

## Balancing School, Work & Family in a Constant State of Crisis: The Experiences of Low-Income Student Mothers



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None of the images used in this presentation represent actual research participants in order to retain respect for participant confidentiality. The images used are either clip art or online images found in google image search. While these photos may represent real students and/or parents no image is portrayed of any research participant.



## Funding Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the numerous funders who supported this research including:

- The American Association of University Women American Fellowship
- The Beth B. Hess Memorial Scholarship of the Sociologists for Women in Society, Society for the Study of Social Problems & American Sociological Association
- The Patsy Takemoto Mink Legacy Award, by the Patsy Mink Foundation
- The Boston College Graduate School of Arts and Sciences Dissertation Fellowship
- The Benedict S. Alper Fellowship, Awarded by the Alper Family & the Boston College Sociology Department
- The Boston College USA Individual Conference & Research Expense Grant
- The Boston College Sociology (SAs) Research Expense Grant
- The Boston College Sociology Department's Summer Research Fellowship
- The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences Conference Travel Expense Grant

## Student Parents in Post-Secondary Education

- Non-Traditional Students are the Fastest Growing Sub-Population of Students (National Center for Education Statistics)
- Student Parents represent 23% of U.S. undergraduate students (Miller 2012)
- 57% of Student Parents are Low-Income (Miller 2012)
- Among Low-Income Students Parents 68% are single parents and 32% are married (Calculated using data from Miller, Gault & Thorman 2012)

## Student Parents in Post-Secondary Education

- Imperatives of Post-Secondary Education
- Effectiveness of Post-Secondary Education as anti-poverty strategy
- Difficulty of Obtaining Post-Secondary Education

## Research Methodology

- Institutional Ethnography
- Feminist Methods (Stand-Point Epistemology)
- Participatory Action Research

## Research Methods

- In-Depth Interviews (31 participants)
- Research Journals (20 participants)
- Interpretive Focus Groups (2 focus groups)
- Institutional Interviews & Secondary Data
- Public Policy Research

## Demographics: Location

- Three Region Sampling (10 states represented)
  - West Coast (CA, OR, WA)
  - Mid-West (IL, MN, MO, OH)
  - Northeast (MA, NY, PA)



## Demographics

- Pell Grant
  - 80% Received a Pell Grant
  - 12% Previous Bachelor's Degree
  - 8% Non-Financial Disqualification
- Public Assistance Programs
  - TANF 33%
  - EITC 41%
  - SNAP 82%
  - Medicaid & S-CHIP 81%
  - Subsidized Housing 46%
  - Childcare Voucher 38%

## Demographics: College Program

- Degree Program
  - 88% Undergraduate Students
  - 12% Graduate & Post-Baccalaureate Students
- Type of College
  - Community Colleges (18 participants)
  - Public Universities (10 participants)
  - Private Universities (10 participants)
  - For-Profit/Proprietary Colleges (4 participants)
- Status & Course Type
  - Most full-time
  - Most took traditional in-person classes (4 participants took courses only online & 12 participants took courses both online & in person)

## Findings & Discussion

- Lifeworlds
- Role Strain
- Financial & Material Hardships
- Conflicts Between Higher Education & Public Assistance
- Dismissal of Women's Labor
- Academic Impacts & Outcomes

## Lifeworlds

The lifeworld encompasses the overall set of feelings, values, and obligations that help a group define a collective identity. (Habermas 1987)

What it means to be a low-income mother, and the mutual understandings and experiences shared between low-income mothers, comprise a distinct lifeworld experience. It involves their experiences as they engage with the social institutions that frame their efforts as mothers, students, and providers as well as the individual and communal sense of identity, prioritization of values and long-term aspirations.

### Role Strain

- Role Conflict
- Role Overload
- Role Contagion



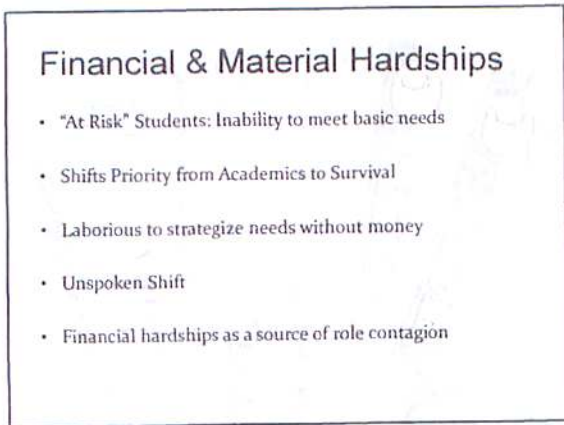
### Role Strain

- Motherhood & Caregiving
- Academic Responsibilities
- Jobs/Work Requirements
- Public Assistance
- Household Labor



### Financial & Material Hardships

- "At Risk" Students: Inability to meet basic needs
- Shifts Priority from Academics to Survival
- Laborious to strategize needs without money
- Unspoken Shift
- Financial hardships as a source of role contagion

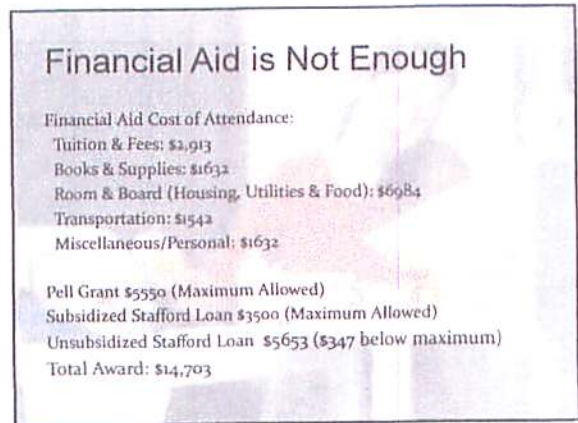


### Financial Aid is Not Enough

Financial Aid Cost of Attendance:

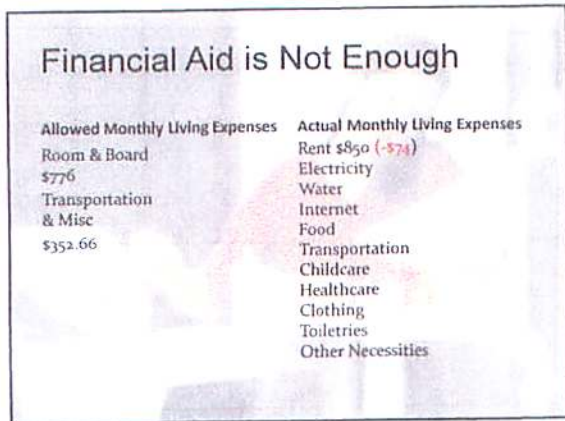
- Tuition & Fees: \$2,913
- Books & Supplies: \$1632
- Room & Board (Housing, Utilities & Food): \$6984
- Transportation: \$1542
- Miscellaneous/Personal: \$1632

Pell Grant \$5550 (Maximum Allowed)  
 Subsidized Stafford Loan \$3500 (Maximum Allowed)  
 Unsubsidized Stafford Loan \$5653 (\$347 below maximum)  
 Total Award: \$14,703



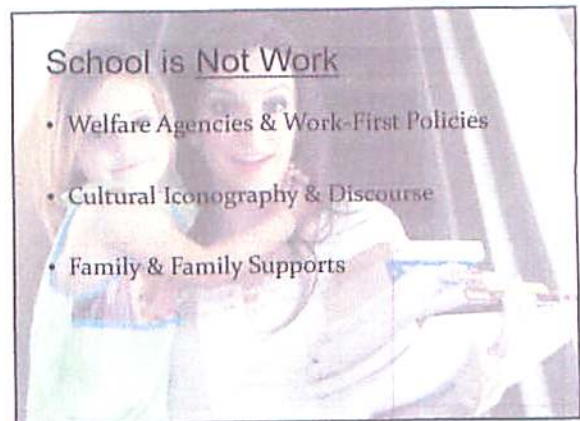
### Financial Aid is Not Enough

Allowed Monthly Living Expenses	Actual Monthly Living Expenses
Room & Board \$776	Rent \$850 (-\$74)
Transportation & Misc \$352.66	Electricity
	Water
	Internet
	Food
	Transportation
	Childcare
	Healthcare
	Clothing
	Toiletries
	Other Necessities



### School is Not Work

- Welfare Agencies & Work-First Policies
- Cultural Iconography & Discourse
- Family & Family Supports



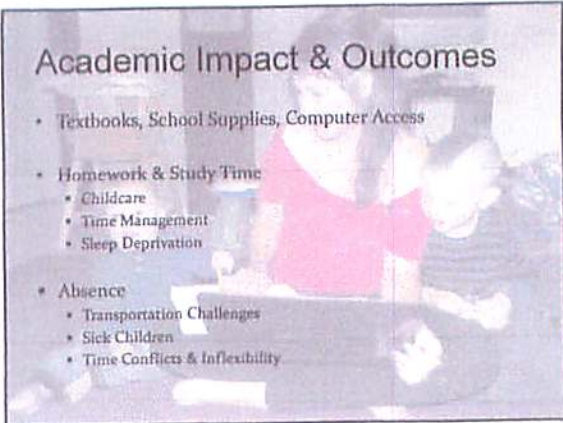
### "Good Motherhood"

- Intensive Motherhood (Hays 1996)
  - Quality Time
  - Intensive Domesticity
  - Role Overload
- Goal-Oriented Motherhood
  - Role Modeling
  - Providing a Better Future
  - "Deserving" of Help & Support



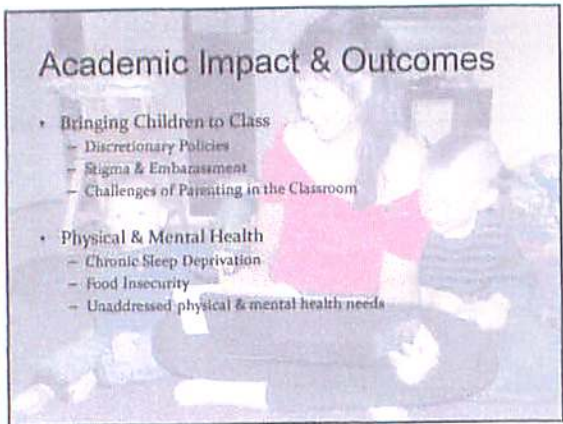
### Academic Impact & Outcomes

- Textbooks, School Supplies, Computer Access
- Homework & Study Time
  - Childcare
  - Time Management
  - Sleep Deprivation
- Absence
  - Transportation Challenges
  - Sick Children
  - Time Conflicts & Inflexibility



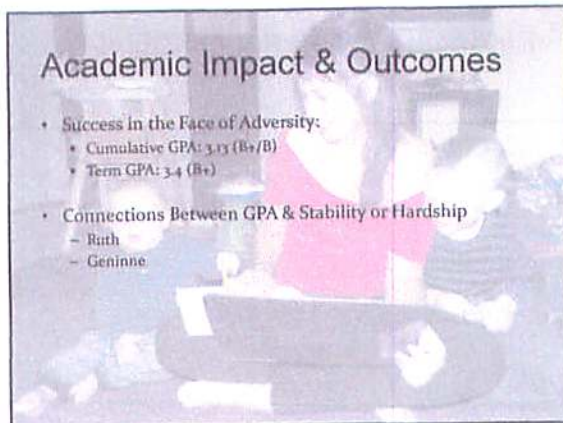
### Academic Impact & Outcomes

- Bringing Children to Class
  - Discretionary Policies
  - Stigma & Embarrassment
  - Challenges of Parenting in the Classroom
- Physical & Mental Health
  - Chronic Sleep Deprivation
  - Food Insecurity
  - Unaddressed physical & mental health needs



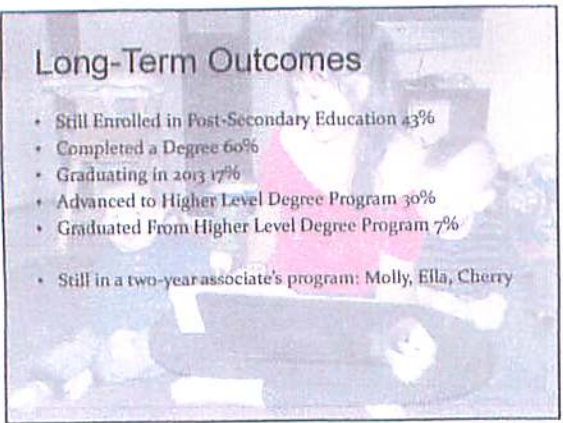
### Academic Impact & Outcomes

- Success in the Face of Adversity:
  - Cumulative GPA: 3.13 (B+/B)
  - Term GPA: 3.4 (B+)
- Connections Between GPA & Stability or Hardship
  - Ruth
  - Geninne



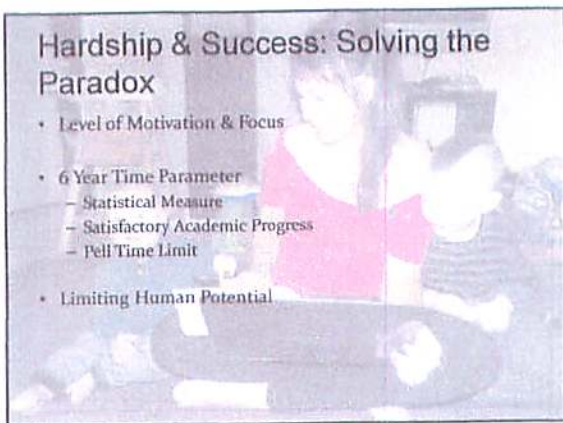
### Long-Term Outcomes

- Still Enrolled in Post-Secondary Education 43%
- Completed a Degree 60%
- Graduating in 2013 17%
- Advanced to Higher Level Degree Program 30%
- Graduated From Higher Level Degree Program 7%
- Still in a two-year associate's program: Molly, Ella, Cherry



### Hardship & Success: Solving the Paradox

- Level of Motivation & Focus
- 6 Year Time Parameter
  - Statistical Measure
  - Satisfactory Academic Progress
  - Pell Time Limit
- Limiting Human Potential





### Supporting Student Parents

- Interpersonal
- Ideological
- Institutional
- Public Policy Advocacy

*Summer Pell  
Pell 6-yr limit*

*include HED equm to work (in welfare rules)*

### The American Dream: A Double-Edged Sword

- Policies based on meritocracy limit choices and options for most low-income mothers
- Myth of Meritocracy
- Myth of Equality

### The American Dream: A Double-Edged Sword

- Resilience & Perseverance
- Proving "Them" Wrong
- Motivation driven by desire to provide "A Better Life" for Children

### The American Dream: A Double-Edged Sword

- Belief in the power of higher education as positive an investment in the future
- Grassroots impact of higher education on extended families and communities
- Personal Empowerment

### Conquering Goliath: Fighting for an Education

- Successive battles for the services, resources and supports necessary to persevere in college
- Battle Weariness over a long-term educational trajectory
- Implications for Educational Inequality
- Role of welfare stereotypes & controlling images in limiting opportunities

### Demographics: Family

- Participants' Age Range: 18-45 (Median 25-30)
- Children's Ages Range: 5 months-17 years (Median 4)
  - 2 participants Pregnant
- Number of Children: Range 1-5 (Median 1.5)
- Majority were single-mothers (71 %/22%)
  - Single/Separated (63%)
  - Married/Domestic Partnership (32%)

### Demographics

- Race/Ethnicity
  - Caucasian/White (31)
  - Black/African-American (13)
  - Asian/Pacific Islander (0)
  - Native American (10)
  - Other (3)
  - Multi-Racial (Checked 2+ boxes) (6)
  - Ethnicities: Latina (Mexican-American, Dominican-American), Jamaican, Cape Verdean. Participants also listed tribal identities including Lakota, Modok, Choctaw, Sioux, and Cherokee.
- Disability Status
  - Disability or Chronic Health Condition 41%
  - Child with Disability or Chronic Health Condition 25%

### Demographics: Majors/Minors

Art, Music or Arts Admin	3
Education	3
Humanities	6
Medical	9
Professional/Trades	4
Social Science	12
Social Work	2
S.T.E.M.	1
Unknown/Undeclared	11
Students w/ Double Majors	2
Students w/ Minors	9