Unyielding: Student Parents and Their Paths to College Success

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Table of Contents

Abstract

Student parents make up more than a fifth of the nation's undergraduates, and their success in college is important not only for their own financial and social outcomes and those of their children, but for improving equity in postsecondary education and reducing inequality in the country as a whole. While a great deal of research has amassed around the various levers that promote college success for many types of at-risk students, little has focused on the unique needs of student parents, and particularly single mothers. This study contributes to that small body of research in two ways: first, it offers evidence of the relationship between participation in a comprehensive support program for student parents and college persistence and graduation, and second, through in-depth interviews, the study provides insight into the lived experiences of student parents, the value they place on college education, the barriers they identify as most challenging, and the types of support and assistance they identify as important for their success.

Keywords: college student parents; student parents; single mother college students; social policy; college persistence

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Unyielding: Student Parents and Their Paths to College Success

One illustration of the trend toward improved diversity in postsecondary education is the steadily increasing proportion of the nation's undergraduates who are not only taking courses but taking care of their own children. More than 20% of the nation's undergraduates are parents (Reichlin Cruse et al., 2019), and 11% are single mothers (Kruvelis, Cruze & Gault 2017). Student parents in general, and specifically single mothers, face unyielding financial, academic, and social disadvantages that complicate their college progress. The result is that student parents' graduation rates are very low: under a third (28%) of single mother college students complete credentials of any kind within six years of enrolling, a share that is well below the 40% of married mothers and 57% of childless women who do so (Kruvelis et al., 2017). Increasing this completion rate can aid students through improved wages among other benefits (Card, 1999; Oreopoulous & Petronijevic, 2013), and it can also benefit their children's educational prospects (Attewell & Lavin 2007). Further, because student parents (and especially student single mothers) are disproportionately students of color with lower incomes, improving their outcomes can help reduce inequity in postsecondary education (Kruvelis et al., 2017).

While myriad dimensions of college retention have been studied over decades, relatively little attention has been paid specifically to understanding the experiences of student parents and the kinds of interventions and supports that might promote college success for this unique group. Despite the difficulties they face, large numbers of parents undertake postsecondary education and they are unyielding in their commitment to their educational goals, even when they find progress challenging (Deterding 2015). Supports designed to target the specific needs of student parents on campus are still relatively rare and understudied. What challenges and motivations do

student parents see as most important? What supports help student parents become college graduates? This dissertation examines the association between participation in a unique, comprehensive support program for student parents and various measures of college progress and success. It also seeks to understand, through the voices of participating student parents themselves, the lived experiences of single mother college students, including their motivations for success, the challenges they find most pressing, and the supports and services they view as most critical. The program in question, the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee's Life Impact Program, aims to improve academic success and graduation rates of low-income student parents attempting to earn their first bachelor's degrees. The intervention is a multi-year, multi-pronged program designed to support student parents financially, socially, and academically. Research suggests all three of these areas may be fruitful in terms of affecting college success, though limited research has assessed the effects of such interventions for this population or described the pathways through which the interventions may operate. Understanding the experiences of these students and the programmatic efforts that promote their college success could have far-reaching implications for students themselves, their families, and society

Statement of the Issue and Main Study Objective

This dissertation adds to the limited evidence base about the capacity of comprehensive support programs to improve college success among low-income undergraduate parents, the bulk of whom are single women. The study explores the ways in which these students conceptualize their experiences in higher education, including adding to the understanding of why these women seek college degrees, what they feel challenges their progress, and what value student parents place on various kinds of support. I use a unique dataset that includes demographic, academic

and financial data drawn from low-income student parents attending the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee between 2010 and 2017, as well as qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with 12 single mothers who are included in the larger dataset. All students in the dataset have applied to participate in the Life Impact Program, a comprehensive multi-year scholarship and social support program targeted to low-income student parents at the UW-Milwaukee, and about two-thirds of students included are (or have been) program participants (also called Life Impact Scholars), receiving a range of social and financial supports over the course of multiple years.

Background and Significance

Large numbers of student parents enter college every year, despite the financial, logistical, and social challenges of enrolling. In fact, recent analyses show that student parents are among the fastest growing subpopulations of college students (IWPR 2018). Qualitative research finds that many of these parents choose to undertake college because they are convinced that postsecondary education is critical for them, and also for their children (Adair 2001; Austin & McDermott, 2003; Butler & Deprez, 2002; Haleman 2004a; Lee & Oyserman 2007), and empirical evidence supports their contention. College credentials are associated with increased wages: graduates (on average) earn more than non-graduates over their lifetimes (Ma, Pender & Welch 2019; Baum, Kurose, & McPherson, 2013; Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013) and wage returns to postsecondary education exist not only for those who complete four-year degrees, but also two-year and vocational degrees (Dadgar & Trimble, 2015; Kane & Rouse, 1995). Wage returns are not limited to traditional students—they are similar for nontraditional (older, financially independent) students and, if anything, stronger for women (Dadgar & Trimble 2015; Leigh &

Gill, 1997). Research shows an increase in average wages for low-income adults who attain postsecondary education (Ganzglass 2006; Hamilton & Scrivener, 2012), even for those who began with low academic skill levels (Carnevale & Desroches, 1999) and single mothers specifically (Attewell & Lavin, 2007) particularly if these mothers complete a credential (Greenberg, Strawn, & Plimpton, 2000; Hamilton & Scrivener, 2012; London 2006; Cellini & Chaudhary, 2014). Parents attempt college not only to improve their financial security, but also in hopes of improving their children's chances for a good education and a secure future (Butler, Deprez, & Smith, 2004; Gardenhire-Crooks, Collado, & Ray, 2006; Katz 2013; Sommer et al., 2012). Attendees observe improvements in their children's study habits, educational expectations and goals (Jones-DeWeever & Gault, 2006). Moreover, research shows that, for low-income mothers with low levels of education, additional schooling can improve young children's academic performance (Magnuson 2007; Magnuson, Sexton, Davis-Kean, & Huston, 2009).

   Stalled college progress. Despite the potential benefits to postsecondary education, college persistence and completion rates for student parents are very low (Kruvelis 2017). Single parent students in particular are more likely than non-parenting students to attend in a more discontinuous way and, ultimately, to leave college without a credential (Huelsman & Engle, 2013a; London 2006; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005; Teachman & Polonko, 1988). Within six years of beginning their studies, just 28% of single mother college students graduate with a certificate or degree, compared with 40% of married mothers and 57% of college student women who are not mothers (Kruvelis et al., 2017). Most single parent undergraduates (61%) attend school part-time (compared to just 30% of non-parenting students) (Huelsman & Engle, 2013, p3). When they do complete, they take much longer, on average (Attewell & Lavin, 2007;

Rousso et al., 2004). A third of low-income single mothers take more than 10 years to complete a bachelor's degree (compared with 16% of all low-income women) (Rousso et al., 2004). Departing college without earning a degree or certificate for their efforts can leave student parents in a weaker position than if they had never enrolled: saddled with debt and having missed time in the workforce and critical time with young children (Seefeldt 2016).

Financial barriers. Given the large potential benefits on the other end of a college credential, why do so many student parents enroll in college only to leave with no credential to show for their efforts? While the reasons for weak persistence rates are surely numerous and interwoven, the ongoing, substantial financial challenges that student parents face are likely prominent among them. Undergraduate single mothers' incomes are low, both relative to those of other subgroups of college students, and relative to single mothers in the general population. Nearly 90% of single mothers have low incomes, and 63% are poor as defined by the federal poverty line (Kruvelis et al, 2017).

While parenting students do receive federal (Radey & Cheatham 2013), state and institutional financial aid, they face high levels of remaining need after all financial aid is taken into account. Eighty percent of single mother students have a $0 "expected family contribution," (or EFC, the federal government's designation of the amount of their own income an individual is expected to be able to contribute to postsecondary costs) compared with about 40% of both married mothers and financially independent students who are not parents (Kruvelis et al 2017). Federal financial need formulas are intended to target higher levels of support for those with the most need, so given their low incomes and family sizes, the distribution of expected family contributions among single mothers relative to that of other female students is not surprising.

More striking, though, is the high level of net cost relative to annual income that remains--that is, the amount that women would have to earn or borrow each year to cover college costs after all aid is awarded (Choitz & Reimherr, 2013). For example, independent students in the lowest income quartile must spend or borrow more than five times their annual income to pay for a year of college (Goldrick-Rab & Kendall, 2014). Moreover, it is likely that single mothers' actual costs of attendance are substantially higher than those described by Goldrick-Rab and Kendall (2014), since the estimated total costs do not include the full costs of living, including major expenses like childcare.

Time use barriers. Financial constraints also manifest as time constraints (Wladis, Hachey & Conway, 2018). Almost 60% of single mother college students report spending more than 30 hours per week caring for their children (Gault 2011), and 60% work full time (Huelsman & Engle, 2013b). Affordable, high quality childcare is in short supply on college campuses, particularly on two-year campuses where a high proportion of single mothers attend (Gault 2011). If childcare is out of reach, and/or work for pay is necessary to cover expenses, available study time is reduced (Wladis et al., 2018). This may cause students to enroll in lighter credit loads or take less demanding coursework. Some research shows that attending with less intensity reduces a student's likelihood of timely graduation (Crosta 2014; Horn & Carroll, 1996; Jacobs & Berkowitz; King, 2002; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005) and that increasing a student's work hours hinders academic performance (Stinebrickner & Stinebrickner, 2003), but that, for many students with high unmet financial need (including student parents), full-time enrollment is not a realistic option (Ziskin, Fischer, Torres, Pellicciotti, & Player-Sanders, 2014).

Academic barriers. Of course, financial and time-use challenges are not the sole source of difficulty for these students, and other factors are likely to play important roles in the success (or lack thereof) of student parents. For one, Cliff Adelman's essay "Do We Really Have a College Access Problem?" points to high school academic preparation as the most important predictor of college access (Adelman 2007). MacGregor shows that academic preparation is indeed a good predictor of re-entering education for unmarried mothers (MacGregor 2009b), and Astone shows the same for low-income African American women (Astone et al., 2000). Single parent students have academic preparation levels that rest, on average, well below those of non-parenting or married parent students. For example, 34% of single parents had SAT verbal scores (or equivalent ACT scores) lower than 400, compared to 16% of non-parents and 21% of married-parents, and, as a result, this group is more likely than married parents or non-parenting students to require developmental coursework (Miller 2010), which extends the needed time until a degree can be earned. Extending the process, in turn, adds to financial challenges by increasing the ultimate cost of a degree (both directly, through an increased number of semesters of tuition payments and indirectly, through lost work hours extended over longer periods of time, for example). While poor academic preparation is surely an important barrier, other research suggests that, controlling for academic preparation, income remains independently linked to college completion rates (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011). Further, some evidence shows that student students have GPAs that exceed those of their non-parenting independent peers (Reichlin Cruse et al., 2019).

Social barriers. Beyond financial, academic, and time-use challenges, student parents may also face unique difficulties in finding sources of social support and a feeling of belonging

on campus. Research supports the idea that a sense of "fit" or "integration" in various forms matters to college success (Kasworm 2014; Kuh 2008; Tinto 1975; 1987; 1993; Brower 1992; Deil-Amen 2011; Torres 2006), though little work has explored the ways in which these concepts are important for student parents (and even less for single mothers specifically). Evidence suggests that single mothers frequently feel out of place on campus, and lament that their campuses can feel "pretty darned cold" (Duquaine Watson 2007). Kasworm finds that community college students are less concerned with "fitting in" and more concerned with their ability to navigate their institution's procedures and requirements (Kasworm 2014). While non-parenting students may be more likely to have the time, energy and means to develop new friendships, interact with faculty, participate in extracurricular activities and immerse themselves in campus life, student parents may need different ways to become connected, content, and confident in college. Little existing research offers evidence about which types and forms of support might be well-received (or effective), or what, in the eyes of parenting college students, makes for a positive experience on campus.

      Gaps in the research. College-going parents face formidable barriers to their educational goals, but very real advantages await (for students, their families, institutions of higher learning, and society as well) if the rates of college success improve for this group. Yet little is known about which interventions, and in which combinations, might be most effective in boosting their college progress and success. Some research has shown that financial aid can improve outcomes for single mothers, at least over the short-term (Richburg-Hayes et al., 2009), and other work suggests that more comprehensive interventions may hold promise for student parents (Carpenter et al, 2018; Fenster 2003). Still, few rigorous studies have been conducted to examine the

association between receipt of comprehensive support programming and college success for student parents, and little research has sought to understand comprehensive interventions through qualitative study of the participating students themselves. Research in this direction must be rooted in an understanding of student-parents' motivations for college persistence and the barriers they see as most pressing.

Relevance to social work. This study is important to the field of social work. The field's foundational values include dignity and worth of individuals, which require a commitment to opportunity and building self-sufficiency. Postsecondary education is a means through which a family can become independent and financially secure. While a great deal of social work research focuses on the experiences of low-income parents, the field has been slow to specifically address the reality that increasingly, low-income parents are also college students, and as such, may experience unique challenges and rewards associated with that status. Further, because student parents are so likely to be poor, and because the work-based US safety net too often excludes students from benefits, the postsecondary education system is one that reproduces systematic inequity. While research in postsecondary education increasingly takes into account the diversity of today's college students, social work research has not adequately examined educational experiences of low-income parents, the value of that education in their eyes, and the concomitant struggles and sacrifices student parents make. Social work research can be improved by gaining understanding of this unique and growing population.

The Life Impact Program

The Life Impact Program of the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee aims to interrupt the intergenerational transmission of poverty by supporting low-income students who are

pursuing college while they parent dependent children. The program provides a comprehensive array of social and financial support, intended to improve student parents' academic performance and graduation rates and to prepare them for satisfying, family-supporting careers. The program is now in its 15th year and has served 234 student parents.

At the Life Impact Program's core are two critical interventions: The program provides substantial financial support and personalized social support, both available over the duration of a student's time at UW-Milwaukee. Financial support is provided through performance-based scholarships distributed each semester for up to four years (in the amount of up to $2,500/semester, currently set at $1,000/semester), as well as through access to emergency funds in the event of unexpected, urgent financial hardship.

Social support takes the form of "life coaching," which encompasses an array of individualized interactions to meet students' needs and coordinated events that help students build connections to other student parents and to social and academic resources on campus and, importantly, beyond campus too. Life coaching can also be academically focused: while the Life Impact staff do not directly tutor or provide structured academic curricula, they are available to help students get these services if they are needed, and they help students set academic goals, monitor academic progress, and simplify academic deadlines (one example is a tool the program offers called "Semester at a Glance", which is a compiled list of deadlines for a given semester to help students manage assignments and exams). Academics are not directly the focus of Life Impact, but through holding students to high standards and providing structured support when needed, the program does address academic needs.

Appendix A provides a logic model depicting the Life Impact Program's application process, activities, and theorized short- and longer-term outcomes. The level and nature of Life Impact Scholars' participation is consistent from student to student in some respects, in that they are required to attend several events and meetings each semester, and they are required to maintain satisfactory academic progress (GPAs of 2.5) throughout their participation. However, programming is also flexible in that students are encouraged to approach Life Impact staff to discuss any challenges they encounter, whether those are personal, academic, social, navigational, or financial. The Life Impact staff will do everything from assisting a student as they research the course requirements for their majors to helping them handle the threat of eviction or escape domestic violence. This flexibility makes the experience of the program very unique to an individual student and responsive to a student's needs, but it also makes the program something of a "black box" to study, hence the need to conduct interviews to glean information about students' specific experiences.

The program serves only financially disadvantaged student parents, most of whom are first generation college students and all of whom are pursuing a first bachelor's degree. These students strive to graduate despite facing substantial social, educational and economic challenges. Over its lifetime, Life Impact has provided more than $2 million in performance-based scholarships and nearly $250,000 in emergency funds to 195 program participants. Of the Life Impact Scholars who have enrolled since 2010, 93% have either graduated or are continuing their studies, and the program's overall graduation rate is 79%. The overall 6-year graduation rate for new freshmen at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (while not directly comparable) was 41% in 2017.

Research Questions

Using data from the Life Impact Program, a unique comprehensive scholarship and support program for low-income student parents enrolled at The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, I examine the college persistence and success of low-income student parents and offer insight into their lived experience as college student parents. This study a) examines the association between participation in the Life Impact Program and college success, b) examines the relationship between demographic and personal characteristics and college progress and completion among participating low-income student parents, and c) seeks to understand *how* students experience college in general, and the Life Impact Program specifically. Specifically, I ask:

1. What factors (i.e., age, gender, number of children, marital status, other demographic characteristics, scholarship amounts/emergency funds use) predict college progress and completion among undergraduate student parents participating in the Life Impact Program?
2. Among low-income undergraduate student parents, to what extent is there an association between participating in a comprehensive financial and social support program and measures of college success (i.e., grade point average, persistence and graduation rates)?
3. What motivates these students to persist? What are the barriers do they see as most challenging, and what supports are most important in their eyes? How do Life Impact Scholars articulate the value of their participation in the program?

Literature Review

A great deal of attention has been paid to the ways in which institutions can intervene to improve retention among disadvantaged students. While little research specifically focuses on the financial, academic and social support interventions that are effective in improving the college success rates of student parents (let alone single mothers specifically), there exist large bodies of evidence focused on the effectiveness of some of these types of interventions

(separately and in combination) with other college student populations. For example, financial aid (in various forms and provided to various populations) is well-studied, offering some fairly firm conclusions about the capacity of aid dollars to improve college success. Also, there exists a wealth of research focused on both the academic and non-academic forms of support that improve undergraduates' progress, including various forms of social support. I review recent research focused on student parents where available, but frequently drawing on research focused on broader groups of students (nontraditional students, independent students, community college students, etc.). One of the overarching difficulties in the literature is that, in most cases, student aid, services and supports are not provided in isolation, but in combination. It is therefore difficult to accurately assess the independent effect of one form of assistance over others. Particularly in the areas of social support, in which definitional challenges abound, existing research offers limited clear findings on effective supports and the mechanisms through which they may affect student parents.

Financial supports.

  Financial aid. Decades of financial aid research (mainly, but not solely conducted by economists) has sought to explore the effects of various forms of need-based financial assistance on college outcomes and the evidence suggests that, other things being equal, when students face a lower cost of attending, they respond with increased investment in postsecondary education (for recent reviews, see Bettinger 2011; Deming & Dynarski, 2009; Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2013; Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2009; Hossler, Ziskin, Gross, Kim, & Cekic, 2009). These studies share a similar reasoning: students choose to enroll or persist when current costs (tuition, books, child care, wages and benefits foregone) are outweighed by future benefits

(both financial and non-pecuniary), and as such, lowering student costs is predicted to produce increased college success (Becker 1964; Leslie & Brinkman, 1988).

But the evidence is not uniformly positive. Early studies of the introduction of the nation's largest aid program, the need-based Pell program, showed disappointing results: Pell Grants had virtually no effect on enrollment or completion for the target population of low-income students (Hansen, 1983; Kane 1994). Subsequent quasi-experimental work on Pell grants is somewhat more positive: Bettinger (2004)'s study found evidence that $1,000 in Pell Grants improved persistence from first to second year of college by 3 percentage points at Ohio two- and four-year public institutions. Seftor & Turner (2002), using discontinuities in the Pell eligibility formula, concluded that Pell increased enrollment for returning adult students by about 4 percentage points (and found no effects for first-time students). One suggested explanation for finding positive effects of Pell grants on persistence among returning adult students and null effects for first time students is the idea that older/more experienced students may have more information (time on campus means time to learn about financial aid, or being an adult just means being more savvy about paperwork) (Seftor & Turner 2002).

Loans (which, of course, entail a repayment and interest charges) have been found to have unclear effects on persistence (Dowd & Coury 2006); (Heller, in Baum 2008) and to function less well than grants (per dollar distributed to the student) (Alon 2011), but they are still perhaps effective given that they are less expensive to provide (Dynarsky 2013). Research suggests that some students avoid loans, but little has sought to examine the effects of loan accumulation on students' sense of their value and prospects as students or belonging at their institution.

The broad conclusion in recent research on financial aid is that need-based financial aid, either in the form of tuition subsidies (Kane 1994; Kane 1999; Kane 2004), or cash transfers to students (Dynarski 2003: Dynarski 2000) positively affects enrollment by an estimated 3 to 5 percentage points per $1,000 of aid. More relevant to this research, studies have also found that grant aid increases college *performance* and/or *persistence*, particularly for more financially disadvantaged students (Alon 2011; Alon 2007; Castleman & Long, 2013; Seftor 2002; Dynarski 2003; GoldrickRab 2012; Bettinger 2010; Singell 2004).

Perhaps most importantly, a recent series of experiments found strong evidence that performance-based financial aid improved a host of college outcomes (credits earned, degrees-earned by 2 and 3 years after the intervention) for low-income parents (Barrow et al., 2012a, 2012b; Patel, Richburg-Hayes, De la Campa, & Rudd, 2013). Other more recent research suggests a scholarship intervention can be effective in supporting student parents (Carpenter, Kaka, Tygret & Cathcart, 2018). Carpenter et al., 2018 form a comparison group from non-applicant student parents, so the study cannot fully account for existing differences that may have driven the observed differences in college success. Further, both of these interventions are multi-dimensional, so it is difficult to isolate the independent effects of a particular approach. For example, the "Opening Doors" experiments (Richburg-Hayes, De la Campa & Rudd, 2013) conducted with TANF-eligible single parent college students produced improvements in retention and measures of college success, but because the aid was provided with strings-attached (minimum GPA needed to be maintained to receive the aid), this intervention could be characterized as financial, but also academic. Scant experimental evidence exists focused

specifically on the effectiveness of financial support for student parents who seek to complete undergraduate degrees.

Safety net benefits. The aforementioned studies examine the effects of the federal financial aid system, and specifically the need-based grants or conditional grants (performance-based scholarships) provided, but other sources of financial assistance are also worth examination as they relate to college persistence of single mothers. Cash assistance (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, or TANF), the Earned Income Tax Credit, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and childcare subsidies are important elements of the social safety net which, when available and used, provide material support that may alleviate some of the financial hardship faced by single mothers who are college students. While these programs are not designed explicitly to promote human capital development, by increasing the resources available to (thereby reducing the cost of college for) students who use them, they could well affect college outcomes. The effects of safety net programs like TANF, SNAP, EITC and childcare subsidies on college persistence have been only minimally explored, in part because, as Shaw writes, social welfare policies are "generally not perceived as higher education policy" (2004, p 61), and potentially in part because of a philosophical shift through which the US legislated a philosophy that work (rather than human capital development) should be the main route to self-sufficiency (Shaw, Goldrick-Rab, Mazzeo, & Jacobs, 2006).

Yet the sparse evidence at least suggests that social welfare benefits could affect college outcomes. Several qualitative (Adair 2001; Polakow 2004; Shaw et al., 2006), descriptive (Jacobs & Winslow, 2003) and quasi-experimental studies (Dave, Reichman, & Corman, 2008; Dave, Reichman, Corman, & Das, 2011) have concluded that welfare reform (which, through its

work-based approach, reduced cash assistance available to women who were enrolled in college) had negative effects on poor women's college enrollment (and re-enrollment). Another recent study found no effects of welfare reform on part-time enrollment (though negative effects on full time enrollment) (Kim 2012).

Childcare subsidies have received even less attention, though they have been known to effectively promote work among low-income mothers (Herbst & Tekin, 2011). Child care is expensive, averaging from $4,863 in Mississippi to $16,430 in Massachusetts for full-time, center-based care for an infant, meaning that families with incomes at the federal poverty level would spend from 25% to 86% of their annual incomes on child care alone ("The US and the High Price of Child Care", 2019). While federal subsidies are available, the waitlists are long (Schulman 2013; Miller 2011). An NBER study found evidence that adding a $1,000 childcare allowance to the federal Pell formula increased enrollment among mothers by two to three percentage points, though the authors are tentative about their ability to isolate the allowance as the only possible explanation for the change (Simmons et al., 2004). Herbst and Tekin, using a national dataset and instrumental variables analysis, suggest that childcare subsidy use is positively linked to a 13 percentage point increase in school enrollment for single mothers of rising kindergarteners (Herbst & Tekin, 2011).

Some safety net benefits have potentially negative effects, and others simply have no evidence base. Evidence (unpublished) suggests that an increase in EITC (which effectively boosts the dollar value of each hour of work) reduces human capital investment among low-income single mothers (Celik 2011). No studies examine the effects of SNAP on college students, though SNAP benefits provide an average benefit of about $3,000/year benefit for a

family of two, more than half the size of the maximum Pell grant. Further, few (if any) studies have attempted to examine the combined effects of various social welfare benefits and financial aid benefits, even though the two sources of funds may reinforce each other (through added dollars available) or work against each other (through the effects of work requirements or claw back). Also underexplored is the possibility that increased access to social welfare benefits could potentially improve college progress specifically for student parents (Gault, Noll, & Reichlin 2017).

Academic supports.

It is a common problem, particularly within non-selective postsecondary institutions, for students to arrive on campus with relatively weak academic backgrounds. This can make students' experiences difficult and can impede student retention and success, which presents challenges for both students and their campuses. In response, institutions have chosen several approaches, from direct provision of targeted education through remedial coursework to less direct interventions that attempt to build academic skills, and others intending to improve the intensity of students' efforts toward learning. These interventions span a range from directly academic to only marginally so, and like a great deal of the literature in college retention, many of these studies cover multidimensional interventions and cannot isolate independent effects.

Developmental (also known as remedial) education attempts to directly provide education to students who need it before they begin regular college coursework. These classes extend the time until a degree can be earned, and they often entail the full cost of college without the benefit of credits that count towards graduation. Research on their effectiveness is mixed (Bettinger & Long 2009; Bettinger, Boatman & Long 2013).

Interventions and supports most relevant to the Life Impact Program's work are those that intend to build academic skill, habits or efficacy but are not provided directly in the classroom. These include college success courses, which intend to improve students' study skills and habits (Cho & Karp 2013), interventions that provide academic coaching or advising (Carrell & Sacerdote 2017), and a range of interventions intended to increase students' "quality of effort" and "involvement in productive learning activities" (Kuh, 2009, p.6). All of these interventions intend to improve students' academic performance, though indirectly. In so doing, many are also inextricably tied to the notion of students' sense of "belonging" or "fit", since many are based on the theory that academic and social forms of belonging (as defined by Tinto, 2012) produce improved college outcomes (Karp, Hughes & O'Gara 2010).

For student parents specifically, academic support may present a unique challenge and opportunity. Student parents enter postsecondary education at an academic disadvantage (Miller 2010), though some work shows that student parents' grade point averages actually are consistent or slightly ahead of those of their peers (Reichlin Cruse et al., 2019). Relatively unexplored is the idea that student parents may perceive academic success differently than other students. College success is of critical importance to student parents (Vaccaro & Lovell (2010), for example, show that single mothers define their academic success as part of their identity as a "good mother"), but success may not be defined as achieving high grades, but rather as persisting through graduation.

Social support.

Student parents play multiple roles (parent, breadwinner, student and often more), and experience high levels of financial, social and educational disadvantage. Additionally, many student parents (specifically single mothers) are students of color (37% of Black female students

and 19% of Hispanic female students are single mothers (IWPR Briefing Paper #C460)). Perhaps in part due to these factors, student parents may experience college quite differently than their peers who face fewer off-campus commitments and demands. This may create a sense in student parents that they are less of a "fit" on campus than their undergraduate peers. To what extent does this sense of difference, or perception of a lack of "fit" or "belonging" exist among student parents? And if it does exist, can it be reduced with through the provision of social support?

A small body of qualitative work has sought to understand how single mothers perceive their place and sense of membership on campus, including students' sense of how "belonging" affects their perceived likelihood of continuing. Several qualitative studies have shown that single mothers feel a lack of social integration (Austin & McDermott, 2003), that they feel isolated, marginalized, and stereotyped (Brown & Amankwaa, 2007; Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Haleman 2004b; Jennings 2004; Polakow 2004), and that they feel questioned by peers and professors about their worthiness as students (Duquaine-Watson 2007). Other qualitative studies of mothers who are participants in various campus-based community building programs show that women feel supported and included through this type of programming (Austin & McDermott, 2003; Butler & Deprez, 2002; Katz 2013; Romo & Segura, 2010; Sommer et al., 2012; Kensinger & Minnick 2018). These studies (with the exception of Butler 2002) are based on sampling mothers who attended single institutions, including those who were currently students or had completed/dropped out of college, but they do not provide a representative national picture. Nor do they allow for comparisons between single mothers with varying levels of belonging, or between mothers who have access to additional programming and those who lack it. Still, the qualitative work on the subject suggests that a) many college student single

mothers feel a lack of belonging, and that b) single mothers participating in support programs place great value on having a sense of membership or fit.

Evidence has accumulated around the idea that college students can benefit from a range of interventions focused on social support of various kinds. Sociologist Vincent Tinto was among the first to popularize the notion that students would benefit from perceiving that they were "integrated" on campus both academically and socially (Tinto, 1982; Tinto 1987; Tinto 2017). Social integration has come to be defined in many different ways in the literature, but at its core it is a mark of the tie a student feels to her campus, and to others on that campus. Social support is commonly defined as assistance provided that falls into three categories: emotional, instrumental, and informational (House, Umberson & Landis 1988 as cited in Hefner & Eisenberg 2009). Emotional support involves offering empathy, understanding, encouragement and expressions of a belief in a student's capacity. Instrumental support includes the provision of tangible help (e.g., providing a student a bus pass or a meal) while informational assistance is help provided through the distribution of knowledge or understanding (e.g., helping a student work through course requirements or completing forms). Support that breaks down difficult tasks, helps students determine which choices to make (Thaler & Sunstein 2008), and facilitates efficient navigation of the world of college may also make students feel that they belong, though this specific connection between informational support and belonging has rarely been investigated in the research.

An experiment conducted with low-income mothers enrolled at New Orleans area community colleges found that performance-based scholarships (offered in conjunction with some minimal advising) increased students' sense of belonging and perceived level of support on

campus (Barrow, Richburg-Hayes, Rouse, & Brock, 2012a). Similarly, Scrivener and colleagues found that provision of a comprehensive intervention to academically underprepared community college students more than doubled three-year graduation rates, but the intervention included both financial (grants to ensure no tuition costs to participants) and student integration (increased interaction with faculty through additional advising and increased social interaction with peers through linked courses) (Scrivener et al., 2015).

Of course, many support interventions include multiple types of social support, for example, one study showed that individualized navigational and informational support in completing financial aid applications increased college persistence for independent adult students (Bettinger, Long, Oreopoulos & Sanbonmatsu, 2012), but this assistance could have functioned purely as informational support (assistance in navigating a complicated form) and it could operate via increasing a student's sense that they would belong on campus given that they had overcome a daunting administrative hurdle.

Emotional support is intangible assistance that makes students feel valued or appreciated (e.g., a mentor who celebrates accomplishments or offers encouragement). Bensimon (2007) shows the importance of "institutional agents" who, through their demonstrated belief in students' potential, can encourage persistence.

Since many interventions use multiple forms of support and because of design and data limitations, in many cases it is difficult to draw strong conclusions about the causal nature of the relationship between these forms of support and college progress. Effects of these interventions may be direct (offering navigational assistance can help students complete necessary processes) and indirect (receiving help and support could make a student feel more accepted and valued),

and no studies that I am aware of seek to quantify the effects of these forms of social support on student-parents or compare their effectiveness for various types of students.

Conclusions from the literature.

The wide-ranging literature reviewed here offers evidence that financial, academic, and social supports each have potential for promoting college student success. Financial support (specifically financial aid) produces gains in persistence, and some evidence shows specifically that this form of support has been effective for low-income single mother college students. Less information is available about the specific relationship between financial support through the safety net and its connection to academic progress. Academic supports most relevant to the Life Impact Program are those that are more navigational or process-oriented in nature, but some evidence shows that these sorts of interventions can support college students in their learning, though less evidence in this area addresses the specific needs of student parents. Research in the area of social support and college students shows that student parents (and specifically single mothers) perceive a lack of social support within their institutions. Other research shows that social support interventions of various kinds can promote college success, though little work focuses on the specific effects on student parents, and it is difficult to isolate the effect of social support *per se* since interventions often provide it in combination with financial or other services. For example, living-learning communities, which are fairly well-supported in terms of their effects on persistence (Inkelas and Weisman, 2003), have both academic and social functions. The same can be said of supports that are in part financial, for example, the provision of emergency funds may increase time available for attending to coursework and also increase students' sense that they are valued and cared for by their institution.

One important takeaway is that the *way* supports are provided matters to student outcomes. For example, students are much more likely to receive financial aid if they are offered assistance in procuring that benefit via assistance completing their FAFSA (Bettinger et al 2012). In none of the three areas has the *process* of acquiring support in itself been explicitly explored for single parent students in terms of how that process affects students' perceptions of their belonging or standing within their institutions. Nor has the cumulative effect of navigating access to different types of support (both in and out of school) been sufficiently studied.

Theoretical perspectives

Theory provides a structure through which researchers can describe and predict the behavior of single mothers in postsecondary education. For this study, I draw on two distinct frameworks that explain college persistence and success among undergraduate student parents and predict which factors or interventions may enhance retention and success, and I add "administrative burden" as a concept of interest relevant to both perspectives. The two frameworks are commonly engaged in studies related to persistence. The concept of administrative burden, to my knowledge, has not been explicitly so used, but may offer unique advantages when applied to the interactions between low-income student parents and their institutions and communities.

Under human capital theory, college students are rational actors who make decisions about whether to stay or depart from college based on the costs and benefits of each choice (Becker 1964). When the benefits (monetary or nonmonetary) of continuing outweigh the costs, a student would be predicted to remain in school. Under student departure theories, like that developed by sociologist Vincent Tinto (Tinto 1982, 1987, 2006, 2017), students' decisions to

remain in college are based on the sense of "fit" or membership that students form through their daily interactions within the structure of their institution. Students who engage in behaviors that develop this sense of integration are predicted to persist and succeed. The additional relevant concept engaged in this study is administrative burden, a term drawn from public policy research (Herd & Moynihan 2019; Moynihan, Herd & Harvey 2014). Administrative burden is an individual's experience of interacting or engaging with the state, which can have an effect on both the individual's access to needed services, and perceptions of their standing and value (Mettler 2002; Bruch, Marx-Freere & Soss 2010).

Both theories would predict that interventions like the Life Impact Program would have a positive effect on persistence and success, though through quite different (albeit overlapping) mechanisms. The qualitative results of this study offer an examination of the ways in which these theoretical frameworks, separately and in combination, may explain students' understandings of their college experience and the support they receive from the Life Impact Program.

Economic theory: human capital

Human capital theory sets forth a compelling explanation for why some college students decide to pursue or avoid (or continue or stop) postsecondary education (Becker 1964) and is the foundation for a great deal of quantitative research on college persistence (Deming 2009; Dynarski 2013). Human capital is defined as a set of skills, knowledge, and talents that make up an individual's "productive capacity" (p.57 in Paulsen 2001). When individuals have perfect information, access to capital, and act in a rational manner, they will (goes the theory) make the optimal investment in education. That is, they will cease to invest in human capital development when the costs of additional investment are greater than the eventual benefit.

The benefits of postsecondary education are primarily conceived of as wage returns (Kane & Rouse, 1995, 1993; Leigh & Gill, 1997; Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013), and these have been extensively studied, with average returns to an associate's degree for females at 22% per year of earnings and average returns to credits (without credentials) of 10% (Belfield & Bailey, 2011). Non-market benefits including, for example, the improved educational trajectory of an individual's own children (Wolfe & Haveman, 2002), also play an increasingly studied role (Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011). These non-market benefits may be particularly relevant for single mothers, many of whom cite setting an example for their child as a primary motivator for returning to school (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Katz 2013). To the extent that college participation is enjoyable, another benefit is the consumption value of the experience (utility derived from schooling that will not translate into future financial rewards, e.g., attending social gatherings) (Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011).

Costs of postsecondary education are conceived as both direct (tuition, books) and indirect (opportunity costs like foregone wages, foregone welfare benefits, foregone time with children). Direct costs are offset by subsidies (financial aid, scholarships), and indirect costs are reduced by any earnings or benefits a student receives while they attend. Much has been written about the costs of college, with some asserting that, particularly for students enrolled at community colleges, tuition costs are not high enough to be of material importance given the size of expected eventual returns (Heckman 2000). Some 42% of single mother college students attend community colleges (Reichlin Cruse et al., 2019), which charge lower tuition rates than four-year institutions. While single mothers may face lower direct costs to the extent that they enroll in institutions with lower tuition, their indirect costs are less clear. Single mothers may not

forgo high wages to attend school, but childcare costs, welfare benefits foregone, and other indirect costs of college may be substantial. Additionally, students face "psychic costs" associated with additional levels of discomfort (to the extent that the experience of being a student is disagreeable) or experiences of discrimination on campus (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2009; Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011).

This theory has been found by myriad studies, over decades, to accurately predict the direction of student responses to clear changes in college costs (due to tuition subsidies, financial aid) or changes in students' indirect costs (foregone wages, for example) (Baum et al., 2013; Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2013; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2009). While the model was originally designed with first-time, full-time students attending college over a four-year horizon (Becker 1964; Kane 1994: Kane 1999; Kane 2004; Leigh & Gill, 1997; Paulsen 2001) (in no small part because it was developed during a time when the average college student met that description), it is easily adapted to nontraditional students (Park & Scott-Clayton 2018; Barrow et al., 2012a; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2012; Seftor & Turner, 2002) who have a longer time horizon over which they face the costs of college, and a shorter horizon over which to recoup their investments. Human capital theory offers a straightforward explanation for participation in higher education and it predicts student responses effectively. A great number of studies have found that indeed, lessening costs increases college participation (Park & Scott-Clayton 2018; Dynarski 2008, 1999; Manski & Wise, 1983), that lower income students are, if anything, more price sensitive and responsive to aid (Kane & Rouse, 1995; Seftor & Turner, 2002). And for all that might be different about student parents, there is evidence that they, too, respond to a lowering in the cost

of college by increasing their educational investments (Barrow, Richburg-Hayes, Rouse, & Brock, 2012b; Richburg-Hayes & Patel, 2013).

While evidence suggests students do respond to reduced costs, and while human capital theory is commonly engaged in any academic discussion of postsecondary education (see for example Ma, Pender & Welsh 2019), it is less clear whether students themselves consciously characterize their pursuit of education in terms of longer-term benefits exceeding short-term costs. For some students, certainly, college is an investment for the purposes of eventual increased income and career success. For others, though, striving for college success may be something else as well: it may be an opportunity to achieve a status, to set an example for one's children (Vaccaro & Lovell 2009), or to mark a victory over other life challenges despite that the eventual financial benefits may never exceed the costs at all (Deterding 2015). If students are not, in fact, rational actors, they may respond to incentives differently than human capital theory would predict. The qualitative portion of this research seeks to understand how student parents express the value of a college education, and how they conceive of the costs and challenges that they face as students.

Higher education: student persistence

Rooted in the theoretical traditions established by Emile Durkheim, sociologist Vincent Tinto developed what has become a foundational theory of college student departure. Durkheim, convinced that suicide rates could best be explained not by psychology or economics alone, used sociological principles to explain variation in suicide rates. Rather than seeing suicide as a voluntary "withdrawal" caused by characteristics of the individual, Durkheim studied the ways in which individuals are influenced by their interactions with the structures, norms, and values of

the communities in which they reside. Following that focus on interaction between person and institution, Tinto (1982; 1987; 1993; 2006), among others (Spady 1970; Spady 1971; Astin 1984; Pascarella 1985), shifted the common thinking around student departure from one that focused almost solely on students' *individual* characteristics (academic or psychological) to a new way of viewing student persistence, which focused on the importance of the *institution*. Subsequent research studied the importance of interactions between students and their institutions (and their social and academic structures, values, norms and culture). Tinto's theory (1975, 1993) sparked a "Tintonian dynasty" (Bensimon, 2007, in Deil-Amen 2011, p55), and is "probably the most widespread theory used in the field of higher education" (Melguizo 2011), and is said to have reached "paradigmatic stature" (Braxton et al, 2014, p73).

Tinto's theory recognized that college students, increasingly older and more diverse in background, no longer followed homogenous or straightforward paths, but instead took varying routes through postsecondary education. Prior work, he contended, essentially blamed these students for dropping out by attributing their decisions entirely to characteristics within the students themselves (e.g. lack of academic preparation, lack of motivation). His theory posits that institutions play a critical role in student retention.

Broadly, the theory says that, a given student's decision to persist or depart (Tinto does not examine involuntary departure) is a function of their academic and social interactions and resultant sense of integration or "fit". For a given student at a given institution, pre-entry background characteristics (family background, skills and academic preparation) shape a student's initial educational goals and commitments to the specific institution. Then, goals and commitments affect the student's institutional experiences within the academic and social

systems of the college. In turn, institutional experiences create a sense of academic and social integration, which affects students' subsequent goals and eventual departure decisions (Fig 1.)

Figure 1: Tinto's Model of Student Departure (adapted from Tinto, 1993).

Background Characteristics

⬇

Early Goal Commitment Institutional Commitment

⬇

Academic Integration Social Integration

⬇

Later Goal Commitment/ Institutional Commitment

⬇

Persistence

Revisions of Tinto's model included "external commitments" as a force that could either reduce or improve student's commitments and goals (Tinto 1994b) but this was seen as a fixed characteristic that institutions could not affect. The framework does not explicitly mention financial aid, except to note family finances as a background characteristic. A linchpin of Tinto's theory is "integration"—a student's perception of belonging or membership within their institution. The model has been extensively tested and, overall, supported, particularly for residential four-year students (Deil-Amen reviews dozens of studies to this end, p. 56 (2011)).

Tinto and nontraditional students. The extent to which, and ways in which, this theory is useful for nontraditional students, returning adult students, and low-income students, as well as

students who attend "commuter" campuses is a subject of debate in the literature, though some studies have tested the importance of integration on two-year campuses and found positive associations with college outcomes (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Braxton et al., 2013; Deil-Amen 2011; Tinto 2006). As Tinto recognized decades ago (Tinto 1994b), American undergraduates increasingly take discontinuous, varied routes into and through postsecondary education, and yet his theoretical framework made no predictions about whether integration would be generated differently or similarly for students whose experiences varied from the norm. Further, the theory says little about how interactions might work differently for nontraditional students. Single mothers might require a different quality or intensity or duration of experiences because they are often limited in terms of the time and energy they can expend. Their ultimate goals to complete college might be as high as those of other students, but their opportunities for social and academic integration, and the way they experience "fit" or "integration" might be quite different from other students. Evidence suggests that student-parents frequently feel rejected by their campuses (Duquaine-Watson 2007), but they may not be as likely to gain a sense of integration through the interactions that might be effective for more traditional students.

But some interactions, particularly in the form of programming or services on campus (Austin & McDermott, 2003; Katz 2013; Romo & Segura, 2010; Schumacher 2013) appear to be helpful for nontraditional students, perhaps more effective when they capitalize on students' dual roles (Sommer et al., 2012). As Deil-Amen (2011) argues, institutional experiences may still be of great importance for this group of students, but in different ways. Perhaps these students develop better integration from interactions that help them navigate their environments (Bensimon 2007), or are academic rather than purely social (Deil-Amen 2011), or interactions

that draw a clear tie between academics and careers (Stuart, Rios-Aguilar, & Deil-Amen, 2014) would be particularly effective.

Tinto's theory, through sharp focus on the academic and social systems that the institution creates and in which students immerse themselves, largely ignores a substantial element of students' experiences with their campus: administrative interactions. Some scholars have suggested considering the potential importance of interactions that improve students' comfort in navigating the requirements and procedures of their institution (Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006). Students interact with their institutions when they apply for financial aid, when they access health or mental health services provided by the campus, when they participate in extracurricular activities, when they access student records online or in person, when they come and go from campus each day using campus parking or campus buses, and through their interactions with various initiatives including scholarship programs (like the Life Impact Program) or student organizations. These interactions are not purely social, nor are they necessarily academic. They allow students to receive the institutional supports a college provides, and as such, they may influence how students identify as "fitting" within their institution. Many of these interactions may be more frequently accessed by students with relatively more financial need, and so the quality of these interactions may have disproportionate effects on low-income students, including student parents. For these reasons, the concept of "administrative burden" is a useful addition.

Administrative burden

Herd and Moynihan describe the concept of administrative burden, defined as "an individual's experience of a policy's implementation as onerous" (Herd & Moynihan, 2018,

p.45), and there is evidence that it affects access to critical benefits and also that it can affect individuals' perceptions of their standing and value in the eyes of the state. The costs an individual may experience are categorized as learning, compliance, and psychological costs. Learning costs are defined as the time and effort that must be spent to determine what services are available, assessing the likelihood of being eligible, and how to go about applying for them. Compliance costs are cost associated with the process of applying or maintaining eligibility. Psychological costs are negative feelings or stigma experienced through interactions with an institution. There is evidence (both more broadly and within the college context) that the costs or burdens associated with person-state interactions can be lowered, and the effect is greater access to critical services (for example, Bettinger & Baker 2014). Herd & Moynihan (2018) also show that burdens exist for a reason —their presence is not a spontaneous byproduct of policy design, but rather a product of choices. Administrative burdens can be altered by institutions to achieve desired ends.

There are a few examples of research specifically within a higher education context that demonstrates the positive effects of reducing administrative burden on enrollment and retention. For example, one experiment demonstrated the positive effects on enrollment of assistance in completing an annual FAFSA form, a process that remains time-consuming and confusing even after recent simplification (Bettinger, Long, Oreopoulos, & Sanbonmatsu, 2012).

While there are few examples of specific research on administrative burden focused on interactions between student parents and their colleges, the concept of administrative burden and the research on the effects of this burden is very relevant to low-income student parents. This group is likely to experience many interactions that present opportunities for administrative

burden within their institutions of attendance: applying for and securing financial aid, determining course selection, procuring transcripts, changing a major, and even scheduling or receiving advising includes various levels of administrative burden. Institutions can affect how onerous these activities become for students through technology, staffing levels, and even hours of operation.

Beyond these campus interactions, student parents are likely to experience administrative burden in their lives as parents—navigating child support, Medicaid, housing and potentially many other social welfare benefits. The costs of learning about available services, of complying with requirements in terms of time and information, and of the psychological costs of loss of autonomy or the stigmatizing nature of the process of securing various benefits could easily become quite significant for student parents. Additionally and potentially most importantly, the off-campus experience of identifying, securing and maintaining social welfare benefits may interact with the on-campus experience of managing student life while parenting, and the interaction may compound student challenges since there are frequent examples of social welfare policies operating in conflict with financial aid policies, and navigating between the two is in itself a significant administrative challenge.

Life Impact Program seeks to address many of these burdens through individualized guidance with any of life's challenges. The program's life coaches will assist a student in understanding a process (whether that is a SNAP application or a FAFSA) and in identifying the appropriate sources of help, and also potentially by lessening psychological costs of various interactions by offering a supportive figure to encourage progress. The program addresses compliance costs directly by allowing students use of printers and help with postage, for

example. However, the Life Impact Program also imposes some level of administrative burden: as a university program, it requires students to complete a time-consuming application (with an essay and references) and the program entails somewhat substantial compliance costs in the form of attendance and ongoing participation requirements.

The concept is a useful lens through which to examine Life Impact's mechanisms and students' experiences: do students perceive that their experiences with their college is onerous, and how does that appear to affect their perception of the school, or their perception of their belonging within that institution? Does Life Impact reduce that burden in any way? Do students feel that participation in Life Impact imposes administrative burden?

Conclusions from theory. This research is informed by human capital theory, Tinto's theory of student departure, and the concept of administrative burden. Human capital and Tinto's theory of departure are the underpinnings of most financial aid and student retention policies, but neither produce policies and programs that adequately address the unique motivations and needs of students who have immovable competing demands for their time and energy. Human capital assumes that students are rational actors, weighing costs against benefits and persisting accordingly, but does not fully account for both the unyielding motivation student parents have nor the immovable constraints they face. Tinto's theory is helpful in identifying the role of the institution as a generator of "fit", and the idea that "fit" matters to decisions to persist within an institution, but it does not acknowledge how this "fit" works differently for different students (Brower 1992). Also, work has not examined the idea that for students like these, specific ties to a given campus are less important than the larger goal commitment to "getting a degree under my belt". Administrative burden is a cross-cutting concept of interest, and one that is not

explicitly included by either framework, but an understanding of the college persistence process of student parents could be improved by interrogating issues around the impact of administrative burdens as they affect the college experience of student parents.

Framework for the study

The Life Impact Program model is designed with the assumption that student parents will benefit from a range of interventions and services that will enhance their likelihood of college success, and that no one element of the program would be as effective in isolation. The program provides substantial financial support in the form of strings-attached grants and emergency funds, and it also provides social support and navigational assistance.

All three theoretical frameworks discussed here have value for the research at hand. Human capital theory suggests that decreasing the costs of college through financial aid should increase college success. While the data in use for this research do not afford an opportunity to test whether financial aid *alone* is associated with increased persistence, I examine whether students receiving Life Impact Program services (including substantial scholarships) fare better than those who do not receive that support. Life Impact may reduce other costs as well, lessening "psychic costs" through making the process of college attendance more pleasant. The study tests whether reduced costs are associated with better measures of college progress, (although it cannot isolate the independent association between financial support and measures of progress).

The program's social and academic services provide multiple forms of support related to Tinto's theory of student departure, from belonging to academic and social integration, and as such, research question 1 also offers an opportunity to extend Tinto's theory by examining whether students who have the social and academic support of Life Impact are more likely to

persist than a comparison group of similarly attributed students who did not receive Life Impact programming.

The qualitative portion of the study explores and connects three frameworks (or elements of each) to students' experiences as students and as Life Impact Scholars. The analysis produces findings related to a) the ways in which students conceptualize the benefits and costs of being college student parents; b) the support that students deem most critical, whether those are financial (as suggested by human capital theory) or a sense of belonging and integration (as suggested by Tinto's work), or the reduction of burden through personalized navigational assistance (as implied by Herd & Moynihan's work on administrative costs).

Methodology

Research design

This project seeks to describe and explain the phenomenon of single parent college student progress in the context of a comprehensive support program, and therefore uses both quantitative and qualitative design. The quantitative analysis quantifies the college progress and success of low-income undergraduate parents at a four-year public university, comparing the progress of students who received additional financial and social support (through the Life Impact Program) to those who received the university's standard services. Using data drawn from 150 undergraduate students enrolled between 2010 and 2017, I employ multiple regression analysis to quantify the association between program participation and grade point average as well as graduation rates. I assess the characteristics that are most associated with college success within this group of student parents (including age, number of children, marital status, other demographic characteristics, and scholarship amounts/emergency funds use). I then investigate,

through semi-structured interviews with Life Impact Scholars, the challenges that student parents contend with, and the types of social, financial and other support that students see as valuable. My research builds understanding about the unique nature of the college experience for this group of students. The qualitative portion of the dissertation uses data from 12 semi-structured interviews conducted with students who are (or were, at the time of their interviews) Life Impact Scholars.

Sampling strategy

Quantitative dataset. The quantitative dataset is drawn from program and university records for 150 undergraduate student parents who care for a child at least 50% of the time and are Pell grant eligible (have financial need), including men and women and students who are married and unmarried. Students who are in the treatment group are those who have participated in the Life Impact Program, with a sample size of 107. Students in the comparison group are those who applied to participate in the Life Impact Program and whose applications earned them a spot in the final pool of applicants but were not ultimately accepted into the program, sample size of 43.

Life Impact Program participation requires an application and acceptance, and available data show that far fewer are accepted than apply. The program is carefully targeted in multiple ways: first, all applicants must meet program eligibility requirements, which are: 1) students must be parents with dependent children; 2) they must be accepted for admission as first time freshmen or new undergraduate transfer students or must be continuing undergraduates at UWM who are eligible to register; 3) students must have demonstrated financial need (a completed FAFSA is required, strong priority is given to Pell-recipients). Of all students who meet these

requirements, preferences are applied for the following: 1) single parents; 2) GPA of 2.5 or above; 3) first-time undergraduates; 4) full-time enrollment; 5) at least 2 semesters remaining before completing the undergraduate degree.

Applicants must complete a 4-page form, which includes academic, demographic, and financial information. Applicants also write a (maximum of 4 page) personal statement explaining their desire to participate in the Life Impact Program and their personal history, challenges, and goals, and students must submit a letter of reference. Applications are collected by program staff and reviewed, and a select group of students is chosen to be submitted to the Application Panel, a group of faculty and staff who make the ultimate decision about who will be accepted as Life Impact Scholars.

Life Impact selects participants not simply based on demographic and financial characteristics, but through a careful review of other qualities including students' personal narratives, their demonstrated academic capacity, and their established level of need for the academic and social support offered by Life Impact. These preferred characteristics limit the number of students who could be considered a "perfect fit" for Life Impact programming. After taking into account these programmatic priorities, Life Impact has maintained a large pool of "perfect fit" students from which to draw.

Qualitative dataset. The qualitative dataset is limited to single mothers[1] (who represent about 80% of the Life Impact Program's participants). The sampling for these interviews began in 2016, when a random sample of six single-mother Life Impact participants was drawn from all 26 Life Impact Scholars currently enrolled. All six agreed to participate in interviews. The

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[1] Single mothers is defined as unmarried. Participating mothers ranged in their attachments from engaged but living separately, unmarried but residing together for long periods of time, to unpartnered.

sample was drawn at random to increase the likelihood of being representative of the larger group of Life Impact Scholars. These six interviews were analyzed and coded before seeking additional participants. Then, because participation rates were so high from the first group of randomly selected Scholars, I conducted another round of random selection from the (then 16) unmarried mothers who were Life Impact participants during the spring semester of 2019. From these 16, I randomly selected seven, six of whom participated in interviews between August 2019 and February 2020. One student did not respond to any of the five allotted contacts allowed under the IRB.

The Life Impact Program director used unique student identifiers to determine which students were selected, and shared names, email addresses, and telephone numbers. I reached out to each by email first and followed up by text message. I did not introduce myself as related to the Life Impact Program in any way, though upon debriefing the interviews, I debriefed students and explained that I am studying the Life Impact Program. This deception was approved by UW-Milwaukee's IRB.

Students were offered a small incentive ($40) for participating in the interviews, and interviews were scheduled at a time and place convenient to the student. Before the interview occurs, students reviewed and signed the consent form. Interviews were recorded and ranged in duration between 45 and 90 minutes.

Measures and interview tools.
For research question 1 (*Among low-income undergraduate student parents, to what extent is there an association between participating in a comprehensive financial and social support program and measures of college success?)* the outcome variables of interest are academic success (as measured by most current cumulative grade point average) and academic

progress (as measured by college outcomes of persisting enrollment or graduating). Control variables include demographic measures (gender, age, race, ethnicity, number of children, age of children, zip code of residence, marital status), and educational variables (first generation status, academic standing at application), and limited financial variables (expected family contribution, Pell eligibility). The main input variable is an indicator of Life Impact Program participation.

Research question 2 *(What factors (i.e., age, gender, number of children, marital status, other demographic characteristics, scholarship amounts/emergency funds use) predict college progress among undergraduate student parents participating in the Life Impact Program?)* I assess, among the approximately 100 Life Impact Program participants, which factors are associated with increased likelihood of college progress and success, and test for associations between college success and various demographic characteristics (age, race, number of children, age of children, gender, marital status).

Research question 3, *(What motivates these students to persist? What are the barriers do they see as most challenging, and what supports are most important in their eyes? How do Life Impact Scholars articulate the value of their participation in the program?)* is a qualitative approach to understanding student experiences in college and as part of the Life Impact Program, see interview protocol (Appendix B).

Data collection.

Quantitative dataset. The quantitative dataset contains demographic, academic, and financial aid information for 107 Life Impact Scholars who began the program between 2010 and 2016, and 43 Life Impact "Panel Group" members who applied to the program between 2012 and 2016. While students were not randomly assigned to the Life Impact Program, program staff

have developed a rating system for applications and use the rubric to determine a group of students who meet the program's requirements well and who would all be accepted if the program had sufficient capacity. All applications that advance to this point are then reviewed by a committee whose job it is to make final decisions. In this way the members of the Panel Group form a plausible comparison group; according to program records, all have the necessary qualifications to be Life Impact Scholars. For all members of both the Scholar group (n=107) and the Panel Group (n=43), available demographic variables include: gender, birth year, birth year of children, marital status (at program entry). Academic data includes cumulative grade point average before application to the Life Impact Program, UW-Milwaukee begin dates, Life Impact begin date, graduation/drop-out/stop-out dates, and last available cumulative grade point average. Financial aid data includes expected family contribution (EFC) and semester by semester levels of Life Impact scholarships received and emergency funds received.

Qualitative dataset. The qualitative dataset includes 12 interviews with Life Impact Scholars who are current (or were at the time of their interview) college students at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Interviews consist of questions about what motivates and challenges college progress, as well as about the various kinds of supports that students find meaningful and students' specific feedback about the Life Impact Program's services and whether and how those services matter (see Appendix B for the interview protocol).

Analytic plan.

To determine the association between program participation and grade point average/graduation rate, I will use multiple regression analysis to examine the association

between being a Life Impact Scholar and final cumulative grade point average controlling for age, gender, marital status, and year of beginning the program.

I use linear probability modeling (LPM) instead of the more conventional logistic regression analysis to examine the association between program participation and likelihood of graduating from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. LPM offers advantages in terms of interpretability and avoids the problems of bias with logistic regression when sample size is small. Critiques of LPM for binary outcomes include the problem of predicted probabilities sometimes falling outside of the range of 0-1, but in this analysis, most coefficients on outcome variables fall in moderate ranges, not close to extremes. Linear models fit binary outcomes quite well when predicted probabilities are moderate, and often, results of LPM and logistic results are indistinguishable (Hellevik 2009). I also conducted the analysis of binary outcomes using logistic regression, and the resulting marginal effects were consistent.

For the qualitative components of the study, which seeks to understand students' experiences in college, the challenges and rewards of that experience, and their perception of the value (or lack of value) of the Life Impact Program, I connect theoretical constructs (belonging or "fit" and rewards and challenges) and contribute to the refinement of frameworks to better understand the needs and experiences of this unique group of students. To accomplish these aims, I collect and analyze students' own representations of their college experiences. While it would be useful to have access to more objective data about their interactions and/or behaviors, this study instead focuses on students' self-representations, or their reported sense of meaning. A disadvantage of this approach is that it is completely interpretive, formed by the way that participants present their sense of meaning on a given day in a given context and to a given

interviewer and in response to given questions. I do not directly observe students' behaviors or interactions with the world, rather I collect their depictions of that world. Given that the goal is to understand students' own perceptions, it is appropriate to conduct research in this way, though always necessary to be mindful of the ways in which my presence and other factors could alter what participants report, or how I interpret their reports. The theoretical frameworks that ground this project are focused on students' perceptions of benefits and costs, their perceptions of integration and "fit", and the ways in which various forms of administrative burden can affect those perceptions.

The six interviews already collected were first analyzed to guide decisions about additional participants and any themes that could benefit from further development with additional prompting. The data collection process, in total, spanned the course of two years, and the first six interviews (collected in 2017) informed the subsequent set of interviews in two ways: First, because all six students of the first round of interviews who were randomly selected to participate in interviews did so, I maintained the same selection process and randomly selected students to participate in the second round. Second, through the process of analyzing the first round of interviews, I observed the importance of the concept of administrative burden, which was described in various forms by many of the first set of interviewees. To learn more about the way students thought about their interactions with their institution and with government more generally, I added specific prompts to the second round of interviews to learn more about this theme.

This research makes use of thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun 2017), which is a flexible method of qualitative analysis useful for identifying, analyzing and reporting themes in

qualitative data. The method, the authors contend, can provide a "rich and detailed yet complex account of data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p5). I began data collection and analysis with the intent to explore the ways in which two theoretical frameworks, human capital and Tinto's theory of student departure, and the concept of administrative burden, apply to this unique group of students. The frameworks informed the development of research questions, data collection and the interview protocol, since both offered explanations of dominant thinking around college student departure. The themes I coded, then, were affected by the questions I asked and my own thinking about the theories of interest.

In my analysis, I undertook the following procedures to develop a rigorous and faithful representation of my interviewee's sentiments: first, I recorded each interview, and re-listened to each immediately after the interview concluded, taking notes and creating memos. Second, after each interview was transcribed, I used a process of open-coding and content analysis in Dedoose to apply coding labels to excerpts that related to various concepts that were repeated by participants and that were of interest given the theories I examine. Third, I studied the excerpts from each code and started to amalgamate codes into larger themes, a more interpretive process than the content analysis itself. My results describe the larger themes that this analysis produced, allowing for a rich description of the experiences of single-mother college students.

Both sets of interviews were coded in a similar manner. Coding was conducted following Strauss and Corbin's guidelines, beginning with open coding (Strauss & Corbin 1990) or initial coding (Charmaz 2014), where lines of interview transcripts were labeled with codes or concepts as drawn from the data. I used memo-writing throughout to track my own developing sense of concepts that emerged and the way these concepts fit together. Concepts, categories, and the

framework that emerged were drawn from the data itself but were also informed by the interview protocol which drew from human capital and student persistence theories, and by the concept of administrative burden.

To maximize rigor in this analysis, I made use of several strategies (Chamaz 2014; Padgett 2016). Reflexivity requires that the researcher recognize the centrality of their role as interpreter and to be vigilant about the ways in which their positions, biases and interpretations may affect the process of data collection and analysis. I used memo-ing and journaling to reflect on my own interactions with the data I collected and how they may have informed the responses I heard. I also constructed an audit trail, using initial memos after each interview, lists of codes and their meanings, and various interview excerpts from which I made specific notes on themes and any connections between them. In general, I focused on maintaining a "spirit of openness" to be clear about decisions made and the process by which conclusions were drawn (Padgett 2016, p 220).

Data storage.

Data storage plans were approved by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Institutional Review Board (see below). For the qualitative potion of the dissertation, protected data includes names and telephone numbers/email addresses of interviewees, signed consent forms, voice recordings of interviews, and interview transcriptions. Contact information was stored on a password protected computer. Signed consent forms were stored in locked file drawers. Interview sound files were stored on password protected computers and deleted within six months of interview completion, and transcripts (which will not include names) were stored on Dedoose, a mixed-method, cloud-based software which is encrypted and password protected.

Quantitative data were deidentified (the program has assigned a unique student identification

number to each student in the dataset and keeps the key to these ID numbers on separate,

password protected computer) and stored on an encrypted, password protected computer.

Qualitative data involves sound files and transcript documents. Sound files were recorded

without use of students' names and were destroyed after transcription was completed.

Transcripts are stored in Dedoose, a password-protected, cloud-based mixed-methods analysis

software approved by UW-Milwaukee's IRB.

IRB Approval

The data collected, including the quantitative dataset and all twelve interviews, were

collected under approval by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's IRB (#194.166). Through

consultation with the University of Wisconsin-Madison's SBS IRB, it was determined to be

unnecessary to conduct further review at UW-Madison since all research activities and data

collection fall under the existing protocol.

Methodological limitations.

Quantitative analysis. The dataset is drawn from one public, four-year, nonselective

institution in an urban Wisconsin setting, so the sample is not representative of the larger

population of student parents, and results are not generalizable. Further, while access to a sample

of students who applied but were not accepted to the Life Impact Program makes it possible to

compare outcomes of students who participated with those who did not, assignment to the

program is not random, and it is likely that students who are ultimately selected to participate in

Life Impact differ in important yet unobserved/unobservable ways from their peers who are not

selected. It is possible that these differences will drive observed differences in outcomes, which

could overstate the association between program participation and college outcomes if the students who were ultimately selected for the program are those who are better poised to succeed in college than their non-selected peers. Further, the quantitative sample size (n=150) is small, and thus does not allow for methodological approaches that could provide a more precise estimate of the program's effects even without random assignment.

Qualitative analysis. The strategy of randomly selecting a pool of interviewees from the current cohort of Life Impact Scholars helps protect against selection bias, but it is possible that the students who were willing and able to participate in interviews differed in meaningful ways from those who did not participate in interviews. Of the 13 total students randomly selected, 12 agreed to be interviewed. If the Life Impact Scholars who are willing to participate in interviews were different in some way than the larger group (for example those who feel particularly sure they will graduate, or those who are stable enough to have an hour of extra time to devote to an interview), this could affect the themes arising from the research. Given that a high proportion of those selected agreed to be interviewed, this problem, while still possible, is less substantial than it would have been with lower response rates.

Qualitative research is often limited by the interpretive biases of the researcher, who is the primary instrument in data collection. I am aware that my privileged position as a white, advantaged, educated, partnered mother has affected the responses that I received, and the way that I interpreted those responses. Further, as the primary instrument, I introduced bias by virtue of the theoretical frameworks I engaged, which affected the interview design and my own interpretation and analysis of the results.

Findings

Quantitative Findings

This section addresses the first and second research questions:

Q1. What factors (i.e., age, gender, number of children, marital status, other demographic characteristics, scholarship amounts/emergency funds use) predict college progress among undergraduate student parents participating in the Life Impact Program?

Q2. Among low-income undergraduate student parents, to what extent is there an association between participating in a comprehensive financial and social support program and measures of college success (i.e., grade point average, graduation/persistence rates)?

I examine the evidence that participation in the Life Impact Program is associated with college persistence and success. The sample used for this analysis includes 150 University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee student parents, of which 107 were Life Impact Scholars and 43 applied to participate in the Life Impact Program but were not accepted. First, I summarize the Life Impact Scholars in terms of their demographic characteristics, their measures of program participation (scholarship and emergency funds receipt), and their academic and attainment outcomes. I use multiple regression analysis to model the associations between demographic characteristics, measures of program support receipt, and college progress (including grade point average and college graduation). Then I analyze the differences in college progress and performance by Life Impact Program participation. I find a substantial and statistically significant association between participating in the Life Impact Program and staying in college or graduating, though no relationship between Life Impact participation and cumulative grade point average.

Life Impact Scholar Sample

The quantitative sample includes 107 students who participated in the Life Impact Program, with their initial acceptance in the program occurring between 2010 and 2016. The 107 represent 46% of the 234 total students who participated in the Life Impact Program since the program's inception in 2005 until data collection was completed in 2016. The data include demographic characteristics (age, gender, race/ethnicity, number/age of kids), financial characteristics (expected family contribution), measures of program scholarship receipt and emergency funds receipt, and cumulative grade point average (at application and at latest and/or final semester as of 2017). The data also include and information about college persistence and graduation.

Each of the students admitted as Life Impact Scholars met the program's baseline eligibility requirements, i.e., they had low-incomes (as measured by Pell eligibility), they were responsible for a dependent child more than 50% of the time, and they were enrolled full-time at UW—Milwaukee. Beyond these firm requirements, the program prioritizes admitting students who are first in their families to attend college, single parents, those who have at least two semesters remaining before graduation, and those who, in the admission committee's judgement, both have need for the program's services and the capacity to make use of/benefit from them (see Sampling Strategy section for additional detail).

Analysis of the 107 Life Impact Scholars who were admitted between 2010 and 2016 shows that the typical (median) Life Impact Scholar was female, 26 years of age, unmarried, had one child, and was the first in her family to attend college. Life Impact Scholars ranged in age from 18 to 53 at the time of admission. The majority of participants began the Life Impact

Program as sophomores or juniors (63%). Less than a third (27%) were seniors and few (9%) were freshmen when they were accepted to the program. Nearly all admitted Life Impact Scholars (96%) were deemed by the federal financial aid system as having the highest possible level of need (a $0 Expected Family Contribution or EFC). Most Scholars were students of color: 34% were African American, 23% Latino/a, 6% Asian, 4% Native American. Over one-third (34%) were Caucasian.

Life Impact Program requires participants to have a 2.5 cumulative grade point average in order to be accepted to the program. The strong majority of admitted students (94%) had academic qualifications at or above the required minimum, though several (6%) were admitted to the program with lower grade point averages, with a plan to improve their grades within the following semester. The median GPA at the time of application was a 3.2 (*M*=3.17, *SD*=.54), the range was 1.4 to 4.0. The bottom quarter of participants had GPAs at or below 2.8, and the top quarter had GPAs of 3.6 or higher.

Life Impact Scholarships and Emergency Funds

The Life Impact Program is designed to be a durable source of support for its participants, and as such, most students maintain their participation from acceptance throughout the remainder of their undergraduate careers. The tangible support that students receive is readily measured in dollars, though as qualitative findings show, students perceive that the value of the program extends well beyond the financial support provided. Financial support for Life Impact Scholars is distributed in the form of annual scholarships and in the form of emergency funds. Scholarships are distributed each semester, contingent on students meeting participation and academic performance requirements. Emergency funds are distributed through an application

process determined by Life Impact Program staff and are intended to address unexpected financial burdens that arise. Both sources of funds are substantial.

Scholarships. Life Impact Scholarships are designed to help low-income student parents afford tuition and living expenses while reducing the need to work for pay and encouraging academic success. The scholarships were sufficient to pay approximately half of the annual tuition cost for full-time undergraduates, and since Life Impact Scholars were also Pell eligible, participating students did not face net tuition costs. From 2010 through 2017, each participant who remained in good standing received $5,000 per year, renewable throughout their time in the program.[2] Life Impact Scholars received scholarships for a duration ranging from 1 to 5 academic years, with a median of 2 total years of scholarships provided (*M*=2.4 years, *SD*=1.1). Total scholarship amounts received ranged from $2,500 to $25,000, with a median of $10,625 (*M*=$11,430, *SD*=$5,432).

Emergency funds. Another core component of the Life Impact Program model is the availability of emergency funds to help students to weather unexcepted expenses. Even with the benefit of substantial scholarships, few student parents have sufficient savings to endure unexpected costs, however minor. Small financial emergencies can easily spiral into semester-stopping or even college-pausing barriers, for example, a broken-down vehicle can mean missing an exam, which in turn can mean failing a class, losing financial aid, and even dropping out of college. Acknowledging this fragility, the Life Impact Program has made emergency funds available to students who face unexpected costs since the program's beginning.

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[2] Scholarships were prorated if students dropped below full-time enrollment.

Emergency funds were a valuable resource and safety net for students: 64% of the sample

received emergency funds at least once during their time in the program. For the students who

received funds, the median number of grants was 3 (*M*=4.2*, SD*=3.4*)*, and 10% of Life Impact

Scholars were granted emergency funds ten or more times. The total per student amount of

emergency funds received (for those who received any aid) ranged between $76 and $7,134, with

a median of $1,444 (*M*=$1,925, *SD*=$1,600).

Including emergency funds and scholarships, Life Impact Scholars received substantial

financial support. The average total amount of aid received from both sources was $12,654

(*M*=$12,500, *SD*=$6,137) and ranged from $2,500 to $30,780.

Life Impact Scholar Outcomes

Very high proportions of Life Impact Scholars either graduated from the University of

Wisconsin-Milwaukee or remained enrolled during the period when data were collected. The

Life Impact Scholars also maintained their solid academic performance between starting the

program and their latest and/or final semesters. I summarize Life Impact Scholars' outcomes and

examine demographic characteristics and program participation as predictors of college

outcomes.

Retention/Graduation. The bulk of Life Impact Scholars were successful in staying

enrolled in college and/or graduating during the observation period. Of the 107 Life Impact

Scholars, 63% graduated and 30% were still enrolled in 2017 when the data were collected. The

remaining 7% departed from the institution, and whether they enrolled elsewhere was not

observed.

I use two different measures of college success. First, I examine Life Impact Scholars who had graduated by the time the data were collected in 2017. Second, I use a measure indicating if a student graduated or was still enrolled at the last point of observation. Table 1 below summarizes the relationship between various demographic characteristics, measures of emergency fund use, and graduation. I find that gender, race/ethnicity and marital status are independent of persistence and of graduation. Graduates had statistically significantly more children (*M*=1.52*, SD*=0.93*)* compared to non-graduates (*M*=1.23 *SD*=0.48). Graduates also had children who were statistically significantly older when the Scholars applied to the program. Graduates' eldest children averaged 6.3 years (*SD*=0.93*)*, while non-graduates' eldest children averaged 4.4 years of age (*SD*=0.48). Graduates themselves also differed by age at time of application, with those who would go on to graduate having a mean age of 28.1 (*SD*=6.5*)* versus non-graduates mean age of 25.1 (*SD*=4.8). None of these differences reached statistical significance between the group of graduates/still enrolled students versus those who had discontinued, but this is potentially related to the very high rate of retention and/or graduation (only 7% of the sample had not graduated/remained enrolled). Life Impact Scholars who are older may be more motivated or have had more chances to find a career path that has enduring appear. Scholars may benefit from having older children who are in school (rather than at home or in costly childcare).

Table 1: Measures of Program Use & Student Characteristics by Graduation (n=107)

Variable	Graduates	Non-graduates	
% Female	85	80	-
% Student of color	61	75	-
% First generation	64	65	-
% Single	85	90	-
Number of children	*Mean*=1.5 (*SD*=0.93)	*Mean*=1.23 (*SD*=0.48)	*t*(104)=-1.83, *p*<.07*

Age of eldest child	Mean=6.3 (SD=5.30)	Mean=4.4 (SD=3.89)	t(104)=-1.96, p<.05*
Age at application	Mean=28.1 (SD=6.5)	Mean=25.1 (SD=4.8)	t(105)=-2.51, p<.01**
Emergency funds count	Mean=3.1 (SD=3.5)	Mean=1.8 (SD=3.0)	t(105)=-1.84, p<.07*
Emergency funds $	Mean=$1,489 (SD=$1,770)	Mean=$778 (SD=$1,060)	t(105)=-2.30, p<.02**

Because the Life Impact Program accepts students who vary in their academic standing, it is reasonable to expect that students with higher standing are more likely to be observed as graduating than those who begin the program with fewer accumulated years of study. Data are collected from 2010-2017, so I am unable to observe students' eventual outcomes if they started the Life Impact Program as, for example, freshmen in 2016. It is reasonable, then, that I find that academic standing at time of application is statistically significantly different for those students who go on to graduate versus those who do not (within the window of observation), χ^2 (3, $N = $ 107) = 15.00, p = .002. Thirty percent (30%) of students who began the Life Impact Program as freshmen graduated by 2017, as did 54% of those who began as sophomores, 58% of those who began as juniors and 90% of those who began as seniors. There were also statistically significant differences in the proportion of students who had graduated by year of entry, $\chi2$(6, $N = 107$) = 33.45, p = .000, with students starting in earlier years having a longer time horizon over which graduation could be observed.

Using linear probability modeling, I estimate the mean marginal effects of demographic characteristics and program participation measures on probability of graduating within the observation window. Table 2 below shows the results of three models. I find that grade point average at time of application is not associated with a change in predicted probability of graduating. Number of children is statistically significantly associated with increased probability

of graduating in each model, with an estimated nine percentage point increase in the predicted

probability of graduating for each additional child, other things being equal. The measure of total

funds received from Life Impact has a very small but statistically significant association with

probability of graduating, while the number of emergency funds grants is not.

Table 2: Mean marginal effects of student characteristics & program support on graduation

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
GPA at application	0.08	0.06	
Unmarried	0.00		
Student of color	-0.01		
Female	0.01		
Age	-0.01		
First Generation	0.07		
Number of children	0.12**	0.09***	0.09**
Age of oldest child	0.01		
Emergency Funds Grants(count)	-0.02	-0.02	
Total Life Impact $	0.00***	0.00***	0.00***
Academic standing			
Freshman	(base)	(base)	(base)
Sophomore	0.36**	0.32**	0.29**
Junior	0.44***	0.41***	0.37**
Senior	0.85***	0.79***	0.75***
Year of application			
2010	(base)	(base)	(base)
2011	0.06	0.07	0.06
2012	-0.04	-0.01	-0.01
2013	0.01	0.03	0.03
2014	-0.27*	-0.25*	-0.28**
2015	-0.41***	-0.38***	-0.38***
2016	-0.57***	-0.56***	-0.55***
Constant	-0.20	-0.32	-0.08
N	105	106	106
R-squared	0.53	0.52	0.51
Adj. R-squared	0.42	0.45	0.45

*p<.10,**p<.05, ***p<.01

Grade Point Average. Eligibility for the Life Impact Program is restricted to those with

grade point averages at or above 2.5, though some exceptions occur. Students accepted to Life

Impact have, on average, strong academic performance by this measure. The mean GPA of Life

Impact Program participants was 3.17 (*SD*=0.54). A large majority of students who were

accepted as Life Impact Scholars (94%) had GPAs above the required 2.5, and 68% had

cumulative GPAs at or above 3.0. More than a third (36%) had GPAs at or above 3.5. Graph 2

shows the distribution of grade point averages at the time of application.

Graph 2: Life Impact Scholars' cumulative GPA at application
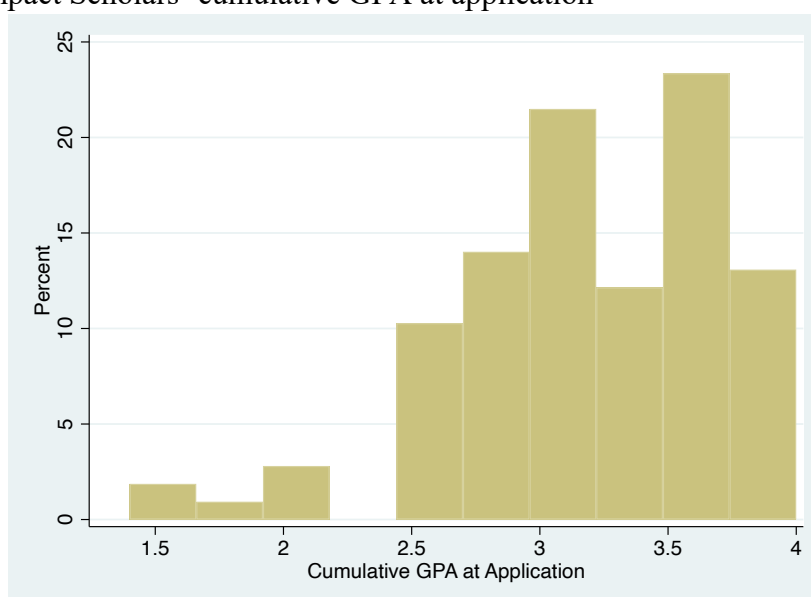
At the conclusion of their time in the Life Impact Program (or at the end of the data

collection window, for those still enrolled), participants' cumulative grade point averages

remained relatively strong, with a mean GPA of 3.1 (*SD*=0.55), which was not statistically

significantly different from the initial GPAs of applicants, $t(106)=1.34$, $p = 0.183$. A large

majority of Life Impact Program participants had final GPAs at or above the program's stated

minimum (87%), and 61% had GPAs at or above 3.0. Nearly a third (29%) had GPA's at or

above 3.5. Life Impact Program participants, on average, maintained (but did not improve) their

strong GPAs over the course of students' time in the program.

Graph 3: Life Impact Scholars' latest or final cumulative GPA
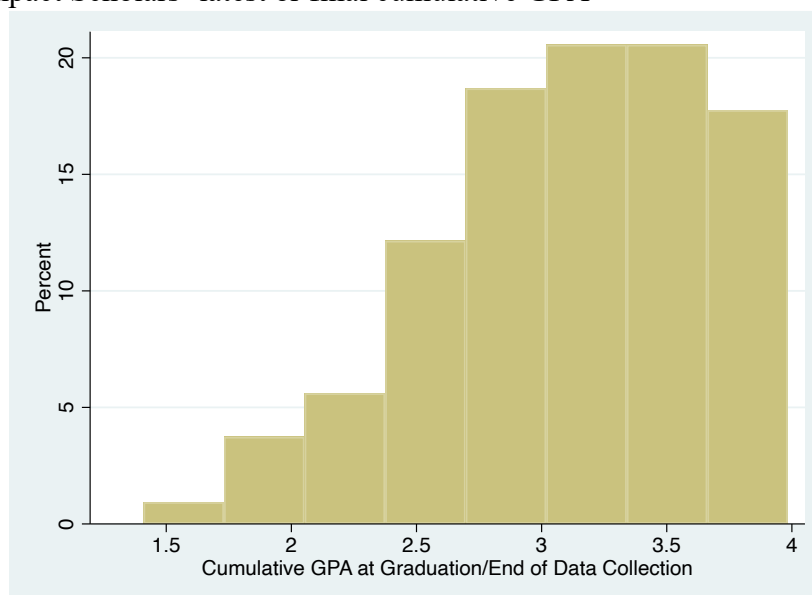
Cumulative grade point average represents students' accumulated academic success in

college coursework, and is correlated with Life Impact Participants' likelihood of continuing to

be enrolled in college and/or graduating. Students who graduated or remained enrolled had

statistically significantly higher grade point averages than the few students who discontinued

enrollment.

I model final (or latest) grade point average using multiple regression analysis and

present a model to estimate the associations between student demographic characteristics,

measures of program support received, and grade point average. I control for students' grade

point averages at entry and also for academic standing at entry. I find that being a single parent is

negatively associated with final cumulative grade point average (other things held constant,

being a single parent reduces a student's final grade point average by 0.2), and that students of

color have lower final grade point averages (by 0.2). Life Impact support has a small but positive

and statistically significant association with final grade point average, where $5,000 of grant aid

is associated with a 0.14 increase in grade point average.

Table 3: Effects of Demographic Characteristics and Life Impact Program Support on Cumulative GPA

GPA Post	Coef.	Robust Std. Err.	t	P>|t|	[95% Conf. Interval]	
GPA at app.	.3485886	.1133781	3.07	0.003	.1236218	.5735553
Single	-.2028384	.0760792	-2.67	0.009	-.3537961	-.0518808
Of color	-.2106859	.0909017	-2.32	0.023	-.3910546	-.0303172
Total LIP $	.0000274	.00001	2.73	0.007	7.51e-06	.0000472
Standing						
Sophomore	.3952984	.1906931	2.07	0.041	.0169218	.7736749
Junior	.5028572	.2001022	2.51	0.014	.105811	.8999034
Senior	.6991271	.2005671	3.49	0.001	.3011586	1.097096
Constant	1.48841	.4053729	3.67	0.000	.6840619	2.292758

Note: Linear regression, $F(7, 99) = 10.58$, P>F=.000, R-squared=0.41

Life Impact vs. Panel Group

       To measure the association between Life Impact Program participation and college

outcomes, it would be ideal to compare performance of Life Impact Scholars against a group of

students who were identical to participants with the exception of their participation. Lacking the

capacity to randomly assign students to the program, a comparison group comprised of

applicants who were as close as possible to the accepted Life Impact Scholars was the next best

option for this study.

       Demand for the Life Impact Program perennially exceeds the program's capacity to serve

qualified students. Program records show that between September 2012 and December 2016, a

total of 447 eligible students applied to become Life Impact Scholars. Of those, 124 were

selected as a pool of finalists, and their materials were sent to a committee comprised of faculty

and staff to make final selections. According to program staff, all students whose applications were sent to this "panel" were worthy of admittance, and if the program had sufficient capacity, they would have drawn larger numbers from this group.

From the 124, 72 were selected to participate, leaving 52 students whose qualifications placed them as close as possible to acceptance without becoming Life Impact Scholars. It is from these students that the present study's comparison group is formed. The comparison group includes 43 of these 52 total students, because the remaining nine students either did not ultimately enroll at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, or because their Life Impact application data was lost before data collection occurred.

The comparison group is similar to the Life Impact Scholars on several observable characteristics (summarized below). The median comparison group member's age is 26, with a range from 18 to 48. The majority of comparison group members were unmarried, had one child, and had an EFC of $0. Most (61%) applied to the Life Impact Program when they were upperclassmen. Table 4 below shows the Life Impact Scholars and members of the comparison group compare on observed demographic and educational measures.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics: Life Impact Scholars and Comparison Group

	Participants	Comparison Group	
n=	107	43	
Female	83.0%	72.0%	$\chi^2(1, N = 150) = 2.36, p = .13$
Age at Application	M=26.99 SD=6.1	M=27.88 SD=7.7	$t(148)$=.75, p<.45
First Generation	64.5%	61.0%	$\chi^2 (1, N = 150) = 0.158, p = .69$
Number of Children	M=1.4 SD=0.80 (n=106)	M=1.4 SD=0.77 (n=41)	$t(145)$=.06, p<.95
Single	80.5% (n=107)	86.9% (n=41)	$\chi^2 (1, N = 148) = 0.97, p = .33$
Standing at Application	Fresh= 9.35% Soph=32.7% Junior=30.8% Senior=27.1%	Fresh = 19.5% Soph = 19.5% Junior = 24.4% Senior = 36.6%	$\chi^2 (3, N = 148) = 5.62, p = .13$

	(n=107)	(n=41)	
Year of Application	2010: 24.3% 2011: 8.4% 2012: 10.28% 2013: 17.8% 2014: 14% 2015: 17.8% 2016: 7.5%	2010: 0% 2011: 0% 2012: 20.9% 2013: 18.6% 2014: 20.9% 2015: 18.6% 2016: 20.9%	χ^2 **(6, N = 150) = 22.5, p = .001*****
EFC in $	M=$66 ($SD$=$526) n=105	M=$92 ($SD$=$479) n=43	$t(146)$=.27, p<.786
EFC of $0	96.2% (n=105)	93.0% (n=43)	χ^2 (1, N = 148) = .68, p = .41
GPA at Application	M=3.17 (SD=0.54) (n=107)	M=2.94 (SD=0.75) (n=42)	$t(147)$**=-2.07, p = .04*****
		Outcome Measures	
	Participants	Comparison Group	
Final Cumulative GPA	M=3.10 (SD=0.55)	M= 2.77 (SD=0.98)	$t(148)$**=-2.56,p<.01*****
Graduated	62.6%	34.9%	χ^2 **(1, N = 150) =9.52, p = .002******
Still Enrolled	29.9%	23.3%	χ^2 (1, N = 150) = .67, p = .41
Graduated or Still Enrolled	92.5%	58.1%	χ^2 **(1, N = 150) = 25.31, p = .000********

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Life Impact Scholars and members of the comparison group are similar in terms of

gender, age, number of children, expected family contribution, first generation status, marital

status, and academic standing at time of application. They differ, however, in terms of their years

of application, their grade point averages, and their college outcomes. Life Impact Scholars have

statistically significantly higher cumulative grade point averages upon entrance to the program,

with a cumulative grade point average of 3.17 compared with an average GPA of 2.94 for the

comparison group, $t(147)$=-2.07, p = .04. If students who enter Life Impact have higher

academic performance than those who do not, the results capture the effects of superior academic

performance on graduation, rather than the desired analysis of the independent association

between program participation and outcomes. Thus, I remove students whose grade point

averages fell below the required 2.5. This includes seven (7) students (16.3% of the comparison group sample) and six (6) members of the Life Impact Program (6% of the Life Impact Scholar sample).

Another key difference is the length of time over which the sample is collected. The first cohort of included Life Impact Scholars group were admitted to the program in 2010, and the sample includes each subsequent cohort including 2016. The students who began in 2010 would then have a total of 7 years over which they could have graduated or persisted, while students who started in later years would have fewer years over which to be observed in persisting, and these extra years are only available for the Life Impact Scholars group. Thus, for the analysis comparing Life Impact Program participants to applicants, I trim the sample to include only students who are accepted to the program in 2012 or later.

Regression Results

I estimate the association between participation in the Life Impact Program and college persistence and graduation. Using linear probability modeling, I model the probability of graduating and the probability of graduating or maintaining enrollment. In both sets of models, I include controls for academic achievement (cumulative GPA at time of application), year of application (spanning from 2012 through 2016) and academic standing at the time of application. I also include demographic controls (gender, age, marital status, first generation status, and number of children). I am not able to include race or ethnicity due to the lack of available race/ethnicity data for members of the comparison group. The tables below present <u>mean marginal effects</u> of Life Impact Program participation on the probability of a) graduating (Table 5) and b) graduating or remaining enrolled (Table 6) within the observation period.

Life Impact and Graduation. In modeling the relationship of Life Impact participation to predicted probability of graduation, I trim the sample to include only a) students who applied to Life Impact in 2012 or later and b) to include only students whose grade point average at the time of application met the program's 2.5 threshold. The preferred model, Model 2, shows that Life Impact Program participation is associated with a 17 percentage point increase in predicted probability of graduating, other things held constant. Grade point average at the time of application is not associated with probability of graduation, and nor are any demographic characteristics in the dataset (to maintain parsimonious models, I do not include these covariates in the preferred model).

Table 5: Mean Marginal Effects of Life Impact Participation on Graduation

Variable	Model 1	Model 2
Life Impact Participation	0.15	0.17*
GPA at application	0.18	
Number of children	0.05	
Female	-0.03	
Unmarried	0.16	
First Generation	0.05	
Academic standing	YES**	YES**
Year of application	YES**	YES**
Constant	-0.54	0.22
N	99	100
R-squared	0.41	0.38
Adj. R-squared	0.32	0.32

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.10

Graduation or persistence. Graduation or continued enrollment is modeled next. For this analysis, I find that academic standing and year of application are not associated with continued enrollment/graduation, and I do not include either as a control. Likewise, because restricting the sample to include only students with GPAs at or above 2.5 reduces sample size and does not

change results, I use the full sample here. Further, I do not trim the sample to match years of

application between comparison and treatment group, since again this does not change results

and does substantially reduce sample size. The results below remain consistent: showing a 29

percentage point increase in the predicted probability of graduating or remaining enrolled

associated with participation in the Life Impact Program, holding other observed variables at

their means. Other than grade point average at the time of application, no variables are

significantly associated with predicted probability of graduation/continued enrollment.

Table 6: Mean Marginal Effects of Life Impact Program Participation on Graduation/Persistence (N=147)

Grad/Enrolled	Coef.	Robust Std. Err.	t	P>|t|	[95% Conf. Interval]	
Life Impact	.2948313	.0815483	3.62	0.000	.1335958	.4560667
GPA App	.1259592	.0424647	2.97	0.004	.0419988	.2099195
Age	-.0008894	.0066501	-0.13	0.894	-.0140379	.0122591
First Gen	.094507	.0639225	1.48	0.142	-.0318791	.2208932
Female	-.0913423	.0639367	-1.43	0.155	-.2177566	.0350719
Single	-.0685202	.0701513	-0.98	0.330	-.2072218	.0701814
Num Kids	.0147346	.042583	0.35	0.730	-.0694596	.0989289
Constant	.3078668	.2170849	1.42	0.158	-.1213486	.7370822

Note: LPM, $F(7, 139) = 5.26$, P>F=.000, r-squared=0.23

Grade Point Average. Using multiple regression analysis, I model the association

between Life Impact Program participation and cumulative final grade point average. I control

for academic standing at time of application, but not year of application. The table below shows

that Life Impact Program participation is not statistically significantly associated with final grade

point average. Prior grade point average is a strong predictor, as is academic standing

(particularly junior or senior standing). The only other predictor that achieves statistical

significance is marital status: being a single parent is associated with a 0.25 point decrease in

cumulative GPA, other things being equal.

Table 7: Effects of Life Impact Program Participation on Cumulative GPA (n=146)

Final GPA	Coef.	Robust Std. Err.	t	P>|t|	[95% Conf. Interval]	
LIP	.145948	.1180837	1.24	0.219	-.0875853	.3794812
GPA App	.5318092	.0998968	5.32	0.000	.334244	.7293744
Standing						
Sophomore	.4240538	.1958754	2.16	0.032	.0366724	.8114351
Junior	.4617475	.2091394	2.21	0.029	.0481343	.8753608
Senior	.555627	.1840761	3.02	0.003	.1915811	.9196728
Single	-.2525722	.0770675	-3.28	0.001	-.404988	-.1001565
Female	.0308162	.097801	0.32	0.753	-.162604	.2242365
First Gen	.0816786	.0881115	0.93	0.356	-.0925789	.2559361
Age App	.0034425	.0073286	0.47	0.639	-.0110511	.0179362
# of Kids	.0207242	.0525033	0.39	0.694	-.0831111	.1245596
Constant	.8501869	.2846142	2.99	0.003	.2873077	1.413066

Note: OLS, $F(10, 135) = 14.88$, P>F=.000, r-squared=0.46

Conclusion: Quantitative Findings

There is a limited body of quantitative research assessing the connections between comprehensive support programs and college progress for low-income student parents. Despite methodological limitations including a small sample and a comparison group imperfectly formed, this study provides suggestive evidence that a multi-faceted student support and financial aid program can be associated with college progress for participants. Life Impact Scholars receive a great deal of financial support from the program over the course of their enrollments. Including scholarships and financial aid, the median Scholar receives $12,500 from the program over a mean of 2 years, though can receive that over as many as five years. Students enter Life Impact with relatively strong GPAs, most are stronger than the required 2.5, and their GPAs remain consistent over the course of their time in the program. Some demographic characteristics of program participants are associated with lower "final" GPAs,

these include being unmarried and being a student of color. Program support in the form of scholarship receipt is associated with higher "final" GPA among participants. But participating in the Life Impact Program is not associated with increased cumulative grade point averages relative to members of the comparison group. On average, then, it does not appear that Life Impact "works" through improving students grade point averages.

A strong majority of Life Impact Scholars remained enrolled or graduated within the window of observation. Ninety-three percent (93%) graduated or were still enrolled, and 63% graduated. Notably, GPA at entry to Life Impact was not associated with increased probability of graduating in any of the models. There is evidence that the Life Impact Program is highly correlated with college persistence. Life Impact participants are 29 percentage points more likely to continue and/or graduate from college than their peers in the comparison group, and participants were 17 percentage points more likely to graduate than their non-participating peers.

Qualitative Findings

This research seeks to understand *whether* and *how* a comprehensive support program may contribute to the college persistence and success of the low-income student parents. To understand the way the program functions in students' eyes, I describe the context for these participants: what are students' *motivations* for continuing through college, and what are the *barriers and challenges* that students see as most prominent? Life Impact Scholars' answers to these questions inform the results around the sorts of supports that matter and the ways in which students experience Life Impact programming.

Through in-depth interviews conducted with 12 participating Life Impact Scholars over the course of three years (2017-2020), I find that students consistently describe their participation in the Life Impact Program as being critical to their success. In particular, students say they value

having reliable, consistent support (in the form of scholarships, but also what one interviewee referred to as "cheerleading"), and access to resources and information. They note that the program's support applies to both in-school and beyond-school contexts, and that support is critical in both arenas.

The findings show that students do, in some ways, view college as a trade-off between immediate costs and longer-term benefits, but that their conception of costs and benefits is quite distinct from what a human capital framework would suggest. The support they receive from the Life Impact Program reduces barriers and, in some sense, increases benefits. The costs students expressed as most important were financial (for most), but not so much the costs of tuition, which was, for most students, covered by grants and scholarships (and loans). Daily living costs were the most-cited source of difficulty, because students had to balance work and school attendance and the costs of childcare and other basic expenses. The "balancing act", as several students called their process of attending school, was further complicated by the cost of feeling physically and emotionally exhausted during what little time they had with their children.

Findings also show that, while "integration" did matter to these students in various ways, the feeling of "fit" may be generated from other sources than simple academic and social interactions, and "fitting" may not translate into institutional commitment. Students, as evidenced by their many enrollment spells at other institutions over many years, and their descriptions of their varied and winding paths to their current institution, demonstrated that their primary goals were related to college persistence, regardless of where that persistence occurred: they valued college success for reasons to do with identity-building, credential attainment, and changing their life circumstances. Some expressed excitement about their specific intended

careers, but most were more generic in their plans to accomplish "some kind of degree." They did not express any particular tie or commitment to the institution they attended, though they did express a great deal of affiliation with the Life Impact Program (and some other subcommunities). The quality and nature of interactions with the institution appear to matter in how students view their campus, but for the students in this sample, nothing seemed to hamper their stated goal commitment.

Finally, during the first six interviews, a theme that arose was the amount of time and effort that participants had to expend in finding, applying for, and maintaining the benefits that they needed (both in school and out of school). Responding to this finding, I explored the question of administrative burden more directly in the second set of interviews, adding probes to specifically ask about various forms of burdens and their effects on students' overall sense of their fit in their institutions. I find that students feel weighed down and frustrated by the level and scope of their interactions with the state and their institution, but that in general, the state and their processes are viewed as much more cumbersome than are the processes students must navigate on campus. Part of the ease of campus navigation is attributed to the specific help students get from the Life Impact Program coaches.

Motivation to persist. Each Life Impact Scholar was asked to discuss their reasons for wanting to enroll and persist through college, and their responses were consistent and clear: most frequently, Scholars reported that their children were the primary reason that they desired a college education. They explained this in different ways, with some Scholars valuing the improved stability they believed a college education could help them provide for their children,

and others saying they valued the example they would set for their children through educational attainment.

Beyond the reasons related to children, participants also noted that their educational success would have a broader impact in setting an example for family members. They sought to interrupt the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage. Some interviewees noted that their motivation to begin (or resume) college was sparked by a desire for increased independence, either because of becoming a parent, or because of the end of a marriage or partnership. Several Life Impact Scholars also cited their desire to work in specific careers that required education, but this was a less prominent reason for college attendance and was mentioned mainly as a complementary reason. Several had even earned credentials prior to starting their bachelor's degree at their current institution, and one said they "coincidentally" earned their credential. Several used initial attempts at postsecondary education to "test the waters" and try to figure out what kinds of programs and courses would work best. For example:

> *"So I got my associate's by coincidence. I was taking a bunch of classes to figure out what I wanted to do and then I just had enough credits to get my associate's. Like, surprise! They're like, well, we can do this then. I'm like, OK, sure."*

The women who were interviewed demonstrated remarkable tenacity in regard to their college persistence; most had attempted college in multiple settings and over long periods of time. Many participants reported they maintained their motivation because they knew that college education was a long-term good that required short-term challenges.

Children as key motivation. All twelve Life Impact Scholars reported that their children were their central motivation for completing college. Interviewees wanted to provide stability and security for their children (and for themselves), but they were also driven to show their

children that they too could break through barriers to achieve a college education and a more

stable life. Others referred specifically to the influence their persistence would have on their

school-aged children. One mother said, *"I feel like once you have these school-age kids you*

can't just start school and then stop," because she felt her child would hold her accountable (and

follow her example). There was a sense of mothers working alongside their children to

accomplish their *family's* educational goals. A representative sample of Scholars' comments on

their child-related reasons for persisting in college follows:

> *"My kids keep me going. It is them and yeah, just getting them out of this cycle that I've always been in. Because none of my family...my parents didn't go to college. I have three siblings, they didn't go to college. Yeah, I just wanted better for [my kids] and to be able to live comfortably with them and show them that, you know, you can do it. And, like, obstacles come along, but keep going, you can do it, you can fight through it."*

> *"You know what, my daughter...I'm really starting to see she looks up to me. She really, really watches me, and um [graduating from college] is going to mean a lot. And because I have a desire to get through school, I even have a stronger desire to do it for her."*

> *"For me it's just, I'm a role model to my [child] so we're doing it together, you know? [My child] always asks me, 'Did you go to school today?' so it feels like we did it together. I couldn't just stop or give up in the middle of it."*

> *"[My children] have been my motivation. I was a wild child, but they slowed me down. My kids made me change. I used to party a lot. I always did. [They] just changed my whole way of thinking—now I'm responsible. The streets were my focus, I was selling drugs and all types of stuff, that was what I did to survive. It was right after I had [my first child]—I noticed that my whole focus changed—it was about business about that point. I needed to be focused and stay on the right track."*

> *"We all have our children behind us to motivate us because we want to get out of school and support them and give them the best possible life that we can."*

> *"I feel like my kids drive me to do better. I look at them and I want to show them that it is important, and you need to do good in school, you know you could go to college, everything, I just want better and I want to show them they can have better so they try to do better and everything."*

Breaking a cycle. Several of the participants referred specifically to being motivated by the idea of breaking a cycle of disadvantage through earning a college diploma. Eleven of the twelve mothers interviewed were first generation college students, so the desire to lead their families by being first to attain an undergraduate degree was a common theme. They cast their motivations in terms of avoiding a repeat of their own families' challenges, and in terms of setting an example:

> *"I was always a good student, but when I was a teenager everything fell apart and I got a job and dropped out [of high school] and had a house and paid rent so that's what happened. I don't want that future for any of them, so…so I'm going to graduate in December."*

> *"I want to graduate. I want it more than anything in life. It makes me emotional because I want to set that example for my family. I have so many nieces and nephews they're young, they're beautiful and my family is smart, but we don't do enough for ourselves. You know, like we're very supportive, we're very loving, we have so much love to give, but they are teen moms so most of them don't have a high school education. None, really none of them. So, they are forced to work minimum wage jobs, and all of my family has two to eight kids. All of them. You know, so it's like, I don't want this to be a generational thing. And I want to be one of those Moms, because they do kind of look up to me. So, um, that would be the main thing for me on graduation day, is my desire to really prove myself to them, that you can do this."*

> *"Well, I'm a first generation college student out of everyone in my family and my family, like, they've struggled a lot with like financial situations and like always working like really difficult jobs for like low wages and I just knew that I didn't want to do that and I didn't want to be a part of that and I just wanted to be different from them. Definitely that's what kept me going is that I just didn't want to live that kind of life. And once I had a child, I definitely was like well, ok, this is even more motivation than before because I don't want my child to live that life either."*

Independence. While the group of students who were interviewed generally mentioned the ramifications of a college degree in terms related to their children's quality of life, they also sometimes described a motivation to gain independence. In three cases this was specifically due to the dissolution of a partnership or marriage, and in others it was because of becoming a mother and not having close family on whom to lean. Regardless, there was a sense of the anticipated value of a degree in terms of increased wages and, more generally, a sense of freedom. Two mothers specifically described the need to move towards independence.

"Well, I was married at the time, you know, it was my second marriage and it was just getting to the point where I could already see the direction it was going and if I was to get a divorce...I would want to be able to have a little bit more backing to be able to support myself and my kids, and to be able to do that you know having more education would be the way."

"March of last year my marriage kind of crumbled. And so, I relocated back home. I knew that I was leaving the marital home so I had kind of start requesting transcripts from the two schools I went to. I didn't know what I was going to do with them, I just knew that these are the type of documents that's requested. You know, so I just started gathering all this stuff and I carried it in my purse. The envelope had been in there for I don't know how long. So, when I decided to move back to home, I get here March 13th, and three days after I arrived, I'm giving my Mom a ride and we happened to be in this area [on campus]. I was like, 'Mom, I just need to stop right here.' We were riding past and I just pulled over. I didn't even park. I pulled into a loading zone. I said, 'Mama, I just have to go in here.' Came upstairs to the into the admission office. I said, "Look I want to apply here. What do I need to do?" They said, 'Well you need to complete this application and you need to do an essay. We need a copy of your transcripts from any school you attended.' She gave me a piece of printer paper and a pen and I wrote an essay right then and there. And I got a confirmation email several days later, 'Congratulations. You have been accepted.' I'm like, 'oh, my God.' This is it for me, you know, cause at this point, during that transition period of me leaving the marital home and coming here back to face my family, the reality that my marriage didn't work out, you know I got these kids with me..."

Career vs. identity goals. Even though every woman who was interviewed expressed high level of commitment to the goal of completing an undergraduate degree, not all were clear on how that degree would be used. For some, the goals students invoked were less defined, more "I want to be *someone* who got through" (Deterding 2015), or a form of *"self-investment"* (Vaccaro & Lovell 2010). Some women referred to their attempts at degrees as "trying to get something under my belt" or "a star on the board" or "just some type of degree." Several interviewees had specific, clear career goals. For those women (who sought degrees in nursing, elementary education, dietetics, and limnology) college was a way to gain a skill-set that would allow progress towards specific occupations or careers, not merely a credential-based goal, but a desire to build skill.

College persistence. All 12 mothers interviewed described remarkable perseverance towards their college goals. As a group they had weathered multiple enrollment attempts, failed classes, taken breaks, taken developmental coursework, changed majors. For ten of the 12 mothers, their current enrollment was not their first attempt at college. Most had had multiple prior attempts. They had begun college at some earlier point and/or at different institutions without earning degrees (the program restricts participation to those who have not yet earned a bachelor's degree). Most frequently, these institutions were local two-year colleges or for-profit institutions.

The interviewees' remarks about prior attempts at college showed that they saw their enrollment as not confined to the traditional full-time, four-year timeline or the traditional approach to attending a single institution. Some were eager to get through and wondered about altering their degree plans to shorten the process. Others were less worried about the timing or intensity of enrollment, as long as the end-goal stayed in sight, and some had developed strategies to test the waters with various institutions (e.g., enrolling completely online as an initial step). Regardless there was a sense that, after navigating so many barriers to be a college student, mothers accepted that there would be mis-steps, and were not likely to abandon their eventual goals to complete their degrees:

"So I still have four years. I'm even a sophomore but I still have four years to go. So I recently was thinking like oh my God you know, like I'm twenty eight, like I'm afraid that you know four years I'm going to be however old you know and, and I went back into the UWM website to check out all the programs that...there was nothing there that interests me. Nothing else. Nothing other than nursing I'm like sit down for a moment, just stop, just stop. Don't worry about the time. People tell me all the time, "Don't worry about the time. The time is going to go by regardless." So, I'm not worrying about time. You know like I said every which way I turn no matter how many thoughts I have about trying to shorten up or speed it up is just like it just comes back to just reality."

"I think the only difference this time, I think really is, I need to finish, and so regardless of whatever's happening, even if I have to take a step back and do part time, or maybe even do like one class at a time, however it has to happen, that it has to happen."

"So then I had my first daughter, after that I was like, I need to do something with myself, like you know, I have a daughter and I want more for her, so I went to [a community college]. I did pretty good [there] and then I was pregnant again with my second daughter so then I had to stop going to school. So, then I didn't go to school for I don't know…it was like three years. Again, I thought, like, I need to do something, so I was searching for what school would be best and then I saw that UWM had a [program of interest]. So, I applied and was like, ok let's see what's going to happen so, I go in, and I took online classes at first."

"This semester I took a remedial math class which I may or may not pass I'm not sure yet, but me not passing that means that that would push me back a little bit. I would have to re-take it. And this math is holding up my chemistry. Chemistry is holding up my anatomy, you know all of that. So, it's like a snowball effect, so I'm afraid of failing and

that taking more time. When in reality failing is part of the process. So, I'm kind of OK. This math class I'm taking, even though I'm still unsure whether or not I'm going to pass, everywhere I turn it's like another opportunity, another opportunity for me to get it right.”

All who attempted college prior to becoming parents reported that the arrival of their first child was a turning point for their education, and that some part of becoming a parent had changed their focus, their motivation, and therefore the weight and importance of their college plans. Being a mother raised the stakes. As several mothers noted about resuming college after becoming a parent:

“I always knew once I was pregnant that I was going to go back to college, and I made a vow to myself that I would start, and I would not stop until I received my degree and I haven't.”

“I had my [child] in the summer. And I took a year off [from college] to be with her because she was my focus. And then, I came back in 2017, at that point I was raising my [younger sibling] full time, my [child] and [other children in her care], they were all with me full time at that point. I became much more focused and much more serious about finishing and getting it done, because I knew that I had to so I could get a degree and get a job that has benefits and retirement. All of a sudden, it just hit me that there are people who are depending on me so I have to finish this so I can provide a better future for them. Because going to school wasn't about me anymore. It was about them now. I mean to a point sure it's about my own enrichment and my own pride in my accomplishments but that wasn't the driving force. It was being able to provide a better life for them than what I was provided. And the key to that is to attaining my degree.”

“It's different because not only is it for myself, but it's for my family, definitely, my kids, but also to the work that I do with other people. And so, I think when you have a goal that's just about serving yourself, like [when I was] a teen, I just want to do this, this is a cool career, and you know, but it was just about me [back then]. Like the penalty of not finishing or completing isn't as high, or the disappointment in not finishing isn't as high, versus if your goal is to benefit something greater than yourself. Then the penalty of not completing or not finishing or the disappointment is so much more than you can withstand.”

The women interviewed maintained high levels of motivation regardless of the

challenges they faced. Two Scholars illustrated this: one by describing her return to homework

shortly after the medically complicated birth of her child, and another by describing her drive to

return immediately to school despite being hospitalized as a victim of neighborhood violence:

"Yeah, I gave birth and like it was funny 'cause even after I gave birth I like, as soon as I was able, I was like on my laptop doing homework. And so, and the only reason I took two weeks off was because I had to stay with my baby in the hospital because [my child had] a health problem and so like for the first weeks we were in the hospital. Like, so I was doing my homework right away. The doctors were coming in like, 'Are you doing homework?' I'm like, yes, like my books were all laid out, my laptop was on there."

"Right after it happened I went to calling the Life Impact Program, so that they could help me rearrange the [meeting] I was supposed to have the day I got [hurt]. And I'm just ready to get back to school and finish my internship, but I just have to take it slow now."

Costs and benefits. Finally, students expressed that though the short-term challenges of college enrollment were substantial, they were confident those costs would be outweighed by eventual (mostly financial) returns. Some students more generally noted that college would be "worth it" in the end, and a several explicitly discussed the trade-off in terms of their future earnings.

"Like its thinking where I would be if I hadn't have done this? It would be horrible. Like my life would be horrible in general and like, it's been hard to be in college this long and to continue to pursue this degree, but it's like…the future benefit is going to outweigh what I have to go through now. [If I] would have not gone to college, and worked a job and got a salary every year, but my debt in college is going to be less than the salary that I will be making so I might as well just pay back in student loans and have a degree that's going to help me, you know, make more in the end, and to be able to live comfortably, especially for my kids."

"Some people don't like to take out loans, and I'm like, in the long run it's going to be more beneficial to me to go to school and to take out loans than to work a minimum wage job and not...because I would rather have a higher education making a lot more money when I get out of school and pay back those loans. You know, so for me, it's not just about the instant gratification, it's about long term."

"In high school I think I was just like 'Oh…I'm going to be a nurse, like this [will be] amazing....' I don't think I weighed out the financial aspect of it then. Like it's serious, like, it's like your pay is going to be extremely more if you do get this degree."

"School is absolutely worth it. I know that at the end of my tunnel there's light—this will pay off. It's stressful now, but I know in the end it will be all worth it. Having a vocation, I feel like I'm a role model to my children, they see I'm a working mother, they see that

I'm in school, so I feel like I'm teaching them a good way to go about business. And I know I'll benefit from the degree and a better job after I have some type of degree under my belt."

Barriers to progress.

Any understanding of the work that the Life Impact Program does, and the value that students ascribe to it, must be informed by a concurrent understanding of the backgrounds and context within which the participating student-parents reside. This is critical for two reasons: first, because it illuminates the substantial, multidimensional nature of the challenges that Life Impact Scholars must overcome in their efforts to persist in college (and thus the types of support they most desire); and second, because it demonstrates the care that the Life Impact Program takes in selecting students whose need for support is real. The challenges faced by the Life Impact Scholars who were randomly selected for interviews are varied and numerous, and students spoke about how these challenges affected their chances to engage and succeed in their education.

Undergraduate education is an immersive experience, requiring substantial time and focus between attending classes, studying, and completing assignments and projects. For most of the women interviewed for this study, being a student while also parenting a child was only one element in a constellation of social, financial, and other life challenges that students faced. These included everyday household matters like budgeting, arranging child care, finding affordable housing, interacting with their children's schools, or fully participating in relationships with partners, friends and family members. They also included the time and energy needed to manage their own health crises, handling grief and trauma due to the deaths of family members, caring for children with special health care needs, and providing ongoing, daily care for parents or other family members with disabilities. They faced divorces, immigration cases, child custody battles,

restraining orders against former partners, escaping intimate partner violence, involvement with the criminal justice system, and being victims of neighborhood violence themselves. While financial aid data may capture the financial need these students experience, and academic data can describe some measure of their engagement with their classes, no form could adequately convey the range and depth of challenge that these mothers outlined during their interviews.

Financial challenges. Financial challenges were frequently cited by students as primary barriers to college progress, though not all students expressed them as central. All students were receiving substantial tuition support from the Life Impact Program, and most also received Pell grants and other scholarships, which covered their tuition costs (though not their living expenses). However, for student parents, whose duration of attendance often spans many years, grant aid is not a sufficient resource: Pell grants have a lifetime limit of 6 years. Several students interviewed had reached that ceiling and were therefore reliant on loans and earnings (and scholarships as available). Most students reported that they would have difficulty weathering a $100 or $500 financial emergency.

Students who cited financial stress as a primary barrier to progress reported that they had difficulty covering current costs of living while accumulating debt. Sometimes this meant making small sacrifices, like limiting children's afterschool activities, but sometimes it meant removing a child from a high-quality preschool program in favor of a less expensive one, going without a computer, or making do with unstable living situations including couch-surfing. Strategies for managing included using financial aid excess to cover several months of fixed costs, finding non-market work, relying on gifts from family. These discussions often produced a sense of anxiety.

"It is extremely difficult to navigate, and you feel just um, fear--where am I going to come up with this because you don't have it. Everything is stretched to the max so in those situations you have to basically, I don't know, we've had to take out payday loans and that was a horrible situation, we've had to beg for help from family members and that isn't always for sure because they just don't have the financial means to support you financially."

"At one point I went a semester and a half without a computer because I had to wait on financial aid, and that semester very challenging cause of the classes that I was taking. And a lot of it you need a computer to do. So I found myself at my Mom's house using her computer which is very, very, very slow and crashed often, it was just a very frustrating semester, waiting for the next semester to start for financial aid so I could go get my computer cause that, that semester my computer just decided to not work, like I turned it on or I tried to turn it on one day and it just wouldn't turn on. It was so frustrating."

Some students expressed more mixed feelings about their financial status. The student

below simultaneously says her costs "work out," but also that she loses sleep worrying about her

financial freedom. Her experience is one of surviving event by event, while worrying more about

the longer-term:

"It's just been working out like that. You know. My tire went out, and somebody gave me the money for the tire, you know. It's just been working like that, but it's not easy and it don't make you feel good. And, too, I haven't been sleeping well. Normally I sleep like a baby, but I swear recently I find myself up on the internet trying to figure out, you know, what do I need to become successful. How do I create financial freedom and wealth and stuff and I'm waking up at three o'clock, I'm like, this not normal, I don't even know what's happening but, um, I think it's just what's going on. Just the reality of my situation right now."

"My [partner] gets jobs every three months or so, he for some reason literally has the worst luck with jobs so his help isn't much. I do receive SSI, that's like a thousand dollars a month with eight-hundred dollar rent. I don't manage. I try. I take out loans. I don't pay, sometimes and then you know I just have late bills, and I pay them when I can. For the most part all I really try to focus on paying rent, and then I try to split up after that when I have four hundred dollars left and the internet may get a hundred and then my phone bill is fifty dollars and the rest is, like, I gotta get pull-ups, gas, anything that could happen and then take out loans if I can cause my credit isn't the best, but, I have one internet loan place where I pretty much go to and then try to get extra funds."

There were a few students who reported that they had sufficient financial resources to

make ends meet between grants, scholarships, loans and earnings. However, most of these were

students who had access to substantial other supports (e.g., had received a windfall from a legal

settlement after an injury). There were also students who had other contributors to their

household earnings (even if those contributors did not reside in the household) so they were able

to earn jointly to cover expenses. Others managed through shrewd planning and savings.

Generally, though these students maintained an overall positive outlook regarding their finances,

they experienced daily needs and strains.

> *"It's been easy for me to afford being in college after I had my baby, I've been getting like a lot of grants and a lot of scholarships I haven't even had to take out any money. No loans, I haven't had to take out any in a while, but I took out some during the summer because you mainly have to pay out of pocket for those. But that's it, like, so my school during the actual school year, it's always covered now. I always get money back. I would be able to cope with [a financial emergency] fine. I save money well. I do have credit cards, too, [I would] maybe put it on a credit card and pay it off over time or pay half in cash."*

> *"My [child's] father got [injured] when I was pregnant and he [is now disabled] so my son actually gets help, like he gets checks, and that's a big help, like it really helps me to like take care of him and then I put some up for him in an account so that he can be financially stable when he gets older, so that's a help."*

> *"I'm just like a freak about this, and like, in the past I've been at places where I've been dead broke and had zero dollars and I'm crying with my kids, like I don't know how we're going to do it....So now, I plan. I plan ahead so, usually when I get my financial aid back I'll split up all my bills and visualize it all and then pay everything at least four or five months ahead of time and then or if I can't pay it I'll put it aside in a specific savings that I can't pull from until this certain date. So, I manage it that way, yeah. And then I usually try to make my work hours so that I know how much I'm going to get…so I can kind of have a view of what we can spend during that month. But basically, like my bills are usually paid from like a couple of months out."*

Time constraints and role strain. Many of the interviewees expressed the difficulty of

managing their multiple roles within the available time, and the frustrations and stress that came

with the "balancing act" of student-parenthood. The mothers who were interviewed all worked

for pay at least part time and had between one and three children in their care. They were

enrolled full-time (as encouraged by the Life Impact Program). While no student who was

interviewed was married (only unmarried mothers were included in the qualitative sample),

several were engaged (but not residing with their fiancés) and others lived with a partner (in

some cases the father of their children). Others lived alone or with their own parents. Their roles

as students, parents, partner/spouses and employees all involved a careful balance. As in

managing their finances, they often noted that sacrifices had to be made:

> *"Last semester I was working, getting kids ready, working all day, tending to children for hours, helping with homework, at the end of the night, 7/8/9 o'clock, I was completely exhausted and that's when I was freed up to do my schoolwork. And sometimes I couldn't get it done. It affected me as far as studying for things—wasn't prepared for a few tests, missed assignments, I couldn't get them done, it was just lack of sleep. Work full time, and being a single parent—doing all of that on my own too."*

> *"I think the biggest thing getting through college while raising kids is being able to do your classes, but obviously you need to work because, I mean your financial aid isn't going to cover living expenses, your kids' needs, it's not going to cover all that stuff. Then doing classes, and also you need to be present as a parent, you know, and so definitely finding that balance is very challenging. Sometimes there could be a little bit of sacrifice, sometimes it might mean scaling back on my kids' activities, or sometimes it might mean reducing work hours, you know, if you do that then I might fall behind on this bill, but then I have to play catch up later, so it's like, you know, it's challenging. I would say the biggest thing would be like the financial demands that it takes to support yourself and a family. Because you need to take care of these responsibilities, you need to work those hours, but how do I work and still do school and be present for the kids? So it's challenging."*

While these mothers strongly voiced that their children represented their most pressing

reason for persisting towards undergraduate degrees, it was often their time with their children

that they recognized sacrificing as they struggled to balance their competing commitments. They

saw this as one negative side of college participation, and especially the mothers of younger

children noted how difficult it was to miss time with their children or to have the time available

be clouded by exhaustion and stress (Augustine et al, 2018). Even while they reflected the value

of demonstrating educational accomplishments to their children, they fretted about losing

precious time. Older children were sometimes roped into attending classes if other care

arrangements couldn't be made, and that too had costs:

> *"There's lots of time where I just want to like not continue, because I want to be there for her growing up and I miss a lot of things, but then I have people reminding me that you know it's great for her to see that and it's only for a short period of time, once you're done it will be so much easier, kind of stuff."*

> *"Like making sure I read him a book every night like he'll hold me to that too, " But we didn't read a book." And I'm like ummmm, just go to bed! And sometimes like, if it's really late, which I'm kind of bad with, I'm like, 'Dude, I'm sorry, like, tonight we can't.' Like there are certain times or I'm just like up to here, like I gotta write a paper, and I got to submit it before tonight, like dude, I'm sorry you're going to bed."*

> *"With school, school doesn't stop at the time that you end it, you still have to go home, and you still have to be a mom and you have to be a student. That's the worst part about being in school. So, like sometimes I get like really sad because it's really hard, like, he'll have missed me. Like we'll sit down and have breakfast and he'll say, 'Can you just please stay here with me' and he'll sit on my lap so I don't move and it's like really hard."*

> *"So I leave one class early go pick [my daughter] up by 3:30, rush back to campus and she have to attend all my classes with me. So that can be tough. And too, she's bored. She don't know what these people be talking about. And of course, me I'm sitting in the front row, and so she's sitting there like this (arms crossed, head down) and I'm like no, straighten up...it frustrates her and she gets mad, no I don't want to go to your school with you. But sometimes its just the only choice because I don't have time to run you back home. I'm tired you know, so that's tough."*

> *"I feel like I don't get to spend as much time with him, it like really takes away from the time. And then another thing that made me super emotional was like I was looking like they do like art projects and like he drew a little picture and like the teacher asked him, like what is this picture and he said, 'that's my mom' and the teacher was like 'what is she doing?' and he was like, "my mom is doing homework" and like, that really just like broke my heart but at the same time it makes me happy. Because he's not saying, like, 'oh my Mom is on her cell phone' or like, my Mom is doing something where she's not paying attention to me, it's just like I'm doing my homework, but at the same time it hurts because it's like you know I must be so busy and occupied with other things like that my son can't get my attention. So that makes it a little hard. But then it affects us positively because now he knows Mommy is doing homework, and then like, when he gets older he's going to realize like even in a few years when he starts you know like elementary school or PreK like he's going to realize like, well my Mommy does homework, like I need to do homework too, you know. So it's affecting him mentally in a positive way but I also think like it can be kind of neglectful in a way because I*

also have to work and like some days he starts crying and he's like 'don't go to work' you know so it's really hard."

Navigational challenges. In all 12 interviews, mothers described the challenges of navigating interactions with government or institutional actors to get their educational and basic needs met. These interactions were described as time-consuming and often frustrating. Several interviewees specifically made note that safety-net benefits, on which they relied to meet basic needs, operated in ways that were at odds with financial aid and campus-based supports, and that frequent changes in policy created a lot of work to maintain eligibility and worry about potential loss of benefits. For example, students reported that their scholarship amounts counted towards their earnings for the purposes of SNAP eligibility, reducing their benefit amounts because of scholarships. Another reported losing public health insurance because of a small wage increase.

> *"There was a point when [my child] was two I believe where I started making too much money to get state help-- I got like a 25 cent raise and that pushed me over the bracket and-- I was barely making ends to meet to afford day care. I had to switch daycares to try to find something cheaper… so it definitely made an impact and I like to call it the F—Y-- bracket. Because you make too much to get the help but then you're struggling to make ends meet because you can't get the help."*

> *"Oh, it's extremely hard... they expect a lot and they've required more information now as the years have gone on. They like want, like, your scholarship awards, they want your tuition statement, which I don't see why that should even matter because all of my scholarship goes to school...and you have to renew, there's like every six months there's employment verification, if you get child support you have to show proof of that, your rent, and then the scholarship and tuition stuff...Yeah it can get kind of stressful. And you're like I've got to get this in...what if we don't get it this time?*

One student explicitly compared the processes of getting help navigating scholarships or advising on campus against the process of getting safety net benefits from the state:

> *"The State stuff is a lot more stressful. It's a lot. Stressful and there's a lot of miscommunication so you can tell them one thing and they'll put something wrong and so you have to call them back to fix it and they you're on hold again or like not all the departments are talking to each other so like child care is separate from Badger Care."*

Several of those interviewed identified a sense of pride that they considered themselves to be expert in their abilities to find and learn about available academic and social welfare supports, and the idea that they could use that skill to help others. They also noted examples of navigating "the system" to support other family members, e.g. helping a parent obtain citizenship. Several described specific financial strategies they had learned to make student/single-parent life work—paying six months of car loan bills with their financial aid check, swapping WIC coupons for discounts with childcare providers, "graying out" scholarship amounts received from applications for means-tested benefits; not living with a partner because of the (real or perceived) implications on their safety-net benefit eligibility. They had learned that, in a system loaded with ways to make things harder, there existed strategies that kept them afloat financially (Edin & Lein, 1997). While there was a sense of pride from some interviewees about their capacity to navigate, there was also a sense of obligation. In two interviews the mothers noted that managing safety net applications/re-certifications was their role, despite the presence of partners who could have also taken it on.

Lack of fit. As discussed previously, all students interviewed expressed high levels of motivation to complete an undergraduate degree (in Tinto's language, "goal commitment"), but no student said anything that demonstrated a particular tie to their specific institution ("institutional commitment") and almost all had, in fact, enrolled elsewhere at other points in time. When students discussed the extent to which they felt a sense of "fit" on campus, a few dimensions were described. First, it was true that some students noted that they felt a bit out of place as a student-parent. Second, several noted that they were older than traditional undergraduates and they felt this distinction in the level of maturity they saw in their peers.

Third, since most students who are Life Impact Participants are students of color (and 10 of the

12 interviewed so identified), students noted feeling isolated in classes mainly comprised of

white students. That said, many students also expressed a sense that they had earned the privilege

to attend their institution, that they were a student like anyone else. Additionally, participation in

the Life Impact Program (and other sub-communities) seemed to bring students a sense of

identity and belonging within their institution.

> *"I fit in because I love to learn and I'm good at it. Like I catch on quickly at the same time sometimes I feel kind of feel out of place 'cause, I have a few friends but it's hard to connect with some of them because our lifestyles are so different. And sometimes the maturity level is different too... Kind of. Like, I fit in in parts of UWM."*

> *"I still have my moments where I'm like, gosh it's uncomfortable being with my kid and every one's staring like 'What is this girl doing in here with her son?' Like I just, even though the way people look at you, I just assume like, I know what they're thinking but I don't. I just need to be more confident and who and what I'm doing."*

> *"I don't think I fit in, I'm like the only parent, one of the only parents in the classes that I do take so I don't feel like everyone can necessarily relate to me like OH, such and such came in drunk last night....meanwhile I had a baby that was fussy all night and I didn't get sleep either but, like you know our struggles are different. Yeah, I feel different. But like at the same time, we're still students. We still have to do what we need to do, and our goal is still the same, to graduate."*

> *"I feel like I fit when, like the smaller communities or the sub-communities that I'm now a part of, I feel like that made me really fit. So the entrepreneurship community, um the student parent community, and then we have a lot of cultural resources on campus and they've had to fight to stay relevant but their fight in staying relevant has also fueled students on campus um, that're part of those cultural committees to say "Hey, I need this place because without it I don't feel like, I feel like I'm just a number. I don't feel like I have a place. I feel like I don't fit. And so for me the Black Cultural Center and the African American Student Success center were two very pivotal pieces for me because during those times where I felt like (this is before baby) there are those times that I felt like I didn't want to be here, I would go to the Black Cultural Center and see all my friends and we would just at that moment I was like, OK, I have the community here so I gotta stay. I can't leave them."*

"It's not easy being a black student here on this campus because you know it's a lot of proving yourself. Like you know to be honest, some people treat you like what are you doing here? Like you don't even belong here. You know. Look we work hard just like everybody else. We're here because we earned the right. We paying tuition just like you."

"When it came to my classmates it's kind of like I wanted to be a chameleon and I wanted to blend in, like depending on the situation or place that I was I felt like there was appropriate and not appropriate times to talk about that kind of stuff (being a parent). Because like again I look young so I feel like I can blend in but obviously just because I look a certain type of way it doesn't mean that I feel that way. So when I was in my organization class, it's a larger lecture, if I was like working in a group setting I wouldn't say it initially because I knew that if I said I was a Mom like people would automatically just treat me different and I knew it because it had happened to me in a couple of classes I feel that."

"I feel like I fit in because there's no place or time that I'm uncomfortable. Whether I'm visiting a department office I'm here, you know. I'm showing up. And I feel like there are some pros to being young, single teen mom, who was having a story like I have. I feel like it it's more respectable. I feel, like, admired. Some people are genuinely interested in helping me move forward in my undergraduate career because they know of the struggles and maybe the potential that I may have. You know, so I'm OK and like I said when I encounter people who may be cold or you know looking at me like what are you doing here, or you know, being one of the only black kids. But basically, I think I make, I am part of what makes UWM a unique, inclusive, diverse campus and they need more of me. So I feel like I fit."

"The campus offers a lot, I mean they have plenty of things and I've never really went to much of anything and I definitely won't go by myself. I've just never felt like, I've just always felt out of place. It felt like, 'You're a parent, you shouldn't be going to these class things. You done with school, you get the work done and you come home.'"

In the context of assessing how well students felt they "fit in" on their campus, they were also asked to consider what kind of reception they received from faculty, and how they approached interactions with faculty around any accommodations they might need as low-income student-parents. Almost all students felt they had supportive responses from the faculty they encountered, and most felt this came from the fact that many faculty members personally understood the difficulties that come with parenting small children. Students varied in their approaches to these interactions, from making a point to directly notify professors that they

would sometimes need to miss classes due to parenting responsibilities, to informing faculty of

their parent status on a need-to-know basis, to limiting their exposure of that information unless

absolutely necessary.

> *"I mean, after you tell someone, sometimes people are like 'Oh, wow. Isn't school really*
> *hard for you?' or something....and I just don't want people to think that I want special*
> *privileges just because my life is harder. You know? I don't want to be treated differently*
> *because I have a kid. Like I still have the same homework assignments as you I still have*
> *to study just like you do so I still have everything else. I still work out and have a real life*
> *too but it's just hard and a lot more tiring."*

> *"I think they need to hear it. This is not for fake. Maybe a lot of them thought it was just a*
> *silly game you know, but I'm like, no. Here, right here. This is real. You know. This is*
> *real. Growing up eating peanut butter and syrup sandwiches this is real. I am very open*
> *to sharing. Sharing is healing. It can help somebody. For example, throughout my whole*
> *divorce, like my teacher, my instructors, I would let them know, hey this is the situation I*
> *would sit down with them, 'This is the situation so if it seem like I'm not here, if I'm not*
> *giving my all...this is why. The one math instructor, she wanted to go above and beyond.*
> *She even cried. She was like 'This is so terrible.' She even connected me with one of her*
> *friends who's a nurse, who went through a divorce, has a kid and had custody battles so*
> *just was very open to helping me in any way possible."*

Social connections. Social integration is said to be important for college students, but

this study provides some evidence that it may be important in distinct ways for college student

parents, who have such limited time and energy available to expend on non-necessary tasks. The

women in this study valued friendships, and definitely valued close supporters, but they did not,

in large part, have close friends who were their student peers. Overall, the mothers sought social

connections for more instrumental purposes on campus, they were focused on finding others who

could share academic information and support.

> *"For me, [social interactions], that's not my focus, I don't have time to socialize with*
> *others, my life is so super hectic and busy, so it doesn't affect me at all. That's just not*
> *important."*

> *"As far as classes go, trying to find people that I really connect with, it becomes hard*
> *sometimes--with group projects everybody's like, oh yeah we'll meet up at so and so's*

house and I'm like, ah can't do that I'm sorry I got a two year old I got to tag along with...don't want to bring her cause there. I don't trust her at certain people's houses and then I don't trust certain people around my child. Like I don't know what lifestyle you live, I'm not saying that you're that type of person but you can't risk it."

"I don't need those social relationships. Oh, it's nice to have other people around me, but I still feel like I fit here but I know a lot of people who left because they felt like they didn't fit in. They felt like it was too big, there were too many people. They wanted to know their professors it was just preference whereas me, I was like it's a grade, I just want to get to the nursing major so I can like get it done and get into my core classes."

Forms of support

The Life Impact Program's comprehensive model provides financial, emotional, academic, social, and procedural/informational support to Scholars, and through this support the program fosters Scholars' confidence in their ability to navigate college-level demands and their sense of "fit" on campus. The program accomplishes these objectives in part by supporting students' whole selves—by providing support that is not limited to topics related to school, but spans the complex, interconnected and complete experiences of student-parents' lives. Further, Life Impact Scholars said they had built real, durable relationships with staff, and felt that they could discuss any issue or concern without fear of judgement. Each of the six interviewees spoke extensively about Life Impact's services and the critical value of the program to their college progress. They cast the value of the program into several main categories: financial assistance, provision of information and resources (both academic and non-academic), encouragement and support, and a sense of "belonging."

"I guess it was the way it makes me feel when we do group work, and all the younger kids of course want to group up and clique together so now, just feeling left out it was kind of embarrassing. Yeah, I think the Life Impact has helped with that just because they have let it be known on campus that they are there to help student parents I think that has helped me with that a lot. It gives you a sense of belonging because you know that there are offices and organizations for a lot of other things but now you have that one other thing, student support parent support where you know you can bring your kids if you need to go there sometimes."

Many students articulated the importance of both Life Impact's scholarships and the fact that these scholarships were renewable over multiple years. This compared to other funding sources that were less reliable: tax refunds, safety-net benefits, etc. They also were comforted by the availability of emergency funds if they encountered an unexpected financial challenge. They reported that the program's participation and academic requirements were not unsubstantial, but that they were helpful. They also said the extrinsic motivation to maintain their scholarships helped them to attend to academic matters.

> *"Like you get financial support from Life Impact and, like they make you like, you have to meet certain requirements so it like almost keeps you on your toes, like you have to go in for like career meetings, you have to take like education workshops you have to like go in for like mid semester and beginning of the semester meetings--there's a lot of things that you have to do to keep the scholarship. So, it's a lot of things on top of school that you also have to do for them, but honestly, going in there and doing those check-ups and doing those career things, it's like, OK now I have an updated resume and now I know exactly when my exams are this semester and when all my assignments are due. They are really important meetings, they are really helpful."*

But Scholars uniformly said that the Life Impact Program was far, far more than a scholarship. They felt the scholarship was a key component and noted that they would never have applied had it not been for the offer of financial support, but also felt that the personalized support and coaching provided by the Life Impact team was really the key to the program's value. When asked about the most important element of the Life Impact program, students' responses included:

> *"Having Natalie and Rachel as life coaches, you are receiving so much more than money. Like you're receiving a support system and they've become like a part of my family."*

> *"Support. Like, the financial part is really great, but their support is like really great. It's like I feel like I would need to go to therapy if I didn't have them. It's definitely the support is number one and the financial is definitely the second most important for*

me. Maybe for other students it's different. I mean if anything I could get the money from loans which is horrible-- obviously the money is really great to get 'cause I don't have to use the loans then but money is not going to provide you support, not someone to talk to and to like walk you through."

"I mean I would prefer to not take out loans, but at the end of the day I need the social, mental, emotional support because I can't function if I'm not mentally OK. There's no way to get through my classes or take my tests if I can't mentally be together, so if it was just like no we can't provide you funds…but to be honest if it wasn't the fund part I wouldn't have applied do you know what I mean? That's why I signed up for Life Impact, because the first thing I needed: Funds. That's what caught my attention. Like, oh, I'm going to get money to help pay for school and thank God, because I don't want all this debt but then it was like, you know they help with all these things and all the family aspects but now actually experiencing it, if they said we no longer offer funds, I'd be like, oh I'm still coming here and I love you guys because I've already established that relationship, you know?"

"I don't know, if they would just give me a check that's not it, it's not just like writing a check. If they give me a check that's nice, but then when other things do come up that could hinder me staying in school, like where do I go then? But they're like that and more. So it's like it's an amazing balance. I feel like parents need, especially parents, but anyone who has a scholarship needs that social support and the financial support to go together to really make, to make it through college."

"I don't know if you know about the Life Impact Program? That is where I really started to kind of believe in myself. It is the program for parents, minority parents and it's a scholarship and it's also support, so you get like a five-thousand-dollar renewable scholarship, but I feel like any Scholar would say the support was the biggest thing that you know, that mattered the most."

Another form of support that Life Impact Scholars valued was indirect academic assistance in the form of skill-building, time-management, or procedural or informational assistance. Life Impact would help students construct a "Semester at a Glance" document that would contain their entire semester's deadlines in one place, which several students found very helpful. They also remarked that they could count on the Life Impact staff to help them determine where to find out about courses to take or to get information about their major's requirements:

"They create in the beginning of the semester what's called 'Semester at a Glance' which is they take all of your syllabi and combine them into one big calendar sheet so you have your three four months of class work planned out and laid out for you and the dates and everything."

"They contact instructors for you, they help make accommodations, like help if you need tutoring or anything, they find all resources and they get on it so fast it's just, you know the actions that they do to show you that they really want you to succeed."

Most of the Scholars' comments on the importance of the program focused on having a trusting, stable relationship with Life Impact Program coaches. Scholars felt that they could safely bring issues or problems of any kind to the Life Impact staff, and that they could count on the coaches to provide good advice or resources without judgement. They also felt that Life Impact coaches were truly interested and invested in their success. That presence and involvement of key institutional actors who believed in Scholars' capacity to succeed in college was an important source of comfort and inspiration for students. Comments from Scholars focused on the importance of their relationships with coaches included:

"You get close to them--depending on how long you in the program and how well you use the program. In as far as the emotional support they are there for anything, whether it was school related or not. There have been times where I have been having a bad day and I walked in and there's been times where you know, when my friend died and I really didn't know what to do or if I wanted to finish school, and it was like nobody could tell me anything for getting me out of that depression but they provided that emotional support, they provided resources and counseling services to go to."

"When I got pregnant with (my child) I had like a big emotional issue dealing with abuse and they were there for me and like saw me through the case and everything and just emotionally, just way over and beyond what they have to do or what they even get paid to do."

"Yeah, they're there. They're always there. Or you can email you can call, like any way you can get in contact with them. I know at one point I was going through a really hard time with my kid's father with domestic violence and things and I actually sat down with Natalie and made like a safe plan...it was like how to get out of my house if I....so it's way deeper than just like financial purpose like it's bonds and relationships that I built. Amazing. Like I don't think they know like how much they affect all of us especially me,

especially, like, everything that I've gone through, like they've always been there. We're really close. And yeah, we're really close. And I feel like they, it's not like, 'Oh here's your check.' You know? [It's like] we're glad that you're doing so well academically, it's like I care about you as a person and I care about your life and I want you to be healthy and I want your family situation to be healthy and I want the best for you. Like that's them."

"Seeing the same faces, like always seeing like Rachel, always seeing Natalie, like I know that I don't have to explain who I am or what I'm about; they know EVERYTHING literally. So just knowing that there's nothing off limits with them. I can go in there and I know that it's a safe place and I can talk about anything."

"I hate to say it like that because you know my family, they are supportive of me, but it's been so up and down, and I have never really felt that they have been as [supportive as] the people at Life Impact. The support that they give, the encouragement, you know, sending cards in the mail just out of nowhere and gift cards, you know cards to WalMart or something, to get some stuff in the mail with a card just to say 'Oh, we're just thinking of you' or 'I believe that you can do it' you know it's just, um, that really strong encouragement that they give and it's real genuine."

"It's just nice because I can talk to them literally like [I would talk to] my best friend. I know there is no judgment, they know my situation I don't have to explain who or what I am and I don't have to hide who I am, I just go in there and talk and know that I don't have to think about what I'm saying I can just say it, you know it's a judgment free zone you know. Like, just because it says that as a statement it doesn't mean that you feel comfortable enough to believe it so with Life Impact, I believe it. I know that I can go in there and they're like, 'We're here for you one hundred percent.'"

"Life Impact, they're just consistent, they're always there. Like if I wouldn't have that person to go to with my question about, well, my financial aid has decreased, why is this? Or you know I'm having a hard time finding child care, or, I found out that my kid's father is going to take me to court, so where can I get legal resources? You know, they're like the first aid kit. They're like everything you need in a little box."

Another group of comments centered on the physical space that the Life Impact office

offered to Scholars. Scholars appreciated having this space that felt safe and comfortable, a place

where they belonged. Comments on this topic included:

"Because it's small, it's cozy, you know, and it feels welcoming and just like the way that it's set up. It definitely feels like home, there's like pictures, they make it like very personal and you see people's kids on the wall and that's just comforting. Like you might

just go in there for coffee but then you'll end up chatting and you'll end up doing all these other things to its great."

"In there, we're student parents, we all have children to support. We're all in there to support each other for the same thing, you know, weren't not going to go in there and not support each other and not do homework or student you know. So it's like a really uplifting place to be, the office is."

"They have an office on campus and so in the office, Scholars you can have free printing, free water and coffee, you can go in there and they encourage you to just stop by and chat you know and so the office space is kid friendly which is another good thing. They have a little corner of toys and everything, yeah you just drop by anytime."

"Life Impact allows me to bring my child into the college setting and not be embarrassed."

"With Life Impact, I'm able to say [to my child], 'Look, college is important.' It's a nice way to just kind of make [my child] understand that. 'You are on this journey with me, we're doing this together you know.' And I don't know, it helps kind of solidify why I'm doing it. Like, 'Oh, baby, you can come to college and Mommy will be able to help you. Because unfortunately my Mom wasn't able to help me.'

Conclusions from Interviews

The women I interviewed were unyielding in their pursuit of higher education despite

great challenge. Their motivations were partly cost-benefit assessments, but also more personal

ones, leading them to persist over long periods of time and multiple institutions. Each woman

resoundingly reported that her children were a great source of motivation and accountability.

Mothers wanted to better provide for their children, but they also wanted to set an example of

achievement that their children could follow. They struggled to manage immovable difficulties:

the realities of tight finances, role strain, and finding time for academic commitments. They

reported the difficulties in the navigation of two separate systems of support: those on campus

and off campus. Both were avenues for various forms of help, but accessing each required time

and effort, and often the two systems were in conflict. They also found it emotionally draining to

miss time with young children or to be distracted by stress.

They were not wholly convinced of their level of belonging on campus, and attributed that to their status as parents, their age, and for students of color, their race. The way they interacted with peers and faculty did not appear to function the way Tinto's theory would suggest—where connections with social and academic systems produce increased commitment to the institution and to educational goals. Rather, these students' goal commitments were established long before they had set foot on campus, and for many, were confirmed and strengthened by the birth of their children. Their commitments were not to the institution. Their social and academic connections were used to help further their goal to "get some kind of degree under my belt", or to reach for a specific career, and students generally felt social connections on campus were important for more instrumental reasons (e.g., getting notes from a missed lecture) rather than for collegiality *per se*. What students reported as being most valuable from the Life Impact Program's services was the presence of a true cheerleader, an individual supporter who knew them well and was invested in their success, and for offering consistent, reliable support that could be counted on when other supports were ever-changing.

Discussion

This study provides evidence of the effects of a comprehensive support program targeted to low-income student parents. I find that Life Impact provides substantial support to participants, and that participants are much more likely to graduate or stay enrolled than comparable non-participants. Ninety-six percent (96%) of Life Impact Scholars either graduate or remain enrolled compared with 58% of comparison group members. Interviews show that student parents have unique motivations and face unique barriers to college success. Life Impact Scholars report being completely committed to finishing college, but they express no particular

tie to any specific institution, rather to individual relationships and sub-communities. They are motivated to persist partially for economic reasons, but also by building an identity and being a role model to their children (and families and communities). Perhaps most importantly, I find evidence that Life Impact works because it helps students navigate barriers through trusted, reliable relationships with staff who offer consistent, personalized support that students deeply value.

These findings are significant for several reasons: First, because they add to the limited body of evidence on college student parents, who comprise 22% of the nation's undergraduates (Reichlin Cruse et al., 2019). Second, research that addresses the needs of student parents serves to build a greater understanding of the large and increasing group of "nontraditional" students as a whole, and to highlight the mismatch between existing policies and institutional practices designed to serve yesterday's college students. Third, this study offers evidence supporting refinement of one of the longest standing theories of student departure.

This study contributes to the very limited body of evidence focused on interventions serving low-income undergraduate student parents. The Opening Doors demonstration grant (Richburg-Hayes et al., 2009), which remains the lone experimental study of an intervention targeted to student parents, provides strong evidence that a financial aid and social support intervention can improve college persistence and performance among low-income student parents. However, despite the study's compelling findings, it does not offer a decisive assessment of interventions promoting student parent success. The Opening Doors intervention was conducted at just two institutions, (a community college and a technical college, both in Louisiana), and only a minority of participants reported that their educational goals included an

undergraduate degree (Richburg-Hayes, 2009, p.13), so the findings cannot be generalized to undergraduate students and students in other regions/settings. The intervention provided a $1,000/semester scholarship for a maximum of 2 semesters, rather than over a longer-term, despite the fact that more durable support may have more positive effects. While the Opening Doors model included some counseling/coaching, results suggest that these sessions became focused on documenting that students' eligibility rather than building in-depth relationships and full understandings of students' needs. Further, the Opening Doors experiment itself was not designed to understand the independent effects of coaching/counseling separately from those of the strings-attached financial support.

My results align with those of Opening Doors in that both show increases in retention among participating students. My study provides additional depth of understanding through the analysis of interviews with program participants who describe the experience and specific value of the social support and coaching provided by the program. I also study the effects of a longer-term intervention, one that is focused on students working to attain undergraduate degrees. This is significant not only because funding could be expected to have more impact if students receive it over a longer duration (and if they can feel confident that the funding is durable and predictable), but because the relationships that students identify as key to the Life Impact Program's success may develop over time.

Beyond adding to the evidence base around student parents, this study helps illustrate a broader point about postsecondary education today: the fact that today's typical undergraduate no longer fits the characteristics for which the higher education system is designed. Today's undergraduates are no longer largely first-time, full-time, four-year students who have few

responsibilities outside of postsecondary success. Like the student parents who are participants in the Life Impact Program, today's undergraduates are increasingly likely to be supporting themselves, caring for family members, and working while they attend college. They are not enrolling continuously from start to finish, but rather taking an incremental approach, often enrolling at more than one institution over the course of their educational careers. The typical college student is distinct from those of decades past, and yet, institutions, public policy, and research itself is still adjusting to capturing and responding to this new normal. This study adds to a chorus of literature illustrating undergraduate students as a diverse group with varying needs and motivations, and who face distinct challenges.

One facet of this readjustment involves the refinement of theories of postsecondary student retention. Tinto's theory, as explored through this study, retains value in its positioning of the institution as playing a critical role in promoting student retention. However, Tinto's model fails is insufficient to predict that retention of student parents (and possibly other nontraditional students) in a few important ways. Tinto's theory places emphasis on the concept of institutional commitment, which in his framework is developed through social and academic integration and related to persistence. These concepts appear to work differently for single mothers in this study, perhaps not surprisingly, given that there is evidence that they have different effects on students with differing goals (Brower, 1992).

In this study, interview results suggest that institutional commitment is less important than theory might suggest. I find that for student parents, institutional commitment is of a more pragmatic nature, where a specific college is one means to an end. Students in my study had enrolled at multiple institutions to meet their needs at different stages of their lives, and, when

they did articulate a commitment to some aspect of their institution, it was tied to a specific sub-community (commonly the Life Impact Program itself). Further, social integration, which is also a critical element of Tinto's theory, appeared to work differently for the mothers I interviewed, who saw social relationships on campus as either of primarily instrumental value (e.g., a person from whom to request missed lecture notes) or as a luxury that constrained schedules did not allow for. Finally, Tinto's theory does not take into account the *ways* in which students receive support from their institutions, something that this study explores through consideration of administrative burden. Nor does it adequately account for the fact that "external factors" including reliance on safety net supports, can play an outsized role in students' college experiences. Institutions surely play a role in student success, yes, but the theory ignores the process through which this role occurs and gives too little weight to factors outside of the institution.

Implications

Implications from this study include considerations related to the social safety-net, the financial aid system and student retention practices at postsecondary institutions.

Work-based safety net. The U.S. safety net's emphasis on work requirements as a condition of benefit receipt complicates or even deters postsecondary enrollment among many recipients (Shaw et al., 2006). Prospective college graduates, including several of the mothers interviewed in this study, faced impossible choices between receiving benefits that would help them meet their children's basic needs and proceeding towards their educational goals. Given the well-evidenced long-term benefits of postsecondary education for both parents and their children, policy that forces these choices is incredibly short-sighted. Regardless, many programs,

including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid and child-care subsidies, require recipients to participate in some level of work for pay. In that case of TANF, at least, these work requirements have been shown to reduce the number of mothers who enroll in college (Dave, Reichman, & Corman, 2008; Dave, Reichman, Corman, & Das, 2011) and those who do so full time (Kim 2012).

However, policies could be redesigned to reward and even incentivize college progress. Specific policy changes might include broadening the types of educational activities that are deemed acceptable under TANF policy (rather than restricting would-be students to two-year or technical programs), reducing or simplifying work requirements for student-parents who receive SNAP benefits, and ensuring that all states accept postsecondary enrollment as an allowable activity for receipt of childcare subsidies.

Individualized coaching and support. One finding consistent with prior research is that student parents greatly value personalized coaching and navigational assistance, particularly from a person they trust and who knows, understands, and is invested in students themselves. Frequently, interviewees said that a Life Impact staff member was one of the people in their lives who most wanted to see them achieve their educational goals. While "low touch" coaching and advising options (offered via phone or text, or through brief interactions, for example) require less financial commitment on the part of institutions, this study suggests there is a critical element of coaching that is dependent on real relationships formed through repeated interactions over time. This study suggests that the costs of intensive coaching/advising could be offset by substantial improvements in retention rates.

Institutional commitment and social ties. While Life Impact Scholars did find value in specific sub-communities on campus, including their affiliation with the Life Impact Program itself, students' comments did not reflect a strong sense of institutional commitment. Students also valued social interactions differently than might be predicted of more traditional college students, valuing instrumental and supportive ties rather than purely social ones. These findings suggest that institutions might do better to focus on promoting sub-community affiliations over a broader sense of what Tinto refers to as "institutional commitment".

Financial aid policy. Federal financial aid policy is still designed for students who are yesterday's "traditional" college students, and several specific changes would be valuable to student parents (and other nontraditional students). For example, the financial aid system is structured to promote full-time enrollment, and this is based on evidence that students who enroll full-time are more likely to persist, and rooted in the human capital frame that shortening the duration of the college process increases the working years available for benefiting from the improved wage rate that college creates.

However, policies that require full-time enrollment may simply be unworkable for student parents, particularly single mothers, and others who cannot forgo work for pay completely while they are in college, both because of their need to cover living expenses and because they need to maintain access to the work-based safety net. Of the 12 women interviewed, only three had proceeded continuously in college without at least some time enrolled at a different institution or taking a semester off for one reason or another. The norm for students who see the goal as a long-term shift in identity is not necessarily to proceed directly, and spells of enrollment should be accommodated. Financial aid policies currently designed to

offer support over limited duration, e.g., lifetime limits on Pell grants, Pell grants not awarded for summer enrollment, should be adjusted to accommodate longer-term learners. The rate of progress that can be expected for non-parenting students is, and perhaps must be, distinct from the rate that can be encouraged for student parents.

   Realities of administrative burdens. Programs and policies designed to support student-parents have to be constructed with an understanding of administrative burdens. The Life Impact Scholars who were interviewed have full schedules and already are sacrificing basic needs to make ends meet. These burdens are immovable for student parents: the reality of needing to work full time and provide (unpaid) care for children is not alterable, so programs need to be built to minimize the level of time and effort participants spend on onerous eligibility or recertification requirements. Institutions would do well to consider the processes and burdens that students face as they access available supports, and to consider ways to simplify these requirements where possible. This is especially important for student parents who face these kinds of tasks both in and out of school settings, and where the tasks are high stakes as they relate to critical supports like children's health care or cash assistance. Reducing burdens could allow students to be better and more efficient learners and parents.

Conclusion

   College students may once have been a homogenous group of relatively privileged, affluent, and unburdened young adults, but they are no longer. Today's undergraduates face many competing needs for their time and attention, and are not purely focused on an immersive, all-encompassing life on campus. Perhaps no college subgroup better exemplifies this change than single parent students, who are working to make ends meet, raising their children, managing

their homes, and pursuing postsecondary education. Yet the policies and programs that are available both as a safety net and to promote human capital development for this group are each designed for those whose motivations are more economic and less personal. The mothers in this study demonstrate their unyielding commitment to college progress, despite facing unyielding financial, social and academic challenges. The Life Impact Program's comprehensive supports are seen as critical sources of cheerleading for student parents, and they report being especially appreciative of the stable, consistent relationship with a person who supports their goals and can help them navigate challenging problems in and out of school. They say this support matters as much as, or more than, the scholarships they receive. Life Impact Scholars are substantially more likely to graduate or remain enrolled than a comparison group comprised of program applicants. Programming that supports college student parents in this comprehensive way has real potential to improve college outcomes for parenting students, reducing inequality in postsecondary education and even in society as a whole.

Appendix A: Life Impact Program Logic Model

University of Wisconsin Milwaukee LIFE IMPACT PROGRAM

Logic Model

ELIGIBILITY

- Parents of dependent children; demonstrated financial need; completed FAFSA
- New freshmen or transfer or continuing undergraduates
- Preference given to: single parents, GPA >= 2.50, pursuing first bachelor's degree, full-time, >=2 semesters remaining until graduation, first generation

RECRUITMENT

- Word of mouth, flyers, and presentations to high schools
- High numbers of applications are received (e.g., in 2016, 40 applications received, 15 accepted).

SELECTION PROCESS

- Applicants submit a 4 page form detailing demographics/household/educational information
- Four-page personal statement, references
- A panel of student services staff selects from qualified applicants

SERVICES PROVIDED

- Scholarships of up to $20,000 per student awarded (dependent on student meeting academic and participation requirements), up to $2,500/semester
- Emergency funds granted to help Scholars cover unexpected, urgent financial hardships
- Life coaching provided
- Referrals to resources and supports on and off campus
- Academic performance monitored, academic support provided (2.5 GPA required for satisfactory progress)
- Events/activities to facilitate social interaction among Scholars and their families
- Campus event collaboration (exposure of Scholars to various connections and resources on campus)
- Post-graduation support to assist Scholars in job search-ing, career planning, seeking further education.

PARTICIPATION

Between 2005-2016:

- >200 Life Impact Scholars participated
- >$2 million in scholarships awarded
- Nearly $250,000 in emergency funds awarded
- 133 Life Impact Scholars have graduated from the program, 33 are still enrolled, giving the program an overall graduation/retention rate of 86%
- 33 (25%) of the program's graduates have entered advanced degree programs
- 270 children have parents who were supported by the program

OUTCOMES: Short Term

Scholars

- Improved engagement with courses/lower drop rates
- Improved study habits
- Improved GPAs
- Improved semester to semester retention
- Improved likelihood of graduation
- Increased awareness of and utilization of campus and community resources
- Increased sense of social support
- Increased sense of "belonging"
- Reduced work hours
- Lower reported stress levels
- Improved parenting

Children of Scholars

- Improved access to stable and high quality childcare
- Increased educational aspirations
- Improved educational trajectories

OUTCOMES: Longer Term

Scholars

- Higher wages/better fringe benefits
- Greater economic stability and self-sufficiency
- Lower student loan debt
- Interruption of intergenerational transmission of poverty

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

- Increased persistence and graduation rates among student parents
- Increased tuition revenue from student parents who persist
- Increased diversity of student body

Milwaukee Community

- Improved socioeconomic conditions for working parents and their families
- Lower poverty rates, higher employment rates

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

INTERVIEW FORMAT

Educational Goals and Progress

1. Tell me about how you came to be a student at UWM. How did you end up being a student at UWM? (Probe for: why this university, why now, why college at all?)

2. If everything goes exactly as you want it to, how much education do you hope to get? How did you decide that that's the level of education that you want?

3. When you get through your degree here at UWM, what's going to be the main thing that kept you going?

4. Some people say it is a struggle to get through college while raising children. When you think about it, as of right now, would you say it is a struggle? How so, or how not? (Probes include: financial, time, parenting, childcare, social, academic struggles)

5. Would you say it is worth doing? What makes it worth doing? Do you ever think it isn't worth it? What makes it feel like isn't worth it?

    a. Sometimes students start college but they don't finish. Have you ever considered taking a break? Or have you ever considered dropping out altogether? If so, why did you think about it? What stopped you?

6. Who at UWM knows that you are a student parent? How do you approach sharing that information— do you share it with everyone, do you resist sharing it with some people, do you share it with no one? Why? (Probe: instructors, peers, other campus staff, etc.)

Parenting

You play at least two roles in your life (probably more): you're a college student and a parent.

7. How would you say that being a college student affects the way you parent? What, if anything, do you think you do differently as a parent than you would if you weren't a college student?

8. How would you say that being a parent affects the way you approach being a college student? What, if anything, do you think you do differently as a student than you would if you didn't have children?

9. Where are your children when you are at class or at work?

    a. What are the pros and cons of the childcare arrangement you have right now?

    b. If you could choose any childcare arrangement at all (if money or time were no obstacle) what would you choose?

Financial Supports

10. Many college students, and especially college students who are also parents, find it difficult to afford college along with their living expenses. How hard or easy is it for you to afford being in college while being a parent?

11. Thinking about your expenses and your budget, how do you manage making ends meet? Has your ability to make ends meet changed over the course of your time at UWM? If so, how?

12. How prepared do you feel for an unplanned financial expense? If you had some unplanned financial expense occur that cost $500, how well would you be able to cope financially? What if it was a $100 expense?

    a. (If student says they couldn't cope with either $500 or $100 expense, ask what they would do/who would they go to for help.)

13. How important is financial aid in helping you stay in school? What different kinds of financial aid do you make use of (grants, loans, work-study, scholarships, etc.)?

14. Some people take out loans to help them pay for college, and some people try to avoid doing that. How do you feel about student loans: Have you ever used them? Why or why not?

15. Some students work for pay while they're in school. Do you work? What do you see as the advantages or disadvantages of working while you're in school?

Social Supports

16. Think about the person/people in your life who most wants to see you reach your educational goals. Tell me about how that person/those people support you.

17. In your classes at UWM, are there people you know well? Are there people you would call friends? Why or why not?

    a. Is it important to have friends on campus when you're a college student? Why or why not?

18. Are there other places/activities/organizations on campus where you make social connections?

19. In what ways do you feel like you "fit in" as a college student; in what ways do you not fit in as a college student?

20. I'm going to read a statement and I'd like you to tell me if you agree or disagree and why: "I feel like I fit at UW-Milwaukee."

Academic Supports

21. When it is time to decide things like which classes to take, or how to make sure all your classes count towards your major, or how to calculate how long it will take you to finish your desired degree, what do you do? Do you figure these things out on your own? Or who do you talk to/where do you find help?

22. What do you do if you're struggling in a class? If a topic or concept is hard for you, how does that make you feel? How do you react? What do you do?

23. If a friend came to you and said they were failing a class, what would you tell them to do?

24. Would you say that the instructors of your classes are supportive of you? Would you ask them if you needed help?

    a. Can you think of a time when a professor or instructor at UW-Milwaukee demonstrated how supportive they were of your educational efforts? If so, can you tell me what happened?

       b.   Can you think of a time when a professor or instructor at UW-Milwaukee made you feel that they were not supportive of you as a student parent? If so, can you tell me about what happened?

       c.   In general, how would you describe professors/instructors on this campus regarding how supportive they are of student parents?

25. Would you describe for me the proudest moment you've had **academically** at UWM? What happened and how did you accomplish it?

26. Would you share with me the most difficult moment you've had **academically** at UWM? Tell me the story of what happened—did you get through it? If so, how? If not—what happened?

Life Impact Questions

27. What made you apply to Life Impact? Why did you decide to apply?

28. If you had to name one thing that is different in your student experience because of Life Impact, what would that thing be, and how has your student experience changed because of your experience in the program?

29. Can you think of any specific challenges that Life Impact helped you deal with? How did Life Impact help you deal with those challenges?

30. What do you think is the single most important thing that Life Impact provides to participating students?

31. What effect, if any, has the Life Impact Program had on your family (including your spouse or partner, your children, and anyone else who lives with you)?

32. Is there anything unique about Life Impact that you haven't experienced with other programs?

33. If you could offer one idea to Life Impact to make the program better, what would it be?

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