AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF


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Larry D. Roper

This qualitative study explores the experiences of women who are welfare recipients attending a community college under the auspices of a new program, Washington State's WorkFirst/Work Study program. The study, conducted over two academic quarters, includes in-depth interviews with WorkFirst/Work Study students, observations in a weekly seminar, and interviews with community college staff who work in the program.

The overarching research question is: "What are the challenges and the transition issues confronted by women who are living in poverty and participating in a community college program?" The research elicits responses about the women’s expectations and fears about education, their aspirations for themselves and their children, what they hope to gain from the college experience and what barriers may interfere. The study identifies five contextual issues in the women’s lives: family background and history, relationships, physical and psychological health, housing, and finances. And the study explores the participants’ experience with and attitudes toward four thematic areas: parenting, welfare, work and school. A major goal was to give voice to these women.
Underlying assumptions are that community college administrators and faculty want to improve access, success and satisfaction with the college for poor women; that learning about how poor women experience the community college gives college personnel valuable information; that Washington community colleges have an interest in working with WorkFirst; and that better understanding of WorkFirst/Work Study participants' experiences is valuable to the colleges and benefits low-income students.

The women interviewed are highly motivated and believe that an education is key to a better life for them and their children. Some of the barriers they face are embedded in the restrictions and requirements of the WorkFirst program. Nevertheless, these women say they are better off on welfare, working and going to school than they were when they were among the working poor. The study questions the value of some vocational education and suggests that more low-income women could be recruited to community college earlier in their lives.
Coming to Community College Via Welfare Reform: An Exploration of Expectations and Experience of Women in Washington's WorkFirst Program

by

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A THESIS submitted to Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

Completed February 16, 2001 Commencement June 2001
Doctor of Education thesis of Susan Kostick presented on February 16, 2001

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Susan Kostick, Author
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study would not have been possible without the support of many people. The author is grateful to Oregon State University for having a doctoral program that is accessible to people working in community colleges in the northwest and for having exceptional distance library services. The author was privileged to learn with and from the students in Cohort 6 of the Community College Leadership Program and the faculty. I am especially indebted to Dr. Larry Roper for his guidance and his encouragement on this study.

Much thanks goes to Jan Strand and Peggy Huetten for sharing their professional insights about the WorkFirst/Work Study program and about their students and to Dr. Ruth Saks for her help with the data analysis. And to the students who shared their stories, thank you for giving me your time and your trust. Thank you for talking to me and for teaching me so much.

A lifetime of thanks to my parents Sam and Marilyn Kostick, both of whom read the whole manuscript. And to Bob and Megan and Juliann, thanks for listening and more.
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PREFACE

This research topic evolved from my concern with social justice and access to higher education and a lengthy professional involvement in communications issues at public higher education institutions. The study topic gelled, however, from a convergence of current events that changed welfare and my exposure to a woman whose personal story fascinated and impressed me.

I first heard Donna Beegle at a National Council for Resource Development (NCRD) meeting in Portland, OR, in 1995. NCRD (now known as CRD) is the professional organization for fund raisers at two-year colleges, and the meeting was for professionals and volunteer board members. Beegle spoke about how she had made the transition from being a migrant farm worker, high-school dropout and single mother living in poverty to being president of a communications consulting firm and a doctoral student at Portland State University. She talked about the role her experience at Mt. Hood Community College had played. Like many of the women enrolled at community colleges, Beegle’s initial involvement at Mt. Hood was through a publicly funded program for displaced women that was conducted on the college campus. Her description of the communications—personal and phone conversations, print materials and events—that had been helpful or meaningful to her, and those that had not, were an early stimulus to the focus of this project. I have had the chance to hear Beegle talk about her understanding of some of the communications issues between higher education and the poor. As an example, she said, words like "work" and "job" may be more negative than promising for people whose only experience with work has been back-breaking labor that keeps them from their children and does little to improve their lives.
Since then, I have thought often about Beegle’s story and her ideas as I have addressed a variety of issues and questions in my work. Her comments convinced me that many of the assumptions made by people like me, who are professional communicators working on behalf of community colleges, may hamper our efforts to communicate with women living in poverty, an important segment of our prospective and current student community.

I began my work on this project by interviewing Donna Beegle in the summer of 1999 to confirm and clarify my recollection of a number of things she had said. She also kindly shared a draft of her doctoral dissertation, “Interrupting generational poverty: Experiences affecting successful completion of a bachelor’s degree” (Beegle, 1999). In the summer of 2000, Donna Beegle became Donna Beegle, Ed.D.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Focus of the Study

This study focuses on women in a new welfare reform program that provides assistance to women on welfare who want to participate in education at a community college. The study explores the variety of factors that influence whether or not poor women come to the community college and what contributes to their feeling comfortable or fearful, hopeful or hopeless, concentrating on the participants' own descriptions of their expectations and experiences. By better understanding these women's experience with and expectations from schools and colleges and their perceptions about what higher education offers, it may be possible to enhance and increase service to people who could benefit from the education community colleges offer. The study may help increase the numbers of people who take advantage of the open access policies and decrease the numbers of women living in poverty.

Other studies, including Beegle's (1999) most recent research, tend to focus on bachelor's degree completion, and some focus on people from poverty backgrounds who have made extraordinary accomplishments (LePage-Lees, 1997). Rather than focusing on students who have succeeded, this study seeks to learn from current students—and, indeed, from students who have had significant economic struggles and followed non-traditional routes to the college—what
coming to community college means to them and how well the college is meeting their needs, responding to their questions and communicating the idea that an education can offer them attainable advantages. Because these women are current students, how long they persist, how far they proceed with their education and any eventual employment outcomes are unknown. Because they are currently in a program for welfare recipients, their choices of courses of study and the length of time they can attend college are limited by state and federal regulations.

The purpose of the study is to identify and explore factors that improve the odds of students in a welfare-to-work program participating and succeeding in the community college program in which they are enrolled. The research looks at the relationship that low income, women students have with the community college, including their expectations and fears about education, their aspirations for themselves, what they hope to gain from the college experience and what barriers may interfere at any point in the process. Some questions at the core of the researcher’s in-depth interviews embrace both the students’ perceptions and experiences: "How do you feel about the college experience you are having?" and "How do you hope attending college will help you?" Overall, the research question is: "What are the challenges and the transition issues confronted by women who are living in poverty and participating in a community college program?"

Significance of the Study

Community colleges have many examples of students who started in poverty and achieved academic and professional success thanks to a community college education. More important than the extraordinary achievements of some individuals is the hope that community colleges are helping large numbers of people out of poverty and into self-sufficiency. This study contributes to the
current body of knowledge regarding poor women’s access to higher education and the community colleges’ role in reducing poverty and helping people become self sufficient. A better understanding of the challenges and issues these students face can help colleges better serve low-income students and increase retention rates.

For some time, community colleges’ open door admissions policies and relatively low cost were considered sufficient incentives to give opportunities for a college education to the poor. A series of government funded programs targeted at bringing the poor to college began in the 1960s and some programs, like Upward Bound, persist. Recently, new welfare-to-work programs have incorporated some education and training components, and community colleges play a significant part in some of these programs. In Washington state, the welfare reform program is called WorkFirst, and the state’s community and technical colleges are key players in providing educational opportunities that fit the program’s time constraints and work requirements. It is hoped that information from this study will help community college leaders, faculty and staff understand how to better communicate with and reach a targeted segment of the population and better fulfill the challenging mission of improving the socio-economic status of the poor through education.

Levine and Nidiffer (1996) write:

...the odds of a poor student attending a community college are considerably higher than the odds of the same student enrolling in an Ivy League university or other highly selective college. This is hardly news. However, what is of great concern is that the odds are even higher that a poor person, even one who graduates from high school, will not attend college at all. And in recent years the odds against the poor have grown increasingly larger (p. 53).

Adding to the urgency of the situation for the poor in America is the current political pressure to move people off welfare. Recent efforts to reduce the
number of welfare recipients have focused on time limits for receiving benefits and on putting work before education and training. Across the nation, since Congress enacted the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, opportunities for pursuing either traditional higher education or vocational training have been reduced for the poor across the nation (Cohen, 1998b). Karier (1998) writes: “Only a small percentage of welfare recipients were ever qualified to pursue postsecondary degrees, but the new focus of welfare reform makes it less likely that even these few individuals will be able to earn college degrees in the future.” (p. 1)

Mothers in poverty have long faced nearly paralyzing obstacles to changing their socio-economic status and providing for their children (Berrick, 1995; Freedman, 1993; Petersen, 1997; Stein, 1988; Weiner, 1986). Freedman writes: “The poorest of poor Americans are single parents with children. If you are a poor single mother, you are the lowest of the low in the new American caste system” (p. 80). The existence of social programs providing financial support and community colleges that offer open access to education, including high school completion and job training, have done little to change the gap between rich and poor in this country. Indeed, recent data from the congressional Budget Office shows that this “gap” has turned into a “chasm” (Johnston, 1999). Community colleges were founded with the mission of equalizing educational and employment opportunity. However they may be criticized for having failed to advance people to the highest levels of education, the colleges have definitely taken a leadership position in trying to continue to offer access to education in ways that will work in the current political environment and under the current restrictions placed on welfare recipients (Grubb et al., 1999; Jones, 1999). The challenges are currently greater than ever. TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, formerly AFDC) rules now
require women to enter the work force three months after the birth of a baby. In
Washington, WorkFirst recipients are required to work 20 hours a week to qualify
for education benefits. Infant child care is expensive and scarce, and jobs for
people with no higher education are scarce and low paying. The more educators
understand about the barriers to education from the point of view of the poor, the
better job they can do in helping capable people find their way to the community
colleges sooner and helping them find their way within the college programs. If
community colleges are successful in fulfilling their commitment to and mission of
providing access to education to all who can benefit from it, this will be the best
outcome for the whole society.

Levine and Nidiffer (1996) call their research approach “pragmatic,”
acknowledging that it “ignores root causes and accepts poverty as a continuing
reality” (p. 58). The pragmatic approach, they say, has three strengths: a relatively
narrow focus on the situation under study, potential for ready implementation,
and acceptance of the current atmosphere of dismantling social programs for the
poor.

This study, too, is pragmatic. The students in the study are people facing
both opportunities and restrictions in their pursuit of education. The rules have
been made by the federal and state governments, not by educators, and this study
accepts these limitations as this society’s practical reality and the context within
which the community colleges must operate to serve these students. With better
information about persistent barriers to poor women’s success, community
colleges may significantly help to reduce poverty beyond merely participating in a
program to reduce the number of welfare cases.

The study is based on several underlying assumptions: that student access,
success and satisfaction with the college is of concern to community college ad-
ministrators and faculty, and that poor women are a significant and valued subset of students; that learning more about how the community college experience is perceived by poor women will give college personnel valuable information about how to improve that experience and better communicate with these students; that Washington community colleges have an interest in working with WorkFirst, the state's welfare reform program; and that better understanding of WorkFirst participants' experiences will be of value to the colleges and will benefit the WorkFirst students.

It is a goal of this study to be educational research that is both reflective and active. This researcher is married to a supportive husband of 15 years. She also has a personal history as a single parent of two children for 10 years. She brings a pro-college bias to her work, having spent 25 years working in public colleges and universities. Further, her own family lore begins with grandparents who were immigrants with no education, but who so believed in the power of education that they intentionally moved to a university town so their children could attend college. This researcher also approaches the subject of education and economic disadvantage with a bias toward social responsibility. Raised to believe that the graduated income tax was one of the things that made America great, the researcher also believes we can do far better by more equitably sharing wealth, opportunity, and knowledge. As William Ponder writes, "[Education] has been a beacon of light for the dispossessed—the last stop for those who have lost all hope of finding that pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. However, the real worth of our system of education is that it can change" (p.46).
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED RESEARCH AND LITERATURE

Community Colleges as an Open Door to Higher Education

Two-year colleges in the United States were originally created as "junior colleges" intended to provide the first two years of college before students moved on to "senior colleges." In the period following the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 that created the land grant colleges, vocational education became a significant part of the public college mission, and the Truman Commission Report of 1947 cemented the idea of the importance to the democracy of providing broad access to two years of education after secondary school (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Cohen & Brawer, 1982).

Birenbaum (1986) suggests that the modern community colleges were created with support from two opposing schools of thought. One, an elitist point of view, saw the two-year college as a means to keep the universities "pure." The other viewed these new colleges as the route to the American dream for the common person. This dichotomy of opinion about the actual effect of the colleges continues today, as does a debate over whether an "open door" to higher education ought to admit students who are not prepared for college level work (Lavin & Hyllegard, 1996; Roueche & Roueche, 1999). But for the most part, there's agreement that community colleges were meant to democratize higher education. According to Ratcliff (1994), "From as far back as 1914, the community college commitment to open admissions and access to higher education has been of paramount importance" (p. 13).
In her essay, "Education in a democratic society," Gittell (1991a) argues that equality and quality are compatible and complimentary and that efforts to expand educational opportunity have led to innovations and improvements in education. She writes:

Public education policy in the United States reflects society's struggle to balance the values of individualism and equality. The translation of these values into educational goals has led, some analysts suggest, to a conflict in the society's effort to achieve educational excellence and its commitment to pursue equality through universal education. Equality, they posit, requires everyone in the society to have equal access to equal education regardless of their background, thus lowering the quality of education. In fact, one can make a strong case for the opposite conclusion that improved quality has resulted from the struggle for equality (p. 31).

Today's community colleges are enrolling almost half of all undergraduate and more than half of the entering college students in America. They enroll about half of the students of color in higher education and a greater proportion of students from low income families than four-year colleges. Community colleges appear to be fulfilling their role of democratizing higher education. As Callan (1997) says, "Universally perceived as the first way station on the road to social mobility, they (community colleges) are at the leading edge of educational opportunity." (p. 95)

Criticisms of Community Colleges

Adams and Jaffe (1971) suggest that open enrollment will never "reconcile essentially irreconcilable aspects of American aspiration—the demand for elite status for all persons" (p. 60), but critics (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Dougherty, 1991, 1992; Karabel, 1986; Monk-Turner, 1995; Pincus, 1980) say we are far from achieving that degree of equity. Rather, they say, by focusing on job-related outcomes, community colleges route their students into the lower echelons of work and, by
de facto tracking of these students into vocational programs, the colleges keep their students from attaining higher levels of education and the professional level careers that follow.

Furthermore, numerous studies have documented that students who begin at a community college with the intention of transferring and completing a bachelor’s degree are less likely to complete the BA than students who start at four-year institutions (Lin & Vogt, 1996; Monk-Turner, 1995). Several studies that look at students’ success in completing a bachelor’s degree and/or attaining employment use data from national longitudinal studies. Monk-Turner used data on all people who entered a community or four-year college between 1966 and 1978 and who had full data on educational status and IQ in the National Longitudinal Survey of Labor Market Experiences database to study factors that differentiated students who entered community colleges with the intention of attaining a bachelor’s degree from students who entered four-year colleges. She also compared bachelor’s degree completion of the two groups and found a negative correlation of BA attainment with a community college background. These conclusions are confirmed in Pascarella and Terenzini’s (1991) exhaustive review of studies on how college affects students. They find a negative effect for students who attend two-year institutions, as compared to four-year colleges, in bachelor’s degree completion, occupational status, and earnings, with the strongest evidence for the bachelor’s degree disadvantage (p. 591). They summarize: “Although where one enters college makes little difference once the baccalaureate degree is earned, the fact remains that students at two-year colleges are substantially less likely than their peers at four-year colleges to complete a bachelor’s degree program and to reap the associated benefits.” (p. 641).
Baker and Vélez (1996) also reviewed a range of research on access to and opportunity in postsecondary education and concurred that beginning at a community college lessens a student’s chances of attaining a bachelor’s degree, but they add that socio-economic status (SES) is the greatest differentiating factor in bachelor’s degree attainment (p. 91).

Hilsabeck (1998) looks at bachelor’s degree completion statistics ten years after high school, using data from the sophomore cohort of the National Center for Education Statistics’ High School and Beyond Study. She gives a thoughtful analysis of three paradigms of the American educational system: the consumer choice model, the meritocratic model, and the social stratification model. Each of these has at one time or another been used to blame or justify the documented result that students who begin at community colleges are less likely than other college students to attain the bachelor’s degree.

In Carter’s (1999) study of educational expectations, she finds that attending a two-year college limits students’ degree aspirations and expectations, with low-income white students most affected. She also notes that college choice is constrained by a student’s social circumstances, pointing out that fewer than 25 percent of the students in her study had applied to more than one institution (p. 37). Grunde’s (1976) report focuses on why students select certain colleges. Although it is working from an assumption that the colleges have selective admissions, according to his model, community colleges can expect to continue to be the choice of students with limited financial means, questionable academic records, and non-traditional educational backgrounds.

Since community colleges serve a higher proportion of people of color and low income students than other kinds of colleges and universities, social critics say the “institutional effect” of disadvantage serves to maintain inequity. Dougherty
(1991) points out that the "negative institutional effect is particularly distressing since the community college has become the main gateway into higher education for minority and working class students... in the past fifteen years community colleges have played a major role in the declining proportion of Blacks receiving baccalaureates." (1991, p. 312).

The issue of bachelor's degree attainment is especially important to these populations. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) write, "Social mobility, as defined by changes in occupational status and income, is inextricably linked to postsecondary education in modern American society" (p. 369).

In Pascarella's (1999) review of recent studies, he concludes that for some students, community colleges may actually help students get a bachelor's degree, if they are students who would not otherwise have had the opportunity because of the selective admissions policies of four-year colleges, "particularly for those students from low income backgrounds who did not perform particularly well in high school; and there is ample evidence to indicate that community college degrees or credentials in and of themselves provide substantial economic advantages over a high school degree" (p. 13).

Economic Impact of a College Education

Brown and Heaney (1997) conclude that colleges would be well advised to tout education's intangible returns on investment, such as the social good of an educated citizenry. Indeed, in his essay on the effects of liberal arts colleges, Astin (1999) identifies three types of "outcomes" resulting from a college education. They are educational, existential, and fringe benefits, which, he says, "have to do with the practical value of the degree itself," including further educational, social,
and career advantages (p. 80). But for this review, it is the "fringe benefits," the economic gains, that are of most interest.

Writing on their study of the economic returns of various levels of education for men, Adams and Jaffe (1971) predict that college degrees may not continue to "pay off as handsomely as in the past" (p. 9) because the increase in open enrollment colleges, including community colleges, might lead to more degree-holding people than jobs for the college educated. Nevertheless, there seems to have been a steady increase in the economic value of a college education to date. Henderson and Ottinger (1985) report on lifetime earnings and steady employment, with four-year college graduates outperforming high school graduates on both measures (and men outperforming women in every category). A recent report in *Higher Education and National Affairs* showed earnings of college graduates have increased by 8 percent "in real terms" over the past 20 years, while wages for high school graduates without a college education have declined. Average earnings of workers with a high school diploma fell from $24,241 in 1977 to $23,250 in 1997, when earnings were adjusted for inflation. Average earnings of those with a bachelor's degree rose from $38,210 in 1977 to $41,106 in 1997 (American Council on Education, 1999). Sanchez et al. (1999) focused their study on California community college graduates for three years after graduation, and they concluded that there is a positive relationship between community college education and earnings, especially for students who have completed a vocational certificate or an associate's degree.

Kane and Rouse (1995) used statistical analyses of data gathered in two longitudinal studies: the National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972 (NLS-72) and the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY). These authors believe community colleges may be having a greater effect on economic
outcomes for students than other researchers are recognizing. Furthermore, they suggest that the debate over the value of community college education and especially the point of view of the critics is “based upon the concentration of low-income students in community colleges and the high student attrition rates, rather than any direct evidence of the economic value of such an education” (p. 600). These researchers focus on the value of community college credits as compared to credits from four-year colleges and conclude that they are equally valuable in terms of the students' earning power. In a footnote, the authors acknowledge a 1993 study by Norton Grubb that concludes that community college attendance short of an associate’s degree is worthless, leaving the student with the same earning power as a high school graduate. Kane and Rouse say there were “computational errors that yielded incorrect data” (p. 600). An important feature of this study is that it may give the community colleges information about a lot of their students, since many community college students do not complete a degree and many of those never intended to. Because of that, degree attainment may not be a fair way to measure the success of the two-year institutions. This study supports the idea that even without high graduation levels, the colleges may offer something of measurable worth, and students may be succeeding even without graduating.

Lin and Vogt (1996) and Hilsabeck (1998) also use the national longitudinal studies’ data. Lin and Vogt focused on individuals' earnings and occupational status about 15 years after high school and the gap in earnings and status between groups—especially whites versus blacks, men versus women, and between those of different socioeconomic status (SES). The results show that going to a two-year college in the 1970s improved individual occupational outcomes and that this finding applied in general to almost all groups. And while two-year college com-
pletion enhanced individuals' employment outcomes compared to those who stopped their education after high school, whites were still doing better than blacks and people of high SES were doing better than people of low SES.

Freeman and Katz (1994) conclude that the "wage gap" is growing for people with different levels of education, saying "real earnings" for male workers with no college fell 20 percent from 1979 to 1989. For women, the necessity for postsecondary education may be even more critical, since women earn less than equally-educated men at every educational level. According to Department of Education statistics, the average woman college graduate earns about as much over the course of her lifetime as a male high school dropout (Dunkle, 1988).

Arrow (1973) proposes a model in which higher education makes no contribution to "superior economic performance." Instead, he says, it sorts out individuals of differing abilities" (p. 194). Having said that, Arrow makes a side comment that he thinks professional schools and science courses do impart skills that are valued in the marketplace. He might, by extension, acknowledge the contribution of vocational courses to earning power.

In a qualitative study, Pincus (1980) reviewed data from 12 follow-up surveys from 1969-77 of former vocational students. He found that vocational graduates had higher unemployment rates than either college graduates or people who had one to three years of college. Furthermore, he writes, "Getting a job in a field related to one's training does not guarantee an adequate income if the field itself includes only low-paying jobs" (p. 352).

Poverty as a Barrier to Higher Education

The Wisconsin status attainment model of the early 1970s (described in Campbell, 1983) poses questions about the impact of family background and edu-
cation, academic ability, and aspirations and motivation on subsequent attainments, but the model has been inconsistent in its results for women and for different minority groups and social classes. For example, in a 1994 study, Duncan (cited in Epps, 1995) found that for African-American females, being from a female-headed family was positively associated with completed schooling, but having a mother who was employed was negatively associated with educational attainment for African American males and females. Baker and Vélez (1996) identified SES as the biggest factor in whether or not students completed a bachelor's degree, and, as already discussed, degree attainment, including vocational certification, is still highly correlated with people earning more and maintaining a higher rate of employment than people with a high school education—or less. In study after study, SES is a critical factor of persistent stratification in entry to higher education, level of education attained, and income. Hearn's study (1991) focused on the relationship between 1980 high school graduates' personal characteristics, including SES, and the kind of post secondary institutions they attended. Students from lower-income families were likely to attend less selective institutions, including community colleges, regardless of their ability, achievement, or aspirations.

Hanson (1994) studied “lost talent,” the failure of students to reach their potential, with attention to gender, class, and race. She found that, of the three status variables examined, class had the greatest effect on lost talent. Lower SES youths were more than twice as likely as were upper SES youths “to have educational expectations that fell short of their education aspirations” (p. 180). She concluded, “Regardless of talent or positive attitudes, these lower SES youths were more likely than were upper SES youths to be selected out of the achievement process at both earlier and later periods” (p. 181). Campbell (1983) raises this
important question: "In a society which values meritocratic selection, why are parents so easily able to pass on status to their children? . . . why do other social institutions fail in their effort to redress the balance?" (p. 59).

Levine and Nidiffer (1996) try to determine what makes it possible for some poor people to succeed in going to and completing college, and they explore what might work to turn around the daunting odds against poor people's attendance at college, even those who have graduated from high school. The authors conducted in-depth interviews with 24 poor, first-generation students, 12 attending a community college and 12 attending a highly selective university. Key to each successful student, they found, was a mentor in the form of a memorable, special person who had provided the impetus and support for pursuing college against the long odds faced by economically disadvantaged students.

Ruthie Mae Bluford was a child whose mother received Mother's Aid in 1934-39. She went to college and eventually to graduate school. She was a long-time social worker and, later, a faculty member. In her memoir, she wrote "As a welfare worker, I encouraged young and old to continue their education to the extent to which they desired. I knew that there was a time when I had been encouraged to do so" (Anderson, 1985, p. 4).

For low-income women who are parents, other barriers to education include the dependence they may have on a network of people who exchange resources to help each other meet their varied obligations. Nettles (1991) points out that participating in the network may be incompatible with success in college: "The student is not to skip class to fulfill obligations (such as child care or taking someone to a doctor's appointment) . . ." (p. 161). Kates (1991b) adds that these women's expenses, as well as their network activities, were outside what was expected for traditional college students and are not included in the budget recog-
nized by financial aid. Such expenditures include children's school trips and
sports equipment, car repairs, and bills related to former spouses. Other authors
(Dunkle, 1988; Gunderson, 1988; Wolanin, 1988), too, identify the bias of federal
student aid programs toward traditional, full-time students and the contradictions
between federal student aid regulations and welfare regulations as creating often
insurmountable barriers to poor women who are parents attending college.
Wolanin writes,

The group which could most benefit from educational and training
opportunities, but which finds itself deprived of them by the con-
licts in Federal policy, is single women who are heads of household
and have dependent children. . . . It is important to note that we are
not talking just about educational opportunities being denied to a
select few who have the talent to succeed at elite and selective col-
leges and universities. What we are seeing is much larger numbers
deprived of the education and training to enable them to obtain
entry-level job skills and, thus, a foot on the bottom rung of the
economic ladder (p. 78).

Poverty Programs and Community Colleges

Donna Beegle came to Mt. Hood Community College to participate in a
special program for displaced homemakers. In her case, she was a young,
divorced, sometimes homeless, mother of two young children who was receiving
welfare. She was critically concerned about housing, and she was told that if she
completed the program she would be eligible for Section VIII subsidized housing
(personal communication, 1999).

Community colleges have long been involved in work with a variety of
publicly funded programs directed at helping people move out of poverty and a
number of relevant theses address the outcomes of these programs. Reeves (1998)
interviewed graduates of a displaced homemakers program like the one Beegle
participated in. Ross (1992) interviewed women on AFDC who were current two-
and four-year college students, and McAllister (1997) interviewed women who
had been students on AFDC in the 1970s twenty years later. Berryman (1996) looked at the gains and satisfaction of participants in a JOBS (Job Opportunities and Basic Skills) program and Poppe’s work (1995) includes an extensive review of literature and a study of JOBS program plans for a post-employment services component. Washington’s WorkFirst/Work Study program is post-employment. Petersen (1997) examined a welfare to work vocational training program at a community college and reviewed the various anti-poverty strategies employed by the United States since the early 1800s. None, she says, have addressed the current trend of more women and children in poverty (p. 96).

Gittell (1991b) says there is a lack of support for higher education as a strategy for helping women on welfare achieve economic independence—something she says policymakers, the public at large and welfare recipients all would prefer. “What is lacking is agreement that education is a reasonable alternative to immediate employment because it offers greater opportunity for economic independence in the future. Policymakers and the public assume that any job is better than welfare; AFDC women know that is not the case” (p. 177). The women she interviewed recognized that they needed better, more employable skills.

McCabe (1999) writes, “Community colleges are the key to avoiding a national crisis by moving underprepared and dependent individuals into productive self-sufficiency” (p. 23). That, he says, is the most important role the colleges can play.

Levin and Kelley (1994) point out that public policy has placed high expectations on education, but that education’s effects are overstated in research that doesn’t consider other conditions:
Education can work to improve productivity only if there are employment opportunities for more productive workers. The same is true for reducing criminal behavior and welfare dependency. Only if education translates into opportunities which can reduce the need for welfare dependency or the incentives for criminal activity, can education be effective in diminishing these outcomes (p. 97).

Welfare Reform Since 1996 and Washington’s WorkFirst Program

On August 22, 1996, President Clinton signed into law the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). The act put in place work requirements and time limits on welfare recipients. It abolished AFDC and replaced it with a new state block grant program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). States had one year to design their own welfare program with federal guidelines.

On April 17, 1997, Governor Gary Locke signed into law House Bill 3901 approving Washington’s TANF program which took effect August 1, 1997. Washington was the last state in the union to implement a TANF plan. The program is called WorkFirst. The WorkFirst program represents a major policy change with its focus on up-front employment versus training (Washington State Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee, 1998).

Community colleges in every state are working to continue their service to the poor, while having to adjust educational requirements. In their review of community college involvement with welfare-to-work programs, Katsinas et al. (1999) write that the “labor market attachment model” of TANF replaced the “human resource investment model” that emphasized basic skill building and longer-term education and training programs as a strategy for helping the unemployed become self-sufficient. PRWORA leaves it to each state to determine which institutions, if any, will provide education and training to welfare recipients. Grubb et al. (1999) review the roles community colleges will play under the variety
of TANF programs. In Massachusetts, Missouri, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Michigan there are no roles for community colleges. Those states’ programs do not allow training for welfare recipients. But in Washington, it is clear that the state’s 36 community and technical colleges are important players, “developing a new generation of training for WorkFirst participants—shorter courses, offered during non-work hours and geared toward specific fields with high demand for workers” (Washington WorkFirst, 1998). Washington’s community and technical colleges have been scurrying to provide those courses and the services, including child care, that are needed. There have been some special challenges associated with the state’s requirement that WorkFirst recipients must be working 20 hours a week in order to receive benefits, including the educational opportunities. In rural areas, seasonal workers need to work as many hours as they can when there is work available, but current policy does not allow them educational benefits in the off season when they are out of work (Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, 1999).

A slight variation in the work requirement was the addition of the WorkFirst/Work Study program that allows TANF recipients who are enrolled at least half time at a community or technical college and are recipients of federal or state Work Study funds to work a minimum of 16 hours a week and still qualify for full benefits, including child care services for work and school hours. This change does not address seasonal variations in work hours.

- 8/22/96 Federal PRWORA replaces AFDC with TANF
- 4/17/97 Washington WorkFirst TANF Act enacted
- 8/1/97 WorkFirst implementation begins
- 11/1/97 Participation in work activities becomes mandatory for all non-exempt WorkFirst clients
- 6/30/98 Last day for former JOBS clients to continue in vocational/educational programs, unless also working
- 8/1/98 Employment Security Department begins referring clients to community colleges for services of up to 12 weeks, if the client is not yet employed, or up to two years if employed
- 3/22/99 WorkFirst/Work Study program announced
- 4/15/99 WorkFirst/Work Study program effective for clients who are recipients of the federal or state Work Study program
- 6/30/99 Exemption for single parents with infants decreased from 12 months to 3 months (with a 12 month lifetime limit)
- 1/1/00 Allocation of special WorkFirst/Work Study funds exclusively for TANF recipients

Washington’s WorkFirst clients are required to develop an Individual Responsibility Plan (IRP). Work Study can be incorporated into the IRP, which is monitored by the student’s case worker. There are progressive sanctions for failure to comply with an IRP.

A significant concern about the zealous push to reduce the number of people on welfare is that these efforts may not be reducing poverty. Many commentators contend that jobs that will give people real self-sufficiency require longer-term education (Foster, 1999a; Foster, 1999b; Grubb et al., 1999; Manzo, 1997), and both national and local news media are reporting declining welfare
rolls side by side with reports of increased hunger and growing demands on food banks (DeParle, 1999; Gavin, 1999; Gonsalves, 1999).

McCabe (1999) writes, “Poverty and the persistent underclass seem impervious to every attempt for improvement” (p. 22).

Special Concerns Regarding Women

There are several reasons for paying particular attention to women’s issues in this study. When we talk about people in poverty, increasingly we are talking about women. In her very extensive report on low income women and higher education, Kates (1991a) discusses the increasing number of female-headed households living in poverty. Sacks (1988) objects to the phrase “feminization of poverty” because “it obscures a long history of women’s poverty, both their hidden poverty—when they are dependent on men who do not earn adequate wages, or who do not share what they earn . . .” (p. 20). Nevertheless, there is wide agreement that the increase in female headed households coincides with an increase in the number of poor women and children. By 1980, nearly half of the nation’s families in poverty were headed by women (McLaughlin et al., 1988) and today in Washington 90 percent of the households on welfare are headed by women (Washington State Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee, 2000).

There is no question that welfare reform is largely about women, and since these women are also the primary care takers of young children, their education and their employment situations will affect their children. In her overview of a 1985 conference, Ackelsberg (1988) says it is a “commonplace” that the rising number of female-headed households in the United States living in poverty “poses a serious threat to the democratic promise of equality and opportunity for all” (p. 1).
Women living in poverty have had to overcome particular barriers to come to college and they are perceived to have special needs (Bakken, 1981; Maddox, 1998; Matthews, 1997; Weiner, 1986). Child care concerns are the greatest source of stress for adult women students (Johnson et al., 2000) and, for low income women, child care is their single most costly expense (Rosen, 1988). These single parents are often dealing with significant issues of safety for themselves and their children, as well. Research on a state and national level has shown “a large and consistently high percentage of women on welfare are victims of this (domestic violence) abuse” (Washington State Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee, 1998, p. 87).

Summary

Any research on community colleges probably needs to be informed by an ongoing debate over a central dichotomy: whether community colleges give students chances they wouldn’t otherwise have or limit students by essentially routing them to mid-level accomplishments.

Currently, community colleges are engaged in challenging efforts to raise people out of poverty. With traditional welfare and other social service programs being dismantled, community colleges are being asked increasingly to provide direct short-term workplace education. On the one hand, these directives may exacerbate social stratification, with community colleges serving to route people off of welfare and into whatever kinds of jobs can be acquired with 12 weeks of training. On the other hand, whatever their strictures, community colleges will continue to be the only education option for an increasing number of adult students, particularly poor women with children. By including community and technical colleges in the plan, Washington has given them an acknowledged role.
in welfare reform and a significant (and challenging) opportunity to improve the future for families in poverty.

Of her study involving interviews with 12 college students who were welfare recipients Kates (1991b) writes,

Access to higher education is a critical policy issue for AFDC recipients and other low-income women with dependent children; further, this issue has significance for a much larger proportion of women living in poverty than is currently recognized. In order to be effective, policies to improve access to higher education must be informed by the experiences of low-income women in higher education (p. 182).
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The Approach to the Study

Employing a multi-case (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 62) or collective case (Merriam, 1998, p. 40) study approach, the researcher explored the question: What is the experience of women coming to community college as part of a particular welfare reform program? The exploration extended to the women’s reports of what incidents, relationships, or services were barriers and which were helpful to their achieving their educational and employment goals, with the overarching concern of what role the community college plays in helping people out of poverty.

A major goal of this study was to give voice to these women. Because the researcher is interested in gaining knowledge about the participants’ point of view, the topics the subjects considered important as well as their description and interpretation of their experiences, in and outside of the community college, were accepted as the accurate definition of the experiences. As Seidman (1991) says, “At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience. . . . At the heart of interviewing research is an interest in other individuals’ stories because they are of worth” (p. 3).

Through interviews, as well as seminar observations, the researcher devoted time to get what Spindler and Hammond (2000) calls the “emic knowledge of the informant(s).” This is what Metz (2000) calls “insider perspectives,” that is, perspective gained by listening “for the interpretations that
members of the group give for their own actions, the actions of other members of the group, and the actions, real and imagined, of outsiders" (p. 62).

A goal of the study was to learn about how low-income women perceive and experience a community college, how they interpret the interactions they have with college personnel and procedures, and how they understand what the college has to offer and how accessible it is to them. Because most of the women who participated in the study were participating in Washington’s new WorkFirst/Work Study program, a program that links the community colleges and welfare, the study included the women’s thoughts about their experiences with welfare. Also during the interviews, additional new questions and issues arose, as they did in the data analysis processes.

The study meets Cobb and Hagemaster’s (1987) eight-part definition of qualitative research, which they say is drawn from several disciplines:

1. Qualitative research is a type of investigation in which: 1. there is attention to the social context in which events occur and have meaning; 2. there is an emphasis on understanding the social world from the point of view of the participants in it; 3. the approach is primarily inductive; 4. major data collection techniques include interviewing. . .; 5. procedures and tools for data gathering are subject to ongoing revision in the field situation; 6. the concern is primarily with discovery and description, although verification is also possible; 7. hypotheses are usually developed during the research, rather than a priori; and 8. analysis is presented for the most part in narrative rather than numerical form (p. 138).

The Summer 2000 issue of Harvard Educational Review was devoted to essays about qualitative research, the contributions of other disciplines, and the state of qualitative research in education. Page (2000a) writes that the “scrutiny” of these research methodologies, particularly as a counterthrust to positivism, is part of “the modern struggle to define the proper relationship between an egalitarianism that honors all individuals’ right to participate in setting a society’s course and an expertise that elevates some people as being more knowledgeable” (p. 23).
subjects' contributions, then, are essential, and this researcher attempted to follow the tenets of grounded theory as explained by Spindler and Hammond (2000) "that the observer should not begin with specific hypotheses or even highly specific categories of observation, but should let the cultural process reveal itself through immersion first in the environment, then in the data." (p. 46).

Models for This Study

Some recent studies (LePage-Lees, 1997; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996) provide models of this type of research. LePage-Lees interviewed women from disadvantaged backgrounds who had high levels of academic achievement, including graduate degrees. For her study, she defined "disadvantaged" as having a childhood in a poor working-class or lower class family; being a first generation college student, and having experienced familial dysfunction or traumatic childhood stress, which participants identified from a list. In LePage-Lees' study, meeting the criteria was determined by self-report and first generation college students were defined as people whose parents had not finished a four-year degree. Levine and Nidiffer conducted in-depth interviews with 24 poor, first-generation students, 12 attending a community college and 12 attending a highly selective university. To meet their selection criteria, students had to be first generation college students on full financial aid. They did not define "first generation." For her current research, Beegle (1999a) included people from three generations of poverty who have completed a bachelor's degree. Beegle has more detailed specifications for her criteria, including three generations of people with no college attendance and no home or business ownership.

The three researchers mentioned in this section all look at the individuals rather than the institutions for answers to the research questions, as this research
does. Further, they have chosen to examine "anomalies," students who managed to escape poverty and succeed at college. In this study, on the other hand, the success of the subjects is not yet determined. At the end of the study period, the students in the WorkFirst program may go on to succeed or fail to meet their educational or work goals. All, however, have made it past the point of initial contact with the college—a critical and necessary first step.

Research Setting

The setting for this study was a public, comprehensive community college located in western Washington. One of Washington's 36 community and technical colleges in a state-wide system, this college is located in a medium-sized city with a service area that encompasses that city and the largely rural surrounding area. Women comprise about 60 percent of the student body and the college participates in WorkFirst and in the WorkFirst/Work Study program. The college's service area has a high proportion of low-income people, both in the city and in the countryside.

The Study Participants

Today's low-income community college students took a variety of routes to their colleges, and they are widely dispersed among the colleges' programs. To assure that the volunteer subjects for this study had a verifiable level of poverty, they were solicited in seminars that were required for students in a variety of programs, including WorkFirst. The goal was to find participants who were in the WorkFirst program. Limiting the pool assured that all subjects in the study have met the state's guidelines for benefits (working parents with incomes at or below
175% of the federal poverty line) and are, therefore, dealing with similar financial, family, and work situations.

Once the volunteers were determined to be students in the WorkFirst program, they were considered eligible according to the phenomenological criterion, i.e. "simply the subject’s experience with a particular phenomenon and the ability to communicate it" made her an appropriate subject for study (Cobb & Hagemaster, 1987 p.140). With a purposeful, criterion-based sample from the group of women students at a community college who are WorkFirst eligible and who have volunteered to participate, the researcher had "a sample from which the most can be learned" (Merriam, 1998 p.61).

Data Collection Procedures

The primary sources of data for this research study were interviews with these students. Two other significant sources of data were conversations with practitioners and observations made in a weekly seminar for WorkFirst/Work Study students. Additionally, two subjects, Betsy and Charlene, voluntarily engaged the researcher in casual conversation before or after seminars on several occasions.

To prepare for data collection activities, the researcher consulted with a WorkFirst coordinator and conducted a pilot interview with a WorkFirst/Work Study student, both at a different community college than the research site.

Soliciting the Study Participants

The researcher prepared an introduction that she made in person to the seminars, explaining that she was a graduate student working on research for a doctoral dissertation in education and describing what she proposed to do, i.e.
spend approximately two to three hours with each subject in two one- to one-and-a-half-hour sessions, tape recording conversations about their experiences before the community college contact and thereafter (Appendix A). She passed out volunteer forms (Appendix B) and asked that all students return the forms, regardless of whether or not they wanted to participate.

Based on the experience of other researchers, it was expected that a sufficient number of volunteers would come forward. In a conversation with Donna Beegle, she had remarked about her own research experience, “Something I found really interesting is that people are so hungry to share this. I mean they are even apologizing when they don’t meet the study criteria. They believe it is an important thing to talk about. They want to be part of it” (personal communication, 1999).

The researcher solicited volunteers to participate in the study on three occasions. First she attended a seminar on March 30. This seminar, which oriented students to college services, was offered several times during the quarter. All work based tuition assistance students were required to attend once during the quarter. Students were receiving tuition from WorkFirst, including aid to low-income working parents, or from a Worker Retraining program for displaced workers. The day the researcher attended, there were nine students present, one man and eight women. Five of the women volunteered to participate, but follow-up calls revealed that four of the volunteers were on Worker Retraining and were receiving unemployment benefits. They did not meet the low-income criterion. The fifth volunteer became the first interviewed subject—Annette. During the interview with Annette, the researcher learned that she was not receiving TANF. She was in the part of WorkFirst that offers tuition grants to low-income, working parents.
The researcher subsequently altered the volunteer sheet to include a place to indicate which program the students were in. This became unnecessary, however, because following the March 30 work-based tuition assistance seminar, the college began a new seminar. Originally this new seminar was conceived to help the college meet monitoring requirements for the new WorkFirst/Work Study option. During the course of the study period, the seminar grew and changed its focus to offer a wide range of assistance to WorkFirst/Work Study students. The weekly seminar was required for all WorkFirst/Work Study students, and that is where the remaining subjects were solicited.

The researcher attended the WorkFirst/Work Study seminar on May 2. It was the third meeting of the group and occurred just past mid-term in the quarter. The seminar was attended by nine women and one man. Five of the women volunteered. The researcher was unable to reach one of the women. Interviews were conducted with three—Betsy, Charlene, and Debbie. Ginny, the fifth volunteer, made several interview appointments, but failed to show up at any of them.

A third solicitation took place at the WorkFirst/Work Study seminar on June 22, the first seminar of the summer quarter. Again, the class was attended by one man and nine women, including the three subjects from the spring quarter. This time three students volunteered. Interestingly, Ginny volunteered again, and again made an appointment and failed to show up. Interviews were conducted with Eleanor and Francie.

Interviews

The researcher conducted 11 interviews with six students. Each student was interviewed twice, except Annette, who was interviewed only once. The researcher tape recorded all interviews, with the exception of the two interviews
with, Debbie, who chose not to be tape recorded. In that case, the researcher took
notes. Annette’s interview took place in a restaurant. Debbie’s and Betsy’s second
interviews took place in their homes, and Francie asked to talk at a picnic table on
campus for her first interview. All other interviews were conducted in a private
study room within the college library.

Debbie, Charlene and Betsy all volunteered for the study about mid-way
through the spring quarter. Charlene and Debbie were interviewed twice during
that quarter, but Betsy’s interviews were seven weeks apart, spanning the spring
and summer quarters. The remaining two women, Eleanor and Francie, were in-
terviewed twice in the summer quarter. All five were in the program both quarters
except Eleanor, who was new to the program summer quarter.

Each interview lasted approximately one hour, and the researcher made
field notes immediately following each interview. The interviews were semi-
structured, guided by a list of issues to be explored (Appendix C), but leaving
maximum flexibility for each participant to express her thoughts and feelings and
raise issues that were germane to her situation. According to Merriam (1998),
“This format allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the
emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (p. 74).
Participants talked about their past and current experiences, expectations, aspira-
tions, fears, and questions.

To learn more about the subjects’ families and their educational back-
ground, the researcher asked them to respond to a questionnaire of partially close-
ended questions of demographic information (Appendix D). The questionnaire
was administered by reading the questions to the subjects at the end of the first
interview. The information sought had predictable choices, but the partially close-
ended form has the advantage of “not forcing respondents into predefined boxes
that don’t fit their situation, and it occasionally generates new information” (Salant & Dillman, 1994, p. 84). In some of the cases at hand, the questionnaire portion of the interview sparked more conversation and raised new issues and topics.

Observations in Seminar

The researcher sat in on a weekly seminar that was required for WorkFirst/Work Study participants. The seminars began in April and during the course of the spring and summer quarters, there were 14 seminars. The researcher observed eight of them.

Attending the WorkFirst/Work Study weekly seminars gave the researcher the opportunity to observe the subjects interacting with others, as well as exposing the researcher to other WorkFirst/Work Study students who did not volunteer for the study (or did not follow through with the interviews.) The first time the researcher attended the seminar each quarter, after she solicited volunteers, she requested permission of the group to sit in on their seminars. This granted, she sat at the edge of the group and took field notes during the classes. Generally, her presence was not acknowledged. Even when a student had been conversing with the researcher outside before the seminar, once in the classroom, the researcher sat alone and remained out of the discussion. The account that follows is a sample from field notes from the seminar on July 20. “Betsy says someone from WorkSource is calling her. They can’t figure out why. Margaret [program coordinator] asks who called, and Betsy doesn’t have a name except maybe Susan. At this point the whole group looks at me. It is the only time during a class that my presence is acknowledged, but obviously they are aware of my presence. I say it wasn’t me calling Betsy, and they all turn back.”
Conversations with Practitioners

The researcher had a number of opportunities to talk with practitioners at community colleges who work with the WorkFirst program. These practitioners included college administrators, directors at the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, and WorkFirst program coordinators at the research site and at a different college. Of all sources, the conversations with Margaret, the program coordinator at the research site, most informed this study. Since Margaret was the program coordinator and the seminar instructor, the researcher had an opportunity to observe her in the classroom as well as to conduct two lengthy interviews with her. The interviews were one and a half to two hours long and were tape recorded. In the interviews, Margaret shared her impressions of the WorkFirst program, the WorkFirst/Work Study program, and the individual students in her class. Margaret did not know which students had volunteered for the study, but spoke in confidence about all of the students, sometimes touching on individuals who the researcher had interviewed. The interviews with Margaret, therefore, added to the researcher’s knowledge about the subjects as well as validating information and impressions from the interviews with the students. It was not a particular goal of this research to make sure the subjects were giving “truthful” information, but rather to learn what their subjective views were. There were instances during the interviews when a participant’s narratives seemed contradictory or incredible, and it was confirming to the researcher to also hear Margaret say about one of the students, “I don’t even know who to believe or what to believe.”
Data Collection Timeline

- 1/15/00 Consulted with practitioner at a non-research site college re: proposed research
- 3/22/00 Consulted with practitioner at a non-research site college re: pilot interview
- 3/30/00 Attended original seminar; solicited volunteers
- 4/14/00 Pilot interview
- 4/16/00 Interviewed Annette
- 5/02/00 Attended WorkFirst/Work Study seminar; solicited volunteers
- 5/9/00 Attended WorkFirst/Work Study seminar; interviewed Betsy
- 5/10/00 Interviewed Charlene
- 5/11/00 Debbie didn’t show up for interview
- 5/15/00 Ginny didn’t show up for interview
- 5/18/00 Ginny didn’t show up for interview
- 5/19/00 Interviewed Debbie
- 5/23/00 Attended WorkFirst/Work Study seminar
- 6/05/00 Betsy didn’t show up for interview
- 6/06/00 Attended WorkFirst/Work Study seminar; interviewed Debbie
- 6/08/00 Interviewed practitioner (Margaret)
- 6/22/00 Attended WorkFirst/Work Study seminar; solicited volunteers
- 6/28/00 Interviewed Eleanor; interviewed Betsy
- 7/03/00 Ginny didn’t show up for interview
- 7/06/00 Attended WorkFirst/Work Study seminar; interviewed Francie
- 7/20/00 Attended WorkFirst/Work Study seminar; interviewed Francie; interviewed Eleanor
- 8/3/00 Attended WorkFirst/Work Study seminar
- 8/23/00 Second interview with practitioner (Margaret)

Data Analysis Procedures

The researcher did verbatim transcriptions of all of the interview tapes from the student interviews. The interviews with Margaret were partially transcribed, also by the researcher. The researcher reviewed field notes and interview transcripts often, rereading past notes whenever she added new information. She became extremely intimate with the data in its raw and chronological form. The constant comparative method is recommended for multi-data sources, including multi-case studies, to accomplish simultaneous data collection and analysis, and as an approach to developing theory (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p.66).

To put the data into categories, line numbers were put on each interview transcript and each student’s transcribed interview was printed out on a different color of paper. The transcripts were then literally cut into meaningful chunks of data. Using the constant comparative method, and with the help of a clinical psy-
chologist who agreed to act as “expert rater,” the researcher developed thematic categories and sorted the aggregated data from all six subjects into these categories. In analyzing the data, the researcher looked for key issues and recurrent events and bits of language that were constructed into categories of focus. Because this was a multi-case study, the researcher performed both within-case and cross-case analysis (Merriam, 1998, p. 194).

Ensuring Soundness of Data, Data Analysis, and Interpretation

In her chapter “Dealing with validity, reliability and ethics,” Merriam (1998) says, “Ensuring validity and reliability in qualitative research involves conducting the investigation in an ethical manner” (p. 198).

The researcher took a number of specific steps to ensure the soundness of the data. First she discussed drafts of the interview guide list of issues and the background questionnaire with the coordinator of WorkFirst at a non-research site community college. The researcher relied on the coordinator’s perceptions and knowledge of WorkFirst students to help ensure that in shaping guideline questions, writing the questionnaire, and preparing the volunteer solicitation script the researcher used language, gave options and addressed issues that are appropriate to the population. The researcher also pre-tested the questionnaire and conducted a pilot interview with a student at this college who met all the criteria. Some small refinements were made following the pilot interview.

In the study interviews, participants were told of the importance of complete, honest responses and the good they will do in terms of making the study results useful to others. They were assured that the report would not be “about you.” The researcher spent time with the participants describing how she planned to protect their privacy and confidentiality. The researcher responded to questions
about her affiliations, assuring participants that she had no connections to DSHS or ESD, in addition to having no affiliation with the research-site college. The researcher was the only person who heard the tape recordings. The transcriptions and all written materials use pseudonyms to refer to the participants and unique details of the case studies that might identify a participant have been altered to protect the participants' anonymity. The researcher attempted to listen with an open mind and to be aware of the limits of her own perspective, background and biases.

The researcher worked to ensure the reliability of the data analysis by - remaining aware of her own preferences and biases during the process; by triangulating by using both interview and questionnaire data, as well as information from the practitioner interviews; and by asking a peer to help identify categories and to comment on emerging themes.

To verify the soundness of the interpretation of the data analysis, the research has attempted to leave "an audit trail" by including "rich, thick description" in the report so readers can determine for themselves whether the researcher's interpretations of the participants' experience make sense or seem transferable. The researcher's hope is that the use of thick descriptions will "convey the fine details as well as holistic features of particular cases, and let us see the value of local knowledge without accepting it at face value. On all counts, they allow us to move beyond simplistic notions of truth or anything-goes relativism to an affirmation of humanity, in both its promise and its tragedy" (Page, 2000b, p.105).
Delimitations

This study is delimited to address the perceptions of low-income, female community college students. It is a multi-case study, exploring the personal experiences of five women who were in Washington state's WorkFirst/Work Study program and one who was receiving aid to low-income working parents through WorkFirst, as recounted by the women during their community college involvement in the spring and summer quarters of the year 2000.

Definition of Terms

In the study, the following terms will be used as defined below.

- **Barriers.** Any physical, social or psychological factor that a participant identifies as keeping her from full participation in education or work.
- **Caseworker.** The social worker assigned to WorkFirst clients by DSHS.
- **College program.** Enrollment in and attendance at any college course, regardless of whether or not the course leads to a degree or certificate.
- **Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS).** The Washington state agency that administers TANF.
- **Employment Security Department (ESD).** The Washington state department responsible for connecting WorkFirst participants with jobs.
- **General Education Development (GED).** The test for people who don’t have a high school diploma that allows them to receive a high school equivalency degree; in common parlance, equivalency degree itself is referred to as a GED.
- **Seminar.** A weekly meeting for students participating in the WorkFirst/Work Study program at which attendance is required by the research site college.
• **State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC).** Washington's statewide board governing the state's community and technical colleges, "given primary responsibility for providing education and training to the unemployed and the working poor, including those participating in TANF" (1998).

• **Welfare.** This term will refer to any of a historical series of federal programs assisting parents and dependent children, including, Mother's Aid, ADC (Aid to Dependent Children), AFDC (Aid for Families with Dependent Children), JOBS (Job Opportunities and Basic Skills) and TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families).

• **WorkFirst.** Washington state's program initiated in 1997 to benefit TANF recipients and other low-income working adults earning less than 175 percent of poverty as defined by the federal poverty guidelines.

• **WorkFirst/Work Study.** A program modeled on federal and state work-study developed in 1999 and implemented in 2000 for TANF clients. The program allows clients to meet the 20-hour-per-week work requirement by working 16 hours per week in a WorkFirst/Work Study funded internship or job while enrolled at a community college.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The Women of the Study

Six women were interviewed: five of them twice, one only once. Annette, the woman who was interviewed once, was not in the WorkFirst/Work Study program. She had long-term financial problems and was receiving a tuition grant for low-income working parents through WorkFirst. Annette was attempting to change her situation, while she was working more than full time.

For the other five participants in the study, being in WorkFirst/Work Study and attending college were part and parcel of having been catapulted into making tremendous changes within the last year. Four were dealing with recent separations and divorces and the fifth had recently been arrested for "driving under the influence" (DUI) and was undergoing court-ordered mandatory treatment for alcohol abuse.

During the course of the study, Betsy and Charlene both saw final resolution to pending divorces and custody issues. Debbie's and Francie's divorces were still pending, although Debbie had resolved issues of support and visitation. Eleanor finished the first phase of her treatment for alcoholism. All of these women were adjusting to significant changes in their relationships, their housing, and their employment. As Francie says: "A lot of change. I mean, not just a little bit, it's like change!" Or Charlene: "Yeah, I'm doing a 360." One hopes not.

Below are descriptions of each woman.
Annette: Heavy Work, Heavy Care

Annette is exhausted. She volunteered for the study, but the only time that she could fit an interview into her schedule was on a Sunday morning when she came off the graveyard shift at a nursing home for Alzheimer’s patients. The researcher meets her in the small town where she was working and offers to buy her breakfast. Annette says she’d like to get closer to home, so they drive caravan-style to a restaurant in a slightly smaller town about 10 miles away from the even smaller town where she lives. Her eyelids are heavy, and she seems barely able to sit up at times. It turns out she has just worked two shifts back-to-back, from three in the afternoon Saturday until this morning. Nevertheless, she is garrulous, eats heartily, laughs loudly at her own jokes and tells a story laced with horrific, sometimes half-explained details.

Annette is 40 years old and has six children. She grew up in Seattle, herself one of six children of a mechanic and a retail sales clerk. She acknowledges that she was a difficult teenager. “I was wild,” she says. “I was hard to find. My mother couldn’t find me sometimes for days. I was just a fly by night.” Her oldest daughter is 23 and was born shortly after Annette left home as a teenager and moved in with a boyfriend. She says it has been a couple of years since she last saw this daughter, who lives in a small town on the other side of the Cascade Mountains and is “caught up with an older man and controlled.”

Annette understands why her daughter can’t see her. She herself was married for ten years to a man who was “so controlling and manipulative and kept me out in the boonies in [a very small town] with no phone, no car and no neighbors. I didn’t know there was a system. I knew nothing about welfare. I didn’t know I could get help until, like, years later when I woke up.”
That husband is the father of four of her children, two girls and two boys, who are 15, 14, 12 and 10. She ended her relationship with this man when, she says, he became delusional, and she had him involuntarily committed to a mental institution. Annette was then homeless and adrift for two years with her five children, until her father “hunted her down” and set her up in the trailer she has lived in for the past seven years.

Her four-year-old son’s father seems to have spent much of his life incarcerated, including a three-year prison term after Annette pressed assault charges against him when the baby was two months old. She alludes to an “even worse” abusive boyfriend between the husband and the baby’s father. But despite her bad decisions about men, she is proud that she has always been the one to leave each relationship. “I always end up leaving. Adios. See ya. Have to march. Bye,” she says, “Because I’m really independent. I can only take so much of a man.”

Annette has high hopes for the five children she is still raising and a fair amount of guilt about her 15-year-old daughter’s burdens. Annette’s mother was murdered 14 years ago while she was babysitting for this daughter, and, Annette reports, “that evening my eight-month-old baby screamed and was alone with the door wide open and wet from here to here.” Now her daughter says she doesn’t want to marry or have children. “I did that to her. The men. The abuse. The torture. And she don’t want it,” Annette says. “I feel bad. Because way back when, they had to grow up so fast. My 15 year old was grown up from six on. Never was a child. Never. Now she’s 15 going on 40.” On the bright side, Annette reports that her daughters, at least, are straight ‘A’ students and want to go to college.

But Annette is exhausted. She has been working in nursing facilities her entire working life, which began at age 16. About three years ago, she took training through a hospital and became a certified nursing assistant. She gets plenty of
work—in fact, she often works 50 hours a week, moving from one nursing home to another and driving as far as 90 miles to a job. She is self sufficient and proud of not being on welfare. She has cable TV service and a computer. She is paying for braces for one of her daughters. On a day-to-day basis, by working incredibly hard, she is able to provide for her family. What she is having trouble doing is making the two big changes she desperately wants.

First, she wants to move. She'd like to move to the town where the interview is taking place so that her kids could stay in the school they attend now, but she would be in a slightly larger community and a little closer to the city. More important, her trailer is rank with black mold, and she has allergies that make her sick. She says it is impossible to clean, impossible to get rid of the mold. She wants to move, but she says her credit is not good enough to help her purchase a different trailer.

Second, Annette wants to change her work. She's tired of caring for people. Even when she took a vocational interest test that a friend brought home from the community college, she was not satisfied with the results. "I came up as a caregiver," she says. "I go, 'Damn. I don't want to come up that.' ...That's mainly all I know, but I want to know something else."

That's why the computer course she's taking through the community college is so appealing. "I need to learn the computer first, because every job I see, you need experience on the computer. So that's why I'm at the college." The course Annette is taking is a self-paced course and is not held on the college campus. The instructor is available at the local high school in the evenings to help and to administer the unit tests. Annette is clear that she would never be able to drive all the way to the main campus or, for that matter, attend regularly scheduled classes anywhere, because of her demanding and variable work schedule.
She's enthusiastic about how much she has learned already and, at this point, about three weeks into the quarter, she has been to the classroom twice—once to sign the “attendance thing” and once to take (and pass) the test over Chapter One. She says she's about ready to do the test on Chapter Two, if she can get to the high school. “Maybe I’ll have to go Tuesday night, take it on my way home from work, because Tuesday I get off at seven,” she says. Annette is confident in her ability to teach herself. She says she's used to picking things up by herself, because in her work she is often sent into unfamiliar nursing homes and often is the only staff person there. She says she loves to read and loves to learn, and she thinks she would enjoy distance education. Lack of time for school, though, remains her biggest problem. Even last night, she says, she brought her text book to work and never got to it, because there was too much going on with her patients.

Annette's goal is clear: she wants to be able to support her family with work that is less demanding and exhausting than nursing home work. "I've been doing this since '76, and I'm so burned out of these people. It's good to do and everything, but heavy work, heavy care. I want to do something easy, I want to work at home," she says. And if her daughter is 15 going on 40, Annette feels like she's 40 going on 70. "My bones hurt. My bones have hurt for three years. My bones and my muscles. My back always hurts. My neck always hurts. My finger joints are constantly aching, every day, my feet, everything. I'm just too old. And I'm feeling it now, and I feel closer to living in one of those facilities. I couldn't imagine doing this work five years from now. Maybe I still will be."

A month after the first interview, the researcher calls to set up a second. Annette is very close to achieving her first goal. With help from a banker, she says she has sold her trailer and bought a newer one in a different trailer park nearby. But the park managers are keeping her out. The banker is trying to intervene on
her behalf, she says. She cries on the phone. She says it has to work out, or she will have nowhere to live. She asks the researcher to call after the first of the month when she will be settled in her new home. She will certainly have the same phone number, she says, because the kids need it.

When the researcher calls again, the number has been disconnected and there is no new listing for Annette. College records show she did not complete the course. This research study lost Annette. The college lost Annette.

Betsy: Furniture and All

Betsy likes to be the center of attention. She knows this about herself and says that’s how she chose her long-term goal of becoming a history teacher. A teacher gets to perform in front of a captive audience, she says, and being a teacher is a more attainable goal then, say, being an actress. In seminar, when she doesn’t have the floor, Betsy may slip on plastic vampire teeth or drape a toy cat around her neck. Her hair is an unusual shade of maroon and her tongue is pierced. She’s as restless and fidgety in her seminar seat as a two year old, but she is the just-turned-21-year-old mother of a three-year-old boy.

Although she had aspirations for higher education and a professional life—she mentions earlier plans to become a doctor, a lawyer, a computer programmer and an astrophysicist, in addition to becoming a history teacher—Betsy dropped out of high school when she was 17, married and pregnant, because her husband wanted her to. She easily passed a GED test, and, with two people working, the young family had the material goods they wanted, including, she reports, two brand new vehicles, a two bedroom apartment, and a big screen TV. “We were living high on the hog, you know. Down to...I have nothing now,” she says.
The marriage broke up, at least in part, because of her desire to go to college, and things went from bad to worse. Betsy and her son were homeless for a period of a month or so, and accusations of child abuse were leveled against her in a custody battle. In the course of these things, Betsy quit her graveyard-shift job to care for her son, began to receive public assistance and, eventually, went on TANF and joined the WorkFirst/Work-Study program.

There is no question that Betsy wants to improve her lot. Although she vacillates about what kind of work she will do, one day touting education because it is meaningful work and the next day quoting the amazing annual incomes of physicians and astrophysicists, she always aims high and thinks about the long run.

"I've had an inspiration!" Betsy announces to the class one day in July. "I will have to be the sole source of income for my family, so being a teacher isn't maybe right." She says she considered psychology at the MA or Ph.D. level, but now is thinking about psychiatry. "Why not go for the MD? The average anesthesiologist makes $223,618 a year," she proclaims.

Her bravado has not kept her from succeeding in her first couple of quarters at the college, but the realities of WorkFirst are that the educational benefits are limited to vocational programs, and for the time being she is officially registered in a program for education paraprofessionals that leads to a technical degree rather than the degree designed for transfer to a four-year college.

Most important, perhaps, is that she knows what the real work alternatives are for people without a profession. Even hearkening back to her married days with two incomes, she reflects: "We were struggling. We had the things. We looked like we were doing well, and appearance is everything sometimes." And it is that realization that keeps her striving for highfalutin' goals. She says, "I don't
necessarily have to be on DSHS. I could be making $10 an hour again, but I'd still be barely making it instead of four more years and, when this is over, I'll be OK for the rest of my life.”

Even when her head is turned temporarily by her summer quarter Work Study job at a “dot com,” where she says she has lunch with millionaires and where she claims to have been offered full-time work that would pay $20 an hour and come with an expense account, Betsy quickly recognizes that this is a big decision. Ultimately, she reports turning down this full-time job offer to stay in school.

Somehow, although none of her parents or stepparents went beyond high school, Betsy intuitively understands the role that college often plays for those fortunate enough to be able to attend college without the constraints of a welfare-to-work program.

“I’m overwhelmed,” she says. “I’m only 21. I shouldn’t have to make decisions like these. That’s why you go to college for years.” In her own way, Betsy is a typical undergraduate, changing philosophies, majors and hair color every quarter. But being a college student is just one of Betsy’s roles.

Betsy asks to have the second interview at her home. She begins the visit with a detailed tour of her two-bedroom apartment in a small town some 15 miles from the city where the college’s main campus is. She proudly explains that she chose to rent more space and get a place with a washer and dryer here rather than settle for a less satisfactory apartment in the city. Betsy points out a clarinet she played when she was in middle school, a glazed tile with her little boy’s hand print on it, a clock she bought from her mother, a refinished dining table, a couch, a coffee table, and a four-inch by five-inch fabric-covered book—her journal. Everything there, as she says, *everything*, has personal meaning. All of the furniture, except the beds, has been acquired in the past week.
Seven months after the breakup of her marriage and three months into her new life as a college student with a Work Study job, Betsy says, her luck has been going “up and up and up.”

While her son watches TV and eats mini marshmallows out of the bag, Betsy counts her successes: “One, I’m losing weight left and right. Number two, I am going to school full time. Number three, regardless of whether or not I’m on the system, I’m not just sitting here on the system pumping out children and not going anywhere. And number four, look at my job. I’ve come all this way since November. Wow. Furniture and all.”

A month later, Betsy confides after the last seminar the researcher will attend that the new young man in the back of the room is her new boyfriend. She says he’s a Harvard graduate and a current graduate student.

“He’s going to marry me,” she says. “He really is.”

Charlene: An Average Human Citizen

Charlene describes herself like this: “I am not wallpaper. I am the couch in the middle of the room.”

Indeed, Charlene is difficult to ignore. For one thing, she wears amazing clothes. One memorable outfit is her electric blue dress with cap sleeves and a modestly cut, if elaborately embroidered, bodice. The dress buttons all the way up the front, but the lowest button on the skirt is barely an inch below crotch height, so her approaching form is dominated by swiftly moving thighs.

Her language is as colorful and immodest as her clothing. Her sense of humor is quick and boisterous. To a fellow student’s comment that “I want to work with juveniles, because grownups are unchangeable and you can’t change a 64-year-old prostitute,” Charlene quips: “If you want to save youth, just show
them the 64-year-old prostitute!” And, once again, Charlene brings down the house.

She has the pluck of a latter day Eliza Doolittle, unschooled and unrefined, but smart and determined with a clear vision of who she is and what she wants. Much as Eliza crooned, “All I want is a room somewhere...,” Charlene says: “I would love to be Betty Crocker, Susie Homemaker, Beaver Cleaver’s Mom... I could stay home, bake cookies, make pies, clean the house. You know, that’s what I want to do. That’s what makes me happy. Not having to worry about bills, sending my man off to go to work, having dinner on the table when he gets home, being the kind of mom who can be on the PTA.” At the very least, she says, “I want my kids to have Nikes and go to the mall.”

Just turned 29, Charlene is the mother of a seven-year-old girl with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and a two-year-old boy with asthma. The children have different fathers, her divorce from her son’s father was finalized during this study, and it doesn’t appear that Charlene’s life, as a child or as a parent, ever resembled the homey, media-produced family life she claims to want. She says she was “kind of abused” by her stepmother. At 15 she was put in foster care, and at 16 she was living on her own. She passed the GED exam at the earliest allowable time—two months before her eighteenth birthday—and worked as a waitress, a cashier, and a bartender. She got a business certificate from a proprietary school within the past three years and landed a desk job, but she had to quit when she became “full fledged pregnant” with her son. Her husband, who she says never worked during their marriage and spent all his time getting high with friends, “took off and left” when the boy was an infant.

Charlene, too, has apparently spent some time getting high. She mentions that she no longer has to “worry about calling a number every day to go pee in a
cup.” Asked about that, she says she volunteered to be checked in order to keep her kids, because during her divorce proceedings a question had come up as to whether or not she abused alcohol. She says she definitely doesn’t abuse alcohol. Nevertheless, in casual conversation, she offers up descriptions of her current activities that include drinking a six pack with a friend, getting “totally wasted” at a concert (but that was a “special occasion”), and meeting a “beautiful” man at a bar where she had stopped in for a drink before picking up the kids at daycare.

Still, Charlene is doing very well in her school work and has picked programs that she hopes will get her a lot closer to that homebody life she described. She is working on degrees in medical transcription and medical billing, work that is often contracted out to people who work at home. “So, I can raid my refrigerator, smoke a cigarette. If my children get sick at school, I’ll be home. I’ll be working at home,” she says. “I thought about going into a business tech degree and having people work for me, but my main goal is to be at home for my kids.”

She regales the seminar with vivid descriptions of domestic mayhem, like the “Pepsi incident” when her little boy fed Pepsi to the fish. But, although the stories are told as funny and warm-hearted, she acknowledges that her children are a significant source of stress for her. In private, she says, “Just the word ‘Mommy’ rakes right down my spine.” She says she plans to call her doctor for help in handling her short temper which she calls the “problem of spitting pea soup at my children.” And in a discussion about handling stress, Charlene volunteers “I throw things.” Asked by a classmate if that made her feel better, she replies, “No. I felt very out of control. I just lost it.”

Charlene wants to improve her situation without giving up her sense of herself. No matter what, she would not want to fade into the wallpaper. She recognizes that what she and the others are trying to do is to change cultures, and she
can articulate what's hard about it. Bartenders are rewarded for loud voices and personal talk with customers. Not so in her new WorkFirst/Work Study position as an administrative assistant in a small agency. Charlene is working hard to make a balanced transition and “stay sane.”

She says she’s trying to focus on long-term goals, not short-term ones. “Here’s a goal,” she says in class discussion about goal-setting. “I don’t want to be a Whopper flopper [fast food cook] ‘til I’m 80.” And she believes that being in school is the key to eliminating that specter. “The only thing that gets me out of bed is, if I don’t go to school, there’d be no light at the end of the tunnel.”

In the short-run, too, this period of her life—being on welfare, having a part-time job and being in school—is a lot closer to her vision of how life should be than any time before. “My day’s done and, you know, I can go home, make dinner, be an average human citizen, and not worry about having to go to a graveyard shift at work.”

Debbie: Spiraling Down

Debbie is grim. She’s a beautiful 40-year-old woman, slender, tanned year-round from the tanning bed in her house and a platinum blonde whose hair color could be natural based on her 11-year-old son’s and 13-year-old daughter’s appearance. Debbie has a gorgeous smile, but for the bulk of the study period she rarely smiled. And one day, as she strode down the sidewalk dressed in khaki pants and an oversized green work shirt, another student watched her go and remarked, “She looks like a man.”

Debbie says she volunteered for the study because “you ought to be interested in me. I’m a very good student.” But she is cynical and suspicious and is the only subject who did not agree to be tape recorded. She points out that the in-
formed consent form says that the tapes will be kept confidential “to the extent the law allows” and that they could be subpoenaed. She has had a lot of experience with the law, and she says she has been betrayed over and over by the systems and organizations that were supposed to help her.

Debbie is finally separated and in the process of a divorce after a long and abusive marriage. She says the abuse lasted more than ten years, during which time she was let down by a roster of agencies, including Child Protective Services, the police, the county prosecutor, battered women’s shelters, the free legal services center, churches, family and friends. “No one helped,” she says. “Finally the battered women’s shelter said, ‘You need an attorney. Go to this guy, go to this guy, go to this guy; fill out papers, fill out papers, fill out papers; make appointments, make appointments, make appointments.’” When she brought charges against her husband three years ago, she says, she told the prosecutor that she wanted her husband to get help, to go to counseling. “I told him, ‘We want him to stop hitting.’ But what he got was a $500 fine. He took it out of my grocery money, so I didn’t eat,” she says. “All my kids and I have learned about abuse is if you tell, you’re going to be without any resources. You’re going to be hungry, homeless, abandoned.” This last and final separation began a year ago, when she reported her husband again and sought a restraining order. She said it took the court three months before supervised visits were ordered. Meanwhile, she lost her job, because she had to be home for her children and kept missing work. When supervision was finally required, the husband stopped seeing the children altogether. “The kids are completely out of control. I told them if they tell the truth the judge will protect us, but it was three months before the court ordered supervised visits. They are angry. Wouldn’t you be? I cry for my kids,” Debbie says.
Debbie went on welfare because she had lost her job and had been unable to collect child support from her husband. He works as a purchasing manager and makes about $50,000 a year. The family house is a newer, suburban home that she very much wants to keep. During this difficult year, Debbie has had some off-the-record financial help so she can maintain her house payments. She says about the friend who has been lending her money, “He helps me, but we don’t have sex. He says God wants him to help me, so I say, ‘Good for God.’” She mentions another male friend who has offered to pay for summer camp for her children. She makes it clear that there is no sexual liaison there either.

Debbie had first come to the college several years earlier in an effort to prepare herself to be self-supporting. In fact, 15 years ago she attended a technical college and trained to be a medical assistant. But she did not take the licensing test, and “those jobs don’t pay enough to support my family anyhow.” She started at this college with the goal of becoming a police officer, but she says she’s too old. At the beginning of this study, her goal was to be a medical death examiner, now she worries that she won’t be able to get any jobs in the criminal justice system because they all require background checks. Debbie comes from a large family of eight children, but is alienated from her family. “My whole family is on drugs, and they won’t say anything good about me because I turned them in.” Anticipating a WorkFirst/Work Study job in the probation office, she worries that she’ll have trouble with the requirement that she can’t associate with people convicted of a felony. “That’s kind of hard,” she says. “I’m storing furniture for a guy who is getting out of prison the end of the quarter and he was going to fix my deck for me when he got out.”

In the middle of the spring quarter, she says, “I’ve had four and a half years of school and none of what I did worked out. I have no degree. I have no
job.” She says she desperately wants to be off welfare and that the only thing that’s working out in her life is school. “I’m running in circles and I’m spiraling down,” she says.

At the end of the spring quarter, with the probation job just begun and a court order for child support in hand, Debbie seems somewhat more optimistic. She is working with support enforcement and will be off of welfare soon. Her boss at her new job in the probation office is very supportive and flexible about her necessary absences for kids and courts. As Debbie explains it: “They [probation officials] are dealing with complete losers, so they give you a little slack.” When asked about her recent successes, she promptly says, “I am pleased about getting off welfare. I am pleased about getting my house in shape. I am pleased about being able to say: I don’t care if I don’t get an A, I need to make time for my kids, my house, and me.”

But as summer begins, Debbie is still on welfare and in the WorkFirst/Work Study program. She is shrouded in her oversized work shirts and never cracks a smile until the last seminar the researcher will attend. In response to the instructor’s “how’s it going?” Debbie speaks up. “I wore a dress [to work] and everyone told me how wonderful I looked!” she announces. And she smiles. She talks about her job and her wonderful supervisor. “I have figured everything out. If I do everything right I can graduate in the spring.” And then the best part: “I went to a concert and danced on stage. Now I’m dating a singer, and he bought me $100 of groceries.” And she smiles again.

Eleanor arrives early for her interviews and is well-spoken, poised and thoughtful in her remarks. She’s an attractive 30-year-old woman, with long blonde hair twisted up off her neck, tailored clothes and the green arm of what might be a starfish tattoo peeking out of her blouse. Eleanor and her five-year-old daughter are receiving a lot of help right now, and the language of therapy, of acceptance, and of hope permeates her conversation. In seminar, she gently suggests, “I think we should try to be happy with who we are,” and she is quick to acknowledge who she is—a work in progress.

Eleanor says, “I have a lot of hope for myself that I have a lot of potential,” and already she has accomplished a great deal. She was raised by her mentally ill mother who was on public assistance and in and out of hospitals. Her childhood memories include standing in line for food banks, going with her mother to DSHS and “being bored out of my mind,” and going to the hospital with her mother. She says, “She was on some very heavy duty anti-depressants and medications, and I remember her not being able to get her medications because sometimes she would take too much or we would be taken off state assistance for a month or two because she didn’t comply with paperwork or didn’t do what she was supposed to do. And my mother not on medication was a really awful thing to be around.”

With that as the home backdrop, Eleanor’s grammar school days as a scholarship student at a parochial school were equally difficult. “I’m not sure that they [teachers] quite wanted to work as closely with me. I was dirty a lot of the time. My mother didn’t care for me that way, didn’t make sure I knew to bathe, didn’t make sure I knew to take care of myself.” And she had problems with the other children, too. “I didn’t know what it was like to just be part of a group without everybody saying you’re poor, you’re ugly, you’re dirty,” she says.
Nevertheless, Eleanor says she got an excellent education during those first years of school and was reading on a college level by the end of eighth grade, but shortly after she transferred to a public high school in the ninth grade, she dropped out, left home and lived on the streets of Seattle for two years. She was 14.

After her mother died a few years later, she went to live with her father and his girl friend, who she says she had bonded with. She took her GED exam and enrolled in her first community college where she nearly completed a technical degree. She says she didn’t finish for several reasons, primarily that she didn’t enjoy the field and was going to school for the wrong reason. She was doing what she thought her stepmother wanted her to do.

When she was 25, her daughter was born, and she enrolled at a second community college. This time the educational experience was extremely positive. Eleanor got excellent grades and completed an Associate of Arts degree. She even transferred to a large university, but that proved too much for her, and she dropped out. During all of this time Eleanor was working, often as a cocktail waitress at night, and she acknowledges that she was more focused on school and work than on her daughter.

“Things have changed for me incredibly in the last year as far as knowing what’s responsible behavior as a parent,” she says. “But I thought I was doing the right thing. I thought I was going to school and working like I was supposed to do and so, you know, nobody better tell me or judge me for what I’m doing."

Things came to a head less than a year ago when Eleanor lost her job, her daughter was kicked out of yet another day care center, and she was arrested for DUI. Eleanor says she started drinking when she was a teenager living on the city streets. More recently, she says, “I had gotten to the point where I was overloaded.
I could take on a lot, but I couldn’t successfully complete what I took on, including parenting, my job, school, relationships...that’s why my drinking problems, because that was easier. That was my stress reliever.”

Being faced with the possibility of such serious consequences as losing her daughter, Eleanor says, “I had to really stop and take a look at my life and look at where I was going. I was very willing to just try to get as much help as I possibly could.”

If she had been busy before juggling a job, school, and parenting, Eleanor’s life today is every bit as serious a scheduling challenge. Her daughter is in a special therapeutic daycare center and also attends a social skills class twice a week. Eleanor would like to get individual therapy for her, as well. Eleanor herself is in an outpatient treatment program for her alcoholism that involves a weekly session plus two Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings a week, and she is also in a weekly social skills class. And, of course, Eleanor has her WorkFirst/Work Study job—a job with a technology company that she likes a lot—and she is enrolled in a computer class at the community college, her third community college.

She is remarkably well-versed in the services and support systems that are available, and she shares that information with the seminar often. She knows the ins and outs of housing and clothing vouchers and is using every resource she can.

Aside from passing references to “relationships” and once to “abusive boyfriends,” Eleanor doesn’t offer any information about the men in her life. She makes no reference at all to her daughter’s father, saying, “I’ve always been a single parent and had known that I was going to be a single parent.” She’s focusing on the future now, still hoping to attain a bachelor’s degree someday, but primarily concentrating on being in a better position to support herself and her daughter comfortably, responsibly, and soberly.
Eleanor says she believes it just takes one, maybe two, people who show they care about what’s going on in a person’s life, to help them overcome the kind of barriers she has faced. That, and making mistakes. “You know, you’ve got to learn from them sooner or later,” she says.

Eleanor reports that the program coordinator told her: “Eleanor, you are the epitome of the perfect candidate for this program because you know that where you come from and where you’re going are two completely, very completely, different places.”

Francie: In the Bosom of the Lord

Francie says no one who knows her now can believe she used to be so bad. And, indeed, she has such a soft voice, such a gentle smile, such round brown eyes, and such a child’s face that the researcher occasionally drifts and has to shake off thoughts of her own 13-year-old niece and remember that this young woman is someone’s mother, and that she has been through a lot.

Francie says she grew up an “army brat.” When she was 13 her alcoholic father “left the family” when he was charged and convicted of sexually molesting Francie. He was sent to jail for about six months, but, she says, “He was doing it from the time that I was 7 to 13 years old.” Francie hasn’t seen her father since then and says he’s on probation until she’s 23. She’s 21 now.

When Francie was 14 and her sister was 12, her mother and new stepfather abandoned the girls in a shopping center, because “we were cussing at her, swearing at her, saying all these bad things to her, just totally treating her like trash.” The end result of this episode was that the girls were placed in foster care, first together, and then they were separated. For Francie, that separation marks the most significant turning point in her life so far: “When we were growing up, me
and my sister, we thought we were like two and two together, and when she left everything went downhill for me.” Francie ran away, vandalized her room, and picked fights with her foster parents and with her mother, too, on the rare occasions that she called or visited.

Francie says she was always a poor student and hated school until she was placed in an alternative school for “at risk” kids in the eleventh grade. She was getting A’s and B’s there and was “student of the month” twice. She liked it, but, at the end of that year, the school was closed, and Francie stopped going to school. She was 18 and homeless. A few months later she had married and was pregnant. And a few months after that, she says, “I was in a trailer, and I was on the verge of, like, suicide or something, because he had just left me with this kid in my stomach.”

In the interviews, Francie does not blame her questionable parents or anyone else for this rocky period. “I had a hard road, like I said, I had a hard road down that road, and it wasn’t until—even though I’m still young—it wasn’t until I was much older that I realized that the road that I took was wrong,” she says. “The road that I took was wrong, because I made my own choices after that [her father’s arrest.] That’s exactly what I’m trying to say. Right after that, I made my own choices. I decided to hang out with the wrong people, decided to get into the drug and the booze scene and all other stuff.”

Her next turning point, then, was becoming involved in a church, the church Francie now always refers to as my church.

The church’s pastor and his wife arrived at Francie’s trailer with some maternity clothes and found her alone and terrified. As Francie explains it, “The reason why I was bawling my eyes out so much is because I didn’t know what to do, you know, and it was right then and there that they told me that God’s the one
that’s wanting to help you out and you’re going to want to, you’re going to have
to let God help you out. And for a while there I didn’t want to have anything to do
with God, but I went anyway, because I decided to, and ever since then, I’ve been
close to God.”

Francie’s son turns two at the end of the summer. She is on TANF and
came to the college spring quarter through the WorkFirst program to complete her
high school diploma. But she switched to a GED preparatory class because “I felt
like I was too pressured... I needed to have more time.” She is also taking some
basic computer training. Francie’s career goals are modest. She wants a job that is
very separate from her home life (“I wouldn’t want to supervise or manage any-
thing”) and she thinks if she could make $10 an hour she could support herself
and her son. She says with a little computer ability she could be a receptionist of
some sort, but not at DSHS where people aren’t very nice to the employees. She
also very much admires her pastor’s wife and would like to be involved in mis-
sionary work, helping people who have had experiences like hers. “I’m stuck
between working with people and working with computers,” she says.
“Computers can’t really hurt your feelings.”

In the seminar, she always sits alone, intently drawing cartoon aliens in her
notebook or staring straight ahead. She participates if she is asked a direct ques-
tion, but rarely volunteers. Once during a discussion about workplace issues, she
raises her hand and says that her boss was fired. No one hears her except the
teacher who quickly loses contact with Francie when another student talks over
her.

At her WorkFirst/Work Study job at a charity thrift shop, Francie says she
is known for being cheerful and friendly. But she does not get involved in the
social life or the griping she hears at this job or the one before it, a restaurant job.
At that job, she says she didn’t like it when the other employees started “this drama thing inside the workplace.” She recalls, “It’s like I wasn’t a part of it, and they’d tease me because I wasn’t a part of it.” At the second interview, shortly after her well-liked supervisor has been fired, Francie says she has been trying to dampen the emotional level among the other workers. “They’re upset and mad and all this other stuff and going through emotions, and, you know, we should just welcome him [the new supervisor] in and give him the benefit of the doubt for a while. You know, it’s not the end of the world, you know, it’s not the end of the world.”

It is her church association that provides meaningful connection for Francie. When she talks about her church, she talks about primary relationships. “My church, my church, you know, the people that are my foundation, that are my friends right now,” she says.

It’s like I couldn’t love anything more. I have about five moms now because of it. I have an extended family. There’s like tons of friends that I never had before and tons of sisters that want to call me sister all the time and that’s something that I never had before. I used to have nobody. I used to walk around with a depressed look on my face saying ‘I don’t have a family. I don’t have anything...and then all of a sudden, you know, I just, I just, I just accept Christ in my life and then BAM I got myself a family. So it’s really cool.

Themes and Issues

All of the women in this study expressed a common purpose. They want to be off of welfare and able to provide for their children.

In Betsy’s words, “I just want what’s best for me and my son.” And Francie says, “That’s one of the first things I want to do. I want to be able to support my family. I want to be able to support my son.”
Somewhat haltingly, but passionately, Eleanor expresses how having a goal is motivating. But a goal is sometimes hard to have, she says, unless you know the options. She talks about creating stability for her family.

I think if you have a goal...I mean that's really that hold on and don't let go energy that I'd put into relationships before, now that I am not in a relationship that's draining me of that, I'm putting it into my own life and my daughter's life, and it's a lot of energy. I think that a person just has to be very aware of what their options are.

When Betsy was contemplating a new job in the high technology world, she joked about her goals during the second interview: “I think I've been just one hell of a study. I'm about to go from zero to rich...remember my goals? Get rich. Week one goal: Get rich. Month one goal: Get rich.”

Charlene also played with a get-rich goal in one interview: Charlene: “Of course, my main goal is to marry some rich guy!” Researcher: “How’s it going?” Charlene: “I better stick with school.”

But, in truth, all of the participants shared the goals of self-sufficiency and responsibility, and these were not new goals. It is what they had always wanted. As Debbie says, “I've been planning my future for years, even when I was dealing with lunatics.”

And Charlene sums up the dilemma: “Oh, yeah. I know exactly where I'm going. It's just getting there, seemingly, that's killing me.”

The interviews make it evident that everything these women are trying to accomplish is occurring within a personal context that is made up of

- family background and history,
- relationships, both supportive and destructive,
- physical and psychological health issues, including substance abuse,
- housing situations,
financial issues.

Further, they are dealing with issues in several thematic categories:

- parenting,
- welfare,
- work, and
- school.

Each woman has her own history of life experiences, plans, dead ends, and detours that has brought her to the college. And each has now come to a new starting place.

Learning to Learn from Mistakes

In the second interview with the program coordinator and seminar teacher (Margaret), she repeated a story told to her some years ago. It’s called “My Life” and it goes something like this:

Chapter one. I was walking down the street and fell in a hole in the sidewalk. It’s not my fault. It takes me a long time to get out.

Chapter two. I was walking down the same street and fell in the same hole in the sidewalk. It’s not my fault. It takes a shorter time to get out.

Chapter three. I was walking down the same street and I jumped into the hole in the sidewalk. It is my fault. I get out immediately.

Chapter four. I was walking down the same street. I saw the hole in the sidewalk, and I walked around it.

Chapter five. I walked down a different street.

Margaret says about her WorkFirst/Work Study students, “I see their past as continually walking down the same street, ending up in the hole, and saying, ‘I don’t know how I got here.’” For her, success would be helping her students to
recognize the pitfalls of their lives and learn to avoid them, or even to go down new paths.

Certainly, several of the women in the study would recognize themselves in this parable. They talk about their patterns of mistakes, most often with respect to the men they have been involved with.

In Annette's words, life is just "trial and error." "We learn from our mistakes," she says. "I never did, because I keep making the same mistake over and over, except for the last four years after I got rid of him [her youngest son's abusive father]. I'm not going to make that same mistake for the fourth time."

Eleanor says that "making mistakes" is what got her in trouble, but she's doing better now because, "You know, you've got to learn from them [mistakes] sooner or later."

Charlene acknowledges that she knew what she was getting into when she married her son's father, a man who never worked and was involved with drugs. And Debbie has a litany of things that have repeatedly gone wrong, although she and Charlene both tend to talk about themselves as victims of bad systems, bad bosses, bad men, and bad luck. Even when Charlene fails one of her random drug tests because she had drinks with some friends "just once," she says it isn't fair that she has to take the tests when her husband is the much worse abuser.

Charlene is most articulate about having to change her lifestyle and her friends, but on some level she is also resistant to doing so. In seminar she talks about how much she chafes against the dress requirements at her job and says she told her boss, "Take this file and file it."

When Margaret talks about her work with her students, she says she worries that she may be too protective and too involved with the younger ones, tracking them down if they miss a class and reminding them of their responsibili-
ties to the program. Francie especially inspires this kind of protective response from her, and yet it is Francie, the youngest and most retiring of the women in the group, who most takes responsibility for her actions and refuses to dwell on any wrongs that may have been done to her. She says:

You know there's times when I get in that mode where I try to feel sorry for myself, but I come out of that real fast, because I'm like going, you know, I make my own choices now. What happened to me a long time ago is what happened to me a long time ago. That's in the past. I can't fix it if it's in the past, but I can help what's at right now. ...Recently, well, as a teenager I was, like, "It's all your fault. It's not my fault. Don't even tell me it's my fault." No. I've recently come to this conclusion that the choices that I make are my own choices.

For Betsy, the mistake she most regrets is dropping out of high school. It was, she says, "Stupid, stupid."

How These Women Came to the College Workfirst/Work Study Program

Although the WorkFirst program was created by the State of Washington to hasten the movement of people from welfare to work, and although the accepted and required measure of success is a reduction in the welfare roles, the women in the WorkFirst/Work Study Program who participated in this study were not long-time welfare recipients. In fact, all of the participants had been welfare recipients for less than a year at the end of the study period, although some had been on and off welfare before. Eleanor and Francie were TANF recipients who completed the required WorkFirst seminar, a one-week job workshop in search skills and assessment. Then Francie came to the college for basic education—in her case, high school completion—as provided for in the bill, and Eleanor was referred to the WorkFirst/Work Study program when she found an internship opportunity that fit the program.
For Debbie, being on welfare is loathsome. She was already a student at the college when she went on TANF as a means of forcing her husband to pay the court ordered support. Betsy, too, had college in her sights long before her involvement in this program. She had not yet started college classes and was working nights and making too much money to qualify for any public assistance. She ended up quitting her job because she said she was “over the limit” emotionally and “realized I can’t do graveyard shift with my son.” She says:

I quit my job and that’s when it was really blue. Everything sort of started settling down and settling in that I just really didn’t have any money. I really didn’t have any resources to take care of my son. I didn’t have a husband anymore. I didn’t have anything. So that’s where this program came in.

Betsy eventually went on TANF specifically to be able to participate in the WorkFirst/Work Study program. Like Betsy, Charlene was working at night. She was not on TANF, but when she came to the college to inquire about the tuition grants for low-income working parents, she was encouraged both by the program coordinator at the college and by her DSHS caseworker to quit her job and go on TANF so she could participate in the WorkFirst/Work Study option.

In short, Francie and Eleanor came to the college program through the regular WorkFirst channels. Betsy, Charlene and Debbie were all encouraged to go on welfare to more successfully achieve their goals. Annette was not a TANF recipient. She was receiving WorkFirst’s tuition grant for low-income working parents and was not in the WorkFirst/Work Study program.

Context

All six of the women interviewed are single parents. Annette has six children. The others have one (Betsy, Eleanor, and Francie) or two (Charlene and Debbie) children. Four of the women (Betsy, Charlene, Debbie, and Francie) are
recently separated and were involved in divorce proceedings and custody disputes. Charlene was the only one of them whose divorce was finalized during the period of the study. Her two children have different fathers. Annette’s six children have three different fathers.

Eleanor was the only participant who didn’t talk specifically about men in her life, including her child’s father, although she made it clear that “relationships” have been an issue for her. The women also made reference to drugs and alcohol. This is a major theme for Eleanor who is currently in treatment for alcohol abuse. It is also an undercurrent for Charlene, who was being monitored for alcohol abuse as part of her child custody dispute during the study period. Francie mentioned drugs and alcohol as part of her history, and Betsy and Debbie both made reference to family members’ drug problems.

Many other family relationships with parents and siblings seem to have been broken, and some have been repaired. Further, discussions of the past often included references to health problems, homelessness and depression. The participants’ lives embrace their history of family, health and living situations, and these contextual issues are the backdrop to their current situations and to their experiences in school or work in the past.
Family

**Family arrangements and relationships during adolescence**

In her second interview, Margaret, the seminar instructor, said that she was surprised to find that these women had apparently not had role models, for example, in their mothers. Three of the women interviewed had certainly not had stable, supportive parenting, especially during their adolescent years. Francie and Charlene had spent time in foster care, and Eleanor was a homeless teen.

In their descriptions of their teen years, the women often talk of being angry. Charlene gives a succinct overview of her life:

Short story long: My mom was married. My real father died. She got remarried while she was pregnant. That man adopted me at birth, and they got a divorce. My dad got remarried. My mom got remarried. My dad got custody of me and my brother and we were kind of raised by them until I was 15, and I couldn’t stand my stepmother. They put me in a foster home. My mother came and picked me up, and I lived with my mother until I was 16, and then I moved out on my own.

She elaborates, saying that she “volunteered” for foster care.

I was running away from home, and they [father and stepmother] caught me and tied me up and called the police, told them I was an uncontrollable child. There was all sorts of dog feces and everything around the house, and the police officer goes, “Why don’t you want to live here?” and I’m, well, “You look around and tell me why I don’t want to live here.” So they called her [the stepmother] an unfit mother and took me off.

Francie, who was abandoned by her mother when she was 14, was in foster care until she was 18 and was then “on her own and homeless.” She describes her relationship with her mother:

When I was a teenager, yes, I was very angry with her because we were on the lines of she would call me during Christmas, or some occasions, and on my birthday. [When I was in foster homes] she’d come every now and again on my birthday, or she’d just drop off something and leave. We had our disagreements because of the fact
that she just never came around. She didn’t have responsibility for me when I was a teenager. And she didn’t see my teenage life.

Francie had already been betrayed by her father who “left the house when I was 13 because of charges that were brought on him because of sexually molesting me and stuff like that,” and her time in foster homes was peppered with violent outbreaks and running away.

Eleanor was raised by a mentally ill mother and stayed with her mother’s male companion during times when her mother was institutionalized. “I was dirty a lot of the time,” she says. “My mother didn’t care for me that way, didn’t make sure I knew to bathe, didn’t make sure I knew to take care of myself and do things, you know, it was just a very difficult upbringing.”

Eleanor lived on the streets from age 14 for a couple of years. She said she lived with her father and his girlfriend briefly (“I had lived with them once when I was like 14 or 15 for just like about two seconds”) but went back to the streets because “they wanted me to do stuff I didn’t want to do, like stay in and go to school.” Then her mother died.

We’d had this really hard relationship. It was very difficult and I kind of experienced a lot of pain and suffering when she died. And what happened was I actually ended up going back to my father’s house and lived there. I had never really lived with my father. My father was, you know, he had a lot of issues, a lot of problems, and more it was his girlfriend who I had bonded with. I was looking for that, you know, maternal support.

**Current relationships with family**

Despite the troubled and broken family relationships of their youth, the women were largely in contact with family members now. Debbie was the only one who said she was completely estranged from her entire family.
Charlene questioned the term family ("My whole family is not really like my family"), but she said she is in contact with her mother, who is in another state ("I just call her up and say, 'Yeah, Mom, I'm going to school.' and she goes, 'Oh, that's nice.'") and until recently was living with her children at her father's home.

Francie said she and her mother are on good terms now, although they don't see each other much. She hadn't seen her father since he went to jail for sexually molesting her when she was 13.

I don't have any problem with my dad. I haven't seen my dad since I was 13. I know he's remarried. I heard he has got remarried and stuff like that. That's about it. I haven't heard anything about my dad really, I talked to my grandma a couple of times, but not very often.

Francie had recently contacted her foster mother ("I just out of the blue, out of the blue, called her. I just out of the blue called her. I just had to."). She said, "She [foster mother] knows that I've changed just by the phone conversation."

Francie's most regular family contact is a renewed relationship with her sister with whom she had been very close before they were abandoned to foster care and became separated.

She [sister] lives in [a small town] and she's actually going to be going to massage therapy school and she's doing good for herself. She's not married, she doesn't have kids, she's living on her own. . . She graduated from high school. She always did good in school. She always achieved.

Eleanor also talked about her siblings, neither of whom lived in her mother's home with her when she was growing up:

I have a brother, but he was more allowed to live with my father more often than not. He's 19 months older, but we're not close. . . My sister is very supportive. I'm not close to my family, but her and I are becoming closer. . . She's my half sister, so we have different mothers, but she's been very supportive of my not drinking.
Betsy, whose parents divorced, but who was never in foster care or on her own as a teenager until she married, has maintained relationships with both parents and a variety of siblings:

My mom, I'm going over to dinner tonight at her house, and I was over at dinner yesterday, and she went with me grocery shopping and taking my son down to the park after dinner so I could do homework after dinner. Yeah. It's helpful. But when I'm at my dad's, it's more opposite. He takes off to work and I watch his daughter. . . There's me at 21, my brother at 17, my sister at 16, and my youngest sister at 7. I want to be a role model for my brother and sisters.

Relationships with men

In the first evaluation of Washington's WorkFirst program by the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee (1998) they reported, "It [research on a state and national level] has shown a large and consistently high percentage of women on welfare are victims of this [domestic violence] abuse" (p. 87). The women who participated in this study were not exceptions.

All of the women interviewed had some history of relationships with men who were abusive, controlling, or irresponsible. Annette says of her marriage to the father of her four middle children, "I lived with my husband 10 years, but for the last 7, 8 years, I couldn't stomach him. . . my husband was so controlling and manipulative and kept me out in the boonies in [a small town] with no phone, no car and no neighbors."

And about her second husband, the youngest child's father, she says, "He turned out to be so abusive, so mean. He beat me all the time. He abused my kids. He's just terrible. He went to prison for three years."

Debbie also says she was in a marriage that was physically abusive for 10 years. She reported him to the police several times, seeking restraining orders, and
eventually seeking a divorce and custody of the children. Eleanor never talked specifically about the men in her life, but she alludes to "bad relationships" in this comment: "If I had it to do over again, I would have let go of a lot of things that were holding me back. Like bad relationships, abusive boyfriends, I mean just things that I've let hold me back... but there are things that I made bad choices with."

Betsy also talks about her husband controlling her, saying, "As soon as we got married, he wanted me to drop out [of high school]. As soon as we got married, I pretty much kind of realized well... I'd say, 'I want to do this.' 'No.' 'Well, can I go out and see my mom?' 'No.'... I don't know why he has such a control issue."

Charlene's husband, who is the father of her younger child, is described as irresponsible, at best.

Well, he didn't work work. I had a friend who owned houses and whenever somebody moved out of the houses he would call my husband and say you know, come work on the house, but I never saw any of that money. That was his drinking, partying money. I don't consider it work when you get to pick your days and get high with the boss at the job and drink all day long. That to me is not work.

The end of relationships

Francie's husband abandoned her when she was pregnant. Now, more than two years later, he is of little help. "I'm still not divorced from him yet," Francie says. "We're not married, we're not together, like we're separated, and we've been separated for a while... he has not [provided any financial support.] He gave me a dollar for bus fare. He won't even show up to court. That's how he is." She adds that this man "has more children out there," four all told, none of whom he is supporting.
For Annette and Debbie, the separation came at their initiation after much abuse. Charlene and Francie were abandoned, and Eleanor didn’t discuss her relationships. But Betsy was clear that she was in a power struggle with her husband and needed to get out of the marriage to do what she wanted to do, namely to go to college. She says, “That’s why we split up, because I wanted to better myself. I wanted to go to college... The marriage turned into a real power struggle. I think that he couldn’t handle the idea of me doing better than him in any case or circumstance."

Despite the hostile relationships, several of the women reported that they had on-going relationships with men who were friends and in some cases former husbands. Charlene and Annette both reported turning to the fathers of their older children for help and even housing during the breakup with the most recent husband. Charlene said of her older child’s father:

Her father wanted to marry me, and it just wasn’t going to happen. But we’re still really good friends. He wants to come up and stay for a week and see his daughter. When me and my husband split up, that’s where I went. I went to go live with him for a while. We’re really good friends. I don’t have any problem with him.

And Debbie has a male friend who lends her money and help. She says, “Nobody’s in for the long haul, except my friend Jack, who’s been there and seen this with their [sic] own eyes.”

Betsy is glad to have gotten out of the marriage at age 20 and with only one child: “You know, it’s real unfortunate that it happened that way, but I’m so happy that it happened now versus like me being 35 and being 35 years old and saying, ‘Oh, now I’m single. I have no education. I have three children, instead of one, and what am I going to do?’"

For the women who are a little older, there were even more declarations that being involved with a man is a hazard. From Eleanor’s “I’m not involved with
anybody and that's fine" to Annette's "Who needs a man?" to Charlene's rather more descriptive thoughts on the subject of men:

I've come to the conclusion that I just don't have time in my life for a man or anything extra. And I really love men and that really burns me because men are my favorite pastime. As long as I don't marry them, I guess I'm OK. Just whenever someone's around I just lose all perspective of where I am or what I'm doing. ...I've learned it's a lot easier to do things without a man around. That was a big milestone to realize that, hey, men don't do anything to help me at all.

Charlene also says help is more available and she can go ahead and do more now that she's single:

Being married you and your husband are supposed to work things out and you can't get help from people because you're married and you got a husband who is more than able to work. Why doesn't he get off his lazy butt and do something? That kind of held me back, because I couldn't do anything with my husband.

Health

Medical issues

By chance, the six women interviewed fell into three pairs that were close in age. The two oldest, Debbie and Annette, were both 40 at the time of the interviews. Both of these women talked quite a bit about coping with medical problems. Annette says she was sick from the black mold growing on her mobile home, and she also describes living with general and constant pain from aching bones and muscles: "My back always hurts. My neck always hurts. My finger joints are constantly aching, every day, my feet, everything." Debbie also says, "I'm in pain a lot. I have a lot of medical problems." She says she was sent "from doctor to doctor."

Eleanor was 30 and Charlene turned 29 during the study. Charlene several times mentioned "a specific health problem" and made reference to being on
medication. She never elaborated on what the problem was. Eleanor says she did not have the glasses she needs in the past and she rarely wears them now.

I didn’t have glasses for a very long time, and I’m legally blind, so for me not to have my glasses and to be stuck in a room full of really loud kids..., for me it was just awful. ...But you know at times I’ve been getting a lot of tension headaches and my glasses make it worse. ...I went for years without glasses.

The two youngest women both volunteered information about recent medical problems: kidney stones (Betsy) and pink eye (Francie).

Mental health issues

In the course of describing their day-to-day challenges, the women made references to depression and stress. Recalling the time of the breakup of their marriages, both Francie and Betsy said they had felt suicidal. Francie had experienced depression before: “I used to walk around with a depressed look on my face saying ...I don’t have a family. I don’t have anything, you know, my sister doesn’t even like me any more, which was true, you know.” And she said that at the time her husband left, “I was on the verge of, like, suicide or something, ‘cause he had just left me with, like, this kid in my stomach.”

Betsy described journal entries she had made at the time of her breakup.

I went through the bad times, the good times, the mental depression, the ups, the downs of almost like a teenage-type feeling going through all over again. So it’s [the journal’s] got the real suicidal, real maniac [sic] depression and the real hurt, the real pain written down on paper that I kind of, you know, am looking back on and going “god, god I went through that.” You know I was very unstable emotionally. I was very unstable financially. I was very unstable in every form of the word.

Betsy used her journal writing and re-reading her journal to monitor her own ups and downs and her progress.

I even have a record of all the goals that I set, and I’m not afraid to write in my journal where I failed. ...And I wrote in some places,
"I'm not a good mother. I can't do this. I can't handle this." And then, after that, a ways down, "Yes I can. It's OK. I can make it. I can do it." And once I started saying that, things started going better.

Debbie's demeanor throughout was rather flat and depressed. She described her marriage as only a degree better than death, and she had found the alternatives to staying with her husband equally oppressive. She says, "Shelters are places I wouldn't be willing to live. When I had a job with the medical examiner's office we found people dead in those places. Dead from suicide. So who is better off? Are you better off dead or in an abusive relationship, but at least you are alive?"

Eleanor and Charlene both mentioned receiving professional help. Because Eleanor was forced to deal with her alcoholism, she also faced up to other problems:

I had been running around in circles and chasing my own tail, so then I decided, you know, to stop. I think that I had been so very focused on doing so much all at the same time and I just couldn't. I was so stressed and so pressured that I just couldn't do it. So then when everything happened, I had to really stop and take a look at my life and look at where I was going and so, you know, I was very willing to just try to get as much help as I possibly could.

Charlene was most descriptive about her stress. She says, "Before I hopped on the welfare wagon, yes, I was making better money. But I was so stressed out I couldn't see straight." Now, she alludes to medication she's taking for a "medical problem." She says the medicine "is supposed to cause severe depression," but she's not depressed. Instead, she describes herself as irritable and barely under control with her children.

Yes, my head's spinning around, and I'm spitting pea soup. Yes. And I think, hopefully, if I can explain to the doctor, you know, what's going on and that the medication I'm taking is not helping this...I'm like a pinball machine. You know: "Mommy?" "WHAT?" And it's not their fault. [She taps on the table.] Just somebody doing that—I've got so much going—that's irritating.
Drugs and alcohol

Drugs and alcohol formed a significant theme in the comments of all of the women, except Annette, who never mentioned them. But for Debbie and Betsy, the comments were about other family members who had problems with drugs, while Francie, Eleanor, and Charlene spoke of their own experiences. Although these three all talked about their involvement, it was in very different ways.

Francie talks about using drugs and alcohol as a teenager, but not remaining involved in that activity:

I quit doing drugs my sophomore year. I didn’t want to do any pot, didn’t want to do any drinking or nothing. Thought that I could, you know, just kind of play the straight and narrow. But still, really, kind of, I felt empty inside. And nothing was filling me quite right, you know, so it’s like all I was doing, I was still searching and searching and searching.

During the period of this study, Eleanor was in treatment for alcohol abuse following a DUI arrest. She said she had started drinking “at a very young age as a way of coping and staying warm living on the streets and that’s what we did.” She was, predictably, very aware of the subject and of the impact alcohol had on her life.

I ended up getting a DUI, so that kind of forced me to look at some problems that I’ve had in the past. ...I started getting help. I think, for myself, a lot of the stress that I was under which sort of led to some abuse issues that I have with alcohol were related to work. I was very frustrated with the amount of money that I was making. ...I couldn’t successfully complete what I took on, including parenting, my job, school, relationships. ...that’s why my drinking problems, because that was easier. That was my stress reliever.

For Eleanor, her half year of sobriety has been a positive experience, “and things have really kind of fallen into place ever since I stopped, and so that’s where I get that kind of support and, of course, I get my sober support also from my out patient [treatment].”
Charlene also talked quite a bit about drinking, but never identified it as a personal problem. During her long anecdotes in seminar, outside of class, and also during the interviews, Charlene often mentioned social drinking. For example, “My idea of study for midterm was margaritas and a block party barbecue.” But she also made reference to “calling a number every day to go pee in a cup,” and the researcher learned that she was having court-ordered random urinalysis as part of a custody dispute. Charlene referred to “peeing in a cup” a couple of times during the second interview, but said she did not abuse drugs or alcohol.

Homelessness and Housing

Housing was a topic of concern for all of the women and several of them volunteered that they had been homeless for some period of time. The most protracted period of homelessness was described by Annette, who had been the homeless mother of five children, some of whom were with her some of the time:

For two years I lived in my car, in the campground, at shelters and all over. . . . I had friends help me. First, I lived with my sister. That lasted about a month because . . . we didn’t like her. We didn’t like living with her, anyway. So I left. I was in and out of his [ex-husband’s house]. . . . My ex-husband always let me come back in and out, in and out. I lived in the campground one summer and went to Utah for a few weeks and just went everywhere, and I went back to his house for a day or two or three or four and back out because I couldn’t handle him. So I was in and out, and, finally, my dad hunted me down and got me this mobile home out in [a small town] and that was seven years ago.

Betsy also used the word “homeless” in her description of her recent life.

Moving in with a roommate, getting kicked out and homeless again. Living with my mom. And finally on my own. This has not been the easiest thing. . . . Finally my family came through. I connived my way into roommat ing with a friend. I was paying over half the rent, living off whatever I had saved up from work right down to nothing and finally had to move back in with my mom, which was really hard.
Francie and Eleanor were both homeless when they were teenagers and had dropped out of high school.

Francie: “I was 18 when I dropped out. That’s when I was homeless.”

Eleanor: “I was 14 and I had left home and I was living on the streets of Seattle for about two years.”

None of these women were receiving welfare benefits at the time of their homelessness. Debbie, who had been in a closer-to-middle-class situation until she ended her abusive marriage at age 40, sums up the situation as a choice between welfare and homelessness: “They are keeping me in the system, forcing me to be on welfare or be homeless.”

Women and their children who were not living on the streets often ended up moving in with a parent. Charlene describes living with her two children in her father’s living room. Betsy and her son moved in with her mother. For Annette, who is not receiving welfare, housing placed at the top of the list of things she wanted to improve, and Eleanor paints a vivid picture of how unaffordable adequate housing is.

If I was not on housing [assistance], that’s what put me in this really awful financial situation for a very long time. I was paying about 50 percent of my wage to rent. …this [housing] is something that had been such a problem. We were only living in a little, teeny one bedroom apartment for $780 a month. It was making me crazy. I didn’t have a room. But, you know, that’s what you’re looking at out there.

Once the women became TANF recipients, they also became eligible for housing assistance and skipped to the top of the usual two-year waiting list. As Charlene says, it’s a great relief: “So, my rent’s paid ‘til August. I don’t have to worry about anything until August as far as rent goes. So, that’s one thing I don’t have to worry about.”
For Betsy, the housing assistance program made it possible to have the apartment she wanted:

So, I have a beautiful two-bedroom apartment and people walk in and go "Wow, this is huge. How are you affording this?" ... What I told them [the landlords] was, I walked in and I said "Hi, my credit sucks, BUT you're entering into a contract with me and not only are you entering into a contract with me you are entering into one with the State and I'm entering into one with the State so you cannot get screwed with this deal. Every month the rent will be paid on time because it's not by me it's by the State." And I think I sold them with that. It's like, "How can I not like a tenant who's always going to have their rent due on time every month for a year and cannot break the contract?" ... I'm very proud of my house. I think that it looks very nice for my age.

Summary of the Contextual Issues

The women's history and relationships with parents, siblings and male partners, their physical and mental health, including drug and alcohol abuse, and the instability of their housing and financial situations form a context for their current roles as parents, employees, TANF recipients and students—the four roles all participants in WorkFirst/Work Study have to play.

Relationships with their families of origin had been stormy for most of the women. All but Betsy described mothers who were unable or unwilling to care for and protect them. All of the women had left parental care between the ages of 14 and 17. Eleanor and Annette's mothers have died, and Debbie, Francie, and Charlene have no or very limited contact with theirs. Only Betsy has regular, supportive contact with her mother. Sibling relationships were supportive for Eleanor and Francie.

Childhood and adolescent relationships with fathers ranged from severely abusive (Francie) to virtually non-existent (Eleanor). The other women had little to say about their fathers' roles as they were growing up, and some have friendly
contact now. Two fathers have provided recent assistance with housing and computers.

Relationships with male partners had been negative, including physical and emotional abuse, failure to support the children, and abandonment. These women have struggled with drugs and alcohol themselves and with substance abuse among members of their families, including parents and husbands.

The women identified finding and maintaining adequate and affordable housing as the most difficult aspect of trying to be self-sufficient. At the time of the study, because housing vouchers are part of the program, the five women in the WorkFirst/Work Study program were reasonably well-situated in acceptable apartments. Only Annette was having housing problems. She was not receiving public housing assistance.

All of the women interviewed operate under a high level of stress. All have many demands on their time and resources. Most have experienced hopelessness at critical times in their lives, but apparently only two have received help from a mental health professional.

Parenting

Annette and Debbie made specific reference to their children having been abused by their fathers or stepfathers. Charlene and Betsy both had been accused of child abuse or neglect during their divorce and custody proceedings. Francie expressed a great deal of concern about letting her ex-husband take care of their son because she does not consider him a responsible parent. Charlene and Eleanor spent the most time during interviews talking about parenting. Both were critical of their own parenting skills, and Eleanor was actively making changes in her relationship with her daughter. Charlene talked about her own lack of patience
and control in dealing with her children. For all of these women, being a parent was a grounding, central part of their identity and a motivator to improve their work and home lives, but the children were also a challenge, a complication, and a stressor.

Three crucial issues that affect these women—child care, custody and safety, and children’s behavior and discipline—are examined here. This section also looks at the participants’ attitudes toward parenthood and where and whether they get help with parenting.

Child Care

Annette talks about what it was like when she went to the hospital-run program to be certified as a nursing assistant: “I had to be there every day at six o’clock in the morning. I had a baby. He was 18 months at the time. Now he’s four, but he was one and a half and I had to have a sitter and get him up at 5:15 and that was grueling.” Now that the baby is four, Annette’s teenage daughters take care of him: “They have to do that. They really don’t have a choice. They take care of Tommy, real good care for me, and if they don’t they’re in real serious trouble, and they know it.”

For the women in the WorkFirst/Work Study program, child care may be less of an issue than it was for Annette. At least it is affordable, because the WorkFirst program provides child care vouchers, and the participants are required to pay only a $10 per week co-payment. But infant care is extremely hard to find, and Eleanor reports that when her daughter was an infant, she was cared for by “a woman in the complex and just different people here and there. Not always the most ideal people.”
At the time of the study, Francie, Betsy, Eleanor and Charlene all had children in the traditional day care age range, 18 months to 5 years, and all were satisfied with their current arrangements for those children. However, finding the right child care center and getting the child into it was not always easy. Eleanor’s daughter has serious behavior problems and had been “kicked out” of several day care centers. She was currently in a special therapeutic day care that Eleanor was very happy with, but she might not have even heard of it if she had not become a client of a mental health care facility herself following her DUI arrest.

Betsy reports that her son is in “a wonderful day care center... which everyone around here knows about.” But she says she had problems getting him into a good center.

For a while I was getting desperate because when I first put him in day care everybody was filled completely. I got on a waiting list and it came down to my turn and she said get the papers from DSHS. Well, of course they’re going to be very slow and my position got closed and they went down to the next person down the line and I was getting desperate. What happened was I had to have my son live with my ex-husband for a month because I had no day care, no resources and DSHS really wasn’t working with me.

Charlene has two children, one day care age and one school age. She talks about the complications of having the children in different care situations.

I have to drive out here early in the morning, drop the one kid off on ‘C’ Street, come all the way to school, which isn’t a problem to drop her off there. The problem exists when I have to go home because I leave here, I go to work in [the south end of the city], I come back downtown to pick up my son and then have to drive all the way back to the school here [at the north end of the city] to pick up my daughter to go home all the way in [the south end of the city]. It’s a real pain in the patoot.

She also talked at length about the problems of having a sick child when there is no day care and no flexibility at the job:

If he’s [her son] got any kind of a fever, I’m not allowed to bring him back for 24 hours. You know, if he throws up, I’m not allowed to bring him back for 24 hours. Whether it was just a mishap throw...
up or not, you know. I'm not allowed to bring him back for 24 hours. He got sick, threw up on the daycare teacher, day care teacher called me up said you gotta come get your son he just threw up. ... And they're like, "Don't you have some sort of emergency day care?" I'm like, "No. My whole family works. They have lives, too." You know, if I can't take him to the regular day care, I'm doomed. There's nowhere else I can take him. There's nothing I can do about it. Just stay at home with him. So I kind of have to hope and pray to god that nothing bad happens in the next two years.

Custody and Safety of Children

Before and during the period of the study, Debbie was in and out of court trying to get final resolution to the level of support her husband would be ordered to provide her and her children, while also making sure her husband would only be allowed supervised visits with the children. She talked about the earlier unsupervised visits and their effect on her school experience, "I got one scholarship and then took one quarter off because my kids were badly beaten." She was angry about the kind of representation she received in court and felt abused by the judge. She says, "I'm not allowed to speak in court and my lawyer doesn't do a good job. Yesterday in court the judge said to me, 'You allowed it to happen.' He said that right in front of my daughter. He made the abuse my fault in front of my daughter. That's not right."

Betsy had left her son with her estranged husband while she was trying to arrange adequate child care.

He [husband] tried to file—while he had him [son] in his custody—a restraining order against me, using my ex-roommate. They all wrote notes saying I really beat my son and really the reason I had him was for the child support, which at the time I wasn't even getting any... [They said] that was the only reason I had my son, aside from me being abusive and verbally abusive and just this horrible person they made me out to be. I smack him around. I throw him in the door. I lock him outside of my house. ....I actually confronted her [ex-roommate], and I said "Why did you write these things about me?" And she goes, "Well, your son wanted his daddy."
Betsy denied ever having hurt her son, and at the time of the study she had custody of the boy. “It’s a fair trade on his [husband’s] part. He got all the material possessions and I got my son.”

All of the women were keenly aware of having a somewhat tenuous hold on their children. Particularly for Charlene and Francie, who had experience themselves as foster children, making sure that they maintained custody of their children was a topic of major concern. Francie summed up her concerns regarding her son’s welfare:

I don’t want to have anything to do with the adoption system. I don’t want to have anything to do with the foster care system. …I was in foster care. I was a foster care child, so I know what it’s like to be in foster care. I would never put my son through that, never. I would not put my son through that, because I was through it and I was so angry at my mom. I thought she was abandoning me. I thought she was terrible. But my son will never know that. …I feel more confident now that I’m going to be able to raise my son, you know. I feel more confident that I’m going to. But before it was like, “Oh, my goodness, what am I going to do?”…He’s my baby, you know. He’s my baby, and I’m not afraid of anything since I’ve been doing so well with the things that are going on in my life, you know, with everything, with the job and school and other stuff, and I’m doing what I’m supposed to be with my son and trying to make the bills, make sure the bills are met and stuff like that. And everything’s coming out OK, you know, so far. And there have been times when I was scared, because a bunch of people that I know that had their kids taken away, you know, that had their kids, children, taken away, sometimes not even for really good reasons, you know. But I know that I don’t have to be scared of that.

Francie also expressed great concern over her son’s safety when his father took care of him. She was still in the process of divorcing, although she had been separated for more than two years.

I allowed my son to stay the night with his dad and he took him downtown the next morning and he was hanging out there most of the day on the streets with my son. And I said, “Ain’t gonna cut it, buddy, ain’t gonna cut it.”…I don’t trust him, and I told him, I said, I want there to be supervised visits again. I want to be there when you’re around Joey, because I’m scared what’s going to happen to him when he’s downtown. I’m scared about it.
For Charlene, the random drug testing that was part of her custody battle was a challenge. In fact, to the shock and surprise of Margaret the seminar teacher, Charlene did risk taking a drink during that period and failed one of the tests even though the stakes were extremely high. But Charlene, nevertheless, expressed a strong desire to be a model parent to her children and, when the custody matter was resolved in her favor, she was relieved about that and about the end of the monitoring.

You know, now that my divorce is over and final there’s a lot of things off my mind. I don’t have to worry about running to the courthouse to file papers. I don’t have to worry about calling a number every day to go pee in a cup anymore. I don’t have to worry about anything that has to do with that.

Children’s Behavior and Discipline

Except for Francie’s concerns about her son’s custody and his visitations with his father, she was alone among the women interviewed in that she did not discuss any behavior or discipline problems. In part, this may be attributable to her child’s age. He was the youngest of the children and had his second birthday near the end of the study period.

Betsy was another participant who had a single, quite young child. Her son was just three at the time of the interviews. She offers this explanation of a recent incident in which her neighbors had complained to the police about the child’s crying.

The rule is that he sleeps in his own bed because I do not want to be a parent—even if it makes me mean or not—I don’t want to have a 7-year-old child sleeping in my bed. So, sick or not, he sleeps in his own bed. ..It was a nuisance. They’ll [the police] probably have a record that they were called to the house now. I have nobody over to the house. I have no parties. And now they [neighbors] call the police when my child is sick. ..So, if he starts crying in the middle of the night, I go in and I try to reason with him. Even if that’s pointless, it’s better than losing my temper. If I get to the point
where I lose my temper, I just walk out of the room, close the door, and walk away.

Charlene also has a two-year-old child and she talks about being impatient and overwhelmed when he wanted attention: "My boy will stand in the kitchen and scream, 'Well, Mommy.' He wants me to hold him, but I gotta make dinner. You know. I get home at 6:30 at night, it's time to make dinner."

But it is Charlene's seven-year-old daughter whose behavior concerns her most.

She's like me. Straight A's, but she can't sit in her seat long enough. She drives her teacher crazy. I'm thinking about taking her down to get tested for ADD. I don't want to put her on drugs or anything, but I would like to know. ...I'm very short tempered, and I have no patience, and when you tell somebody something and they're bouncing off the walls, and they don't hear you, and they turn around and they do exactly what you told them not to do, you know, it makes you wonder if there's something wrong. And she always wants to help. She always wants to be in the middle of things.

Eleanor's daughter, although she is barely five, has serious behavior problems, including episodes of physical aggression against other children that led to her being "kicked out of child care once more. It was about the sixth time."

Eleanor also acknowledges that she is not always able to give her daughter the stimulation or attention she needs. Eleanor has an "extra job" cleaning apartments at night, and, she says, at that time her daughter gets bored.

She gets to watch TV, but, you know, a kid can only watch so much TV, and I've got a million things to clean while I'm there. Everything is 'Mommy, mommy, mommy'...I end up yelling at her more often than not, and I don't enjoy that and she doesn't enjoy that either.

Debbie's children are the oldest (11 and 13) of the WorkFirst/Work Study participants interviewed. Debbie describes constant and serious behavior and discipline problems, especially with her 13-year-old daughter. These are some excerpts from her comments about the children:
“My daughter is a really smart kid, and she had excellent study habits. But now her dad tells her she doesn’t have to listen to me. He says, ‘Your mother’s a fucking whore.’”

“The kids are completely out of control.”

“My kids are old enough to stay alone, but now I can’t leave them. They just fight and trash the house and get in trouble.”

“My daughter is in a youth at-risk program through Denny Youth Center—that’s Juvy [Juvenile Rehabilitation Administration]—she had a signed court order to make her follow the rules.”

And about her personal challenge as a single parent: “I don’t have every other weekend without kids. It’s constant.”

Attitudes Toward Being a Parent

Despite the enormous challenges these women face as low-income, single parents, every one of them talked about the importance of their children’s welfare and future and of either their confidence in or efforts at being a good parent.

Francie sums up her feelings with no apparent negatives:

You know what? I love my job as a parent. I really do. I love my job as a parent. I love my job with my son. ... I do have a goal. I do want something for him. I want him to be established and where I’m at with God. I want him to know that I love God, and I want to be able to be an exampleship [sic] for him for that. And I want him to grow up knowing God. That’s one. That’s my main one. The second one is I want him to be able to do whatever he wants to do.

Other women seemed to be having a more mixed experience. Charlene, for example, describes her desire to provide a good future for her two children as a significant motivation for her to tackle making big changes in her life.

My kids are pushing me to do it [go to school]. I mean, they’re not old enough to really understand what’s going on. All they know is Mommy’s not ever home, and that’s basically what’s pushing me to
do this. I want to be home for them....I want them to have Nikes and go to the mall and have Gap clothes. I want them to have all that and they're not going to have it if I don't get off my duff and do something.

But Charlene acknowledges that she's not entirely positive about her children and that her parenting skills are not what she would hope, sometimes to the point that she has sought medical help.

I'm in a pretty good mood, it's just I cannot stand my children to open their mouth. Just the word "Mommy" rakes right down my spine, and I say, "WHAT DO YOU WANT?" "CAN'T YOU LEAVE ME ALONE FOR FIVE SECONDS?" So, I called my doctor and said, "I seem to be having a problem of spitting pea soup at my children. Can we please do something about this, because I'm extremely stressed?"

Betsy clearly articulates a dilemma she has faced and probably will face again. Trying to do a good job as a parent and staying off of welfare can be conflicting goals.

Well, sure, if I'm working a 40 hour job, I'm off the welfare system. Yay. Good for me. I'm supporting myself and supporting my family. I'm not relying on anybody, but who's it going to hurt the most? That's going to be my son....When I was working 40 hours a week and going to college or planning on going to college part time even, he [husband] said you're not going to have time for our son. Just give him over to me. So I changed that, and now I'm lazy. So I can't win and right now I'm not going to try to win. I'm just doing what's best for me and my son and I'm not worrying about other people. ....I'm not abusing my son. I'm a very good mother. My son is clean, bathed, clothed and fed.

Annette, Debbie and Eleanor all express regrets about their children's experiences so far. For Debbie and Annette, it is because they were unable to protect their daughters from witnessing abuse or being victimized and from having adult responsibilities as children. As Annette said:

My fifteen year old is so anti-kid. She's raised them all just about. She's helped out a lot, especially with the four year old, but she don't want kids. She says, "I've had so many kids already, I'm not never having no kids." She says, "I hate kids." She says, "I'm never getting married." She says, "I know my own mind, and I know
what I’ve seen, and I don’t like it. I’ll never go there.” I did that to
her. The men. The abuse. The torture. And she don’t want it.

In Eleanor’s case, she says she was driving herself so hard to go to school
and to be financially independent that she lost sight of her daughter’s needs.

I was gone lots. And my daughter was getting older and needed me
more and more but I was just really focused on school. ...And I feel
very badly about that now. ...I thought I was doing the right thing. I
thought I was going to school and I thought I was working like I
was supposed to do and so you know nobody better tell me or
JUDGE me for what I’m doing, right, you know, because I’m doing
what I’m supposed to be doing.

But since Eleanor’s recent involvement with various mental health and
therapeutic agencies, she says her parenting has changed. “Things have changed
for me incredibly in the last year in knowing what’s responsible behavior as a
parent,” she says. “I try to spend time with [my daughter] take her to the library
and to the beach and take her to the pool and do that kind of thing. The YMCA.
She really enjoys that.”

Professional Help and Support Groups for Parents

Eleanor now has a great appreciation for the parenting skills she is learning
in her therapy sessions, and she says, “My daughter and I are building a better
relationship through [the mental health agency] and through her school.” But she
recognizes that at an earlier point in her life as a parent, she felt “judged” if any-
one criticized her parenting. The other women interviewed are generally negative
about professional parenting help in the form of classes or support groups and,
one way or another, assert that they are “good” parents.

Betsy’s philosophy is that “experience is the best way to parent, unless
you’re bad at it.” She says of herself, “So far I don’t think I’ve left him [son] emo-
tionally scarred or abused. So, I think I’m doing an OK job so far.”
Debbie and Charlene had been sent to parenting classes by the court as part of their custody dispute resolution. Debbie clearly feels that she was not a peer of the other women in the parenting class.

I don’t need this. I’m a good parent. I have taken parenting classes, because I’m a school person. …Most of the people I saw at the support group reeked of cigarettes. …All they are doing is complaining. They talked about their boyfriends. I’m not like them. I’m in school. I’m not screwing around man to man in front of my kids. Those other women have not been actively trying to change things like I have. I lived with my bags packed and food in my car at all times, so I could take my kids and leave until he calmed down.

Charlene says bluntly, “I think they [parenting classes] are extremely retarded. Well, I went to a parenting class for my divorce, and for someone to sit there and tell me how to raise my children is wrong.” She also indicates that the parenting classes were a burden on an already overloaded life: “Of course, my idea of a lot of things is ‘a waste of my time,’ [to] which people say, ‘Well, that’s where you learn things.’ Well, yeah, that is how you learn things, by going to groups, but let me get a life together first before you send me off to learn more stuff.”

Only Francie was positive about her experience in a parenting class.

I liked the parenting seminar. It got me a chance to know people that are going through the same thing that I’m going through, and I got to say a little bit of my piece about things, too, without talking down my husband, you know, and without making it all blech. And I met a couple of girls who were in the same situation. I met a guy who was in the same situation as me. So it was like, “Wow! I’m not the only one. Cool.”

Summary of Parenting Issues

Being a parent is recognized by all the women as the most important role in their lives. It is the reason for work and for school. All of the women want to be considered “good parents.” They are remorseful about the times they have failed to protect their children and sometimes nervous about whether or not they will be
able to maintain custody of them. They feel badly when they lose patience with young children or when they cannot control the behavior of older ones. They are sensitive to criticisms, including “expert” opinions, of their parenting skills or techniques. They have high hopes for what they will be able to provide their children and what their children will be able to accomplish. They are mothers.

Johnson et al. (2000) have identified child care concerns as the “greatest source of stress facing adult women students,” and they include students who are married and who are not on welfare. For women who are receiving WorkFirst benefits, good child care is considerably more possible now than it was earlier in their parenting years or than it is for women in similar circumstances who are not in the program, like Annette. Infant care was no longer an issue for the women interviewed. Nevertheless, even with licensed child care arrangements in place and paid for, the women still struggled with having to miss work when a child was sick.

The women interviewed have few resources in their lives for help and support with parenting. They generally did not have positive role models in their own mothers, nor do they have mothers or other family members willing and able to help with child care. In general, their descriptions of their friends did not suggest that sharing child care with them was an option. Most of the children’s fathers are absent, abusive or otherwise not trustworthy. They do not have discretionary money for babysitters. It is not surprising that several of the women described feeling overwhelmed by their children’s demands for attention on top of all the work, school, and household duties for which the women are responsible.

Although most of the women had negative comments about parenting classes or support groups, in most cases their attendance at these activities had been mandatory. In the WorkFirst/Work Study seminar, there were often lively
discussions about particular parenting issues which many of the women participated in.

Welfare

Previous Experience with Welfare

Annette did not discuss any experience she may have had with welfare. Of the five women in the WorkFirst/Work Study program, Betsy and Debbie were on welfare for the first time. The other three had some prior experience. Francie went on and off welfare several times, beginning when she was pregnant with her now two-year-old child. Charlene reports that she always worked, but was accustomed to receiving some public assistance in food, child care and medical benefits, but not cash. “You know, I’ve always worked,” she says. “I was getting a few food stamps and getting child care and medical from the DSHS office and then working for my bills.” She went on welfare the first time when she was pregnant with her youngest child who is now two. “I couldn’t work because I was nine months pregnant and gonna have a baby, so I had to go on welfare so my husband could sit at home on his ass, too, but I could not use the DSHS to go to school.”

Only Eleanor talks about a childhood on welfare.

I was raised on poverty level, you know, welfare, for my entire life. That’s what I knew. It’s not what I liked. ...I remember my mother being put in places, institutions, and knowing, hearing, it’s because she doesn’t have insurance, didn’t have money to pay for good care. And with food banks, I stood in food bank lines more than I care to admit. Going to DSHS, staying there for hours, and being bored out of my mind. You know, kids, they are subjected to going into places because they are kind of having to. And it stigmatizes them. You know what I mean. It puts them in this position where they feel bad about themselves.

As an adult, this is her second time on welfare. “I ended up going back on welfare when I had my daughter and then at that point, that’s when I decided, ‘I
want to go to school. I want to do something with myself," she says. Eleanor completed an Associate of Arts degree at that time and was off of welfare for three years until she lost a job and, recently, had her DUI arrest. Because her previous adult experience with welfare began five years earlier, she is quite aware of the changes in what the DSHS office provides and how it works. And she says it is improved.

But the programs! I mean, they may have been out there [the last time she was on welfare], but I didn’t access them at that point, and I wouldn’t have even known to because no one said, "You can do this or you can do this." They are a lot more articulate about what the programs are. ...I mean, working with Employment Security and then they also have a number of other programs that, you know, just didn’t exist or were not told to people, like the housing and different things.

Attitude Toward Welfare

Although Debbie was on TANF at the time of the study, she was a vocal critic of the system. "The so-called 'unemployable'—if there was no social security, they’d get a job," she says. She sees herself as different from "welfare bums," meaning the stereotype of women on welfare: "I did everything the right way that welfare moms supposedly don’t do. I worked my ass off." And, to her credit, Debbie got off of TANF as soon as she could. As soon as she had resolved her divorce and had established that her ex-husband was required to provide child support, Debbie left welfare. She had the option of staying on welfare and in the WorkFirst/Work Study program. DSHS would then have collected the child support money, and Debbie could have continued in the WorkFirst/Work Study job she loved.

For Charlene, there was nothing especially unusual about being on welfare. She said, "Most of my friends are welfare recipients whose mothers were on
welfare and whose mothers’ mothers were on welfare.” She, too, differentiates herself from others on welfare. She describes friends who abuse the system, and says her goal is to be off welfare.

I feel like a leach on the system, but I know I’m doing it for a reason. I’m not like my friend who’s just having babies and getting welfare. So, I know I’m doing something, and it’s against my personal belief. I should not be on welfare, but after two years, I’ll be OK and I won’t ever have to be on welfare again.

Betsy echoes that well-known stereotype and also sets herself apart:

“Regardless of whether or not I’m on the system, I’m not just sitting here on the system pumping out children and not going anywhere.”

Welfare Recipients Are Treated Badly

For all of the women interviewed, being on welfare is a hard pill to swallow, and they voice feelings that they are sometimes treated less respectfully and more harshly than they deserve because they are on welfare. In a private interview, Margaret, the seminar instructor agrees. “They all get treated the same—badly,” she says.

Charlene describe a situation in which she was unable to get information about the status of her child care vouchers, but Margaret, the seminar instructor, was called directly with the information.

I don’t know what it is—whether it’s Margaret’s position because she is a person who works for a living, and she works for the college—I don’t know if it’s her position or if it’s just the fact that, you know, I’m only a welfare recipient. They can’t take the extra five seconds to call a welfare recipient.

Eleanor concurs. She says, “I’m sure that you probably as a researcher know that people are not treated very nicely sometimes and sometimes [it’s] with good reason, but other times it’s not.” And Betsy describes being insulted by her
teenage sister, who said, “You are so pathetic. You live such a pathetic life. You’re fat. You just sit on the welfare system.”

But despite their negative feelings about being on welfare, all of the women interviewed had pragmatic, short-term reasons for putting themselves “in the system.”

Francie is on welfare “just to help me for that time being.” She says, “I’m not happy with being on welfare, and I want to be off of welfare, but I’d be happy with a simple life.”

For Debbie and Charlene child support enforcement was a significant motivator.

Debbie: “I went on welfare because I thought they would enforce the support requirement. He wasn’t paying the court-ordered support. I don’t want to be on welfare.”

Charlene: “I hate welfare. I get a few food stamps here and there, and I enjoy the medical because it helps, but I want my husband to owe me the child support, not the State.”

Welfare Goals

All of the women interviewed were on welfare with a particular goal. In the cases of Betsy and Charlene, they had specifically gone on welfare and left the full time work rolls, because they hoped the new program would offer long-term improvement in their ability to be and stay self sufficient. As Charlene puts it, “It was all done for peace of mind.”

Yeah, I was making better money before I hopped on the welfare wagon. Yes, I was making better money, but I was so stressed out I couldn’t see straight. I was just spinning around in circles with one oar in the water. Now I feel like I’ve got two oars in the water and I’m going somewhere. …No man’s going to ever respect me if I just
sit around on welfare, and I won’t respect myself. And I’m not showing my daughter anything but how to live off welfare. So, since I’m alone and since I’m by myself, I’ve got to do something.

Betsy also sees her time on welfare as a short-term solution that will give her an education for a teaching career with long-term results.

Yes, it’s going to take me a few years, and it’s going to take me probably a lot of ridicule that I’m using the State, but in the end I’m going to be, you know, not ever having to use the State. And I’m going to be more so contributing to the State in the education of the children, so that hopefully they don’t make the same mistakes that I do.

Eleanor also says, “I hope to not ever do this again.” She has had the most experience with welfare programs and has learned, she says, to really make the most of the opportunities the current programs are offering for long term improvement. But it is a learned skill.

I say “working the system” and it’s not a frivolous statement on my part at all. It’s not something I take for granted at all either. I mean the system works for me now. It didn’t work for me before, because I wasn’t open to it, and you have to really be open to it. ... Well, I mean, there’s this stigma to the system and being on the system and, yes, it’s been frustrating to me. There’s been times I’ve felt like I’m in this huge magnifying glass and it’s not fun. However, there’s an up side and a down side to that, and the up side is, if you work with people, they’ll work with you. And if you come across in a way that’s understanding and listening, really listening, to other people, there’s a lot that can happen to you.

Paperwork

The lives of the women interviewed are complex. Not only are they low income, single parents with all of the responsibilities and stresses of parenthood, they are also employed at least 16 hours per week, and they are students at the college. Added to that, receiving social services itself demands a great deal of their time. When Debbie left welfare at the end of the study period, she said, “It’s too hard running from here to there. Being off welfare cuts the running time in half.”
All of the women had stories about mistakes made by the social service agencies and the price they paid. Francie blames paperwork for the delay in her divorce. "It's mostly because of paperwork and stuff like that, and I still have DSHS things to do, to sign, and I have to have child support sign off some things and then I will be done. I've already taken the parenting seminar," she says. But, Francie also says: "I do understand that the welfare system can be a little picky, and I could find tons of things to complain about the welfare system, but it's not going to change anything really."

Eleanor takes responsibility for her role in handling the paperwork:

So I signed up for that [housing] program, as well, but they actually have been slacking. We went in. I did this whole big paperwork thing and I still haven't received it. That was about four months ago... Well, I'm the one who needs to go to them and say, "OK where is my paperwork? Because you guys are slacking here."

And Charlene tallies up the complexities of the agency regulations as a major stressor.

I like structure in my life, but this is really not structured structurism [sic], if that makes any sense whatsoever. My life is more complex having to go by all these [guidelines]. They have set structure, set guidelines that have to be done. My life is more topsy turvy, upside down trying to go by everybody else's guidelines. The school, DSHS, the YMCA where I have my children, the housing authority—you can only do this, if you do this, and you can't have this, unless you do this, this and this. ...I'm sorry. I know that having office work and having a lot of cases and things like that you don't have time to do each person individually like an individual person could do it, but you can only dump so much crap on a single person.

Dealing with Caseworkers: The Good, the Bad, the Inconsistency

The personal relationships between the women interviewed and the welfare personnel also had an impact on their lives. Some caseworkers, like Francie's, were considered very helpful. Francie says, "My caseworker at WorkFirst is doing
a good job. He's doing a very good job. I could say that he’s doing a great job.”

And, as usual, she has great empathy for the personnel at the DSHS office. “I’m one of those people who has to sit down and wait,” she says. “Everybody that’s in there is in bad situations and when you go in there and there’s a few people [DSHS workers] right in front, I go, ‘So, how you guys doing today?’”

But in several other conversations, individual caseworkers were portrayed as distant, and, more troubling, when the women compared notes in seminar they found they had not all been given the same information.

Eleanor has a negative feeling about her current caseworker.

To be honest with you, my caseworker’s not the easiest person to get a hold of. I’ve been switched back with my caseworker at least three or four times, different ones. So, the one that I have currently I’ve had before and she’s not... she’s a very cut and dried person. There’s not a lot of love in the heart there, not a lot of support. She’s been at DSHS for 18 years, and I don’t know if that tells you anything, but in her work there’s a lot of bureaucracy and that’s what she faces. I go in there. She doesn’t want to talk to me. She doesn’t want any details. She does want to answer a question for me and leave it at that. And if that’s not what I want, then I have to make an appointment with her. Even then, I’m not always getting the answer. So what I’ve gotten from her is “Yes, there’s this program. And, yes, you could do it.” That’s about the extent of it.

Washington’s WorkFirst program includes the involvement of DSHS, Employment Security, all of the community and technical colleges in the state, and the Community Trade and Economic Development (CTED) department. Eleanor talks about the challenges of dealing with several agencies, each of which provides a part of her total support package. “It’s amazing to me how little communication there is between these organizations that are supposed to be working together,” she says, adding, “Oh, well, considering the fact that their case load is that they’ve got 30 people for each worker, at least, if not more—I mean, how does one keep track of everything? I don’t know how anyone could.”
Betsy has also experienced the individual differences between caseworkers, "and, by God, if I could switch back to [previous office], I would do that in a heartbeat because my caseworker was so much better. Things happened so much quicker, and she was very understanding about everything."

And Betsy also believes the goal of each caseworker is to get people off the rolls, as she says, "The social worker is really in one narrow minded concern: 'Who else can I get off my case load that I can show as getting off DSHS?'"

Debbie Off of Welfare

By the end of the study period, Debbie had completed her legal work and had a court order for child support and spousal maintenance. She then stopped receiving TANF. She was very pleased with this outcome and continued to be critical of the welfare system, which she claimed made her life more complicated because her child support was coming through support enforcement and through DSHS.

I'm off welfare. I wish I never had to resort to it. ...But I had to go on welfare because I lost my job. ...I was on welfare a brief period, but had to stay on until the end of May. I got my new Work/Study site and took the paperwork to welfare and said, "I'm ready to get off welfare." They said, "You can't get off of welfare!" They said I had to stay on until July 1. ...They said I couldn't get off welfare, and I threatened to go to the media. How would the tax payers like to know I'm trying to get off welfare and they say I have to stay on?

Accessing Social Service Programs Other Than Workfirst/Work Study

Debbie's long history and frustration about getting adequate help during her abusive marriage led her to say this about social service agencies: "These places exist [only] on paper and tax money goes to support them." But other women, notably Eleanor, had received help from many programs. Eleanor points
out that once a client is connected with one of the several agencies and programs, she has better information and access to other programs. "Because I'm in the system—quote, unquote—I am able to access different programs that I would not have been able to had I not been in the system." She enumerates several special programs, including her daughter's therapeutic daycare and her own out patient treatment, as well as housing, food, and education benefits. She is also looking ahead to maximizing her cash benefits:

There is now part of DSHS, a part of the grant system that I was on, that I'm kind of hoping to take advantage of, because I'm hoping to get off of DSHS. That program is for if you opt to end your grant early [i.e. before a client has used the 60-month lifetime maximum]. ...So what happens is, if you choose, if you're starting to work and you're still getting a very small grant, say $50 a month, and you opt to end that grant, you can take the rest of your money. ...And also there's a program through the housing authority. It's called family self sufficiency. And what happens is when you start working, if you make over a certain amount of money you pay more rent; however, they pay part of that or put it into a saving's account for you which goes on for five years past the program. ...So then at the end of five years, you could have a down payment on a house. So I signed up for that program, as well.

Betsy, though less experienced than Eleanor, also tries to make the most of her opportunities in the system.

Well, when I go into the office to get benefits, I've been using every resource available. I'm not an idiot. I've never been an idiot. ...When I got on to this program what I did was I used my case-worker to jump to Margaret and Margaret to jump upstairs to the women's program, you know, and just used every single resource that I could find to get me to where I'm at now.

And still, Betsy experienced frustrations with the system that seemed to her, and to others, sometimes capricious: "My food stamp benefits have now been cut down to $18, where I'm getting $200 a month cash. So, basically I don't understand how they figure it out, when I spent over $200 a month in food stamps on food and now I'm getting $200 in cash and $18 in food."
And for some of the women, like Charlene, the biggest issue is still paying all the bills—food, housing, child care, medical, and "just life."

TANF to WorkFirst/Work Study

The move to welfare was a big step for the women interviewed, but once they were on TANF they became eligible for the WorkFirst education benefits, including the brand new WorkFirst/Work Study program that reduced their work requirement from 20 hours a week to 16 hours a week and increased their access to child care, if they are enrolled at a community or technical college for at least six credit hours. Further, the program gives participants the opportunity to fulfill their work requirement with jobs they might never have had a chance at before.

Since 100 percent of the wage for WorkFirst/Work Study "interns" comes from the welfare program to the colleges, there is no cost to employers who are thought to be more receptive to creating new "paid" positions in their organizations under these circumstances. The transition does raise some other challenges for the women, however.

For Charlene, the availability of the WorkFirst/Work Study program motivated her to give up dead end job situations and go on TANF with the express goal of receiving the education benefit. As she explains, she had to be convinced to take this step, first by Margaret, who Charlene had contacted about a different program that aids low income working parents, and next by her caseworker.

Margaret was telling me that to go through her program I needed to be on TANF. ...Then I took her advice and I went down there and I talked to my caseworker, and he said, "Oh, oh, quit your job." And I said, "Huh? A welfare worker telling me to quit my job? Who are you? Where did you come from?" ...He said, "I understand you don't like welfare. You don't want to be on welfare, and you're so smart, you're so intelligent, you need to go to school and get something, you know, for a more permanent situation." ...I was scared to make a transformation. I was making $1,600 a month waitressing.
Why would I want to just quit my job to go on welfare? ... Yeah. I had to quit everything. Throw everything that I was doing in the garbage to go on welfare to just restart everything all over, because once you’re in the middle of a rut doing something, the only way to get out of it is just to cut it off, nip it at the bud and start all over again.

Betsy describes her first introduction to the program when she was still working. She met her caseworker and became familiar with the WorkFirst program before she was eligible. “When I first went down to the first meeting with the program, I was still in my job that I just was still on, but it was graveyard,” she says. “At the time I made too much to even consider this program or any other DSHS, and I just kind of looked at it and snorted.”

Later, when she had quit that graveyard job to try to deal with her child custody issues, she did go on TANF and into the WorkFirst/Work Study program. When Betsy joined the program, and, indeed, at the time of this study, the WorkFirst/Work Study program was new, and the agencies did seem confused about eligibility, based on Eleanor’s and others’ comments and numerous seminar discussions, especially during spring quarter when the program first began.

For example, Eleanor talks about confusion among the different programs that in some cases lessens benefits. “I kind of got the feel that they [Employment Security] aren’t crazy about the program. They’re not completely informed about the program either,” she says. “I’m satisfying DSHS’s requirement, but I’m not satisfying Employment Security’s in that I’m not working 20 hours a week.”

Eleanor’s next comment elaborates on the issue of some caseworkers’ lack of support for the WorkFirst/Work Study program and the loss of access to other programs.

Well, actually, yeah, my caseworker had told me about the program probably two or three months ago. But what I was seeing as I was doing my WorkFirst seminar [a work-ready, job search seminar required of WorkFirst clients] is that they really intend—when you’re
doing the WorkFirst program—they want you to get a job that you’ll be happy with, but at the same time they want you off State assistance. So they’re more willing for you to take a lesser wage. But that’s what’s kept me stuck. ...To be in WorkFirst you have access to a few other programs that allow clothing options like the program “Dress for Success” and they give you vouchers for some clothing so you have appropriate attire. Well, for me [because I’m in WorkFirst/Work Study], I’m cut off from that anymore.

Betsy describes similar difficulties in the first months of the WorkFirst/Work Study program—perhaps because she moved from one DSHS region to another.

And then I moved to [a new small town] and I got completely denied. And then [my social worker] on my behalf asked, “Why did she get denied?” And they gave a list of reasons such as I’m with the WorkFirst/Work Study program...or all kinds of reasons that are not even by the book at all, so she [social worker] called the attorney that works on these things. ...So we’re going to go over and fight for that which is just another pain in my butt.

By summer quarter, most of the issues around benefits were apparently resolved—i.e. that participating in WorkFirst/Work Study and working 16 rather than 20 hours should affect only food stamps, not housing, child care, medical benefits or cash grants—and there were fewer horror stories from the participants. Eventually, Betsy described the program as “the most wonderful thing I ever heard of,” and Charlene and Eleanor used identical words as they described the process of joining the program. Charlene said, “Things just all kind of fell into place.” And Eleanor said, “It just really all fell into place for me. ...This is an incredible opportunity.”

Summary of Welfare Issues

In the Lerch et al. (2000) study of Washington’s WorkFirst program from July 1997 to February 2000, they report an increase in the proportion of welfare clients who are repeat clients, i.e., they have been on welfare before and they have
been off of welfare (up from 58 to 72 percent of the caseload), or are new to welfare (up from 3 percent to 5 percent). Like all of the women interviewed, Washington's current WorkFirst clients are not long-term welfare clients. Three of the women in the program who were interviewed are repeaters (Eleanor, Charlene, and Francie), and two are new to welfare (Debbie and Betsy).

Nowhere is it more true that “the devil is in the details” than in a look at what welfare recipients (and administrators) must pay attention to. Receiving aid from the government definitely comes at a price. The women interviewed, who are already short on resources, such as transportation and child care, must devote considerable effort to making sure their paper work is in order and in the right people’s hands. In some cases, it required the services of an advocate who is not a welfare recipient—Margaret, the seminar instructor—to make sure the women got the benefits to which they are entitled. Margaret told the researcher, “I encourage them [the students] to try to get it done themselves first, but when it's overwhelming you can get help. The caseworkers could be bullying them. Every one of the students in this program is meeting the DSHS requirements.”

Knowing the ropes helps, according to the women, but it is nearly impossible to figure it all out. Eleanor is probably overly optimistic about being able to come up with a down payment on a house from the bonus for leaving the caseload before the maximum time has elapsed. As it is described in the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee's June 2000 report on WorkFirst (2000), “Clients who receive a grant of less than $100 a month may get a one-time $1,000 Early Exit Bonus” (p. ii). At the time of the study, WorkFirst and the WorkFirst/Work Study program were so new that some confusion was inevitable. One can expect the issues, such as which benefits are legitimate, to become more clear as the program continues.
The women interviewed have embraced many of the negative stereotypes of welfare mothers. They know they have been portrayed as recklessly having many babies, neglecting their children, and being lazy. They are hesitant to accept that they are on welfare, and they are clear that their goal is to get off. But they know they are not lazy. In fact, they are working incredibly hard. They are meeting the requirements of the new WorkFirst/Work Study program: they are parents; they are employed 16-19 hours a week; and, on top of that, they are attending community college.

It is true, too, that the women interviewed were low-income working parents who went on welfare, in several cases, to be able to attend college and become higher-income working parents.

Work

Work History

All of the women interviewed had experience in the work force. Eleanor, Annette, and Charlene had been on their own and had worked full time most of the time since they were 16 years old or younger. For the past decade, Debbie’s husband had been the bread winner and, among other things, she had home schooled her two children. But she had worked as a medical aide for some period of time prior to that and, recently, had put the children in public school and had a job in the medical examiner’s office that she lost during her difficult separation. Annette has spent 24 years as a nursing assistant and says, “I’d like to get out of care giving. I’m burned out on caring for people.”
The other four women had put in a great deal of time as waitresses, bartenders and customer service representatives. Francie, who says her jobs were "pretty low, low key," describes her work experience:

I worked for a store and I worked at [a restaurant]. ... I moved from busser, to hostess. You just go into that job and you go in one day as a busser and the next day you wear a dress and you're a hostess, coffee hostess, you're someone who goes off and does the salad bar and stuff like that if you're wearing the dress. If you're not wearing the dress, you're either the busser or you're in the kitchen doing the dishes.

Charlene worked as a waitress, too, although she tried to get "out of waitressing" by getting training at a business school and taking an office job.

I was six months pregnant and got a job as an executive secretary because of that school. But then I got full-fledged pregnant, and they told me I had to take so much time off and I couldn't do it and in the process my husband had taken off and left two months after I had the baby. ... I just didn't know what I was going to do so I went back to waitressing and I'm thinking to myself, you know, I'm tired of sticking my fingers in AIDS-infested gravy. I'm tired of kissing people's derrières all day long. I just don't want to be 80 years old slinging burgers.

Charlene was making adequate money, but only by sticking to waitressing and by working at night. Betsy's work situation at a small manufacturing plant was similar: "I made $10 an hour but I was doing overtime, so I was way beyond that limit of poverty. ... But time went on and I realized I can't do graveyard shift with my son." Next she had a job through Americorp, but "they weren't willing to work with me. I wanted to go to school and they thought, 'You need to either do work or school and we don't want you to do both.' So we parted."

Eleanor describes her past work as follows:

Restaurants. Customer service—years of customer service—and in the last year and a half I'd gotten a job as an administrative assistant and then I was working in accounts receivable. My jobs, though, had changed pretty dramatically. I'd gone from jobs that were paying a lot less to jobs that were paying more, but still not as much as I wanted and not as much as I think that I'm worth and not enough to support my daughter and myself, to make us self sufficient.
Work Goals, Aspirations and Fantasies

First there is coming to terms with the things one really can’t do. Eleanor says she tried to join the military, but was “turned away, because I’m a single parent.” Debbie says, “I can’t be a cop like I wanted to be. I’m too old. And I probably can’t get other jobs in the criminal justice system, because they all require background checks.” Francie has ruled out supervisor (“the truth is I couldn’t pull off doing the supervisor job because of the way that things are at my house….I don’t think I would ever want to manage or supervise anything”) and teacher (“Oh, no, a teacher, I would never make a good teacher. No. I tried the Sunday School thing. I didn’t do very good on that either.”)

Next there are the goals. For Annette and Charlene, the clearly stated goal was to find a way to support the family and to be at home or at least not to have to work nights or travel far. As Annette says, “If necessary I will drag my butt out to an office, but not across the world.” Charlene describes her ideal work future:

My main goal is to be at home for my kids. Right now medical transcription is mostly done at home, and I’ve been talking to people in the hospitals, and they said within the next two years medical billing will also be done mostly at home. So I can raid my refrigerator, smoke a cigarette, if my children get sick at school I’ll be home. I’ll be working at home. They can call me at home. I don’t have to tell my boss, “Oh sorry I gotta leave, my kid’s sick.” Because I’ll be at home. I won’t have a boss standing over me watching every move.

And both Annette and Charlene want a change in the tenor of their jobs, too. Charlene says she doesn’t want to be a waitress into her old age, and Annette says of caretaking, “That’s mainly all I know, but I want to know something else. I can take care of babies and kids and people, but I want to do machines. I don’t want to take care of people any more.”

Certainly, self sufficiency and getting off welfare are primary goals. Francie states her wage goal as $10 an hour (“I’m not looking for the high scale. It would
be nice if I landed a job that was nice and that would bless me a lot, but you know I could live off of a little bit”). But the more experienced women have learned that they need more money than that. Eleanor says:

I was very frustrated with how much money I was making. I have a lot of hope for myself that I have a lot of potential. ...I’ve always been a single parent and had known that I was going to be a single parent, but I had never anticipated the cost. I thought if I waited until I was 25 years old to have a child that I would be old enough and I would be mature enough and I’d be financially stable enough but, you know, child care was so expensive and I was paying about $500 a month.

Charlene has a specific hourly wage in her sights: “With the degree and two years worth of experience I was looking on the job board—$24 an hour—and so I’m going, ‘Ah, money. Ch-ching.’”

There is some talk of following one’s passion in looking for work. Betsy talks about teaching:

[It’s a] chipperish happy atmosphere. And they [teachers] truly care about what they do. I mean, why would they be making that amount of money? Thirty-six thousand dollars a year, I think, would be the average after teaching for about five years. For me it’s going to be comfortable. It’s going to be a lot more than $10 an hour, but I’m never going to get rich off of it.

Eleanor talks about her growing realization that she would like to be making more money.

I’m in this place right now where I’m thinking I’m more money conscious than I’ve ever been. Realizing how little I have and how much I want. You know there are things that I want that a job in social services is not going to be enough. And the more I see the kind of money that people are making in technical industry, it’s like there’s no comparison. I mean technical writers make about $40 to $50 an hour. And it’s making me think more—unfortunately because I would be really good at helping other people, but, you know, I gotta say, you know, I’m 30. I want a house at some point. I want a house before I die.

But she also has some ideas about having a career in social services, where she would be helping people.
You know people don’t just fall into fields. They do things because they have their own issues, and they have a bond with something. And, to be honest with you, I am very interested in doing that [going back to school for a BA or MA in human services] because I want to help people and that’s because of how I was raised and who I am and who I have become.

Francie says, “I’m stuck between working with people and working with machines.” A job she might like, she says, is receptionist (“That would be cool”) and she is getting some computer training in her WorkFirst/Work Study job. But the bottom line is, “I don’t want to make more money. I just want to help someone.” In the first interview, Francie identified the job of her dreams as “pastor’s wife.” But in the second interview, she clarifies her goal as having a role in missionary work.

It [my goal] is helping people. It’s not just being a pastor’s wife, OK? My main goal isn’t to go off and attract a pastor. That’s not what I’m trying to do. I was thinking about that. I know, it’s weird. I can’t really explain it, but I can explain helping people. I can explain the want to touch people’s lives, the want to be able to be there. Actually it’s not to touch people’s lives for me. It’s to touch people’s lives for Christ. To see Christ move through someone is awesome, because he changes people’s lives all the time. And I’ve seen people that have been drug addicts, that have been the worst of the worst in the world sense, and they come out totally changed. I mean God totally changes their lives, and that’s what I want to do for the rest of my life. I want to be able to be a part of that. And the reason why is because I see the results. I see the results every day. Every day.

The women in the WorkFirst/Work Study program had to enroll in a course of study that was limited to basic education or a post-secondary vocational program. They also had expanded work opportunities. The WorkFirst program requires all clients to file a Personal Responsibility Plan, outlining how their activities will lead to self sufficiency, and the college requires WorkFirst/WorkStudy students to make a Personal Education Plan. Taken together, these requirements of the program seem to have helped the women in the study to think
about the role of work in their lives and to set goals based on their career aspirations. Eleanor sums up her position:

I want a future. I want financial self sufficiency. That's kind of my goal at this point. And this program, like I said, I can't say enough for it, because it's helped me to get something that will fill the hole. Much more than that. It's not just that. I say it like that, but it's not just like that.

Summary of Work Issues

In their article on media portrayals of the poor, Clawson and Trice (2000) write that the news magazines they studied gave the impression that most poor people do not work, although 50 percent of the poor are employed. Even caseworkers reported to the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee for the December 1998 WorkFirst report (Washington WorkFirst, 1998) that they do not feel a part-time minimum wage job is worth it for clients with children. The women interviewed have been dealing with children and low paying jobs for their working lives. They all have extensive work histories and recent employment. Several of them have additional vocational training as nursing assistants, office assistants, and early childhood teachers—all traditionally female dominated occupations with low pay. Nearly all have worked as waitresses in restaurants and bars. Four of them talked about working at night. According to the seminar instructor, a full time worker needs to make $15 per hour to support herself and one child under six, but, as she says, "Where are you going to go, if you don't have training, for $15 an hour?" The Work Study jobs they have now may be giving them work experience they would not have been able to get without the support of the program.

The women interviewed stated their work goals as finding work that is adequate to support their families and that allows them time to meet their fami-
lies’ other needs. Several of them are also drawn to helping professions. They are empathetic with people who are having difficult times and grateful for help they have received themselves, but those careers are low-paying, especially for people with less than a bachelor’s degree, and WorkFirst will only support short-term vocational education.

School

Completion of High School

Of the six women interviewed, only Annette and Debbie said they had graduated from high school. The other four women all described dropping out of high school. Three of them (Charlene, Betsy and Eleanor) later received GED’s.

Francie is preparing for her GED exam as part of her participation in the WorkFirst program.

Francie quit school when the alternative high school she was attending was closed. “I was 18 when I dropped out. I actually went pretty far. I went to the eleventh grade and only had a few credits to go.”

Charlene also attended an alternative high school before she left school.

I was sort of a troubled child. I went to continuation school. ...After another kid put a gun to my head, I decided that it was time to quit school. I went through [a completion program] in California, and I thought it was cool that I was going to school in the mall, so I did GED home studies and got my GED two months before my eighteenth birthday.

Betsy’s story is a little different. She was in a traditional high school, but she was not a traditional high school student. She was married and pregnant. She says: “I dropped out. I dropped out. My ex-husband was very jealous of the fact I
was going to school, thinking I was flirting with the other guys. So I was no, no, no, no, I’ll drop out. Stupid, stupid...I got my GED.”

Eleanor dropped out of school at age 14, shortly after she began high school.

Prior to that, I had an eighth grade education. I had gone to a Catholic school, though, where I had gotten an excellent education. Then I was transferred into a public school for high school. ...At 18, I decided that I wanted to get my GED. I wasn’t willing to complete high school, because to me it was just really a waste of time.

Post-Secondary Education: Technical and Proprietary Schools, Previous College Experience

Annette, Charlene and Debbie all held some kind of technical certificate at the time of the study. Annette had completed a hospital-run certification program for nursing assistants. Charlene had attended a business program at a proprietary school. Debbie had graduated as a medical assistant from a vocational/technical college that is now part of the state-wide system of community and technical colleges. Both Charlene and Debbie expressed much dissatisfaction with the results of those educational experiences. Debbie says: “I graduated from technical college in medical assistant 15 years ago. ...It wasn’t accredited then. I didn’t take the state licensing, but those jobs don’t pay enough to support my family anyhow. Now I can’t get the credit transferred from there either.”

Charlene describes her foray into a proprietary business school, one that recruits students today on the sidewalk outside the DSHS offices.

There’s a man standing outside screaming [the name of the school], you know. So I went there for seven months and graduated from their course with honors and got my little robe. It’s a business technical. They teach you the basic computers in business tech, and I had asked them questions about computer programming and, oh yeah, we teach you that. Well, they didn’t teach computer programming. They teach Microsoft Word and Excel and Peachtree and PowerPoint and taught you business ethics, you know, how do you
sit in an interview, how do you this, how do you that, you know, taught you a little bit of professionalism and taught you how to make a resumé. So I did all that, and I thought whoo hoo I got something... going for seven months of schooling at [the school], which didn't do me a darn bit of good. And I spent ten grand.

Clearly, the women interviewed are willing to go to school, but Debbie, especially, shared a high level of frustration with what she had gained from her schooling so far. As she put it, “I've had four and a half years of school and none of what I did worked out. I have no degree. I have no job.”

After her earlier experience with medical assisting, and before her current enrollment through WorkFirst/Work Study, Debbie had come to the community college in an attempt to become employable.

I've been going from program to program to program. I took courses in several programs for skills. I took math even though it doesn't count because I'm at eighth grade level in math. I thought I should take it. I thought I need it. ... At first I was just looking for skills. I got in the criminal justice program. I took the child abuse investigation course. Learned to gather evidence.

Debbie is now in a law enforcement program, but, she says, “Advisors don’t seem to know what would be a possible job at the end of all this.”

Eleanor had by far the most schooling after the GED. She had attended her first community college in an early childhood professional/technical program that she nearly completed. And later, she attended a different community college and completed her Associate of Arts degree. She also attended a very large state university for a few months.

Her first community college experience in an early childhood education professional/technical program was not successful, she says.

I wasn't ready for college yet. I just wanted to work, basically, and I didn't spend the time necessary to do my homework, and do everything to succeed. And the more I worked with children, the less I wanted to do it. And also the money was an issue, because everybody I talked to who was a teacher said, “I don't make any money.” ... I learned, but at the same time I'm not going to do anything with
it except care for my own daughter. I didn’t get involved in any extra curricular activities. I didn’t get involved in any groups at that point. And my GPA was really lousy, so you know I just really wasn’t ready. ...So then I did that for about a year and a half and then I dropped out and I didn’t complete. I have almost a degree. I was very close to completing it, but it’s not—I just didn’t enjoy it. So I left.

When she was 25, shortly after her child was born, Eleanor returned to school for a very successful experience at a second community college. She says, “I was so very ready. I was full bore. ...I was on the financial aid program, and I graduated with a 3.8 GPA, and I had been working full time...I had an incredible experience for the most part.”

She attributes her success at the second community college, in part, to making sure her teachers knew who she was. She said, “I was there. They saw me every day. They knew who I was. I would go to their office hours. I never took advantage of that before. Ever.” And she describes her biggest disappointment with her college experience there as one having to do with her relationship with a teacher.

There was only a few times where I felt really gypped about my education there, and one of those times was when I had almost completed a chemistry class, and the woman who had been teaching it had been very pregnant and left because she had her baby almost three quarters of the way through. And somebody else came in and took over for her, and I did not relate to that person at all and I felt really bad. And that was the only real educational issue.

Eleanor’s goals at the time of her stellar completion of her associate’s degree were to go to the university, complete her bachelor’s degree, and go straight into a master’s program in human services. Unfortunately, that educational venture was not successful

My intention was to go on the university, which I actually did do. However, I was not able to pull it off. I started. ...I went to school full time. Was not able to do it. So I’ve got some barriers going that kind of stop me from...some people can do the major university
thing, but I felt really bad that I couldn’t. I mean some people can do everything, but I can’t. But I’m OK with it now.

Academic Ease and Achievement

All five of the women interviewed who are in the WorkFirst/Work Study program talked with pride about times when they were successful in school, and the four who are in college level courses identify themselves as “good students.”

Betsy says she has always been a successful student and has intended to go to college all along. “When I was in high school, I was an honor student. When I was in middle school, I was a top honor student. When I was in elementary school, I was 100 percent honor student club,” she says. “So it was no question. I wanted to go to the university, and at that time I thought I was going to be a doctor, actually.”

Debbie brags about her good grades and attributes it to hard work. “I’ve gotten one B in my whole career in school. I have over 100 credits—all A—and I’m not that smart. I told you I’m at eighth grade in math. I’m not that smart, but I work really hard.”

Eleanor recalls some early successes, as before, crediting her personal association with teachers.

At the parochial school I went to when I was in third and fourth grade, I used to write. That was my thing. I won an award for writing little children’s books. And one of my teachers was very supportive and spent time with me doing things that my mother was not able to. I was very involved in sports. That was the thing that was really...I had that. I played volleyball, soccer, anything I could get my hands on. That was the thing that I wanted to do and I was good at it.

Even after dropping out of school in the ninth grade, Eleanor says the GED exam was easy for her. She didn’t take a preparatory class, but, she says, it was "no big deal." She says, "I just took it, and I was in the 90th percentile and, you
know, when I left school after the eighth grade, I was in college level reading, I
was at a college reading level.”

About her successful completion of her Associate of Arts degree, she says,
“T’d been so proud of myself. …It was good, and I could do it, and it wasn’t hard,
you know.”

Charlene describes filling time until she was old enough to take the GED
exam by hanging around the learning center helping others.

At 16, I was already done with the GED program. I took the high
school equivalency, but they told me, “No, you can’t take the GED
[exam] until two months before your eighteenth birthday. You’re
not allowed.” And so I was taking college courses on their com-
puter. Atomic theory. All the adults, 30-and 40-year-old adults,
were coming to me, calling me atomic theory woman. “We need
help. Can you help us with algebra?” That sort of thing. And I’d go
over there and help them. So I kind of stuck it out for two years. To
get to take my GED, I had to stay in the program.

Nevertheless, Charlene never considered college. “I knew that I was better
materials than just slinging the slop Whoppers for the rest of my life. But this
whole college thing. I never thought I could go to college.”

Francie is now working to prepare for her GED exam, and said that school
has been a problem for her since third grade. But even Francie recalled with pride
the success she had during her brief time at the alternative high school, before it
closed.

I hated school up until I was in the eleventh grade, and it was an
alternative school that I liked the best. And I got straight ‘A’s and
‘B’s…I was like straight honor roll—well, they didn’t have honor
roll, but there was student of the month and stuff like that, and I
was student of the month twice while I was there and stuff. And I
was doing pretty good over there.
School Barriers

In reflecting on their prior school experiences the women identified several barriers both at home and in the schools.

Eleanor and Francie both described particularly difficult elementary school days. In Eleanor's case, because of her mother's mental illness and neglect, she felt shunned and excluded by most of the other students and teachers. In Francie's case, she identifies her difficulties in school as coinciding with when her father's sexual abuse of her began. She says, "School hadn't worked out for me since I was in the third grade. I wasn't a very good student. I was never a good student and I think half of it was because of the problems that I went through at home."

For the women who had tried to attend college when they were married—Betsy, Charlene, and Debbie—their husbands were barriers to success. Debbie says, "When I went back to school, my husband wouldn't let me do homework." Betsy described her husband as negative about her desire to go to college because it would take away from their combined earning power, and Charlene simply described her husband's attack on her self esteem and confidence. "I had been with my husband who told me you can't and you're not allowed. So I could work and support his rear end, but I couldn't go to school....You know, you're an idiot, You're a fat hog. You can't do anything, you know."

Lack of information about the availability of financial aid was a deterrent to some students even considering college. Both Annette and Charlene said they assumed they could not afford college. Charlene said, "Well, for one I thought it was completely expensive and there was no way I was going to be able to afford it." And Annette said, "I certainly couldn't pay for it. I wouldn't dare try."
Both Debbie and Eleanor, the two women who had had experience with a community college prior to being in the WorkFirst/Work Study program, identified the financial aid office and processes as presenting barriers to their success. Debbie says: "The financial aid department was helpful once another student tells you what to say. You have to say you are a transfer student. Another single mom has to tell you what to say. And you have to go full-time to get financial aid."

Reflecting on her overall very successful experience at the community college where she earned her Associate of Arts degree, Eleanor says:

So I can't say enough good, except financial aid. Now that. Financial aid is not fun. I'm sure we all know that. And misinformation. I got lots of misinformation from financial aid. They don't have a class for you to say, "This is how you do financial aid. This is how you apply for financial aid." And I needed financial aid, so I had to work through it on my own and just kind of tenaciously try to figure out the paperwork and fill it all out by myself.

Another barrier having to do with financial aid is the requirement that students receiving financial aid have to be full-time students. When Eleanor attempted to go to the university, she had trouble maintaining a full load of classes and, consequently, maintaining her financial aid. She says, "I was put on financial aid probation twice. I tried twice to succeed one quarter there [university], and I couldn't do it."

Similarly, Debbie ran into this problem at her community college. She says, "I'm on probation, because I dropped a class. Guess what! I'm on probation, and I have straight 'A's."

Still another barrier having to do with financial aid that Debbie described was the timetable for scholarship applications. She says, "I got one scholarship and then took one quarter off because my kids were badly beaten. And guess what! That was the only quarter that you could apply for scholarships, so I didn't get another one."
Traditional financial aid and the current WorkFirst/Work Study program both put restrictions on which kinds of educational programs are eligible for support. This provision may keep students like Debbie and Betsy from pursuing their best goals. Betsy is in a paraprofessional program, but really aspires to a bachelor's degree and teaching credentials. And Debbie says, "Now I'm in law enforcement, because WorkFirst will only pay for vocational programs."

Both Francie, the woman with the least prior education, and Eleanor, the woman with the most, talked about the teaching style and the atmosphere of a class as critical to their success or failure. When Francie describes the alternative high school where she had enjoyed some success, she compares it to her experience in a "normal" high school.

I didn't operate very well in the normal high school program. It was really hard for me to be in that setting. Like, the teachers were... didn't care, you know, and stuff like that. ...[At the alternative school] they actually sat down with you and helped you learn and stuff like that, instead of sitting here and saying, "OK, open your book and have it done by this time." These teachers would actually sit down with you and, not nagging at you, but saying, "This is what you need to do and how you're going to do it." And try to really actually teach you instead of expecting, expecting all this stuff all the time.

Eleanor's comparison of her successful career at a community college with her university experience raises some similar concerns about how much help and attention were available.

I was able to do it at Community College level, because I got the help that I needed. When I went to the university, you know, I was going in with this classroom of 400 people, and I had relied very strongly on my teachers. I communicated with them. They had written me letters of reference, you know and I was able to have that relationship, but not in the big university arena. I couldn't do it. I got lost. ...And you know you couldn't talk to the professor. You could talk to the TA [teaching assistant], but then only if the TA was available. You know. They're graduate students. If they had time, great. If not, you just had to tough it out. I couldn't succeed there.
Eleanor also blames her own student style for her earlier failure at her first community college.

I didn’t quite know how the system worked at that point. I didn’t know that if you talked to teachers and if they see your face and if they know who you are that they are more willing to work with you. That if you are one who goes and never asks any questions, and sits there and then maybe doesn’t show up for school a lot of the time, which I didn’t, you don’t succeed.

In addition, Eleanor mentions that not having the glasses that she needed was a problem. But most important for her, she says, is being ready and able to listen. She says about her first foray into community college—the time she enrolled in a professional technical program, but did not complete it: “An advising appointment would just have been a waste of time for me, because I probably wouldn’t have listened. I didn’t listen as much.”

About her successful second community college experience, she says, “This is what I did in college. A person has an eighth grade education going to college, this is what I had to do. I had to listen very hard to what people said. I had to remember their names, and I had to remember their faces, and then they’d remember me.” And she says about her university experience: “I was very frustrated with, you know, the young kids that were in my classes, and they were rude. They wouldn’t listen. They disrupted the class a lot. I couldn’t hear.”

A big barrier that Charlene is still working hard to overcome is an internal struggle between her sense that she’s capable of better things, but perhaps not worthy. She calls attaining a better life “cheating.” “I kind of wanted to cheat and get into something besides waitressing,” she says.
Steps in the Wrong Direction, Lessons Learned

All of the women who hold certificates that they can’t use, say they feel they wasted some time, and Debbie seems to question her current major in law enforcement and the probability that she may run into problems being employed in that field because of her past association with drug users and felons. “This is awful. After four and a half years—They will do a background check and a poly-graph [for a job in law enforcement].”

Eleanor has also had her share of false starts, but she has learned a lot, she says, about how to succeed in school. She is a champion of establishing relationships with teachers. She says she learned how to help herself succeed at the second community college.

Once you’re able to do that, to really hook up with your teachers and have a relationship with your teachers somewhat, if you stop somewhat at times, they might give you a little bit more leeway, because they know what you’re trying to do. I didn’t fly through the system. I mean I didn’t get my degree without working at all. I worked very hard, but there were times when I was able to not work as hard. ...For me, like I told you before, back when I was going to community college, that was just was so important for me to maintain a relationship with my instructor, so that my grades stayed the way that they needed to.

Regarding her first, unsuccessful community college experience, she says: “I was doing what I thought other people wanted me to do and not really thinking about what I wanted....Had I known then what I do now, I would have just taken general classes and not been so specific in what I wanted to do.” And Eleanor’s advice to herself for a more successful transfer to a university is, “If I had to do it over again, I would have gone to a smaller extension.”
Positive Attitude Toward School

The four women in the WorkFirst/Work Study program who are currently engaged in college level work express a very positive attitude toward school, and they are glad to be back.

Eleanor says, "I never stopped wanting to go to school." And Debbie lists a number of reasons why she wants to be in school: "as an example to my children; to continue to stimulate my brain; and as a place to meet a better group of people." She adds, "I think earning a degree will increase my chances of getting a job. The degree helps you look trustworthy, but it doesn't help unless you finish." Betsy is enthusiastic about being in college. "No matter how hard school's getting, I've always loved school, and school's always been fun for me," she says. "I kicked myself in the butt every day after I dropped out, and being back is, well . . . The first day I walked home from school, I said, 'Yes! I did it. I made it.'"

Finally, Charlene, in her inimitable way, sums it up:

School's easy. That's the easy part. It's life that sucks. School, you have structure: this is what you're supposed to know; this is what's going to be on the test. You study for that and you're done and everything is said and over with. Life is just an ongoing thing. It's one thing after another, and there's no studying for it. It just kind of happens.

Summary of School Experiences

Although most of the women interviewed had not completed high school, it is clear that this is predominantly a competent group of students who value and enjoy learning—particularly in a traditional classroom setting. As a group, they have quite a bit of post-secondary education, although the vocational degrees and certificates they hold seem of little value to them at this time. Having trained narrowly in traditional, low-paying, physically demanding fields, several of the
women feel their previous education was a wasted effort. Their current enrollments are, of necessity, in professional/technical fields. Several of the women aspire to a bachelor’s degree or higher, but the WorkFirst program will not support that. Furthermore, in one case, an attempt at university work failed, largely because the institution lacked the kind of personal attention and small classes Eleanor thrived on at a community college. Other women also mentioned getting help from instructors and establishing a personal relationship with instructors as critical to their success.

Beyond the demands of parenthood and employment, other significant barriers to college have been negative messages from husbands, negative expectations about being able to succeed in or afford to attend college, and a combination of poor information about what financial aid is available and rigid financial aid timetables and processes.

Coming to College This Time

Betsy and Debbie were already students, on and off, at this community college. Their changing marital and financial circumstances brought them into the WorkFirst program and WorkFirst/Work Study gave them a way of continuing or returning to their school programs while also working and receiving TANF benefits. Debbie, who likes to be in school but does not like to be on welfare, says: “I’m in school, number one, because it’s keeping me sane. It’s a place where I can go and meet normal people. Number two, it’s a chance for spousal maintenance. I’m sticking with school to get spousal maintenance.” Debbie explains that a divorce court will award spousal maintenance (formerly known as alimony) to a dependent spouse while she is attending college, presumably because she needs the education to become able to support herself in the future.
Betsy was referred to the WorkFirst/Work Study program by her case-worker. So was Eleanor. Francie was also referred by DSHS and says she came originally to complete her high school diploma.

I needed to get a high school diploma because I hadn’t gotten my high school diploma yet, but I decided instead to take the GED program and get my high school diploma through the side door, because they told me that if I wanted to take college courses, I’d be able to get my college degree, plus my high school diploma, at the same time. So that sounded pretty cool.

Debbie said she found out about the program from a notice on a bulletin board. She said, “I did persistent calling [to find out about the program]. It took getting borderline loony tunes.”

Annette’s registration for her self-paced computer course was almost accidental.

I wouldn’t even know about the college until my girl friend LaRita, the one sitting next to me [in the seminar], she brought it up. She’s a displaced housewife… She told me about it about a week before it started. She called me up and goes, “You gotta go with me. It’s in [their small town].” I said, “Wow! I’ll go!” And I signed up. I didn’t know they were so close.

Annette was not a TANF recipient, but was eligible for WorkFirst’s tuition grant to low-income working parents.

Like Annette, Charlene was not on welfare when she started to think about coming to the college. She was then living with her two children at her father’s house and working at night as a bartender. And, like Annette, her first information about the college was word of mouth information about assistance to low income parents. But in Charlene’s case, her first approach to the college led from exploring workforce training to going on welfare and joining the WorkFirst/Work Study program.

I don’t know exactly what brought me to the school. I thought about it and everybody at my work was talking about going to college. Everybody was talking about going to school, going
to school, and I was like, "I really can't afford to go to school." And they were talking about workforce training. One of the girls had got into workforce training and that paid for the schooling, because she was a single mom. And I went, "Oh, well then." So I showed up. ...I didn't know exactly who to talk to. I just went from place to place. They said something about workforce training, and so I just kind of called around and asked, "Who is workforce training? I'm a single mom, working, and I want to go to school." And I was kind of directed to her [Margaret].

Margaret convinced Charlene that she would do best to quit her job, go on welfare and join the WorkFirst/Work Study program with a 16-hour-a-week job. Charlene describes the conversation.

I said, "Well, you know, I can work graveyard and my dad will watch the kids, and then I'll go to school in the morning." And Margaret was, "Well, you're going to be working graveyard, how are you going to be coming to school at nine o'clock in the morning and function?"

Now, Charlene says, "it's all opportunity." She says, "It's just opened up a whole new world to be offered. Here, look. The school's open to you. You take what you want. We'll help you pay for it. It's all taken care of. Go, go, go, go, go. You know. Somebody offers me an opportunity like that, I'm going to take it on."

Current Goals and Aspirations

As part of her participation in the WorkFirst/Work Study program, each student has to have a plan that maps out what courses they will take and what job or career it will lead to. Because the program limits the number and type of courses students can take, sometimes the students' goals and aspirations differ from the goals they formally state for the program.

Debbie, for example, states "If I'm in school, I can get court ordered spousal maintenance." And Betsy, in her first interview, says she wants to be a teacher. In any case, she clearly aspires to earn a four-year college degree and,
perhaps, an advanced degree. Her stated career goal for the government-supported program, however, is teacher's aide, and her courses are in a vocational technical program. She's in the WorkFirst/Work Study program, she says, because “I'm just doing what's best for me and my son.”

Francie's short-term stated goals are to get her GED and be able to support herself and her child. She aspires, however, to do meaningful, probably religious, work. She knows that most of the recognized helping professions require more education. She says, "I can't. I can't go to a four-year college. I know that already, because I don't have a very good education. But I know that I could at least work somehow with people, if I really wanted to." About a conversation with her work supervisor, Francie reports: "She thought that I would make more money if I would just go up the pole and become the head supervisor. And I told her, 'It's not about the money. It's about the people mostly.'"

Eleanor vacillates between her longtime desire to go on to more education in human services and the pragmatic opportunity the WorkFirst/Work Study program is giving her for training and experience leading to better employment than she has had before.

They [the university] have an excellent graduate program in human services and that's what I really wanted to do. ...This program [WorkFirst/Work Study] came to me as something I could learn in and get a job in sooner than later and something that would be financially OK. Yeah. And so, I would sure like to go back to college...

Charlene has the clearest goals of all. She has picked professional technical programs that she anticipates will put her in a position to make plenty of money and work at home. And she is anticipating that getting this education will give her other intangible rewards.

I need to finish school, and I need to do this not only for me, but for peace of mind and for my kids and for their peace of mind. I want
to show my daughter especially that, you know, Mommy went to work. You know. You can go to work. You can go to school. You can do this. You don’t have to be on welfare. You don’t have to let a man tell you what you can and cannot do. Do what you want to do and look at what Mommy did. I want to show her: “Look what Mommy did. You can do it too.”

Current Barriers to School

The women interviewed are happy to be back in school, but they still face barriers to their success.

For Annette and Francie, limited academic ability or lack of study skills may pose real problems. The following is an excerpt from the interview with Annette.

Annette: I read Chapter One over and over, but it doesn’t stick. I finally got the hang of it after about the tenth time... It doesn’t stay... I have to go back, because none of it went in... It’s hard to believe that I’m like that, but...especially when the TV’s on, and I’m watching my favorite show and I’m reading. I watch a lot of TV at night while I read. Oh, I talk on the phone while I read, too. I do many things at once all the time.

Researcher: Have you tried reading without doing all those other things?

Annette: No.

And Francie is dramatic about her struggles with math: “Well, I still think that I’m pretty bad in math. Math and algebra just gets me lost. I can’t even go there. Algebra—if you give me a piece of algebra on my table right here I’d be like, ‘No, no, don’t show me that thing. Get away from me. Get away!’”

Although these women are all single, former husbands are still negative influences for some of the women. Francie includes hers among the people who would like to see her fail at school. She says: “I would tell you, yes, there are quite a few people that would want to see me do that, who would rather see me on the
street with them than succeeding. The old crowd that I used to hang out with. My husband is one of them, too."

And Betsy says her old disagreement with her ex-husband about her desire to go to school continues.

He [ex husband] really does not want me to go to college. He thinks that I am taking something from him by doing it, and I think maybe what it is is that he's jealous because he can't. I'm not going to give it up for him. I'm not going to give it up for anyone. I came down to choosing between college and our marriage. ...So college is definitely coming first. ...I'm not worrying about other people or even my social worker, my husband. You know, those are the two people who don't want me to go to college. Which is really funny.

New relationships with men can also be barriers to success in school, as Charlene says: "You know a boyfriend would throw a wrench in my whole program, you know, because you want to spend time with that person. And I just don't have the time. ...As much as I love men, I have to go, 'Stay away so I can study.'"

For all of the women, meeting the sheer volume of demands on their time from children, employers, social service agencies and college is, perhaps, their major challenge. As Debbie says:

I'm juggling school, work, homework, finals. ...Sometimes I wonder is school really worth it. ...Most of my time is spent filling out papers, calling my attorney. No one calls back. I'm running in circles and I'm spiraling down. ...I'm supposed to be looking for an internship for the fall. Every program I go to has this many requirements. I have so many plates spinning.

Friend and Family Response

Friends and family were sometimes positive and supportive, sometimes negative and destructive of the education and the changes the women were pursuing. Betsy and Debbie say they have supportive friends. Betsy says her friends are likely to say, "You're in college. That's neat."
Francie has identified the “old crowd” as a cheering squad for failure. Nevertheless, it is important to her to maintain open lines of communication.

I kind of do avoid them [old friends], but I do talk to them if they need to talk to me. I’m open. I don’t avoid them like to the point where I want to seem snobbish, you know. But if they try to say something that’s kind of rude, I back out. But I’d love to be there for my friends and see them through things because I know what they’re going through.

Charlene also has a problematic old crowd:

I have one friend that I’ve had since I was like 15, because I moved and came back and stuff. We’re still kind of close. We still talk to each other, but all the friends that I did have were mostly my husband’s friends, so I really don’t have any friends. I just kind of pulled myself away from the whole mess of what was happening and kind of relocated myself into finding new friends and new people to hang out with and new things to do. I find myself, every time I go over to visit our mutual old friends, I get myself in trouble. So I decided: Don’t even be seeing those people. It’s probably a bad idea.

She later tells a long story about the impositions for cooking and child care some of the old friends have made on her, and she concludes: “I should stay away from those people. They want a lot. I’ve done a pretty good job of staying away from them so far.”

Eleanor talks about friends who support her:

I’m getting support from friends. Sober friends. Friends who support that.... I don’t go out. I don’t do the things that I used to do. And so in that way, yeah, I’ve lost touch with some people. But the good friends. I have two very good friends and I’m lucky to have them and that’s where I get a lot of my support.

Eleanor also talks about new friends she met through her daughter’s new therapeutic day care: “So fortunately I’ve met some people through [my daughter’s] school. There’s one woman I switch off with her sometimes. She takes [my daughter] during my evening job.” And she talks about learning to handle old social situations in new ways.
I don’t have much time for social stuff, but I try to. ... I started going out with friends more often. I just recently, actually, went out to a club which I never did because of the drinking, but you know it’s a non issue for me. Oh yeah. It’s fine. You know, I have too much to lose if I do that. So I have my pop or my water and I’m kind of trying to flood myself so I get used to being out in environments like that being sober, because I’m still very shy and I get very nervous about going out to places like that.

Francie also gets support from her new associates. She says, “I’m having an OK time so far with this. I have people who believe in me. I have lots of people who believe in me [at the church].”

She also identifies supportive family members: mother, sister and foster mother. She says, “They are very involved with that [her return to school]. They are very happy about that, should I say. I wouldn’t say involved, but they’re happy about it. ... My sister is calling me almost every night now which is really good.”

Eleanor also appreciates her sister: “My sister is very supportive. I’m not close to my family, but her and I are becoming closer.” Charlene mentions her father’s support: “My dad and his girlfriend are telling me, you know, you can do anything you want to do. Just go for it.”

The bottom line, in Charlene’s terms is that making improvements in one’s life means making some changes.

Well, yeah, you know, you have to do what you have to do. If you’re going to better yourself you’ve got to associate with better people. And so, you know, I kind of engulf myself in my work and school and just worry about that and kids because there’s absolutely nothing else that I could possibly think about.
Current Experience/Success in the Classroom

All of the women interviewed had successful spring and summer quarters, insofar as they were able to complete the work they had registered for and continue in the program, with a few exceptions.

Annette did not complete the quarter, and she disappeared. She was working long hours, had many children, and lived far from campus. She was enrolled in a self-paced class with help and unit testing available at an off-campus site near her home. In her interview, she sounds excited about this option and says, "If it was that I had to go to [the main college campus], I couldn’t do it. How could I four or even three days a week go to the college for however many hours it is if I’m working? I can’t do it. ...Online...that would be great.” Nevertheless, Annette was unable to complete her course.

For Debbie and Eleanor, who took distance education, there were still problems with time. Debbie did not complete the spring quarter correspondence course by the end of the term.

During her first interview, about midway through the quarter, she expresses concern about this. "I don’t have time to go to class, so I took one correspondence class. I didn’t know it would be so hard. I’m way behind. I have four units left to do and the quarter is almost over. I have four left out of five to do;” she says. In her second interview, when she has learned that she has longer to complete the correspondence course, she says, “The correspondence course helped me, so I’m still staying in school and keeping the number of credits up to full time. It’s less stressful because I have a year to finish. And I don’t have to cram.”

Eleanor struggled with an independent study course:

I didn’t get started on my homework until, like, three weeks into the quarter, so I have 32 assignments and I’ve done 7. ...I’m finding that—and I had known this about independent studies—that it’s
harder to maintain that schooling. It's harder to do that because you
don't have the discipline, and you don't have access to the instruc-
tors. ...I'm doing it all on e-mail...I think I prefer the personal
communication. I don't mind it, but at the same time, I think I
maybe do better in a classroom environment.

All of the other students were in more structured, more traditional class-
room situations. Early in the quarter, Charlene says:

I'm pulling an A out of both my classes, and I study not at all
hardly. ...I'm moving. I'm getting a divorce. You know, I have lab
testing I have to get done for a specific health problem I have. You
know. I've got a lot of stuff going on. I've gotta go to work. I've got
two kids, and I'm still popping an A out of my classes. So, I'm very
happy.

Near the end of that quarter, she says: "I surprise myself by knowing I'm at least
pulling a B out of both classes. With the flooded toilet and the wrecked cars and
the moving and the divorce and the children, I think getting an A or a B out of
both classes is a pretty good accomplishment."

Both her advisor and the seminar instructor confirmed her good opinion of
her success and urged her to take a heavier load in the fall.

My medical terminology teacher calls me "Kiddo." She's my
advisor. ...She wants me to take three classes in the fall and I don't
know if I can handle three classes. But Margaret said, "Well, by the
looks of things, if you're copping an A or a B out of medical termi-
nology, with everything you've got going on, I think you can handle
three classes."

Francie, who has not liked school for the most part, changed from a high
school diploma program to a GED preparatory course, because she felt "too
pressured" in the diploma program. She feels more successful in her GED course.
She says: "I thought it was going to be hard. It's actually a lot more easier than I
thought it was, and I was making it out to be more harder than it really was. I'm
not really having trouble. There's a couple of times that I messed up, but she
[instructor] tells me that I'm doing really well."
Current Experience/Success with Work Study Job

The WorkFirst program requires that TANF recipients work at least 20 hours a week, and the recipients have to find whatever jobs are available. The WorkFirst/Work Study Program allows that TANF recipients who are taking advantage of the education benefits (called "wage progression" benefits) can meet the 20-hour work requirement by taking at least six credits at a community or technical college and working at least 16 hours a week. The community college where this study was conducted recommends that the jobs be off-campus and tied into the Personal Responsibility Plan the students file with DSHS and with their Personal Educational Plan at the college. The Work Study program provides the money for the employers to pay students in internship positions.

Some students, like Betsy, were able to take an active role in choosing an employer. During spring quarter, she had a job in a high school library.

I pretty much went out and chose where I wanted to work. It's like Margaret says, "We're paying you, not them. But they just need to show that you're working 16 hours to 20 hours a week." So what place is going to resist. Yeah. "I'm here to volunteer 16 hours a week, but it has to be 16 hours a week." And of course the school jumped on it. ....And I love my job. I love the people I work with. This is definitely enforcing me wanting to be a teacher.

When the high school closed for the summer, Betsy had to find a different job, which she did at a web site development company. Again, Betsy saw this as a way to get professionally involved. She says: "I've been sitting down doing a lot of work, a lot of research for them, just showing off my skills in subtle ways. And, since it's a start up company, I can go places if this company takes off. If you get involved with a start up company you're right on top."

Eleanor also had a job at a high tech-related company, and she credits the program with making it possible.
I would not have had this opportunity had not the WorkFirst/Work Study program paid me a wage to go and learn, because this is such a fast-paced industry that the person who’s teaching you wouldn’t financially have been able just to say, “OK. I’m going to take the time to train you.”...Once I’m done with this program, hopefully, I can be referred on to another company that does this, where I’m going to be making $20 an hour—or a job within the company that I’m working at, depending on how it goes.

Even as an intern, she says, “I’m happy. This is more money per hour than I’ve ever made except when I was cocktailing.”

Charlene got away from waitressing with a job as an administrative assistant, which, she says, is “wonderful. I got my own desk. I got my own office.”

And Francie was working and taking computer training at a charity thrift store.

I think the best job that I’ve had so far is the one that I have right now, I think. Because I like the people there. I like them all. They’re very nice. All of them are nice. I haven’t had any problems with any of the people there. ...I got my job by walking into [the store] and saying, “OK. I need a job and you guys don’t have to pay me. The college will.”

Debbie, like Betsy, had two Work Study jobs. For spring term she worked on campus in the bookstore, but for summer term she landed a job closer to where she hopes to go professionally. This summer internship in a probation office was a big success. She spoke enthusiastically about how supportive and flexible her supervisor was, and she enjoyed the opportunities she got on the job.

I got to interview a client today. I was introduced as a co-worker who is sitting in. They try not to give these people any information about us....The job counts as an internship in the criminal justice program...I’m getting $11.30 an hour but can only work 69 hours a month and I can’t associate with people convicted of a felony.

But when Debbie left welfare, she was no longer eligible for the WorkFirst/Work Study internship money.
Computers and New Technology

It seems important to mention computers as a special topic, because so many of the women talked about them. Given the current literature about the digital divide, the researcher was surprised to learn that four of the women—Annette, Betsy, Charlene, and Debbie—owned computers. Two—Annette and Charlene—were specifically looking for a career change to an area involving computers. Three—Betsy, Eleanor and Francie—talk about being torn between technology careers and helping careers.

Invariably, fields involving computers were recognized as desirable and growing. As Eleanor says: “I had been thinking of computer technology for a long time because it’s just such a—It’s important, it’s growing, it’s fast paced and there’s always room. ...I want to increase my computer skills so I could do things. If you don’t have computer skills, it’s very, very difficult.” And computer skills are recognized as critical to most jobs. Annette said she was looking for “something on the computer,” but “I just haven’t decided what. I need to learn the computer first because, every job on the computer I see, you need experience.”

Furthermore, once students were exposed to computer work, they tended to become even more intrigued with computers. Francie was taking very basic computer application skills courses, but she says:

I’d love to learn DOS. The DOS system, and inside, so just in case the files break down, you could get inside of them. I’d love to learn that. I think I’m going to look into that after I finish the GED. Yes, a lot more. Like looking at the technical point of view and looking at the hardware. Actually taking apart a computer and looking inside it, how it’s made.

And the impression is that working with computers is where the jobs and the money are. As Betsy says:
The computer field is such an open field because it's so new. They just want people. If you know it they want you because computer is not like, you know, you have to go to school for four years to know this. You can have on-the-job training. And some companies will take you without training if you're willing to learn. They'll teach you. They're just desperate. They have pirates out there trying to steal you from other companies to pay you more. I've heard so many stories.

And, although Betsy is sorely tempted by the money in high tech fields, and although during her second interview she is contemplating going to work full time for her WorkFirst/Work Study employer, she is circumspect about changing her educational program to match this career opportunity.

I wouldn't have changed my purpose in school. I still won't. Even if I'm allowed to go to school [while working full time], it's still not going to change my choice. Because, like he [high tech employer] said, and like how the rules are now in the computer industry, if you learn the computer, you learn the web, you learn programming, you can get out there and do a job without any [formal] education in it at all. So why waste my education on something I can get first-hand knowledge and make more than the person who went to school for four years?

She says she would like a liberal arts degree as "a backup degree."

Finally, Charlene points out the college's shortcomings in trying to stay current as a technology trainer.

I'm taking Word 97, which 97 sucks. I think they should upgrade the classes, because most jobs do not run Windows 97. They run 98 or they will be running 2000. ...I've never yet once seen a job run a 97 program...so I might have to take the class again, because I heard that in fall they are trying to upgrade to 2000.

Summary of Experience in the Workfirst/Work Study Program

The women interviewed were all quite positive about their experiences at the college and in the WorkFirst/Work Study jobs.

Eleanor says, "I would not have had this opportunity had not the WorkFirst/Work Study program paid me a wage to go and learn. ...It's not a long
term program. It’s a program that puts you in a place where you can learn something that you don’t know how to do.”

There are also some things the WorkFirst/Work Study program at this college offers that go beyond offering access to the college’s courses and student services and the work study jobs. The program and the college also offer students some special services. Charlene gives one example:

Something else that helps me is that lending library that they have over there. That helps me out a lot....[The] office will special order any book you want. “Just let us know.” So there are things that you can get done in this work study program, even though you had to cut this and cut that and do this and do that. There are certain perks.

The program also provides contact with Margaret, a valuable resource in many ways, and the required weekly seminar she conducts. Although the seminar itself got mixed reviews, Margaret got universal praise from the women. Regarding the seminar, Charlene was pretty negative.

I think once a week is an awful much. Maybe once a month I can see being beneficial. Maybe an hour or two hours once a month. ...To me it’s just a waste of time it’s a big well, pardon my language, it’s a big cluck bitch session is what it sounds like to me. You know everybody’s bitching about something. ...So to me, I just sit around, listen to everybody else’s problems for an hour, and, for one, it’s really none of my business, and, for two, I really don’t care, and, you know, for three, I could be at work and be home an hour earlier. It’s just wasted time that they’re requiring me to go sit at.

Betsy is more positive, but agrees with Charlene that there are issues discussed that aren’t relevant to her. Betsy says, “I like the meeting. I like the people there. Unfortunately, some of the things that they’re getting help with, I’m not, due to the different offices we’re going to and the different caseworkers.”

And Francie agrees with Charlene that there is too much complaining:

Basically, you know, you’re sitting there, you’re complaining about it, you’re basically biting the hand that feeds you when you do that, you know. They’re [DSHS and other agencies] just trying to help us and what we need to do is...One, we need to get off of it, but we also need to understand that they are there to help us. They’re not
there to, like, you know, like they're aiming to cut us off, or they're aiming to hurt us or aiming to hurt our family. And I don't like it when people come into the classroom, and they think that that's what the welfare system is all about, where they're going to try to cut us off or try to, you know, hurt our families and, you know, starve our children. No, they're not going to do that, you know. I don't really think that....And I think that there's too many people that are complaining about it.

In keeping with her defense of the welfare workers, Francie is very positive about the service she gets in general. She says her caseworker and Margaret are both doing “a very good job.” And she says, “So far the program has been very helpful. Margaret has been very helpful.”

Others are even more effusive, when it comes to Margaret. Debbie calls her “the savior,” adding: “Margaret has been very helpful. She went to welfare and said, ‘You are mistaken’ [when they reduced my support]. ...Margaret went to bat for me. ...This program needs a person with a big overview like Margaret.”

Margaret also “went to bat” for others, including Charlene, who Margaret helped work out some issues at her Work Study job. Charlene says:

I've got a representative from the school [Margaret] who says, “This is how it's gonna be. This is how she's gonna work. She works for me not for you. Sorry.” Thank you, Margaret. Because I wouldn't have had—pardon my language—the gonads to stand there, because that's my job. ...She does a lot of my fighting. I like that.

In fact, Charlene credits Margaret with turning her life around.

Margaret helped me with all sorts of stuff. I walked into her office and she said, “You need to quit your job, you need to go to the housing authority, you need to do this, you need to do this.” I was living with my dad. I wasn’t paying any bills. I was living in the living room on a hide-a-bed with my son. My daughter was sleeping on the floor on a futon, you know. And [Margaret] goes, “Charlene, you are going to wear yourself out. Not only are you not getting good sleep, but you know you're working too hard. You got way too many things going on. Yeah, you're not paying any bills, but you don't have your own life.” ...Yeah, she's, “You need to do this, and this, and this. And you look like hell and get off your duff.” And everything she said has worked out so far.

Charlene says she feels close to Margaret. She says:
She tries to be friends with everybody, but I’ve got that little extra something. I worked for her and we’re a little bit more intimate with each other. I don’t feel pushed off, and there’s a lot of agencies and people who [would say] “I’m doing my job. You’re part of my job. You’re part of my case work, and that’s just how it is.” Margaret’s not like that with me. Thank you, Margaret.

Margaret sees herself as an advocate for the students in the WorkFirst/Work Study program. She willingly “goes to bat” for them with employers and caseworkers, and she acknowledges that she may “mother” some of the students, especially the younger ones. “I admit it,” she says. “I don’t know if it’s a good thing, but I tell them, ‘When I call you and you don’t call me back, I worry about you.’” She also admits readily that, indeed, she does like Charlene. “I adore her personality,” Margaret says, “but she has made some really poor choices.”

Margaret says her goal in working with the WorkFirst/Work Study students is to teach self-sufficiency. “It’s not just about getting a person an education, so they can make more than $9 an hour,” she says. “It’s a matter of getting them to look at the big picture of their life. How am I going to be self sufficient? What’s going to happen when this [Work Study] job ends, when child care support ends?”

Margaret says she sees that her students lack problem-solving skills and the ability to see alternatives. “They don’t usually have a plan B, and they lack the hopefulness that there are options,” she says.

For now, Charlene is feeling optimistic about the future. She has a plan and she’s getting the help she needs.

I really don’t have any barriers now. I mean, it seems like all my barriers were lifted once my husband was gone and once everybody started pushing me to go to school. It seems like a whole lot of things have lifted up off my shoulders, and I have a light at the end of the tunnel to look forward to. I just keep thinking, when things get hard, I just keep thinking it will all be over soon. It will all be over soon. I’ll get this done. I’ll get to be home. I won’t have to stress on it no more.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

What Do We Learn From the Individual Stories of Six Low-Income Women Who Came to the Community College?

Studs Terkel, the Chicago journalist, became well known first for his radio interviews and next for his best-selling books based on interviews, many of them with ordinary people. In a radio interview May 15, 2000—on the occasion of Terkel’s eighty-eighth birthday—he said that his third book, *Working* (1972), was about “the everyday things people do to pass the time.” The interviews in this study were also, to a large extent, about what people do to pass the time, or, perhaps more accurately, to meet the many demands on their time.

Hearing from low income women in their natural language about their challenges and their triumphs goes a long way toward helping us begin to sort out who they are, what the community colleges have to offer them, and how well the colleges are doing. We know from these interviews that feeling overburdened and pressured for time is a constant condition for them, and, in talking with these women, it becomes apparent that the issues of their lives do not fall neatly into discrete categories. When the researcher said, “tell me how you came to this college,” information poured out about husbands and divorces. When the researcher asked about career goals, the responses were filled with stories about children and child care. These women, like many students, come with a tangle of relationships and roles that needs recognition.

The four thematic categories that emerged in the interviews parallel the women’s current roles as parents, employees, students and welfare recipients. But
these roles are being played out in the context of their personal histories of family
backgrounds, intimate and social relationships, physical and psychological health,
and housing and financial situations. These contextual issues have been the back-
drop to their experiences in school or work in the past, as they are in their current
situations.

An example of how issues that may appear to be tangential impact the
college experience is Debbie’s concern about background checks and about the
prohibition against associating with convicted felons as a condition of her intern-
ship. Although she wants to change her situation, she can’t change her past, any
more than the researcher could change hers. Debbie also would have to dissociate
from part of her social support network to comply with the “no felons” rule. The
researcher was discussing this situation with a colleague who remarked, “That
would be like telling me I would lose my job if I associated with any college
graduates. That’s who I know.” It is important to understand that some students
may have histories, family and friends with experiences outside those of the
college faculty, staff and administrators. Community college programs may be
asking some people to give up more than the money, time and sleep that all single
parents in college sacrifice.

And these stories work both ways. In Terkel’s birthday reminiscences, he
recalled a woman who said to him after she was interviewed, “I didn’t know I felt
that way.” It may be that talking with low income women students may also help
them clarify how they feel and what they want to accomplish.

The five women who were in the WorkFirst/Work Study program had a
lot in common with each other. Beside the obvious similarities of their being low
income single parents, these five women were all in the midst of major changes in
their lives. And, having been through the earliest pain of jobs lost and relation-
ships ended, these women were ripe to make something good come out of their personal upheavals. They were caught in the midst of change and growth, and, for the most part, at an optimistic point in their transition. All were recently realigned with a supportive community, whether they had reconciled with a sister, joined a church or participated in outpatient therapy.

They all came to the college experience with a positive attitude toward school, because, for the most part, these were women who liked school, even though they had dropped out, and who believed in the power of education to help them improve their situations. Surprisingly, although they had not finished high school in a traditional way, four of the WorkFirst women interviewed had some post-secondary degree or certificate and three of them expressed a desire to get a four-year degree. Although they clearly needed the help they were getting with managing their life issues and planning their academic work, they were relatively well educated, highly motivated and hard working students. In this respect, they were among the more educated and more experienced WorkFirst participants, 35 percent of whom have no high school diploma or GED and nearly one-third of whom have no work history (Washington State Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee, 2000).

Low income mothers without both these personal attributes and the support system offered by welfare and the college are likely to have an even harder time. They may be having too much difficulty dealing with the pressures of poverty to also make the changes and do the work required to get an education that will make a lasting difference. It is important to note that the five women who were on welfare and who came to the college for the WorkFirst/Work Study program did better than the one who was not on welfare or in the program. There are undoubtedly many reasons for this.
Certainly, Annette had many more barriers than any of the other women. She had six children as compared to the other women’s one or two children, and she lived in the most remote location of the six women, farthest from the main campus of the college. At 40, she was the oldest of the women, or at least tied for oldest with Debbie, and, like Debbie, she had a history of being physically abused and had current health problems that kept her in pain a great deal of the time. Because she was not in the program, Annette did not have access to the Work Study jobs. She was still working graveyard shift, while Betsy, Charlene, and Eleanor were reveling in no longer having to work nights. Because she was not in the WorkFirst/Work Study program, she did not receive the benefits of working with a caseworker to develop a self-sufficiency plan, working with a community college teacher to develop a personal educational plan, sharing information with a cohort of other women in similar circumstances in the WorkFirst/Work Study seminar, or being monitored by Margaret. If Annette had been in the program, she would have had an attendance requirement and a concerned professional who would find out why she stopped participating in her course. In fact, Margaret, the program coordinator, admitted that she once drove by the house of a student in the program whom she was concerned about. Annette would, further, have had in this person an advocate to help her deal with the obstacles to her smooth progress, for example, the mobile home park managers.

In Annette we have an example of a woman who is not situated to make change. Although she is not on welfare, the things that Poppe (1995) identifies as inhibiting welfare-to-work transition resemble factors that inhibit Annette’s ability to make a transition to more tolerable work. The elements include jobs with low pay, few benefits and unpredictable hours; the struggle to find affordable child care; and unstable living environments (p. 39). Of the six women interviewed, only
Annette was unable to benefit from the opportunity to take a college class, even though she had a tuition grant. She, too, was motivated, clear about her goals and hard working, but without the additional benefits of the program, she was isolated and receiving considerably less help with managing her life issues.

Perhaps the best advantage of telling the individual stories of these six women is sharing the genuine pleasure of meeting them. These low income, single mothers are personable and engaging, funny and intense. They demonstrated repeatedly that they are insightful about the world around them and about themselves. They would say themselves that their relationships with men were often a barrier to education, and they would say that parenthood was their top priority and their biggest challenge. Their stories are personal and unique, but in many respects their stories are like those of many community college students. These are also the stories of many women who are not at the colleges, but who could benefit from college, if only they could get the kind of support they would need to succeed.

At the end of From Cradle to Grave: The Human Face of Poverty in America (1993), Jonathan Freedman concludes: “The stairs are steep and perilous. At the bottom lurks despair that nothing can be done. At the top lies hope, not of easy solutions, but of difficult choices. The risk of failing to help people climb upward is outweighed by the danger of standing by helplessly while more people fall. All journeys begin by taking a first step.” (p.235)

For some women in situations like the women in the study, the awareness of the possibility of change, a ray of light, may be all they need to persist in pursuing a program like this one. Others may need more help, may need to take more first steps, to keep from falling back to despair.
Welfare Myths

Clawson and Trice (2000) analyzed portrayals of the poor in five major news magazines from 1993 to 1998. They found that the percentage of images of black, urban, and non-working poor in these magazines over represented those groups. For example, the magazines gave the impression that most poor people do not work because only 30 percent were shown working or participating in job training, when, in reality, 50 percent of the poor work in full- or part-time jobs. Similarly, the magazine images of the poor were 96 percent urban as compared to a reality that is 77 percent urban. The magazines portrayed 52 percent of welfare recipients as black, when 37 percent of AFDC parents were black. Clawson writes, "These portrayals of poverty are important because they have an impact on public opinion... In turn, public opinion has an impact on public policy." (p. 61)

Several other writers describe prevalent myths about who is poor and, especially, who is on welfare (Ackelsberg, 1988; Burke-Tatum, 1988; Dickerson, 1999; Sidel, 1998). Reinforced by the media portrayals, these myths include the black, urban, non-working characteristics and more. Sidel writes: "Ask the average American to tell you who receives welfare, and you will be given a description of a woman who is lazy, has lots of children, does not want to work, does not get up in the morning, is African American, never finished high school, and keeps having more children in order to increase her monthly grant." (p. 114)

Ackelsberg (1988) adds to the list of mythical characteristics: "lacking in intelligence—i.e., not likely to be interested in or capable of benefitting from higher education" (p. 3). It is not surprising, then, that the women interviewed were quick to try to differentiate themselves from a "typical welfare mother." People are not immune to believing stereotypes, even of themselves.
Nevertheless, the women’s real life stories belie these myths, as they describe the long days and responsible work they do. Sidel holds up a welfare recipient named Maria Alvarez as “a living example of the inaccuracy of current stereotypes about welfare recipients,” citing Alvarez’s speech in which she describes her usual 17-hour day of work, school, and family responsibilities (pp. 114-115). And the six women interviewed are no less a-stereotypical. In fact, in this study, the five participants who are on welfare are white, rural or suburban, high school or GED graduates and beyond (except Francie), hard working, mothers of one or two children.

After years of debate about welfare, the 1996 welfare reform law reversed six decades of social policy. Dickerson contends that Congress finally compromised on welfare reform and agreed to the 24-month-continuous and 60-month-lifetime limitations, because they knew at least some of the myths were not true. “They had reliable empirical data demonstrating that most welfare recipients left the welfare rolls within two years, and that those who returned often did so because of educational and vocational limitations.” (p. 35)

Burke-Tatum (1988) points out that there is a long history behind these myths and Americans’ antipathy to the poor. She writes that in 1718 in Pennsylvania, recipients of charity had to wear the letter “P,” for pauper, on their sleeves. Later, in 1842 in Massachusetts, William Gaspey wrote these lines about the laws of the day that penalized the poor:

Oh! Glorious was that mortal’s skill
Who first devised the Poor Law Bill,
To teach in these enlightened times,
That Poverty’s the worst of crimes. (p. 61)
The (un)Deserving Poor

The idea that being poor is, in and of itself, a crime, is an idea not far removed from the modern distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor. Clawson, Burke-Tatum and Dickerson all refer to this distinction, with Clawson identifying children, the elderly and disabled people as among those considered deserving. Dickerson writes that Congress ended “welfare as we knew it” because it concluded that people on welfare were “financially dependent because they were lazy, [and] that lazy people did not deserve welfare benefits” (p.18). Describing Congress’s market-based view of income entitlement and the reasoning behind making work a prerequisite to receiving benefits, Dickerson says, “people are entitled to income or other economic resources only if they earn money using their own labor in the market” (p. 22) and adds that a goal of recent reforms is to prevent unworthy, non-deserving women from receiving benefits.

Meanwhile, the reality for the women in this study, is that they had worked long and hard since they were teenagers, but—without access to higher level jobs and as long as they had to depend only on their single incomes—they were unlikely to move their families out of poverty. According to Shorris (1997), their prospects are even more bleak today than they would have been 25 years ago.

The income gap between rich and poor grew faster during the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton administrations than it had during any period in recent history, reversing the trend of the preceding twenty years when the gap had narrowed. And it is not absolute income that defines the game, but the gap between the 10th and 90th or the 15th and 85th percentiles. The middle represents only the inefficiency of the game, which was devised to sort the winners from the losers. (p. 29)

Those at the bottom, the “losers,” must not be “rewarded” with financial assistance, because their poverty is seen as “the result of personal failings, rather
than as a consequence of the structure of the U.S. economy” (Sidel, 1998 p. 201).
And, although children are generally deemed “deserving,” or, at any rate, not to blame for their poverty, it is impossible to punish their “undeserving” mothers without hurting them, too. For Fallows (2000) America’s ability to cut poor women and children loose at a time when the nation is thriving is a result of the significant gap in people’s fortunes and the “natural” tendency of those who are comfortable to be most comfortable when the poor are least visible.

The richer people become in general, the easier it theoretically becomes for them to share with people who are left out. But the richer people become, the less they naturally stay in touch with the realities of life on the bottom, and the more they naturally prefer to be excited about their own prospects rather than concerned about someone else’s. (p.68)

Shrinking Welfare Rolls vs. Reducing Poverty

One way to keep the poor invisible is to be able to produce statistics that prove they don’t exist in any significant numbers. In fact, in the few years since the 1996 welfare reforms, the number of people receiving welfare has shrunk dramatically, with welfare rolls across the nation at their lowest level since 1965 and a 38 percent decline in the number of cases in Washington State from the beginning of the new WorkFirst program in 1997 to June 2000 (The Seattle Times, 2000). However, tallying the number of people on welfare does not necessarily give an accurate accounting of how many families are living in poverty.

Sidel (1998) points out that the emphasis on shrinking welfare rolls “gives states incentive for reducing caseloads by rendering families ineligible for aid whether or not they need and qualify for assistance” (p. 203), and Dickerson (1999) reports that between 1996 and 1999 the percentage of people who left the welfare rolls is four times the percentage of people who moved out of poverty.
Clearly, some people who are no longer on welfare are still living in poverty. They may have gone back to a relationship with a man; they may have been kicked off welfare for failure to comply with requirements; and, indeed, they may have gone to work. The new welfare programs have coincided with an expanding economy and jobs have been plentiful. A national umbrella organization, Welfare to Work Partnership, has 22,000 employers who have filled more than 1.1 million jobs since 1997 with former welfare recipients. But with their average starting wage at $7.80 per hour, if they work full time and year round, those new workers can expect to earn about $16,200 per year—approximately the federal poverty level for a family of three (The Seattle Times, 2000, p. A13).

In Washington State, the welfare caseload declined rapidly for two years and leveled off in the second half of 1999 (Lerch et al., 2000). In a 1998 process study (Washington State Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee, 1998), the researchers reported:

Although 'Work Pays' is a common slogan in the WorkFirst program, case managers reported it is often difficult to motivate clients to take any job, regardless of the hours and pay. Some staff even reported they do not feel a minimum wage job for a few hours a day is worth it for clients who must transport their children to daycare and travel to work via the local transit system. (p. xiii)

Congress has mandated that welfare recipients must go to work and it is expected that when they reauthorize the 1996 law they will “focus on how to press those still on the rolls... into employment” (The Seattle Times, 2000, p. A13), but it is clear that reducing poverty will take more than simply moving people into jobs. Particularly for women, who tended to be employed in clerical and service jobs that feature low pay and little advancement, “having a full-time job does not mean moving out of poverty,” Stein wrote in 1988 (p. 38-39). Dickerson (1999) reports that Bureau of Labor statistics state that over five million people lived below the
poverty line even though they essentially worked full-time. For women like those in this study, unemployment has not been a persistent problem. But being part of the “working poor” is something they know well. Simple reduction in welfare rolls may be adding to their ranks rather than reducing poverty. Dickerson writes:

Because welfare was never designed to redistribute income between the classes, one could argue that the 1996 reforms intended simply to break welfare mothers’ dependence on the system. If this is the goal, then the reforms should be deemed an unqualified success as long as welfare mothers who are forced off the welfare rolls do not live in abject poverty. If, however, the 1996 reforms were intended to accomplish more than break the cycle of dependency, and, instead, were intended to help mothers become economically independent so they could support their families based solely on the income they earned in the market, then the reforms ultimately may be deemed an unqualified failure. ... As the ambiguous success of recent welfare reforms demonstrates, we cannot expect to solve the ‘welfare problem’ until we correctly define the problem and unless we are willing to concede that poverty may in fact be the primary cause for the problem. (p. 38-39)

Sidel identifies four components that are necessary for women and their children to leave poverty: education, higher wages, child care, and health coverage. She writes:

It seems clear that the way to truly help women and their children out of poverty is to encourage girls and women to stay in school as long as possible—at the very least to complete high school and preferably to go beyond high school to vocational training or college—and to raise the minimum wage particularly the extremely low wages in female-dominated occupations. (p. 92-93)

For some welfare recipients in Washington State, including the women in this study, the WorkFirst/Work Study program provides the opportunity for high school completion and post-secondary vocational training, as well as providing child care and medical benefits and internship jobs that pay more than the minimum wage. At question is whether the women in the program will be able to maintain employment at that level when they take their new education and work
experience into the open job market and when they lose their subsidies for child care and medical benefits.

Children's Welfare

The significant limitations and restrictions of the 1996 welfare reforms mean that the United States no longer guarantees support and help to every child. On top of the reality that working parents may still be raising children in poverty—"You can get off welfare, work hard, play by the rules and still not be able to feed your family" (Terry, 2000)—the new reforms require states to limit benefits to no more than 24 continuous months and no more than 60 cumulative months in a lifetime. For children whose parents have used up their time, there is no welfare. Further, states are permitted to deny benefits for children born after the mother enters the welfare system and to reduce or eliminate benefits for failing to cooperate with a number of regulations (Dickerson, 1999). In Washington State, welfare benefits are reduced if women fail to participate in job search activities.

In order to receive benefits, mothers of infants must participate in work search and employment activities when their babies are three months old. Gunderson (1988) writes, "There is probably no element more important to the transition from welfare than a viable and affordable child day care program" (p. 119). In most communities, however, there is extremely limited day care available for children under two and virtually none for infants as young as three months old at any price. The women in this study were fortunate in that the youngest of their children was 18 months old when his mother went on TANF, so although they had some problems finding daycare, there was quality care available in the community for their children.
Both William Julius Wilson and Lisbeth Schorr (Schorr, 1988) talk about Americans' disenchantment with social programs designed to alleviate poverty. In Wilson's forward to Schorr's book he writes: "It is a strange and tragic paradox that confidence in our collective ability to alter the destinies of vulnerable children has hit bottom just as scientific understanding of the processes of human development and the rich evidence of success in helping such children have reached a new high" (p. xvii).

The women in the study are devoted to their children. They want the children to have safer and more prosperous lives than their mothers had. They want their children to have opportunities for education and success, but their children are certainly at risk for having problems at school, with their health, and with the law as they grow up. According to Wilson, "poverty is the greatest risk factor of all" (Schorr, 1988, p. xxii), and, according to census data, in 1998, 18.7 percent of the nation's children under 18 were living in poverty. Unless the women in the study are able to make significant strides in their earning power, their children will grow up disadvantaged by poverty.

Families Need Assistance in Addition to Work and/or Education

WorkFirst has ruled on the on-going debate about whether education or employment is the most effective first step to helping welfare recipients into the kind of stable, well-paying jobs that will move them out of poverty. Today's welfare recipients will work 20 hours a week before and during their education. But the job and the tuition do not appear to be sufficient. Poppe (1995) recognized that AFDC families "need supportive services in addition to technical training and
education" (p. 15) and Wilson states "high-risk families need high-intensity services" (Schorr, 1988, p. xxi).

Washington State's WorkFirst program offers a number of services in the form of grants or vouchers for child care, car repair, mileage, public transportation, education services, relocation costs, testing and medical exams, clothing and hygiene, uniforms, tools and license fees (Washington State Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee, 1998, p. 34). In a comparison of the state's current costs for TANF and previous AFDC/JOBS programs, Lerch et al. (2000) concluded that TANF cases used less financial assistance but cost more in agency-provided services (e.g. personnel, rent, equipment, phones in office, job search and wage progression services contracted). TANF cases also used more support services, especially greater use of child care subsidies, and other support services (e.g. education, transportation, etc.).

The women in the study who were participating in WorkFirst/Work Study were depending heavily on Work Study jobs and tuition grants, housing vouchers and child care subsidies, and personal support and guidance from the program coordinator. They appeared to be succeeding in making improvements in their life situations because they had the combination of financial support (for their families, their education, and housing, child care, and transportation) and personal skills support (for managing their stressful roles and relationships as parents, students, and employees.) In several cases, their children also required their own direct support and help with life issues.
As has been discussed in previous sections of this chapter, many people who are working, including people who leave welfare for work, are still living in poverty. Others may be at risk for needing welfare at some time in the future because their employment is unstable or too physically demanding to maintain, or because managing their other life issues, including parenting, will get in the way of the job, or because their income is simply inadequate to meet their families’ needs. Earlier welfare programs gave emphasis to education and training, but PRWORA puts the focus on work first and limits the number of hours and the extent to which education and training can count as work activities (Cohen, 1998a). In Washington State, community and technical colleges play a critical role providing the allowable kind and amount of education and training for students who are working parents on welfare or have incomes below 175 percent of the poverty level (Friedman, 1999).

A number of objections are raised to providing education for welfare recipients. Cohen (1998b) reports that opponents say “it is unfair to subsidize college for welfare recipients when those who are not on welfare must find time for education outside of work hours, and that there are not strong research results supporting the benefits of college education for TANF recipients” (p. 2). Ackelsberg (1988) implies that the piece of the myth that says a welfare mother is “unintelligent” is self-serving for the policy makers, because “compared to job training programs, higher education is expensive” (p. 3).

A hopeful note for TANF recipients in Washington is Cohen’s (1998b) report that “work-based programs have shown better results for welfare recipients than short-term classroom education and training alone” (p. 3). The women in the
study who are participating in Washington's WorkFirst/Work Study program are being given promising work-based education opportunities.

Again, focusing on one of the characteristics of the mythical welfare mother, Dickerson (1999) says if laziness is the cause of the welfare crisis, forcing people to go to work should solve the problem. "If, however, the welfare crisis was caused by the long-term effects of poverty (minimal vocational and educational skills, limited work opportunities, etc.) not non-work, then the work solution will not work" (p. 18). In Washington, at least, there is an opportunity to improve vocational and educational skills.

Limiting Education to Vocational Programs

In his examination of the meaning of poverty, Shorris (1997) offers two lists: Twelve features of privation and twelve features of oppression. Shorris says privation includes "lack of money for current needs" and "lack of education." In the characteristics of oppression, he includes "enduring defeat, lifelong and passed on to the next generation" and "excluded from education, schooling limited to training." Where the line falls between training and education is debatable, but there is certainly a sense that such a distinction exists. Further distinctions separate short- and long-term training, and the value of the resulting credentials and transferable skills are hierarchical with the longer-term education or training programs higher up on the heap.

Washington's new welfare law "initiates a major policy change by requiring participation in activities that will lead to jobs. The focus is on job search and employment rather than longer-term training, as in previous welfare reform efforts" (Washington State Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee, 1998, p.
1. The goal of the current welfare program is immediate employment, with education benefits geared at helping clients advance in those jobs. In fact, the post-employment education benefits are called "wage progression" benefits, and students are limited to 24 months of post-employment tuition assistance. WorkFirst/Work Study participation is limited to one year, and to be eligible for WorkFirst/Work Study, a student must be enrolled in basic education, job skills training or vocational education at a community or technical college (Washington State Government, 1999a; Washington State Government, 1999b; Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, 2000). So longer-term educational goals, like the desire to pursue a bachelor's degree that several of the study participants expressed in interviews, cannot be part of their official self-sufficiency plan. Nevertheless, there is recent and local evidence that a four-year degree does increase self-sufficiency for former welfare recipients. A study of graduates of Eastern Washington University shows the "returns to a college degree for welfare recipients are sufficiently high to make post-secondary education a particularly promising avenue to financial independence" (Karier, 1998, p. 1).

Whether or not a welfare program that limits the opportunities for welfare recipients to relatively short-term vocational education is intentionally oppressive, it does raise a concern about how long lasting the women's improved employability will be. Of the six low-income women interviewed for the study, four had had post-secondary vocational education. Particularly the specific training as medical or nursing assistants did not prove to be useful in the long-run because the targeted jobs are low paying and physically demanding. One might worry that some of these women are now seeking certification in computer applications and medical transcription and billing, for example. These are fields that are likely to be
affected by the rapid pace of technological change, and the students may have only a short period of relief from the "working poor" jobs they have held before.

For decades, critics have accused community colleges, and especially vocational/technical education, of doing more to maintain the status quo than to raise people up. For some of these women who already had technical degrees or certificates, community colleges may have played a role in cycling them into poverty. The extensive involvement of community colleges in providing the regimented narrow education that WorkFirst will support may draw the colleges into deeper collusion with the forces that have led to this nation's growing gap between rich and poor.

Earning Statistics and the Earning Gap

As discussed in Chapter 2, there is a great deal of evidence that correlates more education with higher wages. A recent article in the *New York Times* (Uchitelle, 2000) reminds us that nearly one-third (32 percent in 1999) of the nation's population has only a high school education and that figure has changed very little for 30 years. (Nine percent has less than high school.) Meanwhile, even during the recent period of a booming economy and low unemployment, college graduates' earnings rose more quickly than other employees' and the wage gap widened. The earnings gap narrowed some in the mid-1990's, but starting in 1997, "the wages of college graduates pulled ahead, according to the Economic Policy Institute's latest figures," with college graduates averaging $20.58 an hour and high school educated workers averaging $11.83 (p. 3). The gap is wider and the value of a college education is greater between women than it is for men. In 1999, college educated men made 40 percent more than high school educated men, while college educated women made 47 percent more than high school educated...
women. A 1995 national longitudinal survey indicates that hourly earnings increase by approximately 19 to 23 percent for women earning an associate’s degree and 28 to 33 percent for those earning a bachelor’s degree (Cohen, 1998b).

Carter (1988) explains, “College education results in higher income for women, primarily by helping them qualify for the better paying occupations... a college education seems essential for women’s financial independence” (pp. 29-30). Carter compares management and professional jobs to sales and clerical jobs. She doesn’t even mention the night-shifts in nursing homes or cocktail waitress jobs that the women in the study had, but one hopes that a college education would give them access to jobs with better pay and better working conditions.

WorkFirst and Community Colleges in Washington

Because community colleges have historically enrolled low-income students and have provided education for degrees as well as for shorter-term training, Friedman (1999) points to community colleges as “an obvious choice” to provide skills enhancement for welfare reform. She says:

Providing an opportunity for TANF recipients and other low-income workers to build their skills is a key component of any strategy to reduce poverty and increase economic wellbeing (sic). Well structured investments in continuing education can result in increased earnings capacity, promote self-sufficiency, and eliminate the need for continued welfare receipt. (p. 2)

Indeed, Washington State has adopted a model that involves community colleges in welfare reform to a greater degree than many other states do. The state’s first process study of WorkFirst (Washington State Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee, 1998) found that community colleges were offering a wide variety of courses to WorkFirst clients, particularly courses for basic skills training and “pre-employment training to lead to specific jobs.” In August 1998
community and technical colleges had begun to receive referrals from WPLEX (Washington WorkFirst Post-Employment Labor Exchange operated by ESD) for post-employment "wage progression" services. Providing basic skills education, specific pre-employment training, and the wide range of post-employment education has been an important role for Washington's community and technical colleges, and the next year's process study (Washington State Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee, 1999) spoke optimistically of a "new emphasis on providing 'post employment' services that will assist clients in keeping a job as well as obtaining a higher paying job" (p. ii).

The 1998 process study also reports that, although Working Connections Child Care provided information, referrals and vouchers for child care, WorkFirst clients have difficulty locating after-hours care and care for disabled children. Further, they predicted that the availability of infant care would become a critical issue after June 1999 when parents would have to participate in work activities when their infants are three months old. Washington's community and technical colleges have on-campus child care centers, but the colleges have only sporadically added after-hours care, and care for infants and for disabled children is scarce on campus as it is in the community in general. None of the women who participated in this study used the child care center at the research site college, but, clearly, child care is a *sine qua non* issue for working parents and parents who are community college students—particularly single parents—whether or not they are WorkFirst clients.

Critical to welfare reform is the contrast between an entitlement program with no time limit (AFDC) and a program that is not an entitlement and has a five-year lifetime limit (TANF). According to Chen (1999), AFDC-JOBS emphasized education and training, while WorkFirst emphasizes employment and job search.
One way the newer program encourages work is by changing how much a welfare client is penalized for earning income. Whereas AFDC disregarded 33 percent of the income, TANF disregards 50 percent before decreasing the grant. Another manifestation of the shift in emphasis away from education and training is that AFDC supported the completion of four-year college degrees, while WorkFirst supports only activities directly related to finding or keeping a job. Cohen (1998a) writes that WorkFirst will only count vocational education and training as a work activity with a 12 month maximum for each person. The preponderance of educational activities is further eroded by the requirement that no more than 30 percent of TANF recipients in a state can be engaged in vocational education as a work activity.

While Washington welfare recipients have many more opportunities to participate in education and training than clients in states that did not include their community colleges as partners in the program, the limitations on how long clients can engage in educational activities as part of their participation in WorkFirst, as well as the limitations on the kinds of allowable programs is cause for concern. As Karier (1998) makes clear, under WorkFirst, no client’s personal plan to achieve financial independence will include a two- or four-year degree program. And yet, as previously discussed in the section “Earning statistics and the earning gap” in this chapter, a two- or four-year degree could be the best way for many welfare recipients to gain lasting self-sufficiency. The women in this study demonstrate that there are some WorkFirst clients who would be motivated and likely to succeed if they had the option of striving for a four-year degree or a two-year transfer degree. As it is, the participants are restricted to vocational programs that may serve them very well in terms of immediate employment. Nevertheless, especially in the face of WorkFirst’s time limits, long-term self-
sufficiency must be the goal. Several of the participants are living demonstrations that technical education may not be sufficient for a lifetime of employment at an adequate level. These women may find they need either higher level education that is more generalizable or the option to return for retraining and career changes.

Welfare as an Attractor to College

Writing about the status of women in 1985, Gunderson (1988) identifies a "female welfare class."

These women, typically low-income mothers, are poorly educated and ill-trained for employment. It is unlikely under present welfare programs that they will ever know economic independence. Thus, even though a great many women have made significant strides, the low-income mother has been impoverished by the very provisions intended for her economic independence. (p. 115)

Gunderson argues for policy reforms, although not at all the reforms that were in fact legislated in 1996. His proposals were for a national day care policy, welfare programs that incorporate educational components, and a revision of financial and academic higher education programs to better serve "non-traditional" students.

One such student was Susan Berube. In her article "Thoughts from a former welfare student: If they want me off welfare, why do they make getting a degree so difficult?" (1988), Berube writes about her experience as a divorced mother with two children who was on AFDC while she went to college. It was a difficult time for her, but under the AFDC program, she was able to concentrate on getting her bachelor's degree, and she did not have to hold a job. How much more difficult must it be, then, for the students in the WorkFirst program? They also have social workers and college bureaucrats to deal with, very little money, and children of their own. The WorkFirst clients who choose to come to the commu-
nity college and work 16 to 20 hours a week must be highly motivated. These are women who very much want to be self-sufficient and, more than that, who want an education. It was noteworthy that several of the women who participated in this study gave up employment in order to be able to succeed in going to the college. Charlene, for example, went on welfare at the urging of both Margaret at the college and her social worker at DSHS, because those professionals felt she was capable, but could not have succeeded at the college under her previous living and working situation. Washington’s WorkFirst program, while it represented a significant lessening of Charlene’s income, offered her assistance with housing and child care, the opportunity to work half time during the days, and a chance to go to the college for a specific vocational program.

For low income working parents who want to attend community college, there are some benefits to being in today’s welfare program. Further, for some of the women who were already on welfare, the opportunity to participate in a college program was a welcome one that they would not have been aware of or able to take advantage of unless they were on welfare. Francie needed the support system embedded in welfare to receive the information and the push to complete her GED. Betsy needed to be on welfare and not working nights, in order to have a chance at her lifetime goal of attending college.

What Is a WorkFirst Success?

The goal of every state’s welfare program since 1996 is clear. It is to move people off of welfare and into employment. In Washington, it is stated thus: “WorkFirst’s goal is to get clients into employment and provide the services and supports necessary to keep them employed” (Washington State Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee, 1999, p. v).
The 1999 WorkFirst process study (Washington State Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee, 1999) found that it was relatively easy to help clients with finding child care, obtaining transportation to and from work, and arranging for housing and shelter.

Many clients are able to obtain and maintain employment once such matters are resolved. Other issues may require longer-term solutions, such as dealing with domestic violence, substance abuse, mental illness or literacy. In some instances, the 'short-term' issues become 'long-term,' such as the absence of public transportation in rural areas. (p. iii)

Of the women in this study, the one who had been most handicapped by problems with housing, transportation, child care, domestic violence, and living in a rural area was Annette. She could not be considered a success in terms of benefiting from that part of WorkFirst that grants tuition assistance to low income working parents, since she did not succeed in completing the course she was signed up for. But in the eyes of the state, Annette was neither a success nor a failure. She was never even a problem, since she was not a TANF recipient.

The woman who the state could, and most certainly does, count as a welfare reform success is Debbie. By the end of the summer, Debbie was off of welfare. But she was still under extreme stress and was no longer eligible for the support or the Work Study job that she had while she was on welfare. At the end of the study period, Margaret said of Debbie: "You can consider that a success, because she’s off DSHS. But in my mind it is not as great a success, because her Work Study job has been very good for her. She won’t still have that job unless they hire her, and I don’t think they’re willing to hire her. Her schooling is important. She needs more skills."

At the end of the study period, the other four women were continuing in the program. At best, they had two (Betsy, Charlene, and Francie) or three
(Eleanor) quarters left during which they would be eligible for WorkFirst/Work Study. Charlene and Betsy are in two-year vocational programs, and since neither of these women is too close to using up her five-year lifetime limit (or her 24-month continuous time limit) on welfare, as long as they can find work for 20 hours a week, they have an opportunity to succeed at completing those programs, finding employment in their chosen fields and becoming successes in the eyes of the welfare reform watchers as well as themselves. Betsy and Eleanor have also expressed the desire to go on for a four-year degree. It is clear from their comments that they will consider themselves truly successful when they have their bachelor’s degrees and a higher level of professional work. WorkFirst will not support that kind of higher education, and Eleanor has already used up much of her financial aid opportunity. And for all of the participants, the state will count them as successes when they are off of welfare. If at some time in the future the local economy becomes less healthy and they lose their jobs, or if the particular technologies they are learning become obsolete and they lose their jobs, they will have limited opportunities to return to welfare and revamp.

Implications for Students: Exceeding Expectations

Whenever low income students come to college, they are challenging the statistical probability that they will remain in that one third of the population that never goes beyond high school. Books on the subject of how people move out of poverty include in their titles the phrases “beating the odds” (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996) and “changing the odds” (Lavin & Hyllegard, 1996), and in Wilson’s introduction to Schorr’s book (Schorr, 1988), he writes, “The drama of success chronicled in this book is not the drama of beating the odds, but the drama of changing the odds” (p. xx). However you phrase it, the odds are against people who grow up in
poverty, and the women on welfare who choose to participate in Washington's WorkFirst/Work Study program are by no means placing a sure bet.

Community colleges are likely the most welcoming colleges for low income students, and Washington has wisely included these colleges in their WorkFirst plan. The students who come to the college via welfare may have somewhat better chances of succeeding and moving out of poverty than low income students who come to the college without the financial and programmatic support that WorkFirst provides. On the other hand, students who come to the college via WorkFirst are limited to taking programs that lead to specific work. Students who may aspire to higher academic degrees, including two- and four-year degrees, will be challenged to make the most of the 12 months of support available in WorkFirst/Work Study and to choose courses and programs that will be most useful at a later date when they may fulfill the aspiration of pursuing a degree.

Implications for Educators: Making Every Minute Count

For welfare watchers, the biggest issues raised by the 1996 legislation are the five-year lifetime limit and the loss of entitlement to aid that poor parents and their children now face. For educators, there is a scramble to make as much impact as possible under rigorous rules.

Community and technical colleges in Washington have been singled out to serve WorkFirst clients because there is a recognition that without helping people get skills that make them employable, they will not be able to leave welfare, and that without helping them to increase their skills and advance in their jobs, they will not be able to stay off of welfare. Furthermore, community and technical colleges are recognized as the entities that are ready to provide vocational training. Friedman (1999) says, "Community colleges have traditionally played an impor-
tant role as a provider of education to disadvantaged groups and have been pioneers in off-hour and employer-based education” (p. 3). Since WorkFirst demands that clients must be working, these kinds of solutions, i.e. post-employment and job specific educational opportunities, are what community colleges can and are being counted on to provide.

Through participation in the program, community colleges also are challenged to make sure that during the time that the WorkFirst students are receiving support to be able to manage their life issues and to attend college, the college courses are delivering the kind of education that will serve these students in the workplace beyond their specific job skills. In a concentrated period of time, the colleges need to stress literacy and communication, problem solving and flexibility. Otherwise, students will have nowhere to turn if the first job or the next job after welfare doesn’t last. This is a big order, especially at the time of this study and in this part of the country where students in computer-based programs, from office applications to programming, are being hired for very adequate wages even before they complete their two-year degree programs. But for women using up their lifetime welfare benefits, as much as possible the colleges need to offer learning that is both applicable and enduring. Community college leaders would do well to work with the four-year colleges and push for the kind of articulation agreements and curriculum that make so-called “capstone” or “upside-down” degrees an option. Students with technical degrees could have a better opportunity to come back and progress at a later date if the credits they had earned were transferable and the time they had spent was not seen as wasted.

Community colleges can also help these students look beyond the immediate and necessary goal of getting employment that will take them off the welfare rolls. College counselors and advisors can help them articulate their long term as-
pirations and help them bankroll skills and information that will help them return to school at a later date, if that is part of what they need and want. Beside information about transfer of credits, these students need clear and consistent information about financial aid. The problems with financial aid may run deeper than an information gap. Federal and state policies seem to continue to penalize independent students and part-time students. At the very least, colleges can go out of their way to help students work with this complicated set of rules to get whatever financial aid is available to them.

Rhonda Coats, assistant director for student services at the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, talked with the researcher about discussions held early in the planning for the community colleges’ involvement in the WorkFirst program (personal communication, 2000). She said there were serious concerns that by taking on this partnership with DSHS, community colleges would become primarily social service agencies, that the colleges are not organized for a case management model, and that the colleges would need a different infrastructure to support the kind of personal attention this population of students needs.

To some extent, all of those things have proved to be true. Even more than before, community colleges will best serve these students by bolstering the educational and vocational part of what students receive with the kind of personal attention Margaret is delivering to her seminar students and by adding a heavy dose of parent education and family support, as well as career and academic advising. Since community colleges are unlikely ever to be sufficiently staffed with counseling professionals, some of the personal attention could be delivered by the broad range of college staff, faculty and administrators, perhaps modeling after the volunteer mentoring programs many colleges have established for multicult-
tural students or for women in science. Women students in a welfare-to-work program comprise another population that might benefit from having a special person on campus who they can touch base with and who can help them find the resources to solve problems in a personal way.

A New Look at Prospective Community College Students

A striking thing about the women in this study is that they don’t look very different from many other community college students in Washington. They are female. Their average age is a little over 30. They are all first generation college students who are parenting and holding jobs. Further, several of the women were newly single, a life situation that often brings students to the colleges.

Because Washington State developed a plan for welfare reform that includes a significant role for community and technical colleges, some women who can benefit from the education, like the five WorkFirst/Work Study participants in this study, are now having an opportunity to attend community college that they did not have before. Others, like Annette, might have missed ever having the chance. As colleges look at the benefits that community college education can give to welfare recipients through WorkFirst, they might also think of other points in these women’s lives when they might have entered college.

For the most part, the women in the study did not graduate from high school, so recruitment materials aimed at high school counselors and high school juniors and seniors would probably not have reached them. Dunkle (1988) says that traditional recruitment materials and financial aid information rarely reach low-income women. She also says that the outreach materials the colleges produce don’t generally address the financial aid concerns of women with children. She reminds us that low income women, like the women in this study, are unlikely to
have informed parents, and she confirms that they have little access to high school guidance counselors, because 17 percent of students from families of low socio-economic status drop out of high school between their sophomore and senior year.

However, the women in the study did take the GED exam. Whereas some students take GED preparatory classes at a community college before taking the exam, these women tended not to do that. They were perhaps more capable than some other GED takers and most took the exam when they were old enough without taking a class. Because they did not take the preparatory class, the community college did not have the opportunity to encourage them to continue in school at that point. In short, because these women followed neither a traditional path to high school graduation nor an alternative path to high school completion through the community college, they were never encouraged or recruited for college at a time when they were carrying fewer other responsibilities. Community colleges might make a concerted effort to contact GED takers at the time of the exam, whether or not they have enrolled for a preparatory course.

The other place where these bright, low-income, GED-bearing prospective students can be found is in that vast place called the workforce. It is extremely difficult to target an information and recruitment campaign at people scattered among employers. TV and radio are plausible, if expensive, vehicles for getting general information out to a broad audience. Also by working with major employers, such as factories and large retail outlets, it might be possible to offer information sessions so the working poor can at least begin to think about what is possible for them at the community college. Word about programs like tuition assistance to low income working parents spreads quickly. Both Annette and Charlene said they heard about the program from friends. As Charlene said, “Everybody was
talking about going to school, going to school.” Colleges can participate in spreading the word by identifying where low income people are working.

Limitations of the Study

The study is limited by the perceptions and range of understanding of the researcher who is a product of her own background, experience and education. It is further limited by the students who chose to participate, by the limitations posed by their levels of self awareness, and by what they chose to share with the researcher. Although there were some women of color in the classroom each time the researcher solicited participants, none volunteered for the study. Those women were present and participated during the seminars, but all of the in-depth interviews were with white women. Further, among all of the women who did not volunteer, there may well have been women with more severe or different issues or barriers than the women who participated.

The study is further limited by the two quarters of the students’ experience and of the WorkFirst/Work Study program. The program was a new experience for both students and college personnel. This study catches a moment in the educational experience of the participants and an early moment in a new program. Things changed rapidly during the course of the study in both the participants’ lives and in the WorkFirst/Work Study program. If the study were done at a different time, there would undoubtedly be different stories and experiences to report.

Recommendations for Future Research

WorkFirst is a new version of welfare and Washington’s WorkFirst/Work Study program was in its first two quarters at the time of this study. Follow-up
research on the program's early participants would be of interest. A longitudinal study of all of the women in the 2000 WorkFirst/Work Study program, following up on their employment and general welfare a year later and five years later would give an indication of how long lasting the benefits of the short-term education were. Follow-up interviews with the women who participated in this study would be of particular interest, especially to learn how satisfied these women are with their own progress toward their employment, parenting, and educational goals a year later and five years later.

Also of interest to this researcher is the notion of "studying up." Page (2000b) suggests that qualitative researchers who have focused on people "at the bottom or on the margins of societies" might now look in another direction. "By giving qualitative attention to power, capitalism, or elites, qualitative studies would no longer be limited to merely providing illustrative cases of 'the system,' and their explanations could move beyond glossing or caricaturing 'social structure' as some opaque, determining force." (p. 104)

In the future, a study of the experience and expectations of major employers vis à vis welfare reform and their view of the role and function of education might shed more light on the paradox of the working poor.

The Researcher's Affective Reactions to Her Research and Final Thoughts

During the course of the study, the researcher became aware, often on a daily basis, of the range of lifestyles and opportunities within the same community. As a researcher, she was becoming familiar with the challenges and trials of women on welfare in a particularly detailed and personal way. In the seminar and in the interviews, welfare mothers often spoke about how hard it was for them to pay for food and clothing for their children. The cost of diapers for a
toddler, a bed for a child, a couch for an apartment, a new starter for an old car, or an appropriate outfit for an office job all presented major financial challenges.

In her professional role as a fund raiser for a college engaged in an active capital campaign, the researcher was meeting daily with wealthy community members, often asking them to make cash gifts that were far greater than the annual income of the study participants. The donors, volunteers and committee members who the researcher worked with during this period provided a stark contrast in lifestyles and resources to the women in the study. The mothers in this group, when they were not giving their time and resources to support their local community college, were either at home caring for children or working as professionals. Their children, in either case, were growing up well cared for, with more than adequate food and clothing, access to physicians and other professionals, as well as lessons, private schools, pets and travel.

In her own home, the researcher would often become acutely aware of how much space, how much clothing, and how much relative luxury she enjoys. Eating at a restaurant, making unnecessary trips around town in the car, even lavishing treats on a dog became occasions for, at the very least, acknowledging that she lives a privileged life. More striking than the differences in income and material possessions was the realization that even when she had been a single parent with two young children living on an income low enough to qualify for reduced price school lunch, the researcher had resources the women in the study do not: stable family members who could help when necessary and a college education.

During the data gathering period and, again, during the data analysis activities with the clinical psychologist who served as an expert rater, the researcher experienced feelings of hopelessness. The troubles and problems the women in the study presented sometimes seemed inevitable. Either, like
Margaret's story character, these women will keep falling in the same hole in the sidewalk, or a new generation of women will fall in. Even if these particular women are successful in becoming more self sufficient, even if they manage to raise their children out of poverty for the remainder of their childhood years, the family challenges they faced growing up and in their relationships with men will likely continue to be the experience of many more girls and women who are growing up now in situations characterized by abuse, neglect, poverty and eventual homelessness.

All of the study participants said they wanted to improve their situation to provide a better life for their children and to set an example for them. Several expressed regrets about some of the experiences with abuse their children had already had. But because so many of the mothers had also had their parental rights challenged and because they talked about having difficulty controlling their tempers, the researcher was sometimes concerned (and the expert rater reinforced) that there was a realistic likelihood, either currently or in the future, of instances of child abuse and neglect in some of these families.

One of the most promising developments during the study came when the women in the seminar began sharing stories about their frustrations as parents and offering each other understanding and tips on what to do and where they might get help. All parents who are working or who are students depend on child care arrangements, but these women's concerns contain an edge of fear. They fear not so much inconveniences, high cost, or even poor child care, but rather they fear that their fragile, complicated world of work, welfare, school, and parenting may come tumbling down. Without a spouse to share the load, a kindly grandparent nearby, or enough money for an at-home babysitter, when the day care center won't take a sick child, these women are left to choose between jeopardiz-
ing their jobs, their success in school, or their children’s safety and, in some cases, their parental rights.

This writer has little doubt that the women in the WorkFirst/Work Study program will be affected by their experience at the community college and that, at the least, they will come away from it with a changed view of their own potential and of the possibilities of life. What is less clear is whether these positive changes will match their stated goals, and the goals of the program, by getting an education, getting a better job and providing lasting promise for their children’s futures.

By participating in the WorkFirst/Work Study program, these women are attempting a most difficult feat: leveraging themselves and their children out of poverty by working and going to school, at a time in their lives when stress from other factors is extremely high. The women in the study, and perhaps all WorkFirst/Work Study participants, are a select group of welfare recipients. They are probably more capable of academic success, while juggling work, school and parenting, and more inclined to seek to better their situation through education than many, if not most, welfare recipients. What they are attempting to do may not even be within the realm of possibility for many welfare recipients. It is certainly very difficult for anyone.

Nevertheless, these women are trying to beat the odds, to end the cycle of poverty and abuse. They are admirable. They should be seen as exemplary individuals who deserve to be encouraged and helped. To the extent that the social service programs or the college programs put any extra barriers in the path of people who are so willing to work so hard to make a better life, we all lose. Once a person has begun to make progress on the path toward these difficult changes, pulling the rug out from under them because a time limit has been reached or because they don’t meet an assignment, because they aren’t taking the right
courses or because they slip up and can’t complete a term, seems penny-wise and pound foolish. This is a subset of the welfare population that has the potential and the strong desire to move from poverty to self sufficiency by getting an education. The WorkFirst/Work Study program is part of a national experiment in welfare reform, testing a theory that large numbers of people can be moved from welfare to work in a way that saves money and cuts down on poverty. If the women in this program fail, they will not be the only victims.

Clearly, the loss of the safety net that the previous welfare entitlement program provided raises significant questions about what will happen to women who move from welfare to marginal self sufficiency. As the study participants’ stories make clear, even people who have received some post-secondary education can find themselves in dire circumstances. It is still not clear whether, in the event of an economic downturn, job scarcity, or job loss for any reason, our country will really say, “Sorry. You’ve used up all the help we will give you and your children.”

As I write this, President Clinton is celebrating the lowest percentage of people on welfare in 37 years (The Herald, 2000). He might also note that during that period, with each successive administration from Lyndon Johnson’s great society and war on poverty to today’s emphasis on “personal responsibility” and time limits for welfare, the gap between rich and poor has grown. Social programs have been “reformed,” while taxes on high incomes, inheritable wealth and real property have been cut.

This researcher has hope, but no real confidence that under welfare reform many people will succeed in moving off of welfare and out of poverty and into work that allows them to raise their children with high aspirations and the means to reach them. It is hard, however, not to suspect that only the first outcome may
come to pass. An early indication may come when we, as a people, decide whether to nurture or cut off programs like WorkFirst/Work Study.


Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (1999). *Preparing welfare and other low-income adults for work and better jobs: A report on low-income students enrolled in colleges and the start-up of WorkFirst Programs.* Olympia, WA.


APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

Solicitation script

I am a graduate student at Oregon State University participating in research on the participation of people in the WorkFirst program at ______ Community College. I would very much like to interview several of you during this quarter to learn about your experiences in the program and at the college. Your responses will be confidential. No officials or instructors from the college or from any social service agencies will know who is participating in the study or what you personally have said. Your participation will be very important for planning future programs and helping more people have a chance to attend community colleges. If you choose to participate in the study, I will interview you a few times during this quarter. I’m handing out a purple sheet to each student in this session. Please check the box “Yes, I’d like to participate” or “No, I would not like to participate.” If you are interested in participating, please fill out the section with your name and phone number where I can reach you and the best time of day to call, so that I can contact you next week to schedule an initial interview. If you don’t have a phone or if you have any questions, I’ll be here at the end of this class and we can make arrangements to meet. Thank you.
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW VOLUNTEER CARD

[ ] YES, I am interested in participating. [ ] NO, I am not interested in participating.

Please print your NAME

__________________________________________________________________________

TELEPHONE where you can be reached to arrange an interview

(area code) ____________ (phone number) _________________________________

When is a good TIME to call?

[ ] MORNING: Best Times ____________________________

[ ] AFTERNOON: Best Times ____________________________

[ ] EVENING: Best Times ______________________________

Is there another different or BETTER WAY to make an appointment?

__________________________________________________________________________

Are you at the college through participation in one of the following programs?

[ ] WORKFIRST  [ ] WORKER RETRAINING

[ ] ASSISTANCE TO LOW INCOME WORKING PARENTS

THANK YOU!
APPENDIX C

Guideline Questions

• Please tell me a little about your prior educational background.
• How did you find out about ______ Community College?
• Please tell me a little about your work history and your current job.
• What is it like to be working and a student?
• What do you hope to gain from your classes at ______ Community College?
• When you were in school before, did you ever have plans to attend college?
• So far, what are your perceptions of your class(es) and teachers at ______ Community College.
• Who is encouraging you to attend college?
• Who is negative about your attending college?
• Who or what has been most helpful at the college?
• Who or what has been most frustrating at the college?
• What arrangements have you made for your child(ren) while you work and go to school?
• What has been the most difficult part of beginning to attend college?
• What is going well for you at the college?
• How have you surprised yourself or had a success since you started this program?
• How has attending college changed your day-to-day life?
• What have you done to help yourself to adjust to these changes?
APPENDIX D

Oral Questionnaire (Read By The Interviewer)

1. INFORMATION ABOUT YOU

Name ____________________________________________  Age ______

• Highest level of school completed
  [ ] 8th grade or lower      [ ] 9th grade      [ ] 10th grade
  [ ] 11th grade          [ ] H.S. diploma     [ ] GED
  [ ] Some college       [ ] Associate’s degree  [ ] Certificate
  [ ] Bachelor’s degree [ ] Other ____________

• Current plans at the community college
  [ ] GED/High school completion
  [ ] Skills courses. What courses?
  ___________________________________________________

  [ ] Professional Technical certificate. What field?
  ___________________________________________________

  [ ] Professional Technical degree. What field?
  ___________________________________________________

  [ ] Associate degree with plans to transfer to a four-year college
  [ ] Other _______________________________

• Current job: ____________________________________________
2. **INFORMATION ABOUT THE FAMILY YOU GREW UP IN**

- Number of children in your family (include any children who lived in the household most of the time)
  
  _______ boys  _______ girls

- Parents' education (include biological and/or step parents who were in your household while you were growing up)

  **Mother**
  
  [ ] 8th grade or lower  [ ] 9th grade  [ ] 10th grade
  [ ] 11th grade  [ ] H.S. diploma  [ ] GED
  [ ] Some college  [ ] Associate's degree  [ ] Certificate
  [ ] Bachelor's degree  [ ] Other ________  [ ] Don't know

  **Father**
  
  [ ] 8th grade or lower  [ ] 9th grade  [ ] 10th grade
  [ ] 11th grade  [ ] H.S. diploma  [ ] GED
  [ ] Some college  [ ] Associate's degree  [ ] Certificate
  [ ] Bachelor's degree  [ ] Other ________  [ ] Don't know

  **Step Mother or other adult woman in the household (grandmother, aunt, etc.)**
  
  [ ] 8th grade or lower  [ ] 9th grade  [ ] 10th grade
  [ ] 11th grade  [ ] H.S. diploma  [ ] GED
  [ ] Some college  [ ] Associate's degree  [ ] Certificate
  [ ] Bachelor's degree  [ ] Other ________  [ ] Don't know

  **Step Father or other adult man in the household (grandfather, uncle, etc.)**
  
  [ ] 8th grade or lower  [ ] 9th grade  [ ] 10th grade
  [ ] 11th grade  [ ] H.S. diploma  [ ] GED
  [ ] Some college  [ ] Associate's degree  [ ] Certificate
  [ ] Bachelor's degree  [ ] Other ________  [ ] Don't know

Parents' occupation (include biological and/or step parents who were in your household while you were growing up)

  **Mother**
  
  ________________________________

  **Father**
  
  ________________________________

  **Step mother or other adult woman in the household**
  
  ________________________________

  **Step father or other adult man in the household**
  
  ________________________________
3. INFORMATION ABOUT YOUR CURRENT HOUSEHOLD

Number of other adults in household (do not count yourself) __________

(For each adult other than yourself, please answer the questions below)
Gender: Male Female
Relation to you: (for example, husband, sister, parent, friend, etc.) _______
Highest level of school completed
[ ] 8th grade or lower  [ ] 9th grade  [ ] 10th grade
[ ] 11th grade  [ ] H.S. diploma  [ ] GED
[ ] Some college  [ ] Associate’s degree  [ ] Certificate
[ ] Bachelor’s degree  [ ] Other _________  [ ] Don’t know

• Current job: __________________________________________

Number of children in household___________
(For each child, please answer the questions below)
Gender: (Circle one) Male Female Age __________

Relation to you: (for example, child, step child, nephew, friend’s child, etc.)