going to contribute. Wherever you go, you’re gonna have to contribute in some fashion….We’re evolving in my household as it moves along…. I have a little sign at home that says something about I cannot clean the house and save the world all at the same time….So, the policy in the kitchen is, everyone has to do their own dishes, they can either rinse them and then stick them in the dishwasher or put them in the
dishwashing rack, if they washed it. But, the sanction is that if they don’t get to it, their portion of their mess within 24 hours then their house key gets taken away until they do clean up their portion. I’m not asking anyone to clean up somebody else’s mess, but they need to clean up after their’s and, so it worked out beautifully.

Christina addresses this conflict between the needs of her family and her school responsibilities, “I would cook on the weekends.” She spoke about her husband coming home to cook dinner for himself and their son, “[husband] would come home and make, I mean it was like hamburger helper, leftovers or something like that.” She also spoke about the struggle of keeping the house clean. She stated:

There’s certain things you just have to give up. Like, if the house isn’t clean, and I guess [husband] would too. He wouldn’t expect me to vacuum every day. And if it wasn’t vacuumed every other day and it was looking bad, he’d do it….He’d do what needed to be done.

Andrea and her husband struggle trying to maintain the household and keep up with their young son. Andrea works full-time in addition to taking six credits each semester:

I get home and I’m just so exhausted. I just kinda like sit down and I don’t want to talk to anybody and I don’t want to do anything. All I have on my mind is this problem, this class or whatever, that sometimes makes it a little difficult.

This spills over into household responsibilities due to the amount of time she is away from home all week long:

Well, it’s [the house] a mess. The house there’s dog hair everywhere on the floor and the dishes aren’t done and the laundry isn’t done. He’s [husband] trying to pick up the slack, but he works night shifts and we still have daycare issues paying for daycare…by the
weekend he just wants to spend time with me and my son. He wants me to be involved and I’m trying to catch up from being behind during the week and, it gets a little, it gets to you.

Kacey described the conflict in this way:

That’s hard, especially living with teenagers. I mean, my son, he’s 19 now, so it’s, with my daughter though, and she’s a real momma’s baby where she just wants to be around me…although I would like to get more involved, I want to do the Social Work club…. Well, I really don’t have time, especially next semester, I’m taking seven classes. I’m not going to have time to do extra-curricular activities and still be at home with a teenage daughter.

Homework is one area in which school and home life intersect. Nikki was explaining this difficulty in regards to her children:

They’re generally good about it, but they’re still kids at the same time. So it gets tiresome. When they’re like, okay, you really have to write another paper this week? I want to go to the park, I don’t want to sit in the house and wait for you to write a paper.

In this example, Christina shares how she combined the needs of her family with her need to get her homework done:

I’ve also tried to make sure, like [son] raced quarter midgets. They would race Wednesdays and every other Saturday and I was like, pit steward. I would check the kids, I still stayed as involved as I could. I mean, oh my God, for state’s race where I didn’t have to work at all, which was up in Schnecksville. I’m sitting there, it was during pro-sem. I’m sitting there making word cards on the cooler with magic marker and stuff.
So, I would take stuff along, I would sit in the back of the truck and write lesson plans on the laptop and stuff.

Another area in these women’s lives is the potential conflict between their role as student and helping to assist their parents. For the three participants who mentioned it, Naomi, Tessa, and Lori, it was not a conflict which has caused any hardship yet, but they do see the needs becoming more pronounced and time consuming as their parents grow older. When Naomi spoke about feeling supported by her mother she also spoke about her mother having mixed emotions about her school involvement because of the time commitment:

She has mixed feelings because, at this age, now that I’m forty-four and she’s seventy-seven, she kinda wants to have more of my help and support around her. Being in school full-time I really don’t have as much time as I could to devote to her. Luckily for me, I guess the branch doesn’t fall to far from the tree. She’s a fiercely independent woman, who tries to do as much as she can on her own and so that’s a good thing.

Tessa addressed this issue by saying it is one of the reasons she needs to finish her degree and move on to her career, “I don’t know what’s going to happen. I only have one brother so, we’ll see what happens. My mother’s pretty self-sufficient but it’s definitely there’s, I can see, with her getting older I need to finish school.” As previously mentioned, Lori talked about stopping out for a semester to help her mother care for her father during an illness. Also, Christina did not speak about this at all except to mention that her mother is now living with them. She did not speak about getting any help with household chores from her mother.

What follows is an example to show that the conflict between school and household responsibilities does not always work out. In this example it wasn’t that school was at the same
time as the event, this had more to do with a general level of being very busy and distracted.

This is Christina speaking about an incident between herself and her son:

I remember like being on the phone one time with my sister and realizing [son] was in elementary school, it was sixth grade because [local high school] has a planetarium and the elementary kids go twice a year. In the fall and the spring and parents are allowed to meet your kid at the planetarium and you sit through the program together and I remember realizing that I should have been at the planetarium twenty minutes ago. But, between…school, homework, everything else, I like, was bawling, but he was like expecting me…and he came home and I’m like, I’m so sorry, he’s like, it’s okay mom, really it’s okay, I know, but I’m so sorry, I can’t believe I forgot about and this and that. And he’s like, it’s okay, it’s okay.

CeCe generalized her comment about this conflict between her role responsibilities:

Right now I’m just trying to finagle like a younger student would be doing. I just think we have, the main thing is the outside responsibilities we have that they [traditionally-aged students] don’t have that are constantly on my mind all the time.

It is these outside responsibilities which must be accommodated while still maintaining school responsibilities as a priority.

Finding a Balance. The goal of maintaining a household, providing care for each family member, being a student, and working when necessary requires a constant juggling of responsibilities and quite a bit of flexibility. This section examines how these women work to achieve some balance between many of their life roles.

Lori and Frances both spoke about timing their school schedules so that they meet the needs of their families. Both of these women are married and rely on their husbands for
childcare. Here are the words Lori used to describe how she balanced her time between these two responsibilities:

- His little brother was in first grade, obviously in school full-time and I made it so I was in school when they were in school. And it’s been just this nice journey, it works….probably why it works for me is that I have to take classes during the day when my children are at school because my husband travels so much that there would be no one here at night.

Here Frances speaks about how she balances school and household responsibilities:

- That’s tough because when I come home and I have to do a paper and the kids are running around like maniacs and the TV’s on and I am trying to concentrate and do something, it’s kinda tough. When I finally get into it and I’m concentrating and I think I have it and I’m gonna write this whole thing out, somebody comes into the room and, Mommy, and they need something and I have to stop and then go back. But since they go to school, they don’t get home till 4:00, I can usually bang something out before they get home. So, I don’t think it’s that bad for me. I mean, the house work gets put off every once in a while. The dishes and maybe I’ll cook a little later, but other than that, it hasn’t been that bad.

CeCe incorporates the role of grandmother into her life on a regular basis, and Claudia spoke about making time in her life on a weekly basis to help to take care of a baby that is due to arrive this year. Here CeCe reflects on her family involvement during the past week:

- Well, let’s take an example from last week, I watch my grandbabies one of the days and then my son came here so I cook supper for everybody. And then there was another day I went, I go with them, they go to school at [local Art Institute]. I’ll go with and go to their
graduation and parties and stuff like that. I also go up to my other son’s sometimes to watch his dog, if they go away somewhere. My son called me last Monday and said will you go with me up to Cabella’s? I want to look at something up there. We went up there and then went to Cracker Barrel. I mean, this is, like, that’s my week. The days I work, then I come home and hopefully I’m doing nothing. This week I went to work three days.

In CeCe’s family, this family time has been established and it is part of her weeks on a regular basis. Claudia will have a new addition to her family and she is already figuring out how she is going to incorporate that into her life:

Well in my next semester I’m going to be a grandmother, so I’m going to work my schedule around babysitting. My daughter is a dialysis nurse so, she can work, like if I take classes Tuesday and Thursday, get my full credits in on a Tuesday and Thursday then she would be able to work Monday, Wednesday, Friday or Wednesday, Friday, Saturday so, that would work. I can do it, oh, yea, I can do that and officiate.

For Alice, this is a very difficult challenge because of the fact that she is a single mother:

It’s really challenging because being a single parent, especially… you have the demands of taking care of the kids, taking care of the house, taking them to doctor’s appointments, after school activities, outside activities, socializing with them and balancing your academic responsibilities and work. So, it was a really huge challenge. It took me a while to get adjusted. I found that I had to go without a lot of sleep cause I didn’t want to cut into my time with them too much but at the same time I still had to work and I still had to do my school work. So, yea, that was definitely tough, but I think I found a really good way to balance that….One of the things I definitely made a point of doing was
trying to take classes during the day time while they were at school so I would basically drop them off at school in the morning, then I would go right to my classes. Now, I’m a morning person, so I prefer having morning classes anyway.

Each of these examples shows how the responsibilities associated with attending school impact these women and their families. Accommodations to complete all those responsibilities which are considered to be priorities must be addressed with time designated to their completion. Negotiating these challenges created by the conflict between household responsibilities and school responsibilities impacts these women in their day-to-day lives. These participants work through these conflicts daily, weekly, and by semester.

**Family Tapestry from Parent to Child**

The term family tapestry was chosen because it symbolizes the interconnectedness between family members based on the integral influence day-to-day interactions have on individuals. Incorporating the changes caused by having an adult learner in the household begin to become in-grained into the family. This occurs as a result of how the women, their partners, and their children negotiate not only the conflicts but determine what expectations they have along the way. In this way, family norms and expectations become established and move from parent to child. The final analysis of the impact of higher education attendance on the current family can be explained by three broad ideas. The first is that these women placed a very high level of importance on being a positive role model for their children and for other community members. Within this mindset, there is an underlying expectation and hope that their children will chose to attend college as traditionally-aged students. The second theme to emerge is how the pursuit of higher education impacts the family financially. The financial implications were discussed by almost every participant and included both current and future impact on the family.
The final theme to emerge is the woman’s own desire for a brighter future for either their families or others who they hope to help once they begin working. This variable captures how the level of importance of persisting towards degree attainment impacts the family. This persistence is explained by looking at motivating factors, personal development, and how life experiences sometimes change educational trajectories. Taken together, these ideas help to explain the underlying drive used by these women to continue their studies.

**Being a Positive Role Model.** Being a positive role model for family and community members is a motivating factor for many of the women in this study. The women tended to speak about it in one of two ways, either as a being a role model because of all of the hard work and effort it takes to achieve this goal or as a model to emulate the expectation that others will go to college as a result of the modeled behavior. Being a role model by showing all of the hard work and effort required to attain the degree as an adult learner was expressed by a number of participants. Nikki has been working towards a bachelor’s degree for six and one half years and she has this to say:

> It’s like I have to finish. I have to show them [children] that quitting isn’t an option and that you just keep pushing forward. Even though I’ve taken like small breaks or I’m only going back for one class, I’m still keeping my head in it, or at least trying to…. I’m always thinking especially [daughter], because she’s a girl. I want her to know that her mom worked hard and that you can achieve anything that you want to achieve. You just have to put your mind to it, actually, do it…I want her to know that, I think that’s like the biggest thing. That I fought for it.

Naomi shares similar thoughts this way:
I hope one day my sons will understand that it’s been a very long road for me and that I hope that my example to them, that this is how important this is to me. This is how important it is to further my education….I’m hoping my example has been something that my children will see.

Andrea also feels really good about being a positive role model for her son:

I think it’s good, I really like it. I think it’s good for him to see me trying to better myself and to have him see me go through school. I think it’s great, all this stuff that he couldn’t, he wouldn’t have been exposed to had I not been taking these classes. So, I think it’s good for him. There’s so many good benefits for him, positive benefits for him seeing somebody that’s going to school.

CeCe initially spoke about being a positive role model specifically for her son, but then generalized her comment to include many individuals who are in the adult learner student population:

The other factor when I first started school to stay in school was because my son, who never did real well in school, but he always passed too, he was in electrical school, getting his Journeyman’s license and I didn’t want to quit because I didn’t want him to see me quit. So that kept me going….When you’re an adult and you’re in school, you’re an adult with children 90% of the time, I don’t know of any adults that are in school that don’t have children or grandchildren or other responsibilities. All of a sudden, everything you do other people are looking or learning from you or taking from what you’re doing, right? So here we are and that’s why I said I’m not stopping till I’m done. I don’t know what other people’s motivation is, that’s my motivation, not only for myself, but for my
kids. Because I just can’t, I don’t want them to ever think that it’s okay to quit but if you have to, it is okay.

The importance of being a good role model is a very strongly held belief for the participants in this study. Tessa explains, “I have to, that’s not an option. I absolutely have to, they’re counting on me to do it because children learn by example.” Similarly, Alice discussed a specific behavior that she thought displayed the value of education in her children, “I think it influences them academically, also, cause I see that they tend to read a lot more than they used to. They have a greater interest in studying and analyzing literature.” Both Lori and Frances spoke about being role models for their children as well. Lori shares, “I think it also helps me show them that education is really important, that it’s huge. That it’s really a huge piece to success here in America.” In this last example, Frances embraces the idea of the importance of intergenerational role modeling:

What she taught me growing up, my grandmother taught me growing up was what made me go out there and, and try to do something better. And that’s what I want to do with my kids. I want to make sure that they know how important education is. And they’re gonna know that because if I decided to go to school after all these years, it’s because it’s important and they, they get it.

The other aspect of acting as a role model for their children is the underlying hope, and in some cases expectation, that their children will also chose to pursue higher education. Kacey is very clear about this expectation with her daughter:

I mean, she [daughter] wants to go to college. Like where my parents never talked about me going to college, it was never even a thought, so, it was like, with her, I’m like, when you go to college, and you are going to college!
She also has a son and is conflicted about how she wants to respond to him:

   It’s hard because a lot of times I feel like I’m being a hypocrite, because, like with my son, how can I push him to do things I didn’t do? I mean, how can I tell him to not to do something when I did it?

Naomi, Alice, and Frances each spoke about wanting their children to go to school as traditionally-aged college students. In Naomi’s words:

   I said, I don’t want to see you end up like me. I’m happy because I’m getting things done and fulfilled. But, yes, in hindsight if I could have done it at your age, I would have done it. I don’t want you to be forty-four years old and your family resenting you.

Alice explains that she tries to show her children what it can be like to attend school as a traditionally-aged student:

   Now, I won’t force it on them, but I want them to know, if this is something you want to do, you can do it and this is what it’s like. Because I was like an adult learner and I had kids at home, I didn’t have the opportunity to live on campus. But, I show them, that’s student housing. This is student housing over here. These are the dining halls. This is where you eat and take your classes. And then, I think they seem to really enjoy that. They’re starting to see that college isn’t just about taking classes, it’s like a whole lifestyle.

Frances echoed this thought:

   I can show my kids how important, cause I didn’t want to be like my mom and say, do this, ya know? I wanted to show them. This is how you do it. If I did it, you can definitely do it. If I did it in my late twenties, thirties, you can do it, you can do it at eighteen, when your parents are paying for it.
Whether the impetus was from the desire to be a good role model and show a strong work ethic or the desire for the children to want to model their mother’s to achieve a higher education, this was a significant factor in motivating these women to persist in their quest of bachelor degree attainment. There is one other example of being a role model, and this involved Lori’s friends:

The group of women that I talked about...We were very much drawn to each other because we had this, we had a common denominator that our children all had something, some special need. I was the first one to step up to the plate and say, I wanna go back to school. Another woman stepped up, she actually got her bachelor’s degree in Criminal Justice. Another mom is working on her associate’s degree as we speak. There’s another, and then there’s a mom…and daughter…they’re both at the community college working on their degrees as we speak. So it was, I almost felt like I was maybe like that pebble in the pond in the ripple effect. That it was like, well, ya know what? You can use that and move forward in ways that people may not think that it’s possible to do. Perhaps my, ah-ha moments led to some other moms that went, hey, if she can do that, look what I can do.

This internal desire to be a positive role model impacted these families because of how these beliefs affected behaviors and messages that were given to the children and community members about the importance of higher education.

**Financial Implications for the Family.** The pursuit of a higher education is a costly endeavor. As adult learners with families the decision to attend and persist towards degree attainment often means that the family will be financially impacted in some way. This financial impact is important to consider when examining how hopes and expectations about higher education are being transmitted. Christina and Claudia are the only ones who specifically spoke
about applying for and receiving financial aid in order to attend college. Here Christina is
talking about wanting to take a couple classes the summer before she was to start, but without
having financial aid funding, she was not able to do it:

To say okay, let me sit down and apply for all the financial aid, and I remember saying,
like I was gonna go in September. And I remember saying to [her husband] there’s a
couple summer classes I can take. It wasn’t like can I have the money, but can I take the
money? He’s like, no. And I remember, and maybe it was being the youngest of five, but
I remember thinking, he just told me no. What do you mean he told me? I can’t believe
he told me no, cause he’s never told me, I never had somebody point blank say, no. I was
like, I guess I’m gonna have to wait for September. So that’s what I did.

For Claudia, financial aid was actually the first step in her process of college enrollment:

In January when I was doing all of my paperwork for my youngest son at college, I
thought, hum, they’re talking about layoffs here…..So, they were talking about layoffs
and it’s like, if I’m to go, I want to be prepared. So I decided to apply and I did
everything that I had to as far as, like, FAFSA and, yea, did all of that. And I thought,
what, worst case scenario, I mean at that point I was, if I don’t get laid off and I’ll take a
night class here or there, ya know?

One of the main concerns individual participants spoke about was the level of debt they were
incurring. This was a big issue for Kacey, CeCe, Tessa, and Claudia and as will be shown had
the ability to change the course or stop the process of bachelor degree attainment. Kacey shares:

I really didn’t plan on pursuing a four-year degree. I really didn’t until I started going and
then I’m like what am I doing, I’m in debt all this money already for just what, an
associate’s degree, what am I going to do with that? So I figured I might just as well go. I’m probably going to do my Master’s, if I get into the program.

CeCe also began at the Associate’s degree level and initially had no plans or desires to continue her education, she explains it this way:

When I was done with [local community college], I wasn’t gonna come back to school at all because I didn’t want to make a higher student loan. Because I was scared if I am gonna have a flare-up, how am I gonna pay a student loan back? Am I going to be able to work enough hours to pay it back?

Tessa’s concern was one of the main ideas that kept surfacing during her interview:

I’m like, just trying to prepare. Initially I wanted to go to law school, but I’m getting too old and finances are getting too tight. I have way too many student loans. I just don’t know what to do from here. So the best thing was to grab a double major because I have to work for twenty-five years and it’s probably going to take me that long to pay my student loans back. I count on student loan money, using student loan money to pay my bills while I’m going to school…and at this stage of the game I’m carrying almost $50,000 in student loans.

Another way that participants described how the financial obligations impacted their family was looking at it as a calculated risk, hoping that the education was a sound investment measured by their ability to pay off debt associated with being a student. This was expressed by Nikki, Christina, Claudia, and Alice. In Nikki’s words, “I kinda see that’s how I am. I’m risking everything to make a better life for my kids and my husband.” Christina shares that she and her husband are hoping that this is the case, “hopefully in a year I’m making more money than he [husband] is.” The importance that Claudia is placing on completing this degree no matter what
the cost is to the family is evident in her statement, “I told him [husband], I’ll live in a cardboard box before I go out and look for another job until I’m finished.” Alice used the pressure of not having full-time employment with benefits and relying on using financial aid as a motivating factor for degree completion, “I knew that if I quit my job and was invested in school full-time, I had a lot to lose. I had a lot at stake. So that was the motivation I needed to really do well and go to school every day.”

For Naomi, Lori, and Frances, the financial impact of school attendance was simply incorporated into their lives. Naomi’s situation is unique because this is the only participant who spoke about feeling guilty that she was spending money on her college education and not financing her children’s educations:

So I’m looking for a part-time job right now, so that I can supplement and that should be an interesting fall semester…. But I will definitely work towards getting my undergraduate studies completed. And that’s so important cause I want to make sure that I’m, I feel guilty because I could try to go, lucky me if I could find a job during this recession. But, I could try to go and find a full-time job and basically try to dedicate myself towards getting my two through now. I feel guilty that I am completely committed to finishing up my undergraduate studies and just helping them whatever way I can. I’m putting a roof over their heads, clothes on their backs, food in their bellies, and if I have to try to get a little extra income however I can then I’m going to try to do it to get them their books. But we’ll work through it one step at a time.

It can be seen that financial implications are felt currently but also may be felt in the long term. It was shown that for a couple women, they decided to pursue their studies because they were concerned about being able to pay their accumulated debt with an associate’s degree. The
financial costs associated with degree attainment have been shown to impact the level of importance each of these women place on completing their degree. Considering the barriers which have been expressed thus far including the conflict between household and school responsibilities and financial implications for the family, it is now important to turn the attention to the motivation that keeps these women in school.

**Degree Persistence and the Family.** In a previous section, the dream of college attendance was examined. Now that these women are actually in college, or recently graduated, it is important to look at how aspects of college attendance have impacted these women and thus their families. Family support and encouragement have been shown to be very important to these women. This support allows them to continue with their studies, or to persist towards degree attainment. This section examines aspects of this persistence including motivating factors, personal development, and changes in the educational trajectory along the way. One of the main motivating factors for these participants is the desire to provide a brighter future for their own families than what they had while they were growing up. These participants were also driven by beliefs, namely, the belief that education will lead to a more fulfilling career and/or the belief that education is important to personal development. Several participants experienced a change in their goals during their educational process. Finally, for many, there is a strong desire to make a difference for others in a professional capacity which requires degree attainment. These aspects of the higher educational experience are indirectly related to the family, and yet are influenced by the family because they result in decisions and behaviors which continue to impact family members on a day-to-day basis, and have the possibility of long-term ramifications for both the individual and her family.
The desire to provide a brighter future for her own family was highlighted by Nikki in the following statement, “like, I wasn’t, that I gave them a better life than what I was given…I kinda see that’s how I am. Like, I’m risking everything to make a better life for my kids and my husband.” Lori’s comment is much more direct and to the point, “the bottom line is, with a degree, for the first time in our marriage, I’ll be able to help financially. Because as we know, that there just aren’t a whole lot of good jobs out there.” Frances as well did not mince words but rather has this belief that her family will be better off once she is able to obtain this degree, “we have to move on to better things and that was one of the things that made me want to go back to school. To be better, have a better job so we can have better things.” Frances continued on saying that she didn’t want to be like her mother and that she wants to actually model the behaviors needed to move forward in a professional career to her sons.

The belief that higher education will lead to a more fulfilling career was shared by a number of participants including Nikki, Kacey, Naomi, and Frances. Nikki actually responded to this idea in a round-about way and in the following quote she is talking about some of the people in the restaurant where she works on the weekends as a waitress:

Other people have come in, they’re like, oh, how many more classes do you have and they’ll ask me how they’re going. They ask me what I’m learning about. They’re interested in me learning and getting ahead. They [know] I don’t want to be a waitress for the rest of my life, a job like that all the time.

Kacey, Tessa, and Frances believe that a bachelor’s degree is a necessity in order for them to move forward into a fulfilling career field. Kacey’s thoughts on this subject are, “do I go out and have fun? No. But do I care? No. I really don’t. Right now, I’m just at this point in my life where I just want to get my career going and…then think about me.” When faced with the
position of having to provide for herself for the first time, Tessa decided that her only option was to get a bachelor’s degree, “I was not marketable…I have no skills…I had to go back to school, it wasn’t an option.” Frances also came to the same conclusion:

If I wanna get a good job, I’m gonna have to go back to school. I’m just not satisfied with this situation. So I thought about it and I thought about it and came to the conclusion that what I wanted to do was to be a teacher.

The motivation to persist was explained by the belief that higher education can lead to a better life. Motivation also came from wanting to take a different path than the one they were raised on. It also came from the desire to move forward into a professional career. However, for some of the women, the desire to persist was also important to them from a personal develop perspective.

Naomi has a strong personal belief that more education will lead not only towards a more fulfilling career but a higher level of life satisfaction as well:

To me there’s no shame in anything that you do to get your bills paid and pay your family. It’s very nice to be able to find a job that you’re absolutely fulfilled with and everybody seeks that and then they are happy with something in the middle….This is how important it is to further my education. This is how empowering I feel that education is to a person. If it translates into a great career with a dollar amount, that’s very wonderful. But if it doesn’t, I still feel that as a human being, I have developed into a better human being and that is a wonderful goal in itself. Having faced mortality, my mortality, I feel like this is what it’s about just trying to be…my motto on Facebook is, I have to live with myself and so I have to be fit for myself to know. And I really believe that and I feel that everyone should really look at that and see that we have to live with
ourselves our whole lives and, depending on what your religious or spiritual beliefs are, maybe beyond.

For Naomi the transformation from personal fulfillment within a career to personal development as an individual can be connected to achieving higher degrees of education. Several of the women in this study spoke about the connection for them between higher levels of education and personal development.

These words describe this process for the women who discussed their journey of personal development. Kacey spoke about how this process has impacted her life:

I’ve grown so much in the last couple years. I mean from where I was to, not only just with the addiction, but, just getting to know myself. And I guess that’s part of getting older too. I mean I just turned 45, so I’m at that point in my life where, you’re just, like they say your thirties, thirties are awesome, but your forties are even better. Because you really start to know yourself and really, I think your head’s straight, I think anyway. A lot of it has to do with my age.

Andrea believes that the work of achieving this degree is important to her personal development:

Even if I never teach, I need to keep achieving, I need to keep working…and get my bachelor’s degree and if I think if I have that, I would feel so much better. I would feel like I actually, like, I worked towards something, I achieved it and if I wanted to I can go out and get a job. My associate’s degree could apply toward that education cause computers are so involved in classrooms these days.

Miriam also is looking at her degree as a personal goal and part of her developmental trajectory:
I mean as long as someone’s happy, that’s fine. I don’t even know what I’ll do with my education. It helps me. It makes me happier with myself, but I don’t know if I’m going to go out and do anything with it, like at this time, I don’t know.

For Claudia, this is also a personal goal:

I’m more determined now and I appreciate going to [current university] now more than I think I would have back then. And even, I know this is bad but, even if I don’t get a job outside of graduating, that’s a major accomplishment. And actually, this is silly but, it’s like, I can’t wait to hold my grandchild at graduation. I get teary-eyed. It’s a huge accomplishment and I’m setting an example for that grandchild, too.

This was a popular sentiment that was expressed by Elaine as well:

For me it was more like the yearning for education itself versus a career. I really love learning and it’s a little challenging because while I am getting a little more focus on maybe where I want to go with it, it was never my intention to get an education for career advancement. It was more the person, a personal need to learn.

For Lori, this personal development has offered her the opportunity to meet challenges she never expected to have the opportunity to do. She identified areas of growth in her life, specifically as it relates to her learning, as well as what influence they have had on her educational experience:

Now I really don’t have a problem raising my hand in class and saying I don’t really know what you’re talking about. ….I just realized that bad stuff isn’t going to happen because I have to say I don’t understand what you’re saying and can you repeat that please? Not every teacher is kind about it, but the majority of them are. It’s funny that you can live your whole life paralyzed with fear of the unknown and when you find out that it’s okay to move forward, what a good feeling it is. How much more relaxed
and…open your life can be….and that’s probably the biggest lesson that I took from that. That it’s okay that I look at everything differently. My opinion matters and it might, actually, be relevant and it might help someone. So, I just think that I came out of this stronger… smarter and definitely with a sense of confidence I didn’t possess years ago.

The previous quotes highlight the ways in which these women feel that they have grown as individuals. Through these expressions it can be seen that their education is intertwined with this sense of personal growth and development. For these women, attaining a bachelor’s degree is important to them as individuals which is illustrated by the emphasis on the personal development rather than on the desired end result which could conceivably be considered to be professional employment. An aspect which has not yet been considered is when there was a change in plans or goals which occurred during the educational process.

Three of the participants experienced a change in their educational plan during their educational process. This appears to have happened as a result of a clarification of life goals and like the personal development was typically experienced as a new and different challenge to work towards which was impacted by life experiences. This is important because life experiences and how they are responded to have been shown to be significantly impacted by family members. Also, this is an important aspect to consider because without some support for continued studies, these goals would be much more difficult to reach. This change due to life experience and the educational process is made clear by Kacey’s words:

My decision to go [to college] is based on life experiences that I went through. That’s why I went. At first I wasn’t really even taking it seriously. I never planned that I would be going to [local university] to get my bachelor’s [degree], let alone maybe my master’s [degree]. I never, that was never a thought in my head ever. Ever. Even starting at [local
community college], it just, I thought I would go for two years till I kind a maybe figured out what I wanted to do with my life or got a job somewhere that paid the bills.

At this point in the process, Kacey has become much clearer about what she would like to be able to accomplish when she is finished with her education:

Counseling, I want to do counseling. I want to do something with adolescents. Just maybe if I can help them, I wish I would have been more serious when I was younger and I know that that’s going to be a hard thing to do because not too many teenagers are very serious. But some kids they know what they want. I had no idea, I just wanted to party and that was it. But then I’m an addict to so, I want to help addicts, that’s what I want to do.

CeCe too has increased her expectations of herself academically based on her illness and inability to continue in the nursing field. Here she speaks about working through the transition from a life time goal of being a nurse to her current goal of working as a counselor in the field of addiction:

My lifelong dream was to be a registered nurse. …My life decision to let go of a dream was pretty hard on me and I didn’t know how to transition. I didn’t know what to transition into….Then there was a teacher at [local community college] that helped me make my decisions and I went into the Social Work program because I want to go into counseling. So that’s where I’m at as of right now….I’m working on my bachelors [degree] but I want to get my masters [degree] because in order to do counseling or therapy you need your masters….and that maybe, you know what, God has plans for us and we don’t know exactly what they are.
CeCe changed majors due to her personal illness and some soul searching, here she speaks about how she is using her educational experience as a vehicle for her personal growth with her ultimate goal of helping others:

I try to force myself to raise my hand [in class] cause, I’m, always aware. I’m just, believe it or not, I’m kinda like backward. I don’t, I don’t, um, it takes a lot for me to talk in class. I don’t know why, but it does. So that’s one of my behavior changes I, today I’m going to make sure I raise my hand in each class once. Something like that, ya know? So those things that have to do with recovery really interest me. And I see how you can go from addiction to lead cause you’re so emotionally stunted when you’re in the addiction and how you can completely change your whole outlook on life and your behaviors and everything. And that just really makes me want to help people.

The last example of a change during the educational process was from Lori who has reconciled herself to the fact that because she is unable to pass the math portion of the PRAXIS exam, she will not be able to become a reading teacher. These are her thoughts on this change she has experienced:

Well after I realized that being a teacher was going to be impossible because of my inability to do math, I just thought, what can I do? I have all these credits. So, what I chose was this General Studies degree with a concentration in History and Sociology and the sociology piece of it allows me to explore relationships with people. It involves maybe not so much the learning process, although it kinda does, but I think it will allow me to probably go back and work with children. Like teaching parenting classes and things and I thought, maybe this was all God’s plan that maybe being a teacher was too restrictive because I can be kind of a free spirit. Then maybe I needed to broaden the
scope. So, I think that when this is all said and done that there’s probably a, a nice little niche for me….Where it will make my soul sing. I think it will be okay when it’s all said and done.

The desire to truly make a difference in people’s lives was also expressed by Frances as a hugely motivating factor for her and is being included here because it specifically addresses the desire to help even though she did not go through a major change in the process:

I think that’s the reason I wanna be a high school teacher. Because I just, I don’t see why, ya know? I was a good student, well, prior to that, but, I didn’t see that there was a need for me…I didn’t see, I didn’t think that, if I had had that help, I don’t think I would have dropped out. I think that I thought I had the ability to do better and go to college…I’m just really glad that I decided to go back to school and it’s one of the best things, one of the best ideas I’ve had and I can’t wait to get done and maybe help somebody that is going through what I went through. If I can keep somebody from dropping out of school then it will all be worth it.

Whether it is the desire to provide a better life for their family, the belief that college education is an important component of personal development, or a new educational goal based on life experiences, these women continue to take classes each semester to help them reach their goal, and this participation continues to impact their families in their day-to-day lives.

This section started out by looking at how important it is to these women to be a positive role model for their children. This idea had two aspects, one was modeling the hard work and effort it takes to achieve a life goal and the other is an underlying hope and sometimes expectation that their children would chose to pursue a higher education as well. This was followed by an examination of how school attendance impacts the family from a financial
perspective. Family finances are part of the day-to-day life of families and going to college takes a significant economic and time commitment. The way that different families approach this was shown to impact the study participant’s educational trajectory. This section ended with an examination of aspects associated with persistence towards degree attainment. This included a look at the women’s motivating factors to continue with their education, an examination of some underlying beliefs about the importance of higher education for personal growth, followed by a brief discussion on why educational goals changed for some of the participants. Taken together it can be seen that the current family has a profound influence on the educational experiences of these women.

The current families of these women have been shown to significantly and profoundly impact their educational experience. Each of these women chose to attend school during this time period in their lives. This section began by examining how entry into higher education was based on family needs, or lack thereof, for the majority of the study participants. This was important due to the nurturing and caretaking responsibilities that these women were shown to have. This was followed by an examination of how family membership also impacted school attendance. Some of the participants had stable family relationships which acted as a support system, other families went through changes in membership resulting in the opportunity for higher educational attainment. Finally, many of the study participants included the role of worker in their lives on top of family and student responsibilities.

From this examination of the current lives of the study participants the discussion moved to how the academic experience impacts all of the individuals within a family. This discussion began by looking at the emotional support received from spouses and partners. From there, other individuals, like children, other family members, and in some cases friends or community
members offered support. One of the ways these study participants nurtured this sense of support was through integrating their worlds of home and school. Participants described ways in which they worked to achieve some overlap. Finally, conflicts between household and school responsibilities were discussed. The participants spoke about these conflicts and often shared information about how they have worked to balance their lives in a way that meets the needs of their families as well as their own commitment to their educational goals.

This section concluded with the ways in which the value of higher education gets passed down to the participant’s children but goes one step further and examines how the educational process has lead to the personal growth and development of the women involved. In some instances the process of higher educational attainment has provided a clear focus and direction for what they are hoping to do when they complete their degrees. There is one more factor which has not been addressed and that is of the educational institution itself. Since all of the women who participated attend the same four-year public university, it is important to examine how that institution may also impact their educational experience.

The Institution as a Factor

Each of the study participants attends the same four-year public university. As such, they reported on their experiences related to being a non-traditional student, or adult learner, at this institution. This university has a student population of just over 9400 undergraduate students with 91% of them being traditionally-aged, defined as under 25 years of age. Another important fact is that approximately 46% of the student population lives in on-campus housing while all of the study participants live off-campus with their families.

Although there is not a direct connection to the family, this aspect of the participant’s educational experience is also salient from a family perspective. First, several participants spoke
about feeling very frustrated about their experience at orientation, and the people they reached out to were their family members. These family members helped to reassure them that this was a good decision and that they would be okay. Second, although the university is structured towards traditionally-aged students, for these participants, this structure worked for them because they are available to attend classes during those times. Third, it is very important to each of these participants that they are seen as a positive role model for their children and other family members, feeling connected to the university in some way helps them to reach their personal goal of degree attainment, while providing their children with a model of being a success college student. Taken together, the experience at the institution is also integral to the woman’s educational experience from the perspective of the family.

The institution as a factor was a theme which emerged from the data. Almost all of the respondents addressed some facet of the institution as impacting their educational experience. The themes were categorized into three categories. Many of the participants in this study had some experience at the community college level prior to attending the four-year institution. Another common theme to emerge was one of feeling like a fish out of water, in other words there was difficulty reported in the transition to the university. For some this began at orientation, there was also some difficulty and awkwardness reported as a result of being a minority population member due to the age differences between the general student population and the adult learners. Finally, many of the study participants shared that following an initial period of transition, they began to make connections which helped to make them feel much more comfortable at the university. These connections occurred with faculty members, other students, and in some instances university programs. This section will examine how the institution has impacted the participant’s educational experience.
Community College as a Stepping Stone. Nine of the 13 study participants had some community college experience prior to their current enrollment at the four-year university. This group included Nikki, Kacey, Naomi, Miriam, CeCe, Tessa, Alice, Lori, and Frances. For many of these participants, community college was the first step towards bachelor degree attainment. Several participants spoke about attending community college while their children were young. Nikki attended community college during the time period that she had her first two children. In her words, “took classes there until I got my associate’s [degree], had two kids while I was there…seven, no, six and a half years it’s been a very long time. It took me four years to get my associate’s [degree].”

Naomi also attended community college when her children were younger because of the support she received from her mother, “she helped me with the children and I was able to go and get my first two years of general education out of the way, and I went to [local community college].” Alice’s children were six and eight years old when she began her studies at the community college as a full-time student and proceeded to complete her associate’s degree in 18 months, “In January 2005 I started taking classes full time…I went there year round through 2006. I graduated from [local community college] with an Associate’s in Psychology in June of 2006.” This was the case for Lori as well, she began attending community college when her youngest started first grade and her other son was in fourth grade. Frances originally went to community college for one semester but due to difficulties with a pregnancy dropped out and didn’t return until her youngest child was in preschool. As previously mentioned, she spoke about waiting until he began first grade so that she could take classes on a full-time basis in order to complete her degree requirements in a shorter time.
Several participants spoke about attending community college without having a clear focus of study. Kacey shares, “when I went to [local community college] it was just because I didn’t know what I was doing with my life. I just come out of all that [recovery from addiction] and I really didn’t plan on pursuing a four-year degree.” Frances echoed this sentiment, “I took my GED and I just wanted to go to school. I wanted to do something, but I didn’t know what I was doing. I just enrolled and took a couple of classes.” CeCe and Tessa spoke about attending community college with the intention of becoming nurses but CeCe had personal health issues which prevented her from continuing on that path and Tessa decided that nursing was not for her. Miriam’s early educational experiences at both a technical school and community college are different because she participated in government sponsored grant programs that required her to be in skill specific programs. It was after those programs had ended and she was pursuing her own educational goals that she became more serious and focused on a major that interested her personally. For most of these study participants, community college attendance was a bridge towards bachelor degree attainment.

The first step in attending an institution of higher education is going through the application process. A number of participants spoke about their experiences related to the admissions process and the decisions they made about their educational pathways based on their life experiences. Several participants did not initially plan to attend the institution they eventually went to. This occurred for a variety of reasons. For Miriam it came down to being conditionally admitted at one school and while being fully admitted into her desired major at the other school:

I applied, got all my paperwork and there were some classes they wanted me to take prior to going...to start. So I thought, well, I’ll check one more school. That’s when I
contacted [current university] and it was really fast. They’re like, oh no, you still have
time to start. I didn’t think I would be able to start because it was so close to the fall
classes. Just send in your application, we’ll do it, boom boom! I went up there and it’s
like, wow, I didn’t have time to go there and really...get the full orientation, I just started
right away.

Elaine had plans to attend a different school because they had a major that more closely mirrored
her interests and they had different general education requirements which she liked better. But
then, she became interested in a specific program at the university she is currently attending, and
that was the turning point, “I never considered [current university] right from the get-go because
they had no degree that was a good fit for me and they also have a lot of science requirements in
their general education requirements that [other university] didn’t have.” Elaine then went on to say:

So I enrolled in the first Pennsylvania German course in the fall of ’09. The same
semester I enrolled at [other university] and I was completely taken with the
Pennsylvania German Cultural Center and the course and everything that was going on
there. Completely, to the point I knew that’s where I needed to be and I knew and I went
and I transferred. I didn’t even look at the requirements for gen. ed. [general education], I
just transferred. I didn’t look at degrees. I just transferred. And I said, I don’t know how
it’s gonna work but I just have to be here. I knew it. I felt pulled.

Alice addressed this sense of connection and wanting to attend this university as a result of a
visit she made to the campus, here she describes her experience:

So I took a tour of [current university], got information and I instantly fell in love with
the campus. The diversity of the campus, the population, I just really fell in love with
this, so I applied and I was accepted. Then fall 2007, I started attending classes at [current university].

Christina did not attend a community college prior to being admitted to the four-year school, even though she did not get accepted into her desired major right away. Rather than going to community college, she re-applied:

When I applied all they [current college] had were my high school records. They sent me a letter for [local community college] and information for [local community college] and then they got my ACT scores and said okay, you can come, but you can’t declare a major. I think we did that and then I applied like another two or three times, for like the next semester then I applied for the next semester, and then I ended up applying for the next semester…cause I was just too chicken to do it [actually enroll following admission].

Getting into the major was important to Christina but more than that, gaining the confidence to actually begin classes was an important factor for her. Getting into her desired major was also a big challenge for Andrea, here she shares her thoughts, “Yea that was huge it took me like three years to do that cause I was very nervous. I didn’t think my work was gonna be up to par and so I finally just sucked it up and turned it in.” Beginning at a community college was the option for some of the participants, gaining entrance into a specific major was the impetus for others.

Regardless of the path that led these women to the university, each one of them did gain entrance into the university and then had to deal with the transitions that occurred as a result of their attendance.

**Feeling Like a Fish Out of Water.** One of the biggest issues to surface was a feeling of not having the needs of a non-traditional, or adult learner student recognized by the institution. The first harbinger of this occurred as a result of dissatisfaction with the orientation program
experienced by Christina, CeCe, and Frances. Christina spoke about not feeling that the information presented was relevant to her situation and the fact that she needed special consideration in scheduling:

They don’t know what to do with the non-traditional students for the orientation. They throw you in with the transfers. I remember… sitting there in the SUB and they’re talking about this and that and I got kids behind me talking about [current university] being a dry campus and I’m thinking, ya know? Oh, I had to go see [head of new student schedules] cause my schedule wouldn’t work out, I was still, I was still going to work. I needed classes at night. I needed classes that didn’t start until four so I had to get my schedule changed.

CeCe was not happy about her orientation to the university either:

I left during orientation. My daughter-in-law went with me and she’s an alumni of [current university], like I said and she just graduated with her Masters. And I looked at her and said none of this stuff has anything to do with me. I’m not going to be up here walking on the campus, drinking on the campus, living on the campus. Nothing that they had to say, had anything to do with me. So I just left. They were talking to the parents about their kids, taking care of their kids. They were talking to the kids about being away from their families. They were doing all the things and none of it had to do with me. So I, I thought why am I sitting here, this is a waste of my time. Let’s go get something to eat for awhile and then I’ll stand to do my classes and that’s what I did. And I thought, that was my first taste of [current university] and that’s a shame. And all they did say during the thing was, we do have a lot of non-traditional students here now. I thought, oh, now they’re gonna get into it. That was it. I do know there is evidently something for non-
traditional students or is it commuter students, that they get together, or something? But I don’t have the time to do that.

Frances also was discouraged following her experience with orientation:

When I received the letter about the orientation and signing up, I was really excited cause when I went to [local community college], I mean, it’s still small but there’s a lot to know like…library hours what help you can get, where to go if you need help with a paper or math or whatever and that kind of thing. And how to do financial aid and all that stuff, so you have a lot of questions. And even if it’s a small school, where you can find everything easier you still have questions. So when I was going to [current university], and it’s not a big school, but it’s definitely bigger than [local community college]. So I had a lot of questions and I decided to go to the orientation. I was there and I started talking with another lady that was older and we sat together and had a lot of questions about everything. We got there and we’re sitting there and all they talk about is dorms and how the parents need to let go of the kids and just stuff that teenagers would be dealing with and none of the issues that we were concerned about. Things like car registration and…financial aid were talked about briefly, very briefly. Just go to the building, it’s there and that kind of thing. But, nothing concrete and I remember, I don’t, I can’t think off the top of my head right now what other questions I had. But I remember leaving thinking this was a waste of time because none of my questions were answered. I don’t know what I’m doing. I didn’t even know that I had to register then. I mean they talked about registration, but they sent us to a different place cause I was undeclared at the time and I didn’t know where to go as an undeclared student. So I ended up registering really late and I didn’t even register myself. The person from the Undeclared
Department called me over the phone, like two weeks before school started to register me. And, it was just, ya know?

Following orientation came the adjustment period whether the participants were coming from a community college experience or not. A factor which several students mentioned was just trying to find their way around the university. Nikki states, “you don’t know where you’re going, you don’t know what’s going on, you’re just kinda like in a whirl wind.” Christina talked about acclimating herself to her new class schedule almost every semester:

About a week before school would start every semester, except for the last few cause then I knew my way around, I would make [son] go with me, up to [current university] and we would walk around campus and drive around the different parking lots to find the buildings I had to go to so I wasn’t looking like a real loser, lost.

A similar vein, Alice mentioned:

I think the biggest transition for me besides the commute one of the biggest transitions was just finding my way around everything. It sounds kinda silly, but it wasn’t until my second year at [current university] that I really realized where everything was. I remember right before I started, a couple days before classes started, I had my little map and I was walking around trying to find this building and that building. I said, well my class is in this building and just trying to figure out where to park…and how to get from point A to point B. So, that was a big challenge. That was a big challenge for me, like transition wise, just spatially figuring out where everything is.

Frances also struggled initially with finding her way around campus:

I didn’t know where the library was, so I had to look for the library. I thought during the, the orientation they were gonna walk us around campus and show us like where things
were so that when we got there we’d know. I didn’t know where the buildings were. I didn’t know anything.

One of the outstanding factors which the participants discussed was the difference between themselves and the majority of the student population, particularly as it related to differences in age and responsibility level outside of being a student. Nikki describes it this way:

I’ve had a hard time coming to [current university] because I called it the triple-edged sword a commuter, a non-traditional, and a transfer student. So I had a very hard time adjusting to [current university] cause it’s all these little teenie boppers running around. Like, it’s not focused for those kind of students that I was at all.

CeCe is frustrated because she believes all of the instructors treat students as though they are all young students. These are her words to describe this experience:

I guess being an older student, the way they talk or relay information sometimes, it’s like, are you underestimating my intelligence, or are you forgetting that I’m here? You know what I mean? It’s an awful way to feel. I don’t know how to put it. I don’t think they’re trying to, I really don’t think they’re doing it on purpose, because the majority of the classroom is young kids.

Tessa experienced this as well, in the following quote she describes a recent event that brought this idea to the forefront of her thoughts:

I guess, like it is difficult for non-traditional students at the university that’s a difficult thing. I went over there today to the university to do the laptop swap, because I do a laptop swap every four days. The new incoming persons, and I just looked at them and thought, oh, no, I need to get out of here cause it’s a whole fresh another group coming in. I tell ya sometimes, I get these looks like do you really have to be here? Or, my
mother’s here kinda thing. Do you know what I mean? It’s really not, I probably because I go during the day. I noticed if you take the later classes…later in the day, like the five to eights you do really run into a little bit more older students, but that, it’s difficult trying to go to a four-year university and be with younger students. And I really don’t understand, for me I feel like they should be able to better blend with me cause this is all, we’re all gonna be in the workplace together.

Alice talks about this difference as well and more specifically identifies some of the differences that she noticed:

Another challenge was just not being sure, like how many adult learners would be in the class, would I be the oldest person in the class, will I feel out of place? And so that was definitely a challenge for me, I thought, cause I had my own conceptions and preconceived notions about what the classes would be like and I was really pleasantly surprised. Yea, so it was definitely a different case than at the community college level, you have a lot more adult-level learners and people who work full-time and go to school part-time. People with families at home, where at [current university], you’re dealing with a lot of younger student who don’t have children.

Alice continues that these differences were more pronounced at the beginning of her time at the four year school:

Initially I felt a little out of place only because the majority of students in my classes being to undergrad study, a lot of them where eighteen, nineteen to twenty-two, twenty-three years old. And here I was, like, thirty-six, thirty-seven and there was like a big age difference, so, at first I felt a little awkward with the students….here I am, an older student coming from [nearby city], so I felt like I was a little out of place.
Although Lori really enjoyed the student population, she also commented on feeling different due to her non-traditional status and she acknowledges that the university fills her needs since she can only take classes during the day:

I have to say for the most part, I think my experiences have been, it’s okay. Although you do tend to be a fish out of water as an adult there cause it is not geared toward my, probably why it works for me is that I have to take classes during the day….so, it works for me but I’m not sure it would work for everyone.

For Frances, the difference was not noted so much by responsibility levels, but more just by age differences:

That was tough, especially the first semester. I came home and I said to my husband, I feel so old. I walk around and there’s all these beautiful young people and I’m like, old. I feel so out of place, ya know? You’re walking into a room full of kids but I got used to it.

Another aspect of feeling a little out of place brought up by several of these participants is instructor interaction and expectations of students. Several participants spoke about feeling as though the instructors assumed that all of their students were traditionally-aged full-time students. These instances occurred both in the classroom as well as with outside of class expectations. CeCe shared her thoughts about this succinctly:

There has to be an understanding that you talk differently to adult students, you react differently to adult students. Adult students are more visual. Adult students start at A and go to B and to C, they don’t go from A to D….I just think they really need to really just stop and say, ya know, we have traditional students and nontraditional students. And the goals of these two, it’s totally different. We’re all wanting to get a degree but in a
different manner. We go about it in a different manner. We study in different ways. We go to school in different ways. We’re not there to talk about that, oh, so what were you drinking last night?

This is a comment that CeCe made about out of class expectations:

All my Social Work classes say you can have extra credit if you can be back here tonight at 7:00 for so and so or next week at this time you can do this or next week at this time. These are all extra credit things, we’re showing a movie and we’re having a speaker and we’re doing this and we’re doing that and I’m going I don’t even have time to join the Social Work Club. How the [explicative] am I going to get up here to all this stuff for extra credit? Is it right after my class so that I can do that and then schedule my clients? Or be home or get home and then go back up? So you know I can’t be involved in a lot of things that I would like to be involved in.

Tessa also mentioned this struggle:

My biggest thing is that it’s very difficult being a non-traditional student and going back to school and not so much at the community college level, but at the four-year university level, it’s very difficult….A couple of other ones [professors] are like, ya know, calling me a kid. I’m not a kid. You don’t understand what I’m carrying here.

Although for many the period of adjustment was difficult, most of the participants worked through that initial awkwardness and found that they began to feel more comfortable at the university than they had initially.

**Getting Connected.** This happened as a result of getting connected to somebody or something at the university. These connections included faculty members, other students, and university sponsored programs. Here Lori describes this change, “I could never get a
conversation going with anyone that was helpful. And it really wasn’t until I met [college professor] that I really felt I had…. and then he really, um, he truly heard what I was saying.”

Once Lori found that one professor who truly listened to her and was able to provide some guidance, she began to feel more connected. Here Christina talks about the importance of this connection to a professor and a conversation that occurred after a class was over during a semester in which her sister died:

Everybody left, everybody had already gone and she [her professor] was like, so how are you? I said, I got that, my brother’s leaving for Iraq in September, I’m carrying eighteen credits, I don’t even know where to start with getting caught up on work. But I just can’t afford to have the nervous breakdown I know I deserve. And she said, do you wanna drop something? And I was like, not if I don’t want my sister to come back and kick my butt. This is April here, I have…what, five weeks left? I’ve gotten this far carrying eighteen credits, what’s another five weeks? And the professors were good.

Here Alice shares that she also felt supported by the faculty members:

So I wasn’t quite sure if the professors would be really receptive to understanding that I might be late because I have kids or I might be absent because my children are sick or daycare is closed or my car is old. But I found that as long as you communicated that to them upfront…or you had a problem, they were very accommodating. So that was really a pleasant surprise for me up there. And I found that they were very supportive. If you needed a deadline extended they were very open and willing to work with you. So I was greatly impressed with the faculty at [current university] in that sense.

Frances spoke briefly about her positive overall impression of the university faculty members, “the professors, professors are okay. I’ve had some not so nice professors, but most of them are
pretty good. They seem to be prepared. They seem to like their job. So, yea, it’s been good.” In addition to connections with faculty members, several of the participants mentioned that they enjoyed the connections between themselves and the students.

Claudia spoke about her relationships with the student population as feeling very comfortable right from the beginning of her college experience:

I had golf and volleyball my first semester and I loved it. The interaction with the kids, it was like, I’m getting goose bumps cause it was so much fun. They accepted me, like right off the bat. I mean, I was just another student, but yet, I wasn’t.

Her connections and experiences outside the classroom provided her a way to offer support to the students she got to know:

I helped out some of my fellow classmates because they were interested in possibly working in a gym or helping football teams with their workouts and that sort of thing and I have friends with the [local football team] and I have friends at[local gym]. So, I got their names and handed them out and so hopefully things will work out totally for them, but, ya know…initially I got them in the door.

Alice also spoke about feeling accepted by the students after an initial feeling of awkwardness, here she talks about that experience:

They’ve [traditionally-aged college students] really admired my, that I was going to school and working and having kids. And they said, I don’t know how you do it, I think you’re amazing. So, it was nice to get that acknowledgement from them. I still wasn’t totally able to relate to all the students cause some of them lived on campus and they lived at home with their parents so our life styles were a lot different but I found they really had a lot of respect for my lifestyle. They understood that I couldn’t do all of the
things they could do because I had other outside obligations and commitments so that, in that sense it was really nice.

Alice shared these thoughts about the students in another way a little later in the interview:

But I started to see that as I gave myself a chance to get to know them, I started to see that they didn’t treat me any differently. I felt like some of them really respected me for being like a non-traditional student. And they seemed to respect, I guess my wisdom, not like an old lady by any respect, but my wisdom, my experience.

Elaine also got connected to the students, although she sought out a group of older students to establish connections with:

I’m feeling a lot of connection. I got involved with or sought support for non-traditional students immediately. Sought support through a virtual community….They had meetings, but I could never get to any of the meeting times but I did build a relationship with a few of the women there and got together with them for a couple of events. So I am a person that, I immediately go to my resources, wherever they are.

Here Lori shares her enthusiasm of being part of a traditionally-aged student population:

What I really like, the kids. I do notice it, most non-traditional women in particular, in the classroom, tend to sit away from the other children. I say children, because they are children to us. They don’t interact they tend, they’re like lone wolves or something. And I actually see the students, they’re my peers and they, actually, can tell you how to find the information that you’re looking for. They’re better at the computer than I am. These kids know things that I don’t.

Two of the participants specifically mentioned an academic support service program which helped them to feel more connected and gave them hands-on tools to help them to be more
academically successful. Here Miriam speaks about strategies she learned from her academic counselor:

I tell you what, the Act 101 Program really helped, I think. Because it really changed once I started going to the counseling and she showed me some simple things, like structure, the time management…and those charts…I do that now at the beginning of each semester I do that. I sit down and I map out the class times and time blocks.

Alice too, found the program to be very beneficial to her:

Being part of the Act 101 Program really helped because I got to see other adult learners and other people with families and dealing with the same situations I was dealing with. So it was great. Yes, that really helped out a lot.

In addition to feeling connected to professors or students, there were other aspects of the university which helped to establish the sense of connection for several of the adult learner participants. Tessa spoke about the variety of opportunities and programming that was available to her as a student and wanting to take advantage of them while she could:

There’s a lot more things that they offer that the community college didn’t. For instance, like the laptops, every four days. They have a complete, beautiful audio visual center. I mean you can borrow projectors, which you can do at the community college too, but the four-year college has much more stuff because they have more funding and the tuition is higher. There’s a lot more things that are available to you. And they have a lot more programs, like comedians, and like the Asian-American Day and the African-American Day…and they have the Multicultural Center, has their dance classes. There’s like so much going on, it really is a much better experience.
Elaine found that it was a specific program which encouraged her initial enrollment, but here she expands and expresses how she has worked to establish a sense of connection:

I’m feeling connected. I’ve found this program, this museum…that there’s a connection there with my interests. I immediately got involved with connecting with non-traditional students, even though there’s not a big pool of those students I’m interacting with I’m seeking support. I think I continuously seek out support, I’m very I definitely have the assertive skills. I know what to ask for and who to ask and who to keep looking for and I just keep going until I find what I need. I get a lot of support from the honor’s program director.

Although this sense of connection came from a variety of sources, it highlights its importance to these individuals. What has been shown is that the institution is also a factor in the educational experiences of this student population. This section began with a look at the large number of participants who had community college experience prior to their current educational experience at the four-year school. This prior experience impacted these women in different ways, but they all expressed thoughts on differences between the two experiences. Community college attendance was a gateway to attendance at a four-year school for the majority of the participants. For many, it was a way to begin their higher educational experience while their children were young. The next major theme which emerged was a feeling of not quite fitting in at the university, it was described as feeling like a fish out of water. Many of the respondents commented on this experience specifically as it related to orientation, the application process, relationships with professors, and in relationships with other students mainly due to the differences associated with being an older student with family responsibilities. Due to their minority status on campus, these differences were pronounced and they were experienced in
interactions with administration, faculty members, and other students. Finally, this section concludes with the comments that were associated with passing through the transition phase and beginning to feel comfortable and connected to the university. It was shown that this connection was created by relationships with professors, other students, or a university program. What was emphasized is that when one-on-one interaction was received, it made a big difference in level of connection at the university for these participants. With this connection, family support to remain at the university was not as crucial as it was when they began their program of study.

Summary

The findings of this research study were broadly broken down into four categories. The chapter began with an overview of the family-of-origin expectations, this was followed by the idea that college attendance was often a dream for many of the participants, the next large category was the importance of the current family and an examination of how the institution impacted these participants was the final major factor in this qualitative analysis.

Family-of-origin expectations were a thread that was found to have a significant influence on the participant’s educational experiences. This thread symbolized the interdependent web between the women and their families. The section began with an examination of how this thread of influence may have impacted the participants’ beliefs about kindergarten through twelfth grade (K-12) education when their parents emphasized educational attainment, when parents did not emphasize K-12 educational attainment, and when parent’s did not understand or necessarily place value on higher educational attainment.

It was shown that each participant reported some type of family emphasis on K-12 educational attainment. Many times this was reported as being more prevalent during the time
period prior to high school age. Two participants were taught to read prior to starting school because their family members believed so strongly in the value of education. Report card day was an important day in families who emphasized educational attainment. In these families, the children were expected to share their grades, perform well in school, and to graduate from high school. In these families, schoolwork, test grades, and personal accountability were part of the day-to-day life in family functioning. In a number of families, this influence was intergenerational and came from grandparent’s even more than it came from the participant’s parents. Although most participants at least mentioned the importance of education in their family of origin, there was much more information shared about K-12 educational attainment not being emphasized.

The four main themes which emerged regarding K-12 education not being emphasized were having parents who did not place priority on the student’s academic progress; who accepted a gendered expectation that because each of these women were female, higher education was not really important; who experienced shifts in the family of origin structure causing changes in home life; or if there were issues of drug or alcohol abuse or mental illness within the family. One way to measure emphasis on education within a household is by how report cards were responded to. Five of the thirteen respondents reported that report card results were not important to their families. The idea that there was no need for women to attain higher education was voiced by three of the study participants. Family of origin membership also impacted the level of emphasis on educational attainment. For four of the study participants, there was a shift away from an emphasis on educational attainment following changes in family membership. Six of the participants were negatively impacted by these associated with either alcohol or drug abuse or mental illness within the family of origin, most common was alcohol abuse. In each of
these families, other issues were more prevalent than the children’s educational attainment. Part of the reason for this seems to be when higher education was not understood by the participant’s parents.

The construct of when higher education was not understood by parents was broken down into several categories. Education levels of the parent’s, especially in regard to first-generation college students were examined. From there, issues associated with a lack of knowledge about higher educational attainment which included not being academically prepared or knowing about available resources designed to assist with higher education attainment. The last factor that was examined was when the participants did not receive any financial support from their family of origin for higher education attainment.

Of the thirteen participants, only one had a parent who had either an associates or a bachelor’s degree, so everyone except Tessa were first-generation college students. When the parents’ level of education was extremely low, participants reported that they did not receive any guidance in regard to pursuing higher education. This was reported by seven of the participants. It was found that without having someone who understands higher education, there is the possibility for misunderstanding, wrong information, and lack of an opportunity to discuss many issues because questions related to attending college never even have a chance to be voiced to anyone. It was also found that other individuals such as guidance counselors or teachers could have a profound influence on these students in either a positive or negative way. Finally, when higher education was not understood by parents they did not typically offer any type of financial assistance so that their daughters could attend college. This was a significant barrier, because many of these women were expected to take on financial responsibility for themselves once they
reached adult status. Many of the participants also moved out of their family homes either prior to high school graduation or just afterward.

Although the family of origin did not necessarily emphasize K-12 educational attainment or understand higher education, the majority of study participants dreamed of attending college one day. When educational attainment was not emphasized in their family of origin, many of these women spoke about receiving support from other individuals. For six of the participants, this support came from members of their extended family during the time when they were growing up. Another theme to emerge was the desire to provide a better life for their families. Within this idea, it was found that wanting to achieve more and have the ability to provide for a better life for their families were the motivating factors towards change. When these women spoke about returning to school, they mentioned that it was either for professional development, personal fulfillment, or based on their life experiences. Taken together, these factors provide the needed motivation that pushed the participants to move forward with their decision to attend college.

Personal beliefs are another important variable to consider when explicating these women’s ability to be academically successful at the college level. Indeed, without having belief in their academic ability to be successful, they were not as likely to enroll and succeed in this endeavor. Although this belief has to come from inside the individual, there were several participants including Miriam, Elaine, and Lori who reported that their confidence was nourished by the encouragement of their spouse/partner whose support helped them to move forward on their educational trajectory. Another contributing factor was the gendered messages the women received from their family members about educational expectations as they were growing up. The final variable which seemed to influence this ambition of higher education was the level of
personal drive to achieve a bachelor’s degree that these women carried within themselves. Although these dreams were delayed, having an underlying latent desire for more education was an issue that continued to surface for these women throughout the years.

The discussion of the dream of higher education was followed by the impact of the current family on the participant’s educational experience. These participants all had a current family, defined here as a significant other and/or a child or children of their own in addition to their family of origin. For these participants, the timing of entry into institutions of higher education was significantly impacted by the needs of their current family and the women’s roles within their families. Nine of the 13 participants had children living in their homes with them, and six respondents had children under the age of 14. The needs of the current family varied depending on the age of the children, the younger the child(ren), the more difficult to attend college regularly and the more likely these participants were to take a reduced credit load.

Having teenaged children provided greater freedom for class attendance. One thing that was made clear numerous times during the interviews was that all of these women consider themselves to be the primary caregivers for their families. Their responsibility as caregiver was the one which everything else was organized around.

Another factor which significantly impacts college attendance is the membership of the current family. Of the thirteen participants, seven women no longer live with their original partners. This change in living arrangements provided more of an opportunity for successful degree completion for each of these women. Lastly, eight of these women work, which means they have a household, school, and work responsibilities to juggle and keep track of on a day-to-day basis. Of the eight, one works full-time and she attends college on a part-time basis. Of the seven participants who work part-time, five attend school full-time. Taken together, it has been
shown that creating the time and space in these participant’s lives for attending institutions of higher education is significantly impacted by their current families.

Now that these women are either in the educational process or recently graduated, one finding is that the educational experience became a family affair for all family members. As a whole, these women report feeling very supported by their spouse/partner, in fact, several credit their partners with offering the inspiration and support that have got them to where they are today. In addition to support from a spouse/partner, these women spoke about receiving support from their mothers, their children, other family members, friends, and community members. This support was displayed by hands-on assistance with things such as childcare or assistance paying for books; as well as, emotional support which involved having someone who is interested in what they are doing and willing to listen. One way these participants nurtured this sense of support was to try to merge their worlds of home and school. One of the ways participants reported doing this was by inviting family members to the school for activities, programming, or to simply walk around campus to learn where classes are for the next semester.

The sense of support from family members is important because having to negotiate the needs of the household with school responsibilities occurs on a regular basis in households with a female adult undergraduate student. Time to devote to all responsibilities was an underlying theme, but it was also important to consider the stage in the family life cycle. While all of the participants spoke about current family responsibilities, three participants also mentioned parental needs which were both current and future. Finally, there was an examination of some of the ways these women reported finding a balance between their life roles.
How the women responded to these challenges is the result of how they, their partners, and their children negotiate not only the conflicts but the expectations. Changes in the family brought about by the college attendance of the participants became ingrained into the fabric of the family. This experience impacts the participants and their family members. As they traverse the educational process, three themes emerged, there tended to be a high level of importance placed on being a positive role model with the underlying expectation that their children will attend college; the women discussed how college attendance impacted the family financially, both currently and in the future; and the women focused on their need for degree completion, despite and as a result of their embeddedness within their families. Despite the obstacles presented by all of the responsibility these women carry, they continue to persist towards degree attainment. The three main reasons that participants reported continuing to persist towards degree completion, were professional development, personal fulfillment, and/or the belief that obtaining this degree is an important aspect of their own personal development. Three participants experienced a change in their educational plan during the course of their education as a result of life experiences.

The current families of these women have been shown to significantly impact their educational experience. Initially, the decision to enter higher education was found to be based on a number of variables including level of family need, or lack thereof, family membership, and in some instances changes in family membership, and work schedules because of the ability to be able to include the role of student in their lives. Once a woman decided to enroll, she continued to be impacted by her family. The women’s spouse/partner often played a significantly supportive role as did the mothers of many of these participants. Other individuals who offered support were children, other family members, and community members. The support from these
other family members tended to be more emotional support although there was some hands-on, or physical, support offered as well. One of the ways the women nurtured this support was by trying to integrate their worlds of school and home.

Once the women incorporated the role of student into their lives it became part of the family tapestry. This means it was a part of the day-to-day life of family members, it became a norm. All of the women in this study spoke about how attendance at college impacted their family. One of the biggest factors for everyone was the importance they placed on being a positive role model for family and community members. It was also important to examine how current and future financial implications impact the family in regard to educational goals. Finally, these women spoke about the desire to be able to make a positive difference for their own families, but also for others as they pursue professional occupations. Taken together it can be seen that the current family profoundly impacted these women’s higher educational experience in a myriad of ways.

The last aspect which was considered is how the institution may be a factor. Nine of the thirteen participants had some community college experience prior to their current enrollment at the four-year university. Each of the study participants were either currently studying at the four-year institution or recently graduated, this means that each one of them has negotiated the transitions which occurred as a result of their attendance. Many of the participants mentioned that they often felt uncomfortable at the beginning of their experience at the college due to being older and many times a transfer student at an institution who mainly serves traditionally-aged students. For several, this occurred during orientation. For others, it was more of a struggle with either the larger size of the school or with interactions with students or staff members. Although for many the period of adjustment was difficult, most of the participants worked through their
initial awkwardness and found that they began to feel more comfortable. The participants spoke about feeling connected to faculty members, other students, or a specific program or activity which made them feel like they were more a part of the university community.

In review, the key findings of this research study were broadly broken down into four categories: the thread of family of origin expectations; college was often a dream; current family matters; and the institution as a factor. Family of origin significantly influenced these women’s educational experiences as a result of emphasizing and not emphasizing K-12 educational attainment as well as by not providing guidance or assistance with higher educational goals due to a lack of knowledge about higher education in general. Family was also found to influence the dreams of attendance by impacting the desire to attend college, the ability of the woman to make the dream a reality, effecting the beliefs the woman had about her own ability to be academically successful, as well as by the gendered expectations some of the participants were raised with. The current family was integral to the higher educational experience of these participants. This was made clear by each participant during the course of the interview. Specifically, the current family impacted the timing of entry into higher education, her attendance and participation was impacted by family responsibilities and conversely her attendance impacted her family, and finally the tapestry of expectation and hopes, dreams, and desires of these women for their children was a motivating force propelling these women towards degree completion. Finally, institutional structure was found to directly impact the woman’s ability to attend and indirectly impacted the family in that struggles, issues, and concerns experienced by the woman were typically shared with her family. Taken together, both families were found to impact these women’s educational experiences throughout their lives.
CHAPTER SIX

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research study was to examine how the family of origin and current family influence the educational experience of adult female undergraduate students. This chapter begins with a brief introduction explaining how this research furthered previous research done on this topic. This is followed by a review of the key findings which warrant further discussion. This leads to an in-depth examination of how these findings can be explained. The implications of the findings for individuals who work with adult learners and institutions who serve these learners are explored, as well as suggestions for future research. The dissertation ends with some final reflections.

This research supplemented and supported research which has been previously documented about adult learners; however, it also shed light on an aspect of higher education that is at once integral to many people’s experience with higher education, and yet removed from a direct relationship and that is the influence of the family. The goal of this research was to examine how both the family of origin and the current family influence the higher educational experience of adult female undergraduate students. This research further informs quantitative work done by Plageman and Sabina (2010) which examined perceived family influence on adult undergraduate women. This study rated support of family members within the current family and the family of origin on the initial decision to attend college and the support to persist towards degree completion. The results of the Plageman and Sabina (2010) study found that participants perceived high levels of family support from both families and that behavioral, or hands-on, and emotional support in the current family was related to overall support to attend and persist. The current findings reinforce the importance of support received from family members while adding
color and depth to the findings because it includes specific examples of how this support is experienced and explains the value that is placed on it.

**Points of Discussion**

Overall, there were several key issues which stand out and contribute to the literature on adult female undergraduate students and their persistence in higher education. Weaving these findings together is best done by considering this data in a chronological order. The discussion begins by examining several of the more prominent reasons that these women did not attend college as traditionally-aged students considered through the lens of their lived experience which encompasses their family of origin. Unique to this population was that most participants felt that their family of origin supported them in their academic endeavors at the elementary school level; however, family expectations and support were reportedly lessened as these participants grew older and attended secondary school. Of primary importance is that of the 13 participants, only one had one parent who had a college degree, meaning that all but one participant was a first-generation college student. From the participant’s perspective, this was pivotal in a lack of perceived support for academic endeavors from their family of origin.

Second, despite a lack of support for academic achievement during the secondary years from the family of origin, most of the participants dreamed of going to college one day. Participants shared that their primary reasons for attending college included a desire for career development, personal growth, or because of a personal life experience. This required overcoming the barriers that occurred while living with their family of origin as well as creating a current family structure and dynamic that was conducive to attaining a postsecondary education. Timing of entry into higher education was also integrally tied to responsibilities associated with the current family. The last point of interest in regard to the current family is the
profound influence on the desire of these women to successfully complete their degree so that they would be seen as a good role model for their children, family and community members. An extension of this finding was the participant’s descriptions of how their enrollment in higher education influenced family and community members in what they believed were positive ways.

Last, an indirect link that impacted these women and their families, was found between the participants and the institution. This link should be considered from a structural perspective. For example, the institution where the research was conducted is a state school with lower tuition than either larger public research institutions or local private colleges or universities. With the majority of participants reporting that their current family is in a low socio-economic status group, attending the state school was a more affordable option. It is interesting to note that first-generation college students are more likely to enroll in a public comprehensive institution as opposed to a research university than those students who have at least one parent who has a college degree (NCES, 2001). The public institution where this research was conducted only offers complete degree programs during the daytime and during the week. Meaning, students who attend this institution must be able to fit into this model. The majority of students who attended this institution were traditionally-aged students and this model is very conducive to serving the needs of this student population. This model worked for the participants in this study, many times because of their family responsibilities. Thus, the institutional model directly impacted these students because they were able to add the role of student to their other life roles due to their ability to fit school attendance in during times that classes were offered by this particular institution of higher education.

Decreased Academic Expectations with Increasing Age
From a broad perspective, there was a decreasing emphasis on educational attainment for these participants as they moved from elementary school until they reached high school. This was experienced by the participants in a number of ways including a lack of emphasis on grades and homework, little to no feedback on report card results, and a lack of interest in or concern for their general academic welfare by members of the family of origin. One way to make sense of this perceived lack of support for academic achievement in high school and the corresponding lack of support for college attendance by the family of origin is to draw on the concept of social capital (Coleman, 1988). Social capital is based on the idea that individuals create networks of individuals and institutions which then act as personal resources. Social capital has been described the following way, “all social relations and social structures facilitate some forms of social capital” (Coleman, 1988, p. S105). Characteristics typically identified with the theory of social capital include individual and community networks, resources made available as a result of those networks, norms that are established through the networks, and trust in the individuals that reciprocity will occur (Alfred, 2009). Social capital is a theory which can be considered from both inside and outside the family. Social capital within the family, as it relates to education, has been measured by aspects such as parental involvement in school activities, discussions about school in the home, and the parent’s time and presence with their child that focus on intellectual endeavors (Coleman, 1988). Outside the family, the idea of social capital addresses the issue of contacts and network opportunities that are available or not available to family members based on family membership. In fact, a lack of social capital both within and outside of the family, was found to increase high-school drop-out rates and thus the educational trajectories of students (Coleman, 1988).
This is particularly relevant since only one participant had a parent who had a college degree. All of the other participants were first-generation college students. A first-generation college student is, “a student who is the first in his/her family (mother, father, or siblings) to complete a college education” (Payne, 2007, p. 1). In fact, a number of the study participants had parents who did not have formal education beyond elementary school and, as a result of low levels of education of parents, many of the participants described a lack of understanding about how to access higher education, as a traditionally-aged student. This made outside contacts much more critical as a way of nurturing postsecondary enrollment. Additionally, there were aspects which are indirectly impacted by family membership including family expectations resulting from cultural norms and include historical time period in history, ethnicity, variables associated with English as a second language (ESL), as well as if there were issues of drug and/or alcohol abuse or mental illness within the family of origin. It is important to look at each of these issues more specifically. The influence of the family of origin is profound, often ingrained, and typically invisible. In fact, Canfield, Hovestadt, and Fenell (1992) write that “an individual acquires from early family experiences a set of explicit and implicit expectations, values, attitudes, and beliefs which serve as points of reference for the evaluation of many subsequent interpersonal experiences” (p. 55).

Women who are first-generation college students did not have a parent who completed higher education. Because of this, there was no one in their immediate family who they could speak with about what it would mean to go to college or what was necessary in order to prepare to go to college. With such a high percentage of participants being first-generation students, it is important to consider why this could impact these women in such a profound way and cause the delay in entry they each experienced. In considering this from the perspective of the family of
origin, it is the day-to-day interactions with family members that provide the context for understanding their lived experiences. Social constructionism helps to explain this because it is based on a theory that peoples’ perceptions and beliefs are unique and are influenced by interactions with those individuals who are part of their day-to-day lives due to the interactive effect with their environment (Berger & Luckmann, 1996; Puig, Koro-Ljugbert & Echevarria-Doan, 2008). Further, the social constructionist perspective is based on the belief that meaning is created through social interaction and this social interaction will be profoundly influenced by context (Burr, 1995). With this in mind, children are molded by their parents and the environment they are raised in. For the majority of these women, the topic of higher education was not an issue that was discussed, expected, or encouraged.

Research has documented that the education level of parents is strongly linked to the education level of their children, in that children are less likely to pursue higher levels of education than their parents (Crosnoe, 2004; Gofen, 2009). This informs the current study because it provides a rationale for higher educational attainment not being emphasized while addressing the more personal feelings these women had about not being academically supported during their high school years and beyond. Having parents who did not understand the benefits of higher education or the resources available to help make it more accessible also appears to be a by-product of being a first-generation college student. The results of this lack of knowledge about higher education translated into the participants feeling as though not only did they not receive encouragement to pursue higher education, but perhaps more importantly, they were not privy to information explaining specifically what to do and how to do it if they did want to pursue higher education. Without knowledge about college preparatory classes, financial aid, and the testing needed to be considered for admission to many college and universities higher
educational access was limited. These young women did not typically even have enough information to know which questions should be asked or who they could talk to about it.

Similar to the correlation between parents and their children’s levels of education, research has documented that individuals who are in families in lower income brackets are less likely to pursue higher education for a variety of reasons including “a significant lack of financial support, familial obligations, and lack of social support” (Milheim & Bichsel, 2007). This research is important to the current study because seven of the thirteen participants described the income level of their family of origin as low, four reported their families were from the middle income bracket, while only two participants reported they came from a family within a high income bracket. With the lack of emphasis on higher educational attainment coupled with families who for the most part were struggling financially, these participants did not feel they had the knowledge of, or emotional, physical, or financial support they felt they needed from their family of origin to pursue higher education as a traditionally-aged student.

A difference which surfaced in regard to educational expectations may have been impacted by differences in ethnicity. This was compounded by the low-socio economic status of these families. This sample included nine individuals of European descent, two Hispanic, one African American, and one American Indian. These cultural differences appear to have impacted the educational trajectory of these women in regard to high school completion. Both women of Hispanic descent and the participant who was African American dropped out of school prior to high school graduation. Of the 13 participants, these were the only three who did not graduate from high school. These participants spoke about the need to find work and leave the family home. Additionally, the participant who was one half American Indian reported moving out of her family home immediately following high school graduation. All four of these participants
came from low-income households in which there was more of an emphasis placed on working to survive rather than on achieving higher levels of education. Thus, these participants were truly marginalized in regard to college attendance as traditionally-aged college students and they each came from a cultural background that was not of European heritage.

In addition to cultural differences, there were two other distinctions that it is important to acknowledge which impacted the educational trajectories of the participants in that it is also related to family of origin influence. This includes those students for whom English is a second language (ESL) and those who came from families who had at least one parent who struggled with addiction or mental illness. Each of these issues was responded to by the family in unique ways and was thus integrated into the day-to-day lives of the participants. For example, there were three people in this study who were ESL students, Naomi, Christina, and Frances. Naomi and Frances were of Hispanic descent and both of them dropped out of high school prior to graduation. Both of these women had mothers for whom working for survival was the priority. As their daughters reached working age, they too were expected to work and education was thought to be a luxury item. For both Naomi and Frances, it was not the fact that they themselves were ESL students, but rather the expectation that their mothers had for them which focused on earning a living by working and therefore indirectly influencing the educational trajectory of their daughters based on their own life experiences. These young women left school to join the work force and did not consider attending higher education during that time period in their lives. The third participant for whom ESL was an issue came from a family who did support K-12 education; however, there was no support for higher educational attainment. Rather, the children in this family were also expected to join the work force in order to become economically independent.
These are clear examples of how integral family expectations, or linked lives, from the life course perspective, are to the behaviors and actions of these participants. As a reminder, the life course perspective examines the life trajectory on a continuum and incorporates social pathways of family, education, and work with individual lived experiences which are influenced over time and by family context (Aulette, 2002).

A variable that was found to be a commonality for almost one half of the study participants was an issue of alcohol and/or drug abuse or mental illness within the family of origin. Although participants spoke about this issue, it tended to be done in a way that provided the researcher with enough information to understand the issue but did not tend to explain how this was experienced in their day-to-day lives. I speculate that it was important to these women to not portray their family members in a negative way. Grappling with a parent or parents who had an addiction or who suffered from mental illness was a significant issue for six of the thirteen participants with alcohol addiction being reported as the most prevalent. This was an issue that was difficult for the participants to talk about and yet significantly influenced their early educational experiences mainly because of the lack of family involvement and/or a lack of emphasis on educational attainment of the participants. The participants reported that issues associated with alcohol and/or drug abuse or mental illness were reasons why they moved out as young adults, spent time away from home as adolescents, and felt that their relationships with their parents were strained. This shows how integral day-to-day family interaction can be to individual’s lived experiences, and in these instances, the educational trajectories of the participants.

A broad aspect that it is important to consider, in regard to influence of the family of origin, is the time period in history in which these women were raised. With an average age of
42 years old, the majority of the participants were brought up during the 1960’s and 1970’s. During that period in history, the family structure of a husband who was the primary wage earner and a wife who stayed home to care for the children was still common, particularly for white middle class families (Coontz, 2008). This is important to the current research since nine of the thirteen participants had a mother who stayed home to raise the children. It seems the cultural norm that women should stay home and raise the children influenced the educational expectation these participants experienced in that it impressed upon them the importance of playing a primary role in the nurturing and care-giving of their own children. This supports findings by Shaw and Lee (2009) who report that historically and culturally women are expected to be mothers; further, they are expected to be nurturing, comforting, the caretakers, and willing to sacrifice for their children.

One thing that was made clear by all of the participants is that providing both hands-on and emotional care for their family members was of primary importance to them and that educational advancement came second. This was displayed through taking a lower number of credits than what was desired and in a couple instances, dropping out of college in order to care for a family member. Interestingly, twelve of the 13 participants were raised by both a mother and a father; although, there were numerous changes to family membership along the way. This means these families were, for the most part, following the social and historical ideology of that time period.

In summary the influence of the family of origin on an adult woman’s higher educational experience is significant. It was shown that when there was a lack of emphasis on higher educational attainment, it was associated with not attending college as a traditionally-aged student. This is not to say parents did not want the best for their children, but rather, there were
other issues that were occurring within the family of origin and they took precedence over the
educational pursuits of the participants and their siblings. These findings are also consistent with
previous research which found that, “a student whose parents expect him/her to finish only high
school, never discuss school activities, have no contact with the school and participated in no
activities has an 11% predicted probability of attending a four-year school” (Sandefur, Meier,
and Campbell, 2006, p. 546). In addition to the lived experience within the home these
participants were impacted by broader factors. The time period in which these participants were
raised normalized a two-parent family in which the mother stayed home to raise the children. It
was found that this was true for the participants of European descent, but not so for those from a
Hispanic, African American descent, or for those who were ESL. Finally, when addiction or
mental illness issues were prevalent in the family of origin, there was less emphasis on
educational attainment and little to no support for the pursuit of higher education as a
traditionally-aged student.

Obviously, situations have changed for each of these women because they are either
currently enrolled in a higher educational institution, or recently graduated. This means there are
other factors to consider. For instance, there are increasing numbers of first-generation students.
In fact, The National Center for Educational Statistics (1998) reported that during the years
1989-1990 first-generation college students made up 43% of the population and during 1993-
1996, they made up 47% of the student population (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). In
addition, Skolnick and Skolnick (2003) purport that parental determinism is too narrow of a
construct and that individual temperament and characteristics will significantly affect the
ultimate outcomes of individual’s lives. Part of this is because of the interactive effect between
parents and children. Also, time has passed, and these women’s lives have changed in focus and
direction. Each of these women has made a conscientious decision to return to the academic
arena as an adult learner. This discussion now turns to factors that influenced them in their
decision to return to school, which incorporates both individual experience as well as broader
aspects considered from a socio-cultural perspective as well as time period in history.

The Dream of College

Similar to the symbolism of a tapestry that was used to describe the interconnectedness
between a mother and her children in chapter five, so to this symbolism comes to mind in regard
to the dream of attaining higher education. This dream was most often begun when the
participants were children; however, even for those participants for whom this dream came later,
it was an issue that surfaced throughout their life times with differing levels of intensity. Again,
it was strongly impacted by both of the participant’s families. Difficulties faced as a result of
issues associated with the family of origin included: having parents who did not place priority on
the student’s academic progress, particularly at the high school age; participants who accepted a
gendered expectation that because they were women, higher education was not important for
them; those who experienced shifts in the membership of their family of origin; and those who
had issues associated with drug or alcohol abuse or mental illness within the family of origin
were all reasons why the participants did not attend college as traditionally-aged students.

The dream of going to college was a life time dream for many of the study participants,
and for the others resulted from life experience. In spite of a general lack of support for higher
educational attainment by family of origin members, all of the participants spoke about people in
their lives who did support them academically. Between parents, grandparents, other family
members, and community members all of the participants reported somebody they remember as
being supportive of them in their academic endeavors. There could be at least two reasons for
this. First, some of these women sought out input from other individuals in their lives who
would support them in their idea of attending college. The second possibility is that these
supportive individuals saw and nurtured potential within these women when they were children.
Having someone who believes in your ability to be academically successful appears to be very
important throughout the life span.

This was important to these women as children, because it helped them to nurture the
dream of one day continuing their education. It was also important in their current lives as
demonstrated by the emphasis they placed on having someone who believed in their academic
abilities as adults. For example, several participants shared that it was due to the support of their
significant other that they are currently pursuing their degrees. The significance of this support
was documented in research which found that the majority of participants perceived high levels
of support for their academic endeavors from members of both the current family and their
family of origin (Plageman and Sabina, 2010). Specifically, perceived support from family of
origin members was highest from mothers. While perceived support from spouses was high for
current family members, in the quantitative study, other family members and mothers were
slightly higher than reported spousal support. This discrepancy could be attributed to differences
between the research studies. The quantitative study was based on rating levels of support of
various family members. Results were based on likert scale variables and participants did not
have the opportunity to comment on the frequency or specific type of support offered by each
individual family member. The qualitative study allowed for sharing in-depth information about
support received. Spousal/partner support was felt to be imperative because of the assistance
with the day-to-day functioning of the household. It was this hands-on assistance whether it was
realized as physical, emotional, or financial that occurred regularly which truly assisted these women with their persistence toward degree attainment.

The desire for more education was made evident through a variety of lived experiences. The women spoke of personal fulfillment, job advancement, wanting to be a role model for their children, wanting to provide a safer and more secure upbringing than the one they received, wanting to complete a degree for themselves, their partners, their children, and even their parents. The drive to successfully complete their degree was strongly voiced by each participant. It was extremely important to each one of them that their children and families witness them successfully complete their degree, so that they could be a good role model. Also, just as they were driven to complete a bachelor’s degree, they spoke about the desire to have their children go to college as traditionally-aged college students so that they could have the college experience and would not have to go to school as an adult who has so many other responsibilities in their lives. Another important aspect of this desire to succeed is the belief that degree attainment will lead to a better life. Indeed, Aiken, Cervero, and Johnson-Bailey (2001) report that higher educational attainment may be viewed as an opportunity for upward social mobility because it can be tied to career advancement. This is very important for economic self-sufficiency. This, coupled with the desire to be a good role model, were highly motivating factors for degree completion. This seems particularly relevant for these participants because it instilled in them a desire to create a different outcome for themselves, their children, and their partners than they had in their family of origin.

**Current Family Matters**

This study found that the current family significantly influences the adult undergraduate woman’s educational experience. The reason for this appears to be the importance each of these
women placed on being the primary caretaker of their families. This seems to imply that despite broad societal changes that include more women gaining more education and increasing in numbers in the work force, they still struggle with the central moral dilemma of the dichotomy between serving themselves versus serving the needs of others which was found by Carol Gilligan in her work from 1982. This is probably due to their day-to-day lives being so interconnected with family members. The life course perspective posits that although lives are lived independently, it is the socio-historical influences which are expressed in the day-to-day living with those individuals that people are closest to that have the most significant influence on the individual’s thoughts and behaviors (Elder et al., 2003). Aspects specifically related to the current family that are discussed in more depth include: the importance of having supportive family members, the importance these women placed on being a good role model for their family and community; the importance of feeling supported by family members, particularly from their spouse/partners; how integral the current family is to the time of reentry; and finally a discussion of the on-going challenge of balancing all of their life responsibilities.

One way to gauge the influence of the current family on the female adult learner is by the motivation to attend and succeed at college which these women derive from their current family members. The desire of these women to be positive role models for their children was a sentiment which was expressed by every participant. In their discussions of this desire, they spoke about how important this goal is to them for their children, hoping it will encourage them to attend college as a traditionally-aged student. Another way the idea of family influence was made visible is through the idea of integrating family members with the participant’s educational experiences as much as possible. This happened through sharing university activities with family members such as, having them join the participants on campus for tours, errands, or even
occasionally during class times. It also occurred through grade competitions between family members as well as through introducing children to ideas, music, and projects that they never would have been exposed to if Mom had not been attending college. Each participant spoke about how their children observed the work and determination that it takes to be successful academically by watching their mothers. They also spoke about the importance they placed on being emotionally available to their children despite the challenges that being a student placed on them. For these participants, being the family caretaker was the priority and school responsibilities were typically secondary.

Just as the current family members count on the care provided by the participants, support from current family members for the participant’s academic endeavors was shown to be essential and valued by all of the study participants. Although the issue of a lack of academic self-confidence tended to originate as a result of experiences these participants had while growing up, it is within the current family this lack of academic self-confidence became prominent in regard to college attendance. In fact, beliefs and self-doubts about the ability to be academically successful established due to a lack of support for higher education within the family of origin, figured prominently in the lack of college attendance as a traditionally-aged student. This was an issue that current family members helped these participants overcome.

Sander and Sanders (2006) studied academic confidence and had this to say, “the self and self-beliefs are being seen as key indices of achievement motivation” (p. 29). Having a lack of confidence in the ability to be academically successful was an issue faced by many participants. This was a significant issue and a barrier that needed to be overcome because of it’s impact on the educational trajectory of the participants. These women had to gain the confidence in themselves and their academic ability in order to be able to move forward educationally. This
lack of confidence in their academic ability was short-lived for this population. It took a couple semesters and good grades to dispel this belief. With an average grade point average of 3.27, these women as a group were academically strong. Success in the classroom was reportedly very empowering. In fact, concerns about the academic ability was not an issue during the interviews; rather, the participants spoke about how they make the time to do all of their course work while continuing to maintain families and households.

Each one of these women spoke about the importance of the support and encouragement they received from their spouse/partner in their original decision to attend a four-year institution. Through living together and observing behaviors and activities, these spouses/partners believed in the abilities of their significant others to be academically successful, and more importantly, were able to help instill this belief into these women. This helped to provide the needed encouragement to initially enroll. This was particularly important to Miriam, Lori, Elaine and Frances. In fact, each of these women credit their spouse as being highly influential in their initial decision to enroll as well as playing a significant role in helping to get them where they are today educationally. They spoke with pride about their partners being very proud of them and their academic accomplishments. Interesting to note, for four of the six women who suffered from a lack of confidence in their academic abilities, alcohol or drug abuse within their family of origin was a significant issue.

The importance of having a supportive spouse/partner was reiterated by all ten participants who are currently involved in a long-term live-in relationship with another adult. The support for higher educational attainment was something that was important to these women and for a number of them, they experienced a change or changes to their family membership that helped to facilitate higher educational attainment. Of the ten participants who are currently
involved in a close relationship, six are with their original spouse and four have a new spouse/partner. In each case, this new spouse/partner became a supportive force in the decision to attend school and the ability to remain enrolled. The importance of having this support was addressed in a variety of ways. For some women it was help with physical household tasks and childcare, for others it was financial assistance which gave them the freedom to attend school, and others reported on the emotional support they received and the importance of having someone to talk to about their educational experiences. What all of this implies is that due to this support, these women were able to focus more clearly on their schoolwork with the ultimate goal of degree completion. This was true even for the women whose husband’s did not necessarily understand the reasoning behind the drive for degree attainment. In addition to spouse/partners, support from the participant’s mothers was voiced numerous times as was feeling supported by their children. What was most important to these women was feeling as though they were supported as they faced this personal challenge in their lives.

Another important aspect to discuss with regard to an adult female undergraduate student’s current family is the timing of entry into higher education. The current study found that mothers with children of all ages attended college, but it appeared easier to balance the demands of college enrollment with older children. Attendance and credit hours taken were often timed to coincide with children’s attendance in school for parents of younger children. There were more stop-outs reported for woman with younger children. In one case, there was a ten-year wait between associate degree attainment and the opportunity to pursue a bachelor’s degree because of childcare and household responsibilities. Parents of older children remarked on the freedom afforded them for higher educational endeavors now that the primary needs of the childcare were no longer necessary. These findings support research by Jacobs and King (2002)
who found that younger mothers, those under the age of 25, were more likely to stop-out due to childcare needs; whereas, for older mothers, those over the age of 25, parenting responsibilities did not significantly impact college enrollment. All in all, the study participants conscientiously chose this period in their lives to be working towards bachelor degree attainment.

The biggest challenge the women spoke about was working to achieve a balance between their life roles. They each reported doing well academically and commented on the need to incorporate academic responsibilities into their day-to-day lives. They worked on balancing their life roles in a variety of ways which often included trying to attend classes and studying as much as possible while other household members are either at school, work, or sleeping. It was important to all of these mothers that they have time to spend with their children. This is a particularly difficult challenge for single mothers because they are primarily responsible for all of their children’s needs all the time. Another way of achieving this balance was by integrating their worlds of home and school. Participants spoke about having spouse/partners and children join them on campus for programs and activities. In this way it helped to nurture support of the participant’s academic endeavors. On average, these participants had achieved junior status as far as average credits completed; this implies, these families have incorporated the changes to family life brought about by college attendance.

In summary, the current family has been shown to be a significant influence on the women’s educational experience. This was made visible through the importance placed on the support received from their spouse/partner, the drive to be academically successful in order to be a good role model for their children, and the joy in being able to expose their children to new ideas and experiences. Importance was also placed on balancing their life roles designed to successfully incorporate the role of student while not short-changing family member needs.
The Institution as a Factor

A last aspect which is important to consider is that of the institution itself and how that impacts the experience of the adult female undergraduate student from the perspective of either of her families. Although this is an indirect connection, it is important to consider. The institution where this research was conducted is a mid-sized public university with a population of just under 10,000 undergraduate students. At this university, there are no undergraduate degrees that are available to students who are only able to attend evenings or weekends. In other words, students must be able to attend classes during the daytime during the week in order to complete a bachelor’s degree. These constraints impact the student population it serves as well as their current families. At this institution, 91% of the undergraduate population is composed of traditionally-aged college students.

The women who agreed to participate in this research study were able to attend classes during this time period. In fact, the ability to attend classes during the day, during the week, is one of the reasons they were attending this school, because it offered classes during the day, not at night. For them, this structure works. Only one participant was employed full-time, all of the others either worked part-time or in one instance, not at all. Conflicts became problematic when the participants were required to be on campus for reasons other than class attendance including involvement in out of class group assignments, attending activities for extra credit or when group meetings are held evenings or weekends. For them, these requirements conflicted with their other life roles, specifically as it related to care of the current family. This made group project completion or activity attendance very difficult. As far as organizational involvement, these participants most often reported not having the time or freedom to become involved if it was not something that could be easily incorporated into the time that they were already on campus.
These student constraints are directly related to responsibilities associated with parenting, running a household, or working. Although as a group they are dedicated to performing well academically, these situations cause conflict and anxiety because of the time constraints which they juggle. They want and need to be available to care for family members, and yet, they also want to be involved in university groups, most often the ones that are associated with their degree programs. It is this tension and these restrictions which are often wearing on the participants. This is particularly true when class grades are tied to mandatory outside meetings or events which may conflict with other life responsibilities. Although these aspects do not directly influence persistence, they certainly affect the educational experiences of the women due to their inability to participate in these activities and missing out on the networking opportunities they provide.

At this point it is important to briefly consider the theoretical constructs used to frame this study. The theory of social constructionism was important because of it’s emphasis on context and how meaning is made based on interactions with others, particularly those who participants interacted with daily. A second theory, life course theory was important to the current study because of its emphasis on examining choices and paths from a life-span perspective. While this theory recognizes that decisions are made based on perceptions of experiences throughout the life course, it does not specifically account for interruptions or barriers that may occur which could impede the individual from attaining a life goal in either the short-term or long-term. The life course theory has been most frequently used to examine cohort phenomenon from a quantitative perspective. It can be very useful from a qualitative perspective as well, particularly, as more researchers use it as a framework for their studies.

**Implications of the Findings**
Although becoming a college student may appear to be an individual endeavor, this research study found that for adult women the decision to attend college is not made in a vacuum and the repercussions to their lives are a shared experience rather than an individual one. This means that the question of whether adult women perceive family members as having a significant influence on their educational experience can be answered with a resounding yes. This influence was experienced as a reason for delayed entry as traditionally-aged students based on experiences within the family of origin. The influence of the current family was found to be substantial, though certainly not the only factor. These women spoke of being immersed in their families, cognizant of family need, and responsible for the primary care of family members. Actual attendance was found to be more profoundly impacted by the current family, as it was the situatedness within the current family which was a key factor in college enrollment. As a result, the timing of entry was impacted by family need, as was the ability to remain enrolled. In addition, a number of the participants credited their spouse/partner with instilling in them the belief in their ability to be academically successful. This shows that the current family is not only important to consider but integral to the attendance and persistence of this student population.

The influence of both families is a cumulative process across the life span of the participants. It is the messages received as children, expectations about higher education, and a lack of knowledge about attaining higher education which was largely responsible for these women not attending college as traditionally-aged students. However, current family support appears to significantly influence college participation and persistence, particularly spousal/partner support. The participants spoke about the value of having someone believe in their ability to be academically successful as foundational in the initial decision to enroll.
Further, receiving emotional support and/or hands-on physical support was both appreciated and beneficial in regard to persistence towards degree attainment. Lastly, current family members were found to be a motivating factor in persistence due to the participant’s desire to be a good role model for family and community members. One caveat, although all of these participants reported some support from current family members for their goal of bachelor degree attainment, this may not always be the case. In fact, a third of the study participants who are currently involved in a long-term live-in relationship with another adult have a partner other than the one they initially married. These new partners are all supportive; whereas, earlier relationships were not reportedly supportive of higher educational attainment. Therefore, institutional personnel who are aware of the prominent status the current family has on the female adult learner due to the close connection with these family members can more effectively assist adult learners.

In summary these are some specific implications for both the family of origin and the current family. The family of origin tended to be more supportive of academic endeavors as an adult, particularly mothers, than they were when these women were in high school. For the most part this support was emotional, rather than more hands-on or physical. Meaning, they were able to more often offer emotional support and encouragement over the phone, than to provide hands-on assistance with childcare or meal preparations. This means while the majority of these women felt supported by the members of their family of origin, they could not count on their help on a day-to-day basis. For the current family, when a family has a mother who is a student there are often accommodations that need to be made as everyone adjusts to this new life responsibility which has become part of the family system. Although the women spoke of trying to minimize the impact on their family, they acknowledged that there were times when school-related responsibilities impacted current family members. This means that it could be helpful to offer
programming designed to address issues that could potentially impact the family to both adult learners and their families in order to prepare everyone in a proactive way for changes that could occur as a result of college enrollment.

There are several important points for individuals who work in higher educational settings to be aware of in regard to serving the needs of this student population. The key areas that have emerged are issues associated with the admissions process, new student orientation, program advising, and increasing faculty awareness with regard to incorporating adult learners into their classrooms. Each of these areas would benefit from an audit of best practices to determine if student needs are being met in an effective manner. From an admissions perspective, adult learners do not have the same educational trajectory as traditionally-aged students. Admissions counselors should be made aware that adult learners need to be assessed using additional types of measures in the decision to admit them to the university. This research supplements other findings which found that adult learners may apply and not immediately enroll. A study conducted by Stoicescu (2008) found that between 2000-2005, 35% of adult learner applicants were offered admission and did not enroll and 18% of adult learners became paid accepts and then did not enroll. In this type of situation, having an admission counselor who works with this population exclusively could allow for one-on-one outreach and would give the perspective student a specific contact person who could assist them through the entire admissions process. This could be very beneficial for adult learners, particularly if they have concerns or feel intimidated, because it would give them a contact person who is sensitized to their needs and able to assist them throughout the process.

Offering a new student orientation which addresses the needs, concerns, and questions of adult learners is another issue that emerged throughout the course of the interviews. New student
orientation is a program which is a gateway to the college for newly admitted students. It is important that program design and content be geared towards the needs of the student population being served. This supports findings by Bailey (2009), who found that a first-year seminar course designed with adult learners needs in mind assisted these students in feeling more positively about their decision to attend college because the participant’s reported that it helped with their learning, their adjustment to university life, and with their personal development. At the institution where this research was conducted, there was one general student orientation for everyone. This proved to be frustrating for the adult learners. As a group they reported that their needs and questions were not addressed and that too much time was spent on issues associated with traditionally-aged college students. There are several ways this could be addressed. There could be a totally separate orientation session for adult learners, or there could be pull-out sessions designed to meet the needs of unique student populations such as adult learners, first-generation students, commuters, or residential students. The information provided at orientations is important. When students leave feeling as though their concerns and questions were not addressed that is problematic for everyone. The students may not know where to go to get their questions answered and the college has lost an opportunity to have the student be satisfied with the services they are receiving.

In addition to issues associated with financial aid, advising, parking, and the bursar’s office, which are often covered by many orientation sessions, there are specific issues which are more specific to the adult learner population. Some examples of issues that surfaced during the interviews are the many ways that college attendance impacts the family. It has been shown that although adult learners are attending orientation and classes as individuals, their lives are highly integrated with their current family members. There are several areas that may be of special
interest to these students. For instance, the recommended time needs of a student based on credit hours. There could be a discussion about creating study time and that it may take some creativity and maybe even some re-negotiating of family roles and expectations. Another important topic to include would be the need to be able to effectively communicate with household members in regard to changes that may occur as a result of this new responsibility which has been taken on by the family member. Finally, discussing the level of commitment needed for degree completion and the benefits of having a supportive network of people who are willing to help may be appreciated by these incoming students. It could also be beneficial to spend time talking about who students can speak to at the educational institution when they have issues or concerns. This may mean explaining who they may want to speak with based on the specific problem or question they have. Most importantly, students should leave feeling comfortable with the school and program they have chosen and with an understanding of where they should go when questions come up.

Another factor that emerged as important to adult learners as they navigate their way through their educational programs is having faculty members, advisors, and counselors who are sensitive to adult learner needs. It is not that they want special consideration which would place traditionally-aged students at a disadvantage; rather, they would like to be able to work with individuals who treat them as adults, have a respect for their outside of class responsibilities, and are aware of being sensitive to issues associated with adult learners. Specifically, many adult learners rely on faculty members to be organized about creating and giving assignments, offering feedback and grades in a timely manner, and creating opportunities for group work to be organized in a variety of ways allowing for flexibility due to adult learner schedules.
Advisors should be aware of the adult learners schedule and how they can best help this student build a schedule that allows them to be as academically successful as possible. In addition, effectively guiding these students through the advising process and being available to assist them if they need someone to talk to about subjects such as choice of major is important. Although this is extremely important for both traditional and non-traditionally aged students, offering adult learners the opportunity to work with an advisor who understands the many facets of an adult learners life may make the interaction that much more meaningful and helpful for the adult learner. The same arguments can be made for having counseling staff members who have an understanding of some of the challenges faced by adult learners so that their interactions with this student population can be as helpful and effective as possible. In summary, institutions of higher education who are interested in effectively serving their adult learner student population should offer in-service training or approval for conference attendance which is geared towards the adult learner student population in order to assist college personnel in becoming more familiar with the unique needs and concerns this student population brings to the college with them.

**Limitations of the Research**

There are several limitations which are important to address. A major limitation of this study is the fact that all of the participants attended the same higher education institution. This means that in some ways the participants were similar to each other because of the fact that they were each able to attend classes during the daytime during the week. This probably accounts for the reason that twelve of the thirteen participants worked part-time, and only one individual worked full-time. This is unusual for an adult learner population. To take this one step further, although this study focused on female adult learners pursuing a bachelor’s degree, many of these
participants began by obtaining an associate’s degree. This research study is limited to students attending a four-year university. A large percentage of adult learners attend community college, so this research project was again limited by the institution of higher education where the research was conducted. Another possible limitation may have been within the research design itself. Additional details about the findings of this research study may have been accessed if the researcher and the participant met more than one time. Although a good rapport was established during the course of each interview, the participants explained enough about their background and childhood so that a clear picture emerged; however, in-depth information about how these issues were specifically experienced on a day-to-day basis were not detailed, particularly if the participants believed it may have portrayed their family members in a negative way. I do not believe this would change the underlying findings; rather, it would add more detail about specific behaviors, thoughts, and actions that may have either encouraged or discouraged educational attainment. Addressing these limitations in future research endeavors could further the work that was begun in this research project.

**Future Research**

There are several avenues of research that could be pursued based on the findings of the current study. First and foremost, this study could be re-created using male adult undergraduate students to see if there are significant family influences on their educational experiences. It would be interesting to look at the data separately but then to compare it to the current study to see if there are differences related to gender. A second path of research could further these study finding by creating a research project designed to gain a more in-depth knowledge of the influence of the spouse/partner because this influence was found to have such a significant impact on the higher educational experience of these women. Conversely, it would be
interesting to learn how the spouse/partner may be impacted by their partner’s college
attendance. The current study found that women reported that their spouse and/or partners were
a significant influence on both their original decision to attend as well as a means of support to
persist. Thus, it follows that gaining a more in-depth look at this phenomenon could help
institutions of higher education to understand how important it is to acknowledge and perhaps
include in some way these other individuals who help the college students to attend and persist.
One way to broaden this study would be to include interviews with or observation of family
members. In this way, a more complete picture could emerge. This type of study would likely
not only highlight how the balance of day-to-day demands are negotiated but could more closely
examine how college attendance impacts other family members. A final study idea born from
these results would be to return to each participant to request some longitudinal data. It would be
interesting to get closure on degree completion information and to find out about college
attendance or plans for college attendance of the participant’s children. Each of these ideas
could further the research that was done in the current study.

Conclusion

This research project was a pleasure to create, facilitate, and write. Each participant was
a delight to meet. They willingly shared stories about their lives as they were growing up as well
as what is happening currently. By focusing on the topic of the perceptions of family influence,
conversation and questions centered on the family and education, and yet each interview had a
unique flavor. After the first several interviews, I realized that it was helpful to structure the
interviews so they follow the age trajectory in a more linear pattern. Several participants tended
to skip around to different time periods and it became more difficult to follow the trajectory of
their lives and educational experiences.
Each interview was a gift. The topic of the family is personal, integral to day-to-day living, and is a binding force as to how and why many thoughts, beliefs, and feelings are formed. These women shared their stories of what it was like for them as students when they were children. They spoke about home life and school life. They spoke about topics that touched on deep emotions. Many of them had difficult childhoods that were not particularly supportive of academic endeavors. As a result, these interviews brought a wide array of emotions to the surface. Clearly laying the ground work by reviewing and having them sign the informed consent prior to beginning the interview was an important component of this process. The women were clearly told and asked if they understood that they did not have to answer any question they were not comfortable answering and that we would stop at any time. This helped to establish a rapport which allowed for the free exchange of information. There was a closeness that was created through this trust and sharing and almost all of the interviews ended with a hug.

As the researcher, I learned the transcripts inside and out. By reviewing their comments and stories, I felt as though I began to know each participant on an even deeper level. When I sent out emails asking them to review the summary of chapter five in order to make sure they felt like they were included within its pages and that it was an accurate portrayal, I was compelled to send individualized notes to each one. I knew what was happening in their lives currently and what they were hoping for in the future. My curiosity wanted to know how everything turned out with current situations that were occurring in their lives. They each responded enthusiastically. As a group, they were happy to have the opportunity to be included in this study. As Christina wrote:

I enjoyed seeing your work and being a subject. It was a tough road [bachelor degree completion], but I’m so glad I did it. I hope this doesn’t sound corny but it feels as if my
struggles/story is being told. I know that professors can’t have different expectations for the “old ladies” and the young kids, but I hope some read your paper and understand all we have to do. There are no Thirsty Thursdays for us. When it’s dinner time there is no walking over to the dining hall and ordering – we have to make it for ourselves and our family. Like you [the researcher] said, we have responsibilities, school responsibilities and deadlines, children who need homework help, meetings to attend for children, house cleaning, grocery shopping.

It was a pleasure being the one to be able to tell these women’s stories. Each one of them is working so hard to either complete their bachelor’s degree or to move forward towards their next step. For the two who graduated within the past year, one has begun a Master’s degree program, her goal is to become a college professor, and the other one is working as a substitute teacher trying to get a full-time position in a school district. Every participant spoke about the learning experience that a college education provides. Although they felt it was a different experience due to their non-traditional status, they reported that they were actually able to appreciate the benefits from their older vantage point more than if they had attended as a traditionally-aged student.

All in all, the findings of this research project support the belief of the researcher that family is integral to a woman’s educational experience. This was seen by the thoughts, beliefs, and memories participants shared about their time as children and as adults. They spoke about specific family members and specific memories that impacted their beliefs about themselves and their academic abilities. As a whole, there was more positive influence during elementary school years than at the high school level for academic achievement. As these women grew older, issues surfaced within their family of origin which significantly impacted their educational
trajectories at the high school level and impeded progress towards higher education as a traditionally-aged student. As adults, these women rely on members of their current family, particularly significant others, to provide support for their academic endeavors. That said, most of the respondents also report feeling supported by their family of origin in the pursuit of degree attainment. This quote by Frances sums up thoughts about the importance of the family of origin as well as the importance of passing the value of higher education on to her own children:

I think the family is very important. I think the family is the most important thing when it comes to education because if you don’t have that support you’re never going to do it. My grandmother shaped everything that I think. She shaped everything, my whole person, who I am, because education was so important to her. If she had not put that in me at an early age, I don’t think I would have gone back to school….What she taught me growing up, was what made me go out there and try to do something better. And that’s what I want to do with my kids. I want to make sure that they know how important education is. And they know it because since I decided to go to school after all these years, they see that it’s important, they get it.

With these words it is clear that having family members who support educational attainment from a young age is beneficial. However, even when family of origin circumstances were not necessarily supportive of bachelor degree attainment; the dream of a college education was a motivating force to create space in their lives for college attendance. Many of these women rely on their spouse/partner for assistance with this educational goal. Almost one half of the participants experienced a change in partners, and these partners have been very supportive of assisting their spouse/partner to achieve their goal of higher education. Attendance in higher education is truly a family affair for those women with families in that the women are influenced
by their family members and their attendance then influences the members of their family. Higher education institutions and faculty members who acknowledge this and look for ways to incorporate this into programming and assignments are able to more effectively and holistically serve this unique student population.
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APPENDIX A

Examples of Possible Interview Questions

1. What was report card day like at your house?

2. Was educational achievement emphasized or valued? By your family? In your culture? In society?

3. Were there any differences between being male and female in your household as far as educational expectations were concerned? Different expectations based on gender?

4. Did you think about going to college when you were growing up?

5. What did your family expect you to do as you became a young adult? Do you think your FOO wanted you to pursue higher education? Do you think they believed you were capable of doing it? Would they have supported you?

6. Can you tell me about your decision to come to college?

7. Where are you at the moment in regard to your higher educational goals?

8. What roles or responsibilities do you currently have?

9. Tell me about your relationships with family members now that you are in college. Do you feel like you have changed? Have your relationships changed?

10. Do you have family members, past or present, who significantly pushed you forward or held you back educationally?

11. Do you feel supported by your family in your educational pursuits? In what ways do they support you? In what ways do they make it difficult?

12. In day-to-day interactions with family members:
   - What messages did you get growing up?
   - What messages do you get now?
13. In what ways did/does your family impact your personal beliefs about your ability to be academically successful?

14. FOO & Current: Expectations, Norms, Personal Beliefs, Motivations, Emotional Support, Instrumental Support
APPENDIX B

Demographic Information and Interview Format

1. Informed Consent
2. Will not use first name
3. Okay to turn on recorder?

Participant:

Approximate Credits Completed:

Approximate GPA:

Full-time or Part-time student?

Race:

Category of Income Current Family (Low, Middle, High):

Category of Income FOO (Low, Middle, High):

# of family members living in household:

Live in spouse/partner? Yes/No

List of children and their ages:

# of hours currently work/week:

Who was in your family of origin (mother, father, siblings)?

Did you ever go to college before this time?

Can you tell me the story of why you are pursuing your degree now? How did your family impact that decision?

Are there specific reasons why you did not pursue your degree as a traditionally-aged student? Are they related to your family?

Ending Notes
Do you know anyone else who may be eligible and willing to participate in this study?
Transcription will be a Word document, how would you like me to send it to you?
THANK YOU!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
Vita
Paula M. Plageman

Education


M.A.  Counseling Psychology, Marital and Family Therapy, Kutztown University, May 2002

B.S.B.A.  Economics, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, August 1984

Professional Certifications

N.C.C.  Nationally Certified Counselor, October 2009
L.P.C.  Licensed Professional Counselor, August 2007

Professional Experience

Director of Counseling, Harrisburg Area Community College, Lebanon Campus, June 2010 to present

Director Act 101 Program, Kutztown University, August 2006 to May 2010

Assistant Director Act 101 Program, Kutztown University, August 2003 to July 2006

Coordinator Learning Assistance Services, Kutztown University, August 2002 to July 2003

Refereed Articles


Presentations

October 2010 Research on Women and Education 36th Annual Fall Conference
Perceived Family Influence on Undergraduate Adult Female Students

December 2009 Adult Education Symposium
Family Influence: For Better or Worse

March 2009 Pennsylvania Association of Developmental Educators
Retention through Connection: Developing and Maintaining Student Relationships