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Community College Student-Parents: Experience, Persistence, and Outcomes

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Community College Student-Parents: Experience, Persistence, and Outcomes
Senior Thesis: Fall 2019
Trinity College
Emily Schroeder

Abstract

Adults who occupy both the role of student and parent represent over twenty percent of the American undergraduate population. Unfortunately, little research exists about the experience's student-parents have balancing their dual responsibilities and the challenges they face while enrolled in post-secondary education. Thus in partnership with the Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance and Capital Community College, we endeavored to answer the questions of what differences exist between the experiences of community college parent and non-parent students in regard to their attendance, persistence, and outcomes in community college, as well as how student-parents navigate their long-term educational goals versus the immediate responsibilities of parenthood. I utilized a mixed-methods approach, using the 2012-17 Beginning Post-Secondary Student survey from the National Center for Educational Statistics as well as qualitative interviews of two community college parents to analyze student-parent experiences. A sizable achievement gap exists between the attendance, persistence, and success rates of parents and non-parents enrolled in community college. Additionally, parents report both an emotional and logistical challenge in balancing their dual roles in the classroom and at home that challenged their academic success. As student-parents make up a sizeable portion of the higher education system, their long-term success is crucial for the changing demands of the modern high-skill economy.

Community College Student-Parents: Experience, persistence, and outcomes

Introduction

As changes in the United States' economy demand more high-skilled workers to prevent a credential gap, it is essential to understand the academic success of all students, and in particular, student-parents. Parents currently make up 22% of the undergraduate population, with over half of these parents reporting at least one preschool or younger aged child (Cruse, Holtzman Gault, Croom, & Polk, 2019). Though childcare equates for the largest household expense, Connecticut is one of two states that highly restricts parents' access to childcare subsidies when enrolled in post-secondary education (Tran, Minton, Haldar, & Giannarelli, 2018). With childcare costs averaging \$19,521 in Connecticut, or approximately 28% of a household's annual income, access to affordable childcare is crucial for many parents before engaging in educational opportunities (Schulte & Burana, 2016).

The nation's network of public community colleges serves the greatest population of student-parents and represents an important avenue for many to engage in post-secondary education. While advanced education represents an important avenue in accessing high-skill, high-wage jobs, childcare costs can hold lower-income parents from attaining degrees. Therefore, it is important to understand who student-parents are, and how they differ from their non-parent peers. In this paper, I ask what differences exist between the experiences of student-parents regarding their attendance, persistence, and outcomes in relation to their non-parent peers, as well as how student-parents navigate their long-term educational goals versus the immediate responsibilities of parenthood.

Through this mixed-methods study, I found that student-parents do not attend, persist, or achieve longitudinally at the same rate as their non-parent peers. Moreover, parents reported

both logistical and emotional challenges in balancing their dual roles, which ultimately led to sacrifices in their education. This research was conducted with the guidance of the Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance (CECA), a statewide organization that works to improve early care and education access for children birth to eight as well as comprehensive legislative action plans. This research will help in the CECA's lobbying efforts during the Connecticut Legislative Sessions as well as address the limited longitudinal research that currently exists on student-parents' post-secondary academic experience and outcomes.

In this paper, I will explore the body of literature available on student-parents enrolled in post-secondary education to better understand who these students are and the challenges they face. I will also outline an analysis of the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) and two-generation legislative approaches. Then, I will describe the mixed-methods approach utilized in this study and annotate the findings. Finally, I will discuss the results in the context of policy recommendations and further research.

Literature Review

Who are America's Student-Parents?

Student-parents represent a unique population within the American education system who must balance their dual responsibilities in the classroom and at home as a parent. They are engaged in adult education programs, English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, post-secondary education, and job training courses, all to expand their future economic and career opportunities. Moreover, these parents are often faced with balancing their academic success with childcare responsibilities, employment, and personal needs. Only when a better understanding of the student-parent population is developed, will policies and programs be successfully developed to positively impact the academic success of parents.

In undergraduate programs, student-parents make up 22% of the overall population (3.8 million student-parents). In all, 70% are mothers, with 40% of mothers identifying as a single parent (Cruse et al., 2019). On average, 55% of parents are employed in full-time work, with more still in part-time work (Sallee & Cox, 2019). The nation's community college network serves 42% of all student-parents, the largest percentage out of all undergraduate institution types (Belfield, 2018, Cruse et al., 2019). Community colleges provide flexible and affordable programs for students and therefore serve a high percentage of low-income, minority, first-generation, and non-traditional college-aged students (Baime & Baum, 2016). Developing legislation to help engage low- to moderate-income families in post-secondary education, especially considering the financial burden of tuition, childcare costs, loss of working hours, is essential. Education can act as a positive economic cycle for parents entering higher waged employment and increasing both personal and family social mobility.

When parents enroll, the age of their children has important implications for student success and how they manage their responsibilities. Fifty-three percent of student-parents have at least one preschool-age or younger child at home which causes greater constraints on students' ability to balance their home and school responsibilities (Cruse et al., 2019). In Connecticut specifically, with 50,548 students enrolled in the twelve community colleges across the state, an estimated 11.2% of students (total 5,661 students), are parents with a dependent under the age of five (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016; Connecticut Office of Higher Education, 2016).

Challenges Faced by Student-parents

The challenges faced by student-parents enrolled in post-secondary education are unique to their population and represent important limitations in their long-term academic success.

Though the enrollment of student-parents at community college has increased since the 1980s, the number of schools offering on-site childcare centers, a known factor in increasing student success, has continued to decrease (Sallee & Cox, 2019; Peterson, 2016; Cruse et al., 2019; Moreau & Kerner, 2013). Access has fallen from 53% of community colleges offering on-site childcare facilities in 2003, to only 44% in 2016 (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2016).

Analysis by Moreau & Kerner (2013) of British student-parents as well as van Rhijn, Quosai, & Lero (2011) study of Canadian student-parents, found that lack of childcare subsidy funding and eligibilities have placed significant burdens parents. The developed world is seeing the cost of childcare outpace that of income, making the combination of tuition costs and loss of working hours challenging for lower-income families (Moreau & Kerner, 2013). Childcare costs and other factors related to young children are known to delay participation, completion, and success of young parents in post-secondary education (van Rhijn, Quosai, & Lero, 2011). Nevertheless, Moreau & Kerner (2013), as well as Peterson (2014) both found that parents were motivated by the ideas of providing a better life for everyone in their family and were proud to show their children what it meant to work hard and make sacrifices for their education.

The success of student-parents in the classroom is important for the growing credential gap in the Connecticut workforce. In the upcoming years, 70% of Connecticut jobs will require post-secondary education or specialized job training, though 34.8% of the current population has only a high school degree/GED equivalent or less educational background (Jarosz and Mather, 2018). Though there is a growing awareness and drive to engage low-income parents in the new workforce, nationally, only 11% of parents on public assistance programs including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, housing assistance, or Supplemental Security Income, are engaged in school or

training programs (Adams and Spaulding, 2018). Across the nation, there are 11 million working parents with children under the age of 3, whose access to reliable and affordable childcare is fundamental to their engagement. Working parents without secure access to childcare cite three main impacts to their success including limited work time, lower work productivity, and fewer career prospects (Belfield, 2018).

Community college student-parents represent an understudied but important population of the American higher education system. These parents, faced with substantially different and often overwhelming challenges compared to their non-parent peers, are still finding ways to succeed. They play an important role in the Connecticut economy and are an important subset to target when considering the long-term economic needs of the state.

The Child Care Development Fund

The Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) is a federal block grant program utilized by states to provide childcare subsidies for low-income parents of young children. Federal guidelines stipulate that families are only eligible if they are at least 85% below the state medium income, have children who are 12 or younger, and are provided for families engaging in specific work, education, and training situations (Tran et al., 2018). Eligibility for CCDF subsidies differs across states and territories. These differences can be broadly categorized as approved educational and training activities, minimum work hour requirements, income eligibility, and redetermination periods (Tran et al., 2018).

In the State of Connecticut, the CCDF grant funds the Care4Kids childcare subsidy. Only parents who are less than 20-years-old, on TANF, or enrolled in an approved training program through Jobs First, can access funding. These restrictions exist not only for those looking to engage in post-secondary education, but also for adult education/GED, ESL classes,

and other job training programs (Tran et al., 2018). Even still, this prevents parents who are currently receiving Care4Kids findings from engaging in educational opportunities without losing access to their childcare subsidy.

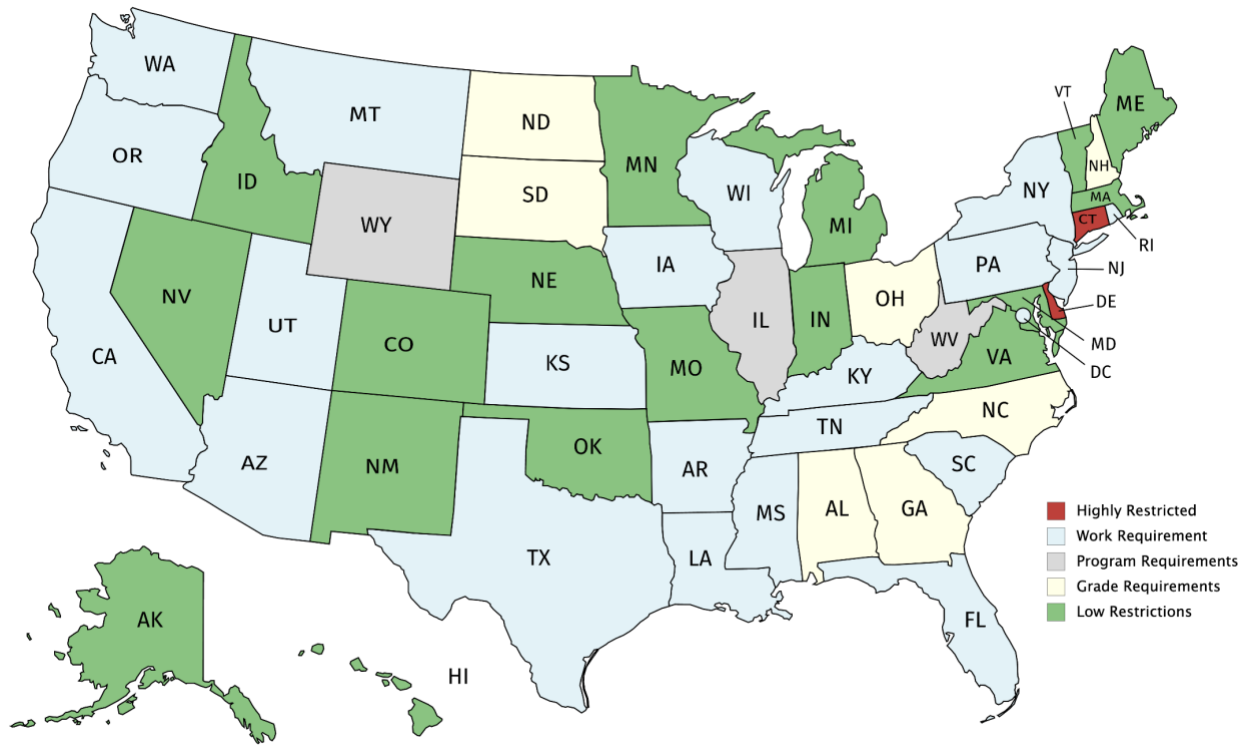


Figure 1: National analysis of state policy regarding requirements for parents to access CCDF funding while enrolled in post-secondary education. Some states have little to no additional requirements outside of the federal guidelines for parents to access CCDF funding, while others have work hour minimums, GPA minimums, or restrictions on the type of programs parents can enroll in. Connecticut and Delaware are the two most restricted states. In Connecticut specifically, only teenage parents, those on TANF, or part of the Jobs First program can access (Tran, Minton, Haldar, Dwyer, 2018; Data analyzed by author).

When comparing Connecticut’s restrictions on parents engaged in post-secondary education and their access to CCDF funding, it is clear Connecticut is falling behind the other progressive states both in the Northeast region and across the country. Though legislation has been drawn up in the past regarding increasing CCDF to parents engaged in education, the large theoretical price tag attached to this change has prevented its passing the budget office

considering the high debt the State of Connecticut is currently facing. Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont all allow parents to access subsidies with few to no restrictions. Massachusetts, for instance, requires that students must take courses at an accredited university, while Vermont requires parents to show that their coursework will lead to employment. Several states, including New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, all have a combination of work requirements for parents to complete along with their coursework. Connecticut and Delaware are not only the two states in the Northeast that do not allow parents to access subsidies, but they are also the only two in the country (Tran et al., 2018; Adams & Spaulding, 2018).

Two-Generation Policy Models

Two-generation policy models recognize that multigenerational approaches to family poverty can be the most effective in enabling upward social and financial mobility for the entire family unit (Moore & Currey, 2017). The main hypotheses behind these models are, first, that early childhood represents a crucial time period in child development and can be used to propel students into future academic and social success. Moreover, access to a quality childcare center can provide young children with the environment and resources to develop positive cognitive and social development (Shonkoff & Fisher, 2013; Rose, 2010)

Instead of focusing on the success of one generation, two-generation programs recognize that the greatest chance families have at upward mobility is focusing on building both short- and long-term benefits. When parents are able to access affordable childcare, they report being able to engage in higher waged jobs and progress within their fields (Schonkoff & Fisher, 2013). At the same time, children are placed in safe, educative environments that could have potential long-term benefits in their own academic success.

Literature Summary

This study looks to answer how the experiences of student-parents and non-parents differ regarding their attendance, persistence, and outcomes when enrolled in community college. Additionally, we look to understand how parents navigate their long-term desire to advance their education versus their immediate responsibilities of parenthood. Previous research has found that student-parents, while engaged in educational opportunities, are often employed, enrolled in community college, and struggle to balance their childcare needs and expenses.

The CCDF provides subsidies to lower- and moderate-income families, while parents are engaged in work or educational opportunities. Though there are a variety of restrictions states use to limit parents' access to funds, like work hour requirements, and GPA minimums, subsidies represent an important two-generation policy model. However, Connecticut remains one of two states that limit CCDF access to TANT recipients, parents under the age of 20, and those enrolled in Jobs First training programs.

Methods

This study utilized a mixed-methods model through an analysis of the 2012-2017 Beginning Post-secondary Student (BPS) survey from the National Center for Educational Statistics as well as two case studies of current community college student-parents. This project was originally designed as a qualitative analysis of student-parent interviews, however, an inability to capture this population shifted the project to its current mixed-methods model. The challenges associated with recruiting participants is linked with several major constraints with participants and study design. These include the extensive time commitments in student-parents' schedules and a general sense of vulnerability that is brought up in discussing experiences through one-on-one interviews. Additional problems included a shortened recruitment and

interview period of just five weeks as well as an unexpected challenge in building connections with faculty and staff at the community college to help identify potential interview participants.

The qualitative interviews were conducted at Capital Community College (CCC), located in Hartford, the capital city of Connecticut. This study was approved by both the Internal Review Board (IRB) at Trinity College (Hartford, Connecticut) and at Capital Community College.

Quantitative Data Analysis

A quantitative analysis of the 2012-2017 BPS survey from the National Center for Educational Statistics was conducted to determine what trends, if any, existed between student-parents' experience, attendance, and persistence while enrolled in community college, in comparison to their non-parent peers. Percentage distributions, as well as calculated averages, were utilized to express differences, as well as similarities, between the two populations. Longitudinal trends were also analyzed.

Site Description

CCC was founded in 1949 and is an accredited college located in downtown Hartford. The school resides on a single campus in a former department store and has 3,315 (Full-time equivalency; 1,731) students enrolled in their 36 different Associate degrees and 24 Certificate programs. The most popular degree programs include health professions/related programs (39%), liberal arts/humanities (19%), and business/marketing/management (14%). Tuition and fees for the 2017-2018 academic year were \$4,356 for in-state and \$12,908 for out of state students (Capital Community College Facts, 2019).

The majority of students, 74%, reside in the Greater Hartford Area in Hartford, Bloomfield, East Hartford, New Britain, Newington, Rocky Hill, West Hartford, Wethersfield, and Windsor. The average age of CCC students is 29 years old, classifying most as non-

traditional students. The majority, 71%, identify as female and about 80% of all students attend CCC as part-time students. The racial distribution for students is 35% Black/African American, 30% Hispanic/Latino, 20% White, and 5% Asian. There are 226 faculty members with an overall student to faculty ratio of 14:1 The student retention rate is about 45% with a three-year overall graduation rate of 6% (Capital Community College in Hartford, CT, n.d.).

Participants

CCC was chosen to recruit participants from due to its location within the City of Hartford, and the connections that exist between Trinity College faculty and the staff at the Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance. Student-parents were recruited through a variety of indirect and direct methods. These included direct recruitment by CCC faculty to their students who had self-identified as being a parent in the past, through the onsite childcare center, Capital Child Development Center staff to the parents being served, and snowball sampling from participants to their connections after completing their own interview. Indirect methods included the distribution of flyers and business cards throughout the downtown campus to help bring awareness about studying. Snowball sampling was expected to be the most successful way of increasing participation in the study as the network between parents, and especially parents of young children can be incredibly strong.

Participants needed to be currently enrolled in CCC classes during the fall 2019 semester and have at least one child under the age of five. Recruitment occurred over five weeks and in the end, only two participants were interviewed, ending in a case study approach versus qualitative analysis of a cohort of interviews.

Interview data collection and analysis

Participants were asked to take part in a 20 to 40-minute interview in which they were asked about their experiences balancing their dual roles as parents and students. The interview guide asked questions about their decision to enroll in community college, experiences associated with balancing their responsibilities, and the challenges associated with reaching their personal educational and employment goals (see Appendix A).

The participants in the study were able to opt into a second part of the study in which they would express many of the same questions in a 3-5-minute video recording that was shared with the Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance to utilize in their lobbying efforts in the 2020 Connecticut Legislative Session. Both parents in this study chose not to participate in this part of the study, mostly based on privacy concerns.

All interview audio was recorded and then transcribed using *Trint*, an online transcription service. The interviews were then coded using Atlas.ti to assess for themes and co-occurrences between the two interviews.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study that must be addressed and considered when analyzing the data collected. For the qualitative interviews, only two parents volunteered to participate in the study, resulting in the shifted study format to case studies. Both parents were mothers, who raised their children in two-parent households, a demographic that is not representative of what it means to be a parent today. Additionally, each parent had a non-traditional means of handling their childcare obligations. One mother's children had been accepted into a free magnet pre-school program while the other was able to utilize her older children to help with short-term childcare needs. Because the recruitment period was so short,

there was little time to increase participation and find individuals who represented different demographics.

The BPS data were analyzed on a national level, limiting our ability to conduct a specific analysis of states with their corresponding CCDF policies or of Connecticut specifically. Moreover, we were unable to discriminate differences between parents with children of different ages. Specifically, for parents with children aged 5 and younger. The 2017 BPS data was released during the course of this study and several outcome variables including those available through transcript analysis, were not yet available for analysis.

Research Positionality

It is important to recognize the potential impact that I may have had on participant responses to the interview questions. As a self-identified younger, Caucasian female, without a child, I outwardly differ from my participants. Additionally, in many cases, it was made known that this project was a collaboration between Trinity College, an elite private college within the same neighborhood of CCC, and which has a challenged relationship within the Hartford community, as well as the Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance.

Results

Quantitative Analysis of NCES Post-Secondary Student Survey

An analysis of the longitudinal 2012-2017 BPS survey from the National Center for Educational Statistics was conducted to determine trends between student-parents' experience, attendance, persistence, and other factors in comparison to their non-parent peers. Longitudinal changes were also expressed when appropriate.

Table 1: Demographics of Student-Parents and Non-Parents Enrolled in US Community Colleges

	Parents	Non-Parents
Age as of 12/31/11 * (mean/SE)	30.4/2.01	20.1/0.99
Gender		
Male*	33.7	48.1
Female*	66.3	51.9
Primary language spoken at home (%)		
English	87.7	84.3
Spanish	7.6	9.5
Other	4.7	51.9
Race/Ethnicity (%)		
White	56.2	54.2
Black/African American *	22.9	12.4
Hispanic/Latino	17.7	23.9
Other*	3.2	9.5
Employment status while enrolled in 2011-12 (%)		
No Job	56.0	56.0
Part-time *	17.5	27.1
Full-time *	26.5	16.9
Employment status while enrolled in 2013-14 (%)		
No Job *	72.2	54.4
Part-time *	13.6	30.4
Full-time	14.2	15.2
Average number of hours worked/week while enrolled (among workers)		
2011-12*	36.3	30.3
2012-13*	35.6	29.5
2013-14*	34.0	28.7
2014-15	32.0	30.0
2015-16*	36.0	30.5

* $p < 0.05$

Source: BPS 2012/17 Survey Data

Table 1 presents the demographic and employment differences between parent and non-parent students enrolled in US community colleges. Student-parents were significantly older than non-parents (30.4 vs 20.1 years respectively), which was an expected difference. Student-mothers had significantly higher representation in comparison to student-fathers. There was no significant difference in the proportion of students in either category in respects to the primary language spoken at home.

While there was no significant difference in the population of student-parents and non-parents without a job while taking classes in the 2011-12 academic year, a higher proportion of

parents were engaged in full time, versus part time work. Both groups saw a decrease in employment during the 2013-14 academic year, though more significantly for parents. For students employed while taking classes, the average number of hours worked (excluding the 2014-14 academic year) was significantly higher for parents versus non-parents.

Table 2: Prior Academic and Employment Experiences of Student-Parents and Non-Parents enrolled in US Community Colleges

	Student-parents (%)	Non-Parents (%)
High School GPA		
0.5-1.9	9.2	9.2
2.0-2.9	38.4	40.6
3.0-4.0	52.4	50.2
Highest Math Class		
< Algebra 2 *	34.9	23.1
Algebra 2	38.4	40.4
Pre-Calculus *	14.2	23.5
Calculus or beyond	9.9	13.0
Jobs held before post-secondary education		
None	22.5	19.3
One job	68.9	68.9
> One job	11.5	11.8
Academic confidence prior to attending		
Disagree *	12.4	5.9
Neutral	14.6	9.8
Agree *	73.0	84.2

* $p < 0.05$

Source: BPS 2012/17 Survey Data

Table 2 presents important findings in regard to the prior high school experiences of parents and non-parents, as well as their previous employment history. Despite similar high school academic performance across both groups, measured in terms of GPA, student-parents reported significantly lower confidence in their academic abilities prior to attending a post-secondary institution. Moreover, there were significant differences observed in the highest level of math course taken in high school, with disproportionately more parents having never taken a

course higher than algebra II. There was no significant difference found between the employment records of parents and non-parents prior to enrolling in post-secondary education.

Table 3: Student-Parent and Non-Parents' Academic/Social Experiences while Enrolled in US Community Colleges

	2011-12 Academic Year		2013-2014 Academic Year	
	<i>Parents</i>	<i>Non-Parents</i>	<i>Parents</i>	<i>Non-Parents</i>
Knew Requirements to Complete Degree				
Disagree/neutral	9.9 *	17.1	12.2!	11.7
Agree	90.1 *	82.9	87.8	88.3
Academic Confidence				
Disagree/neutral	11.2!	13.8	9.7!	10.5
Agree	88.8	86.2	90.3	89.5
Felt Like Part of an Institution				
Disagree/neutral	7.6	12.3	33.9	38.1
Agree	92.4	87.7	66.1	61.9
Interactions with Faculty				
Disagree/neutral	12.9	17.7	9.2!	13.1
Agree	87.1	82.3	90.8	86.9
Interactions with Other Students				
Disagree	18.5	18.6	14.2	19.6
Agree	81.5	81.4	85.8	80.4
Satisfaction with Studies				
Disagree	14.4	23.3	17.2	19.1
Agree	85.6	76.7	82.8	80.9
Satisfaction with Social Experience				
Disagree	30.4	34.1	27.2	28.9
Agree	69.6	65.9	72.8	71.1
Socioemotional Support from friends at school				
Disagree	36.2	32.2	36.3	30.5
Agree	63.8	67.7	63.7	69.5
Socioemotional Support from parents				
Disagree	15.8	9.1	23.3*	12.2
Agree	84.2	90.9	76.7*	87.8

! Interpret data with caution. Estimate unstable because the standard error represents > 30% of the estimate.

* $p < 0.05$

Source: BPS 2012/17 Survey Data

Table 3 presents longitudinal differences between parent and non-parent students in their academic and social experiences while enrolled in community college. In 2011-12, more student-parents agreed to understanding the requirements to complete their degree.

Longitudinally, both parents and non-parents saw a decreased perception of feeling like part of an institution, though this growth was larger in parents. There was a significant difference in the reported socioemotional support received from parents, though this is expected considering the average age range of the two populations. Longitudinally, both parents and non-parents reported lower levels of feeling like they were part of an institution.

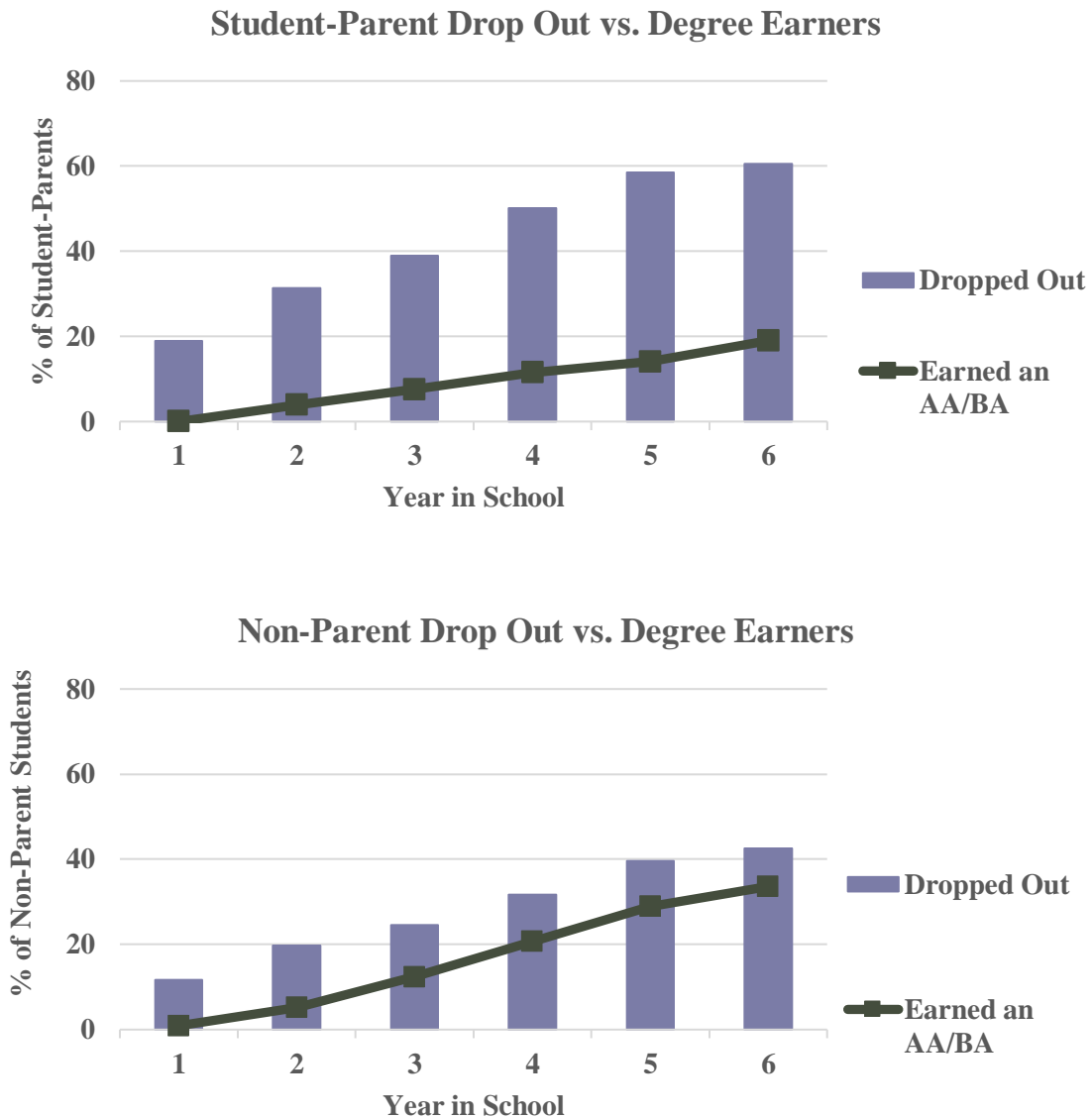


Figure 2: (Above) US community college student-parents drop-out, as indicated by purple bars, between 2011-2017, in comparison to the percentage of students who completed either an AA or BA. (Below) US community college non-parents drop-out vs. AA/BA degree earners. Results are cumulative over the longitudinal study. Data was collected and analyzed using the National Center for Educational Statistics DataLab PowerStats.

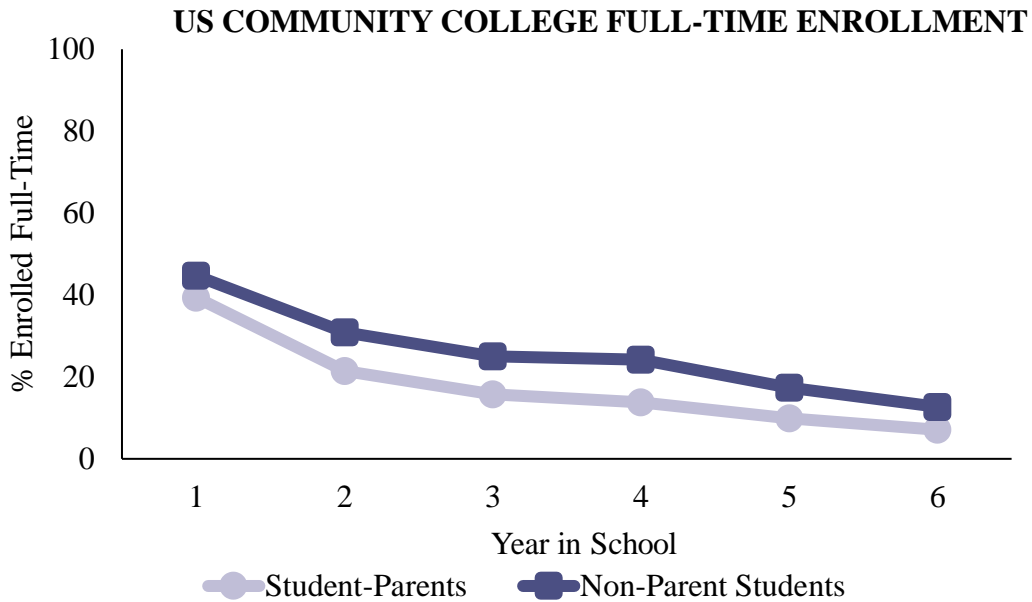


Figure 3: Community college non-parents attendance intensity pattern between the 2011-12 to the 2016-17 academic years. Data collected using the National Center for Educational Statistics DataLab PowerStats.

Figure two illustrates the difference in the drop-out rate, versus degree earners, between the student-parent and non-parent subgroups. Student-parents are significantly more likely to drop out in comparison to non-parents and are less likely to earn a degree over the course of six years. Figure three illustrates the longitudinal change in attendance intensity for parents and non-parents from the 2011-12 to the 2016-17 academic years. When looking at full-time enrollment, student-parents were significantly less likely to enroll full-time, compared to their non-parent peers, starting in the 2012-13 academic year, and continuing through the rest of the study (Figure 3)

Table 5: Student-parents and Non-Parents Academic and Economic Outcomes in 2017

	Student-parents	Non-Parents
Cumulative GPA		
3.25 – 4.0	36.3	39.4
2.25 – 3.24 *	16.6	28.3
1.25 – 2.24	4.3	2.0
>1.24 *	44.2	28.0
Ever Taken Remedial Courses (%) *	68.9	59.6
Stopout – Ever Took One (%)	41.3	44.9
Transferred to Different Institution *	24.9	42.9
Cumulative Student Loans (\$/SE)	8,064.1/6.17	7,280.5/13.32

* p < 0.05

Source: BPS 2012/17 Survey Data

Table 5 presents student outcomes from the 2017 BPS student survey. Overall, a greater percentage of student-parents had cumulative GPAs less than 1.24 (44.2% total). This is matched with several other differences, including a higher percentage of student-parents compared to non-parents, having taken a remedial course while enrolled, 68.9% versus 59.6%, respectively. Though there was no difference in the percentage of students in either category in having taken a stopout, student-parents showed significantly less mobility in transferring to different institutions.

Table 6: National Community College Degree Attainment (AA/BA) and by State Restriction Categories on CCDF Access

	Student-Parents (%)	Non-Parents (%)
Attained associate/bachelor's degree between 2011-2017 *	16.9%	32.8%
Students (%) who attained an associate/bachelor's degree according to state restrictions on access to CCDF funding		
States with Low Restrictions	26.7	35.9
States with Work Requirements *	15.8	32.0
States with Program Requirements *	7.3	27.2
States with GPA Requirements	12.1 !	36.1
States with High Restriction	⊖	⊖

* p < 0.05

⊖ Reporting standards not met

! Interpret data with caution. Estimate unstable because the standard error represents > 30% of the estimate

Source: BPS 2012/17 Survey Data

Nationally, student-parents who originally enrolled in public 2-year programs, were less likely to graduate with an associate's or bachelor's degree over six years (2011-2017) compared to non-parents (16.9% and 32.8%, respectively).

When looking specifically at state restriction patterns of CCDF funding for parents enrolled in post-secondary education, several patterns emerge (see Figure 1 for breakout of state restrictions on parents access to CCDF funding while enrolled in post-secondary education). First, for states with little to no restrictions on access to CCDF grants, there is no statistical difference in the graduation rates of parents and non-parents over six years. There were, however, statistical differences between parents and non-parents in states with either work hour requirements or those with restrictions on the types of programs student-parents could enter.

As there are only three states with GPA requirements, and two states with high restrictions on CCDF funds, there are too few data points to make claims about graduation patterns of student-parents.

Initial analysis does appear to signal that access to childcare subsidies in the form of CCDF funding has an impact parent's overall success. States with limited restrictions on parents' access to funding had higher graduation rates compared to the national analysis.

Case Studies: Community College Student-Parent

Description of parents.

Two interviews were conducted with current CCC student-parents with at least one child under the age of five. A brief description of each parent will be given along with themes that emerged from the interviews.

Maria, (pseudonym) was a mother of a middle-school aged son and preschool aged twins, who lived with her spouse. Maria and her spouse had enrolled a year prior at a different

community college before coming to CCC in the 2019 academic term. In the previous year, the couple met in parking lots to switch the children back in forth as one parent went to work or school and the other was heading home. Now, with their son in public school and their twins in a magnet preschool program in different towns, along with her commute to CCC in Hartford, Maria has a new set of challenges navigating the schedules of the three different districts, as well as her spouse's online class and work schedules. In the upcoming year, Maria is hoping to apply to the CCC nursing program and work towards her long-term goal of becoming a registered nurse.

The second parent, Jennifer (pseudonym), was a recent immigrant to the United States and has been attending classes at CCC for the past year. She has three children under the age of ten, with her youngest in preschool. Jennifer started learning English when she first arrived in the United States and has since entered community college to help provide for her family in the future in terms of a higher-skill, higher-wage job. She stresses the importance of both her children's academic success, as well as the model she serves them as a student-parent. Jennifer's partner works full-time and encouraged her to continue her education and take care of their children. Jennifer spoke of her passion to become a professional organizer after her time at CCC and help support her entire family's academic success.

Theme 1: Managing the emotional toll of playing two roles.

Navigating the many responsibilities placed on parents is not a new phenomenon, and though there is a growth period, many parents learn to adapt their lifestyles and identity. But the roles of being a parent and a student requires an immense amount of time and emotional energy. When split between these two roles, both parents noted being drained and dissatisfied with the amount of energy they were capable of putting into either. Maria had her own term for this

phenomenon, called “Mommy Guilt”. When she talked about “Mommy Guilt”, Maria discussed how she struggled with the sacrifices she was making both to her education, but mostly to her children. She described how she was in a constant internal battle:

“As a student, as a mom...I just I felt...like I constantly question, ‘Is this right? Am I being selfish?’ Like my kids, like I should be with my kids. I should be spending time with them... That's just gonna be an ever-continuous thing as a parent, because you're always going to wonder, oh, ‘Could I have done this better’... but... You’re gonna have some guilt about something somewhere along the lines” (“Maria”, Fall 2019).

Throughout the interview, Maria talked about this internal struggle that she constantly faced. Though she would always put her children first, no matter if they called sick minutes before her midterm exam causing her to leave class or their spring breaks did not align with hers, Maria knew it meant sacrifices to her own education and success. Though as she was in her second year of school, Maria had come to terms with this fact and was confident in her decision to put her children’s needs above her own academic success.mm

As a recent immigrant to the United States, Jennifer provides an important perspective to the differing demands on immigrant parents, and especially refugees. As Jennifer admits, she never dreamed about coming to America, but it became her family’s only safe option. Now Jennifer expresses how her ‘American Dream’ pushes her to continue through hardships and explains:

“It’s a lot of pressure in a mom’s life – kids – And the same time, I want to continue my education. I came to this country, you know, I’m trying to learn the language and get support and start working. So, it’s very challenging. And also understand, my kids are learning the language too” (“Jennifer”, Fall 2019)

For both Jennifer and Maria, learning to draw their own line in the sand, where their responsibilities as a student or a parent in that moment belong, is important but also tiring. They

express challenges in dealing with the potential long-term consequences on their children and their partners lives, who are each making sacrifices so they can succeed as students.

Theme 2: Navigating the demands of multiple lives.

Navigating the multiple roles student-parents play can be a dance, balancing school, children, work, household needs, and self-care. It is both a mental and a logistical marathon. But a race whose rules are set to change at any moment of any day. Both Jennifer and Maria discuss how sickness, snow days, afterschool activities, and in-school demands of their children's teachers all place undue stress on their lives. For Maria, who is now taking night classes to help balance her schedule, she is finding that:

“I don't think these night classes are as...productive and efficient for my learning. Because by that time I'm...I'm...I'm burnt out. I've gotten the kids, I get up at 5:30, taking the kids to school and gotten them ready, fed all that. Drive them [to school] ...I'll come here [CCC] to study if I can” (“Maria”, Fall 2019).

Maria, whose children attend schools in two different school districts and has to commute to Hartford to attend classes at CCC, is finding herself emotional exhausted and questioning the sacrifices she is making as both a parent and student. One of her children has a disability and thrives when she is home to facilitate in her nighttime routine. However, since starting up night classes, Maria has had to watch her child's behaviors and progress revert backwards, making it an emotional battle every time she has to leave her classes and witness the consequences of that decision. Throughout the interview, the guilt she felt and the exhaustion she endured over the past few semesters was inescapable.

Jennifer describes a similar struggle in balancing multiple schedules and describes how the needs of her children always come before her studies. When explaining how she finds time to get her schoolwork completed, Jennifer said:

“I have [school] three days a week...So, I study in morning while they are at school. Or after I put them to bed. So, [I] stay up late and do my homework, or I go to the college before I have class to study...While they are home, I have to do their homework...I have to take care of them...when they are around me I cannot study” (“Jennifer”, Fall 2019)

This is a phenomenon unique to parents, who are often unable to play any other role other than ‘parent’ while at home. This is something both parents eluded to, but this comes at a cost. As Jennifer described, “When the kids get sick, or when I don’t have somebody to take care of them, or when I cannot pay a babysitter...[and] I go three hours for school. They [childcare center] take \$15 for each child. So, I have to pay \$160 for just one day” (“Jennifer”, Fall 2019). Long-term, these bumps in schedules or sudden changes in family needs can come at a great cost to their own education. Jennifer described how if she didn’t have the money that week to pay for childcare, she simply would have just stayed home and not gone to class.

For these two parents, navigating the schedules of their children, their classes, outside lives, and their partner’s work hours, was an incredible challenge. Being an engaged parent was something both Maria and Jennifer expressed great importance of for their children. And it was clear, their children come first, their academics come second; always. This is a compromise, but not one that either expressed a desire to change. Nevertheless, both parents still spoke about the incredible drive they felt to continue their education, to gain the credentials to a higher-wage job and provide for their family in a way only education can insure.

Discussion

This paper asked what differences exist between the experience of parent and non-parent community college students regarding their attendance, persistence, and outcomes, as well as how student-parents navigate their long-term educational goals versus the immediate responsibilities of parenthood. Through a mixed-methods analysis of the BPS 2012-17 survey

and case study interviews of current CCC student-parents, we uncovered a sizeable achievement gap between parents and non-parents. Moreover, the interviews found that parents struggle with the emotional toll of their dual roles and the sacrifices that their partners and children must make because of their attendance at school.

Though limited research currently exists on student-parent success in post-secondary education, the results from both the PBS analysis and the interviews confirmed similar findings of student-parents in other nations like Canada and the United Kingdom (Moreau & Kerner, 2013; van Rhijn, Quosai, & Lero, 2011; Peterson, 2014). The high school data available, including the highest level of math taken, cumulative GPA, and academic confidence prior to enrolling, allows for an analysis of how these factors impact a student's future academic success in community college. Parents were significantly more likely to take a remedial course during enrollment, which is likely linked to their older age and lower high school math attainment (Tables 2 and 5). Unfortunately, there is a growing body of research that suggests enrollment in remedial courses can discourage students' success and can lead to significantly lower graduation rates (Bettinger & Long, 2005; Boatman & Long, 2018; Melguizo, Bos, & Prather, 2011).

The academic and social experience measures available from the BPS provided few differences between the two cohorts or longitudinal changes. The major finding for both parents and non-parents was that both populations reported a decrease in their perception of feeling like they were part of an institution (Table 3). Though these experiences may have remained constant through the two testing intervals, it may also be a reflection on the quality of the questions asked through the BPS and their ability to capture complex phenomena. In general, a longitudinal qualitative study of students would be essential in deciphering what differences, if any, actually exist in the experiences of parents and non-parents.

When specifically looking at the longitudinal persistence of student-parents and non-parents, as well as a variety of outcome variables, we found important differences. First, student-parents are more likely to drop out of school and are less likely to enroll as full-time students (Figures 2 and 3). Employment statistics found that fewer parents reported employment as the study persisted, while the percentage of non-parents working, as well as their employment intensity remained relatively consistent. This indicated that non-parents were able to find long-term balance in their academic and employment needs, while parents were statistically less likely to continue working. When comparing the academic success of the two cohorts, it was found that student-parents reported significantly lower cumulative GPAs, though this is likely associated with the higher representation of student parents in remedial courses as well as their higher dropout rate. Interestingly, however, was that there was no significant difference in the academic mobility, student parents were significantly less likely to transfer to a different institution while enrolled (Table 5)

Though parents were significantly less likely to achieve academically or persist through school and earn a credential, both parents interviewed matched findings that parents continue to persist because of their motivations to improve their family's future (Peterson, 2014). As childcare costs are known to delay participation, completion, and success of student-parents in post-secondary education, the results collected through the BPS analysis were not unexpected (van Rhijn, Quosai, & Lero, 2011).

Both parents interviewed expressed an incredible challenge in balancing the schedules of the members of their family while finding enough time to complete their coursework. Nevertheless, each described an important trial and error period in finding a balance between their responsibilities. For example, Maria discussed in detail how she and her partner for the first

year of their enrollment each worked, took classes part-time, and did a child swap in parking lots as one parent was on their way to work or school and the other home. After their first year, Maria and her partner found this lifestyle unsustainable, and quickly realized they needed a more stable and practical long-term plan. For Jennifer, after her first semester at CCC, her partner decided to take on additional jobs and allow her to focus specifically on her classes and looking after their kids at home. Though each parent is now several years into their studies and still finds some challenges in navigating the demands of their many responsibilities, they have been able to establish a new normal that for the moment, is working for their entire family.

Though both parents interviewed in this study were in two-parent households and this presents a limitation in analysis, this also opened up an unexpected question into what potential importance exists in having additional partner or family support for parents enrolled in school. With the combined cost of tuition, childcare, and the loss of working hours, it is critical to consider what role having a partner plays in allowing parents of young children to successfully continue their studies. Maria emphasized the importance of her husband picking up additional hours at work and taking online classes in easing their schedules. Jennifer was also able to establish the challenges she and her partner faced as new immigrants without any extended family in the states. As one-parent families continue to grow in representation, a further analysis of both the support networks utilized and how families manage the expenses and inevitable loss in paychecks, is crucial in understanding the experiences of student-parents and why some, but not all, succeed.

Policy Recommendations

There is a sizeable achievement gap when comparing student-parent and non-parent enrolled in community college, and unique challenges faced by parents engaged in education.

The first recommendation to address these challenges would be to extend CCDF grants to parents engaged both in post-secondary education, as well as other educational opportunities like high school/GED courses, ESL, and approved job training programs. Childcare subsidies for parents engaged in education represent a two-generation policy model with the potential of having benefits for both parents and their children's long term educational and economic prosperity (Moore & Currey, 2017; Shonkoff & Fisher, 2013). As Connecticut and Delaware remain the only two states who do not yet allow parents to access childcare subsidies for student parents, it is essential that Connecticut takes steps forward and progress with the rest of the country (Tran et al., 2018).

An additional recommendation is to increase access to onsite childcare facilities at educational institutions, including post-secondary schools as well as at adult education and job training programs. When parents have to travel additional distances to place their children in childcare facilities or struggle to find services with extended hours, the success of parents is limited as they will continue to place their child above their academic needs. Finally, both parents interviewed in this study reported limited resources and support networks for parents engaged in education. Institutions, and especially community colleges, need to recognize the large population of student-parents within their student body who could benefit from a support network with resources.

Future Research

Limited longitudinal qualitative research is currently available on post-secondary student parents in the United States. Though these parents make up over a fifth of the total undergraduate population, the longitudinal analysis of the BPS 2012-17 data found a substantial and persistent achievement gap between parents and non-parents. Further qualitative analysis but be undertaken

in order to better understand what challenges parents are facing that are preventing them from achieving and persisting at the same level as their non-parent peers.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide for Community College Parents of Young Children

1. Tell me about your children? What are they like and how old were they when you decided to enroll?
2. Tell me about your decision to enroll in community college and the factors that you considered.
3. How do you balance your academic responsibilities with other demands of your time? Childcare? Jobs? Hobbies?
4. Tell me about a time when a lack of childcare affected your ability to complete schoolwork or attend classes. How often is this an issue?
5. What are your future goals? And what challenges have you or others in your life faced while you try to reach these goals?
6. Is there anything else that you think is important for me to know about this topic?
7. Do you have any questions about this research project?

Appendix B:

Informed Consent to Participate in the Study of the
Relationship Between Adult Educational Advancement and Child Care Access

The purpose of this research study is to understand the relationship between access to affordable childcare and the ability to participate in educational opportunities such as community college. Participants will be asked to participate in an interview to better understand their personal story in navigating childcare costs with the additional burden of tuition, or what barriers parents have faced that have inhibited them for pursuing higher education. We estimate that this will require approximately 20-30 minutes of your time.

The benefits of this study are the ability to help provide a better understanding of the challenges parents of young children face when balancing the needs of their family and personal educational goals. The stories and information collected will be used to help bring awareness and data to legislators across the State of Connecticut about the importance of having access to high quality and affordable childcare. The study involves only minimal risk, meaning that the probability of harm or discomfort is not greater than ordinarily encountered in daily life.

Interview Part 1 will be an audio recording, and the transcript will remove your name any individually identifiable details. This will last about 20 minutes, and you will receive a \$10 Visa gift card upon completion.

I agree to an audio recording in Interview Part 1

Interview Part 2 is an optional video recording, where you will be asked to repeat some of your answers to part 1. This will last about 10 minutes, and you will receive an additional \$10 Visa gift card upon completion. The video footage will be edited and publicly shared on the web, with your full name, to assist the legislative efforts of the Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance.

I agree to a video recording and my name to be used in Interview Part 2

I do not agree to a video recording and my name to be used in Interview Part 2

I understand that my participation in this project is completely voluntary, and I am free to stop or withdraw my participation at any time without any penalty.

I understand that all of my responses in this study are completely confidential and will be used only for research purposes. If I have any questions about this study or want more information, I am free to contact:

Principal Investigator: Emily Schroeder / Emily.schroeder@trincoll.edu / 203-823-6022

Research Supervisor: Jack Dougherty / john.dougherty@trincoll.edu

Or contact the Trinity College IRB administrator via email: irb@trincoll.edu

Print your name: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

All signed forms will remain confidential. Participants may keep a blank form if desired.