Lessons from Success: The Experiences of women who have completed an associate degree while parenting children

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DISSERTATION PRESENTATION

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This dissertation was born out of my own experience as a higher education professional in student affairs. I witnessed women with children as they struggled to overcome obstacles in order to improve their lives and the lives of their children. As the professional they turned to for help, what I wanted was the answer that might lessen their struggles.
Women attend community colleges in large numbers, representing 58% of total community college enrollees.


During fall, 2006, 3.8 million women attended two-year colleges while 352,536 women received degrees from U.S. associate degree-granting institutions in 2007.

(U.S. Department of Education, 2005)
Risk Factors of Non-Completion

1. being financially independent,
2. attending school on a part-time basis,
3. working full-time outside of school,
4. having dependent children,
5. being a single parent,
6. delaying entry to college, and
7. not having a traditional high school diploma.

(U.S. Department of Education, 2002)
Students with children are at greater risk than other undergraduates (e.g., they are financially independent, have children, and may be single parents). Undergraduates with children or other dependents averaged 4.3 out of 7 risk factors, and single parents averaged 4.7 out of 7 risk factors.

(U.S. Department of Education, 2002)
Research Question

To what factors do women who successfully attained an associate degree while parenting children attribute their success?
Research Sub-questions

- How did they handle childcare?
- How did they finance their education?
- What strategies were used to manage time?
- How did their institutions support their success? Did the graduates utilize these support systems?
- What external support systems did they have (family, friends, or community)?
- What detailed advice would they give to administrators and future and current women with children pursuing their degrees?
• The American community college
• Reentry women in higher education
• Mothering and motherhood
• Adult learning theory
Research Methods

- Exploratory Qualitative Approach

- Two individual interviews and one focus group Interview involving 11 participants

- Participants graduated within two years of data collection from one of three comprehensive community colleges in northern New England.
Data Analysis

1. Personally transcribed all interviews
2. Emailed transcripts to participants for their review
3. Began identifying emergent themes from the 1st round of individual interviews
4. Created a spreadsheet of emergent themes
5. Reread transcripts to check for missed themes
6. Had two peer reviewers check my work
7. Repeated steps 3-5; 28 emergent themes became the basis of the 2nd individual interviews
8. Began reorganizing themes into general typologies
Data Analysis

9. Conducted steps 1-8 with all 2nd round interview transcripts
10. Reorganized all typologies with subthemes.
11. Developed prompts for focus group interviews
12. Conducted steps 1-8 with all focus group interview transcripts
13. Once all data collection was complete, my primary analysis tool was in writing, rewriting, arranging, and rearranging the emergent themes
Josie: “It means everything to me”
- Nursing, 39 years old, 3 children (21,21,17), single, full-time

Bethany: “The hardest thing I’ve ever done”
- Nursing, 41 years old, 1 child (8), married, full-time

Tina: “It just made me want it more”
- Nursing, 36 years old, 1 child (14), Partnered, full-time
Participant Overview

- Rita: “There is so much behind it all”
  - Nursing, 27 years old, 3 children (3, 2, 3 mos), married, full-time

- Joyce: “I’ve probably struggled more than anyone”
  - Nursing, 41 years old, 2 children (19, 17), divorced, full-time

- Krista: “I’m not done yet!”
  - Business Administration, 29 years old, 1 child (9), single, part-time
Participant Overview

- Audrey: “I had to do it for myself”
  - Business Management/Accounting, 34 years old, 1 child (14), partnered, part-time

- Susie: “I’m trying to prove myself”
  - Business Marketing, 27 years old, 1 child (7), single, full-time

- Christina: “It means a hell of a lot, Jim”
  - Database Management, 51 years old, 2 children (23, 19), married, part-time
Participant Overview

- **Jamie:** “I thought it was for somebody else”
  - Computer Technology, 42 years old, 3 children (21, 19, 16), single, part-time then full-time

- **Deanna:** “Wow! I accomplished a lot!”
  - Human Services/Liberal Arts, 36 years old, 1 child (13), divorced, full-time
Participant Overview

- The median and average age of the participants was 36 years old.
- The average age of their children was 14; the median age was 17 years old.
- Ten of the 11 participants were first-generation college students.
- The 11 participants in this study averaged 5.7 out of 7 risk factors of non-completion.
DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS
Motivating Factors

- Early academic success as motivation to continue
  - Participants were wary of their academic abilities
  - Instructor feedback and encouragement provided a spark

“I think that that right there helped out a lot and really kept me going because I think during the first year I was really discouraged and I think that what got me going after that first semester, after the first couple of “A’s” that I got, like “Wow, I’m really doing good.” So that kind of fueled me.”

(Audrey)
Motivating Factors

- Co-curricular involvement provided connection
  - Preconceived notion that time would be a prohibitive factor
  - Involvement beyond the classroom connected participants to the overall experience of college. They felt responsible for their organizations.

  “Everything! I was involved with everything...Student Senate. I received the President’s Award...I was a member of TRiO. I was a member of [Campus Activities Board]. I was on every board...Alternative Spring Break...I jumped in with both feet. And that was a big thing too, I think being involved in the community really helps you feel like you can succeed, when you walk in the door, you have people there that are there to do the same thing that you are doing. And we’re all trying to achieve that goal at the end of graduating. It makes a big difference.”

  (Jamie)
Motivating Factors

Lifelong desire for higher education

- Ten of the 11 participants knew they wanted to go to college for a very long time. It was a question of when and not if.
- Most of the participants deferred their dreams until their children were older.

“But for me I always thought I want to go to college but I don’t know how I’m ever going to get there, when I’m going to get there, or how I’m going to make it happen. I think that for me that’s why it’s so much more [meaningful].”

(Jamie)
Motivating Factors

- Unsuccessful previous educational experiences
  - Only one participant had never considered or attempted college before this successful experience.
  - The participants enrolled in college on their own terms.

“I had been accepted into the nursing program at [another community college] and the only reason that I even applied was because people told me that I should become a nurse. You know nurses make good money. Nurses are always going to be needed, and you should, you should. And so I did because people told me that I should. And I got accepted into it and I bought the uniform and bought the books and yea for me I got accepted into this thing that only forty people are accepted into. I couldn’t care less. I didn’t open the books. I failed the bed making test.”

(Deanna)
Experience of Mothering

Shortly after I started my interviews, however, I realized that the whole mood of the interview shifted when women discussed motherhood. They were more engaged in discussing motherhood than work; answers were much longer, more detailed and personally disclosing. I realized that while respondents and I talked about both work and motherhood, of the two, motherhood was the more salient issue in the interview.

(McMahon, 1995, p. 4)
Experience of Mothering

- Personal dreams deferred
- College enrollment and mothering tension
- College enrollment and improved mothering skills
- Experience of fostering responsibility
- Experience of being a role model
Building Blocks of Success

- **Gaining support from family and friends**
  “My entire family was right behind me and every fall I was like “I don’t know if I’m going back” and they were right there behind me, pushing. And it got to a point, probably during my senior year, when I really didn’t think I wanted to come back. And my family was all yelling, “You’ve come this far, you can’t not go back!” I had a huge support system which for me was a good thing.”
  (Christina)

- **Dealing with diminishing support**
  “I think that everybody at first was all revved up and ready to move forward and even students. Everyone is excited to do it and then by year two or three, everybody’s really exhausted. Even helping out, babysitting, they want to get on with their lives too.”
  (Audrey)
Overcoming a lack of family and friend support

“I had a lot of doubt but I kind of kicked it out of my head. My first experience was when I called my father and told him I was going to nursing school and he said, “Don’t bother. You’ll fail.” The conversations I’ve had with him. Was he right? Was he wrong? This is back then. I started doubting myself then.”

(Josie)
Building Blocks of Success

- Experience of building relationships with instructors and advisors

“It was probably the professors who got me through that time. They talked me through it and we talked about all of our options. You know how I could stay in school and how they could help support through finding a nurse and doing work at home. It was before clinicals had started so you know that was a big time for me.”

(Joyce)

“A lot of the professors were more than willing to be contacted after school hours, at home, if I had issues, or had to miss a class and needed information. They all were very good about home phone numbers and were like: “Get in touch we’ll help as much as we can.” And like I said, I don’t think I could have done that anywhere else. Building those relationships with faculty was key.”

(Christina)
Building Blocks of Success

- Experience of building relationships with classmates

“I really clicked with one of my classmates. She was really tough and says it like it is and her honesty really appealed to me and we got to be really close friends. One other classmate, I didn’t know her much the first year because she’s kind of shy but she was part of our study group, she was a great support, she’s funny.”

(Bethany)
Building Blocks of Success

- **Experience of building relationships with other mothers**

  “Just having other women in the same situation, trying to get through it, single parents, or you know, same type of person trying to get through and do what you need for the day to accomplish your goal, is what helped me through it.”

  (Jamie)
Experience of building relationships with God

“I have to talk a little bit about God because I have a strong faith. I have a strong faith-base and I think a lot of times I say if God didn’t want me to be where I am, I wouldn’t be doing what I’m doing. I really have that strong faith that I’m on the path that I’m meant to be. If I wasn’t, I wouldn’t have been able to get where I need to go. I think it’s a big part of getting through, having some faith, having something that’s bigger than you to get you through to the other side of it, whether it’s God or whatever you want to call It.”

(Jamie)
Building Blocks of Success

- **Experience of study groups**

  “Vital. Everybody needs to do that.”  
  (Tina)

  “I made friends in my classes that I paired well with. Especially in the marketing program. It’s a small program so the specific classes to the marketing program, it was the same people in all the classes so we’d get together and I could call them up if I had a question or they would call me. We would meet in the library or somewhere. And I did a lot of group projects.”  
  (Susie)
Building Blocks of Success

**Experiencing community college support systems**

“I think there were more staff members who were supportive than people who weren’t very helpful so you found yourself going back to the ones that you knew you could count on, who would, if they couldn’t help you, they would recommend someone who could until you got the problem solved.”

(Krista)

“I butted heads with most of my teachers. The biggest help here, they have a single mother’s organization and they were great. It was like therapy. We’d sit down once a week and just talk and she was always there for me. So that was very helpful.”

(Rita)
LESSONS FROM SUCCESS
Lessons of Success

1. Strive to build a strong support system at the college.

2. Strive to get your family and friends on board at the beginning.

3. Surround yourself with people like you.

4. Ask for help.

5. Commit yourself fully to achieving your goal.
Lessons of Success


7. Get organized and stay organized.

8. Apply for every scholarship and grant that you can find.

9. Be realistic and know your limits.

10. Realize that going to college is not going to be easy.
Limitations

- It was beyond the scope of this study to investigate characteristic differences (e.g., age, the age of their children, number of children, academic concentration, their race, or their socioeconomic status, etc.).
- I depended on administrators and staff at the three institutions for participant recommendations.
- I am male, I attended a large four-year university right after high school, and I have never attended a community college.
- My professional role as an administrator at a community college.
- Research sites have relatively low enrollments (1,000-2,000 students).
Implications

- Do we, as administrators, shape our policies and procedures based on what we understand about failure or success?

- How might these findings apply to other populations of nontraditional students (what about fathers)?

- For the future... institutional size, student characteristics, social class, etc.
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