ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

Kate R. Barry for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education presented on May 1, 2012

Title: Women, Poverty, and Educational Success: A Critical Exploration of Low-Income Women’s Experience in Community Colleges

Abstract approved: ________________________________

Larry D. Roper

The purpose of this study is to critically explore low-income women’s experience as they negotiate post secondary education in community colleges. Three research questions explore the context through which low-income women have entered the college experience, what that experience is like for them, and how the community college experience has impacted their consciousness and view of their futures. This study has significance because poverty is a critical social issue for women, post secondary education is a route out of poverty yet social welfare policy does not support access to education, community colleges have traditionally provided access to education but supports for women have been diminished, and poor women’s voices and their own definitions of educational access and success are missing from the public and academic debate of these issues.

Past qualitative studies that focus on poor women’s experience of college are smaller parts of quantitative studies. Other existing in depth studies have focused on obstacles, persistence, and support systems, or have been studies of special
transitional programs formed specifically for welfare eligible women. There is little knowledge of women’s experience and sense of self from their perspective as students who are also in poverty. This study uses the research technique of in depth unstructured interviews with eight welfare eligible women student parents in Oregon’s Parents as Scholars Program. Six themes emerge from the narrative interviews with the participants that have implications for educational practice and add to and expand the small body of qualitative work that has been done on the college experiences of low-income women students.
Women, Poverty, and Educational Success: A Critical Exploration of Low-Income Women’s Experience in Community Colleges

by

Kate R. Barry

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the

degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Presented May 1, 2012

Commencement June 2012
Doctor of Philosophy dissertation of Kate R. Barry presented on May 1, 2012

APPROVED:

__________________________________________
Major Professor, representing Education

__________________________________________
Dean of the College of Education

__________________________________________
Dean of the Graduate School

I understand that my dissertation will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University Libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

__________________________________________
Kate R. Barry, Author
I would like to express my gratitude to the faculty and staff of the Community College Leadership Program for their teaching, professionalism and support. In addition I want to give my sincere thanks and appreciation to:

1. The members of cohort 14 for being on my team and providing weekends of learning, challenge and fun
2. My committee but particularly Dr Larry Roper for his unfailing encouragement and support
3. Dr George Copa who made this dissertation possible
4. The eight women who shared their thoughts and lives with me
5. My partner Barbara Delansky who graciously cheered me on through the CCLP program and full time work without complaint, and my daughter Anna who has always been in my corner.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter One: Focus and Significance</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research purpose</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research questions</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty is a critical issue for women</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education is not supported as an anti poverty strategy</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-income women have diminished access to community colleges</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor women’s voices are missing and crucial</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Two: Review of Literature</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Search and Selection Process for Materials</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization of the Review of Research</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review of Related Research</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes in public policy and poor women’s access to education</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact of post-secondary education on women’s lives</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effects of post-secondary education on low-income women</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# TABLE OF CONTENTS (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low-income women’s experience of college</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effects of gender and class on women’s sense of themselves</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of Literature Review</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three: Design</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philosophical Approach</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical approach</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminist perspective</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedures</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data needs</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant selection</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site selection</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data collection techniques</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data analysis</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soundness of data and analysis</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies to protect human subjects</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Four: Data Collection and Analysis</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents As Scholars (PAS) the Context</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAS rules and processes</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS (Continued)</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits and barriers</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Profile of the Participants</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographics</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work experience and goals</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Themes and Analysis</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paths to college</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience of college</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s sense of themselves</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of interviews and themes</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of Chapter Four</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results in relation to the Literature Review</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The importance of transitions programs</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students as mothers</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resilience, planning and strategies for success</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The impact of DHS policies and practices on the students’ educational lives</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s sense of themselves, the impact of education</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TANF and self</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TABLE OF CONTENTS (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Practice</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entry programs</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The importance of cohorts, belonging and connection</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A college culture that supports low income women</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordination between government agencies and colleges that</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>does not penalize the students</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations of the Research</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Future Studies</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendices</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A: An Oregon DHS Context for PAS</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B: Interview Guide</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C: Recruitment Materials</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix D: Personal Disclosure</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix E: Glossary of Terms</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1: Focus and Significance

“If you want me to pull myself up give me bootstraps”


Poverty is a critical issue for women and education can play a key role in an anti-poverty strategy. Yet, there are significant structural barriers to low-income women’s participation in post secondary education, and low-income women’s issues and experiences are not visible as a key community college issue. This study aims to fill this gap through a critical understanding of low-income women’s experiences in post secondary education, particularly community colleges.

There are complex connections between women’s lives, poverty, public policy, and education. The early 70s saw a rise in the divorce rate and a consequent rise in women amongst the ranks of the poor; this trend was so evident that it earned the social catch phrase “the feminization of poverty” (McLanahan & Kelly, 1999). Other feminist researchers have pointed out that a more accurate description of what was happening to women was the pauperization of motherhood, an idea partly derived from the high poverty rates of single mothers in the United States, as well as from the substantial number of mothers who worked in poverty-wage jobs, even when they worked full time. Census data (Wider Opportunities for Women, 2006)
confirms that there is still a significant risk of poverty for women. The number of women in poverty is increasing and a greater percentage of women than men live below the poverty line. Lovell, Hartmann and Williams (2008) point out that single mother face a double jeopardy, lower earnings and more financial stress from parenting. Women, particularly single parents are more likely to experience economic insecurity than men and 74% of single mothers working full time do not earn wages that could provide economic security (Wider Opportunities for Women, 2011).

There is evidence that post secondary education can help women move out of poverty and that it has the capacity to improve both women’s income and future earning power. United States (US) Department of Labor statistics indicate that education increases earning power. The 2010 American Community Survey data indicate a 46% difference in median earnings between wage earning women over 25 who have a bachelors degree versus a high school degree (US Census Bureau, 2010). For both women and men, higher levels of education are associated with increased wages and reduced rates of unemployment. Access to education is especially important to women who earn less than men at every level of educational attainment (Day & Newburger, 2002). In addition, a college degree has been shown to have a positive effect on women’s income and reduces their chance of being poor (Kahn, Butler, Deprez, & Polakow, 2004). Given these effects, promoting educational access and success would appear to be a necessary part of any anti-poverty strategy. Yet public social welfare policy, popularly known as welfare reform, promotes immediate
access to jobs not access to education. Since welfare reform was introduced in 1996, the numbers of welfare recipients enrolling in post secondary education has been dramatically reduced. For example, the numbers of welfare recipients enrolled at the City University of New York dropped from 22,000 in 1996 to 5,000 in 2000 and Massachusetts’ community colleges had a reported average decrease of 46% in enrollment of welfare recipients (Center for Women Policy Studies, 2002). The majority of welfare recipients are single mothers with children and while their movement into employment does reduce welfare rolls, it may have little impact on reducing poverty.

A social welfare policy focus on employment ignores the potential poverty reduction benefits of education and potentially excludes low-income women from the very path that could improve their futures. This potential exclusion is exacerbated by the fact that federal supports for programs that have supported low-income women entering career education and training have been eroded. Despite these barriers, low-income women do enroll in college. Women are the majority (56%) of undergraduates enrolled in all US post secondary institutions and 34.9% of these women are low-income when defined as having a personal or family income of less than $25,000 per year (Center for Women Policy Studies, 2004). Also women are the majority of all low-income post secondary students. Yet low-income women’s experience of and participation in post secondary education is not visible, or seen as a critical social policy issue in education. Furthermore low-income women’s experiences are framed by class and gender and as Adair and Dahlberg (2003) point
out, poverty tends to be analyzed from a class privileged standpoint and poor women’s stories are often invisible, distorted, or ignored.

Education can help women move out of poverty. Helping low-income women access and succeed in education is an investment in women’s and their families’ futures. As Marx (2004) points out, “public policies should assist low-income women in increasing their economic security by investing in higher education and related supports” (Roadwork Ahead ¶ 3). There is a leadership challenge for educators to provide a community college experience that recognizes and validates low-income women’s voices, needs, aspirations, and experiences, and one that functions to facilitate their long term success. My study brings low-income women’s voices and experiences in community colleges to the foreground.

Focus

Poverty is gendered, and women are more likely to experience it. Given education’s positive impact on women’s capacity to move out of poverty, it is critical to understand low-income women’s educational experiences.

Research purpose.

The purpose of this study is to critically explore low-income women’s experiences as they negotiate post secondary education in community colleges. The aim is to situate women’s own understanding of their educational experience within a context of gender and class disparities and systemic constraints.
Research Questions.

The research questions guiding the study are:

- How do low-income women come to participate in community college education?

  This question aims at understanding the context for entering community college education from women’s own perspective. There are two guiding focuses:
  
  (a) What were the paths that have been taken to enter community college education, and

  (b) Why was post secondary education important? From these focuses issues such as access, barriers, supports, women’s expectations, their ideas of education and its meaning in their future should emerge.

- What is the experience of community college like for low-income women?

  This question focuses on the daily, lived experience of community college education. What do low-income women experience as supportive of their learning experiences, do they experience the college as welcoming. Do they feel at home in education? What is it like to be in the classroom? Do they feel like outsiders or insiders in the educational experience? What strategies do they use to negotiate the college experience?
How has the experience of community college impacted low-income women’s consciousness of themselves and view of their futures?

This question provides a focus on women’s consciousness of themselves as poor women, as people whose experience is mediated by both class and gender. Has this shaped how they see themselves and their possibilities, as they participate in education? Has education redefined their consciousness of themselves as women and their place in the world? Is it a source of resistance to dominant interpretations of the place of poor women?

**Significance**

This study has significance for four reasons: (a) poverty is a critical social issue for women, (b) post secondary education is a route out of poverty yet social welfare policy does not support access to education, (c) community colleges have traditionally provided access to education but supports for women have been diminished, (d) poor women’s voices and their own definitions of educational access and success are missing from the public and academic debate of these issues.

**Poverty is a critical issue for women.**

Census data shows that women, particularly female-headed households continue to be in poverty. As analysis of this data by Wider Opportunities for Women (2006) demonstrates:

- The number of women in poverty has increased --- nearly 400,000 more women are in poverty in 2005 than 2004. Women in poverty reached 2.1 million in 2005.
• 14.1% of women live below 100% of poverty compared to 11.1% of men.
• 25.2% of women who did not finish high school are living in poverty.
• 38% of female headed-households with related children under 18 years of age (no husband present) are living in poverty.
• Poverty is even greater among women of color:
  • 11.9% of non-Hispanic white females are living in poverty;
  • 27.1% of African-American females are living in poverty; and
  • 23.9 percent of Hispanic females are living in poverty. (¶ 1)
De Navas-Waid, Proctor, and Lee (2006) report that 52.9% of children under six who live in single mother households are in poverty, over five times the poverty rate of their counterparts in married couple households. For children under 18 in single mother households, 42.8% are in poverty, as compared to 8.5% of children under 18 who live in married couple households. In addition, the income deficit, which is the difference between a family’s income and its poverty threshold, is greater for female headed households than either married couples or male headed households.
Continuing wage inequality adds to this picture of gender, race, and class based constraints in women’s lives. The persistence of the wage gap between women and men is well documented (Institute for Women’s Policy Research, 2006; US Department of Labor, BLS, 2009) as well as a trend of poverty for female headed households, with the additional burdens imposed by race in these patterns of gender inequality (Hartmann, Spalter-Roth, & Sills, 2003). Whether expressed as the
feminization of poverty or the impoverishment of motherhood, poverty is clearly a critical problem for women and by extension for society.

**Education is not supported as an anti poverty strategy.**

Education is a route out of poverty for women but is not supported through public policy. Education increases women’s earnings. A report from the Center for Women and Policy Studies (2002) stressed that education is an effective way for women to move from poverty to self-sufficiency. In addition, Bureau of Labor statistics show that in 2008 the median weekly earnings for women with less than a high school degree was $378, while for female college graduates it was $955, an increase of 152% (US Department of Labor, BLS, 2009).

However, public policy as enacted in welfare reform does not support education as an anti-poverty strategy. There are barriers to poor women accessing education and evidence that the number of women in higher education has substantially decreased since Congress enacted welfare reform in 1996 (Adair, 2004). In addition, legislative changes such as the removal of the gender equity set aside from federal Perkins funding have removed the support for programs that had helped poor women gain access to career education and training. *Invisible Again*, a report prepared by the National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education (NCWGE) (2001) demonstrated the negative impact that Perkins III had on programs serving women. This report concluded that the support and programs created by the prior Perkins legislation were collapsing and women and girls were being left without
avenues for educational opportunities. The promise that education holds to improve the lives of women and their families is not being realized.

**Low-income women have diminished access to community colleges**

Community colleges have traditionally provided access for women students and women have taken advantage of this access, but changes in funding for specific programs that have supported women in entering occupational education, combined with welfare reform, have reduced access to post secondary education for low-income women. In presenting information about programs for welfare recipients at community colleges, Szelénye (2001) has pointed out that both educational institutions and states will benefit from research on students’ views and experiences given the limits placed by welfare reform on training and education. Adair (2001) has argued that educators must challenge themselves to understand how crucial post secondary education is to low-income single mothers in particular, given education’s potential role as a route to social equity. Community colleges with their flexibility and mission of responsiveness to community needs are uniquely situated to respond to the needs of poor single mothers and could play a gateway role in the educational system for low-income women.

**Poor women’s voices are missing and crucial.**

It is critical therefore to understand how poor women who have managed to enroll in post secondary education are experiencing college. Although there have been several large scale studies of the effects of welfare reform, there has been less qualitative research focused on low-income women’s perspectives or experiences in
education. Findings in quantitative and qualitative studies show that access to education and training has a significant impact for low-income people in general and female headed families in particular. However, women themselves, their own views of their preferred future, and the role of education in that future are not fully explored. Adair (2005) has pointed to the shame and invisibility that poor women may face in post secondary education classrooms. Such issues as these, and whether they form part of low-income women’s lived experience as they negotiate higher education, has not been extensively studied. There is a gap in the research that supports the need for the exploration of poor women’s experience in college settings.

This dissertation could be part of bridging this gap in knowledge about poor women’s educational experiences. It could inform the development of community college programs for low-income women and help such programs to be useful, relevant, and promoters of student success. Data from this research could also impact public policy, supporting a focus on education and helping to reverse policy directions. The research intent is to provide knowledge that can help colleges, advocacy groups, and women themselves promote policy and programs that can support poor women’s access to education and in the process give authentic voice and visibility to poor women’s lives. Kates (2004) has argued that more exploratory in depth studies of low-income women’s experiences would make valuable contributions to our knowledge base.

If we wish to make education and training accessible to low-income women, we need to take some important first steps. First, we need to think in more connected terms about women and their families. Second we need to pay
attention to their experiences [italics added], listen to their opinions and acknowledge their family responsibilities. (p.38)

Women’s voices, their sense of themselves, and their experiences as they negotiate educational systems are central to improving those systems so they serve low-income women’s needs.

Summary.

This study seeks to critically explore low-income women’s experience as they negotiate post secondary education in community colleges. The research questions focus on women’s own understanding of their educational experience within a context of gender and class differences. There are systemic barriers to low-income women accessing post secondary education and their needs and experiences are not in the foreground of educational or social welfare policy. The research questions ask about the context through which low-income women have entered the college experience, what that experience is like for them, and how the community college experience has impacted their consciousness and view of their futures.

Poverty is a significant and critical issue for women and education provides an effective route out of poverty. By rejecting education as an anti poverty strategy, public policy is making the social and economic situation for women worse not better. The community college has been and can be a significant gateway to educational success, yet the community college promise as an avenue for education and the economic progress it brings is becoming less assured for low-income women. The vision of community college education has always been more than simply providing a pathway to economic success; at its core, the community college mission
of extending opportunities for education is a vehicle for democracy and change.

Education has the promise of a profound impact on low-income women and their families. How is this promise playing out in low-income women’s lives? The central research questions for this study are: (a) how do low-income women come to participate in education given systemic barriers?, (b) What is their experience of the community college?, and (c) How does education shape their consciousness of themselves and how are they able to reframe themselves and their lives? Low-income women’s voices and experiences are critical to an understanding of the responses to these questions.
Chapter 2: Review of Literature

The purpose of this literature review is to explore literature related to women, education, social welfare policy, and poverty. The literature review was guided by two questions. What is the impact of welfare reform on poor women particularly in relation to access to education, and what are poor women’s experiences as they participate in education? Other issues that emerged from the literature review included the degree to which poor women’s voices are missing from the research on low-income women’s experience of education, and the effects of these experiences on poor women’s consciousness of themselves.

Search and Selection Process for Materials

The approach to the literature review included searches of databases such as ERIC, Sociological Abstracts, Academic Search Premier, and Dissertation Abstracts using the key terms, women, single mothers, education, poverty, and welfare. The search included books, articles, and dissertations. The Summit catalogue was searched for books and references, and bibliographies from found sources were used to expand the search. From prior reading, searches were done using the names of scholars such as Vivian Adair and Sandra Butler, who are active in research in this field. Websites of national research and policy institutes that focus on women’s issues, poverty issues, and social policy; such as the Institute for Women’s Policy Studies, Wider Opportunities for Women, and the Center for Law and Social Policy were also reviewed. Criteria for inclusion were relevance to the topic and materials that were published preferably within the last six to ten years. There was an emphasis
on studies done after 1995, since welfare reform was enacted in public policy in 1996. The focus was on research that related to the United States. Articles that focused primarily on poor women’s transition from welfare to work, or experiences of motherhood rather than their educational experiences were excluded as secondary to the research focus and questions. There is a substantial amount of research on JOBS (readiness for work) programs for poor women. That literature was also excluded because of the lack of attention paid to the effects of education and the focus on immediate employment.

**Organization of the Review of Research**

Several areas of literature emerged from reviewing the related research. These were: (a) the recent changes in public policy that have impacted women’s access to education, (b) the impact of post secondary education on women’s lives, (c) low-income women’s experience of college, and (d) the ways that class interacts with gender to shape and potentially stigmatize low-income women’s sense of themselves.

The first area documents the changes in public policy impacting educational access for poor women. There have been two recent changes in public policy that have affected poor women and their access to education. The most apparent public policy impact is the effects of the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity and Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), popularly known as welfare reform. There is a great deal of literature on welfare reform and its historical, political, and social effects, including the shift from access to post secondary education for welfare clients to a policy focus on immediate employment. A smaller
body of literature demonstrates another policy shift that has impacted low-income women. The development and demise of funding for gender equity programs that functioned as access points to career training for women at community colleges also frames low-income women’s experience. This framework of policy change provides a context of systemic barriers and lessened supports for low-income women to enter and succeed in community colleges. What may appear as individual problems of diminished possibilities and increased difficulties, as low-income women access community college education, are actually systemic limitations; what Naples (2003) calls the “hidden dimensions of state regulations as they are manifest in the daily experiences of women” (p.143).

The second area of literature concerns the impact of education on women’s lives and evidence that post secondary education has a positive impact for poor women in particular. There is clear evidence that education impacts people’s wage earning power and economic stability. There are also a number of studies that show a positive relationship between education and economic well being for low-income women. Given that poverty is a critical issue for women and education appears to be a key to improving women’s lives and the lives of their families, exploration of low-income women’s experience in the community college setting is essential.

The third area comprises literature on low-income women’s experience of college. There have been several studies that focus on low-income women, particularly welfare recipients, and their experience in post secondary education. However, most of these studies are quantitative, few focus on the community college,
and there is not extensive knowledge about low-income women’s experience of education from their perspective. It is therefore important to surface poor women’s voices. Low-income women and their needs are not at the top of the community college agenda and there is not a lot of attention to poverty and what that means in women students’ daily lives. This study with an explicit qualitative focus on low-income women’s experience in community colleges will help fill these gaps.

The fourth area explores the ways class interacts with gender to shape and stigmatize low-income women’s sense of themselves, particularly in the context of welfare reform. Current discourse on welfare reform tends to make poor women invisible. It speaks of welfare clients or recipients rather than specifying that the majority of people on welfare are single mothers. Adair (2005) has pointed to the shame and invisibility that poor women may also face in post secondary education classrooms. Such issues as these and whether they form part of low-income women’s lived experience as they negotiate higher education have not been extensively studied. It is important to make low-income women’s experience visible and their voices audible, and explore how education could be supportive to a redefinition of poor women’s sense of themselves.
Review of Related Research

This section provides a review of the relevant research literature organized by areas set forth above.

**Changes in public policy impacting poor women’s access to education.**

These changes establish the social context for the proposed study. It is important to understand whether or how changes in public policy have created barriers to education for low-income women since this context shapes low-income women’s experience as they participate in community college education. This section is organized into two parts that reflect the two major public policy changes that have influenced educational access for low-income women. These are the changes in public social welfare policy through welfare reform, and the changes in the federal legislation that funds career education in community colleges.

**Welfare Reform.**

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity and Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), popularly known as “welfare reform” changed the way the United States views and supports poor families. This legislation repealed the Aid to Families with Dependent Children Program (AFDC) that had provided cash assistance benefits since 1935 to poor families, particularly poor women with children. Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) replaced AFDC with block grants to the states that were work focused and time limited (Greenberg, Levin-Epstein, Hutson, Ooms, Schumacher, Turetsky, & Engstrom, 2000). The overall effect of the law was to replace welfare as a federal cash entitlement program with flexible state based
programs aimed at work support and attachment. The key elements of the law were discretion, work requirements, and time limits (Coven, 2003). States had broad discretion in use of funds and in designing assistance programs with no federal entitlement to assistance (Greenberg et al., 2000). Under TANF, most states have developed time limited assistance programs with a strong emphasis on work requirements in which everyone, including parents of very young children, was required to participate, and most importantly, TANF imposed restrictions on education and training (Greenberg et al., 2000). Since the majority of TANF (welfare) recipients were women, this meant an immediate reduction in access to education and a redirection into programs that promoted employment.

Under TANF, welfare caseloads have been substantially reduced. In 1994, five million families received AFDC; by September 1999 this had fallen to 2.5 million. At the same time the number of female heads of household who are working for pay has risen (Greenberg et al., 2000). The majority of welfare “leavers” have found work; in general, 60% are working and 40% are not (Coven, 2003). However, most welfare leavers have found jobs with below poverty level wages without healthcare and other benefits (Coven, 2003). The poorest 20% of female heads of household had a loss of disposable household income between 1995 and 1998 (Greenberg et al., 2000). In a study of welfare reform in Oregon by the Center for the Study of Women in Society, Acker, Morgan, and Gonzales (2002) found that most single mother families who have left welfare are working at jobs that do not provide enough income to support their families. Acker et al. presented results from a two
year study of families who left or were diverted from cash assistance (welfare payments) or Food Stamps in the first quarter of 1998, combining findings from state administrative records, repeated telephone interviews with a state–wide random sample of families, and in-depth in person interviews with a sub sample of families.

In their report, “Welfare Restructuring, Work and Poverty: Policy Implications from Oregon” Acker, Morgan, and Gonzales asserted that while welfare-to-work policies appear to promote employment, Oregonians who were diverted from public assistance did not move out of poverty but continued to live with economic hardship, including inadequate wages to support their families, limited job benefits, and ongoing food insecurity. A later analysis of this data confirmed the gap between the promise of self sufficiency promoted by welfare reform and the economic reality of families struggling to make ends meet on low wage work (Morgen, Acker & Weigt, 2010). A national report from the Institute for Women’s Policy Research, “Before and After Welfare Reform” (Jones- DeWeever, Peterson, & Song, 2003), used longitudinal data from the United States Census Bureau’s Survey of Income Program Participation to examine aspects of low-income single parent families’ lives just before and about three years after welfare reform was enacted. Although these families increased their participation in paid work after welfare reform, 78% were concentrated in low wage jobs without increased access to healthcare. In particular, when comparing single mothers and single fathers, women worked at a higher rate than men and earned less. Poor single parent families experienced a significant increase in poverty, and there was a decrease in access to education.
In summary, these studies document some of the negative impacts of welfare reform on female-headed households. Welfare reform is often presented as a positive social policy because the legislation increased employment rates for welfare clients, who are overwhelmingly women and children, while simultaneously dramatically decreasing the welfare caseload. However, as these studies show, welfare reform presents a different picture when viewed through the lenses of poverty reduction and family well-being, rather than the lens of employment. This is a “reform” that has created systemic barriers to women pursuing education, and instead has supported entry into low wage work. Low-income women who enter education do so in spite of these barriers.

These are well thought out, large scale studies that utilize census and other state and national administrative data. As such, they point to overall patterns but do not explore how these social impacts play out in the lived experiences of individual women. Acker et al.’s 2002 study has a mixed data collection technique that does include interview data, but the interviews focus on overall effects of the changes in welfare law in people’s lives rather than a specific focus on educational access and experiences. There is a need for a specific focus on women’s educational experiences from their perspective within a context of systems that deny them that access. This study seeks to answer questions about how a group of low-income women access and experience community college education and how their sense of themselves as poor women defines and is defined by that experience.
Changes in Perkins.

While welfare reform limited poor women’s entry into education and instead promoted immediate employment, the federal legislation that provided funds and programs that assisted women to access career training was also changing. This section briefly summarizes those changes and their impact on low-income women.

The Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act is the primary federal law addressing the way schools and colleges can improve and develop vocational education. A brief summary of the changes in Perkins as it has been reauthorized demonstrates a further erosion of supports for women to enter education and training.

Beginning in the 1970s, Congress began to address women and girls’ need for access to higher wage jobs by authorizing funds to help states address gender discrimination and assist women to enter and succeed in technical training. In 1976, Title II of the Education Amendments provided funds for sex equity coordinators to address issues of gender stereotyping. These positions were located in the department of education in each state. Title II also made provisions for states to use their vocational education funds to provide programs for displaced homemakers to gain skills to enter the workforce (National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education, 2001). In 1984, these efforts were codified when Congress authorized the Carl D Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act to improve vocational education and ensure a competent workforce (Hogg, 1999). Recognizing that women faced barriers to education and career training, the Perkins Act targeted greater access for women to
vocational education through a set aside of the act’s total funds for women and girls. Perkins included targeted funding for programs for displaced homemakers, single parents, and nontraditional training. This targeted funding was preserved in the second version of Perkins in 1990 (American Vocational Association, 1990). Most importantly, states were required to spend significant funds on programs for students training for nontraditional careers and for adult women transitioning back into the workforce (National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education, 2001). These two aspects of the law recognized women’s economic disadvantage and set up specific education focused strategies aimed at changing this status.

While the success of these programs was demonstrable (Women Work!, 1995), the reauthorization of Perkins in 1998 (Perkins III) removed the gender related set asides for both what were termed special populations, displaced homemakers and single parents, and for gender equity programming in vocational training. The Act also removed the position of gender equity coordinator from the states. However, once specific required funding disappeared from Perkins legislation, so did the programs and services that had assisted women and girls. Invisible Again, a report prepared by the National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education ([NCWGE] 2001), demonstrated the negative impact that Perkins III had on programs serving women. In this report, more than half of the programs reported that their funding had decreased since Perkins III and 71% reported a decrease in their ability to provide services. In addition, programs reported an increasing inability to meet student need and that state support and local agency support had declined. The report concluded
that diminishing programs were leaving women and girls without access to educational opportunities (NCWGE). In this view, more women than ever were working for pay, with education and training increasingly important for women to access high skill/high wage jobs, yet these legislative changes removed the very supports that had helped women gain this education and training.

The Displaced Homemaker/Single Parent programs established through the original Perkins legislation had also provided access to education for low-income women receiving Aid to Dependent Families and Children (AFDC), commonly known as welfare. Although regulations varied from state to state, many low-income women were able to enter college and improve their economic situation while receiving AFDC. Single Parent/Displaced Homemaker programs provided bridges to education and training that were tailored for low-income women’s needs. Together these changes in welfare and Perkins have removed these bridges and presented systemic barriers to low-income women in entering postsecondary education.

**Summary.**

This section of the literature review established the social context for low-income women’s experience of community college education. The barriers to low-income women entering community college education are formidable and shape their experience. The exploration of poor women’s experience is framed within systems of power and privilege that can exclude them from access to education. Welfare policy regulates poor women’s lives and structures their futures in terms of paid work, rather than educational possibilities. This future of paid work tends to be low wage work
that is inadequate to support a family and does not offer a route out of poverty. The gender focused educational bridge programs that were funded through Perkins did provide avenues to career education that offered increased income. The lack of these programs has decreased women’s access points to education. At the same time, as the NCWGE report (2001) pointed out, the reduction of programs has also added to the invisibility of low-income women as a group. The presence of programs and services specifically supportive of women’s success in education makes it visible that women as a group may have gender related barriers and needs for support. When those programs disappear so does a public articulation of women’s issues. My research seeks to articulate these issues for low-income women through questions about their paths of access and daily college experiences. The first research question focuses on how the women students interviewed have come to participate in community college education and aims to understand the interaction and relationship between the barriers to college and women’s own choices and expectations. The second question seeks to understand what daily college life is like for low-income women students with a focus on negotiating the college experience.

The literature discussed in this section suggests both the importance of education and the difficulty for poor women in accessing it. My study seeks to make these difficulties visible as a critical question for community colleges through the focus on women’s experiences from their perspective. My research questions aim to bring out the paths women have taken to community colleges and their experiences within colleges. While an analysis of women’s experience that makes their actual
lives visible is needed and important, that understanding also needs to be framed within the structural constraints demonstrated in the literature.

Low-income women do not have support for education, may face attitudes and practices that actively discourage them from seeing themselves as potential students, and their issues are not seen as critical to community colleges. It is important then to bring these issues to the foreground, to form a critical understanding of women’s experience as they negotiate the community college in this context. This study aims to make visible women’s experience in their own voices while framing this experience in the systems that provide constraints on actions and choices.

**Impact of post-secondary education on women’s lives.**

This section of the literature review focuses on the impact of post secondary education on women’s lives, particularly education’s effect on low-income women’s economic status. Questions of access to and success in education are critical because education can make a difference in low-income women’s lives. Welfare eligible women are not offered access to education as a means to escape poverty, yet there is a substantial literature that suggests that education has a positive impact on earning power in general and women’s earning power in particular. This section restates the effects of education on wages through a brief discussion of the relationship between education and earning power, summarizes some implications for the role of education in improving policy supports for low-income people, and then focuses on the benefits of postsecondary education for low-income women.


**Relationship of education and earning power.**

A report from the College Board (Baum & Payea, 2005) delineated the benefits of higher education. Higher education is correlated to higher earnings and reduces both poverty and unemployment rates. Bureau of Labor statistics also clearly indicate that education pays. The median weekly earnings of full time workers over 25 who did not finish high school are less than half of people with a college degree while both women and men who had a high school diploma and no college earn about 55% of what college graduates earn (US Department of Labor, BLS, 2009). In addition, Census data illustrate the specific impact of education on women.

![Women's Income by education level](image)

Figure 1: Women’s median yearly income by education level.

¹Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2005 American Community Survey
Further, in a 2010 American Community Survey One Year Estimate, women over 25 with earnings had a median yearly income of $21,427, while those with bachelors’ degrees earned $40,393, a 46% difference (US Census Bureau, 2010). Despite this demonstrated relationship between educational attainment and earnings, public policy advocates continually find the need to stress the importance of access to education. It is as if the barriers to education or needs for supports are invisible. My study brings those barriers and needs to the surface through a critical exploration of low-income women’s educational experience.

**Role of education and policy gaps.**

Studies of poor families often stress the need for educational opportunities. Waldron, Roberts, and Reamer (2004), in their report from the Working Poor Families project, analyzed national and state data to examine the life conditions for working poor families with children. They found that more than 25% of working families were low-income (defined as a family of four earning less than $36,784 in 2002), that low-income workers were over three times more likely not to have finished high school, and that there was a great deal of variance in the supports and education and training opportunities by state. This report recommended investment in post secondary education and training for low-income families. Similarly national analysis of post TANF programs has emphasized the importance of education as well as employment strategies. The 2002 Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) is a nationwide project that supports the provision of education and training as an option for women transitioning from welfare. Brock, Matus-Grossman, and
Hamilton (2002) in a report for MDRC analyzed different nationwide efforts to successfully implement welfare to work programs and compared mandatory jobs programs with programs that emphasized education and training. Brock et al. argued that programs that included education and training served welfare clients better and that community colleges in particular offered distinct advantages in the design of these programs.

Waldron et al approached the situation for low-income families with a focus on poverty reduction but their report focused on low-income families in general. While they demonstrated the positive effects of education, they did not distinguish these effects by gender. The MDRC study advocated for education as a program component but defined success for welfare clients as their ability to move to employment. Their study took the movement of welfare recipients from welfare to work as a given, rather than questioning whether obtaining employment resulted in a movement out of poverty. Access to education was therefore viewed in an employment context, not in the context of what might best for the future of women and their families as they themselves might define it.

There is a gap between the demonstrated relationship between education and earnings and public policy. These studies attempt to bridge that gap by advocating for low-income families (Waldron) or advocating for a mix of training and work experience (Brock). However neither asks questions about low-income women’s experience from their perspective and Brock takes the policy framework of welfare reform for granted rather than questioning it. This gap in analysis has implications
for the design of my study that has women’s own perspectives as a focus. My research questions form a framework where, as a researcher, my intent is to explore women’s experience with them in a dialogue that supports the emergence of their narrative and their understandings. At the same time, these narratives are contextualized and analyzed within the actual social conditions of daily life; these conditions include welfare policies that prescribe and limit opportunities for education. Rather than taking welfare reform for granted, this analysis poses it as problematic and oppressive to women. It seeks in Smith’s (2004) words to produce a social analysis that is for women, that critiques social reality as it is presented and helps instead to create new possibilities.

**Effects of post-secondary education on low-income women.**

Several recent studies have cast a more critical eye on the effects of welfare policy on women and have sought to demonstrate the effectiveness of supporting low-income women in post secondary education. Their purpose is to show that education is a route for women to permanently exit poverty and they advocate for policy changes to accomplish that goal. These studies challenge the work first assumptions of the 1996 welfare reform legislation and aim to contribute to social policy that is effective in reducing poverty for single mother families. As such, they represent a critical feminist perspective that is reflective of the material conditions of women’s lives and aims to improve those conditions. A report from the Women’s Policy Institute (Jones-DeWeever, & Gault, 2006) presented the results of a mixed data collection technique study of student parents who received welfare while attending
college in California. The researchers surveyed current and former student parents, did focus groups with current students, and interviewed college administrators. They found that access to education had positive financial, social, and psychological effects on participants plus positive effects on their children. According to this study, communities also benefited since most participants stayed in their communities and had higher wage earning capacity. However, there are some serious limitations to this study in terms of the validity of the results and whether they can be generalized to either the population of TANF eligible single mothers in California or welfare mothers in general. The researchers sent 957 surveys to single parents who were current and former students and were on welfare while in college. They received 92 responses, a 9.6% response rate. This low response rate, while understandable in terms of the shifting dynamics of poor people’s lives, raises questions about the validity and reliability of the results. This very low response rate may mean the presence of bias, since it is possible that the people who responded were people who had indeed attained some additional economic benefit and family stability from education, while we know nothing about the large number of non-responders. My study has different aims and focuses and does not rely on a mailed survey but on unstructured interviews to gain in depth accounts of women’s experiences.

Other studies have demonstrated the effects of education more effectively. The report “From Poverty to Self Sufficiency” by the Center for Women Policy Studies (CWPS, 2002) did show that education is an effective route out of poverty for low-income women. This report synthesized and analyzed both survey and
administrative data to demonstrate the positive relationship between education and economic benefits, particularly for poor families. Education, from the perspective of CWPS, “opens the door to economic self sufficiency and social mobility” (p. 9).

Zahn and Pandey (2004) also asserted that post-secondary education significantly improved single mothers’ economic status, while past work experience was a relatively weak predictor of that status. They documented the rise in the number of single mother families, analyzed and reviewed research on various factors that affect single mothers’ economic status, and identified research gaps. Through an analysis of a sample of female single heads of household drawn from the 1993 National Panel Study of Income Dynamics, Zahn, and Pandy demonstrated that post secondary education is a significant predictor of economic well-being for both white and African American single mothers. There is a limitation to Zahn and Pandy’s work because of the inherent time lag present when analyzing Census data, but it does provide strong support for the positive effects of education on poor women’s lives.

Both the Center for Women and Policy Studies’ report and Zahn and Pandy’s study showed the strong effect education has on women’s well-being and Zahn and Pandy specifically focused on the effects of race as well as gender. However, neither of these studies dealt with women’s own perceptions of their experiences of education and its benefits or women’s own definitions of supports and access. My study focuses on women’s own accounts of community college education and what it has offered them in relation to their needs, goals and hopes.
Additional evidence of the benefits of community college education in particular comes from Mathur, Reichle, Strawn, and Wiseley (2004) through a study of the effects of the CalWORKs program. CalWORKs is a program where welfare recipients are allowed to attend a California community college for up to 24 months. Mathur et al. compared the employment rates and earnings of CalWORKs students with other women community college students and the general welfare population in California. They found that earnings substantially increased for CalWORKs students after college even if the students entered without a high school diploma, and the more education a CalWORKs student accomplished, the greater her earnings increased. The earnings of students on welfare while they were at school were also greater than the earnings of the general welfare population. Second year out of school median annual earnings of CalWORKs women with associate degrees increased 403% compared to pre-college earnings. This analysis points to the particular importance of community colleges as access points for poor women and as crucial gateways to an improved economic future. Few studies have focused on the community college. My study will add to this literature through narrative interviews with low-income women community college students.

**Summary.**

These studies demonstrate the positive effects of education for low-income people in general (Waldron, Roberts, & Reamer, 2004) and low-income women in particular (CWPS, 2002; Mathur et al., 2004; Zahn & Pandy, 2004). Jones-
DeWeever and Gault’s 2006 data is flawed by the very low response rate and MDRC subsumes women’s voices under the rubric of welfare clients. However, the Center for Women Policy Studies 2002 study, Zahn and Pandey’s 2004 research, and Mathur et al’s 2004 study of CalWORKs have well designed and methodologically sound data showing the improvement post secondary education makes in poor women’s economic status. These are critical voices whose purpose is to challenge the work first assumptions of the 1996 welfare reform legislation and contribute to social policy that is effective in reducing poverty for single mother families. These studies took the actual social conditions of women’s lives as their starting point and contributed to an understanding of the possibilities education can offer to low-income women. The importance of post-secondary education and in particular the community college was emphasized (Brock, 2002; Mathur et al.). However, women’s own voices, their understanding of the constraints that govern their lives and how this might translate into their experience of community colleges was absent. Large scale quantitative studies such as these provide a framing description of social conditions and possibilities but they cannot answer questions about the meaning of community college education to low-income women or how barriers and supports are actually experienced. In contrast my study aims to create understanding about how a group of low-income women came to be in this place that they were not supposed to enter, and the effects of education on their perceptions of themselves and their place in the world.
Low-income women’s experience of college.

Low-income women have continued to enter college despite public policy constraints. This section analyzes studies that examine low-income women’s experience of college. These studies have focused on welfare eligible women, and take welfare reform as problematic in its denial of educational opportunity. They deconstruct the notion of welfare policy as a reform through making the positive effects of post-secondary education for low-income women visible. These effects go beyond earning power, and range from an increased sense of women’s personal empowerment to impacting the educational goals and futures for their families.

While there are large scale studies that report low-income women’s experience of college, there are few studies that explore that experience in depth. This section first reviews two studies of welfare eligible students in Maine and California that provide qualitative data about low-income women’s experience of college as part of larger quantitative studies (Butler & Duprez, 2002; Jones-DeWeever & Gault, 2006). Then, three recent dissertations are discussed that have an in depth focus on welfare eligible women students’ experiences of college (Pearson, 2006; Walker-Griffea, 2004; & Kostick, 2001), and the section ends with an extended case study of women on welfare who attended university (Christopher, 2005). Each study gives insight into different aspects of low-income women’s experience, but none explores the experiences of welfare eligible students as they progress through the community college or asks questions about the ways their experience as poor women affects their views of education and themselves.
Studies of welfare eligible students in Maine and California have demonstrated the beneficial effects of college for low-income single mothers. Butler and Duprez (2002) and Jones-DeWeever and Gault (2006) both described low-income single mothers’ experience of post secondary education though analyzing the reported experience of TANF eligible student parents. Butler and Duprez analyzed the effects of being in post secondary education for single mothers through the impact of the Parents as Scholars (PaS) program in Maine. PaS is an innovative program that uses state dollars that are required as a match for federal dollars in implementing welfare reform, and repurposes these funds to provide financial support to TANF eligible single parents as they pursue higher education. Surveys of 222 PaS participants reported increased self-esteem, enhanced opportunities, enriched lives, better relationships with their children, and excitement about their futures. Additionally, Jones-DeWeever and Gault’s study of welfare eligible student parents in California provided some valuable information about women’s own perspectives on the effects of attending post-secondary education. Although there were flaws in the survey portion of this study, as described in the last section, both the survey responses, and particularly the data from focus groups with 17 present and former student parents, attested to the positive effects of post-secondary education. Student parents reported considerable barriers in accessing college but also major benefits in terms of increased self-esteem, sense of empowerment, greater confidence, increased ability to improve their own economic and personal situations, and feeling better equipped to foster their children’s educational goals. The qualitative portion of this
study had additional value since most of the student parents in these groups self
identified as women of color. My research questions will add to this understanding of
low-income women’s experience through asking what it is like to be in the classroom
and whether the community college is supportive of low-income women’s learning
experiences. Both Butler and Duprez and Jones-DeWeever and Gault report that
students felt empowered and had greater self-esteem and more confidence through
their experiences in college. My research can extend these findings through
exploring how women negotiate community colleges and what produces these
experiences. I am interested in how dominant cultural interpretations which tend to
denigrate and demean poor women (Abramovitz, 2006; Mink, 2006) impact low-
income women’s sense of self, and whether education forms the basis of resistance to
these negative interpretations. Through in depth interviews, I hoped to create
dialogues with women that acknowledge and reflect on these cultural ideas.

Three recent dissertations have addressed aspects of low-income women’s
college experience through a more in depth focus on women’s own accounts of this
experience. Pearson (2006) explored the effects of welfare reform on the educational
goals and experiences of TANF participants through in depth interviews with 20
welfare mothers in Georgia who were able to fulfill their work requirements by
enrolling in post secondary education. Pearson’s focus was TANF as an obstacle to
students’ success, although she also examined students’ beliefs about education and
parenting, their family obligations, and support systems as shaping their experiences
and likelihood of educational success. Walker-Griffea (2004) used both surveys and
semi structured in-person interviews with 25 single mother participants to reveal themes in their experiences of college as part of their total life experience. Walker - Griffea focused on the mother-child relationship, support networks, economic resources, and what she defined as the difficult and complex process of receiving government aid, and emphasized the importance of institutionalized support systems and programs for single mothers attending community college. Kostick (2001) studied the experiences of a group of welfare mothers attending a community college through what was then a new program, Washington State's WorkFirst/Work Study program. Over a two term period, Kostick observed program seminars and interviewed participants and program staff. She explored the challenges and transitional issues for women on welfare attending a community college for the first time as well as the students’ barriers and experiences with combining parenting, welfare, work, and school.

These three exploratory studies all provided insights into low-income women’s experience in higher education, with two of them focused on community college education. In these studies students saw education as the key to a better life for themselves (Kostick, 2001) and their families (Kostick; Walker-Griffiea, 2004). Education was valued, the women in Kostick’s study felt they were better off juggling welfare regulations, working, and education than when they were living lives as the working poor. These results echo the insights into low-income women students’ experiences gained from quantitative studies. In addition, institutional systems and welfare regulations (Kostick; Pearson, 2006; Walker-Griffiea) were seen as barriers to
women’s success. Walker-Griffsea identified the need for community college support programs for single mother students and Pearson’s analysis looked at TANF as a barrier. Kostick did focus on women’s lived experience of the community college; however, her students were in the initial terms of a transitional program rather than having had more extensive experience as students. A further self identified limitation for Kostick is that although the program participants had diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, her sample of interviewees was all white.

My proposed research focuses on women who have entered regular community college classes, so should add to and amplify Kostick’s conclusions. All three of these studies provide insights for guiding interview questions. Probing for how students view education, perceive essential supports, and what forms barriers to success became key questions to pursue. Women students who are eligible for welfare are also parents and each of these studies speaks to different aspects of their difficulties with combining motherhood and school. While my study does not focus on motherhood, it is essential to see low-income women students in Adair’s (2003) term as embodied; that is they do not exist in one realm as students and in another separate realm as parents. Their responsibility for children reaches across both worlds and is part of both experiences. My guiding interview questions acknowledge student parents as mothers and explore what that means in their experiences.

Finally, Christopher (2005) has argued that welfare mothers experience many barriers to persisting in college but also use many strategies to resist the multiple forms of oppression they confront. She stressed that their experiences are not
captured by existing theoretical assumptions and research findings on higher education, assumptions and research that are grounded in the experience of traditionally aged white college students with no children. Christopher explored college attendance and persistence of welfare mothers through an extended case study method that involved repeated in depth interviews with 17 women, mostly women of color, who were welfare recipients while attending an urban university in Kentucky. Her purpose was to inform theory through the complexities of the everyday lives of women, rethink existing research on attendance and persistence, and show that an examination of welfare mothers’ experiences can illuminate the different supports that they may need to succeed. One of Christopher’s strengths is using a feminist theoretical frame that sees women as both being constrained by oppressive social systems and resistant to those systems. In Christopher’s study for example, having children was a complication and a barrier to educational success, but also formed a basis for resistance, an incentive to persisting despite barriers. Christopher calls for more qualitative research that can identify the complex strategies that welfare student parents use to succeed. My research questions should add to knowledge on this question through an understanding of how low-income women negotiate the community college, what are their strategies, and whether education is a source of resistance.

**Summary.**

Most of the qualitative studies that focus on poor women’s experience of college are a smaller part of quantitative studies. These studies do show the positive
effects of post secondary education for low-income women. Education was seen as empowering; a source of confidence and self-esteem, as well as a route to a better future. These effects were also generalized to a felt impact on, and benefit for, students’ children. However, the information from these studies is valuable but limited. For example, Butler and Duprez’ 2002 study derived most of their data on poor women’s experience in the PaS program from surveys that were supplemented with focus groups. They did not pursue an in depth analysis of the meaning of women’s experience. The research questions in my study ask about the daily experience of community college from women’s own perspective. They probe the meaning of experience and whether low-income women feel at home in the college environment. They reflect the daily material difficulties of low-income women’s lives by seeing college life as a terrain to be negotiated, and they seek to identify strategies women use to succeed. The three dissertations cited did look at students’ lives in depth through the use of in person interviews, but for two of them (Pearson, 2006; Walker -Griffaea, 2004), their focus was mainly on women’s experience of obstacles and support systems. Kostick (2001) focused on the experience of welfare mothers at a community college, but the students were part of an experimental first time program that had the characteristics of a transitional program. She was not able to explore the students’ experience of college when they were enrolled in ongoing regular classes. I interviewed welfare eligible women students who are at different stages in the community college, students who are enrolled in mainstream classes and programs. These students’ more extensive experience of community college should
provide different insights into low-income women’s experience than students who are at the beginning of their educational journey.

Christopher’s intensive case study highlighted the way low-income women’s experiences are not captured by existing educational theory. She attempted to re-theorize women’s experience seeing low-income women as both accepting and resisting the conditions of their lives and produced an expanded understanding of the supports needed for attendance and persistence that needs to be extended to other aspects of low-income women’s educational experiences. My research framework also sees women as both agents in their own lives and as constrained by those lives. Any analysis of their experience must capture both of these aspects. From the perspective of welfare policy, low-income women’s presence in the classroom is itself a contradiction. Within this context, oppression and resistance form a both/and rather than an either/or explanation of women’s lives (Collins, 1991). There are implications here for the interview protocol in my study, my questions needed to be framing and open ended so they could allow the complex reality of low-income women students’ lives to emerge. It was essential to create a rapport with the students interviewed so that contradictory aspects of their experience might be expressed. My analysis of their life experience aims to surface those contradictions and situate them in the context of each woman’s life.

**Effects of gender and class on women’s sense of themselves.**

This section briefly discusses the ideology and cultural imagery surrounding poor single mothers as promoted through the public discourse on welfare reform. It
then reviews studies that speak to the effects of ideologies of class and gender on poor women as they participate in college, including negative impacts of these cultural messages and some evidence that poor women see themselves as outsiders in education. The section concludes with implications for my research.

**Discourse on welfare reform.**

Much current discourse on welfare reform either renders women invisible or stigmatizes poor single mothers as lazy and dependent. Typical public discussions of welfare policy do not name women or single mothers as the subject of discussion. For example, the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation in its report analyzing different nationwide efforts to successfully implement welfare to work programs (Brock, Matus-Grossman, & Hamilton, 2002), never refers to the people on welfare as women and children, they are instead welfare recipients. Rather than specifying that the majority of people on welfare are single mothers, this discourse on welfare recipients or welfare clients renders the population most affected by welfare policy faceless and invisible, and the impact of the changes in social policy on women are obscured. However, as Abramovitz (2006) argues, welfare in the US has been primarily a program that impacts the lives of women and children, and gender, as well as race and class, matter when talking about welfare. My study aims to bring poor women’s lives to the foreground with research questions and analyses that are grounded in the structural constraints in low-income women students’ lives.

The other side of women’s invisibility in discussion of welfare policy has been what many feminist researchers see as a cultural attack on poor single mothers...
(Abramovitz, 1991; Fox Piven, 2002; Mink, 2006; Reese, 2005). Both Mink and Fox Piven have argued that public discourse and policy has blamed poor women for their own economic need. In this view, the rationale for welfare reform developed through the demonization of single motherhood, with women who had children outside of the confines of marriage being seen as deviant (Mink). Abramovitz (1991) in an earlier detailed analysis of the power of language used to describe the poor, revealed how this language covered up oppressive conditions and justified punitive policies. Abramovitz analyzed the cultural double standard of expecting and applauding middle class women for depending on men but punishing poor single women for “depending” on state assistance. This language of welfare dependency has blamed poor women for needing aid, and single mothers have become constructed as dependants who need a sharp dose of self-reliance.

The Work First principles set out in welfare reform have embodied these negative assumptions about welfare mothers and applied them to education (Kahn, Butler, Deprez, & Pokalow, 2004). Education for low-income women has been framed as work avoidance, and poor women who seek education have been seen as lacking responsibility. This construction of single mothers as dependent people who need to become self-reliant has produced a disjuncture between policy and women’s lived experience (Limoncelli, 2002).

Conceptions of poor women’s character and place have resulted in barriers to education, but less is known about the impact on low-income women’s conceptions of themselves as they pursue education. Adair and Dahlberg (2003) discussed the
alienation that poor women often feel when they enter college, a dissonance between cultures that is expressed in not being at home in either world. Harris (2003) and Madsen (2003) both talk about the image and stereotype of the welfare queen which casts poor women as deviant, lazy, and dependant and Madsen described the sanctions and punishment applied to welfare mothers who go to school. Adair (2003) also discussed the negative external stereotyping and inner messages that welfare student parents experience. Adair, in a survey and narrative interviews with former welfare mother students, asked why they left college. While external factors such as inadequate funds played a part, a large number of responses indicated that women felt shamed, blamed, and undervalued in college classrooms and in contacts with college personnel. Sharp (2004) interviewed single mothers on welfare who were attending colleges of different sizes, to understand what institutional policies and practices supported their success. Her interviewees reported college as a liberating, confidence boosting experience but also gave accounts of humiliation by college personnel because of their welfare status.

Summary.

The public language of welfare reform constructs women as invisible or deviant and dependant. There is a solid body of feminist research and analysis that documents the negative connotations attached to poverty in general and poor single mothers in particular. These connotations have been analyzed as a form of social control (Piven & Cloward, 1993). Few studies have explored how consciousness of oneself as poor may preclude women from educational success or how education
might be a source of resistance. Some data from studies of welfare eligible students suggest that negative cultural attitudes about poverty are present in the daily life of educational institutions and that poor women may experience exclusion and shame in the classroom. These studies are in contrast to the data that suggest that education leads to empowerment, increased self-confidence, and hope for the future. My research aims to illuminate this contrast. My third research question focuses on the effects of gender and class on women’s sense of themselves and whether or not education is a place that supports resistance to cultural stereotypes of poor women.

**Summary of Literature Review**

The review of literature focused on four different but related areas of research. These were the recent changes in public policy that have impacted women’s access to education, the impact of post secondary education on women’s lives, low-income women’s experience of college, and the ways that class interacts with gender to shape and potentially stigmatize low-income women’s sense of themselves.

Changes in public policy have provided a social context of lessened support and systemic barriers to low-income women entering post secondary education. Social welfare policy regulates poor women’s lives and structures their futures in terms of low wage work. Low-income women lack support for education and face practices and policies that discourage them from seeing themselves as potential students.

Yet evidence supports a college education as key to improving low-income women’s lives. Education improves earning power and is a route out of poverty for
low-income people in general and women in particular. Education has the potential
to improve poor women’s economic status and the community college has a key role
to play. It is critical to explore the meaning of community college education to low-
income women and how barriers and supports are actually experienced.

Most qualitative studies that focus on poor women’s experience of college are
smaller parts of quantitative studies. These studies show positive effects of post
secondary education for low-income women. These effects go beyond economic
benefits. Education is seen as empowering and a source of confidence and self-
esteem. It is part of a better future that extends to a perceived impact not only on
women students but also on their children and their children’s future. However, these
studies have not pursued an in depth analysis of women’s experience and existing in
depth studies have focused on obstacles, persistence, and support systems, or have
been studies of special transitional programs formed specifically for welfare eligible
women. There is little knowledge of women’s experience and sense of self from their
perspective as students who are also in poverty.

Low-income women students’ experience of college takes place in the context
of a public discourse about poor women that either renders them invisible or
constructs them as deviant and dependant. Few studies explore the effects of these
negative constructs on women’s sense of themselves as they enter college education,
or whether education might be a source of resistance to dominant cultural
interpretations of poor women’s identity or social place. In contrast to the studies that
show education to be a source of empowerment, some research indicates that poor women may also experience shame and exclusion in the classroom.

My study aims to add to this knowledge by exploring three research questions. The first asks how low-income women come to access the community college. This question seeks to understand the context for entering community college education from women’s own perspective. Despite systemic barriers and cultural ideas and practices that can discourage low-income women from pursuing education, the group of women I studied are in the community college classroom. This question aims to uncover the ways that structural constraints manifest in women’s lives, what barriers and supports were present as they accessed education, what were their expectations and ideas of education, what was its meaning for their future. The second question explores their experience at the community college. This question focuses on the daily lived experience of community college education, including whether low-income women experience the college as welcoming, and whether they feel at home in education. Are they outsiders or insiders in the educational experience and what strategies are they using to negotiate the college experience? The third question seeks to explore the effects of class and gender on these experiences. This question provides a focus on women’s consciousness of themselves as poor women who are students and whether this has shaped how they see themselves and their possibilities. Has education been a place of redefinition of themselves as women and is it a source of resistance to dominant interpretations of the place of poor women? These questions form a critical exploration of low-income women’s experience at the
community college that expands knowledge through bringing their voices to the table and situating those voices within the structural constraints of low-income women’s lives.
Chapter 3: Design

The purpose and questions for this study are best approached by taking a social critical philosophical orientation and using a feminist perspective as the basis for my critical position. This approach and critical position govern the study topic and research questions I’m posing. Poverty is a significant and critical issue for women. Public policy is making access to opportunities that could change poverty rates worse not better. My overall intent is to provide knowledge that can help community colleges, advocacy groups, and women themselves promote policies and programs that can reverse this trend and in the process give authentic voice and visibility to poor women’s lives. Smith (1999) argues that critical inquiry involves trying to trace the connections between the practices of people’s ordinary lives, their experiences, to the larger social processes that can constrain those lives. Within the tradition of critical inquiry, people are agents in their own lives. It is crucial therefore to understand people’s lived experience, their understandings, actions, meanings, and to see them as actors, to honor their subjectivity, to have that at the center. But at the same time, there are social relations of power and privilege that mediate that experience; the task of research from a critical perspective is to connect the two. This involves critical deconstruction of everyday understandings formed within systems of power and privilege with the purpose of taking action to improve social conditions. The purpose of my research is to critically explore low-income women’s experiences as they negotiate post secondary education in community colleges and to situate
women’s own understanding of their educational experience within a system of
gender and class disparities.

Part of my research perspective is as a feminist. By that I mean, a focus on
women as well as a commitment to understanding and changing systems of power
and privilege that constrict people’s lives. I understand social reality as structured
and mediated through the intersections of race, class, and gender. I see gender as a
set of relationships, not a binary concept. My research purpose and questions reflect
an interest in contributing knowledge that can improve women’s lives. They are
based on a social critical approach with a feminist perspective that takes women’s
experience as central and important. The focus on low-income women comes from
the possibility that they are being dispossessed of an educational access that could
move them out of poverty. My questions focus on women as negotiators of systems
that are not necessarily set up to support them; the aim is to understand both low-
income women’s experience and consciousness within a social framework that seems
to imply that they should not be in college in the first place.

**Philosophical Approach**

In this section I will briefly discuss the social critical philosophical approach
and feminist perspective as the basis for being critical, with a focus on critical
feminism as my overall theoretical approach.

**Critical approach.**

The critical approach in social research derives from Marxist and
psychoanalytic social theory, particularly the Critical Theorists of the Frankfort
school, and has been further developed by such theorists as Habermas, Bourdieu, and Friere (Neuman, 2003). This approach embodies an anti-positivist critique and sees research as existing in a social and historical context (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). The key questions for the critical researcher are knowledge for what and for whom? There is no such thing as a value free research method or perspective. For the critical approach, the point of doing research is to increase knowledge that makes a contribution to people's self understanding and that promotes their ability to change their personal and social world; what critical social theorists call an emancipatory purpose (Neuman). From a critical feminist perspective, an emancipatory purpose would include knowledge that contributes to an eventual end to gender based relations of domination and systems of inequality. The idea is to change social conditions, critiquing social relationships and conditions to promote empowerment (Hesse-Biber, Leavy, & Yaiser, 2004).

Critical social researchers see people as having agency in their own lives; there is a focus on the human being as a subject who produces meaning, as well as a focus on social conditions and relationships. At the same time, critical theory differs from interpretive epistemologies that focus solely on subjective meanings. The critical social theorist agrees that human subjects produce meaning, but they do so in a context of social relations that shape and can distort those meanings in a reciprocal process. Comstock (1982) expresses this as humans having the potential for agency but being trapped in “ideologically frozen conceptions of the actual and the possible” (p. 370). Naples (2003), a materialist feminist researcher, describes the same process
as relations of ruling being infused in daily life. Poor women who are eligible for welfare are often blamed for their own circumstances (Fox Piven, 2002). They are seen as welfare dependant, not work ready, and certainly not as agents, knowers who can transform their own lives through education. These definitions of self or accepted understandings may become internalized. Social reality is historical and cultural, people are historically situated and think and act within concrete material social conditions that structure their experience within relationships of power and privilege. For low-income women this also means negotiating educational systems that may not be constituted to help them succeed, as well as dealing with negative cultural constructions of who they are.

In the social critical approach, theory that informs practice and evolves and changes through conscious actions underlies the key critical concept of praxis. Using the term praxis infers an understanding of social action that emphasizes consciousness and human subjectivity as central to the collective practices that constitute our social worlds, in Carr and Kemmis’ (1986) words, a kind of “informed doing” (p.149). The focus of analysis is on change and contradiction and collective human agency that can change social conditions that trap people in oppressive social relationships. The task of social research is to help people see that potential. For my study, one aim is to make women’s agency visible to themselves. The systems regulating low-income women’s lives do not construct them as potential students yet they are participating in college. The potential for change lies in bringing their
experiences and the meaning of their lives to the foreground both for themselves and for the framers of policy and educational programs.

In my view, some forms of critical social research can be somewhat deterministic or mechanistic, for example the concept of false consciousness is very much at odds with an emphasis on human agency. Neuman (2003) refers to social critical perspectives as bridging the subject-object gap, attempting a transcendence of the positivist conception of independent objective reality and the interpretive tradition focusing purely on subjectivity. Versions of social critical theory that see the research task as revealing the “truth” of their social situations to research subjects, sounds too much like another form of domination to me, rather than the bridging that Neuman references. My own focus fits more with critical research that focuses on how people produce their choices and actions in society, on how they negotiate structures, have agency and produce resistance (Bogden & Biklen, 1998). This focus with an emphasis on the subjectivity and agency of women comes to the foreground when a feminist perspective is taken as the basis from which to be justifiably critical.

**Feminist perspective.**

The central change that the feminist theoretical perspective brought to research was that feminism inserted the gendered subject, or the knower as a gendered being, into research epistemologies and processes (Hesse-Biber, Leavy, & Yaiser, 2004). There are multiple feminist perspectives, but all begin with women’s experience. As well as this focus on women as subjects, feminist perspectives question social power relationships, take a critical stance to universal knowledge
claims, pay attention to issues of difference, and have a commitment to social and political action. Feminism is not one unitary epistemology, there are many feminisms. However, Hesse-Biber, Leavy, and Yaiser do posit some critical concepts as foundational to feminist research. These include a critique of positivism as a form of social dominance, the rejection of androcentrism defined as a male or masculinist focus and perspective, rejection of the subject-object split, seeing the researched as subjects, and involving a reciprocal relationship between the researcher and the researched.

Feminists conceptualize women as a starting point for research, but as postmodernists have pointed out, there is no one universal or essential category named “woman,” there are instead many specific women grounded in race and class and other structural relationships. Many contemporary feminist perspectives acknowledge differences between women, and also acknowledge that there is therefore no one truth of women’s experience, rather there are many truths that are context bound. This notion of women’s multiple experiences as a starting point for research has been most fully developed by what is called standpoint epistemology, an approach first advanced by Sandra Harding and further elaborated by such feminist thinkers as Harding, Dorothy Smith, Patricia Hill Collins, Nancy Hartsock, and Nancy Naples (Naples, 2003). It is this epistemology that provides the basis for what I am calling a critical feminist perspective. Standpoint epistemology is rooted in women’s lives, in their everyday existence, but it also sees power relations as central to that experience. Naples terms her perspective multidimensional standpoint; she
seeks to see how social relations are embedded in women’s daily activities. In contrast to a purely interpretive approach which would see lived experience in terms of subjective meaning alone, Naples is interested in women’s lived experience to “investigate how power works” (p. 69). In this philosophical approach poor women’s experiences in community college are necessarily seen as situated within a context of class and gender constraints. Some standpoint theorists seek to articulate what they call a new feminist objectivity as opposed to the old positivist objectivity. This feminist objectivity is based on situated knowledge, knowledge that comes from a particular historical and social location. In this view, bringing history, social relations, and values of empowerment to the fore does not diminish objectivity, it increases it. “By using the marginalized position as the standpoint objectivity is maximized” (Hesse-Biber, Leavy, & Yaiser, 2004, p.16). In my study analysis begins with low-income women’s experiences, their experiences form the standpoint from which to begin thinking about their situation.

These feminist perspectives build on critical social theory but also transform it. The point of social research is to create thinking and research for women (Smith, 2004), to give voice to women and discover and disrupt systems of oppression. The systems in which low-income women participate were not created with their needs in mind. The regulatory frames of welfare agencies see poor women as a dependency problem to be corrected, and educational programs are not based on their actual needs in terms of access or success. Having poor women articulate their experiences and needs in community college education is a step towards changing that framework.
Summary.

My philosophic approach and assumptions are those of a critical feminism based on standpoint theory. This approach was first developed by feminist thinkers who were grounded in a critical Marxist perspective but sought to transform that perspective through an analysis of how relations of gender inequality structured and produced knowledge (Harding, 2004). Harding points out that a version of standpoint theory emerges in the knowledge critiques of all new social movements, when people and voices that have been marginalized begin to critique dominant knowledge conceptions and create their own discourse and analyses of social relations. For feminist standpoint theorists, knowledge is grounded in women’s lives, and analysis is the journey of thinking that begins from these experiences (Harding, 2004; Smith, 1990) with the purpose of creating research that can help women see and analyze and therefore change their own lives (Smith, 2004).

The criteria for truth or knowledge claims in this approach are based on the idea that knowledge is situated in social relations of power and privilege, so research that illuminates those relations will be less partial and have more explanatory power than research that claims to be objective or universal. Also, research that recognizes and makes social conditions explicit becomes a more complete understanding of social reality that stands in contrast to an interpretive perspective that describes reality, or a positivist perspective that addresses human processes as mechanical or technical processes. Once gender is understood as a structural relation that shapes experience and knowledge of that experience, then it is no longer possible to pretend
to a universal truth or make a universal knowledge claim. Instead there are many
truths that are context bound through structural relationships such as gender, race, and
class. Since knowledge is gendered, a criterion for truth about women’s lives is to
begin with women as the starting point. The aim is to produce a situated knowledge
that gives voice to women within history and social relations, including the history
and social location of the researcher. Generating knowledge from the perspective of
marginalized or oppressed groups in this way is seen as maximizing truth.

The strengths of this approach are the focus on empowerment and social
justice, the commitment to produce research for women not about women, and the
completeness and complexity of analysis. The downsides are that a situated
knowledge or idea of many truths can easily slide into a relativism in which there are
no solid grounds to stand on. Also the notion of the researcher as having a critical
analysis that can help illuminate the lives of those researched can become oppressive
in its own right. Marginalized voices as the standpoint to generate research problems
and truths can become another kind of essentialism. It is also difficult to put a pure
form of this method into practice.

**Method**

The research methods for this study are derived from and justified in the
social critical philosophical approach and feminist perspective described in the
previous section, are supported by the review of the literature, and are befitting of the
study purpose and questions. I am labeling this method critical feminism. A feminist
research approach also requires feminist methods. Feminists, like other critical
thinkers, state that “the real world makes a material difference in terms of race, class and gender” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 24). Critical inquiry begins with the examination of the human life world, a hermeneutic step of discovery, but understands that that world is framed through larger social relationships. When discussing feminist method, Naples (2003) does not see phenomenology and a critical materialist feminism or standpoint theory as mutually exclusive, rather each informs and enriches the other. Exploration of low-income women’s experience as they negotiate community college education involves aspects of a phenomenological method. This method centers on the interpretation of human experience and interaction, particularly the construction of meaning in daily life (Denzen & Lincoln, 2000). This hermeneutic step is initially focused on women’s own interpretation; it needs to be their narrative, their perspective with only some framing guiding questions. However, understanding low-income women’s experience will also involve situating those interpretations within gender and class relations and the larger systems of social welfare and dominant educational policy.

In this way, feminists see research as a process; they “pay attention to the synergy between the context of discovery and the context of justification” (Hesse-Biber, Leavy, & Yaiser, 2004, p. 22). This synergy is a complicated issue. In a critical feminist perspective it is crucial to understand people’s lived experience, their understandings, actions, and meanings. Smith (1990) speaks to the necessity of beginning research from women’s lived experience as a ground for knowledge. Harding (2004) building on Smith and other standpoint theorists argues that
beginning the journey of thinking about women through examining their daily activities is the basis for knowledge claims, “Starting off research from women’s lives will generate less partial and distorted accounts not only of women’s lives but also of men’s lives and of the whole social order” (p. 45). But, at the same time, there are social relations of power and privilege that mediate that lived experience and the researcher may interpret people’s lives differently than they do themselves. I think this can create ethical dilemmas in qualitative research where a relationship of trust is created in the research process and there is a commitment to share perspectives and results. What is important is for researchers to situate their interpretation in their own theory, history, and culture, particularly when describing differences between how the researcher and the researched see the world. The task as I see it is to make each person’s, the researcher and the research participant’s, narrative transparent and contextualized within research analysis.

A feminist method also seeks to eliminate the division between the researcher and researched, to constitute the people researched as participants and not as objects of the research process. Naples (2003) states that power operates during the research process, and that the researcher must surface and explore how this process might be shaping interpretation and interaction. Standpoint theory also stresses disclosing the history, position, and beliefs of the researcher as well as the researched (Hesse-Biber, Leavy, & Yaiser, 2004) as an important part of feminist analysis. Denzen and Lincoln (2000) describe this as feminist, as well as other critical researchers, engaging “in a kind of dialogue with their informants” (p. 31). In my study and
analysis I have tried to share my own interests and perspective with both the research subjects and the readers. Analysis needs to acknowledge the researcher’s theoretical framework but this framework is also shaped by the perspectives shared by those researched. I therefore had an initial commitment to share and discuss results with the women interviewed and aimed to incorporate my and their interpretations into the analysis through follow up interviews. In practice, I was only able to follow up with some of my participants resulting in a more limited dialogic process. Other participants did not have time for ongoing discussion of results though I was able to check on everyone’s progress.

Finally feminists are committed to empowerment as part of research method. This approach also governs my research process. I am asking questions about the experience of low-income women in community college programs in part to make their perspectives visible and help improve and change systems.

**Procedures**

The critical feminist method I have described in the previous section led me to use the research technique of in-depth unstructured interviews, guided by a series of framing questions. The subjects I interviewed for this study were eight welfare eligible low-income women who are in community college educational programs. I also researched the establishment and operations of the Parents as Scholars Program (PAS) in Oregon in order to understand the context and ground for the study participants’ experiences.
Data needs.

The experience of people who have been marginalized or devalued provides the most fruitful ground for research problems and inquiry; they become the starting points for thought (Harding, 2004). A critical exploration of low-income women’s experiences in community colleges needs to be centered on in-depth narratives and descriptions of those experiences in women’s own words and from their own perspectives. Devault (2004) points out that topics that researchers construct may not be the topics that are meaningful in women’s lives. The questions that produced the data for my study therefore, needed to be broad and framing, rather than narrow and pre-set, so each woman’s experience can emerge. The review of the literature pointed to a lack of in-depth knowledge of low-income women’s experiences of the community college, with little known of women’s experience and sense of self from their perspective as students who are also in poverty. To help fill this gap, the research questions and process needed in Smith’s (1990) terms to get inside the everyday lives of the women in the study.

Before each interview I asked each woman to complete a short form that provided basic demographic information. The interview then explored three research questions. An interview guide that contains the demographic information form and research questions is attached. See Appendix B.

Each research question in my study is constructed as a frame from which to produce understanding of different aspects of low-income women’s experience. The first question aims to gain a sense of each woman’s journey into community college
education, a journey contextualized within knowledge of how access to education for welfare eligible women is structured in Oregon. The two guiding focuses in this overall question are the paths taken to enter college, and each woman’s view of why post secondary education was important. Both aspects to the question aim to illuminate the relationship between the constraints and barriers to education for low-income women and each woman’s choices, experiences, and goals. The guiding question I used to begin this contextual conversation was to ask each woman to talk a bit about her journey to the community college and how she decided to come to school. I then followed up with questions about that journey that explored the decision making process, why education was important, supports and barriers to entry into school, and how each woman found out about the PAS program.

The second framing research question asks what the daily experience of community college education is like for low-income women. This is a very broad question. I found that asking about a typical day when attending school was a good way to get a sense of women’s experience. Entering each woman’s narrative experience through a question about a typical day, rather than asking about the college in general, was important. This place of entry into women’s experience allowed for the interactions between women’s family or community life, and college life, to emerge. I was also listening for the strategies women use to negotiate the college experience and whether they feel at home in the college or the classroom. This kind of listening is important in the data collection process (Devault, 2004). Devault argues that feminist researchers must “open up standard topics” (p. 232) and
listen for the less articulated meanings in the responses. Since women’s actual experience is distorted by dominant cultural interpretations, feminist researchers need to be careful to listen “around and beyond words” (p. 233). Follow up questions focused on classroom and community college daily experience, supports and barriers, whether or not college was welcoming, and strategies used to manage the college experience and succeed in the classroom.

The third framing research question asks how the experience of community college has affected low-income women’s consciousness of themselves and views of their futures. This question acknowledges that not only is low-income women’s experience distorted by dominant cultural descriptions, but that the cultural image of welfare eligible women is of someone who is dependant, work avoidant, lacking responsibility, and willfully deviant in producing her own single motherhood (Abramovitz, 1991; Mink, 2006; Piven, 2002). My interest is in how low-income women cope with these cultural conceptions. Have these ideas shaped how women see themselves and what might be possible as they participate in college? Is education a source of resistance to dominant interpretations, has it reinforced those interpretations or both? These questions seek knowledge and understanding of how each woman sees herself in terms of relations of privilege, such as gender, class, socio-economic status, and race/ethnicity. Some aspects of the answers to these questions emerged in the accounts of whether women feel at home in the community college, or whether their experience is mirrored in the classroom, or accounts of a typical day. I asked a framing question about whether women felt differently about
themselves since being in college. This question led to insights about the role of education in women’s sense of themselves. An important point of entry into their experience was to ask if women ever talk about the fact that they are on welfare with other students or staff at the college and whether they felt being on welfare made a difference to their experience of school. Questions about dreams and hopes for the future also illuminated these women’s view of themselves as both students and welfare clients. Again framing open-ended questions and listening for points at which such issues can emerge and be opened up was important.

In addition I needed to explore the establishment and operation of the Parents as Scholars Program in Oregon to understand the systemic constraints that frame and underlay these students’ experiences. I researched the legislative changes that established the PAS program and interviewed a former welfare client who was instrumental in advocating for this change. I interviewed local, Lane County Department of Human Services (DHS) personnel who are involved with the operation of the PAS Program, including a program coordinator, DHS analyst, and a local DHS district manager who was involved in the founding of the program statewide. I also interviewed the PAS Program Coordinator at DHS Central Office in Salem who has overall responsibility for the program’s operation statewide.

**Participant selection.**

The participants I interviewed are welfare eligible low-income women who are in community college educational programs. In Oregon it is possible to identify a group of women with this specific set of experiences. Oregon is unique in having an
experimental pilot program, Parents As Scholars (PAS) that permits a small number of welfare eligible parents to attend college while receiving welfare benefits through having their educational activities count as work related activities. During my study 1% of the total TANF caseload, 300 people maximum statewide, were eligible to be part of PAS. The PAS program developed from the efforts of a coalition of poor women, feminist researchers and organizations, educators, student associations, social agency staff, social activists, and sympathetic state legislators, whose aim was to replicate Maine’s Parents as Scholars, (PaS), program in Oregon. Although the 2003 Oregon legislative session authorized this program, it could not be fully implemented because the Oregon Department of Human Services was unable to procure the required federal waiver to utilize state matching dollars for the program. A small pilot program was implemented in its place and was in its third year of operation during my study.

I initially tried to recruit participants by asking contacts in community college programs to share information about my study with PAS students who then could contact me if they were interested. I thought that contact through a community college staff member who is known to the potential interviewees would generate more initial trust in our research relationship. I focused on contacts in programs that might be natural first stops for PAS students such as Transitions Programs, Women’s Centers and Workforce Centers. See Appendix C for recruitment information sent to contacts. I contacted advisors and coordinators in these programs who would have personal contact with the students. This recruitment method did not immediately
produce results. Therefore I also developed a flier with information about the study and asked contacts in Transitions and Workforce Programs to post it, see Appendix C. I contacted community college staff statewide multiple times by phone, email and in person, and posted fliers on seven community college campuses. One of my contacts posted information about the study on the college webpage. I was initially reluctant to utilize staff at Department of Human Services (DHS) offices to contact participants since I did not want the PAS students to see me as connected with the agency. Eventually I did contact PAS program coordinators in three DHS districts who agreed to ask case managers to forward the information about the study when they sent written communication out to their clients who were on PAS. The letters contained a clear message that their choice or not to participate would not influence their PAS status.

This third party method of recruiting participants was both time consuming and very slow to produce results. Community college programs are understaffed while serving an ever increasing student population. Although many staff members agreed to share information about the study, they also had many other demands on their time. The PAS students I was seeking to interview also faced multiple competing demands. Several students emailed or called me because of interest in being involved, but we were never able to meet for an interview because school pressures, childcare issues, other time constraints, or personal circumstances intervened.
I did make successful contact and scheduled interviews with eight women from three different areas of the state and interviewed each in depth. My participants found out about the study from a variety of sources including a college website, a friend who had been interviewed, caseworker referral, community college staff, and the posted flier. Several of these interviews were scheduled and rescheduled more than once to fit with the demands of the participants’ lives. I was also contacted by a PAS student who was at university and had not been part of a community college. I did have a long phone conversation with this student about the PAS program that served as further context for the interviews, although she is not included in the study population.

This is a difficult population to find and contact. They are hard to locate since they are in a special DHS program but are not treated as such in the community college. In the DHS system their caseworkers may not have frequent contact with them. As student parents they are juggling two systems, welfare and the educational system, they are also single parents with very low incomes and multiple barriers. I am grateful for the time they spent with me.

**Site selection.**

I wanted to interview students who lived in both urban and rural areas of the state. Through the interviews with DHS administrators I learned that the majority of PAS students are either from Lane County (principally Eugene/Springfield) or from the Portland area. The rural community with the most PAS students was the
Medford/Grants Pass area. I therefore focused my recruitment efforts on these three parts of the state.

To help create rapport, the actual site of the interviews was wherever the individual women felt most comfortable. Seven women chose to be interviewed at the community college, one chose to be interviewed at her home. Community college interviews took place in a room at the college campus the participant attended so the setting was familiar and convenient.

**Data collection techniques.**

I used the data collection technique of in depth unstructured interviews. Feminist researchers have used narrative in depth interviews as ways to discover daily, lived experience. These interviews can also function as a tool to explore the social relations that frame an individual subjective account (Naples, 2003). In this sense, the in-depth interview as an account of subjective experience becomes the place to start thinking about women’s lives. Devault (2004) develops Dorothy Smith’s notion of the interview as a talk between women to suggest that the unstructured interview as used by feminist researchers needs to be more like a conversation. Grounding this conversation in actual accounts of everyday activities, for example my question of how women spend a typical day at the college, allows women to talk about their experience in a way that might not have been previously articulated, and “we can mine the talk for clues to social relations” (p. 233).

Although the focus is to let women’s experience come through in the interview process, it is more of a two way process than the typical hermeneutic concept of
bracketing. Whether in a pre-interview dialogue or in the “aha” of discovery in the interview process itself, the feminist researcher is engaged in the interview process, through the framing questions and dialogue, she is collaborating in the construction of the conversation (Devault).

The researcher’s place within the construction of these interviews can be informed by Collins’ (1990) concepts of an ethic of care developed in her discussions of black feminist thought. In the ethic of caring, Collins brings attention to the fact that emotions are appropriate in interactions and form a basis for understanding. She also stresses the uniqueness of individuals and the importance of a capacity for empathy. These factors are important in building relationships and creating rapport when interviewing, and provide a basis from which women may be more likely to share their deeper experiences and thoughts. As Naples (2003) points out, an ethics of care can help deconstruct power and experience differences between the researcher and researched. However, it is important to realize that these power differentials are not erased by empathy. Postcolonial feminists have been critical of the notion that feminist researchers can simply give voice to women who are in different social locations than the researcher (Hesse-Biber & Leckenby, 2004). The idea of giving voice to the Other in itself speaks to the privilege and advantage of the researcher.

Instead, the researcher must be conscious of the differences present in the interview conversation, and locate her own voice as well as the voice of the woman interviewed. In this way, methods become “doorways” (p. 216) that do not limit the ability to listen. Naples (2004) refers to the relationship between empathy and
consciousness of differences as understanding “outsiderness” (p. 378) in herself and those she interviews. I aimed for this reflexive understanding as well as some self-disclosure in the interview process.

**Data analysis.**

A feminist critical analysis begins with thinking from the standpoint of women’s lives (Naples, 2003) so data analysis began with the interview accounts of women’s everyday college life. The material conditions that shape women’s lives are revealed in their accounts; I viewed their narratives as links to these conditions and larger social processes and aimed to reveal these connections. In part, this required an understanding of the purpose, framework, rules and practices of the PAS program. To ensure I understood this context my first step was to summarize the interviews with Department of Human Services’ (DHS) staff and the advocate who had helped to put the PAS program in place, and codify the basic elements of the program. I also used this contextual information in the participant interviews to follow up on different issues and check my understanding of the program with the participants’ understanding and experience with different aspects of the program.

Each participant interview was audio recorded and subsequently transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. I wrote a reflection immediately after each interview and used the reflections as a commentary on the interviews and a source of initial insight and reaction. The interview data were then analyzed for common themes and insights. I compiled a composite demographic picture of the eight
interviewees. The data from both interviews and reflections helped me to revise and rethink how I followed up on questions in subsequent interviews.

I have tried to make this data analysis conscious of the views and social location of myself as researcher as well as the researched and make my own viewpoint and interpretations of experience visible in the narrative as a point of difference and connection. Listening is as important in the analysis as it is in the interview (Devault, 2004) since noticing silences or disconnections in the interview leads to further insights.

**Soundness of data and analysis.**

What are the truth claims of this kind of analysis and what strategies can be used to ensure soundness of data? The criteria for truth outlined in the summary of the research methods section are based on knowledge being situated in social relations of power and privilege, and that making these social conditions explicit does not weaken the analysis, rather it strengthens it and increases understanding.

Critical feminist thought that derives from standpoint theory argues that thinking from women’s specific social location increases the truth claims of knowledge (Naples, 2003). This view has developed from the social critical analysis that sees all knowledge as socially produced. From this perspective, knowledge about women’s lives that is not based on an analysis of the social relations of gender is knowledge that is false and partial. On the other hand, knowledge that is situated in women’s specific lives can create what Haraway (1998) calls a feminist objectivity,
since those who are the objects of oppression are also knowledgeable about oppression.

One strategy to ensure soundness that derives from this perspective is to share the analysis with participants in a dialogue that surfaces both differences of interpretation and the potential reasons for these differences. I was only able to follow up with some of my participants. However, articulation of differences in interpretation and the social relations that frame and shape that difference also give the possibility of surfacing the many truths of women’s experience. Consciously creating empathy and rapport, while discussing difference and its effects on the interviews increases soundness. Accuracy and faithfulness of accounts occurs through locating the voice of the researcher as well as the voices of the women researched in the analysis of results. In this way, the reflexive examination of research assumptions and values, of power in the research process, and whose voice is being heard all increase the truth claims and trustworthiness of the knowledge produced (Hesse-Biber & Leckenby, 2004).

**Strategies to protect human subjects.**

All protocols for protecting human subjects were followed. Approval from the Oregon State University Human Subjects Review Board was obtained before the study began and a time extension of this approval was obtained before the study was finalized. Each research participant signed informed consent documents that clearly stated the purpose and any risks of the research and that the interviews would be recorded. Participant interviews were digitally recorded and professionally
transcribed. All transcripts were kept strictly confidential and locked in a file cabinet and the digital recording files were password protected. Each research subject was assigned a pseudonym that was attached to the interview transcript and demographic information sheet. No information was included in the analysis that would aid in identifying a particular community college location. The list of names and pseudonyms were kept completely separate from the digital files, informed consent forms, demographic information sheets, and transcripts.

There is significant responsibility involved in any research inquiry; in a feminist critical study there are some added complexities and ambiguities. An intention of doing research for women does not alone protect from doing harm. A method that involves a reciprocal relation between the researcher and those researched, in which trust is generated, can mask power dynamics. Care must be taken to honor experiences and interpretations but acknowledge differences. Just because a feminist researcher aims make marginalized voices more visible does not change low-income women’s situation. It is important to give back through sharing knowledge and results with those who have some power to change educational and social systems, as well as with the women themselves.
Chapter Four: Data Collection and Analysis

This chapter describes the data collected and the analysis of that data. It is divided into four sections. The first section summarizes the results of my research into the beginnings of PAS, plus the contextual interviews with the PAS program advocate, Department of Human Services (DHS) staff, and a PAS student from the University of Oregon. This section describes the rules, practices and operation of the program that provides an institutional system of benefits and constraints that frame the participants’ experience as students in community colleges. The second section provides a brief demographic profile of the participants, and describes key attributes including past educational level, work history, and college goals. The third section analyses the interview data in terms of themes that relate to the three research questions. The chapter concludes with a summary.

To enter the world of welfare recipients is to enter a world of acronyms, DHS, PAS, TANF, JOBS. For a glossary and explanation of these terms please see Appendix E.

Parents As Scholars (PAS): the Context

The PAS program was authorized by House Bill 2450 the “Parents as Scholars” Bill, in 2003. The program operates now as a small pilot program, rather than a statewide project involving the majority of welfare parents that its advocates and the bill had envisaged. After passage of the bill a state work group was set up with wide representation from legislators, DHS staff, social service agency staff, anti-poverty advocates, and “welfare moms”¹, to establish the program practices and operation. Though this work group is still in existence, the program is now coordinated through
DHS central office in Salem “The work group created recommendations, rules, guidelines for the program, it is on hiatus now, could be pulled together if needed” (interview with PAS Central Office Program Coordinator). PAS was in its third year of operation at the time of my interviews.

**PAS rules and processes.**

Eligibility for the PAS program requires that students are parents who are receiving or are eligible for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), popularly known as welfare, and are enrolled full time year round in an accredited two or four year degree program, (Oregon Department of Human Services, 2011). The definition of full time enrollment matches the definition at the institution that the student is attending, though in practice it is usually twelve credits or more. This full time enrollment requirement includes summer term. Interested TANF eligible parents can apply online, by fax, email or postal service with or without the involvement of their DHS case manager. Applications are all processed at the DHS Central Office that determines eligibility based on the above criteria and maintains a state database of PAS students. Eligible students are then placed on a wait list and are accepted into PAS on a first come first served basis. The wait period to get into PAS is ten to twelve months on average. On the wait list students do not receive PAS related supports and services and cannot count their college classes as the JOBS program “work activities” that are required for clients receiving TANF. Most students on the PAS wait list must still participate in a required number of job searches, JOBS workshops and JOBS related activities while remaining enrolled full
One Oregon district that has a history of supporting and creating welfare and education projects operates differently. This district allows its PAS wait list students to count their education as a work activity for up to one year and receive some PAS services, so these students can pursue a full time load of classes without needing to do additional JOBS activities while they wait to be accepted into the program. One of the DHS managers in this division, Mary S., was on the original PAS workgroup and is clear about the rationale for this difference, “there was agreement on the work group that AFS (Adult and Family Services, later renamed DHS) would not do things that would negatively impact those on the wait list.” At the time of the interview (January 2011), this district had 50 active enrolled PAS students and nearly 200 on the wait list. Statewide at the time of interview there were 221 active PAS students and 470 on the wait list.

Once on the PAS program, students must remain eligible for TANF, provide proof of full time enrollment, monthly proof of attendance for one year, and maintain satisfactory academic standing. Proof of attendance is obtained by the student having any college official, typically a faculty member, a manager, or a counselor/advisor, sign a DHS form that certifies that the student is attending their college classes. Students submit their grades and proof of registration to their case manager and the district office to document other requirements. After the first year, students only need to provide proof of attendance if they are receiving additional benefits such as childcare funds. If they are only receiving TANF (cash assistance) they do not need to document attendance. The student can choose any accredited two or four-year
program to pursue and approval is not based on the student’s major or type of professional technical program, “we don’t have the time or person power to check (programs), we take what students put down at face value” (PAS Central Office Program Coordinator). Once Central Office makes the determination of eligibility, clients are individually case managed at the district level. Each district has a “point person” that manages the program at the local level. There is no coordination or systemic connection between the local DHS office and the college the PAS student is attending.

**Benefits and barriers.**

The PAS program provides substantial benefits for students who meet the requirements and are accepted into the program. Students continue to receive monthly cash assistance without the job search activities and work attachment placements that are normally attached to that assistance. They also receive medical benefits (Medicaid), food stamps, and if needed, transportation assistance, childcare funds, and up to $100 per year for books. PAS support is separate from Financial Aid and the two funding streams do not interact or impact one another, a considerable benefit for low-income students who often find they are given cash assistance with one hand to have it taken away by another, since the benefit is usually counted against college and federal financial aid. There is a two to four year time limit for PAS support that can be extended for two more years if there are special needs, or if the student begins at a community college and goes on for a four-year degree.
There are some institutional barriers for students in both accessing PAS and in successfully remaining in the program. The PAS program is not clearly visible in DHS information either to clients or outsiders unless you have prior knowledge of its existence. It is difficult to find via the DHS website. It does not come up as an option if “education” is entered into the website search field, and education is not listed in the “A–Z” of “Helps” on the website. It is not linked to Financial Assistance on the A-Z and not listed under “Other Helps” if you go to Financial Assistance from A-Z. It is easily accessed by entering the exact program name in the website search field. PAS visibility is not helped by DHS staff’s apparent lack of understanding of how community colleges function and how students become enrolled. Publicity about the program and a brochure was sent to community colleges when the program began, however this marketing material was sent to JOBS contractors who are the DHS Workforce partners, not to the Enrollment or Counseling/Advising areas of the colleges. Community College Workforce partners are typically housed in separate locations from the main college campuses around the state and are not used by the majority of students. At the district level there is a lack of clarity about how students find out about the program. The district staff interviewed thought that colleges were referring students, or that the program might be mentioned by the case manager or JOBS staff if a client indicates they want to go to school. However, James L., the district point person for PAS also indicated “a sizeable number of the case managers are not aware of the program, there is a need for constant education about it.”
DHS staff also identified programmatic barriers to PAS students’ success. The wait list time, structure, and requirements make it difficult for students to enter the program. The JOBS requirements that are part of wait list status for the majority of PAS students are not flexible and may conflict with students’ schedules. The University of Oregon PAS student I talked with confirmed this … “I needed to prove I could benefit….—had to do JOBS that first year on the waiting list, this was a major problem” (emphasis hers). District staff agree that the wait list is an obstacle since students have to maintain TANF eligibility and be successful students for up to twelve months “there’s a lot of volatility in the wait list” (James L). When people move from the wait list to PAS they must provide proof of current full time enrollment within thirty days or they lose their place and go back to the bottom of the wait list, “it’s a constant revolving process” (PAS Central Office Coordinator). In practice this means that there are always less than the 300 student program capacity enrolled in PAS at the same time that there are several hundred students waiting.

Another barrier is in the application process itself. A large proportion of applicants to PAS are turned down, most commonly because they don’t send proof of enrollment or they are not attending college full time. Many people who did not submit proof of enrollment reapply, but their applications are not pended while proof is sent in since it is seen as too time consuming, they are simply turned down, “it’s a cut and dried easy application process, if they are going to college they should be able to do this” (PAS Central Office Program Coordinator). However, this application practice is exactly the opposite from college application practices that students would
be used to. For example when a student applies for financial aid & does not submit everything that is required their application remains current while the needed documentation is added. They do not lose financial aid in the process. The same is true of admissions documents.

The requirements of the program present additional barriers to success. The full time, four terms per year attendance policy that includes summer term can be difficult for single parents with school age children, “summer can be an issue … students can substitute work experience but that requires case management and we don’t have the staff” (James L. district PAS Point Person). Having some income variation that temporarily puts a person over the limit for TANF is identified a barrier, particularly for the wait list students. The PAS Central Office Program Coordinator identified the documentation required for the attendance policy as a barrier. She has had reports that asking college staff to sign proof of attendance statements felt shameful since it identified the student as a welfare recipient. These reports were confirmed by the experience of my student participants. Case managers may also feel ill equipped to deal with PAS students. They report that students face a significant barrier by taking classes that may not be relevant for their degrees yet the case managers are not academic advisors and are not sure if it is their role to judge. DHS staff feel that PAS students would benefit from more intensive case management, intervention, and support. At the same time district offices are very short staffed and case managers have very large caseloads. Many view the PAS students as “making it easier to manage their jobs … these clients have a track”
(PAS Central Office Program Coordinator). James L reports that “indirectly case managers ignore the population [of PAS students] they don’t utilize their opportunity to case manage”.

The PAS Central Office Program Coordinator reported the PAS program success was low, less than 10% of students have graduated at the end of the first two years of the program, a rate she felt was too low. Yet this rate is comparable to many community college graduation rates. For example Lane Community College data shows that from a 2003 fall cohort of full-time, first-time, degree/certificate-seeking students, 19% completed an associates degree after four years and of those remaining, 32% transferred to another higher education institution (Lane Institutional Research Assessment and Planning, 2012). This is comparable to the nationwide data that only about 19% of students earn an associate degree after four years (Complete College America, 2011). While community colleges are concerned about these rates and many are currently focused on increasing student completion, the PAS rates of completion are not low compared to general community college results.

**Summary**

Parents as Scholars is a program with substantial benefits for participating students who can receive cash assistance and other family supports while going to school. It also presents barriers in terms of accessibility and student success. Case managers may be unaware of the program and its requirements. There are also contradictions between the case manager’s role and expertise and the needs of student in community colleges. Program requirements may also present barriers to students
being successful. There is a basic contradiction in the program’s structure. As Helen, the PAS student completing a four-year degree reported:

The systems do not work together, (DHS and education), but as an end user I see only one thing, one system. The systems don’t relate, Financial Aid does not talk to PAS and PAS does not talk to Financial Aid. The case managers don’t know what PAS is, even my case manager did not really know, even though he wanted to help.

This is an educational program managed by people with good intentions but no experience or knowledge of community college education and practices and who are not in collaboration with college supports. In addition the program is largely invisible in colleges and the PAS students it benefits may not want to identify themselves as such. All these benefits and constraints are seen in the experiences of the women I interviewed.

**A Profile of the Participants**

**Demographics.**

The PAS student participants in this study are eight women, four from Eugene, two from Portland and two from the Medford /Grants Pass area. Their age range at the time of first interview was 25 - 46 years. Four are single (never married), two are divorced, one widowed, and one married but separated. All are single parents; two have boyfriends (their description) in the home. Five of the women have one child living with them and three women have two children living with them. Six out of the eight have children under six, two have additional older children who are not living with them at present. Three women were teen moms. All eight receive TANF cash assistance & food stamps, seven have financial aid, two
receive child support, and one has Social Security Income for her child. All identify as white. Six of the eight are first generation college students. They have diverse prior educational experience. Two did not graduate from high school while one woman had been in an apprenticeship program and two have prior college experience. Four of these women began their college careers at a pre-college developmental skill level for reading, writing and/or math, including a student who is now completing her degree with honors.

**Work experience and goals.**

Six of the eight participants had several years of work history at low wage work. Most had a pattern of service work such as waitresses, a cook, gas station attendant, fast food and retail. One had been a residential painter and one a travel agent. Only two participants had no work history and had primarily relied on TANF before attending school. One of these participants was a young woman in an abusive family situation and the other had a disabled child. In addition four participants had experienced domestic violence and five were in recovery. There is a public misconception that people on welfare and people who work for pay are two different social groups. However this pattern of low wage employment while also occasionally relying on welfare that was true for the majority of my participants is also the case for welfare recipients in general, for whom employment is a common experience which is usually combined with some welfare receipt at different times in their work lives (Hartmann and Spalter-Roth, 2003).
These women were at different points in their community college journey. They had been attending college anywhere from two terms to three years. They were enrolled in a variety of majors. Three were pursuing the Associate of Arts Transfer degree (AAOT) that provides the first two years of a four-year degree and allows graduates to transfer to any Oregon university as a junior. One of these three had also acquired an Associates degree in Human Services at the time of interview. One was pursuing a physics major, two were enrolled in general education classes with a science focus, one was doing pre-requisite courses for an X Ray technician program and one was enrolled in a Fitness Technology associates degree program and had also achieved certificates in activity directing and fitness for healthy older adults. Their eventual goals were equally varied. One woman wanted to pursue a science degree at OSU with a focus in forensics, one had a goal of being a speech therapist, another wanted to be a counselor or social worker. The physics major wanted to be a high particle physicist but also was considering teaching. One had a dream of a career in radiology. Three were very specific in their plans and had clear career maps for their future. One was preparing to transfer for a bachelors degree in X ray /ultrasound technician at Oregon Institute of Technology. One planned to pursue a BA in Child & Family Services then a masters’ degree in social work at Portland State University. The third was preparing to pursue a bachelors’ degree at Portland State University then enter an occupational therapy program at Pacific University.
Interview Themes and Analysis

This section provides a description and analysis of the interview themes as they relate to the three research questions. Six themes emerged through analysis of the interviews. These were:

- The importance of Transition Programs in helping the women interviewed navigate the transition to school
- The centrality of motherhood in these students’ lives, both in the daily struggle of balancing education and family, and in the way children are a central part of articulating goals and motivation for success
- The resilience, planning and strategizing involved for these students to successfully pursue education
- The impact of disconnects between DHS policies and practices on the students’ educational lives
- The effect of education on their self-esteem and confidence
- The impact of being on TANF on their sense of themselves

The section is organized by research questions. The research questions functioned as beginnings not ends. Each theme is discussed in relationship to the research question although the themes emerged at different points in each participant’s narrative. Relevant contextual details about the participants’ experience are included. The section concludes with a brief summary.


**Paths to college.**

“If a woman’s on TANF (welfare) she’s been through hell and back”

(Mary, a 27 year old single parent with two children in her third term of college).

The first research question guiding the study asked how low-income women come to participate in community college education. This question aimed at understanding the context for entering community college education from women’s own perspective given the systemic barriers that exist for this particular group of women to access education. The paths each woman took to enter community college education were diverse but had elements in common, different life changing events for which school was seen as a solution. Two women were in recovery programs that linked with the community colleges in their areas and one was in a shelter for abused teens where staff encouraged school as a route out of her circumstances. Two women, one who had worked as a residential painter and the other as a Certified Nursing Assistant experienced injuries that meant they were unable to continue in those areas of employment. One woman was escaping from domestic violence, her ex husband’s abuse causing her to move across the state to survive. For others the immediate change came from separations, job loss and the inability to find work that would support their children. Although these immediate events that precipitated these students considering entering college differed, for many women their children were a common turning point for change.

Susie is a 27 year old recovering addict with one four year old child at home and three older children no longer living with her. Susie had spent years in and out of
recovery programs and living with domestic abuse when her second youngest daughter was permanently removed from her and adopted by another family. She subsequently spent “years selling drugs and doing drugs and living that lifestyle.” When despite using birth control she became pregnant with her youngest child it seemed like a second chance at life.

The day I found out I was pregnant, I stopped drugs… and that’s when I made the decision that I was going to do something different and I did… and I’ve been clean ever since and I’m trying my damndest to get somewhere in life where I wasn’t. (Susie)

Ann a 33 year old with two girls under six, also identified her pregnancy as the turning point in her life that prompted recovery from meth addiction and a turn to thoughts of other goals and purposes. Ann had first trained as a flight attendant and then worked as a travel agent in California, “I had no kids, had fun, partying, started partying way too hard - way too hard.” Ann moved home to Southern Oregon and almost immediately became pregnant:

And getting pregnant made me – it saved my life, my girl saved my life. I got help. I stopped using. Then my ex left me for another woman and I was just depressed and lost and I thought (after encouragement from her recovery program) I’m going to school. You know, I’ll just take a couple of classes. Well here I am, six classes away from transferring for my bachelor’s degree.

For other women, while the need to support their children was an element for change, the key motivation was a pathway to a better future, a future they thought education could provide. Mary has two young children, one with a severe disability. She had worked as a Certified Nursing Assistant before a back injury made that work impossible, and dealing with her daughter’s disability had also meant a consistent
pattern of reliance on TANF with intermittent low wage employment. For Mary, her children were the “clincher deal” in deciding to come to school:

I want to show them what they can do and I can’t really do that without walking through it myself. I kind of want to be a push for them to be able to realize what they can achieve if they put their minds to it. I really feel strongly about children knowing and seeing what they can accomplish…you know I call them my higher powers cos they are, without them I wouldn’t be where I’m at in my life.

Another reason for entering college was to escape low wage work. Jill is 34 with twin five year olds. She did not finish traditional high school but earned an alternative diploma through a program for high school drop-outs and has worked in “customer service” including waitressing and being a gas station attendant since she was sixteen. Although Jill also mentioned her children as motivation for school, she stressed that the low wage work she was qualified for could never allow her to support her family and leave “the system”:

I’m not going to be able to retire on that (waitressing), and I would still need food stamps and help with daycare. No matter how far I advanced, I could be a super waitress and I still never would have been able to. But it was risky, once you get out of the restaurant industry it’s hard to get back in without references.

She is clear about the contradictions posed by low wage work, between providing good care for her children and having enough money to get by:

It isn’t conducive to a healthy family. You have to work weekends, holidays and nights and I would never be there for my kids. I could take less wages and work in the morning and get off by the time they’re out of school but I would make half the money and still have the day care cost. I had to choose, it was either go to school or give up on my ambition to be home evenings and weekends and holidays. I had to either boost my income by working those days and nights or go to school. I chose school.
The importance of transition programs.

Many students said that family were an important source of support as they considered entering college. Family members offered to care for children, provided motivation and support, and helped by sharing living situations. In addition the monetary support from the PAS Program itself was viewed as important in seeing school as a realistic possibility. Though these supports were important, the one common element identified by all the women as helping them to enroll successfully was the presence of a transition program either in the college or community.

The main sources of support for successful college entry were the adult transition programs that began in Oregon as Single Parent/Displaced Homemaker Programs. Seven of the women interviewed cited support from these programs as the primary reason they were able to enroll and get through the first term successfully, the eighth woman gained support from a community transition program that was linked to the college Women’s Center. Many of the students mentioned the comfort, community, and support provided by being part of an entry cohort of women transitioning to school. Liz is 43, widowed with two adult children and a nine year old still at home who initially was scared to walk onto campus. The college transitions program provided the comfort and familiarity she needed:

The transitions program sure is a program to be hailed. It really gives you a comfort coming back to school. The camaraderie between the women who are in there, you get close because you’re going through a lot of personal things. Then, after you move on you’re seeing people around campus that you already know, so you’re comfortable and hey I know that person and everybody’s glad to see you.
Mary also stresses the importance of first term supports and the feelings of belonging that came from her transitions class and home base in her college Women’s Center. These are supports that not only assisted her entry but also continue to sustain her as she moves through the college:

My first term was really helpful. Women in Transition has been amazing. I feel like I belong here instead of like Oh my god I’m on campus, what do I do now? I think the biggest resource of making me continue school is the Women’s Center and other women students that were in my (transitions) class. I see them around campus, we check in with each other. Without that I would feel like a lost dog on this campus and not really find my way or feel comfortable like I belong here. I can walk down the path and say hi to them and we both have something in common, that yes we’re going to school but we also have that -Women in Transition that we all showed up (for) and it was our first day and we were scared to death.

Liz also stressed the knowledge of the campus and the career exploration assistance provided by her transitions program. It was a job shadow during her transitions class that helped her finalize her career direction and helped her actively pursue a career goal. Margaret, 26, with a four year old at home also identifies her women in transition program as “a lifesaver”. Margaret found the community college entry process very intimidating, “by the time you’re able to register and just coming in as a new student, it’s not very friendly” but “Women in Transitions was a big help, it just kind of solidified everything”. For Brenda the program was her turning point, “hey you know what – just cos I’m 45 years old doesn’t mean I can’t go to school and be successful”.

While the transitions programs provided support during the entry process and crucial first term of college, there were also barriers to making that first step. Brenda, 46, with two adult children and a teenager at home and in her second term of school
remembers DHS as a barrier to even considering college. Brenda had worked most of her life as a cook and shares other participants’ view of service work “yeah – there’s no benefits, no weekends off. No holidays, you know, there’s no future”. Brenda had moved across the state to escape an abusive ex husband who was stalking her, and found herself unemployed, with no home and no job, and on TANF once the unemployment ran out. While she was unemployed a friend had told her about her local women’s transition program and she enrolled and “aced all my classes”. However, she found DHS unsupportive of continuing school:

I wanted to go to school and they wanted me to do 30 hours of work search, they put me through a lot of red tape and I had to beg for them to give me a grant. I had to go in front of three people and pretty much beg for them to let me go to school.

It was only when a worker at the Unemployment Office told her about the PAS program and that she could go to school while waiting to enter. Other students talked about not understanding the financial aid process, the difficulty of figuring out finances, how to budget, transportation issues, finding the right child care, and balancing college and family responsibilities. The biggest barrier for many students was low self-esteem and being convinced they were not smart enough for college. Jill at 34 was scared about her age, feeling that she would not be able to compete. As a student who entered with low scores in math and writing, she worried that she was not intelligent. Three years later as an honors student with a 4.00+ grade point average she reflected on that feeling of intimidation, which she saw partly as the effects of abuse. Ann was also intimidated; she returned to school at 29, started at the lowest math and now is preparing to transfer to Oregon Institute of Technology. Her
biggest barrier was “thinking that I couldn’t do it, that I wasn’t smart enough”.

Brenda also did not think she was smart saying it was 28 years since she finished high school. Liz was scared of failure; Pat was “terrified”. For all these women college was a huge step into the unknown that promised a different future.

**Experience of college.**

The second research question asked what is the experience of community college like for low-income women? This question focuses on the daily, lived experience of community college education. For all the women I interviewed that daily, lived experience was shaped by motherhood in multiple ways, from the struggle of balancing home and school to the ways in which having children were part of each woman’s goals and motivation. Being a student and being a parent were not separate identities but were intertwined.

**Students as mothers.**

She’ll have nothing to do with me until I’m on the computer doing my homework, then... my mom has a picture where I’m on the computer doing my work, she crawled up on my back and she fell asleep on me, I’m sitting there still doing my homework and she’s asleep on my back.

(Ann describing managing homework and a pre-school child)

The students I interviewed describe their daily experience as one that is structured by their single motherhood. Their children are “both and”; both a constant struggle, a juggling challenge, and a reason for continuing their education. The challenges begin with class schedules which must be constantly juggled to fit childcare needs. Classes needed for a major may be structured back to back which conflicts with day care schedules (Jill). Mary needs classes that are only held in the
evening but her childcare ends at 5.30pm. She is also frustrated with faculty who do not seem to understand these demands on her time:

They say “hey you can stay after class and we can talk”, well guess what I have another class. And that one hour or whatever that they’re available is impossible to access for me, I only have a certain amount of time that you know, 3 o clock to 4 o clock, that I can meet with the teacher. Not after 4 o clock, I gotta get a baby. And a two and a half year old, you do not want to bring to a meeting with your teacher to talk about the math you’re not figuring out.

Susie is coping with a toddler with some behavior issues, early mornings “ don’t work for my kid ” and she needs to leave no later than 2pm to pick up her daughter.

Pat is finding scheduling easier now she is past pre –requisites and in a professional technical program, Fitness Technology, with set consistent hours. Margaret plans for consistency, if possible trying to choose twice a week rather than three times, fewer days mean a better fit with work- study and child-care. This all takes organization and constant planning:

I’m very organized when it comes to schedules and setting up classes. If I take a Tuesday/Thursday class then I’m in class Tuesday and do home work Wednesday, then class Thursday and wait until Monday for homework to leave the weekend more free for one on one time (with her child). You know I never thought about what I do to keep it all organized, I just do it. Might be a little sleep deprived sometimes.

Their time however well planned is constantly interrupted. Susie has a four year old “ I’ll be able to write a sentence, then I’ve got to do something and then I’ll write a sentence ”. Brenda finds teenagers at the house at all hours. Mary’s two year old sees her writing “ Oh mom’s coloring, let’s color all over her homework ”.

Balancing family and school takes conscious strategy where every moment is scheduled and life means that “ you get up and do it all over again ” (Brenda).
Strategies to cope include the juggling of class schedules described above, getting up really early to get either quiet study time or alone time, staying up really late, doing homework at night when the kids are asleep, doing homework in the 45 minute breaks between classes, taking online classes, and organizing life to the minute “every hour is scheduled” (Jill), “it’s definitely an ongoing never ending cycle” (Margaret). Everyone interviewed describes an exhausting moment by moment plan to get through. Ann with two daughters under six describes a typical day:

I get up in the morning (early) and sit and breathe. Then I get the girls up and take Heidi my five year old to kindergarten. Then I come home, do homework and work on my online classes. Then I take Reilly (her second daughter) to preschool at 12.30, go back home, do reading, pick Heidi back up at 2.30, go get Reilly at 4.30, then I take them to my mother’s house, she watches them for me. Then I go to class. After class I come back, get the girls, get them in the bath, get them fed, and get them put to bed. Kiss, read them a book, tell them I love them and get up in the morning and do it all over again. It gets exhausting.

Jill describes a similar schedule:

I get up anywhere between four and six (for quiet study time). Then I get the girls ready, watch the news to relax. Do homework right before I take the girls somewhere if I need to. Make them breakfast, take them to day care, come to school. Spend several hours in the Tutoring Center or the library, then I go to class for two hours, then I go back to the Tutoring Center (she is taking physics and calculus) then I go back to class for two hours (she laughs). Then I go back to the Tutoring Center for two hours, and then I go and pick them up. And then it’s dinner, bath, we try to play a little bit of something, then bed and homework. And then I pass out. And then it starts over the next day.

Through this constant activity, just as they had been reasons for earlier life changes, everyone identifies their children as part of why they continue with school. Many women see themselves as role models and resources for their children. Brenda wants to be an example to her teenager so he will be successful, “My dream is for my
son to see me be successful on that platform with that cap and gown on”. Mary wants her children to see that they can succeed. Liz wants to “set an example for the kids and grandkids – model a better future”. She is seeing her example having real effects since one of her adult daughters is now thinking of returning to school. Pat encourages her younger brothers to keep going with their education. Jill wants to be able to tutor her girls when they are in high school. She entered college with “very low” math skills and wants to have the resources to help them, to “not let my educational cap be theirs, … especially since they’re girls”. For Ann being in school makes a difference in her expectations for her children, “I tell my girls you guys are going to college”. She and her daughters do homework together:

My youngest is in pre-school but she gets hers out and we do homework together. My five year old loves to do her homework. You know “Mom, I want to do my homework”. And I think if I hadn’t been in school I don’t think she’d be as into it. She sees that I’m doing it.

For these women entering education was not just improving their own future, it was altering educational goals, expectations, and behavior for their families.

Resilience, planning and strategies for success.

The degree of organization and planning it takes to manage school and family life shows how these students are actively planning for their success. They also use other conscious strategies to ensure they do well in their classes. One of the primary strategies is to take classes with friends or find bonds with other students they are in class with. Susie takes classes with friends, having someone she knows in class is important, they stay at the same pace and help each other. She feels being in recovery gives her the advantage of an instant community at her college since she knows many
people in the same situation trying to change their lives through education. Brenda also finds a friend when she’s in class. Mary refers back to her Transitions Program cohort as a success strategy “it’s empowering to know you’re not alone, I’m not the only fish in the sea..we’re all here, we’re going to do it”. She talks of a feeling of comfort as a support for learning “the more comfortable you are on campus the more comfortable you are with classes”.

For Susie and others teaching style is important, she feels she knows what she needs in the classroom to succeed. Susie uses the college system strategically, if she is not doing well in a class she changes to a pass grade. She understands the percentage of credits she needs to be in good standing with financial aid and the need to keep a good grade point average. She is very much in charge of her education and strategizes and plans around her needs. She knows all the rules of financial aid and academic progress. When asked how she learned to do this she said, “I just figured it out”. Ann actively manages her education in the same way, withdrawing if she feels there is not a good teacher fit “I know it’s not the best but if I take a class and I’m doing bad, I’ll fail, it’s like a domino effect and I’ll do bad in all my classes”.

These students are active learners, Susie sits in front “I can’t pay attention in the back”, makes sure she can see. Mary also sits up front and asks questions as a conscious learning strategy. She doesn’t worry about not knowing answers or being wrong “the way we make it through school is using group brain, you’re here to make mistakes in the class before you take the test so you don’t get graded on your mistakes”. Pat sits up front, asks questions, takes lots of notes, if she’s not sure how
she’s doing she asks her teacher for her current grade. She stresses reaching out if there’s a problem, and actively getting help “I know a lot of people they come across problems they come across those brick walls they just turn around and go back. They don’t find somebody to hand them that sledgehammer to break down that wall.” They work with their teachers, keep in contact, go to class, use office hours and services and supports such as Tutoring and Disability Resources. They use PE classes in Mary’s words “to de-stress”. Jill is resourceful and used her own initiative to find out how to succeed, she got hooked into resources, and took free workshops on study skills. The use of tutors and resource centers is a common strategy. Brenda uses the Tutoring Center to “study at school with no interruptions”.

The women I interviewed were resilient, determined to succeed. Jill in pursuing a career in science feels she is now working much harder for the same high grades. She “resets” each term “I’ll keep on it every night, I’ll make new study habits, I look at Chemistry every single day—trying not to beat myself up.”. Brenda talking about the difficulties of having DHS support her going to school says “I’m not going to give up you know, I’m a tough woman”. One way they maintain this determination is to take one step at a time. As Mary says “you can handle anything pretty much for ten weeks”. Brenda’s success and survival strategy is “one term at a time”. Ann also takes it a day at a time “if I start thinking about it (school) too much I start to panic”. This determination and step by step approach is evident in the conscious planning and career pathways many of the women have constructed. Several women have actively managed their career choices, doing job shadowing,
using career classes and centers to figure out the jobs in demand, planning to combine longer training with paid work as a strategy to continue school. Pat is using an internship for career planning creating a pathway for herself. She is in a Fitness Technology Program working towards an Associates degree. She has an internship at the local YMCA that has the potential to turn into a job since she also completed certification as an activity director and in older adult fitness. Her eventual goal is occupational therapy that she is pursuing after strong encouragement from a faculty member in her program.

Margaret is planning to transfer to Portland State to get her bachelors degree in child and family services and masters in social work. She has spent three years not only completing her Associates degree in Human Services, but also a certificate in Aging and is now finishing the Associate of Arts Oregon Transfer (AAOT):

Now I’m done with that Associates, (I thought) yeah let’s do a transfer (degree). When I started I chose the AAOT, but I’ve known people who get out to the university and it’s so overwhelming they stop after a couple of terms, they just quit with nothing to fall back on. I want something to fall back on because with my Associates… I also have a certification; I can get in a door somewhere and work until I can get back in. So I switched from the AAOT to an Associates, and then looking around – it’s a lower level degree, so I’m like Ok I’ll just keep going…but I wanted that safety net.

Life at the community college involved common sets of supports and barriers. Everyone identified the community colleges themselves as essential to their progress, with smaller classes, supportive staff and multiple resources including counselors and advisors, Transitions Programs, Women’s Centers, Disability Resources, Tutoring and Resource Centers, and encouraging faculty who can have a strong impact on students’ aspirations. Pat describes a conversation with her “favorite instructor”: 
I asked her for a letter of recommendation (for a scholarship), she was like “sure, what are you going for?” I was like “just a bachelors probably in Exercise Science”. She’s like “I think you have more potential than that, I think you should look into occupational therapy”.

This conversation, coming from “a woman that is amazing and has a Masters in Exercise Science” immediately reshaped Pat’s goals and sense of what she could achieve and was instrumental in her eventual career pathway.

Once they have negotiated the first entry steps students speak of community colleges in terms of comfort and belonging. Other identified supports include families, scholarships, PAS support especially with daycare costs, support with housing costs, and encouragement from individual DHS case managers. Their barriers besides the difficulties of managing school and single parenting include difficulties of getting classes, resources not being visible, particularly resources for parents, and transportation. Several students struggled at the beginning of their academic careers before they found suitable college supports such as Disability Resources. They have old and undependable vehicles and four of the eight depend primarily on bus transportation. Pat spent a couple of months commuting by bike with her child “I bike it I bus it I don’t care I get there”.

**Impact of DHS policies and practices.**

The students I interviewed were negotiating an educational system, community colleges, as single parents with constant family obligations. At the same time their lives were shaped by another set of systemic practices, the policies and rules of the PAS program as implemented by DHS. This set of practices was enmeshed in their lives and choice from their entry point to the college to their
everyday experience of education. The women I interviewed saw TANF as a necessary support during hard times, as Ann says “I never wanted to get on TANF ...I was struggling ”. Brenda who has raised her child totally on her own while working also does not like it “I’ve never really been on TANF this long, I don’t like it, they’re all up in your business and stuff”. How they arrived at Parents As Scholars and the degree of support and encouragement they received from DHS varies. Susie saw a sign on the wall when she was visiting a DHS office. Brenda had learned about her local college transitions program from her sister and enrolled despite being told to do the JOBS program after losing unemployment. She had to “do 30 hours of work search ..they’re making me do those things and I’m hating it because I don’t want to go into a restaurant and tell them how good I am. Bam I’m hired “. Brenda did not want another low pay service job so she “BS’d my way through that program for a good month or two ” by not really submitting applications. She found PAS through an unemployment office staff member who gave her the application packet after Brenda insisted that she wanted to go to school. Jill talks about the difficulty of finding PAS “It’s very hard to find out about, people don’t know about it “. She had called her DHS office to ask about resources for school and was asked whether she was talking about the PAS Program. Jill said; “Maybe –what is the PAS Program? And she told me Parents As Scholars and I knew by the name she was talking about me “. Jill describes that she had to do a lot of following up after this call “they don’t have a phone number, they don’t have an address.. and a lot of my caseworkers have never heard of it “. Jill feels her case managers were willing
to help but did not know about the program, she says laughing “maybe I had to, you know…I had to have the name. It’s weird, I’ve even tried to refer other women around here and they still can’t get to it even through their caseworker ”.

Others had direct assistance from case managers. Mary, off and on TANF for years because of caring for her disabled child had told her case manager she wanted to go to school and was referred to PAS. Mary stresses the need to self-initiate “some of them (case managers) really work and some don’t but if you’re willing to go to them and say ‘this is what I want to do how do I do it?’ it works really well ”. Ann’s worker also referred her while she was trying to go to school and do the work search hours required by the JOBS program, “the Parents As Scholars grant saved me”. Pat was in her second term of school when DHS acted to terminate her benefits, they “wanted to kick me off the JOBS program because I was in school”. Her case manager told her about PAS as a new program and actively supported her being on the wait list until a slot opened up. This enabled her to continue with school and receive benefits while the program was being established, “She saw my potential and said ‘it’s really important that you stay here’ (school) ..I think I slipped through a loophole, because most people that I know who try to go to school get cut off ”. Margaret also had clear case manager support. On TANF because she lost her job, Margaret had discussed going back to school with her worker who said “well we’ve got this great new program, it’s only for so many people, go ahead and apply”. On PAS for three years Margaret was one of the first applicants “we (she and her worker) both kind of learned the program together ”. These women were either in
school despite DHS or were actively considering school as a choice when they were referred to or discovered PAS.

Though everyone I interviewed found the help they received from the program essential, they were also constrained by its requirements. The full time attendance requirement was a problem. Mary, like many re-entry students with family responsibilities did not want to take twelve credits for her first term, “that kind of worried me, I felt up against the wall, kind of forced into doing it full time, mandatory you know”. She was afraid of failing and credits her transitions entry program with helping her manage that first term successfully. Other students had conflicts between full time summer attendance and child-care availability, or like Ann “just needed a break”. Others had difficulty managing the paperwork. As one of the first group enrolled, Margaret describes learning this process with active caseworker support, “we experienced the ways of the program together so over time we’ve become more fluent”, although at first “the ins and outs of paperwork, getting everything together, that initial entrance was a little rough”. The requirement to document and verify students’ attendance by having any college official sign paperwork each term drew the most negative response. Susie initially said this was easy “just have one of your teachers sign” but she also mentioned that “not every teacher will sign it”. This search for a signature was sometimes met with discomfort from faculty:

It was such a big thing and some teachers were uncomfortable signing...they don’t know if I’m doing you know everything I say I’m doing. I mean they know when I’m in their class, but they only require one signature per month
so they don’t know (about other classes). It’s weird. There would be a lot to gain from taking the education system and linking it with DHS. (Jill)

Margaret also quotes faculty who would refuse to sign saying “well I don’t know if you go to these other classes so I’m not going to sign this”. Ann agrees that the teacher will sometimes say “well, I don’t know your other teachers or if you went to class or not” and talked about the difficulties of finding people to sign when she was taking mostly online classes. Pat’s caseworker tells her to just use one “trusted teacher” and Pat is frustrated that the caseworker does not understand how the college works and talks about the difficulties of term by term schedule changes with many different teachers. It “bugs the people that need to sign the paper” and singles the student out as someone on welfare “I don’t want all these people knowing that I’m on DHS programs”. Many students solve this problem by going back to their transition program faculty and staff to sign, and then worry about what this will be like when they transfer out of the community college and lose these personal contacts. Pat has a solution she feels is obvious “you’d think grades would be enough, if I send you my (passing) grades at the end of the term, do you think that would be good enough?”. For Pat and other students this is an obvious disconnect between DHS and the educational system that singles them out and makes them uncomfortable. Other issues such as not understanding requirements or not always maintaining paperwork have had different consequences.

The women I interviewed had different experiences with PAS. Some had not kept up with program requirements at one or more points in their college careers. The
consequences for this varied widely and seemed quite arbitrary depending on their caseworker and the practices at the DHS branch involved.

Some students received full program benefits while on the waiting list for PAS and some did not depending on their district’s interpretation of policy. Brenda thought she was in line for PAS as she attended school for a year supported by DHS but had not actually applied. She was attending school under another more limited DHS program. The same Employment Office staff person who told her about PAS either did not give her the right information or did not give it in a form she was able to absorb “I thought they told me I had to wait a while; wait until I was in school for a year”. She was not set up with the same active caseworker support as Margaret. Since Brenda experienced the Unemployment Office worker as very supportive this was probably due to a lack of communication and knowledge about the program between agencies. When she found this out Brenda immediately applied for PAS. Others failed to meet requirements in a variety of ways but with very different consequences.

Jill became caught in a change in TANF regulations in her the middle of her first year of school and was cut off from PAS with three days notice. She describes the process and its effects; “oh sorry we’re not going to pay for your day care in three days, oh sorry no more food stamps. No more this, no more that..it scared me so bad ”. Jill filed a grievance with DHS and was reinstated because the caseworker did not give her enough notice of the change. Ann did not initially understand the summer school requirement and found herself off PAS and back on work search, but
was reinstated in the fall by her caseworker who took time to explain the regulations to her. She was also supported when she was unclear about attendance documentation and failed to turn in monthly forms. Her worker called to tell her she had not turned in what was required and she and another worker visited Ann to check she was okay and understood what was needed, “I appreciated that they came to my house, it was nice they were checking on me”. Ann had confused two different regulations for ongoing PAS students. She thought she had been told that once she was on PAS for a year she did not need to turn in these forms, which is true except if the student is receiving child care funds from DHS. This lack of understanding and issues with clear communication had very different consequences for Liz.

Liz returned to school at 43 and was referred to PAS through her Transitions Program. Liz said that she was accepted into PAS, but “nobody set me down and said this is exactly what this means”. Early in the program she was ill and did not complete the required number of credits. She tried to contact DHS thinking she had a “legitimate reason” for the credit drop and she had understood that “they’ll work with you”. Liz reports that she repeatedly called DHS leaving messages until four months later she reached someone who made her an appointment to come into the office to meet with the PAS point person. Liz was then informed she was no longer on PAS:

As soon as I get in there she told me “you’re out of the PAS program”. She says (talking to an assistant) “go ahead and call the program and tell them there’s an opening”. And I was like, “wait a minute how unfair is this?” And she said, “well there’s been no communication, why weren’t you in touch? There’s non compliancy”. blah,blah, so I was booted out on the spot.
Liz had been attending her community college for almost two years upgrading her skills and completing prerequisites, when from her perspective she was suddenly back on JOBS, doing required work search and contacts. She was told she could try for a one year certificate program but for Liz “here goes everything I’ve been in school two years for, right down the toilet, I could have just started crying right there on the spot. Because I’d worked so hard”. She tried to continue her schooling but could not manage the conflicts between her class times and the requirements of the JOBS program. At the last time of contact she was trying to continue the math prerequisites she needed by going to classes at night.

Part of the issue for Liz was not just the wide disparity in treatment for a presumed program rule infraction, but also the lack of knowledge and communication about program regulations. Liz seemed genuinely confused about program process. Susie also talks about the lack of communication in DHS. She states that caseworkers don’t communicate with each other and she has had to contend with the constant switching of caseworkers “They switch caseworkers without us knowing it—without the caseworkers knowing it and nobody talks to anybody else in the same fricking office”. Some caseworkers seem not to know what PAS is. Susie speaks of a caseworker she was assigned to who did not know about PAS, did not know she was in it and asked for her JOBS activities and contacts. Susie recounts she had to tell the worker she was not (her emphasis) on JOBS but was on PAS and what that entailed. Ann recounts that when the workers came to her house, something she
appreciated, they did not agree about the regulations they were explaining and told different stories:

One would tell me something and the other would be like “No that’s not right”. She told me that PAS is only good for two years and the other worker’d be “no, four years.” And when the college is on holiday you don’t get your money from PAS, and she’s like “No they get Christmas off without having to do work search.”

Ann is sympathetic, she “couldn’t have done without TANF” and she appreciates the caseworker caseload and “always new things going in and out of the office”, but states that she finds it hard having had five or six different caseworkers. Both Ann and Susie were in districts that provide extra assistance for their PAS clients. Susie is grateful for these supports given her schedule “people who come & give us our letter (about their hours) or collect what we have – so helpful – to make sure we have our hours turned in – that’s cool.” Margaret has had the same caseworker all along who she likes but rarely sees. Margaret expresses this as a conflict between needing support and the reality of DHS:

I don’t really talk to her which is a good thing. The less you hear from them the better. But then you lose that personalness and I see her maybe every six months and I’m in there for five minutes and I leave. To her I’m one of her like easiest clients.

This caseworker now also has an aide who does communicate and sends Margaret “little reminder notices, like, turn in your stuff, it helps to have somebody who knows what they’re doing and who’s willing to work it through with you if you need that”. Pat also cites lack of communication when her caseworker did not let her know about upcoming DHS budget cuts that impacted her childcare, “I called my
caseworker and she’s like ‘I didn’t call you?’ No you didn’t as a matter of fact I called you a week ago and you never returned my call”.

Some of the contradictory treatment between these students illustrates the lack of DHS knowledge about how the educational system works. Margaret has a “wonderful” caseworker who she feels has been a support in her educational journey. However, Margaret receives her cash grant from PAS plus Medicaid and food stamps, no other additional benefits. Other students receive childcare, transportation help and help with books, and many identify the childcare help as the crucial part of PAS assistance. Margaret has been told by her worker that childcare is included in her financial aid so the state can’t pay for it. Margaret did receive childcare funds when she was on JOBS, but “once I got put on PAS she was just like.. because the school looks at all your income and stuff, once the school includes that childcare as expenses then the state can’t pay for that”. This is a misinterpretation of how financial aid works on the caseworker’s part and in fact Margaret should be eligible for childcare funds just like other students. Another student showed Margaret a list of the kinds of things PAS helped with, “if you had difficulty paying –I think it was books – that they could help. I mean I’ve only gotten the cash assistance”. Despite this she feels grateful. The caseworker’s misinformation to Margaret seems to be part of a larger disconnect and lack of understanding between DHS and educational systems. During the time of these interviews DHS was considering budget cuts including cuts to PAS. Jill’s worker told her that day care funds were going to be cut because it would be more important
to the student to have the grant cash assistance. Jill could not believe what she was hearing:

And I can’t believe she’d say that. That’s not true. For women who’ve spent the last year setting themselves up in financial aid and establishing care and they have $500 a month in financial aid or scholarships or whatever they’ve done. And they have $500 a month (from TANF), you know taking $1,500 a month (cost of day care) is what’s going to hurt them. So I don’t know how they got that confused (laughs). I mean $1,500 a month for childcare is a lot more than $500 a month for a grant.

Women’s sense of themselves.

The third research question asked how has the experience of community college impacted low-income women’s consciousness of themselves and view of their futures? This question explored whether or how being on welfare shaped women’s consciousness of themselves as students, and what impact education has had on how they think about themselves.

Impact of education on self.

Everyone I interviewed saw school as having a positive effect on their sense of themselves, they felt different, more confident, intelligent, better able to function in the world at large. They are excited at their own achievements. Susie talks about the first time she got an A grade “first time I got an A I got 98% on a math test I was like jumping up and down _woo woo _”. Susie loves “being the one who knows what they’re talking about –it’s kind of like an ego booster”. Mary says her self esteem is up she feels “better put together, I have life tools, feel more well rounded ”. Getting good grades reaffirms her sense that she can do it “can I make it? It’s a toss up. But when I get those As & Bs I’m like, hey I got it ”. Jill is more confident and feels
“more smart” in the world. Brenda feels responsible for herself, feels very successful, her self-esteem “went way up – I feel very very much more sure of my smarts – I’m finally on a path for me”. Liz, a high school drop out who was on the Dean’s list her first year in college feels like “I’ve been given a second chance”, school was a source of pride “I really felt like somebody”. Ann also says school “makes me feel proud” she is more confident, feels “more educated…I spout off some stuff that I’ve learned in class you know and it feels good”.

Margaret, due to graduate, has self-confidence, pride, feels self-reliant, knows she can “do it”. The power of completion is evident in her words “I completed something I actually wanted to do (her Human Services degree), my choice. I’m so excited about that…it solidifies everything you know”. She is more organized “my focus has changed, just being here, moving along, I’m almost done with something I planned”. Yet this very organized woman who plans each minute doesn’t assess herself this way “that’s not me, I’m not a planner”. Her self-assessment differs from what she has accomplished. Other students, women who feel boosted by school, finally convinced they are smart, also express self-doubt. Jill is more confident “on the outside” but has inner doubt “I still feel kind of like the dummy”. Jill has over a 4.00 grade point average and has been asked by her school to be a spokesperson because she has overcome great odds and won some prestigious scholarships. Mary also still has to talk herself through the day “like this is a test, this is only a test, that’s all life is”. Both women see a difference from when they began to now. The first time Mary signed up for classes she had a panic attack “Oh my god I want to do
this but all this stuff is stopping me, nipping me in the butt to try and get me to stop from going, that’s kind of what I feel like ”. Jill’s good grades keep her going, and there is a similar effect for Susie “ when I first started here I was so stressed out about passing…now I’ve got As in everything and I’m in the Honor Society ”. Jill says school “ changed my idea of the world, it’s changed my life, and it’s changed my dreams ”. Pat says school helped her see she was resilient “ once I was afraid of the community college, I definitely wasn’t as smart ”. Now school is a refuge, she has become more confident, changed her goals, feels she has more strength and drive. Pat sees school as a process of being successful a move from the negative to positive “ If you push past the discouraging, the fear of failing people can find themselves ”.

Both Jill and Mary speak of school as particularly positive for low-income women. Jill, speaking of her Transitions classmates “ I don’t think women are given nearly enough credit for succeeding through such hard times ”. Mary talks of the strength it takes for women on welfare to go to school “ All those angles those women are dealing with, it’s not an easy task to pull themselves off TANF, and for them to show up one term and try to do this is amazing ”.

**TANF and self.**

The women I interviewed had complex and contradictory attitudes to welfare and to themselves as being both students and being on TANF. Many students were grateful for TANF assistance and said they had no problems with being on welfare. Susie who had many years in different recovery programs said she had an open attitude to receiving assistance “ I’ve been on welfare forever and it’s easy for me to
talk about it. I’m very open, tell you my whole life story .. so much of us in are in the same program –in recovery ”. She talks of friends who won’t do welfare and are struggling “ like if there’s help there get it ”. Others speak of hard economic times and everyone being in the same boat. Liz says she’s fine with being on TANF “ most of the people in school are having a hard time, there’s so many people struggling, you’re not the only one that’s low income ”. Yet she does not feel able to challenge the decision to remove her from PAS. For others too the poor economy lessens the stigma of receiving TANF. Margaret says in the current economy “ everybody is looking for what help they can get, there’s not so much of a stereotype about receiving help from somewhere anymore because people know –everybody’s feeling it now ”.

Still she is not open about TANF “ nobody knows – I don’t (talk about it) ”. Margaret redefines what TANF is when it’s received through the PAS program and separates it from welfare, “ It’s TANF but it’s a different program. When I talk about it –it’s a state program, you don’t really have to now exactly what it is ”. Mary also thinks PAS redefines the meaning of being on welfare “ I don’t consider it welfare – I consider it the PAS program ”. Although she does not verbally redefine welfare as PAS, for Susie school is an offset to feeling looked down upon. Susie’s self-presentation is as someone who has clearly gone through hard times. She talks about another student, Beverly, who “ used to talk under her breath about me and think she was better than me ”. Susie finds relief from this perceived put down in her school performance:
It’s like dude I got a 99 on my frickin test out of 100 and you got a 50. So I’m just rockin it and I’m totally willing to sit with people and help them and eventually Beverly got off her little high horse and thinking she’s better than me and asked me for help.

In this description Susie reveals how she uses her educational success as resilience to others’ attitudes to her as a poor woman.

For other students the feelings of embarrassment or shame about being on welfare are mixed with their acceptance of negative social perceptions of welfare moms, even when they clearly want to exempt themselves from these perceptions. Jill speaking about whether being on welfare comes into her thoughts of herself at school says “Yeah it does and it’s hard”. She is reluctant to tell people that she receives TANF “it’s not like I’m staying home eating bonbons, watching Days of our Lives”. She gets embarrassed at using a food stamp card “I do a big shopping at once .. they don’t know I’m a student and not sitting around. I’ve always worked, worked hard”. Knowing she has worked hard all her life is her message to herself, her strategy to cope with feelings about being on TANF. Ann also feels uncomfortable in public situations such as getting groceries that signal her receipt of assistance:

I just want..I always seem to explain myself. Like with the grocery clerk. “I’m a student going to school”. I just want them to know I’m not a mom that sits at home and does nothing. I go to school full time.

Brenda tells of a conversation with her reading teacher about why she needs to know about her grades “I’m on TANF, I only have a year to do this” she says and “she (the teacher) didn’t seem to look down on me”. Brenda might mention welfare but
does not go into details with school friends. After all she says she’s a single mother going to school “it’s not like some people who just sell drugs.”

I asked Pat if she talked about being on welfare, “It depends on who I’m talking to –if it comes up sometimes I’ll mention I’m on a program”. She talks of explaining her need to go to school full time in the summer to other students who think she’s “nuts” to try and do this “I don’t have a choice, I’ll lose some benefits if I don’t. That’s pretty much what I leave it as”. She does talk to friends she has become closer with, knowing they will respect her privacy and not tell others “cause I don’t want them to you know ‘hey that chick’s on welfare’. Na na na–I don’t want people talking about me in a bad way”. She is clear about the stigma attached, “welfare gets a bad rap it’s a shame because it’s a beneficial thing to have, so many people need it”. Pat does not like what she sees as negative DHS attitudes to clients.

Speaking of her caseworker:

She talks to me like I’m incompetent. I’ve experienced that a lot with people who work in DHS. I can understand that a lot of people on welfare systems try to mess with the system try to get out of their stuff, I really understand that but I’m not one of those people. I feel that they don’t treat me as an individual I think they just group us all into the same stereotype.

She does not seem aware she holds that stereotype herself. Jill looks forward to not having to deal with the stereotype. This is my interpretation not hers. She describes being finished with school and being free of DHS bureaucracy:

Once I’m off I’ll be off for good. No matter what happens in my life it’ll be great. No more attendance sheets. No more food stamp card. No more caseworker. No more leave your social security number at the beep.
Summary of interviews and themes.

These eight women came to school through different external sources of change, supports and barriers. All stressed that the cohort experience of first term transitions programs with women in similar situations were essential to their entry and to success. For these student parents motherhood did not mean a separate but related realm of family and school. Being a mother was a central motivator to go to school, a barrier to succeeding, and a reason for staying in school. Their college experience impacts themselves, their children, and their families in very positive ways. They have to actively manage their time as both students and parents. They manage their education; they are resilient, active learners who strategize how to succeed. All students were impacted by DHS program policies and practices. There were barriers to finding PAS, difficulties and embarrassment associated with the attendance requirements, disconnects between DHS and the colleges. Experiences of PAS and the benefits they received varied. Most at some point did not keep up with program requirements but the consequences were very different depending on caseworker or branch. Being at the community college has made an enormous difference to these students. They have more self-esteem and confidence; they have changed their goals and dreams, yet they are still plagued by self-doubt. Although school is a source of pride and resistance, for each one her identity as a woman on TANF adds layers of discomfort. They keep quiet about this aspect of their experience, are not open about receiving DHS assistance and take pains to redefine
what it means to themselves and others. Through all this they are successful students with high grade point averages and varied future career goals.

Summary of Chapter Four

Chapter four describes my research into the PAS Program, its policies and practices, to establish a context for the participants’ college experience. The chapter then summarizes a demographic profile of the eight participants I interviewed. The profile includes age, marital status, household composition, sources of financial support, race and ethnicity, level of education, past work experience, and current goals and degree programs. The third section of the chapter discusses and analyzes the interview data. Six major themes emerged from the interviews. These themes are discussed in relation to the beginning research questions. The next chapter will discuss the implications of these results, their relation to past research, their possible impact on educational practice, and suggestions for future inquiry.

Endnotes

1. Interview with anti poverty advocate who helped to establish PAS.

2. Interview with District DHS staff

3. Interview with DHS Central Office PAS Program Coordinator

4. Although they were not the subjects of this study, I have given DHS managers and staff pseudonyms in the narrative to protect their identity.

5. It is possible to find the PAS program if you know the program name. Entering Parents As Scholars in the search function of the DHS website brings it up immediately. However it took me 15 -20 minutes of searching using many different variations in links to find it when NOT using PAS in the search field.
6. Phone interview with “Helen” a third year PAS student in her last term at the University of Oregon. She graduated with honors.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications

It’s a real challenge being where I’m at, TANF, however you want to say it, low income, single parent, domestic violence survivor, you know you name it - I’m in recovery. Against all odds and still try to succeed. (Mary)

The purpose of this study was to critically explore low-income women’s experience as they negotiate post secondary education in community colleges. The aim was to situate women’s own understanding of their educational experience within a context of gender and class disparities and systemic constraints. I began this research with three research questions about low-income women’s experience of college. These framing questions asked how low-income women come to participate in college, what the experience of community college is like for this group of women, and how has the experience of community college influenced their consciousness of themselves and view of the future. I focused these questions on the experiences of eight TANF eligible women student parents in Oregon’s Parents as Scholars Program. The research questions were entrances into these students’ accounts of their paths to school, the supports and barriers they encountered, their daily college and family experience, the ways education had changed their lives, and their sense of themselves as students and women on welfare. The analysis of the interviews was based on feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 2004; Smith, 1990 and 2004), a journey of thinking about these women’s lives that was grounded in their accounts but also makes connections to the constraints on their lives. This chapter will discuss the results of this study in relation to other research as described in the literature review,
the implications of this study for educational practice, the limitations of the research, and implications for future studies.

**Results in Relation to the Literature Review**

The eight students I interviewed were all single parents who at the time of interview had attended community college from two terms to three years. Higher levels of education are correlated to higher earnings and all of these women understood education to be a gateway to a different life. Over the period of the study seven of the eight were doing well at their respective schools with three ready to graduate to the next step. One student, after two years of college, had been terminated from PAS and eventually left school though she had hopes of continuing in the future. Education has changed their lives, their sense of themselves and their expectations for their children. These women entered the study through learning of the research from recruitment posters, DHS caseworkers, friends and college websites and staff. This is not a representative sample since that was not the methodology of the study, though I did recruit from different areas of the state. However it is worth noting that while not representative in the statistical sense, these women are not atypical TANF recipients, they are not special or unique. These are low-income women who have survived domestic violence, family and substance abuse. The majority have a background in low wage service work that they are desperate to escape. They are not able to earn enough income to support their families. Two women had no work history and have depended on public assistance for most of their adult lives. Six women are first generation college students and four of the eight
began their college careers at a pre-collegiate developmental level with very low reading and math.

**The importance of transition programs.**

Every student stressed the importance of the college adult transitions programs that began in Oregon as Single Parent Displaced Homemaker Programs. This theme emerged in relation to the first research question, exploring the paths women took to college and what supported them in this journey. Transitions programs were the essential link that bridged these women to college, gave them the tools and confidence to continue and sustained them in their college careers. Being together in a cohort created a sense of community and belonging. The effects and success of these programs has been demonstrated in the past (Women Work! 1995), as has the negative impact of their de-funding (National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education, 2001). Forming learning communities as a strategy for improving persistence and graduation rates is substantively grounded in research (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005) and many colleges have established learning communities that involve cohorts of students as best practices. While there is considerable literature on cohorts as supports to student success and the importance of integrative learning provided in learning communities (Crockett, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 2005) there has been little focus on the importance of a community of students who face similar life circumstances. However for these students it was the unique experience of coming together as women that provided the foundation for the first term of college and the support to continue and succeed.
Students as mothers.

This theme of experience structured by single motherhood was present in students’ accounts of why they came to community college, their accounts of their daily lives at college, the barriers they faced, and their motivations to succeed. Although most public discussion of welfare does not name TANF clients as mothers or parents, women on welfare as mothers is an issue that has been explored in the literature. In their study of welfare reform in Oregon, Morgen, Acker & Weigt (2010) situate welfare recipients as parents who do essential care-giving work and also emphasize the negative effects of that reform on family well-being. Both Butler and Duprez (2002) and Jones-DeWeever and Gault (2006) describe the positive effects on children of welfare parents’ participation in school. In two recent dissertations, Walkea–Griffea (2004) and Kostick (2001) focused on students as parents who saw education as the key to a better life not just for themselves but also for their families. In my study mothers’ participation in education had a wide and positive impact on their families in several ways. The students I interviewed describe being role models for their children and creating changed expectations for their children’s futures. Attending college does not just affect expectations and attitudes it also changes family practices. Students talk about their children doing their homework with mom, in essence developing new expectations and study habits. For some their participation in college had caused another family member to consider or enroll in school. Education is not confined to the student mother; it ripples through these families and alters their future goals and dreams.
Fewer accounts focus on the way that being a mother shapes the totality of experience for women student parents. Adair (2003) sees low-income women students as mothers; they do not inhabit separate areas of existence where they are parents here and students there. Similarly, for students in my study, their motherhood and “student-hood” were never separate but always intertwined. Their lives are structured through managing their schoolwork in relation to their families. This is a complex and exhausting task. Their children are both sources of stress and difficulty and a motivation to continue, to overcome barriers and succeed. This aspect of their experience is one that was also captured by Christopher (2005) in her case study of welfare recipients attending university. In Christopher’s study she saw having children as both a barrier to success and an incentive to persisting despite barriers. My study confirms this perspective and adds to the knowledge of the strategies that women students use to succeed.

**Resilience, planning and strategies for success.**

Negative assumptions about welfare mothers and education are embedded in the principles of welfare reform (Kahn, Butler, Deprez, & Pokalow, 2004) and there is extensive scholarship about the cultural attacks on poor women (Abramovitz, 1991; Fox Piven, 2002; Mink, 2006; Reese, 2005). Few studies focus on low-income women as active managers of their own future. Yet in my study this theme emerged in response to every framing question. These students negotiated barriers, juggled schedules and families, talked themselves into success, all within the considerable limitations of poverty and stresses of functioning within disconnected systems.
There are implications in the everyday language about welfare parents that they are not suited for school. In my interview with her the PAS Central Office Coordinator suggests that what she sees as the program’s lack of success may be due to “the people (clients) we work with don’t understand what school is about”. The students also reported condescending attitudes from DHS staff.

These women’s lives stand in direct contradiction to these notions. The women I interviewed constantly manage their education and lives, they plan how to succeed, they are active learners, and create workable strategies to negotiate the community college. They face family responsibilities, caseworker misinformation, struggling to get to school, and nagging self-doubt. They are withstanding multiple pressures and demands as they negotiate education. They know they need relationships with other students to support them and plan classes with friends or seek out connections in the classes they have. They use every “good student” strategy; they go to class, sit up front, ask questions, communicate with teachers, check progress, use college resources. They have or are developing maps for their futures and check these maps against occupational trends and earning power. They accumulate extra credentials along the way “just in case” (Pat). They often do not recognize what they are doing “I’m not a planner” (Margaret), “didn’t realize what I did to organize” (Ann). Limoncelli (2003) has pointed out that the notion of women on welfare as dependant has produced policy that does not reflect women’s lived experience. My study gives life to this disjunction. Active, capable, planner, being
strategic, this is not the cultural language attached to poor women, but it is these students’ realities.

**The impact of DHS policies and practices on the students’ educational lives.**

Naples (2003) draws attention to the ways that state policies and regulations shape and affect poor women’s daily lives, and in “Stretched Thin” (2012) a study of welfare reform in Oregon, Morgen, Acker, and Weigl discuss the ways in which welfare regulations are obstacles for poor families. There are few studies of welfare regulations as an obstacle to student success. Three studies of welfare mothers attending college have some focus on the difficulties experienced in receiving aid and the barriers provided by welfare regulations (Kostick, 2001; Pearson, 2006; Walker-Griffea, 2004), and Pearson specifically analyzed TANF as a barrier. Butler and Duprez’ 2002 analysis of the Parents as Scholars program in Maine focused on the positive effects of that program on student participants. In my study PAS in Oregon provided the participants with systemic benefits and systemic constraints that varied widely from district to district and caseworker to caseworker but all affected the students.

The PAS Program, though established to support TANF eligible student parents in completing education, has minimal connection with educational systems and no coordination with the colleges these students were attending. This disconnect emerges in the difficulties students had in accessing the PAS Program and the barriers produced by its requirements. There is no systemic way for students in general or
TANF clients to find and enroll in PAS. Most of my interviewees either stumbled on the PAS program or found it through referral from a caseworker or college staff member. Their initial experience on the wait list varied by district and caseworker. For some students they experienced no difference in support whether they were on the wait list or on the program. For others support for education began when they were actually on PAS, and for one student communication was so unclear that she did not realize she was not on the wait list at all. Not only district policy but caseworker communication and support made the difference.

From my interviews with them DHS staff feel that program requirements are simple and documentation is minimal. The students’ experience is different. Full time attendance including summer term is experienced as a hardship for these single mothers and many had problems in managing other requirements. The requirement to have a college official document and verify attendance in classes produced the most problems. Students encountered faculty who would refuse to sign the attendance documentation and the requirement triggered shame because it revealed the student was on welfare.

Arbitrary treatment by caseworkers produced profoundly affecting results. Although most of the students at some point did not keep up with one or more of the program requirements, for some this meant friendly reminders of rules or support in keeping them. For others it meant sudden removal of benefits, and for one student it meant removal from the PAS program. One student who experienced her caseworker as very supportive was nevertheless not getting many of the benefits, including
childcare that she was entitled to under PAS. These differences in treatment were due to caseworker lack of knowledge about education systems and the PAS program, as well as inadequate caseworker communication. At least one instance seemed to be an arbitrary use of power.

**Women’s sense of themselves, the impact of education.**

All the students interviewed described being in school as very positive. They felt changed, were more confident, and had higher self-esteem. These results replicate those of other large-scale studies (Butler & Duprez, 2002; Jones-DeWeever, & Gault, 2006) and supplement these studies with women’s own narratives that describe how education bolsters their sense of self. Academic achievements boosted self-esteem, gave the women in my study pride in themselves and re-affirmed that they could succeed. They feel more intelligent, self-reliant, and capable. They have new goals and dreams. For the students who have been at school longer, completion solidifies this sense of themselves as competent. The students feel at home in the community college, that they belong in education.

At the same time these in-depth conversations revealed a self-doubt that is not explored by other studies. Adair and Dahlberg (2003) do focus on the alienation that poor women can feel when they enter college, and Adair (2003) discusses the way poor women can feel undervalued, and the stereotyping that welfare student parents can experience. Sharp (2004) also sees the college as both a confidence boosting experience and a source of humiliation for the welfare mothers she interviewed. In contrast the students in my study felt supported by the community colleges they
attended. They may have encountered a teacher they did not particularly like or who did not understand their circumstances, but in general they see community college staff and faculty as their supports, allies, and advocates. They feel empowered by school, convinced that they are smart, but at the same time they have inner doubt and have to talk themselves through. All the women report a difference in these contradictory feelings since they began school and now. For them school is a process of being and feeling successful. They rely on the fact that they have good grades, that they are more resilient, they have more strength. They speak of how school has changed their lives, and they have insights into what in Mary’s words constantly nips at their heels. One of the students, Jill, talked about how the self-loathing generated by the abuse she had experienced could act as a perverse source of strength and how that sense of herself could betray her. She described how seeing yourself as nothing could become the only source of power available so you hang on to it. Other students like Mary spoke of the sheer strength required for women on welfare to even attempt to go to school. Whether it was because of their own difficult history or the effects of being on welfare, educational success was both a personal triumph and a personal struggle for these students.

**TANF and self.**

The cultural language and assumptions about women on welfare are negative, seeing them as lazy and dependant (Harris, 2003; Madsen, 2003) and these assumptions are embedded in welfare policy (Kahn, Butler, Duprez, & Pokalow, 2004). There have been few studies that examine how these cultural ideas may affect
low-income women’s sense of themselves as they pursue education. For the women I interviewed the effects of being on TANF were complex and contradictory. Students talk about TANF as an important source of support and a necessary form of assistance that is no different from other forms of assistance in economic hard times. Everyone is struggling and they are not the only low-income people at school. At the same time they do not readily reveal to others that they are on TANF, experience shame at using a food stamp card, feel embarrassed when they have to have attendance forms signed, take pains to redefine their situation as being on PAS (their emphasis) not welfare, assume that other people might look down on or stigmatize them for being on TANF, and clearly hold the same stereotypes about welfare moms themselves as does the culture at large. They have strategies to cope with these feelings. They seek to distinguish themselves from others on welfare, they rely on their school success, remind themselves that they’ve always worked hard, that they are students not welfare moms. Being in school and having educational success forms a base of resilience and resistance to dominant cultural ideas of women on welfare. As Ann says when talking about using welfare benefits “I’m not a mom that sits at home and does nothing, I’m a student going to school”.

**Summary.**

This section discussed the themes that emerged from the narrative interviews with my participants in relation to the literature review. Although educational research has stressed the importance of first term experiences and cohort learning, what was crucial for the women in my study was to begin college in community with
other women in transition. My participants’ narratives add to the literature on students as parents and present the degree to which being single mothers underlies and shapes their experience. Their children provide reasons for change. They are barriers, hopes, and dreams. As mothers these students constantly negotiate school and home, they are organized, planful, and exhausted. Their descriptions of how they manage going to school as parents who also must work with a welfare bureaucracy are at odds with the cultural descriptions of poor women as dependant and in need of gaining self-sufficiency. Their stories add to and expand the small body of qualitative work that has been done on the college experiences of low-income women students and emphasize their presence in education as capable and self-reliant people. There are few accounts of the ways welfare policies shape the possibilities for success for students. DHS policies and practices have a profound and somewhat arbitrary impact on these students’ lives, from whether they have access to the PAS program or whether they remain on it. There are disjunctions and disconnects between the program’s structure and purpose and the students’ experience.

Though many studies show the positive effects of post-secondary education for low-income women, there is a much smaller set of qualitative data about women’s own perceptions of these effects. Few studies explore how the negative cultural image of being on welfare affects women students or whether education provides a basis of resistance to this image. In my study being at community college was a very positive force for change in these students’ lives and the lives of their families. They are more confident, assured of their worth, and their intelligence. They have changed
their life plans and the plans for their children as a result of their experience in post-secondary education. At the same time they have internalized many of the negative stereotypes of being on welfare and assess themselves and the reactions of others around them accordingly. They are silenced on this aspect of their experience unless they know and trust their listeners. Their success and presence in school does provide a basis for resilience in the face of negative ideas and judgements about poor women, particularly about women on welfare. This is nowhere clearer than when Mary tells me very definitively that she is not on welfare, she is on Parents As Scholars.

**Implications for Practice**

These students’ own accounts of their educational experiences and the analysis and themes I have drawn from their stories have implications for educational practice. In the next section I will discuss these implications in terms of college programs, staff perspectives on and treatment of students, and issues for college leaders. The implications I see are in the following areas:

- The focus of entry programs
- The importance of cohorts, belonging, and connection
- Establishing a college culture that supports low-income women
- Coordination between government agencies and colleges that does not penalize the students

**Entry programs.**

Educational practice has embraced first year experiences, sets of coordinated academic classes and services as entry programs for first term students. All but one
of the students in my study spent their first term in a program designed for women in transition, the remaining student was connected to a college women’s center. Everyone attributes their success in completing that first term and their subsequent positive school experiences to these programs. The students, initially very unsure of their abilities, felt they had a foundation for success and a community they could rely on as they moved through their respective colleges. Part of this foundation was learning the skills needed to be successful in school. When students talked about the strategies they used, such as looking at their education in manageable pieces, “just take it one term at a time”, they would attribute learning that skill to their transitions program teacher or counselor. This suggests the importance of a focus on planning skills for college programs such as advising, orientation, entry, or college success classes.

However these students also emphasized being in a group of other women in the same situation as core to their transitions experience. As educators we need to pay attention to this. Though first year experiences in general are a very accepted educational practice, there is much less emphasis on tailoring these educational experiences for groups who face common circumstances. Yet these women’s accounts suggest this was essential for them. They valued making connections to others in the same situation, and the personal support, comfort, and encouragement that these connections offered. If we are serious about access to community colleges we need to rethink our approach to these first college experiences and also give
support to programs that focus on specific groups and that facilitate bonds and connections.

**The importance of cohorts, belonging and connection.**

Cohorts as a source of support, belonging and cohesion were a constant theme in my interviews. Being in a cohort made a difference for these students. For some, professional technical programs continued the cohort experience of their transitions program and provided new connections in school and social activities outside of school. Margaret stresses the importance of these connections:

I mean I’ve had people that I’ve had a year of school with. I mean every term I’ve had two or three classes with them. When you get in that program and you get in the groove, you get to know these people…. It’s great… The connections around here are great. You can always find somebody you know. (Laughs) Or can talk to.

Students who take general education classes that are not cohort based try to create that for themselves. They take classes with friends or consciously look for connections in the classes they have. Other students find support and connection in their campus Women’s Center or through checking in with their transitions program classmates as they progress through school. My interviews suggest that it is important that colleges find ways of fostering continued connections between students, whether that is cohort based programs or home bases and centers. These students value learning settings that promote relationships and bonds with others, and see these as promoting their success.
A college culture that supports low-income women.

Community colleges pride themselves on creating access and success for all students regardless of educational starting points or abilities. This theme of universal access is central to the community college mission. To meet that mission for poor women, particularly single parents, college cultures need to acknowledge their presence and provide programs that support them. Mathur et al. (2004) in their study of welfare recipients in California, demonstrate the importance of community colleges as access points and gateways for poor women. This importance is replicated in my study. However, in most colleges the needs and issues for low-income women are not visible as a priority, programs that support them are not seen as mainstream or necessary. College leaders need to make these issues visible, and promote greater recognition of the complexity and pressures students are under when filling different roles as student, mother, low income, or on welfare.

Kates (2004) has stressed that accessible education means thinking about women and their families in interconnected ways. Colleges should evaluate their supports for student parents and their families and increase these where needed. To support their roles as both mothers and students, the students I interviewed need more flexibility in scheduling, deadlines, teacher availability, and class format. These students want more family supports at college and more visible, family oriented resources. For example Susie talked appreciatively about the free community recreation opportunities available to her family through the Student Activities area at her college that allowed her family access to events they could not otherwise afford.
The students also value and rely on college resources yet say they were often not apparent to them. Sometimes in community colleges we create divisions between academics and student affairs in terms of which is primary for student success and learning. The students in my study did not see those divisions. They saw one college where both individual faculty support and encouragement and student services and supports were essential.

It is also important that colleges promote evidence-based portrayals of the issues for poor women. By this I mean services and a classroom dialogue that see poor women as capable, not victims of a "poverty culture" or having lacks they need to make up. College personnel could benefit from training in issues of class, barriers for low-income students, and the effects of negative stereotypes about poor students and students on welfare. The women in my study faced barriers and constraints, they carried some scars of difficult personal histories, most often those of substance abuse and gender based violence, but they were resilient, tough, and determined to succeed. They need coaching and encouragement and a culture that reflects their strengths, not one that makes them invisible.

**Coordination between government agencies and colleges that does not penalize the students.**

It would clearly benefit PAS students to have coordination between colleges and DHS. Many of the decisions that negatively impact students are based on lack of knowledge about community colleges and how educational systems work. Helen, the university student on PAS who I interviewed by phone describes TANF as a “penalty
based system” and it is important that this coordination does not further penalize the students or set up more barriers. Students need a coordination that could inform DHS practices and eliminate unnecessary requirements. They also need an advocacy that understands DHS bureaucracy and caseworker pressures. Systemic supports for students could include dialogue and liaison between the PAS point people at DHS and the transitions programs at the colleges, as well as a college advisor designated for PAS students.

**Limitations of the Research**

All research has limitations as well as benefits. This study was based on in-depth narrative interviews. A sample of eight women is adequate in that context and provides rich data. However, my initial goal was to interview between ten and fifteen women, and the research would have been strengthened if I had been able to find more participants. There is an additional limitation since all my interviewees identified as white, and the experience of women of color would be different in some key respects. The analysis is therefore limited since I was not able to include these experiences. I also would have liked to do more follow up with the women, both individually and in groups. It was very difficult to find and schedule interviews with my research subjects. This population is not visible at colleges. There was no natural point of connection with them. Under Institutional Review Board recruitment protocols they had to take the initiative to contact me. Their lives are very busy, overscheduled and subject to disruption. If they wanted to interview, circumstances often prevented that. When they scheduled interviews intervening events, a child
sick, a test due, interfered and they did not show up. In retrospect it would have helped to be able to offer them something to compensate for their time. Interviews were understandably low on the list of their priorities. Despite this, when we did talk I was able to establish relationships of trust where the students revealed details of their lives and fears as well as hopes.

**Implications for Future Studies**

This section briefly describes two main areas for future study, those of low-income women in community college and cohort based entry programs. It concludes with a need for further exploration of the role of education in empowerment for women on welfare. This is in part a reflection on the aspect of the research I found most interesting as well as a statement about further study.

There is a need for more studies on low-income women attending community colleges, particularly welfare eligible women. Their presence, voices, and what they need to succeed are not generally visible, but community colleges are clearly places where they can succeed and gateways to an improved economic future. Qualitative studies such as mine on PAS recipients need to be replicated, broadened to include different groups of women, and supplemented by quantitative studies.

There is a need for more research on entry programs and cohort based first year experiences to gain understanding into the different needs for different populations. My interviewees felt that it was the connection with other women in transition that made the difference for them. I suspect that this is true for other groups, and that we may do a disservice to students by designing programs and
services that are for “everyone” or the “general population”. We need more research on the supports different groups of students need, and what focused experiences are beneficial.

For me one of the most interesting aspects of this study was the complicated relationship between the women’s sense of themselves, their view of being on welfare, and how education affects how they see themselves and their possibilities. None of the women in my study used words like class although their lives were constrained by being poor. My phone interviewee was conscious of class and its privileges. She identified herself as upper middle class and was sure that DHS workers perceived and treated her differently because she wasn’t the “typical welfare client”. My interviewees however did not describe themselves as low-income or poor, instead they talked about struggling financially and not being able to support their families. They described the effects of being poor and on welfare obliquely. They did not talk of stigma or shame though they described these things in different words. They expected and anticipated that people might look down on them or treat them badly if they knew they were on TANF. They had internalized negative assumptions about welfare moms while distinguishing themselves from these assumptions. They appreciated the support government assistance gives while they were not able to talk about this central part of their experience to other students. It was not, as the other studies on this topic have suggested, that they were directly shamed or humiliated by differential treatment as welfare moms at the college, rather it was a sense that they would be seen as “less”, the expectation of others’
assumptions that they carried with them. Education and educational success did seem to act as a buttress to this negative sense of themselves, and a source of resistance to dominant cultural ideas of poor women, as well as changing what they could do with their lives. I think this is the core of why students like Jill and Mary stress that school is particularly important to low-income women and women on welfare, that it is essential to their futures. I would have liked to explore these ideas more with the women I interviewed and hear their reflections on them. Research and a whole strand of scholarly thought suggest, and many of us in education hope, that education is empowering and liberating. There is a need for more research that tells us whether that’s true. Research that opens up what it is like to be a member of a culturally stigmatized group, and how and if education can change that. This study is a small contribution to that end.
References


APPENDICES
Appendix A: Oregon DHS context for Parents As Scholars (PAS) Program

Questions for Local DHS Administration of PAS

1. Does your office administer PAS for Lane County? Eugene only?
2. What are the main administrative responsibilities at this office – e.g. tracking/monitoring? Does it pretty much work the same in each county?
3. How many people are participating locally?
4. What is the gender breakdown?
5. Who is eligible? (check TANF regulations) Are participants always parents? Any exceptions? Do they have to show they have children at home? What about adult children?
6. How many on PAS waiting list? How long is a typical “wait”?
7. How does a client find out about PAS? (Note: DHS website – very hard to find information)
8. Do caseworkers typically mention the program? How do they decide that?
9. What is defined as full time education?
10. One of the criteria is that completion of schooling will lead to employment that will provide wages that will allow the person to be off assistance (without TANF)? How is that defined locally?
11. How is participation in a 2 year degree defined? Declaring a major? Acceptance in a program?
12. What proportion of applicants are accepted? Turned down? Why might this happen?
13. Are there time limits? E.g. to achieve a 2 or 4 year degree

14. Does TANF impact financial aid or vice versa?

15. Do participants typically receive TANF only? Or do they receive other benefits?

16. Do you think the program is successful?

17. What in your view are the barriers to people succeeding when on PAS

Questions/Topics for Central Office Administration of Parents As Scholars Program (PAS)

1. Check the program process statewide – what are local responsibilities, what are central office responsibilities

2. Check the history of the program – what was the state work committee’s composition. What is the role of the committee now & then.


4. Check what program data is available.

5. Check Wait List locally and statewide: Lane County supports up to one year – average wait is 11 month for a slot – how does this work statewide? Do people on wait list get services? Does education count as work activity?

6. One of the criteria for PAS is that completion of schooling will lead to employment that will provide wages that will allow the person to be off assistance (without TANF). How is that defined?
7. How is participation in a 2 year degree defined? Declaring a major?
   Acceptance in a program?

8. Do you think the program is successful?

9. What are the PAS Program issues/challenges from your (the Central Office Coordinator) perspective?
Appendix B: Interview Guide

Demographic Information

Age ________________

Family status (Please check)

Married___________ Single (never married)____________
Divorced_________ Separated __________ Widowed________
Partnered___________

Children

Y/No    Ages ______________________________________

Living with you? Y/No

Single parent     Y/No

Income sources/household support: (check all that apply)

TANF_________    Financial Aid __________________________
Wages__________ Child support __________________________
Food stamps________

Other (scholarships, family help etc)____________________

Race/ethnicity (optional)

Alaska Native _____ American Indian _______ Asian__________

Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander________________________

Hispanic___________ African American____________________

White (non Hispanic)________________________

Bi or multiracial ________________ Other___________________
Highest level of education completed (please check)

- High School/GED
- Some college
- Associates degree
- Bachelors
- Other

First generation college student

- Y
- No

**Interview Questions**

The following is a guiding frame designed to encourage participants to report their own experiences in their own words. The interview explores three areas of the participants’ experience. Framing questions and possible follow up questions are listed under each topic area.

1. Understanding the context for entering community college education from women’s own perspective.

**Framing Question**

Please talk a little about your journey to the community college.

**Possible follow up questions**

- How did you decide to come to school?
- Why was post secondary education important?
- Is this the first time you have been in college?
- What were the barriers you experienced? Tell me about what was difficult in deciding to come to school.
- What supports were there for you? Who or what was helpful?
- Was coming to school scary?
How did you find out about Parents as Scholars? Would you be attending college without it?

2. Exploring what the experience of community college is like for low-income women.

Framing question

Please describe what a typical day is like when you are going to school – how does your day start? What happens next?

Possible follow up questions

What is it like to be in the classroom?
Are there parts of the college that feel supportive of your learning or being at school? Anything that does not feel supportive? In what ways?
Does the college feel like a welcoming place for you? Why or why not?
What do you like about being in school? Dislike?
What strategies do you use to be successful at the college?
What has been the most helpful thing for you in pursuing your education?
How well does school fit with the rest of your life?

3. How has the experience of community college influenced low-income women’s view of themselves and of their futures?

Framing question

Has your view of yourself changed since you’ve been in school?
Possible follow up questions

How do you feel about being you? Is that different? How?

Are you at home now in the community college - has this changed since you first got here?

Do you ever talk about being on welfare with other students or in the classroom? Do you think being on welfare makes a difference for you in your life at school? In what ways?

What’s your dream or dreams for the future – what do you hope for? Has this changed since you came to college?

4. Anything else you would like to tell me about your experiences that we haven’t touched on in the interview?
Appendix C: Recruitment Materials

Recruitment information for contacts

Kate Barry has worked for many years in community college programs for women and is currently a doctoral student in Oregon State University’s Community College Leadership Program.

The topic of Kate’s dissertation is Women, Poverty, and Educational Success. Her study will focus on interviewing women community college students who are also participating in Oregon’s Parents as Scholars program.

Kate is interested in exploring low-income women students’ experiences in community colleges, how they made the journey to college, their own views of their preferred future, and the role of education in that future.

She is looking for women who would be willing to share their educational journey through individual in-depth interviews. Participation in this study would involve a maximum time of 3-5 hours.

If you are interested in participating in this research study, or want more information about it you can contact Kate either by email at barryk@lanecc.edu or by calling her at 541 484 4367. You may also contact Larry Roper, the principal investigator for this study by email at larry.roper@oregonstate.edu or call him at 541 737 2636.
Looking for WOMEN COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS who are participating in PARENTS AS SCHOLARS

Kate Barry is conducting a research study for her doctorate at Oregon State University on Women, Poverty, and Educational Success. Kate has worked for many years in community college programs for women.

The aim of the study is to explore low-income women students’ experiences in community colleges from their own perspectives and improve knowledge about women’s experience of education and its role in their future.

Kate is looking for women who are part of Oregon’s Parents As Scholars program who would be willing to share their educational journey through individual in depth interviews. Participation in this study would involve a maximum time of 3-5 hours.

If you are interested in participating in this research study, or want more information about it you can contact Kate either by email at barryk@lanecc.edu or by calling her at 541 484 4367.

You may also contact Larry Roper, the principal investigator for this study by email at larry.roper@oregonstate.edu or call him at 541 737 2636.
Appendix D: Personal Disclosure

Personal Disclosure

Being a researcher for me means having a curiosity about the social world and how it works, particularly how systems of power and privilege are maintained, and adding to the knowledge that helps to change those systems. I’m interested in contributing to knowledge that has the potential to improve women's lives and so I identify with the social critical and feminist research approaches I have described. My academic background is in sociology and I see the world in terms of social relations not just individuals. I have a commitment to the self knowledge of where I stand in these interconnections and relationships, how I participate in privilege as well as experience oppression, and how I can be in alliance with others to change that reality and ourselves. This set of interests and philosophical lenses has framed my research interests and topic.

I have spent many years developing educational programs for women in a community college. This extensive background gives me an understanding of what works and what doesn’t in terms of education that is focused for women. However, some care was needed in the research process to ensure that my own professional experiences, perspectives, and values do not preclude other knowledge. In other words I needed to be open to information that contradicts these experiences and values.

Both my professional background and my personal experience provide me connections and empathy with the women I researched. I grew up working class
though I now have the income and social privileges of someone in the professional classes. As a younger adult, I was a single mother and spent several years of my daughter’s childhood coping with varying degrees of poverty. I have strong views on the value of education, the possibilities that education offers not just for changing people’s economic status, but their whole view of themselves and their place in the world. I see community colleges as social justice institutions that offer hope to people who have been excluded from avenues of change for their lives.

In the research process my mix of lenses and background means that I could identify with the women I interviewed. Collins (1990) points to the necessity for researchers to develop empathy with those they are researching in order to provide grounds for sharing deep experiences. My own background and experiences provide this empathy. However, this is both an advantage and a challenge. I have known what it’s like to juggle work, school, and kids with little or no money. I understand some of the coping strategies, underground or informal economies, and networks of relationships that women create to support their families. However, I am also conscious that I don’t live in that world anymore; I now go home to a different place. My current position is that of relative advantage. The sharing between an interviewer and interviewee may temporarily break down differences and power differentials but that sharing is temporary and limited (Naples, 2003). It does not remove those differences. I needed to listen to the variety of women’s experience and recognize that though there may be connections, their experience differs from mine. I have tried
to honor that experience in any analysis and be aware of and reflexively surface the power relations that exist.
Appendix E: Glossary of terms

**AFS:** Adult and Family Services, an older term for the state agency that oversaw welfare benefits. Still used by long time workers and clients.

**Case managers versus caseworkers:** both terms refer to DHS (see below) employees who monitor eligibility for benefits, track progress, provide support and enforce program rules for a caseload of welfare clients. Current agency staff use the more recent term “case manager”, the clients I interviewed use “caseworker” or just “my worker”. I have used “case manager” when discussing interviews with staff and “caseworker” when discussing the student interviews.

**DHS:** Department of Human Services, current term for the state agency that oversees benefits and services for low-income families. The agency is organized into districts, different geographic areas with individual responsibility for implementing programs and serving clients. The overall coordination of programs and policy is provided by the Central Office in Salem.

**JOBS:** the program of workshops, trainings, work searches and work activities that are required of everyone who receives cash benefits from DHS. JOBS is designed to mimic the hours and requirements of a full time job and is not compatible with education.

**PAS:** Parents as Scholars, the Oregon pilot program that allows TANF eligible student parents attending accredited colleges to count their education as a work requirement (see JOBS).
**TANF**: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, formerly known as welfare, provides limited cash assistance to eligible low-income families. Families must meet prescribed conditions and activities to receive TANF.