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# An Exploration of Campus Resources and Strategies that Support First-Year College Students who are Young Unmarried Mothers

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AN EXPLORATION OF CAMPUS RESOURCES AND STRATEGIES THAT SUPPORT  
FIRST-YEAR COLLEGE STUDENTS WHO ARE YOUNG UNMARRIED MOTHERS

By

TABITHA JEAN ROBINSON

A Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the

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Psalm 119:105      Jeremiah 29:11

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to learn how colleges and universities can help first-year college students who are young, unmarried mothers succeed. The transition from high school to college is a bit of a learning curve. In high school, students have a very structured environment and much of their schedule is planned for them. When they get to college, they are expected to be independent adults and know how to manage their own lives. This can be very difficult and many students struggle through their first year of college. Students who become mothers before or during their first year of college have to learn an additional set of responsibilities as they learn how to be a parent and raise a child. The challenge of learning how to balance the roles of student and mother are difficult enough as they both require a lot of time. All of these challenges - being a mother, a student, and a first-time college student can be very overwhelming and thus make succeeding in college a struggle. I designed and conducted a research study to learn about the experiences of first-year college students who are young unmarried mothers. This study was conducted at a large southeastern university with eight participants who were either current students or graduates of the university. I conducted one-on-one interviews in my office and the interview method was either in-person or over the phone. To be eligible for the study participants currently had to be between the ages of 18-30 and at the time their child was born, been in their first-year of college, unmarried and between the ages of 18-21. Study results indicate first-year college students who are young, unmarried mothers need; 1) relationships on-campus to succeed, 2) devoted campus resources, and 3) opportunities to build a sense of belongingness. Implications include the development of a student parent scholar program on-campus, the development of a student parent resource center and on-campus childcare.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Summary**

The transition from high school to college is a bit of a learning curve. In high school, students have a very structured environment and much of their schedule is planned for them. When they get to college, they are expected to be independent adults and know how to manage their own lives. This can be very difficult and many students struggle through their first year of college. Students who become mothers before or during their first year of college, have to learn an additional set of responsibilities as they learn how to be a parent and raise a child. The challenge of learning how to balance the roles of student and mother are difficult enough as they both require a lot of time. All of these challenges; being a mother, a student, and a first-time college student can be very overwhelming and thus make succeeding in college a struggle.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Student mothers are often an unsupported population on college campuses, with education often leaning more towards the 18 – 24 year old single college students who begin college right out of high school (Mahaffey, Hungerford, & Sill, 2015). Despite the fact that education leans more towards the traditional college student, twenty-six percent of the undergraduate student population in the United States have children and seventy-one percent of those are women (Kensinger & Minnick, 2018). With student parents making up more than a quarter of the undergraduate student population in the United States, colleges need resources available to support them.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research study was to learn how colleges and universities can help first-year college students who are young, unmarried mothers succeed. I designed and conducted a research study to learn about the experiences of first-year college students who are young unmarried mothers. This study was conducted at a large southeastern university with eight participants who were either current students or graduates of the university. I conducted one-on-one interviews in my office and the interview method was either in-person or over the phone. To be eligible for the study, participants must currently be between the ages of 18-30 and at the time their child was born, been in their first-year of college, unmarried and between the ages of 18-21. See Appendix B for the participant consent form and Appendix C for the participant interview questions.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the needs of first-year college students who are young unmarried mothers?
2. What can colleges do to help first-year students who are young unmarried mothers, balance their many roles?
3. What campus resources are beneficial to young unmarried mothers?

### **Significance to the Field**

This research study is significant because there is no existing research about the experience of first-year students who are young, unmarried mothers. The findings of this study can be used to develop programs to help first-year students who are parents, succeed in college.

### **Terminology**

#### **Nontraditional Students**

Nontraditional students can be categorized as those who fit one or more of these categories; not enrolling in postsecondary education in the same calendar year that the student finished high school, attends school part-time, works full-time, is financially independent, has dependents other than a spouse, is a single parent, does not have a high school diploma (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011).

### **First-Year Student**

A first-year student refers to a college student who has completed less than 30 credit hours of college coursework.

### **Young Unmarried Mother**

An individual who was not married when they had their child and were between the ages of 18-21 when they gave birth.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

Student parents make up 26 percent of the entire undergraduate student body (Beeler, 2016). Of those students, about 44 percent are doing so without the support of a partner and of those students, about 80 percent are women (Kruvelis, 2017). A report by the Institute for Women's Policy Research, revealed that only 8% of single mothers who enroll in college graduate with an associate or bachelor's degree within six years, compared with 49 percent of women students who are not mothers (Gault, Milli, Reichlin Cruse, 2018). The fact that only 8% of single mothers graduate within six years, indicates that there is a problem. Student parents have to find a balance between their roles of student, parent, and often, employee as well.

Without that balance, something will suffer. As researchers Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011, p. 36) explain, “the challenge for non-traditional students lies ... in striking a balance between their academic and external commitments that enables them to reach a level of engagement sufficient to achieve academic success.”

In one study by Moreau & Kerner, 2015, a group of student parents were interviewed, and the research revealed that, “students talked of a ‘balancing act,’ through which they aimed to dedicate enough time to the needs of their family, to their studies and to their other activities and people that matter in their lives” (p. 219). There hasn’t been much research into first-year college students who are young unmarried mothers, so much of the literature below will explore the relevance of this topic to student parents in general. However, in a research article published earlier this year, authors shared that while single mothers do face many obstacles while trying to make their way through college, “if just one quarter of single mothers completed a degree, it would have significant impact on national single mother poverty” (Dodson & Deprez, 2019, p. 37). This statement brings attention to this important yet under-served subpopulation of students on college campuses. The literature review below explores several topics that are relevant to student parents and their success.

## **Topics Relevant to Student Parents and Their Success:**

### **Nontraditional Students**

Non-traditional students can struggle with trying to find classes that fit their schedule because they are pulled in many directions as a student, parent, and (for many) employee. These numerous responsibilities, especially the home responsibilities, can impede a mother’s educational progression (Osam, Bergman, & Cumberland, 2017). Trying to find a class schedule

that works with their child's schedule can be especially difficult (Brown & Nichols, 2013). Between course prerequisites, limited availability and varying registration time tickets, student parents may not be able to get the classes they need and therefore end up taking longer to complete their degree program.

### **Class scheduling**

According to Woods and Frogge (2017), most traditional college students prefer to take classes in person instead of hybrid or online. For non-traditional students who are parents, they have the challenge of splitting their time between school, their child, and often work as well. Since the majority of classes are generally offered during the day, it makes it difficult for non-traditional students to get to classes in-person. In the same study completed by Woods and Frogge, they found that only a third of non-traditional students preferred face-to-face classes to online classes. Because of their schedule, it makes it easier for some mothers to take fully online classes and others, in the evening. Classes are often only offered once every few semesters, often only in the morning or only in the evening, or only through only one method of delivery, either online or in-person. With all of these limitations put on class offerings, it makes their already difficult task of registering for classes around their child's schedule, even more difficult.

Other than General Education courses that are required for all students, courses generally don't have sections offered all day long. Students who are parents have to balance multiple roles which can make it difficult to get the classes they need. When courses are offered infrequently, it can be even more difficult for student parents to get the classes they need. This can cause student mothers to fall behind in their degree progress, have to sacrifice time with their child, or sacrificing their job. Student mothers must find childcare for their kid(s) while they are in class and often while they are studying as well. Even with online classes, there may be scenarios

where a parent needs childcare for their child. If they are working on a test online or another assignment where they need to be focused and without interruptions, they may need childcare. Another thing to note, online classes often come with an additional fee for each online class. Childcare is often expensive and difficult to find at the time needed.

## **Childcare**

In a recent study, researchers found that childcare was the number one resource student mothers identified as a barrier to their academic success (Roy, Bradecich, Dayne, & Luna, 2018). Not having access to and/or not being able to afford reliable childcare puts an additional strain on student parents. Some student parents have family members who are able to watch their children, which can alleviate some of the stress that comes with unreliable childcare. The role of family support through childcare, or otherwise, cannot be understated. A research study conducted in 2018 revealed the important role of family in the life of a single mother. According to the study, the majority of single mothers at a university attributed their success to the emotional, moral, financial, and childcare support of family (Carpenter, Kaka, Tygret, & Cathcart, 2018).

Childcare is generally very expensive, and daycare centers have set hours, which may not be conducive to the hours needed by a student. Between the cost and the time conflicts, it can be difficult to find childcare. In one study, researchers heard from students, “many spoke of putting their children in private daycare, which were perceived as extremely expensive” (2013, p. 514). Some students are fortunate enough to go to colleges that have childcare available on campus. Having accessible on-campus childcare helps students succeed in their college journey, “effective learning environments are built on the success of staff and faculty, which sometimes requires space to support these individuals’ needs, whether it be meeting areas, cafeterias, daycare centers, or research facilities” (Cort, Cort, & Williams, 2017, p. 102). Some on-campus

childcare centers provide discounted rates to students who struggle financially. For example, the University of Georgia's childcare program offers a reduced rate for those who are low-income (University of Georgia). Unfortunately, programs such as these have been on the decline. Between 2002-2015, the number of child care centers on campus dropped by 5 percent (Eckerson et al., 2016).

### **Professors**

Another issue that student mothers must deal with are their professors. According to Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding, and Lunde (2017), student mothers experienced difficulties with their professors because they did not acknowledge their multiple roles. Although some professors are willing to work with students who are mothers, many still see college as a student's primary responsibility. As stated by Beeler, "Although they are expected to be ideal students, single mothers are also expected to be 'ideal parents'" (Beeler, 2016, p. 71). Sometimes student mothers must miss class because of their child, and not all professors are willing to work with these students.

### **Campus Resources and Support**

"One study found that 52% of parenting students left higher education before degree attainment (at six years) compared to 31.7% of their non-parenting counterparts" (Nichols, Biederman, & Gringle, 2017, p. 70). The resources and types of support available to student parents, often varies by college. One study identified the specific need for parent resource centers on campus (Kensinger & Minnick, 2018). Resource centers dedicated to student parents could provide student parents with information about childcare, scholarships, and Title IX information (2018, p.142). Additionally, as Moreau explains, "by rendering the perception of carers, children

and pregnant bodies invisible in academia, media, national policy and university ‘texts’ regulate (the) student body/ies and normalise the association of the ‘bachelor boy’ with HE [higher education]” (2016, p. 913).

There are a number of campus resources available to students on college campuses. These resources can help students with their academics as well as their personal lives. Campus resources such as counseling and psychological services as well as tutoring are offered at most colleges and can have a positive impact on the students who take advantage of them. Other resources that can help students are student organizations dedicated to specific sub-populations of students as well as organizations that are designed to unite students who share things such as similar life circumstances and/or experiences or a belief system. Many colleges have a student organization dedicated specifically to student parents. This type of organization is a great networking opportunity and can help student parents by bringing parents together to network with others who share common experiences (Mahaffey, Hungerford, & Sill, 2015).

### **Academic Advising**

Academic Advising is an essential part of a student’s college experience. As one study found, “the levels to which advisors are available to students, actually meet with them, and provide them with assistance and support are clearly linked to factors demonstrated to predict student success” (Young-Jones, Burt, Dixon, & Hawthorne, 2013, pg. 15). Academic Advising goes beyond just class planning. To make the most of academic advising, advisors must get to know their advisees and build relationships with them. In 2009, a mid-Southern doctoral university surveyed 429 undergraduate students about their satisfaction with their advisor’s advising style. Of those students, 95.5% of them indicated that they want a personal relationship with their advisor and seek more from their advising relationship than simply information on

course selection and scheduling (Graham, Hale, Johnson, 2009). When Academic Advisors get to know their students on a personal level, they can help them find a balance between, work, life and school. Additionally, students who meet with their Academic Advisors on a more frequent basis, have a stronger relationship with them (Fosnacht, McCormick, Nailos, & Ribera, 2017). By having a stronger relationship between an advisor and advisee, there is a greater trust factor and advisors are better able to help their students create a plan to help them succeed.

“Student-parents and their families need more attention and focus to be successful” (Roy, Bradecich, & Luna, 2018, pg. 55). The additional attention required can come through more focused advising sessions, campus programs, other campus resources. As reiterated by Brown and Nichols (2013), “in spite of the ‘invisible’ nature of this population, it is vitally important to create programs and policies geared towards pregnant and parenting students” (p. 505).

Resources and support services vary by institution. Even for institutions that do have them, students don’t always know that those resources are available to them. As one study explained, “finally, it was found that even when resources were available for pregnant and parenting students, there was little to no knowledge about their existence” (Brown, Nichols, 2013, pg. 502).

### **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

This study explores the needs of first-year college students who are young unmarried mothers. The outcomes of the study will help identify what those needs are which will provide a better understanding of how colleges can help first-year college students who are young unmarried mothers. This study could potentially fill a gap in the existing research because there does not seem to be research about the type of support that colleges can provide specifically to first-year college students who are young unmarried mothers.

The qualitative study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the needs of first-year college students who are young unmarried mothers?
2. What can colleges do to help first-year students who are young unmarried mothers, balance their many roles?
3. What campus resources are beneficial to young unmarried mothers?

### **Qualitative Research Approach**

Qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2014). The research study I conducted, takes a qualitative approach by using data from interviews. By using a qualitative approach, I was able to learn more about the individual participants, their thoughts and experiences from their first-year of college as an unmarried mother.

### **Study Design and Interview Protocol**

This explorative study investigated the experiences of unmarried mothers in their first year of college. All participants are either attending or already graduated from the same large southeastern university. The university does not have any specific resources for students who are parents. This study provided an opportunity to gain insight from participants who did not have prior experience with campus resources for student parents, to help determine what type of resources they could benefit from.

Using the existing literature, I designed my participant interview questions. All participants were asked a series of questions and depending on their response, additional questions may have been asked as well for clarification (this is widely known as a semi-

structured protocol). Also, as explained by Creswell, researchers can expect the research question to evolve and change during the study (Creswell, 2014). See Appendix C for the list of questions that study participants were asked. The questions were designed to learn more about the participants first-year experience as an unmarried mother as well as to gain insight in to the needs of first-year mothers and to determine what areas the university needs to improve on. These questions gave the study participants the opportunity to expand upon their answers and to open up about their experiences as a first-year college student and an unmarried mother.

I also found that some colleges have student parent programs designed to help student parents succeed. These programs and resources vary by college. To learn more about the type of resources and programs that student parents perceive as helpful, I included a question asking the participants if any of the student services or resources at the university have helped them as a student parent. The literature revealed that unreliable and expensive childcare can negatively affect a student's ability to succeed in college. I also found that the support of family with childcare, positively contributes to student parent's success in college. I used this information about childcare to design the participant interview questions about childcare. The literature also revealed that academic advising plays an important role in the success of students. Research shows that when academic advising involves more than just class planning and students have a personal relationship with their advisor, students are more successful. I included participant questions to ask about the participant's experience with academic advising, to learn more about the impact that it had on them as a student parent. I also included a question asking what academic advisors could do to help student parents.

## **Participants**

To be eligible to participate in the research study, the participants must have become pregnant during or before their first-year of college and they must have been between the ages of 18-21 when they got pregnant with their child. See Appendix B for the participant consent form outlining these requirements.

### **Data Collection**

I included information about the research study along with my contact information, in the university's daily campus-wide student email. See Appendix A for the post requesting study participants. The information was shared multiple times over the span of two weeks. There were approximately eighteen participants who responded to the request and one who was referred to me. Of those participants, I interviewed the ones who (at initial contact) appeared to be eligible. Interviews were conducted over the phone or in person. Using Creswell's *Research Design* as a guide, I created the participant interview questions using exploratory verbs (Creswell, 2014). See Appendix C for the participant interview questions. There were eight participants who I was able to verify their age at the time they gave birth to their child and I received a signed consent form from. See Appendix B for the signed consent form. I recorded their interviews using digital recording device and erased the interviews from the device after uploading them. To protect the privacy of these participants, I used pseudonyms.

### **Data Analysis**

I began the data analysis process by typing verbatim transcriptions from the recorded interviews of the participants. I then used axial coding to analyze the participant interview data.

### **Assumptions**

I had several assumptions about what I would find with my research. I believed that the participants would require a more flexible class schedule and might need to enroll part time. I also expected participants to identify the need for campus support and resources such as parent-friendly organizations, support groups, child care, etc. Additionally, I anticipated that participants might need more easily accessible campus resources, such as offices open longer hours and for advising, the option of virtual appointments.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS**

### **Introduction**

This chapter will review my findings from my interviews with research participants. Through the participant interviews, I found three main themes emerged; relationships, resources, and sense of belonging.

First-year college students who are young, unmarried mothers, need relationships on-campus to succeed. Many of the participants shared about their positive experience with their professors, speaking to the importance of relationships with faculty on campus. College campuses need devoted resources for students who are parents. On-campus childcare was something that participants expressed a need for. Affordable and reliable childcare can be difficult to find. First-year college students who are young, unmarried mothers also need to feel a sense of belonging. Participants shared how they didn't have a way to connect on campus and while they knew other student parents were on campus, they didn't know who they were. Being able to connect with other student parents would be helpful because it would provide them with an opportunity to connect with other student parents and talk about their experiences as a student parent.

I also found some participants who changed their major because of becoming a parent. While I had considered the fact that becoming a parent may cause a student parent to change their major out of necessity, such as to graduate sooner. I didn't anticipate student mothers changing their major because their experience as a student parent affected their career goals.

I organized my study results by participant because I want the participants' stories to be front and center. It is important to hear the narrative of each student in order to get the full picture of their lives and experiences.

### **Participant Narratives**

#### ***Elizabeth***

Elizabeth was 18 years old and attending her first year of college out of state, when she got pregnant, but during her pregnancy believed she had miscarried. Elizabeth moved back home and transferred to a local college she could commute to, to take a few classes with plans on transferring back to her original college later on. During her first semester at her university closer to home, she learned that she never miscarried when she went into labor. Determined to keep up with her college education, she finished writing a paper while she was in the hospital to give birth and three days after having her daughter, she was back in class. In her words,

I didn't want to give up on school like I knew girls that had done in the past. College has always been super important to me, I knew that was like one thing I wanted to do so after everything happened and my life changed courses, I knew I wanted to stay in school regardless.

She began college with a major in the sciences, but after transferring to a college closer to home and having her daughter she decided that she wanted to graduate as quick as possible and

changed her major to something that would allow her to do so. She graduated a little over a year ago, but still managed to graduate in about four years from the time she started college. She didn't know what she wanted to do after college, so her career choice wasn't directly impacted and after interviewing for a variety of positions across several different fields, she ended up working at the same university she graduated from.

During her first year of college at the out of state school, she joined a sorority but decided not to re-affiliate at her new university. Between being a mom, commuting to school, working part time, and attending classes, she did not have time to be very involved on campus, but she attended many of the college football games with friends she grew up with. She also went to some events for fraternities and sororities to show support, as an alum from a sorority herself. Additionally, she had the opportunity to bring her daughter with her to the Greek trick-or-treating event on campus. Elizabeth was also able to be involved on campus by participating in several plays. While in class or at events, she was very fortunate to have several options for childcare. Elizabeth and her daughter live at home with her parents and her parents also assist with childcare. When her daughter was younger, she attended school five days a week from 9am to 1pm and Elizabeth was able to drop her daughter off on her way to campus. After 1pm, Elizabeth's mom or dad, friends, or her parents' friends would pick her daughter up and watch her until Elizabeth got out of class and could come and pick her up. Currently, her daughter is in a three day a week, full day, private preschool and Elizabeth's mom watches her on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Financially, Elizabeth said she was really lucky and most of her college was paid for out of pocket and she had a loan as well that helped with the rest that wasn't paid out of pocket. Now that she has graduated and is working full time, she supports her daughter almost 100 percent.

## *Lakeisha*

Lakeisha was 17 years old and still in high school when she became pregnant. While in high school, she also participated in dual enrollment. While she was originally planning on going straight to college after high school graduation, with the birth of her child, Lakeisha ended up taking a break for a year and a half before starting college. Her motivation to go to college didn't change once she had her daughter,

I definitely knew that I was going to go to college cause neither of my parents did and I was pretty studious in high school so I knew that I was eventually going to go. It was upsetting that I couldn't go right away like I planned but I tried to be positive and think, I can spend the first year with the baby and it's the most important year so that's kind of how I tried to think about it.

Lakeisha started at a community college in her home state and received her associate's degree there. She planned to transfer to a four-year university, also in her home state, but ended up going to a different college for a couple of reasons. The university she was originally planning on going to didn't have the program she wanted to do, additionally she got married and her husband was from out of state, and the public schools in the area were good, and the university was affordable, and they had planned on coming back to this area anyway. Lakeisha would love to be more involved on campus but said there's no way for her to be that involved. She is a senior now and is on track to graduate by next spring. She also said that it is a struggle to get the classes she needs because there is a small amount of classes left that she needs and limited availability for those classes and she can't always get a babysitter at the time the classes are offered. She is also limited to mostly online classes of those that are available. Lakeisha has had some childcare available in the past as her mother in law used to watch her kids (she and her

husband have a child together as well), but her mother in law recently started a new full-time job and is no longer able to watch her kids so they don't have a babysitter available anymore.

Lakeisha said that none of the student success resources at the college she is currently attending have really helped her. She said this has been very frustrating because she has a friend who goes to a different college out of state and her school does have resources available to student parents. Specifically, the school her friend attends offers discounted daycare in the area for students that have kids and Lakeisha noted how helpful it would be to have something like this at her university. She said,

I've never heard of anything at [my college] that's helpful as far as people that have kids and maybe I just don't know about it but I tried searching for any sort of resource for it and I've never seen anything.

Lakeisha didn't have any financial support for herself and her son. Her child's father left when she was pregnant, and her parents didn't agree with her decision so she worked and said she was in school as soon as she was able to be. Since Lakeisha had a dependent, she said that she was able to get additional assistance through the FAFSA. She said she got the maximized amount available because of having a dependent, which was very helpful especially with limited finances. However, she said she eventually used up all the student loans and therefore, has since had to cover it herself or take a loan out. Lakeisha expressed her concern over the amount she has to pay for school and how little usage she gets out of things she is required to pay for:

I feel like, we pay a lot of money for tuition and a lot of stuff that frankly a normal college student would use like the gym and all these crazy fees but I'm not going to use that, I live an hour away, I go to school to go to school, that's it. And I would rather have my tuition go to, I get a discount at some daycare or maybe they can recommend a place,

have on-site daycare, anything would be incredibly helpful. But having to pay like \$300 a semester, however much for the gym, which I'm never going to use, is frustrating.

Lakeisha said daycare is really expensive and it would be great to be able to go to the school's website find a list of the daycares in the area that would give students a discount if they show their ID. She also said that they use the school's healthcare and while it is a good plan, the high cost has been a real struggle for her and her husband.

Lakeisha has had the opportunity to do some internships but does not work full time because of her limited time between her kids and her classes. She said that it has been difficult trying to balance all her roles, especially as her kids are getting older because they have things such as school plays, extracurricular activities, and parent-teacher conferences. Additionally, there are often instances where there was an emergency and her babysitter cancelled so she ended up having to take her child to class with her. She said so far, she was fortunate to have a professor who was understanding. Another time, her son had surgery and she had to miss a couple classes, but when she returned and tried to explain the situation to her professor he reiterated the class policy that after a certain number of absences, the final class grade will drop a letter. Lakeisha said she felt like her professor wasn't "looking through the perspective of somebody as a normal college student; they're never going to have something like this and even if they did, you have to be understanding." She also said that she does her best in school and makes really good grades and having two kids, school, court dates with her first son's father, being sick, and everything and then having a professor who doesn't understand or care was almost hurtful.

Lakeisha said she's has had a pretty good experience with academic advising; she usually only goes in if she has specific questions. The one thing she found frustrating was when she

needed information about a minor that fell within in a different college and her academic advisor didn't have information about it. In addition to the lack of resources for parents, one of her biggest issues with her college is scheduling. She said she understands that to a point, it comes down to staffing though. However, there are some classes that many students need but there aren't enough sections offered and when they are offered, there aren't enough seats in the sections. Lakeisha told me about a class she wanted to take this semester but was unable to because of time it is offered,

I sat at a computer this semester in tears cause the class that I've been so excited to take was data management cause I want to work in databases ... this is one of the classes I was looking forward to the most but I needed it this semester and I just couldn't do it at 3 o'clock.

She also said that class offerings could be more reasonable so that parents could have the opportunity to take evening classes. This semester, there weren't any evening classes she could take because everything started at 5pm and she wouldn't have been able to get to class until 6pm. She went on further to explain that a lot of people get off of work at 5pm and they can't make it to campus sooner, especially in Atlanta traffic. Something she would like to see added to her college campus, is a student parent organization, to provide student parents with a place where they can come and talk about their stressful situations. She also said that she would be willing to exchange babysitting during class hours with other student parents.

### ***Rebecca***

Rebecca got pregnant at 17 years old, when she was still in high school. She already had plans to go to a different university in the state, but said she had to, "completely get rid of that

plan and then decide to take a semester off' before she ended up going to a university closer to home. Before her daughter was born, she didn't know what she wanted to major in, but after having her, she decided to major in Biology with the career goal of being an OB. Rebecca said she had no interest in doing that before she had her daughter. She dual enrolled her senior year of high school and plans to take classes every semester, including summer and is currently taking fifteen credit hours this semester.

Rebecca and her daughter live with her parents and she said most of the time, when she is on campus, her daughter stays with either her sister, mom, or one of her best friends and her parents. Rebecca is in her first semester of college and said that it has been stressful being away from her daughter. She also explained how she is trying to keep every aspect of her life separate,

it's definitely hard because I like to keep it separate ... and my mom, she's like, why don't you take [your daughter] with you to the meeting, and I'm like, cause I want it like, separate. I know this is for school, I know this is for school, but I want to keep them separate.

Financially, her parents are helping and take care of most of what her and her daughter need. She also works part time while she is in school. Since Rebecca is still new to college, she said she hasn't had experience with campus resources or services yet but that she really likes college so far and all her professors. She shared, as with many other participants about her experience communicating with her professors. She had to miss the first day of the semester because her daughter wasn't doing well with her babysitter. When she emailed her professors to let them know, she said they were very nice and understanding. Having that open communication with her professor proved to be very helpful because they were very understanding. She would like to see an on-campus daycare. She said if her daughter were here on campus, she would feel

more at peace knowing she is right there. Right now, Rebecca said that she is on campus for some of her classes, but would like to do as many online as possible in the future, “I wish I had more online classes so I could be home more but it’s just, it’s fine cause I need that time away from her too I guess cause I guess it’s good for both of us.” Before getting pregnant, Rebecca wanted to rush and join a sorority. When Rush comes around again in the fall, she would still like to do it because she doesn’t want to miss out on it and later regret not doing it.

### *Victoria*

Victoria was 20 when she got pregnant with her child and had already dropped out of college the first time but said she was planning to go back to college. However, once she got pregnant she thought there wasn’t a chance of her being able to go back to school now. She got a job waitressing, but said, “I want more for myself and more for my family and I don’t like being away at night” so she decided to go back to school. She is currently a non-traditional freshman and said that her experience homeschooling her stepdaughter led her to change to a science major instead.

Between she and her husband, who was also a single parent, they have two kids. While she is in class, she said her kids stay either with her neighbors or their kids, her pastor and his wife or her parents. Since she is in school full time and working part time and her husband works, she said she has to get a babysitter for an hour until her husband gets home so that way he can take the kids and on the nights she comes in later, she has to wait for her husband to get home before she can leave..

Victoria also works part time and attends school full time and because of this, said that her campus involvement is limited. She said she is going take classes every fall, spring, and

summer and plans on graduating in three years. Victoria said that financially, things are really difficult for her and her husband, especially with expenses such as babysitters and even the gas to get to campus. She is using student loans to pay for school. Victoria said that she is worried that her grades will slip and she can't afford a babysitter more than one day a week and so she uses that day to study and do what she needs to do. She also said she doesn't sleep that much, "most nights I'm waiting till the kids go to bed and then I'm up till 3, 4, o'clock in the morning doing school work and I'm up again at 6." Victoria hasn't found any campus resources to help her with balancing her roles of parent, student, and employee, noting that there is nothing on campus for parents. She has been fortunate with her professors though, that if she has had to miss a class because of her child, they've been understanding. Victoria also reiterated the importance of communication with professors. This speaks to the importance of open communication and a relationship between student parents and their professors. At the beginning of this section, I noted that students mentioned the need for student parent resources on campus. Victoria shared that she would like to see on-campus childcare or options for parental health and also noted the high cost of childcare in the area. She said even if someone could help her find childcare in her price range, that would be helpful. Someone told her about a daycare in the area, but it was very expensive and there's no way she would be able to afford it. Additionally, Victoria would like more hybrid class options, which would be more manageable for her, as a parent, to attend. She also suggested a possible option for on-campus childcare, to have the students in the education program, work at an on-campus daycare and have extended hours for parents with later classes. Another suggestion she gave, was to have family-oriented events or extra-curriculars on campus, such as inflatables on the green during finals week as well as opportunities for parents to interact and mingle on campus, through events such as a parents night out, "that way, they can share

stories and ways that they do, how they cope with it and how you cope with it. Cause you know, not everyone has all the ideas and sometimes you got to exchange them.” She noted that everything extracurricular is geared towards the general college who lives on campus or close by and are free on the weekend and don’t have a job that requires a lot of work hours.

### ***Hannah***

Hannah had her daughter at 18, the summer after she graduated from high school. She decided not to go to the school she was originally planning, but said she knew that was going to still going to go to school, “but my desire to go to school never changed because I knew it would be best for both of us.” She originally wanted to go to med school but after having her daughter said she realized that wasn’t going to be feasible so she changed her major to Nursing instead. Her first semester, she decided to take online classes and then ease into traditional classes. She hasn’t had the opportunity to involved on campus, “I think just my stage of life is so different than everyone else, I haven’t really found a community. I mean I have some friends that are here but not really so it’s just everyone’s kind of doing different things; going out partying and I’m you know, at home, so it’s just different.” Hannah plans on taking four classes a semester in the upcoming semesters, but isn’t sure how long it will take to graduate and said that she is going to see how things go.

Hannah’s daughter lives with her but while she is in class, her mom watches her. Hannah's dad is a pastor and there is a childcare program for kids of the staff, which her daughter is going to be a part of beginning next semester. Financially, Hannah and her daughter get some support from the father of her child, but her parents help as well. The biggest challenge Hannah faces with being a parent and a student, is finding enough time in the day. She said she doesn’t have enough time in the day and she has to be more intentional when planning on her days. She

also said that it is hard to find time to do school and take care of her daughter and still try to have some space for herself and she doesn't have friends nearby because they all left to go to school, so she doesn't have a community. She has also had very understanding professors. She said her daughter was sick last week and she could only make an appointment during one of her classes so she had to miss class for it because there isn't much she can do about it since it is just her and her daughter.

Hannah said she feels like she isn't getting anywhere, since she is taking so few classes. Her advisors have been encouraging her to keep at it though as she told me, "just because something feels too hard right now doesn't mean it's always going to be too hard." She has had two advising appointments so far and had another one scheduled for the week after I met with her. Originally, she said she is going to do the whole year all online, but when she went through the classes she needed to take and what she could take online, how to spread out the class times, etc. With her timeline for graduation and the number of classes she was planning on, she said it was going to take her double the time to graduate and even though she said online classes would be best for her, some classes, like math, she won't do online because doing math online won't do well. I asked what academic advisors could do to best help students who are parents and she said, to just be understanding, "I feel like as a student parent and being so young, people are pretty quick to judge like I'm not, I don't know, most people were shocked when they heard that I was still going to school." Hannah also shared that while she has always been very accepted and supported, not everyone will be that way. She shared something else she experienced, "I've found out, so many people that are pro-life and then once you decide to raise your child, there's not the support once you get to that point, so I wish that there was more of that, people supporting you along the way, once your child's actually born."

Hannah said the school she was originally planning on going to a different university that has a house for student moms to live in with their child, for the first year of their child's life. The program also has students that help baby-sit while the mom(s) are in classes. Once they finish the first-year program, they help the student(s) find housing elsewhere. As I explained earlier that students need to have a sense of belonging on campus, Hannah said that it would be great to have that kind of community (like the other university) and ability to connect to other moms, because she knows there are other student moms but there's only one other that she knows of. Her friend who is a year younger also has a daughter and Bailey said that has made a big difference because they are both going through the same situation. She said that the school has been great in giving her so many different options for classes, and her advisors have all been great, and with the student parent research, it says a lot about the campus and the community here and she is so thankful for everything here.

### *Stacey*

Stacey was 19 and in her first year of college when she became pregnant with her first child. When Stacey found out that she was pregnant, she changed her plans for the next semester and took classes that she thought would be less academically rigorous. She said she always liked online classes and tried to take at least one online class a semester so she didn't have to be on campus as much each semester. She also stayed a full time student every semester. She graduated in about five years instead of four but said that was due to the fact that she was not taking five classes each semester.

Stacey's son lived with her but while she was in class, she said she was very lucky to have her mom watch him. Her mom already had in-home daycare so Stacey said she never had to worry about daycare or anything like that. Financially, her parents helped a lot and for college,

she had scholarships and her parents covered the difference. She explained how some things changed once she became a parent, “well obviously, so I always liked school, but I didn’t like it as much once I had him because it wasn’t as fun as he was. I would much rather come home and play with him than have to do school work.” She said things changed socially as well because she didn’t leave to go out and didn’t do anything except for school. Additionally, Stacey didn’t work while she was in school. She said that none of the school’s student services and resources helped her with her college experience as both a mom and a student. Right before she graduated though, a survey was sent out to students asking about childcare on campus and if they had a child, whether or not they would use it. She said nothing ever came of that, but she knows of other colleges in Georgia that have a daycare on campus through the education program. She said that having a daycare on campus would help parents a lot.

Stacey saw her major advisor when she was an education major and after she changed her major to psychology, she met with that advisor as well. She said her psychology advisor really took her time and broke everything down for her. Stacey recommended that advisors offer different times to meet outside of the normal 8 to 5 to better help accommodate student parents. She also said being more flexible, such as offering phone advising and skype advising and also being flexible for students who are late. Stacey told me that before she had her son, she was always on time for things but after, she was always late. Some advising offices have a policy that if students show up a certain amount of minutes late, their appointment will be cancelled, “that would be really tough if you got your kid in the car, came up here, and then had to reschedule because you were late.”

*Olivia*

Olivia got pregnant at 17 and had her son at 18 when she was in her first year of college. Because of the huge support system that she had, her plans didn't have to change and she was able to continue pursuing her college education, "my parents were very like, no, you need to go to school. If anything, you need to get your education, that's our main priority." After having her son, she went part time online for two semesters before switching back to full time.

Olivia wasn't able to be very involved on campus because she didn't have time and she didn't have a babysitter which also limited her availability to get involved. She said she is very lucky that she doesn't have to work right now, but she did work for about three years after having her son, "it was very overwhelming with school and my grades were dropping so I had to switch majors and it was just one of those things like, had I not had him, it might have been easier to focus in that area but he's a blessing." She was originally planning on being a teacher for middle grades education, but after the experience her sister had as a teacher, she changed her major. The new major she switched to required 200 hours of work outside of school though, so she changed her major again and this is the one she ended up keeping and will be graduating with this semester. Her degree program gave her more flexibility with online, hybrid, and night classes which she said, definitely helps. She doesn't know what she wants to do for a career yet, but has considered a variety of things such as Human Resources, training and development, or academic advising. She said she doesn't have a specific passion yet, but needs to kind of dip her toes into something to get an idea.

Olivia's son lives with her and goes to school five days a week from 9am to 1pm, so she has tried to schedule her classes during that time frame. Her mom was a stay at home mom with her and her sister and now watches him as well, when she has to come to campus for night classes. At first, she didn't have financial support for school because she wasn't working and her

parents still claimed her on their taxes so she couldn't file as an independent when she was filing for FAFSA. She said that once she started working though, she was able to file as an independent and received Pell which has been a huge help. Since she isn't working now, she said she is living off refund money which takes care of all her needs and her parents pay her insurance, her car, and other needs, but anything outside of that she is on her own. She usually will pick up a summer job though.

Her biggest challenge is time, "you wanna have as much time with your child as possible but then at the same time, you want to be that support system for them and be able to provide financially and you will also at the same time, are juggling another hand and like I'm trying to do well in school and so it's just basically finding the time." She sacrificed a supervisor position at Carter's, where she had worked for three years so she would have the time she needed for her son and school. As far as success in school, she said that her advisor (when she was in her former major) was very helpful in working with her and helping her figure out if she had any options. Along those lines, Olivia said that one of the things that Academic Advisors can do to help student parents, is to be transparent with them, "saying you know, like this is what you have to do and like we're going to work with you to fit your schedule as best we can." She also would like to see more classes offered because that has been a struggle for her to try and find classes that fit into her schedule. While she noted that this is not just a student parent problem, but for students in general, students who are parents, don't have other options the way students who don't have a child might. Olivia said that something that would be helpful to have on campus, that wasn't available to her when she found out she was pregnant, is pregnancy tests. She didn't have a car when she lived on campus her freshman year so she and her best friend had to walk from campus to the off campus pharmacy, for her to get one because none were available

anywhere on campus. Additionally, Olivia would like to see early intervention for student parents, “I feel like that would be helpful and just that you know, constant, you’re gonna be okay, like you have, you’re gonna be able to do it and maybe even success stories.” She noted that while the school showcases all these wonderful students all the time, those students are rarely student parents, especially young student parents. While she hasn’t personally experienced an issue with her professors not accepting her child as a reason for not being able to make it to class, she said she has heard of students who have had this issue.

### *Mia*

When Mia got pregnant at 19, her college plans changed. She was originally planning on attending the semester after her pregnancy, but ended up taking a whole year off. She originally enrolled here before she got pregnant, but after her year off, she decided to go to a technical college instead. When a change at Mia’s job allowed her to work closer to the university, she was able to transfer back. Mia said that she would be able to attend classes a little bit easier because she could be at her child’s school after her classes or work.

Mia said she has always wanted to do Accounting for her major so that stayed the same even when she transferred schools. She also said she has always had to work so that was her priority and then school. She tried some online classes, but said she isn’t very good with online courses, “I knew that if I wanted to be successful, I needed to figure out a way that I could be able to attend classes and you know, have to sit in a classroom to learn the material versus being at home.” She is currently a sophomore and is planning on taking courses every semester, including, summers, to catch up from the year she took off. She said her goal to finish her degree is Spring 2021. She isn’t taking as many classes each semester because her time is limited with working full time and being a parent. Mia works while her son is at school and her mom watches

him when he gets out of school. She said that her mom stepped down from a position to work less hours so that she could pick him up from school and watch him until she gets out of classes. Mia supports her son financially and said that it is easier now that he is in public school because she doesn't have the daycare expense and between aftercare and her mom, he has someone to watch him until she gets out of class. Mia is using Pell grant for school but said her job also has a tuition reimbursement program that she is able to use.

The biggest challenge Mia faces is with time and she has to pre-plan a lot. She explained that Sunday's are when she grocery shops, gets food, makes it ahead, and makes sure that she and her son are prepared for the week because she said her weeks get kind of crazy. She further explain, "I find myself not home a lot and you know, also with my son, there's days where I don't see him at all, like by the time I pick him up from my mom's house, he's asleep and so we're waking up the next morning and we're back on a routine where he needs to be at school early so now I'm waking him up, getting him ready, and he's gone off to school again and I'm off to work but I think the biggest thing is like time management and I think also missing out on quality time with him, but I try to make up for the best I can on the weekend; we have a lot of fun on the weekend." Mia said that she has started looking into student services recently, since she is getting through her degree requirements. Because her time is so limited though, she said she can't commit to a lot. Mia said that she met with an Academic Advisor last year and it went well, as they were able to give her a good understanding of what she needed to do. Mia is still trying to find a way to move closer to campus so she can attend more classes. She said that her advisor told her about evening classes, which she already knew about, but that would take time away from her son so she is not sure if she would do evening classes. Mia said she didn't mention to her advisor that she was a parent because she doesn't want it to be an excuse, "I want

to be focused on what I'm trying to do and not use any type of big excuse to why I can't do it." She said that she would like to see childcare incorporated in some way on campus, "I would even pay for it, like ... just to know someone's there, cause, you know a lot of daycares, they don't have evening hours so it's, you pick up your kid by 6 or 6:30 and then if you're working full time and it's during business hours, you have to figure out something for that evening."

### **Data Analysis**

To analyze the participant interview data, I created a word document with all the participant interview questions. I then copied the answer from each interview transcription into the word document and analyzed the responses to each question. To discover if there were any similarities between the participant answers, I organized a word document with all of the participant questions and then copy-pasted the answer from all participants under each question. I then used axial coding to group similar responses and began developing key concepts, followed by themes.

### **Thematic Summary**

Again, the three themes that emerged from the study were the importance of relationships, need for campus sources, and participants' sense of belonging. With relationships, participants expressed the importance of good communication with their professors. Participants expressed the interest in and need for resources such as on-campus childcare, a prenatal health center, and a resource center for student parents. The participants shared their current and past childcare arrangements and how it affected their class and (for those who work) work schedules. Sense of belonging was important to study participants because many of them expressed that they didn't have a way to connect on-campus. They also expressed that being able to share

experiences with other student parents would be helpful to learn how others have handled situations. For several participants, their choice of major was affected as well as their experience as a parent affected their future career goal.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION**

I found that there is room for improvement with student parent resources on college campuses. Between the literature review and the student interviews, I learned that on-campus childcare is something that would be very beneficial. Not having enough time in the day is something I found both in the literature as well as from my participant interviews. Additionally, student parents often feel marginalized on campus and feel that they don't fit anywhere, thus lacking a sense of community or sense of belonging. Student parent resource centers are a great way to help alleviate this problem because provides students with a place they can go to get information as well as a way to connect with other student parents, thus giving them a sense of community, or sense of belonging. For students in their first year of college, they face the additional challenge of learning what it means to be a college student on top of everything else. Several students expressed how they either wanted to be involved on campus or were already involved on campus during their first-year of college, but those plans had to change when they got pregnant and had their child. Instead of being able to connect on campus in their first year of college, the extent of their time on campus was going to class. Having student parent organizations would help bridge this gap for student parents, especially in their first year. One study that looked at student involvement in intramural sports in students first-year of college, determined that involvement would lead to increased retention (McElveen & Rossow, 2014). If student parents have a group to serve as a support system and other students to connect with in their first-year of college, this could increase their retention.

## **Thematic Discussion**

### **Relationships**

Participants expressed the positive experiences that they have had with their professors when they openly communicated with them about their situation. Building those relationships between students who are parents and faculty, has proven to be successful in helping student succeed with their classes. Some participants also shared their negative experiences with professors. One participant shared a specific instance where she was late getting an assignment turned in because her daughter had been sick the night before. However, her professor didn't believe her and told that making up a daughter wasn't an excuse. Another participant shared that her child had been in the hospital which caused her to miss a couple classes and when she came back to class the next week and explained to her professor why she was absent, her professor wasn't willing to work with her.

Participants who had experience with academic advising, generally said that it has been a positive one. Again, when a student parent builds that relationship with their academic advisor and openly communicates with them, they are better able to help a student plan for success.

### **Resources**

Participants shared the need for campus resources that are specifically for student parents. One resource that most participants mentioned, was on-campus childcare. As explained in the literature review, researchers found that childcare was the number one resource student mothers identified as a barrier to their academic success (Roy, Bradecich, Dayne, & Luna, 2018). One of the biggest issues that unmarried young student mother face, is trying to find childcare while they are in class (and at work). Two of the main issues with childcare are the high cost as well as

the hours at daycare centers. Most daycares don't have evening hours and for mothers who work during the day and go to school in the evening, they face the struggle of trying to find additional childcare. For students that don't have friends or family around to watch their kids, they are left with limited options for classes. These students either must bring their child with them to class or try to get their classes online. While some professors are understanding and don't mind students bringing their children with them to class, others won't allow it. Additionally, many universities have a policy that minors are not allowed on campus. Also, while many programs offer online class options, but not all students do well in online classes and are at an additional disadvantage because they can't take them. On-campus childcare centers help alleviate these issues because students don't lose as much time coming and going between work, class, and daycare centers, because they can bring their child with them to campus and drop them off at daycare there. There are many colleges who offer on-campus childcare programs. These programs range from daycare centers located on-campus to student parent programs that incorporate housing for students and their children. While student parent housing programs may not be as feasible for all universities, on-campus childcare may be a more manageable option. One way to accomplish this, is by incorporating education programs (majors) as they are already established on campus. Some colleges offer a childcare center through their education degree program, which provides an opportunity not only for student parents but also for students majoring in the degree program. On-campus daycare centers can also offer extended hours to meet the needs of student parents who take evening classes. Either way, as backed up by literature, "effective learning environments are built on the success of staff and faculty, which sometimes requires space to support these individuals' needs, whether it be meeting areas, cafeterias, daycare centers, or research facilities" (Cort, Cort, & Williams, 2017, pg. 102).

Another type of resource is student parent programs, such as the one at Endicott College. Endicott College's Keys to Degree program provides young students parents with the opportunity to attend college with their child (Endicott College, 2019). Students accepted to this program receive benefits such as a scholarship, childcare, and on-campus housing. Additionally, these students have access to tutoring services and extra childcare for students to be able to participate in on-campus events. Another institution with a lot of opportunities for student parents, is University of California – Berkeley. UC-Berkeley's Early Childhood Education Program provides care for to more than 200 infant – preschool aged children of faculty, staff, and students (University of California – Berkeley). They also provide a list of childcare resources in the county. One of the most advantageous aspects of their program is the back-up childcare. Of those colleges that have on-campus childcare, most are structured programs and don't offer back-up childcare as an option. While the programs at both Endicott College and the University of California – Berkeley are both great examples of programs that support student mothers, there has been a decline in these programs across the United States.

Additionally, a student parent resource center for student parents would be a great way to provide a centralized location for student parents to find helpful information. Some information that could be provided through a resource centers would be, Title IX information, local (or on-campus) childcare information, and prenatal health information.

### **Sense of Belonging**

A sense of belonging, or sense of community seems to be missing for student parents on college campuses. Due to the many responsibilities of student parents, they don't always have a chance to get involved on campus. Even more than that, these students don't always have a way to connect with other students because of their unique situation. Student parents aren't

necessarily an easily identifiable group of students on campus, which can make it difficult for these students to connect with each other. While having a child isn't necessarily something that student parents try to hide, it also isn't something that generally comes up in conversation. Therefore, without a way to identify or bring together student parents on campus, many student parents go through college feeling alone or without a community. One way to solve this problem, is through student-parent organizations. Offering student-parent organizations on campus provides a way for student parents to connect with other student parents. This is important to their success, because student parents are able to share their stories, learn from others who have gone through and are currently going through the same thing they are. There are many colleges that offer student parent organizations, but there are still many who do not. Building this sense of community will help these students succeed and encourage students to keep moving forward despite the challenges they may be facing. Students who may otherwise feel lost and question their decision to go to school and raise a child at the same time, will know that they are not alone and that they have a community they can identify with and reach out to if they are struggling.

### **Limitations**

A limitation of this study is that all study participants are currently attending or graduated from the same large southeastern university. Additionally, the participant interview questions were researcher created and it is possible that I phrased the questions incorrectly. Another limitation is that two of the participants are colleagues so they might not have been as forthcoming with their answers.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

I would recommend doing another research study to learn more about the needs of student parents, but instead of narrowing it to down to a certain age range and just mothers, I think it would be beneficial to include all student parents. The large southeastern university the study participants came from is currently lacking in student parent resources. This could be beneficial to another research study as well because the absence of resources provides an opportunity to hear from students who do not have prior experience with them, to see what type of resources they would like to have on-campus. Some of the participants mentioned different student parent resources they were aware of at other campuses. For example, two participants had knowledge of student parent resource centers at other universities. I recommend doing a research study at a university that has established student parent resources and comparing the student responses with the responses of students at a university that does not have any.

Now that I have learned how important sense of belonging is to first-year students who are unmarried mothers, I recommend doing a study specifically about sense of belonging with this sub-population of students. Learning more about the impact this has on these students as well as how universities can help facilitate this sense of belonging, or sense of community, could potentially increase success for these students.

### **Implications for Practitioners**

An implication for this study would be the development of student parent resources on campus. The student parents I interviewed expressed the need for resources on campus, including childcare. Childcare impacts how students can schedule their classes. Between the traditional daycare hours that aren't always conducive to students' classes and work schedules, as well as the high cost, providing childcare options to student parents would go a long way in helping them succeed. Even if providing on-campus childcare facility isn't an option, several of

the participants mentioned that they would be glad to do a type of shared babysitting with other student parents. Basically, one parent would watch their child as well as the children of other student parents while they are in class and vice-a-versa, depending on class schedules. Another childcare option would be for the university to partner with a couple local daycares to provide discounted rates to student parents. This would also help students who may have a longer commute to get to school, if there was a local daycare near the university that they could afford to send their child too, they would have their child nearby.

An implication would be to add an option on college applications, to select if you are a parent. By making it easier to identify these students up front, colleges can reach out to these students and let them know the resources available to them.

Another implication would be to develop a student parent scholar program. I recommend developing a program for student parents to have consistent advising and access to additional resources on a regular basis. This would work by providing Academic Advisor(s) specifically for student parents and they would advise across all majors. These students would have priority registration which would help ease the scheduling conflicts that so many of them currently face because they would have more class options to choose from. Their Academic Advisor(s) would also have additional information about which majors and classes are more flexible, to help with planning. Also, there may be more professors who are student-parent friendly and willing to work with students who need the flexibility because of their schedule with going to school, raising their child, and often working as well. Students would be required to meet with their Academic Advisor before registration opens each semester in order to keep that priority registration time ticket. Student parents in the program would also have checkpoints throughout the semester, where they meet with their Academic Advisor to talk about how everything is

currently going with life, class, being a parent, work, etc., to see if the student needs any help accessing campus resources or if any adjustments need to be made to class scheduling. Academic Advisors for student parents would have more flexible hours to accommodate student parents schedules, and be available for walk-in advising throughout the week as well for students who need to stop by. These students would receive advising from a holistic approach with the goal, to help students succeed through college, not just by class planning, but also by helping them find a balance with all they have going on in their lives. This would be available to all student parents, but especially important to those in their first-year, where it is easy to get lost and not feel connected on campus. By providing that stability and connection on campus in their first-year, this has the potential to positively impact retention in student parents.

## **Conclusions**

Young first-year student mothers are very motivated and driven students. Their education impacts both their future and the future of their child. It is a lot to take on adjusting to college, going to classes, raising a child, and often working as well. Having support from their college, whether that be through a student-parent organization, on-campus daycare, or other student parent programs, makes a difference in the life of that student. Student parents might currently be a group that slides under the radar, but at twenty-six percent, they make up just over a quarter of the undergraduate student population in the United States (Kensinger & Minnick, 2018). The perseverance of these student parents is admirable and universities should do what they can to support them. By providing extra help and access to additional resources, colleges can help student parents succeed. The importance of having all these resources, especially in the first-year of student mothers is crucial. Adjusting to college is difficult enough on its own, but learning to be a parent and raise a child on top of that makes it even more of a challenge. By providing

additional resources, first-year students who are parents will have the additional support, that can help them get through their first-year through graduation. By helping first-year student parents find a balance between all of their roles, it provides a support system on campus. Having a support system on campus and a sense of community, can provide stability and in doing so, may increase the likelihood that these students will continue in their education.

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## APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

### College student mothers ages 18-30 sought for research study

Are you currently or did you previously become a mother just prior to or in your first year of college? If so, you are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Tabitha Robinson, a master's degree seeking student at [REDACTED]. The purpose of the study is to better understand what campus resources would be most helpful in assisting student mothers achieve academic success. To participate in the study, you must be between the ages of 18 - 30 and currently enrolled in (or have already graduated from) college. Participants must also have; a) become mothers just prior to beginning or during their first-year of college, and b) been unmarried and between the ages of 18-21 when their child was born. Participants will be asked to complete a one hour interview with the researcher. If you have questions or are interested in participating, please contact Tabitha Robinson at trobin46@kennesaw.edu. This Study #19-091 has been approved and is under the oversight of [REDACTED] IRB.

## **APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM**

### **SIGNED CONSENT FORM**

**Title of Research Study:** An Exploration of Campus Resources and Strategies that Support the Academic Success of First-Year College Students who are Young Unmarried Mothers

**Researcher's Contact Information:** Tabitha Robinson  
470-578-3243      trobin46@kennesaw.edu

#### **Introduction**

You are being invited to take part in a research study conducted by Tabitha Robinson of Kennesaw State University. Before you decide to participate in this study, you should read this form and ask questions about anything that you do not understand.

#### **Description of Project**

The purpose of this study is to learn about the needs of first-year college students who are young unmarried mothers in order to learn about campus resources and strategies that will help these students succeed in college.

#### **Explanation of Procedures**

You will be asked to meet with me for an interview to discuss your experience as a young unmarried mother in your first-year of college and to talk about campus resources, services, and advising experiences to learn how the university can better help you succeed in college..

#### **Time Required**

I estimate the initial interview may take an hour to complete. There may be follow-up emails, phone conversations, or in-person conversations later on as well.

#### **Risks or Discomforts**

There are no known risks or discomforts with this study.

#### **Benefits**

Although there will be no direct benefits to those participating in this study, this study will potentially benefit future first-year college students who are young unmarried mothers. By improving campus resources and services, the university will be better equipped to assist young mothers succeed.

## **Confidentiality**

I will use pseudonyms for the study participants in my final paper to ensure anonymity. The results of this participation will be confidential. All data will be stored on One Drive. After I record the interviews, I will move the recording to One Drive and erase it from the digital recorder.

## **Inclusion Criteria for Participation**

Participants must be between the ages of 18 – 30, currently enrolled in (or have already graduated from) college. Participants must also have; a) become mothers just prior to beginning or during their first-year of college, and b) been unmarried and between the ages of 18-21 when the child was born.

## **Signed Consent**

I agree and give my consent to participate in this research project. I understand that participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw my consent at any time without penalty.

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Signature of Participant or Authorized Representative, Date

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Signature of Investigator, Date

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PLEASE SIGN BOTH COPIES OF THIS FORM, KEEP ONE AND RETURN THE OTHER TO THE INVESTIGATOR

Research at Kennesaw State University that involves human participants is carried out under the oversight of an Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding these activities should be addressed to the Institutional Review Board, Kennesaw State University, 585 Cobb Avenue, KH3403, Kennesaw, GA 30144-5591, (470) 578-2268.

## APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### Participant Interview Questions

- How old are you and how old were you when you got pregnant with your child?
- When you found out you were pregnant, did your plans regarding college change (e.g. when to start; whether or not to attend or stay enrolled; where to attend college)?
- After your baby was born, did you make any additional changes to your college plan (e.g. taking time off of college; transferring to another college; changing your major and/or future career plans; class schedule; campus involvement; job while in college)?
- What year in college are you (freshmen, sophomore, etc.) and when do you anticipate graduating? Or, if you have already graduated from college, how long did it take you and in what year did you graduate?
- Does your child live with you?
- What childcare arrangements do/did you have for attending classes and other college related activities?
- Do you (or did you, if you have graduated) have financial support for you and your child? What about college?
- What challenges do/did you face in trying to manage your many roles (parent, employee, student, etc.?)
- Have/did any of KSU's student services and resources (or the resources at the college you attended) help(ed) you with your college experience? If so, in what way?
- Describe your experience with Academic Advising. What are some specific ways academic advisors could best students who are also parents?
- Is there something you would like to see colleges offer or do a better job of that could help you or future young parent students balance their multiple roles and/or succeed in college?
- Is there anything else you would like to share with me on this topic?