

ABSTRACT

DISSERTATION TITLE: THE LABORING SCHOLAR:
COMMUNITY COLLEGE GEOGRAPHIES AND
THE POLITICS OF CARE

Anne Elizabeth Hofmann, Doctor of Philosophy, 2024

Dissertation directed by: Perla Guerrero, PhD
Department of American Studies

The Laboring Scholar: Community College Geographies and the Politics of Care is an institutional ethnography that investigates the personal, political, and economic costs to student caregivers seeking a college degree. Through a critical analysis of student interviews and a close examination of community college structures and histories, I deploy an interdisciplinary, qualitative methodology that seeks to topple and contest previous ways of researching two-year collegiate structures in the U.S. I argue that, internally, community colleges offer intermittent respites from the physical and emotional labor of caregiving by being locations of intellectual invigoration and professionalization for students; however, I also address how community colleges' positioning within larger regional and global political economies ultimately renders them stations of stagnation for many students, especially those with the most overlapping needs and markers of difference. To analyze these concepts, I use an interpretive framework that threads theories of disinvestment, structural exclusion, and predatory inclusion, to explore the

use of the term “care,” which is used flexibly across institutional and everyday life to recruit students and animate collegiate recruiting and retention initiatives. I trace the link between two-year schools’ reputation as both places of “opportunity” and “second chances,” and as a stigmatized alternative to “real college.” I do so by examining the language and visual arguments deployed by colleges’ public-facing websites, as situated within broader historical-political narratives about community colleges, and by conducting in-depth interviews with caregiving students. I find that political and popular beliefs regarding studenthood and care work are internalized by students, particularly those with the fewest financial and time resources. Additionally, the overlap between race, gender, and unpaid care work aligns with those students who are the least likely to graduate from college and the most likely to accrue significant debt and physical or mental distress due to their attempts. The study triangulates institutional histories, neoliberal rhetorics of education and success, and student caregiver testimony to conclude that unpaid care labor for biological or chosen family is simultaneously a primary barrier, a fundamental source of personal joy, and a possible location of subversive power for community college students seeking a post-secondary credential.

THE LABORING SCHOLAR:
COMMUNITY COLLEGE GEOGRAPHIES AND THE POLITICS OF CARE

by

Anne Elizabeth Hofmann

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment of
of the requirements of the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
2024

Advisory Committee:
Perla Guerrero, PhD, Chair
Nancy Mirabal, PhD
Baylee Marquez, PhD
Beth Douthirt-Cohen, PhD
Michelle Espino, PhD

© Copyright by

Anne Elizabeth Hofmann

2024

Preface: Points of Confluence

This dissertation is a love letter to the community where I teach. It is an honoring of the unique and important work that happens here to give so many people a chance at being in the world when “going away to college” isn’t possible or desirable. And like every love story, this dissertation will also reveal conflicts to be resolved – critiques of the structures and practices that reify racialized and gendered hierarchies. This love letter will ask my community college, and higher ed spaces like it, hard questions like: How do community college policies marginalize students who are caring for their biological and chosen families? Why do you recruit caretaking students, ask them to invest money in tuition and other necessary expenses for college completion, and then not invest in the supports we know they need? How can we promise “opportunity” without also promising childcare, affordable housing, and predictable course scheduling? In this love letter, I will ask our students what they need, what processes help, stagnate, encourage, or harm them, and how being a community college student who also identifies as a caregiver is different from being any other kind of student.

In this dissertation, I am rooting for community colleges. I want them to be – like any location of love – places of opportunity, growth, and shared labor. I do not want to name them (as I have in certain parts of my research) places of extraction and exploitation. That said, I’m willing to step back from my relationship with community colleges and assess what is structurally at work to create them because, of course, they are not sentient beings capable of love. Community colleges are places created by humans within particular socio-historical contexts that prioritize some lives over others. Therefore, a relational reckoning, analysis, and

study of community colleges must include the stories of those who work within and attend them. I am prepared to do that here.

I am also prepared to recognize my position as an embedded, participant-researcher in community college life. As a ten year faculty member and now Chair of the English and Humanities department, I share responsibility for many of the gaps and successes I will articulate, in particular our failure to collect student stories with rigorous (and therefore protective) qualitative methods. I will share the ways that external political structures and the local economy sometimes support but more often exploit student investment. I will also demonstrate how the study of a community college must be grounded in a firm understanding of its geographies, both human and political, as well as its location within higher education. Finally, I will explore how everyday life as a community college caregiving student tells us far more than the “success data” colleges nationwide are collecting but struggling to disaggregate. In this way, my dissertation is a reckoning with my own professional life, the potential harm I’ve caused, and the insight I may be able to contribute by analyzing the structures I know, and reporting what I’m told makes being a community college student caregiver so immensely difficult.

I am writing this preface to my dissertation from a hotel room in Harpers Ferry, WV. I am here because my own work and caretaking responsibilities make it seemingly impossible for me to conceptualize new ideas at home. Like my students and graduate colleagues who similarly balance career and the primary care for children, aging parents, siblings, or other kin, finding

space to think and write is a material, intellectual, and emotional problem. It requires nuanced support and financial means to make it through our current structures of higher education.

Knowing this, I've come to write in an American town that is both a point of confluence (of the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers) and the site of John Brown's 1859 abolitionist rebellion. My work sits within Abolitionist University Studies, Women of Color feminisms, and Critical Cultural Geography. It will locate community colleges as complicated sites of study with the human impact of overlapping systems of oppression at its nexus. Here, I will write what I hope will be a coming together of ideas as an initial act of revolution for those students carrying the financial and caretaking load of their community.

Dedication:

*This work is dedicated to my mom, Honey Hofmann, who
has loved me into believing I can do anything.*

Love is a labor, and she does it best.

Acknowledgments:

One of the things that has gotten me through the hardest stretches of writing and revising this dissertation was the daydream of eventually, finally, somehow, getting to the point where I write the acknowledgements page for the completed work and have the chance to formally thank so many folks for loving me through this process. This project has taken and given so much to me, my children, and my teaching. In many ways, I'm a different person than I was when I started my doctoral coursework eight years ago, and I am so humbled by the time, encouragement, expertise, resources, and *care*, so many people in my life have extended to me so that I could be one of the few single moms who make it through a PhD.

First of all, I'd like to thank my two beautiful, spirited, amazing, brilliant, and generous children, Lynne and Jonathan, for being both my purpose and my inspiration in this process. When I started this degree, they were 9 and 11 years old and they have been with me through every step of the journey – the good, the bad, and the ugly – cheering me on, telling me to rest, asking me about my project, and making me a cup of tea when I look weary. Without their love, I couldn't have done this. Without their joy, this wouldn't be worth it. Without their humor, I wouldn't have made it.

I'd also like to thank my mom who has been indefatigable in her support for me. She has driven from Virginia countless times to “fill in the gaps” for me while I worked, mothered, studied, and wrote. She drove carpools, attended cross-country meets (in the rain), made groceries runs and countless meals, and prayed for me every day and every way to see me to the finish line. She is my mentor, my friend, my confidant, and the one person in my life who I know

believes in me without hesitation. Her humor, advocacy, practicality, warmth, grace, and love define presence for me and fuel me when self-doubt looms.

My siblings, Rusty, Carol, and John, and their partners, Amy, Tim, and Sharon, as well as my godmother, Lee, and cousin Neil have all comprised “Team Annie Moo” who have visited, called, texted, and hugged me through this degree and reminded me that Hofmanns don’t quit but we do like to enjoy ourselves along the way. Similarly, countless friends and colleagues have been important sounding boards for ideas – good and bad – that have emerged during my research process. I’m also lucky enough to have friends who also like to celebrate each success with me and do so in amazingly creative and fun ways that usually involve travel, dancing, cycling, or brewery trivia. In particular, I’d like to thank Kyle, Lori, Lisa, Lynne, Jill, Kelly, Leslie, Christine, Magin, Colleen, and Cate for being on the front lines of my care circle in these final months of writing.

I have been honored and humbled to work with the brilliant and gracious Dr. Perla Guerrero as my dissertation chair, who has believed in my project since day one. She has pushed me as a scholar in ways no one ever has with her rigorous questions and evaluation of my writing and research. She gently and authentically helped me believe that my ideas have worth. This is a gift that extends far beyond the completion of a PhD.

Many thanks to my dissertation committee, Dr. Nancy Mirabal, Dr. Baylee Marquez, Dr. Michelle Espino, and Dr. Beth Douthirt Cohen who similarly helped me shape ideas into a work I am proud to present. Additionally, I’d like to thank the Department of American Studies at The University of Maryland and the community college where I work for the resources, skills, and platforms to present my work. And to my AMST PhD “battle buddies,” I wouldn’t have made it through without you.

This work would not *be* without my students and the study participants who generously donated their time to me and the broader advocacy for care work. Their stories of struggle and triumph fueled me to explore my research questions with a depth that parallels my deep respect for their experiences. I am grateful for their care – for asking me how I am, for inquiring about the whys of my work, and for trusting me enough to take their stories and make collective meaning with them. I hope I have been a good steward of this trust.

Finally, I'd like to honor and thank my Dad who passed away just after I advanced to candidacy, for his advice to "Trust yourself and trust your God." I was lucky enough to be encouraged everyday by my dad, a self-proclaimed feminist, and his deep value of education & public service. He took me to my first march, showed me what equity is long before I understood the word, and believed deeply in the transformative power of organizing to advocate for and serve others. He truly believed we can use our gifts to change systems, and encouraged each of us to do so, together. It's his hope and light that I carry into this work that centers the dignity of all people and all work.

Table of Contents

Preface: Points of Confluence.....	ii
Dedication.....	v
Acknowledgements.....	vi
Table of Contents.....	ix
Chapter 1: The Laboring Scholar: Community College Geographies and the Politics of Car.....	1
Chapter Interlude: A Place to Stand	28
Chapter 2: Mapping the Scholarship of the Politics of Care at Community Colleges....	32
Chapter Interlude: Dina.....	83
Chapter 3: A Critical Methodology: Collecting Narrative and Care as Method.....	86
Chapter Interlude: Repair	117
Chapter 4: Findings: Threading Theory, Institutional Rhetorics, and Experiences of Care.....	120
Chapter Interlude: Intimacies of Care.....	170
Chapter 5: Conclusions, Complications, and Possibilities for Further Study.....	172
Appendix 1: Interview Coding Synthesis Grid.....	199
Appendix 2: Condensed Participant Description and Individual Analysis.....	278
Works Cited and Bibliography.....	297

Chapter 1

The Laboring Scholar: Community College Geographies and the Politics of Care

"I love community colleges. They are places of grit, determination, commitment, and pride. Our community colleges are the citadel of second chances."
~ Former Republican Governor, Jeb Bush

"A white college student from a private college goes into a poor neighborhood and volunteers four hours a week and that's considered exemplary. [Whereas] a poor kid who lives in that community and takes care of all the kids in that neighborhood four hours every day is not seen as a volunteer."
~ Patricia Hill Collins

"Where life is precious, life is precious." ~ Ruth Wilson Gilmore

Chapter 1: Who *cares* about community college students?

I began this dissertation project seven years ago when my son was ten years old. He has heard me describe the study to curious family members asking about my doctoral studies, usually with a follow-up question about if I'd finished it *yet*. He has worked on his own homework next to me at the kitchen table while I've read articles, coded interviews, written IRB summaries, and fielded Zoom calls with my American Studies dissertation chair. This fall I enlisted his help by asking him to describe my dissertation as he understands it. I offer you *his* summary, which speaks to the two-generation impact of being a parenting student, and how much information children absorb about *doing college* when they walk next to family members earning a degree. His ability to synthesize my project functions here as both content and purpose: as a clear descriptor of the dissertation project and as evidence of why degree completion for caregivers matters so deeply in unsettling the overlapping material consequences of race, gender, and class inequality in the US.

I *think* your research is about how community colleges say one thing about helping all students get a degree, but they don't actually do what they say. In fact, for students like single moms trying to support their kids alone or immigrant students working extra hours to send money to family in their home countries, sometimes community colleges actually harm these students by putting them into further debt without getting them to their degree. And what seems to be the confusing part, is that everyone at community colleges *cares* so much about students, but they just can't seem to really help the people who need it the most in a way that actually changes their living situations. It's also confusing because your students seem to love the college and believe the college is helping them. So even though they don't all get a degree, they still seem to enjoy and value what they get from being a student. I think you're asking how all of those things fit together, and how it can be different.

Then he added, "That's kind of a lot, Mom." We laughed.

I've wrestled for several years with the best way to address and investigate the disconnects he describes. Interrogating the historically reinforced "common sense" understandings of educational communities is a complex, messy, and unsettling process. It requires research frames extending beyond existing disciplinary boundaries and methods that connect individuals' lived experiences with the overlapping structures that contribute to the creation of categories and conditions of race, gender, and class in America.

Through a critical analysis of student interviews and a close examination of community college structures and histories, this dissertation investigates the personal, political, and economic costs to student caregivers seeking a college degree. I argue for a critique of local and state community college structures and the care they purport to provide their students and local

communities. Specifically, I call for an examination of the cultural narratives deployed historically and politically *about* community colleges as sites of opportunity for failed or unfit students, and how these concepts of care (or paternalism) maintain and possibly exacerbate existing race, gender, and class inequalities for the very populations they claim to help within their jurisdictions. At the same time, I recognize and explore the incredible power and position community colleges assert within the education and workforce sector, both because of their hyperlocal ubiquity *and* the communal student relationships fostered on community college campuses. The study compares the definitions of care deployed and extended at, near, and about community colleges and the ways in which the caregiving students (who are mostly workingclass women and people of color) that arrive at two-year schools contribute to, but frequently do not benefit from, a campus climate that is frequently described as nurturing, supportive, helpful, and family-like. The study centers the experiences of students who are unpaid caregivers to biological and chosen family because of the unique impact their unpaid labor (defined by some as extractive) has on the local community and their expertise in defining the cost, work, and impact of community care. It also examines the cost caretaking has on students' lives as well as the deep satisfaction caretaking brings to both the college community and the individual. Quite simply, the project looks at who "cares" about community college students, and who cares for them.

Research Questions:

The process of distilling my research questions into measurable components for this dissertation study has been difficult, precisely because of the ubiquity and magnitude of the problems I am addressing. While American Studies projects provide some methodological tools to uniquely uncover veiled hegemonic structures (like community college care rhetoric) cloaked in "common sense" ideologies, narratives, and social behaviors, I've chosen to ask questions in

this study that explicates rhetoric and articulates its impact on both structures and people. As such, readers will notice that my questions and methods operate at multiple scales, from the level of the individual through to the examination of overlapping institutions. Despite the invisibility of community college geographies and the politics of care, both lived and politically constructed, even my son understands the impact of how educational structures fundamentally reinforce rather than disrupt race, gender, and class narratives, *and* the polemics of colleges simultaneously being important places of belonging and joy for students. This chapter names and contextualizes my research questions, situates them between and across disciplinary arguments of care ideology in public education, and ground them in American Studies theories and methodologies.

The central research question and sub questions of this dissertation are:

1. How do the politics of “care” – ideology, policy, and lived experience – shape community college structures and the lives of the students who attend them?
 - a. How is “care” defined and constructed by and for community colleges?
 - b. How is “care” valued at community college uniquely?
 - c. For which students is “care” extended, and at what cost is “care” implemented, internalized, or co-opted?

To answer these questions, I use an interdisciplinary framing of community college political economies through Marxist Geography, Critical Education Studies, and Women of Color feminisms. This approach enables me to gain a deep understanding of the ways in which race, gender, and sexualized identities are formed and connected with/by colleges to create different kinds of labor and property ownership.

Community College Geographies and the Politics of Care is an interdisciplinary, qualitative analysis that investigates care rhetoric in higher education administrative structures by examining the language used across selected institutional archives, digital marketing materials,

and student interviews. The central methods are linguistic with a primary focus on the use and deployment of the term “care.” For the purposes of this study, I define care as the physical, emotional, financial, spiritual, intellectual, or social support one person or group gives to another person or community. My methodology combines critical discourse analysis as the unifying method for drawing conclusions from in-depth, open-ended interviews as well as the historical and digital archives of the study site. The analysis of both data sets is grounded in the longer history of community colleges, which provides a unique way to map how disembodied College policies and institutional structures are predictably re-membered on the bodies of caregiving students. Explicating “care” as a flexible and sometimes manipulated term that is culturally coded differently across race, gender, and class categories is essential for evaluating its use as a primary justification for recruiting and “serving” students, particularly those who rarely earn a degree. The study examines the definition of care at the individual and institutional level, and seeks to measure the impact of care rhetoric on caregiving students’ lives by asking how they define, experience, co-create, and see college as a site of care and caregiving as a source of both joy and extraction.

Structure of Dissertation & Chapter Summaries

This dissertation consists of five traditional academic chapters yoked by autoethnographic, narrative interludes that ground the research in lived experience and remind readers of my positionality and personal stakes in the research. Additionally, each chapter is framed by three quotes from various scholars, politicians, poets, and experts that function as epigraphs for the chapter they announce. They are intended to be a rhetorical precis for the arguments that follow. Below is a brief summary of each chapter to guide readers of this introduction:

Chapter 1: This chapter is an overview of the key arguments, research questions, theoretical framework, and the methodology of *The Laboring Scholar: Community College Geographies and the Politics of Care*. The chapter informs the reader on why the study matters and how the research and analysis are constructed as a new intervention to the field of American Studies.

Chapter 2: This chapter is a literature review of fields relevant to the research questions. Specifically, I synthesize the works of scholars who investigate the histories of community colleges, geographies of educational disinvestment and exclusion, and political economies of gendered and racialized care work, to include definitions, rhetorics, and ideologies of care.

Chapter 3: This chapter articulates my methodology, delineates the limits and scope of the study, defines “care” as assessed in the data analysis process, addresses issues of researcher positionality, and frames the data with appropriate historical-political context of the study site.

Chapter 4: This chapter synthesizes the findings from the study. It draws together the themes and important dynamics surfaced in the student interviews and sets them alongside the narratives of care deployed by the College in their outward-facing, public information.

Chapter 5: This chapter concludes the dissertation and considers the impact of the study as well as the possibilities of its findings. This chapter offers recommendations to colleges interested in improving the student caregiver experiences at their sites. It also proposes additional research questions for consideration and draws conclusions about the broader systemic impact of unpaid care work as well as community colleges as possible sites of resistance to racialized and gendered care work pipelines.

So What? Why does this study matter?

My dissertation explores the historical genealogies, ideological frameworks, and material consequences of “care” at community college and the gendered, racialized, classed labor pipelines these ideologies manufacture. Specifically, I am interested in the slippery (often framed as flexible or nimble) nature of junior colleges and the opaqueness of their functioning within and beyond public school systems and workforce development. As a student of American Studies trained to recognize and reveal hegemonic power structures, the tangled nature of community colleges’ relationships with local, regional, and national institutions seems an obvious opening for the study of the precarity and possibility of working class/working poor students and the degree to which care is embedded as an additional, and culturally varied, expectation of their lives. In particular, the study examines how the institutional devaluing of care labor impacts women and communities of color. While organizations such as the Institute for Women’s Policy Research has recently generated powerful data on the status of community college women and the benefits of investing in their education, to date, no research has been done within American Studies on community colleges as potentially problematic sites for disruption of existing, cultural labor distribution (IWPR 2019).

The complexity of community college’s local, regional, and national political economies demands rigorous spatial, material, and ideological analysis in order to measure the physical impact on the people within them, particularly minoritized students who are also contributing unpaid care labor to the community. Community colleges are at once a last resort and a foundational economic machine for local labor markets that are often gendered and racialized. For example, 56% of registered nurses (RNs) and almost all low-wage medical professionals are credentialed at community colleges; these “essential workers” are predominantly women and women of color (respectively) who go on to work within the communities where they are educated (Cruz et al). In many ways the students with the fewest choices become the best pool

for exploitable labor, especially if they never achieve the golden ticket of class ascension, a college degree.

In particular, adult students seeking degrees disproportionately attend community colleges over four-year institutions because they are often tied to the location of their families. Because they frequently have no other geographically or financially accessible option, and because they are often saddled with the majority of unpaid domestic labor in the home, more women and mothers attend community college than any other sector in higher education (Martin et al 7). However collegiate structures rarely facilitate a path forward for this population. In fact, only 8% of single student-mothers ever complete an Associates degree, and many are victims of predatory student loans and for-profit colleges (Rose & Hill, IWPR 2019). This dismal completion rate is unsurprising, and perhaps part of the reason, that 70% of single parent students are living 200% below the poverty line (Gault et al 3).

Given the physical and economic stakes for women and children in the US, a transformational, interdisciplinary framework is necessary to carefully unpack the multiple (and unique) overlapping labor systems each community college serves. Additionally, the answer demands a deep understanding of the cultural constructions of motherhood, race, class, and gender that positions caregivers unevenly, and often invisibly, within paid and unpaid labor markets. To date, community colleges have not been viable sites of economic security, yet they cast themselves as a panacea, a “bridge to success,” for minoritized, working class individuals. However, in the welfare-resistant climate of the 21st century, the stakes of giving up on community colleges entirely as sites of economic transformation for working class mothers, in particular, are high, given that few other options exist for secure, “upward mobility”. Therefore, analyzing how caregivers’ experiences converge or diverge from other minoritized individuals in varying geographic and fiscal markets, each with its own histories of exclusion, erasure, and

displacement, will be an essential component of my study, as will the possibilities of community college students as agents of change and resistance to hegemonic power structures. Ultimately, the study of gendered, racialized, and classed labor, and its articulation with community college political economies, is a key component to understanding class ascension, economic security, and physical survival for 70% of the US poor who are women and children (Women's Legal Defense and Education Fund).

Overview of Disciplinary Grounding and Theoretical Positioning:

I assert my questions and arguments through an intersection of American Studies and Critical Education lenses, which differs considerably from scholarly projects about community colleges situated in traditional Humanities or Education fields. Specifically, this dissertation is built on the premise that community colleges are a strategically flexible component of the US Education system that participate, articulate, and overlap with other parts of the US political systems to function as key sites of maintenance of generational poverty, racism, and sexism in the US. Therefore, while professionally I am deeply invested in the successes and positive contributions of community colleges, this research's disciplinary stance is aligned with Critical Education Studies and American Cultural Studies overlapping goals of identifying structures of harm in existing educational structures rather than focusing on necessary improvements to a system historically built to exclude and contain the kinds of students centered in this study. Instead, this project seeks to clarify how the language of care contributes to structural inequality at community colleges so that new possibilities may emerge towards a safer, more livable life for those who spend much of their time and resources in the name of "care."

Because my research questions operate at scale, from one broad question about the structure, function, and positioning of community college care narratives within higher ed to an

interrogation of cultural and institutional practices that impact individual student lives, I frame my analysis with theories of Marxist geography that center uneven development and organized abandonment. By examining community colleges through place-based methods of inquiry and abolitionist geographic theories, new ways of examining persistently low graduation rates and its relationship to students' unpaid care labor widens the view of "student success" from individual responsibility or student fitness to the interrelationship of institutional failures within and beyond the single campus. Specifically, the scholarship of Neil Smith, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and Keeanga Yamahtta-Taylor will provide the lens through which I will explore the relationship of race, place, gender, and care work within the context of higher education that makes placemaking difficult for students who are unpaid caregivers to biological or chosen family. Smith's theories of uneven development, Gilmore's definitions of organized abandonment, liberation, and racism that animate neoliberal political economies, devalue care work, and prohibit liberation, and Taylor's model of predatory inclusion allow for an incisive examination of the relationships between student displacement and political economies that drive disinvestment in particular student groups.

I also engage with Critical Education Studies and Women of Color Feminism to accurately position junior colleges within the history and maintenance of exclusion in higher education. Tools from these fields are necessary to study the lived experiences of place-making among caregiving students at community colleges. Specifically, I will use Tara Yosso's reframing of Bourdieu's social capital theory, Nowlie Rooks concepts of Segrenomics, and Sara Goldrick-Rab's critique of collegiate funding structures, to inform the ways in which caretaking has varying costs to individuals and entire career fields, depending on race, class, and the paid/unpaid work women chose to perform or resist. To do this, I will draw together theories of

Whiteness as Property and *Education as Property* as defined by Cheryl Harris and Latoya Clark (respectively). Finally, I will assess constructions of racialized motherhood and care work as presented by bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Valerie Pokalow, and the Chicana (M)otherwork Collective.

Defining Care Work: What is it? How is it co-constructed with neoliberal rhetorics of “care”? Who resists dominant, cultural constructions of care work?

In order to answer my research questions, I define and contextualize the term “care” and how it differs from care work. Importantly, care ideology varies by culture, subculture, and historical moment; therefore, one goal of this study will be to define “care” as it is deployed, created, and experienced at community colleges. Chapter 2 parses the terms “care,” “care work,” and “care labor,” and frames commonly deployed versions of care rhetorics within the rising neoliberalism and academic (racial) capitalism of the 20th and 21st century that also coincides with the birth and expansion of community colleges in the US. Briefly, however, for the purposes of understanding this introduction, “*care*” is used to denote common sense understandings of interpersonal or institutional support, and *care work* or *care labor* (used interchangeably) are the terms I use to describe the individual time and human capital resources (emotional, physical, spiritual, social energy) invested to another person. Throughout the project I negotiate and delineate care ideology from lived experiences of both care labor and “care” reception.

Broadly, I use the term care work to encompass unpaid or underpaid labor that individuals perform to help another person function physically, emotionally, or intellectually. This definition includes the parenting of children, the supervision of disabled folks or elders, and even for taking on the emotional responsibilities of nurturing the bereaved, ill, or recovering community

members. Care work is frequently (and historically) viewed as “women’s work” and is therefore often taken on by women and feminized subjects in families, workplaces, and across professions such as elementary school teaching, nursing, and child care work. Multiple overlapping systems of paid and unpaid labor systems have constructed this common sense understanding of care work as feminized and has likewise led to its lack of recognition as real labor.

However, study after study (discussed in Chapter 2’s literature review) has demonstrated the physical, emotional, and material consequences of care work -- consequences that disproportionately (but not exclusively) impact women because this labor is frequently unpaid and feminized. Caring for another human being takes time, energy, skill, training, and resources that otherwise could be devoted to earned income. Likewise, if it is largely performed by women, the lost time, energy, and resources work to the advantage of those unencumbered by care work - predominantly white men. Ironically, care work is elevated in American culture as a necessary and valuable service, despite the lack of monetary compensation for it. In many ways, the esteem associated with helping others is intended to be its own kind of noble payment that ultimately maintains gendered and racialized pay gaps. I move beyond this understanding to examine how community colleges, as places with their own unique and historically specific political economies, are shaped (1) as places that create local, paid, care work pipelines, and (2) how they are constructed by the disproportionately care-working students who attend them. More specifically, I focus on students who perform unpaid care work for their biological or chosen families and how community college policies marginalize these individuals. In particular, I explicate the cultural construction of care work by drawing on the work of Patricia Hill Collins, Anna Crittenden, Brigid Schulte, bell hooks, and the Chicana Motherwork Collective to address the intersections and deviations of care work and motherhood in higher education.

Perhaps the most logical place to start in discussing the intersection of studenthood and carework is with the scholarship of bell hooks — a pillar of feminist, womanist, and critical education scholarship. In *Teaching to Transgress: A Pedagogy of Hope* hooks identifies the purpose of education as practice of freedom and care. She indicates that teaching is care work and that students must be treated as fully human in order to thrive. Moreover, hooks calls for pedagogies of care as foundational to the process of dismantling discriminatory practices in schools. hooks writes extensively about care (and love) as the necessary center of transformative education, and the ways in which traditional schools are structured towards the harsh rigidity of the imperialist, white patriarchy. In this way, hooks positions studenthood as vulnerable in the face of school policy and teacher-practitioners as interlocutors with the agency to negotiate new spaces of freedom within their classrooms. While hooks interrogates possibilities inherent to the relationship between student and teacher, she likewise acknowledges school policy as a primary adversary to freedom for women, students of color, and lower/working-class students.

Most importantly, however, hooks discusses the construction of studenthood as marginalizing for many groups of students, from the way film and television represent schools as places for young people to the policies colleges create with an ideal (young, white, straight, middle-class) student in mind. In this way, hooks opens the door for a critique of who is valued and who educators must center in their work. hooks' scholarship follows the intellectual genealogy of Paulo Freire who, through the lens of Critical Theory, views education as a location of resistance and power redistribution. For Freire, hooks, and others in this tradition, classrooms are microsites for undermining colonial structures of power and building ideologies of revolution and change.

In the book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984), hooks began calling for a racially intersectional recognition of motherhood. The academic and cultural insistence that

motherhood, and feminism for that matter, is a monolithic experience of oppression is an ongoing contestation in the field, noting that working-class women and women of color often do not view motherhood as an identity of disempowerment. “Historically, black women have identified work in the context of the family as humanizing labor, work that affirms their identity as women, as human beings showing love and care, the very gestures of humanity white supremacist ideology claimed black people were incapable of expressing” (133). For my work, it is important to state that care work itself is not oppressive, but in fact the gendered scripts and material consequences of taking on unpaid care work are primary barriers for caretaking students seeking a college degree and financial stability.

Why Examine Community Colleges and “Care” together?

Unlike the political battle grounds of k-12 schools or university classrooms, community college campuses are places that are rarely questioned or considered by the public (Marcus). Perhaps because of the open access and affordability of the degrees they offer, or the child care centers and gyms they provide to local residents, they are largely inoculated from public critique. In fact, community colleges are frequently touted as the educational saviors for families without the generational wealth or disposable income to pay for a college degree out of pocket. They are positioned as places of second chances and sites of “care” for students failed or left behind in the ugly escalation of 4-year university tuition costs. Politically, community colleges have somehow escaped accountability and assumed a kind of invisible neutrality no other sector of US education enjoys (Marcus).

At the same time, while most people working in education know that community colleges serve more working-class students than residential 4-year schools, many people do not know that community colleges account for more than 40% of all undergraduate student enrollment in the

US and more women, students of color, first generation, immigrant, returning, and parenting or caregiving students (Martin et al). Of particular interest to me as an American Studies scholar is (1) how and why community colleges universally attract these students, (2) how the “place” of a community college is similarly constructed across locales despite their varied governance and site structures, (3) how different cultural narratives of “care” work as technologies of class maintenance, (4) and how they articulate indirectly with the child “care” system.

Community colleges are sites of stigmatization and a holding tank for unresolved race, class, and gender politics. They are middle spaces in higher education often referred to as “13th grade” and stigmatized as not exactly high school but not “real college” either. On the one hand, they serve nearly half of the undergraduate students in the US, yet they are frequently excluded in conversations of high-impact, higher education programming (A. Smith). Of the 5,300 accredited American higher education institutions, 1,132 are community colleges, and despite their relative underfunding compared to large, land-grant, public or privately endowed institutions, they serve the majority of US students who are low-income, housing-insecure, women, parents, and people of color (Martin et al 7). They are rarely included by name, or even collectively, in popular media’s discussion of college or in annual *U.S News and World Report* college rankings, as if they indeed aren’t *real* colleges. Their faculty are largely absent from serious, discipline-specific, academic conference proceedings, and while almost all colleges and universities house education departments devoted to k-12 and higher education credentialing, only a handful of institutions have any kind of programming related to community college professionalization. For all practical purposes, community colleges are invisible in higher education in spite of the large number of transfer students who successfully matriculate from 2-year to 4-year schools and who enjoy better bachelor’s degree completion rates, and less debt, than students who start at a four-year college as freshmen (A. Smith). Even within American

Studies, a field devoted to shifting elitist systems and freedom-making, community college scholarship, polemics, and students are, themselves, minoritized within the field.

On the other hand, in terms of the scope and success of their mission, community colleges promise “access for all,” yet only 20% of the students who attend them graduate with an Associates degree in three years (Martin et al 5). Their champions are devoted to student service and democratic notions of “upward mobility,” yet degree and career programming is frequently structured in traditional modes that exclude students with “non-traditional” needs. And ultimately, the students who attend community colleges desperately want a degree, but they often lack the financial resources, geographic flexibility, domestic freedom, or prior educational success to go anywhere else. Many campuses are precariously state and county-funded on an annual basis, and locally governed, often by “good ole’ boys,” politically appointed boards of trustees who are regional industry leaders with little to no higher education experience (Rhoads and Valadez). They hire instructors at low salaries who are passionate about teaching and social justice yet saddled with five classes per semester (often full of underprepared students), and little-to-no time to publish or earn a terminal degree in their field. Sometimes they have wellmanicured campuses that resemble their four-year counterparts, and sometimes they exist mostly on-line or as a few floors in a city office building. Like so many sites in America, college development is uneven and at the mercy of culturally biased, fiscal decision-making and investment (Brint and Karabel).

Methodology and Methods: How do I study these questions?

I began this study by examining the historical and existing (varied) structures of community colleges, discovering that they are a uniquely American construction created to serve the US capitalist economy, the US military, and as a safety net for failing k-12 public school

systems that promote the class stratification reflected in university system graduation rates. I also researched how community colleges are studied within academe and evaluated the degree to which existing research adequately centers lived experience on community college campuses, as well as who is doing the research about community colleges. Most of the respected body of research on community colleges is conducted by scholars at 4 year universities (The Community College Research Center at Columbia University, the Georgetown Center for Workforce and Education, the Office of Community College Research and Leadership at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and the Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research at North Carolina State), and by non-profit advocacy or think tank groups, like Achieving the Dream, Inc., The Urban Institute, and New America. The existing research focuses on “student success” rates and promotes neoliberal narratives of success that are inconsistent with the dismal completion numbers of students for whom a college credential would have the biggest class impact. Among these students is a population whose racial, gendered, and class intersections uniquely magnifies the question of “care”: students who are parenting or caregiving while attending college.

In order to prioritize a depth of understanding surrounding the use and deployment of care narratives at community colleges, I chose a single site of study (called Mid-Maryland Community College, or MMCC, here) for the student interviews and for the close reading of college marketing materials and program recruitment. My goal was to establish a new methodology for studying community colleges from within them, and to identify the gaps, overlaps, and differences in student experiences of care and a college’s care rhetoric as reflected in marketing materials, policies, and program investment decisions. For all of the data evaluation, I used critical discourse analysis to sort, code, and evaluate themes across materials

and interview transcripts, a method consistent with the examination of language, rhetoric, and the distribution of power in and across institutions.

While my theoretical framework is steeped in American Studies theories of constructions of difference, the enactment (or methods) of my research is grounded by my home-discipline training in English language studies and the close reading of texts, images, and storytelling. Specifically, using critical discourse analysis of interviews and an archive of the place of study will allow me to thread multiple fields and, hopefully, articulate the potential power and harm housed in two-year colleges. Critical discourse analysis is a form of linguistic and textual analysis, to include oral, written, filmic, and multimedia communication, “that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in social and political contexts” (Van Dijk). Critical discourse analysis is frequently used to study institutions and their impact on individual and group access to material and social capital. It is frequently used alongside Marxist epistemologies, and is likewise, a good fit for my questions of interest.

Research Site Selection

The community college where I work, that for IRB purposes will be called Mid-Maryland Community College (MMCC), is typical of junior colleges across the county: mid-sized, founded in 1954 as part of the post-war, GI Bill funded community college movement, predominantly white but with high number of students of color, undocumented students, women, and students over 25 than its regional 4 year institutions, offering 2 year credit degree and non-credit workforce credentials, and regionally serving the county where it is situated. While MMCC cannot be wholly representative of all community colleges, structurally and historically it is an

excellent site of study for understanding the broad system articulations and student experiences at 2-year schools.¹

The chosen site is also where I've worked for the past eleven years as a professor, so my research position is embedded and participatory, lending – I hope – an important experiential perspective on the ways the linguistics and policies of care are climatized at this site.

Data Collection and Analysis Processes

Because the methodology of this project includes the intersected methods of human subject research and the close textual analysis of digital media and historical archives, a brief explanation of how these elements fit together methodologically and logistically for a cogent analysis is necessary in this introduction. After completing a full literature review of community colleges' care rhetoric and determining the best way to theoretically ground the research questions, I separated the data collection into two categories: (1) student interviews, and (2) the digital media / historical archives of the study site. I began with student interviews and their analysis, which is the largest data set in this study, and then proceeded to the close analysis of the digital and historical archive. The final step in the data assessment was looking at these two sets together and examining the differences, overlaps, and similarities between a college's care rhetoric, the student experiences of caregiving and receiving, and the longer history of community colleges that situates the analysis politically and temporally.

In the Fall of 2022, in compliance with my approved IRB at both my doctoral program site and the study site, MMCC's Office of Student Affairs published a call for study participants

¹ Specific demographic data about the study site is discussed in Chapter 3 where the history of the institution and current demographics are described.

in its weekly email news blast. This news blast is sent to all students currently enrolled in credit and non-credit coursework at the College and methodologically controlled for an overrepresentation of any particular student demographic. I also hung paper flyers around the campus and digitally advertised the project through social media and asked others to share the call as well.

The call for participants asked for a 30-60 minute, recorded, Zoom interview with me where we would discuss their lives as MMCC students who are also unpaid caregivers to biological or chosen family. I did not attach any kind of monetary or gift reward to participation, only the encouragement to share their stories and hopefully improve the college experience for caregiving students. I received over 30 emails of interest and ultimately ended up conducting 23 in-depth, open-ended interviews by the end January 2023. Participants were incredibly generous with their time with most conversations lasting well over the 30-minute mark and always closing with my gratitude for their time and the promise to share the final dissertation study with them. The process was poignant and revealing, reinforcing the efficacy of using interview methods to both ground and answer my research questions.

Then, I spent several months manually coding the Zoom transcripts while concurrently rewatching the interviews to responsibly account for body language, conversation hesitations, word emphasis, and emotional tone shifts in both the participant and me. I conducted two rounds of coding to distill themes from the interviews. First, I explicated the transcripts using both *in vivo* codes (or exact quotes from subjects) as well as descriptive codes (or summative words/statements assigned by the researcher) in order to capture the specifics of individual student experiences. Then, I looked at the list of codes and created meta-codes that identified the significant trends or themes from the full 23 interview set.

Finally, and in conjunction with the meta-codes, I scanned the data for stand-out experiences that may not be representative of the entire interview set, but which speak to experiences perhaps lived only by the most extreme or marginalized students or life situations that must be made visible in the context of care. For example, one student shared the unique exhaustion she experiences as a Black, French-speaking, immigrant, single mother of three who also works 96 hours a week as a certified nursing assistant (mostly night shifts) providing inhome care to dying patients while also earning a social work degree. While her experience is not typical, it also is not uncommon at community colleges and certainly not in a set of students who would likely have the time to be able to participate in an elective research study. Therefore, this final round of analysis captures the outliers in the data set whose experiences deeply matter for an accounting of student care.

As is hopefully evident in this description of my data collection and analysis, the use of this particular form of interview method was intense, time-consuming, and invaluable for grounding the rhetoric of care in real people's lives. Critical Discourse Analysis, according to Johnny Saldana's *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, as well as Esposito and Evans-Winters *Introduction to Intersectional Qualitative Research*, demands this rigorous and close examination of conversation dynamics and positionality – a process that, when done ethically, is far deeper than a mere counting of word repetition by a computer program. Admittedly, the use of computer software in my analysis would have been faster but would not have been congruent with the rigorous linguistic and relational study CDA calls for. I found the interview analysis process to be immensely fruitful for distilling the nuance, diversity, and complexity of care rhetoric in its performed, expressed, and lived form.

The second part of my data analysis was the application of Critical Discourse Analysis to the written materials of the study site. One method for applying CDA to constructed written

language is a process called explication. Explication is a form of close reading used in literary studies to examine the nuances of an author's position, message, dramatic situation, purpose, and their relationship with an intended audience. Applying explication as a CDA method to the outward-facing digital marketing materials and an institution's public archive turned out to be fruitful for studying the overlapping rhetorics of institutional care and perceived student needs.

The process of choosing which parts of the institution's public archive to explicate required a scan and selection of resources/documents that address care either explicitly or in its rhetorical approach. In order to construct a meaningful archive of sources reflective of current and public care rhetoric at MMCC, I chose to closely read the College's current, public-facing website, and external marketing materials deployed in the past 2 years with the term "care" or its adjacent terms (relating to some kind of special attention or intimacy with a student's experience, e.g. "help," "second chance," "opportunity," etc). The process of examining the College's recruitment and community positioning of "care" alongside student experience interviews reveals a deep and complex (dis)connection between student belonging: Why am I here? How do I fit? What can I achieve and how? This methodology asserts that a re-evaluation of care rhetoric, at community college in particular, is critical for a better understanding of caretaking labor and its intersections with race, gender, and class constructions.

Researcher Positionality, Limitations, and Self-Reflexivity as Method of Possibility

Given my research questions which interrogate structures of racialized and gendered power, it is essential to recognize that ethnographic and linguistic interview methods (which stems from the disciplines of Anthropology and Language Studies) have been critiqued for the violences they have historically enacted. It is important to similarly recognize that social

scientists, who have inserted themselves and their colonial epistemologies onto human objects of study, have caused harm by producing knowledge about groups they are not truly a part of. Therefore, a deep awareness of my positionality as the primary researcher in this study is an essential component to responsibly use interview analysis as a research tool. However, because I am a current and decade-long employee of MMCC, I am confident that I am indeed a participant observer in the campus culture, specifically as a person who has taught and built programs for our student-parent population. While I will discuss the details of my race, gender, and class positionality later in this dissertation (particularly the Findings section), I recognize that perhaps the most powerful and difficult part of choosing interview methods for my study is continually assessing the impact my singular perspective has on my interpretation and analysis of the archive and interviews.

This research project is born from my 25-year teaching career in the English classroom and the interdisciplinary questions I have always asked as an ardent advocate for public education and the Arts and Humanities. While I spent the first half of my career in high school and four-year regional university campus teaching (in Alexandria, VA and San Antonio, TX), for the last twelve years, I've been at MMCC. I began as an adjunct instructor teaching in the evening and moved to full-time, ten years ago. I've been tenured for the past 5 years and recently became Chair of the English and Humanities Department, managing over 50 faculty members and maintaining a 2-2 teaching load. In addition to being a faculty member, I am the innovator of a scholarship and degree-pathway program at MMCC that provides students, who might not otherwise be able to attend classes due to the cost of childcare, the funding and academic supports to pursue a degree. Due to my positions as both a professor teaching at MMCC and as an academic administrator, I have identified multiple barriers for students both nationally and at my institution, and I

frequently question my own participation in predatory inclusive practices. Therefore, my position in this study is not neutral nor removed. I am deeply embedded in the College's institutional formation, and I am equally invested in the political advocacy for my students but am aware of my potential complicity in upholding damaging College policies.

The Use of Autoethnographic Interludes:

For readers from traditional Humanities and Social Science fields, the use of autoethnographic interludes may seem strange and deserve explanation. They function here as a reporting method for reminding the reader of my authorial position as an embedded researcher with a very specific relationship to community colleges, the study site, and care work.

Additionally, the personal narrative components help to ground the study in my lived experience of the place (which impacts interpretation) and also situates me as part of the College's institutional structure. Therefore, I acknowledge my participation in potentially harmful institutional policymaking, and also claim the agency to understand and change the structure of my workplace through scholarship, teaching, and involvement in College governance committee work and other political action.

Brief, Summarized Findings:

While Chapter 4 provides an in-depth synthesis of the findings in this study, the primary conclusions from this methodology are as follows: (1) Care Labor is largely unaccounted for by community colleges, but it is a critical component of caregiving students' college success. (2) Definitions of "care" vary according to institutional and individual positionality. (3) Student caregivers internalize neoliberal narratives of success and care and also draw joy and

encouragement from them. (4) Race, ethnicity, and gender impact students' care labor responsibility. (5) Community college place-making that "feels caring" is shaped by the hyper representation of caregiving students on their campuses; this climate sits at odds with evidence that many student caregivers feel "out of place" in classrooms and advising spaces. (6) Students who perform the most care labor and who report the most financial instability experience the highest levels of physical and mental exhaustion. (7) Community colleges in Maryland are sites of cyclical disinvestment that financially hinder more caregiving students than they help.

Additionally, while Chapter 5 provides an extensive set of recommendations for community college researchers and leaders to use as a starting point for reconsidering care for caregiving students is deployed at their institutions, I couch the list in caution. This dissertation calls for a deep dive into care language and rhetorics in order for community colleges to be a site of expansion, not exclusion or extraction, of its students; therefore, all recommendations should be approached with a critical and dialectical lens and should not be used as a checklist or "playbook" for improvement. Finally, the study concludes that while this methodology is useful for connecting community college histories and scholarship with theories from abolitionist geography, feminist, and critical education studies, it also is only a starting point, opening, and portal for new ways of considering the links (and scales of impact) between unpaid care labor and higher education political economies. Further site-specific and hyperlocal investigations of these approaches across more campuses, particularly by embedded, community college practitioners and students, is encouraged.

The Laboring Scholar: A Study of Care Narratives at Scale

The ultimate purpose of this dissertation project is to create and expand a framework for studying community colleges by analyzing the relationship between the politics of disinvestment

in groups of students who take on under or unpaid labor through spatialized theories of cyclical (dis)investment, predatory inclusion, and organized abandonment. I also attempt to apply feminist lenses of community care that resist neoliberalism and its tendency to monolithically reapply paternalism in place of the care necessary to uplift people, families, and communities from the material consequences of organized abandonment. I connect trends in neoliberal academic capitalism and the ways in which community colleges are especially vulnerable to forced participation in student disinvestment in the face of enrollment pressures and external market fluctuations that jeopardize their institutional viability. In this study, unpaid caregivers who are also community college students function as a barometer for the degree to which unpaid care work impacts scripts of a non-ideal students (and workers). While scholarly and popular work has begun to examine the relationship of universities and gentrification, little if any research has been done on the role of community colleges in supporting and or resisting settler colonial logics of displacement and disinvestment not only in spaces, but in groups of people. To this end, I hope my dissertation project centers the lived experiences of community college student caregivers, the value of their unpaid labor, and their strategies of survival and resistance within neoliberal academic capitalism.

The remainder of this dissertation works within the tension of what second-wave feminist Carol Hanisch dubbed “The personal is political,” constantly reminding the reader and researcher of our collective investment, participation, exploitation, and contributions to un/underpaid care work (Dale Smith 153). My hope is that this study expands academe’s understanding of both community colleges’ *and* articulating systems’ roles in maintaining, exploding, and rewriting rhetorics of care that disproportionately impact women, people of color, and working poor students. In short: Who *really* cares about community college students? And how can researchers

explicate *why*, *how*, and *which* students receive “care”? What follows in this dissertation is an academic attempt to answer these questions in a new way.

Chapter Interlude: A Place to Stand

The first time I set foot on a community college campus, I was 33 years old and the mother of two small children. I'd just moved to Maryland with my (then) husband and kids on the dime of the US Army. He was a newly minted medical officer, and his expertise was needed for biological weapons defense at a base near Washington, DC. I recall seeing the campus for the first time when I was at a park on-post with my 2- and 4-year-olds. From my vantage point at the baby swings, I admired – across the barbed wire fence – the flowering trees, the inviting and accessible academic buildings, and the beautiful arts, science, and student centers that freckled the landscape. I assumed it was a small liberal arts college until on the way home I noticed the proud banners hanging from the streetlights with the words proudly declaring its community college name.

I was looking for work. We left San Antonio, Texas just after I'd been admitted to the English PhD program at The University of Texas at San Antonio. I turned down the offer because the Army needed my spouse in Maryland and, with an inevitable deployment to Iraq looming, I knew I'd soon be the sole caregiver to the children for up to a year – maybe longer if we were one of the unlucky families whose soldier didn't return. It was an uncertain and difficult time to navigate the career and caregiving I both wanted and felt was expected of me.

I applied to teach writing at the College because it was a mile from our home and directly across the street from the racially diverse, neighborhood elementary school our multiracial kids would attend. If I was going to continue my career, I needed a geographically convenient academic job. I didn't have reliable nor affordable daycare (even though both the Army base and the College have childcare centers), and the cost of me working full-time wouldn't cover the cost of full-time childcare. So, I picked up several classes as an adjunct instructor to maintain my teaching skills. The PhD would have to wait. It was a degree I couldn't pursue with two babies on my hip, a husband in a war zone, and extended family three states away.

The first community college classroom I entered was as the instructor of an English Literature and Composition class that ran at night from 7:45pm to 10:20pm. To my (wildly uninformed) surprise, my class was full of students facing life-challenges similar to my own. This stood in stark contrast to my own experience as a "traditional aged" undergraduate student at Miami University where I lived on campus at 18, was free to focus only on my studies, part-time job, and robust campus and social involvement. The students in front of me were fathers, veterans, high-school dropouts, once-upon-a-time teen moms, and a young, Mexican woman who left class in a panic one evening when she realized she didn't have proper documentation with her if she was stopped by the police. I quickly learned that earning a degree in the US as a caregiving student was not just my problem, it was a significant problem for anyone who doesn't fit the description of a "traditional" American college student.

Because I was teaching (and still teach) the craft of writing, story, and the power of narrating our own lives, I also was invited into an intimate knowing of my students. I still bow humbly to each piece of student writing submitted to me as a complicated demonstration of academic

fitness and textual proof that their lives both exist and matter. I've read dozens of stories of abuse, addiction, and loss, and thousands of stories of triumph. Two students in particular that first semester stand out: Melanie and Charles². Melanie was an unhappily married 26-year-old mother of two who wanted to be a teacher, and Charles was a 30 year old, single veteran turned-truck driver who just wanted a stable job so he and his girlfriend could afford housing in the DC area. Over the course of the semester and years that I knew Melanie and Charles as students, each became sources of my own personal and academic transformation situated at the intersection of higher education, the power of the state, and caretaking. Melanie, I learned both through her writing, that she was struggling to leave an abusive marriage, and Charles was recovering from combat-induced PTSD that compromised his housing security. When he finally graduated, he told me he was living in his car for the duration of the time I had him as a student.

Four years after that first class at MMCC, and many, many students later, I found myself parked in the College student center lot, dialing the number for a divorce attorney, scared and unsure of how my life would change as a single mother. In those four years, my kids had moved into elementary school, and I had landed a full-time faculty position in the English department, a job that – unlike adjunct teaching – meant that I could financially support myself and my children. It was my MMCC faculty colleagues who also encouraged me to apply for admission to The University of Maryland's American Studies PhD program, read my statement of purpose and told me it sucked, and then showed me how to make it better, just like we do with our students. They showed me the links on our HR website to have my part-time doctoral tuition paid and came to my house to drink cheap wine when I got in. They came back when I signed the final divorce papers, changed my name back to Hofmann, passed my comps, became Chair of the English and Humanities department, buried my beloved father, and passed my dissertation

^{2 2} All student names in this document at pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

proposal defense during the COVID-19 pandemic. The intimacies I've experienced and the personal care I've received from the "place" I know as my workplace and local community college stands at odds with many of the intellectual arguments I make in this dissertation and helped me to understand the same tensions my study participants describe. It's an uncomfortable place to stand, between gratitude and skepticism of a place that feels like home.

CHAPTER 2

Mapping the Scholarship of the Politics of Care at Community Colleges

“I’ve seen with my own students; community colleges offer an affordable route to four-year degrees and good-paying jobs.” ~ Dr. Jill Biden, Community College professor and First Lady of the US Presidency

*“When you sign up to be a parent in the US, you are signing up your kids’ safety and your family’s financial stability that you would not have to consider if you lived in any comparable country.”
-Stephanie H. Murray, The Atlantic, 2024*

“The system cannot fail those it was never meant to protect.” W.E.B. DuBois

A Literature Review Across Fields: Community College Place-making, Care Work, and Rhetorics of Care

This chapter synthesizes scholarship that examines how competing “care” and “success” ideologies cyclically create, reinforce, maintain, and transform community colleges as culturally significant places of educational and workforce pipelines for working-class, historically excluded student groups who also incur the bulk of unpaid/underpaid care labor in the US. Here the reader will find a contextual overview of community college structures historically, politically, economically, and ideologically (particularly within public education’s histories of exclusion and abandonment) as well as 21st century American cultural & institutional narratives of individualism, self-determination, student fitness, and care. Specifically, I draw together scholarship that allow for a reading of community colleges as (1) physical and imaginary locations constructed for and by the neoliberal rhetorics of “opportunity,” “second chances,” and community care of middle and working-class Americans, (2) places that experience cyclical (dis)investment in fiscal resources and neoliberal logics of austerity, (3) sites for managing

“unskilled” surplus labor for local economies, and consequently (4) as places that potentially reify racial projects and maintain systemic inequalities by recruiting the most financially precarious students into programs known to fail them at alarmingly high rates. I complicate this body of scholarship in my study (explained and explored in Chapters 3, 4, and 5) by recognizing and documenting that, internally, community colleges offer intermittent respites from persistent dehumanization by being locations of care and hope for students; however, I also address how their positioning within larger regional and global political economies ultimately renders them stations of stagnation for many students, especially those with the most overlapping needs and markers of difference. In sum, the project – and Chapter 2 in particular – looks to scholarship across Critical Cultural Geography, Critical Education Studies, and Women of Color Feminisms for frameworks for understanding the deployment of neoliberal “care” rhetorics and technologies of coercion towards unpaid labor and their impact on community college caregiving students.

The four sections of this literature review will (1) introduce key scholars from my framework to link concepts of predatory inclusion, organized abandonment, student precarity, and liberatory place-making, (2) situate community college scholarship within the academe and histories of exclusion, (3) justify the use of Marxist Geography for the study of community college campuses, and (4) present the caregiver, and their labor, as an important subjectivity for the study of organized abandonment in higher education. As Neil Smith notes in *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space*, the hallmark of capitalism is uneven (and scaled) geographic development, from the urban to the national to the global that fosters inequality in an expanding pattern (6). Therefore, if process follows, community colleges’ role in expanding class inequality can be revealed through a close analysis of their spatial histories and funding structures, their current social function, and their on-going, politicaleconomic purpose from the scale of the individual student body to the regional, national, and global markets they

source. It is important to note that in my research I have not found that Marxist Geography's theories of uneven development and cyclical disinvestment have been used to theorize the role of community colleges in a neoliberal academic capitalist market, and current critiques within community college scholarship both pleads for funding and justifies its importance to the American economy without scrutinizing the potential benefits of its ongoing failure.

While varying rhetorics (or arguments) of care are discussed throughout this literature review, it is important from the outset that I define *neoliberalism* and the use of *neoliberal rhetorics*. According to Mitja Sardoc in "The Language of Neoliberalism in Education," neoliberalism is a term that sprawls across disciplines in 20th and 21st century humanities and social science scholarship "...characterized by the strategy of marketization, i.e. the 'extension of the economic form of the market into areas of the social where it was previously illegitimate' (Ball, 2020: 23) This has had a negative transformative influence on social spheres previously thought to be outside of its realm of application and influence, e.g. the corroding effect of neoliberalism on care" (2). Sardoc traces the waves and histories of neoliberalism to also describe it as "... a process of constant transformation, evolution, remodeling, adaptation, renewal, progression and 'development'" (2). Within education, then, the cultural, political, and philosophical shifts of schools as a public good that is a foundation of the welfare state towards educational administrative frameworks that run (and describe) schools as marketplaces changes the way students and employee well-being, or care, is prioritized and exchanged. This political "shift" in the late 20th century towards schools as marketplaces is what Henri Giroux calls "academic capitalism." Neoliberal ideology that conflates "egalitarianism, equality, justice, wellbeing, fairness, equality or opportunity" in schools with the "rationality" of the free market creates a troubling landscape for educators whose values lie not in economic profit but in the physical, emotional, and intellectual development and safety of human beings (Sardoc 3). The

neoliberal rhetorics of education and care that I describe in this study, are ones aligned with policies and processes of student fitness that turn on how well an individual can take up “opportunity” regardless of how broader systems of access may be constructed. With this grounding understanding of neoliberalism, neoliberal rhetorics, and educational spaces, neoliberal logics, care, care work, care labor, and other rhetorics of care will be defined, discussed, and negotiated throughout the remainder of this dissertation.

Contextualizing, Historicizing, and Situating Community Colleges: What is a community college and what does it *do*?

In light of the fact that nearly half of American undergraduate students who graduate with a bachelor's degree attend two-year schools at some point in their career, there is an unsettling and puzzling irony in community colleges' broader invisibility within the academe. Given that community colleges have been a significant driver of local workforce development since the early twentieth century when they were conceptualized and fully mobilized under the New Deal and the GI Bill, it's difficult to imagine public education and labor training without them (Thelin). Their formations vary based on their state and geographic location, but their foundations are uniquely American and middle-class focused. Since their inception in Joliet, Illinois in 1901, they have always been a bridge between k-12 education and the local economy either in the form of vocational and technical training or as military or four-year college transition sites (Levin). Community colleges' articulation with higher education institutions that grant baccalaureate degrees is their hallmark as locations of financial mobility and the promise of reaching the American Dream. So engrained is the messaging of “opportunity” and “success” at community colleges that few students fathom how they could ever fail once they enroll. These promises of success -- and their inclusion in the local workforce -- is where the stakes of the

community college “promise” ratchets to problematic levels. What does it say about a student who fails in a place where opportunity abounds? Are they solely responsible for their failure or deficiency in some way?

It has taken me some time to recognize that the complexity of community college infrastructure is intentionally obfuscated. The architecture of junior colleges is frequently touted as “flexible” and “nimble,” accurate depictions of systems that bend and accommodate the local and regional economies they serve but not the students they are supposed to serve (Levin). But this conformity is not without cost, typically to the most historically underrepresented student populations. Financial austerity is almost always the justification for discontinuing funding or alternately investing College funding into military-backed degree pathways that attract “traditional” (read: young, able-bodied, male) college students. In spite of the two-year college’s high Black, Latinx, immigrant, first generation, female, and low-income student populations, year after year, the needle barely moves on racial equity gaps and on college success rates for these “non-traditional students” (Martin et al 7). Yet, community college administrations consistently strive for goals of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) that their employees appear to deeply value and strive towards. Faculty and staff spend hours (sometimes years) cultivating relationships with students to encourage and resource them towards graduation -- an effort that only yields a 20% total success rate for all community college students over three years (A. Smith). These staggering numbers are often examined at the campus level, but they frequently go uncriticized from a broad educational systemic perspective. Perhaps this is because the problem is so difficult to see, separate, and solve.

Community Colleges are underfunded and marooned spaces in higher education, and their visibility depends upon methodologies that acknowledge the complexity and importance of their political economies. Furthermore, the academic failure of caregivers at community colleges

is amplified by the intersection of racist, sexist, and classist narratives that dominate American culture, as minoritized students are especially vulnerable to exclusion *and* predatory inclusion within higher education. For this reason, the site-specific ecologies of student groups must be locally and regionally analyzed if community college student caregivers have a chance at success within systems of higher education that persist in prioritizing white/cis/het/upper-class men who rely on and benefit from unpaid care work.

Due to the ways in which community college programming and spaces flex to accommodate their political economies, it can be difficult to clearly track the “progress” they purport to mobilize. The troubling disconnect between community colleges’ narratives of improvement and their actual student graduation rates deserves new frames of analysis beyond the market-driven ones housed within and across colleges’ institutional research divisions. One lens with promise as a means of understanding the cyclical investment, abandonment, and extraction at work in community colleges is the theoretical application of Marxist Geography and uneven development to Critical Education and feminist literatures that acknowledge the complexity of student identity, labor, and location. Just as the *Broken Windows* theory informs deficit (and criminalized) ideologies of working poor communities of color, so too do stigmatized narratives of insufficiency around community college students (Kelling & Coles). In the same way that narratives of improvement are deployed to justify forms of “urban renewal” that disproportionately displace and discipline communities of color, similar “transformative and life-changing” enrollment campaigns use single-mother and student of color community college “success stories” to encourage prospective students to apply. Unfortunately, while women and students of color predominantly attend community colleges, graduation rates and programmatic fiscal supports unevenly fall in favor of traditional-aged, able-bodied, white, male students (Martin et al).

Scholars agree that community colleges are institutions created to be generators of a local labor force. In many regions, the “junior college” is a stopgap for failing k-12 public education systems that cannot adequately place graduating students in a local job. As previously discussed, community colleges were a post-War invention designed to retool returning (white) GIs who needed a place in the workforce. The function of two-year colleges has expanded and cyclically politicized since its inception, picking up “opportunity” for different groups depending on the climate and struggle of the decade. One example of this was the national emphasis on vocational education and “workforce development” for unfit high school students in the 1980’s – another post-war moment when returning Vietnam vets struggled to acclimate to work life at the same time as the American economy sailed into the neoliberal golden age of the late 20th century.

The Dream Diverted (1989) by Steven Brint and Jerome Karabel tells a counter narrative to the “open access” history of community colleges. Brint, a public policy professor and Karabel, a sociologist, wrote one of the few texts that tackles the construction of American community colleges. Brint and Karabel remain leaders in their fields, speaking publicly about the histories of discrimination in higher education and genealogies of exclusion at community colleges. *The Dream Diverted* reveals that the innovators of two-year institutions did so to keep unwanted /unprepared students out of their institutions (27). Presidents of the University of Chicago, the University of California at Berkeley, Stanford University, the University of Michigan, and the University of Illinois “were motivated not only by nationalist economic concerns but also by a desire to improve the status of their own institutions... [They] believed junior colleges would eventually assume all routine teaching functions, thereby enabling them to drop freshman and sophomore instruction. This in turn would enable the university to concentrate on its proper functions: research and scholarship” (26). Brint and Karabel’s scholarship has since been

corroborated by multiple scholars, in spite of the democratic ideals reflected in almost all colleges' outward-facing mission statements (Drury 3-6).

Constructions of Care at Community Colleges: Opportunity, Fiscal Responsibility, and Care Teams

Three important components of community colleges' identities is that they are branded as sites of student care, as places of opportunity, and as a fiscally responsible decision. Obliquely, the messaging is that community colleges are the post-secondary option for people who either require academic support or who need an affordable college option. In this way, care – both financial and academic -- at community colleges is constructed in opposition to the four-year sector that recruits students under the auspices of academic rigor, “world-class” facilities and faculty, student fitness, and *US News and World Report* program and job placement rankings. To demonstrate this, a brief surfing of two-year and four-year college websites reveals a repetition of these concepts. Below is a collection of images from several community colleges and community college-serving organizations across the county that show how language of opportunity, fiscal responsibility, and communities of care are deployed at and about community colleges:



Figure 1: This collection of images from varying community colleges and community college non-profit research organizations demonstrates how two-year schools are ideologically constructed, and branded, as locations of opportunity, fiscal responsibility, and care. (Upper left to right: “Unlocking Opportunity” *Community College Research Center*; “Care Team” *Laramie County Community College*; “Tuition Free” *UCNJ*; “New Jersey Community College Opportunity Grant” *County College of Morris*; Bottom left to right: “The College Promise” *Warren County Community College*; “EMCC Opportunity Ready” *Credly*; and *Rochester Community and Technical College*)

The logos above reflect the rhetorical links between community colleges as sites of “opportunity” and fiscal austerity deployed as access to “possibility.” For most American readers situated in a neoliberal culture, this symbolic equation makes sense: a spend-thrift approach to any product, even a college education, is a kind of “responsible” set of choices that leads to more money to spend on other things, which in the case of a student may be books, or clothes of transportation. Additionally, prudence and thriftiness is glorified here with no mention of the quality of education received at these colleges. These images suggest that the affordability *is* a form of care. The new use of the term “care team” at two-year schools (and depicted here) harkens language from the health care system where nurses and orderly stand by to help a sick patient. In sum, these logos fuse access to a community college education a kind of welfare service, as grants or support for students who somehow cannot fully care for themselves. There

is an oblique message across these images that positions the community college (and adjacent organizations) as saviors, standing ready for students who need help.

The implication of the repetition of these narrative and images is the construction of community colleges as a place of care for people who are needy in a variety of ways. This imaginary community college student, then, is a person who looks and acts very different than a student who is recruited by, for example, The University of Maryland, whose website leads with: “The University of Maryland is consistently recognized as one of the preeminent public research universities in the United States” (“Academics”). The site further positions its students not as in need of opportunity or skill development (as is especially depicted in the Maine Community College Credly badge), but instead, “Terps are bold, smart, curious, and proud” (“Welcome to the University of Maryland”). As is true with other forms of social constructions, community colleges and the rhetorics of care they deploy are built in relationship to four-year residential schools.

Knowledge Production about Community Colleges: How are Two- Year Schools Studied?

In order to understand how community colleges are situated structurally within the academe, politically within public education, and ideologically within the American consciousness, it is important to examine how they are studied and how knowledge is produced about them. Over the past forty years, Critical High Ed scholars have increasingly critiqued rising neoliberal decision-making regimes at colleges and universities. More recently (and as discussed later in this chapter), Abolitionist University Studies advocates have further examined the intersections of academic and racial capitalism, recognizing that systemically colleges articulate with the political economies they’re situated within. While the political economy of each institution deserves examination and should be studied within the specific geographies they

are located, community colleges are typically analyzed by state and in concert with the state university systems. Between states, funding and governance structures vary, which makes comparison of state systems and outcomes difficult. Therefore, critically examining how community college ecosystems are studied deserves serious assessment and consideration.

Community college spaces are rarely treated as their own field of study, and the organization of its scholarship is as diffuse and confusing as its political economies. Most major universities do not have faculty, coursework, or training pathways specifically for 2 year college professionals, which indicates a lack of active scholarship within universities and highlights the invisibility of community colleges as legitimate sites of study.² Nationally, only three R1 universities have centers for community college research (Teachers' College of Columbia University's Community College Research Center, North Carolina State University's Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research, and the University of Illinois's Office of Community College Research) through which much of the national scholarship for and by community college faculty is archived. Both centers are heavily funded by private donors like the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation, which presents its own set of questions around the role of private funding in public scholarship. The remainder of the research is being done through smaller, privately or grant-funded non-profits (such as the Center for the Study of Community Colleges in Los Angeles, Achieving the Dream, the Institute for Women's Policy Research and Hope for College in Philadelphia, which is affiliate with Temple University) or the leading professional organization for 2-year professionals, the American Association of Community

² The University of Maryland's programming is an example of this field gap with no scholars on site who specialize in community college scholarship, despite three departments devoted to education. Morgan State University, a public HBCU, is the only school in the state to offer any course specifically targeted towards community college professionalization.

Colleges. While the articulation of scholarship surrounding community colleges is not the focus of my study, it is an important component of understanding its position within the academy, and it may be an indicator of why community colleges remain invisible in spite of the powerful role they play in higher education.

The Economics of Community College Funding and Governance: Uneven Development and Unpredictable (Dis)Investment

It's important to note that even though this study examines community colleges as a kind of institutional monolith that all claim the same title, not all community colleges are funded or structured exactly the same way. Like k-12 public education and four-year universities, community colleges are federally overseen by the Department of Education, but funding and governance is determined at the state and local levels. Each state has unique histories from which their systems evolved, with some community colleges articulating more closely with four-year transfer institutions and some with vocational, workforce systems (McGuinness). In states like California, New York, Alabama, Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, and Wisconsin, community colleges are in a single system that shares resources across the state and that are formally articulated with the four-year state university system. In some, but not all of these states, a local governing board shapes campus policy and in other states, all policymaking happens at the state education board level. This heterogeneity of funding and governance makes it difficult to both compare and define community colleges as a US entity. It also makes it difficult to clearly see when and how and why certain groups of people are being targeted or disinvested in. Identifying and defining community college geographies (physical locations, cultures, proximity to resources, land histories, migration, ecology) is essential and the methodological approach of this study.

In *Confessions of a Community College Administrator*, Matthew Reed (a regular contributor to *Inside Higher Ed*) provides a concise explanation of the way American community colleges are funded. He recognizes the flexible nature of their financial infrastructures but provides a helpful breakdown of the traditional lines of income for most two-year colleges, which includes some federal and state revenue, but primarily local, tax-paying funding systems. In short, as a part of the public education system, community colleges are funded similarly to the k-12 public education systems they articulate with as opposed to the way regional or state four-year, residential campuses are funded. He also offers an explanation and critique of how community college funding structures hamstringing administrative decision-making around instruction and faculty hiring, the most contentious being the ways in which adjunct faculty are so poorly paid for their work and the percentage of adjunct instruction that, at many institutions, makes constitutes up to half of all coursework offered. While issues of work equity are not the focus of this paper, it is important to note that most community colleges are administrator heavy and the bulk of their operating budget does not go to faculty salaries.

In Maryland, the state site of study in Chapter 4, the balance of federal, state, and local dollars are determined annually by an algorithm called the Cade formula (Klein). Passed By Senator John R. Cade in 1996, the formula was created as a way to provide a predictable budget to community colleges based on the per-pupil, FTE (full-time enrollment) spending expenditures of the University of Maryland state system. In theory and “[r]ecognizing that all of public higher education has an obligation to work together to educate students and prepare a ready workforce,” the CADE formula set aside a percentage of funds annually to support community colleges to an unsure an equal, three-way division of responsibility for the Maryland state community college funding. However, according to the Maryland Association of Community Colleges, “[d] espite Cade, community colleges have experienced numerous reductions in state support, forcing higher

student tuition and county contributions (Klein). In most budget cycles, BRFA legislation (Budget Reconciliation and Financing Act) has been introduced to balance the state budget. As a result, the year that full Cade funding would be achieved, has been pushed repeatedly into the future” (Klein). This funding instability reflects the same disconnect I’ve repeatedly pointed to that demonstrates an outward, political lip-service to community colleges but, ultimately, a fiscal disinvestment in their operations. It is important to note that Maryland is among the majority of states in that the two-year system is not formally articulated with the state university system, which makes statewide accountability and cross-institutional collaboration difficult. States like California and New York, which have unified collegiate/university systems tend to have better data transparency, likely because they share common software systems and processes for documentation. This does not make these systems “better,” but it does make their governance and policy making more centralized and, potentially, less flexible or responsive.

In addition to state funding in Maryland, federal and local support fluctuates annually. Federal dollars are the smallest proportion of the budget and are provided directly through student tuition relief in the form of Pell grants. Therefore, the amount of federal aid community colleges receive is directly proportional to the number of eligible students they recruit. In some ways, direct federal aid to students incentivizes colleges to enroll financially qualifying (and therefore middle to lower class) students. As mentioned previously, local aid is passed through the County Commissioner in the same process as k-12 funding and is dependent upon property tax-generated county budgets. Finally, the remaining budgetary shortfalls must be recouped through tuition and fees and/or through the manipulation of employee salaries. In sum, the fiscal operations of community colleges in Maryland operate on unpredictable, shoe-string budgets that require the recruitment of students with steady funding streams (like Pell grants) and ideological

buy-in from local politicians, businesses, and residents who vote on state and local funding initiatives.

Definitions of Care in Education: Public Good or Marketable Product?

It is important to mention that the word “care” and its associated connotations, is a flexible linguistic symbol for varying kinds of relational supports that fluctuate depending on the historical moment, context, culture, and relationship to power with which it is deployed. As Angela Valenzuela famously traces in *Subtractive Schooling: U.S.-Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring*, American schools are particularly notorious for “care” tropes that frequently stand in for paternalism and forms of discipline that extract social capital, or harm, certain students. Valenzuela specifically examines the Texas public school system, but a similar lens can be applied to the study of community colleges, particularly given their close articulation with k-12 systems.³ However, because in Maryland, community colleges are at once a public good that is free to some (like high school dual enrollment students) and a fee-for-service enterprise for others (returning adults), the expectations and deployment “care” become understandably muddy. Additionally, the ethical imperative to deliver the “care” or and support promised by institutions through their explicit marketing or internal program recruitments, likewise hangs in the balance between what is an individual student’s responsibility to navigate and to what degree is the institution accountable for delivering “opportunity for all,” the ubiquitous charge of community colleges across the nation. In this study, I will specifically look at institutional

³ In the case of the study site for this dissertation, the community college examination began within the walls of a local high school and eventually expanded into a full campus in a location nearby.

definitions of care by considering the implicit and explicit messaging about community colleges as well as the fiscal and scholarship investments made at the state, local, and campus levels.

I also acknowledge through my methodology that care is defined and experienced differently at the individual level. For the purposes of this study, I define care as the physical, emotional, financial, spiritual, intellectual, or social support one person or group gives to another person or community. For most of us, the term care is lodged in interpersonal relationships and a kind of intimacy is assumed with a person or group of people who support us in a variety of ways. I describe this exchange of intimacies “care work” and “care labor.” I use the terms interchangeably to intentionally connect the time, money, emotional and physical resources of supporting other people as both work and labor, despite the joy and hope it also brings to people’s lives. This definition of care work / care labor as a currency is an important methodological tool, in particular, as I connect the cost of attending college with the amount of care work a student performs or has to pay someone else to do. In this way, I explore how the intimacies of familial care work (which I interchangeably describe as care labor), can be confused, conflated, manipulated, and blurred with neoliberal versions of institutional care that function to serve the market, not to support an individual. I conclude by asking, in the words of Ruth Wilson Gilmore, how and if community colleges are – “life-affirming institutions.” I assert that at the core of this question is our personal, cultural, and institutional definitions of care, and our collective commitment to achieving it.

As mentioned above, an important and foundational book within Critical Education Studies that examines the intersections of race, ethnicity, and citizenship with public school structures and rhetorics is Angela Valenzuela’s book *Subtractive Schooling*. Valenzuela’s book is an ethnography of a predominantly Mexican high school where Valenzuela observed the “subtraction” of material and cultural resources from students. Her study is comprehensive in

that she looks at the legal, extra-legal, academic, and everyday lives of students within Juan Seguin High School and maps them against Nel Noddings aesthetics of educational care.

Valenzuela uses and extends Noddings' framework for "authentic" caring and "not caring" of students and teachers by establishing that care as defined by historically white educational structures denies, and sometimes even punishes, students the benefits of their heritage language and cultural practices by maintaining assimilationist educational standards and policies.

Valenzuela adds that the Houston school (which the reader can apply to other US schools) erases the Mexican definition of *educación* that grounds learning in an ontology of caring relationships that form more than just schooling, but also justice and character. This erasure causes harm, as Valenzuela writes, "...the maintenance and elaboration of students' social capital is jeopardized by institutional policies and practices which subtract resources from them" (29). Valenzuela's work is important to consider alongside the questions I ask about definition and politics of care at community colleges and the ways in which caregiving knowledge is valued within a 21st educational space.

Much like Valenzuela creates a theory of subtractive schooling in k-12 spaces, this project is designed to investigate how neoliberal logics of care and success (which also attempt to discount or erase care labor) work in community college spaces, it also is a chance to consider what writer and activist Arundhati Roy calls the "bones" of our educational structures (Roy). Making clear the frames of racial logics that maintain systems of dominance is a necessary first step towards building sites of caretaking and community healing. Roy's hopeful metaphor of the pandemic as portal is a helpful lens towards a shift may be on the horizon: COVID-19 and the sustained racial uprisings of 2020 presents an opening for reassessing the success of neoliberal community college models. In December 2020, the New York Times released staggering data on the crushingly low enrollment rates at two-year colleges across the country (Richtel). While

pundits projected enrollment would soar across the country for junior colleges due to four-year students opting for affordable online options rather than risking residential college costs, reports show that it dropped a devastating 22% (St. Amour). While college presidents are clutching their pearls at this data, those of us who have been pointing to the structural imbalances in community college systems for years are cautiously optimistic that what looks like an imminent collapse, may in fact be an opening for new ways of being, building, and becoming sites of liberation.

Linking Predatory Inclusion, Organized Abandonment, and Student Precarity

In her book *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership*, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor describes a twentieth century, neoliberal phenomenon she calls *predatory inclusion*. She explains: “Predatory inclusion describes how African American home buyers were granted access to conventional real estate practices and mortgage financing, but on more expensive and comparatively unequal terms” (5). While the context of her work is different than mine, the web of historicized and racialized exclusion are similar. Home ownership and a college education are sisters in the twentieth century American Dream mythos, both presenting deceptive access to financial and social equity for all people. In the same way that community colleges offer slim-chance pathways to higher education (while collecting tuition dollars from underprepared students who are ultimately pipelined into low wage jobs), Taylor details the stacked-deck of mortgage lending to Black Americans. Both systems extract capital from a population already struggling to accumulate wealth and social capital with the frequent-enough success story to reinforce a bootstrapping narrative. The difference between the lending crisis and the community college crisis is that few leaders within community college leadership recognize the slippery role their sites play in perpetuating structures of dominance in higher education and in the workforce. Taylor notes: “Taken together,

multiple stories and reports, carried mostly by the African American press, wove together a powerful portrait of the exclusion of African Americans from the full promise of social mobility that was the centerpiece of the concept of the American Dream” (28). To my knowledge, higher education has yet to publicly reckon with a collection of such stories that forces systemic critique and change of community college infrastructure.

What Taylor points to in the realm of real estate histories are the same racial logics of deficit that shape neoliberal academic policy. It is important to note, however, that while my study focuses on community college spaces, practices of academic capitalism endemic to neoliberalism prevail in k-12 and university settings as well. However, I assert that community colleges are particularly vulnerable to market-driven decision-making due to their hyperlocal funding structures and often incestuous political economies. Furthermore, hierarchies of prestige also play a role in community colleges’ ability to enact research-based, programmatic change in the face of deeply rooted regional beliefs around race, gender, and sexuality.

Both Taylor and Ruth Wilson Gilmore use place-based analyses to study similarly complex institutional structures rooted in racial capitalism and tethered to state projects of social death. Both authors also explicate the braiding of private and public interests that cloak the bones of deeply racist systems with narratives of social worth, individual accountability, and liberal “best practices” of colorblind equity. So complete is the commonsense acceptance of measures of financial fitness for homeownership and moral deficiency for prisoners, that most people rarely challenge the underlying histories and on-going architectures of real estate and carceral institutions. A similar, place-based approach to higher education access and its relationship to the racial (and maternal) wealth gap, racial capital, and the public and private (dis)investment structures is necessary at its most vulnerable locations: community colleges.

Considering that almost half of all US undergraduates and the majority of Black, Latinx, women, and first-generation students attend community colleges, critical theoretical and methodological lenses are necessary tools for unveiling these sites of slow, social death masquerading as opportunity (Contreras-Mendez et al). Neoliberal and racial logics are foundational to the maintenance of the current US higher education systems in strikingly similar ways to the exclusionary property ownership and state-sanctioned violence is on-going in a 21st century “progressive” landscape. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, whose analysis of the California prison system calls for the abolition of carcerality in the US, notes that the neoliberal policies that uphold systems of dominance are defined by (1) organized austerity, (2) organized abandonment, (3) organized violence/criminalization (Democracy Now). Her work closely untangles the cultural myths and economic realities that undermine the necessary care work that could transform a failing US prison industrial complex. At the heart of her critique (and Taylor’s too) is the racial capital, or the profit to be made from white supremacy.

Gilmore’s definition of neoliberal policies (undergirded by racial logics) when applied to community colleges reveals a deep, structural complicity with white supremacy and the maintenance of nationalistic, patriarchal economies. Community college leadership literature touts “best practices” of fiscal conservatism (austerity), rugged individualism (abandonment), and colorblind academic fitness (slow violence/criminalization). Furthermore, institutional decision-making is rarely informed by expert stakeholders, and almost never includes experts knowledgeable in the areas of racialization that could potentially reveal problematic programming. Broadly, the issue of policy built in the absence of critical analysis results in the maintenance of white supremacist structures.

This is not to say that community colleges are not aware of racial equity as an important component of institutional effectiveness; in fact, arguably some of the most radical DEIB work is

happening on community college campuses (L. Wood); however, one critique across higher ed institutions is that DEIB investment must go beyond “awareness” (a neoliberal logic) and move towards policy and procedure changes that require an institutional investment employees and students to see actionable change. The state-mandated creation of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging offices requires an on-going examination of difference across programming for accreditation, and while the institutionalization of DEIB work has arguably improved faculty and staff’s awareness of equity – the actual institutional resource shifting at all colleges is precarious in the current political climate where state-level DEIB funding has been completely eradicated (Asmelash). Much of this is due to the funding structures of two-years schools that rely heavily on tuition dollars that are so closely articulated with access to financial liquidity, loan fitness, and insider knowledge of how to leverage both. In short, the work of DEIB offices, though important and foundational to longer-term projects of ideological change, run the risk of serving as a technology for helping to recruit and abandon students of color. Conversely, with sufficient investment, DEIB offices can be a site for mobilizing structural change.

Perhaps the most disturbing trend in neoliberal logics employed at community colleges (and education at large) is the manipulation of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion platforms to recruit white, middle-class, “traditional” students into programs supposedly launched in the name of race and class uplift. In Gilmore’s terms, these manipulations are both neoliberal logics of organized abandonment and organized violences since they draw students to the organization who they have little intention of supporting in equitable ways (Equal in terms of opportunities offered, yes. Equitable in terms of providing the necessary resources for each student to be successful, no.) When pointed out, most decision-makers can acknowledge that the “risk” of recruiting students of color is discontinued attendance (or lack of “persistence”) and loss of tuition revenue, frequently in the form of federal Pell grants; however, they would likely resist

the notion that taking students of color on without equitable support is a kind of violence against them. But it is a kind of violence, because the same platform that systemically robs students of color of Pell grant benefits without the promise of a degree also benefits from the success of white students and the optics that rugged individualism and persistence -- not inequitable practices -- is what leads to success.

One shift in the community college enrollment landscape over the past decade that deserves consideration through a lens of political and financial investment is high school dual enrollment programs at two-year schools. Over the past ten years, and as a means of stabilizing tuition income and providing “college access” to more students, community colleges have expanded high school-college dual credit programs at record-setting rates. Dual Enrollment is a method of earning high school and college credit simultaneously so as to democratize access to a college degree. Each program is structured slightly differently (and transferability to four years schools is inconsistent), but the concept originated as a diversity, equity, and inclusion practice targeted at low-income students between the ages of 15 and 18 who otherwise would not have access to an affordable college education. According to the Community College Research Center’s September 2020 report, in most locations, dual enrollment has become another source of racial inequity across educational systems rather than the panacea it purported to be (Mehl et al). However, white middle-class and working-class students have made significant gains as a result of dual enrollment programs, which both stabilizes tuition income (as promised) for community colleges and widens the racial wealth gap. In this way, the survival of the institution - complete with arguably white supremacist policies -- is conflated with “opportunity” for working class students and students of color but also benefit the institution.

The stakes are even higher and the success rates are even lower for older, non-traditional students returning to college for workforce retooling or to earn a primary degree. Resources for

programmatic support and scholarship dollars are miniscule in comparison to the fiscal support allocated to younger, presumably “fitter”, students. However, adult students comprise a significant portion of the community college population and their institutional viability is historically tied to GI Bill tuition benefits. Even many state “Promise Scholarships” that guarantee free community college to low-income students exclude most adult learners, limiting applicants only to those who are within two years of high school graduation or GED completion. The adult student community college population, like its younger counterpart, includes significantly more low-income and students of color than four-year institutions, posing the question: what assumptions, risks, and logics of fitness are at work in these calculations?

Here, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor’s concept of predatory inclusion is particularly salient. Even as community colleges attempt to “serve” low-income students, the neoliberal constructions of two-year institutions and their vulnerability to local political economics steeped in racial logics renders them cyclically subsumed by public and private projects. These projects, that are closely articulated with k-12 and public university systems, collectively extract rather than invest in communities of color and replicate the same inequalities they purport to abolish. Nowlie Rooks, a k-12 educational sociologist and author of *Cutting School: Privatization, Segregation, and the End of Public Education*, discusses the “segrenomics” of compulsory public education, which is always linked to capitalism that maintains and perpetuates violences on the basis of academic fitness. Her work, when aligned with Taylor’s and Gilmore’s presents fertile ground for a critique of exclusion, predatory inclusion, and the neoliberal logics in community college spaces.

Another important component of community college’s architecture in the context of organized violence is its inextricable relationship with the US military. While direct federal funding is only a small portion of community college’s budgets, tuition dollars in the form of Pell

grants and GI Bill benefits is primary to the institutions' survival. As Taylor notes in her book, post WW2 GI Bill mortgage benefits excluded African American veterans because the private organizations they articulated with overtly denied Black lending. Similarly, though not articulated by Taylor, was the tuition benefit that provides funding and a housing stipend to vets returning to school. Because the GI Bill tuition benefit predated *Brown vs. The Board of Education*, which desegregated schools and colleges, many African American vets could not earn college degrees. Save the few historically Black universities that were able to accept only some of the returning Black soldiers, many people of color had to put their college degrees on hold. As a direct result of the GI Bill, community colleges popped up all over the country as a means of retooling America's soldiers with Uncle Sam footing the bill. To this day, community colleges and high schools have a deep interest in geographic closeness and military-back degree programs that magnify the complicated racial histories of "subprime" student inclusion and investment. Even today, community colleges are required to allow active recruitment of students into military service on their campuses, a practice of low-income student predation that deserves ethical critique and an evaluation of student abandonment.

Community College Scholarship & Critical Education Studies

Community college spaces are rarely treated as their own field of study, and the organization of its scholarship is as diffuse and confusing as its political economies. Most major universities do not have faculty, coursework, or training pathways specifically for 2 year college professionals, which indicates a lack of active scholarship within universities and highlights the invisibility of community colleges as legitimate sites of study.⁴ Nationally, only a few R1

⁴ The University of Maryland's programming is an example of this field gap with no full-time scholars on staff who specialize in community college scholarship, despite three departments devoted to education. Morgan State University, a public HBCU, is the only school in the state to offer any course specifically targeted towards community college professionalization.

universities have centers for community college research (Columbia University, Georgetown University, North Carolina State University, The University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, University of Michigan) through which much of the national scholarship for and by community college faculty is archived. Both centers are heavily funded by private donors like the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation, which presents its own set of questions around the role of private funding in public scholarship. The remainder of the research is being done through smaller, privately or grant-funded non-profits (such as the Center for the Study of Community Colleges in Los Angeles, The Aspen Institute, Achieving the Dream, the Institute for Women's Policy Research and Hope for College in Philadelphia) or the leading professional organization for 2-year professionals, the American Association of Community Colleges. While the articulation of scholarship surrounding community colleges is not the focus of my study, it is an important component of understanding its position within the academy, and it may be an indicator of why community colleges remain invisible in spite of the powerful role they play in higher education. It also declares, perhaps, an opening for the emergence of Community College studies as a legitimate and necessary field of study within the academy.

Despite the diffuse nature of community college scholarship at present, pockets of research relating to space, place, and learning at two-year schools does exist within Critical Education fields mostly within critical pedagogical scholarship and social justice education. This scholarship is performed broadly by teachers and teaching-focused professors, like me (and Jonathan Muak discussed later) who see the community college classroom as a unique site of instruction and study with rich opportunities for understanding students within the community

college classroom. Additionally, educational sociologists and historians who study exclusion practices in the US, like J. Luke Wood – an interdisciplinary scholar whose work sits at the intersection of African American Studies and current, structurally racist education in the US – are beginning to thread classroom experiences and the broader political economies that situate students at two-year or regional four-year campuses. However, even Wood’s books, including *Leadership Theory and the Community College: Applying Theory to Practice*, and his subsequent articles function more as a how-to playbooks (how-to improve black/brown student success / how-to improve access and retention for black men at HBCUs) than a comprehensive analysis of the super structures of two-year colleges, which is my intervention in this study.

In essence, by choosing to situate my work within American Studies and scholarships of organized abandonment, I’m making space within existing academic discussions for a proper critical frame of the historical and maintained exclusion within higher education. Arguably, research critiquing the relationships between two-year and four-year schools could (and perhaps should) be included in conversations in Critical University Studies (CUS).⁵ However, currently, community college study is not part of dominant CUS scholarship, nor is it seeded within

Abolitionist University Studies,⁶ despite both fields’ commitment to historically underrepresented populations in higher education. This omission is an irony and an argument for

⁵ Critical University Studies (CUS) emerged in the 2010’s and is derived from Cultural Studies and Critical Pedagogy. In spite of CUS’s genealogy rooted in the Cultural Studies work of Antonio Gramsci, Stuart Hall, and Raymond Williams (who extensively studied working class and adult education in England), and the Critical Pedagogy work of Henri Giroux, bell hooks, Peter McLaren, Jean Anyon, Doloras Delgado Bernal, Paul Willis, and Paulo Friere (who famously centered “the pedagogy of the oppressed”), community colleges remain underrepresented in the scholarship.

⁶ Abolitionist University Studies (AUS) scholars claim Critical University Studies is too historical and nostalgic in its expectations of higher education as a panacea for social ills. The field asserts that the University has always been built on policies of anti-blackness, and that CUS’s efforts are not critical enough to dismantle educational inequalities. Dylan Rodriguez, Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz, Bettina Love, Fred Moten, and the authors of *Abolitionist University Studies: An Invitation* collectively ask what role universities play in abolishing racial capital and the carceral state that animates its power. See Boggs, Meyerhoff, Mitchell, and Schwartz-Weinstein

exploring community colleges as locations of exclusion. That aside, existing publications on community college work falls broadly into two categories: teaching pedagogy and higher ed administrative praxis. Interestingly, while community college pedagogy is steeped in the application of critical fields (because our student populations demand it), administrative publications stand starkly at the other end of the critical spectrum, steeped in neoliberal language and rhetoric. The gap in community college administrative scholarship and community college faculty scholarship, and its exclusion from Critical University Studies, is one I hope to address in my work: a bridge between administrative advice rooted in academic capitalism and faculty praxis that demands new ways of helping students get a meaningful degree.

To explicate this gap in scholarship, I turn to the two most recognizable names in community college scholarship: Terry O'Banion and Anthony P. Carnevale. Their works are focused on community college administration, enrollment strategies (often labeled "student success"), and securing sustainable funding streams; however, neither scholar's work (or training) addresses the exclusionary practices of community college sites. Terry O'Banion, who has enjoyed a decorated career in community college leadership, writes from a position of sweeping authority that frequently neglects the nuanced importance of site-specific campus study and the role race, gender, sexuality identity, and disability play in advising professionals.

Furthermore, Carnevale's PhD is in public finance, he has never taught at or worked for a

community college, and yet he holds a powerful position in community college research. His research and his work as the Director of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (GUCEW) produces many of the directives for federal and state funding guidelines that frequently disperses "best practices" for community colleges nationwide. The scope and power of O'Banion's influence is troubling given its painfully uncritical lens. Carnevale's work,

and the work of GUCEW recently has made important intersectional strides in their crossanalysis of groups by race, gender, class, and accessibility points to higher education. Still, both O'Banion and Carnevale's work address the large, organizational structures that continue to abandon student caregivers on campuses across the country. Certainly, this critique can be addressed as a "scale" problem whereby O'Banion and Carnevale are intending to shift structures instead of individuals; however, their work is also not grounded in feminist or critical race methodologies. Upon checking their indexes, not one critical race or gender studies scholar is cited, and the work of the "leading" scholars in community college scholarship prioritized big data over qualitative, student experience-informed data.

In contrast, Johnathan Mauk, a two-year college writing professor, discusses the location and dislocation of community college students. Specifically, he writes about the lived experiences of the students occupying college spaces and how they struggle to integrate and accept their identity as budding scholars capable and worthy of a motherhood that privileges their education as equal to their position as mother. Mauk situates his spatial argument within the composition classroom, claiming: "...A vast number of college students share a common trait: they are unsituated in academic space. Or, put another way, academic space is not an integral part of their intellectual geography. They are first-generation college students, they are commuters; they are part-time community college students; they are 'non-traditional' ... with jobs and families" (199). Mauk goes on to reference Foucault, Massey, Soja, and other space scholars to assert the need to recognize all space as academic and to collapse the walls of the classroom to knowledges outside the Academe. Mauk's work with community college composition students presents an important grounding for my assertion that student-mothers struggle to thrive in college due to a conflict rooted in dislocation from campus programming or relationships that understand students' overlapping needs. The disconnect between "big names" in community

college administration and “small voices” of faculty scholarship that is grappling with the embodied, lived experience of students is crucial to understanding community college’s role and function within higher education.

One powerful voice in community college scholarship is Dr. Karen Stout, a former Community College President and current CEO of *Achieving the Dream*, a non-profit organization that coaches community colleges in structural change. While she is rarely considered a “scholar” (in spite of the many white papers her organization produces that shapes community college leadership), she is revered as an important and esteemed figure in community college structures. I mention her in this literature review alongside Terry O’Banion and Andrew Carnevale as a recent disruptor of historically race, gender, and sexuality-neutral examinations of community college “success” models. Her leadership at *Achieving the Dream* and as a member of the Board of Directors on two of the most important institutions of scholarship on community colleges (NC State’s Belk Center for Community College Leadership, Columbia University’s Community College Research Center) points towards what I hope is a budding era of structural changes that universally include critiques of institutionalized white supremacy within and across college structures. She writes prolifically for popular publications like *The Hechinger Report* and for organizations like the National Endowment for the Humanities. Her most recent article, “We can and must do better to help black students enroll in college and succeed,” is representative of her focus on race and other intersections of difference, and to the prevalence of paternalistic / inneed-of-help narrative I see repeated across community college publications (Stout).

There are, however, four foundational community college scholars whose work my own is built upon: Steven Brint, Jerome Karabel, Robert Rhoads, and James Valadez. Brint and Karabel are known for their work documenting the history of exclusion community colleges

frequently bury. Rhoads and Valadez have written extensively on the linkages between multiculturalism and the political economies of higher education. Their books *Democracy, Multiculturalism, and the Community College* (1996) and Rhoads' book *Multiculturalism and Border Knowledge in Higher Education* (2005), critique neoliberal concepts of multiculturalism that flatten racial inequities in favor of color-blind models of equality on college campuses. Their works are important pivot points for my study of women of color and student mothers at community colleges, populations they do not address. In particular, none of these scholars apply intersectional feminist frameworks to their study of community colleges. It is also important to note that while a handful of studies (primarily dissertations) have been done on community college mothers, they have largely documented individual educational barriers and have not unpacked the systemic (and hegemonic) intersections of these barriers.

The Dream Diverted (1985) by Steven Brint and Jerome Karabel is a foundational text in understanding the history of exclusion at community colleges, a bold counter narrative to the “open access” message touted by O’Banion and college marketing departments. Brint, a Distinguished Professor of Public Policy at UC Riverside, and Karabel, a Professor of Sociology at the University of California at Berkeley remain leaders in their fields, speaking publicly about the histories of discrimination in higher education. *The Dream Diverted* explains that the three key innovators of two-year institutions (Presidents of the University of Chicago, the University of California at Berkeley, and Stanford University, followed by the University of Michigan and the University of Illinois) launched the community college concept in the 1950’s to keep unwanted /unprepared students out of their institutions (27). He notes:

“[The presidents] were motivated not only by nationalist economic concerns but also by a desire to improve the status of their own institutions. Both believed junior colleges would eventually assume all routine teaching functions, thereby

enabling them to drop freshman and sophomore instruction. This in turn would enable the university to concentrate on its proper functions: research and scholarship” (26).

Brint and Karabel’s scholarship has since been corroborated by multiple scholars, though the history John Thelin (and others) touts remains deeply entrenched in the community college narrative of open access, as reflected in most colleges’ outward-facing, public mission statements.

Brint, Karabel, and Thelin do agree on one important concept central to my research: the role of community colleges as institutions created to be generators of a local labor force. While their work (again) does not address the impact of unpaid, caregiving labor on students, their work explicating the primary, and historical, functions of community colleges is necessary in unpacking current constructions of two-year school. All three scholars point to the powerful role the military has historically played in funding, resourcing, program investment, and geographic campus location. However, none of the authors address the patriarchal implications of US military involvement on college campuses may have on women and mothers whose unpaid domestic labor they rely upon to “stabilize” the home front and operationalize deployments.

Brint and Karabel note a historical shift in the function of two-year colleges during the neoliberal golden age of 1980’s with a turn towards vocational education and “workforce development.” In many regions, the “junior college” was a stop-gap for failing k-12 public education systems that could not adequately place graduating students in a local job. Colleges served a similar role for GI’s returning from service who were not trained for a non-military workforce.⁷ Additionally, John Levin, Susan Kater, and Richard L. Wagoner trace the rise of the

⁷ The US Government enactment of the GI Educational Bill aligns with the emergence of the American Community College and is responsible for funding many of the students who attend 2-year schools.

neoliberal college structure and community college's role therein. While the book focuses largely on the political economy of community college faculty as a labor force, this text offers a salient critique and history of the role of two-year colleges within higher education and within a broader neoliberal economy. This text, along with Brint and Karabel, offers an important Marxist lens to the relatively quiet conversation of community college's role within the academic industrial complex that provides a firm foundation for my broader critique of student mothers' troubled navigation of higher ed. While these scholars have looked at the political-economic role of the community college from a critical perspective, they have glossed issues of gender and they have not examined motherhood as a factor of labor at all. My study seeks to include these scholars' important contributions while analyzing the overlapping impacts of race, motherhood, and labor politics within and beyond community colleges' scope of influence.

Community college scholarship is sometimes situated within the field of the Sociology of Education. Grounded in the work of Max Weber and Emile Durkheim in the early 20th century, early theorists of this field resisted the dominant belief that education (and the self-reliance it allegedly builds) can improve social stratification. Conversely, scholars assert that schools and educational structures reproduce class inequality instead of improving them. Sociology of

Education draws upon the same critical theory and the Marxist frameworks that have shaped American Studies as a field, and "critical" educational sociologists center the liberation of marginalized populations in an effort to reveal the institutions that maintain patriarchy, white supremacy, and postcolonial rule. Within a critical sociology of education framework, executing emancipatory work requires the study of schools and their articulating systems, to include an examination of time and place (history and social context), and the lived experiences of students, faculty, administrators, and other stakeholders. Research in community college spaces, histories,

and scholarship demands the tools of this field of study, which explicitly questions the established cultural and political economies of American education that have been built on traditional, western modes of knowledge production.

Educational Sociologists have taken up critiques of education within a capitalist system, most famously, perhaps, by Pierre Bordieu who coined the phrase “social capital,” referring to the non-monetary societal currency individuals gain as they increase their financial and educational position.⁸ Tara Yosso has since expanded and challenged Bordieu’s model, claiming social capital theory should include the cultural wealth that comes from belonging to communities of color. In *Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth*, Yosso presents an important shift within the sociology of education towards the inclusion of race, gender, and subaltern subjectivities as non-deficit positions. She draws on Women/Gender Studies frameworks to assert that social capital is not always less among students of color; in fact, she claims students of color have unique strategies, skills, and ways of knowing that must be valued as important social capital. Her work, however, is situated primarily within k-12 education and has not been extended to community college spaces or

students. My intervention in her work would be examining the difference between the way social capital for mothers of color students (who are mostly adults) functions differently for adult learners than for children.

Perhaps the work of scholarship most closely aligned with my own is that of Valerie Polakow and Sandra Butler. In their book, *Shut Out: Low Income Mothers and Higher Education in Post-Welfare America*. Polakow, Butler (and two other contributing authors Deprez and Kahn)

⁸ See Bordieu, Pierre. “The Forms of Capital.” *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education*, edited by J. G. Richardson. p. 241–58 New York: Greenwood Press, 1986.

offer an examination of regional studies of low-income student mothers. The editors note that the work attempts to “examine [the] confrontation between a welfare-to-work regime that coerces single mothers into low-wage work, and women who have resisted, understanding that higher education is critical to their capacity to provide for their family’s long term economic selfsufficiency” (2). Polakow et al mainly explore the role of the state welfare system in perpetuating poverty among women, which is an important component to understanding the financial landscapes and cultural assumptions impacting single-mother students. Other separately published work by Polakow and Butler unpacks the material conditions for women and children living in poverty. Polakow’s work centers largely on children living in poverty and Butler’s focuses more generally on single mothers. While their individual publications are necessary groundwork for examining the complexity of low-income student parents, their synthesis of intersecting factors impacting this population is best articulated in their co-authored book.⁹ However, *Shut Out* primarily focuses on site-specific solutions for low-income mothers at a range of state institutions, but it only examines one community college. Polakow and Butler’s

work is a point of origin for discussions of mothers in higher education, but it does not adequately address the sector that serves the majority of single mothers: community colleges.

Sarah Goldrick-Rab is a Sociology of Education professor at Temple University whose work on public colleges, social mobility, and higher education financial aid policy directly addresses many of my questions regarding the problems and possibilities of community college

⁹ See Polakow, Valerie. *Lives on the Edge : Single Mothers and Their Children in the Other America*. University of Chicago Press, 1993., Polakow, Valerie. *Who Cares for Our Children? : The Child Care Crisis in the Other America*. Teachers College Press, 2007. , and Butler, Sandra, and Nan Fink Gefen. *It Never Ends : Mothering Middle-Aged Daughters*. She Writes Press, 2017.

labor ecologies. In her book *Paying the Price: College Costs, Financial Aid, and the Betrayal of the American Dream* she explicates the academic, financial, and government institutions and policies responsible for the extraordinary rise in college costs in the last twenty years. Her work, both in this book and in her advocacy work as a leader within *Achieving the Dream* (a non-profit organization that helps community colleges close achievement gaps), directly addresses social mobility for working-class adults, student parents, and other invisible populations in higher education. Specifically, Goldrick-Rab combines degree completion and student debt information on 3,000 young adults at The University of Wisconsin to reveal that half of the students in the study left without a degree, and less than 20% completed a degree in five years. She also notes the significant student debt accrued while tracing the lived-experiences six of students who struggled to balance school, work, and financial stability. Her work uncovers the hidden costs of “traditional” college attendance structures and the ideal student it presumes to serve. While Goldrick-Rab’s work champions community colleges’ mission and fiscal responsibilities, she likewise critiques broader higher education institutions (particularly “elite” schools) for their sexist, racist, and classist practices. Her work focuses primarily on four-year public institutions with a close examination of the relationships between community colleges and state universities from the perspective of the cost admissions, transfer, and graduation, and its subsequent impact on class ascension. Goldrick-Rab’s research is both praxis and theory, whereby she applies her understanding of working- and middle-class students’ lives to federal policy change, most notably in her plan free community college for all. However, critics of her work note that her federal and state policy proposals do not adequately address local political economies and the site-specific barriers individual campuses face; my research attempts to address this gap.

Interestingly, in the past five years, the bulk of the data collected on community college political economics and the intersections of gender, race, and class have been done by the

nonprofit organizations The Institute for Women's Policy Research, Achieving the Dream, The Hope Center, and Generation Hope. Always linked with anti-sexist and anti-racist advocacy, their work and methodologies are both critical, intersectional, and embodied. The three organizations work much like a collective, sharing resources and staff for project and research completion. For example, in December 2019, IWPR released a state-by-state "Return on Investment" report documenting the benefits of investing specifically in community college single mothers (Cruz et al.) They work across organizations on projects such as the *Student Parent Success Initiative* to: "focuses on supporting students with dependent children who are pursuing college. The project involves research, tool-building, technical assistance, public education, and networking with advocates, policymakers, and practitioners invested in the success of student parents in postsecondary education" (IWPR). Much of the statistical data that exists on the intersections of race, gender, class, and parenting status exists only because these organizations have collected it.

In conclusion, while some critical fields like Women's Studies and Critical Race Studies have overlapped and intersected significantly within the last thirty years, scholarship between critical fields and Education studies has been slow to take hold in k-12 and community college spaces. Despite scholars' advocacy towards a more context-conscious framework for educational systems, the rise of Critical Education Studies in the 21st century has remained predominantly isolated to conversations in graduate classrooms and among scholars; dominant administrative training and decision-making at all levels of education reflects educational systems steeped in academic capitalist practices, gender ignorant policies, and color-blind models of multiculturalism. Furthermore, the field of American Studies has not given serious attention to community colleges as sites of cultural reproduction of racialized/gendered scripts, nor have American Studies scholars considered the community college campus a possible site of study and resistance.

Marxist Geography & Education as Property

This section of the literature review will draw together scholarship that discusses the relationships between place-making (specifically displacement), and the physical and material consequences of unpaid labor and laboring people. This literature relates to my study to the extent that I claim unpaid care work as an important and invisible component of a community college ecology. Central to this claim is the scholarship of Neil Smith, a marxist cultural geographer (trained by David Harvey) in the field of place-making studies. At first glance, Smith's work on the cityscape seems distant from political economies of community colleges; however, the application of his displacement studies is crucial to issues of college access and degree completion. His book *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* takes an uncompromising look at the calculated, settler colonial logics that undergird "speculators" (or financial investors') claims to the city scape -- one that is based on an American frontier mythology legitimizing the dislocation and elimination of indigenous populations. Smith summarizes: "Whereas the myth of the frontier is an invention that rationalizes the violence of gentrification and displacement, the everyday frontier on which the myth is hung is the stark product of entrepreneurial exploitation" (23). His articulation of capitalism, violence and the normalized, justified, everyday displacement of people is crucial to an exploration of student abandonment within current public education fiscal models. As Smith later theorizes in *Contours of Spatialized Politics*, systemic inequities operate in scale -- beginning with the body, and moving outward to the home, the community, urban space, region, nation, and globe. His scholarship, when applied to my work on community college caregivers, provides a useful framework in thinking about the way a "campus" can be examined as a multilocal project where racialized and gendered identities deeply impact the successful navigation of the higher ed spaces

and the career pipelines they fill. Because community colleges are spaces created, maintained, funded, and legitimized by the state, they run on federal, state, and local funding with a heavy reliance on local business partnerships and political relationships to remain viable. Community colleges' open-access admissions policies create the *perception* that they are resistant to elitist cultural constructs of "the collegiate," when in fact their governance structures are tightly bound to state k-12 educational systems and local principalities that are deeply entrenched in exploitative, capitalistic projects. Smith's work, when applied to the two-year sector of higher education, helps reveal and untangle the many competing agendas at work in the seemingly benevolent, opportunity-granting, community college systems.

While gentrification as a process may seem like an odd inclusion in a conversation about community college spaces, physical displacement is continuing to be defined in expansive and interdisciplinary ways. Loretta Lees, Tom Slater, and Elvin Wyly define gentrification as "the transformation of a working-class or vacant area of the central city into middle-class residential and/or commercial use," adding that the formation and expansion of gentrification studies continues to reveal the ways in which it "is no longer confined to the inner city or to First World metropolises" (xv, xvii). Their foundational text, *Gentrification*, meticulously articulates the "how" of gentrification and the many places and access points it enters from and through. Their work extends Neil Smith's theories by addressing the specific roles of local, regional, and state property policy. They tread lightly in the area of schools and education, noting the function of education and school zoning in promoting gentrification, but paying little attention to the potential role of institutions of higher education in the displacement and disinvestment of communities within the urban scape.

In spite of this gap in research, scholarship that critiques a new order of university organization and decision-making motivated by academic capitalism can be threaded with

gentrification theories for a useful lens in studying community colleges. Scholarships by Henri Giroux, Gary Slaughter, Sheila Rhoades, and Larry Leslie provide a powerful examination of the impact that rising neoliberalism in the late 90's and early 2000's has had on North American higher education and the bodies within it. Academic capitalism, a term coined by Sheila Slaughter and Larry Leslie, is "market and market-like behaviors on the part of universities and faculty" that dramatically impact student recruitment, academic program maintenance, and intellectual property at universities" (154). Their work addresses academic capitalism from various vantage points within the academic industrial complex and seeks to historicize, document, quantify, and (hopefully) disrupt the shifting power dynamics that subjects students and faculty to precarious conditions of labor and violence. In "Academic Capitalism in the New Economy: Challenges and Choices" written by Slaughter and Rhoades (published by the American Federation of Teachers), academic capitalism is articulated in succinct and specific ways so as to clearly communicate the origins, structures, locations, and urgency of practitioner resistance to market-driven decision making in the academy that function as a "regime" (37).

Furthermore, Henry Giroux, a founding scholar of critical pedagogy (who wrote extensively with Paulo Freire), articulates a vision of activism from within the academy that calls for teaching frameworks of resistance that directly address the politics of oppression within public education. While they do not use terms of gentrification, Giroux, Slaughter, Rhoades, and Leslie assert a phenomenon of displacement and disinvestment in students, faculty, and academic freedom in favor of fiscally profitable agendas and corporate partnerships.

Collectively, these authors call for a critical examination of the neoliberal polemics driving decision-making in higher education. This scholarship does not yet articulate with the political economies of community colleges in legible ways, however, popular culture and news

media have acknowledged state disinvestment in student financial aid in the past ten years, a rise in college tuition, student debt, and university administrations' quest for other funding sources (Marcus). According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities "States collectively cut spending to colleges and universities by 16 percent in real terms between 2008 and 2017" (Marcus). When the impact of these significant cuts are placed alongside popular and scholarly conversations around the gentrification of college towns, student homelessness, and dropping enrollment rates, a complex and problematic web of the American College economy becomes visible. And while Critical Education scholars, like Sarah Goldrick-Rab (whose work on college student precarity was discussed earlier in this paper), have documented disparities related to housing insecurity, an articulation with gentrifying markets has not been explored.

Education and legal scholars, such as LaTonya Baldwin Clark and Richard Rothstein, have examined the role of k-12 public education and universities in the segregatory politics of cities, but there is little to nothing written about community colleges' susceptibility and vulnerability to displacement within markets of rising property speculation and under the pressures of academic capitalism.¹¹ In particular, rising housing costs that outpaces a student's ability to earn a living wage often requires a move, often to less resourced areas of the county a community college serves. For example, in Maryland, once a student moves out-of-county they are no longer eligible for affordable, in-county tuition rates. They are then left with four choices if they want to finish their degree: (1) pay out-of-county tuition, which is double in-county tuition, (2) stay in housing that is too expensive for them, which often leads to food insecurity, (3) move to a different county and transfer to a different community college that may or may not have the degree program they are seeking, or (4) drop out of college. Therefore, students attending gentrification-susceptible counties are at even higher risk of non-completion due to the displacement caused by rising housing costs. Parents attending community college are faced with the additional complexity of

disrupting their children's lives and schooling by moving, even if a college degree would allow them to dramatically change their financial situation. In my experience, many students simply choose to stop pursuing their degree.

The links I articulate here between displacement theories and community college political economies have not been explored anywhere in the higher ed or in gentrification literature. However, LaTonya Baldwin Clark addresses the link between race, education, and property ownership under local legal regimes of exclusion (framed as zoning) in the k-12 public sector. Clark's article, *Education as Property*, published in *The Virginia Law Review* in 2019, innovatively synthesizes and applies the work of Cheryl Harris (*Whiteness as Property*) to the domain of public schools for a new way of seeing and understanding the relationship between

11

See Rothstein, Richard. *The Color of Law : A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*. Liveright Publishing Corporation, a Division of W.W. Norton & Company, 2018. & Rothstein, Richard. *Class and Schools : Using Social, Economic, and Educational Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap*. Teachers College, Columbia University, 2004.

private property ownership and segregation. Clark argues that school property tax functions as a form of both de facto and de jure segregation rooted in a belief that education is a “thing” residents pay for, making education a kind of property. She cites three school districts in different states where lawsuits were filed by officials claiming families were “stealing” an education by sending their children to schools outside of their neighborhood of residence. She also catalogues all of the cases filed in the US for similar reasons, noting virtually all cases were charged against lower-income people of color and prosecuted by wealthier, mostly white, public school officials. Clark concludes that schools funded by property taxes activate what Cheryl Harris calls the “right to exclude” on the basis of ownership and complicity with white supremacist structures. Community colleges, which also draw most of their revenue from local property tax, are subject to similar critiques of covert exclusion; in fact their “open access” marketing often hides the

ways in which rising housing costs pushes students out of the county where they begin their college education, creating further barriers to degree completion. I provide Clark's work as an example of the ways in which Critical Education Studies and Spatial Studies overlap but have not yet been applied to community college spaces.

Several gentrification scholars have examined the "studentification" phenomenon in university towns. Darren Smith, who coined the term in his 2005 article '*Studentification*': *The Gentrification Factory?*, examines the economic impacts of urban geographies surrounding universities in the UK. Popular journalism also narrates this phenomenon, noting the ways in which high-tuition schools bring with them a gentrifying student population that drives demand for commercial business-like Trader Joe's, Starbucks, and Whole Foods (Vo). While these theories make sense when applied to residential campuses, they require different nuance if applied to community college campuses which, by definition, are non-residential. In fact, because community college students are on average poorer than residential college students, the impact of "studentification" on geographies surrounding non-residential campuses should be explored.

While the relationship between community college campuses and political economies of neoliberal place-making has yet to be examined, this is not to say that it is not worthy of study. In fact, due to the geographically contained nature of community college student bodies, I contend that entire campuses are at risk of displacement because of the working-class, minoritymajority populations they serve. If examining community college students (particularly singlemother students who have limited geographical range) and their campuses through Neil Smith's *Revanchist* terms, students *and* campuses are vulnerable to displacement and disinvestment by creeping subsumption of gentrification and myths of urban renewal. Smith notes that revanchism, or "revenge against minorities, the working class, women, environmental legislation, gays and

lesbians, [and] immigrants [has become] the increasingly common denominator in public discourse” (44). Smith situates urban space as a “new frontier” where (predominantly) white speculators enact a racist, sexist logic of elimination to justify the erasure of “native” people, or those living on the desirable city land. He notes “The frontier takes on different forms in different places; it adapts to place as it makes place” consistently making invisible the underclass (18). While it is important to note, that not all community colleges lie in gentrifying areas, most are located where underserved populations can access them, typically in urban or public transportation accessible suburbs. Smith’s theories make way for an interesting examination of the class containment, disinvestment, and displacement of community college mothers and campuses under a neoliberal narrative of open-access and job opportunity.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore, a student of Smith, is a cultural geographer and critical race scholar whose book *The Gold Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* critiques the California State infrastructure as a failed attempt to “fix” the social crises of the late 20th century. While the context for Gilmore’s work is carcerality (and her object of study is the California State penal system) her approach to untangling the political economies of the California prison industrial complex and its intersections with racialized, state-sanctioned violence is a model for similarly examining the institutional articulations of race, gender, and class in higher education. She asserts, through prison census data, prison mapping projects, and the tracing of raced labor histories, that working-class people of color have been unjustly incarcerated at alarming rates as a means of stimulating the CA economy and in order to provide a scapegoat for a widening wealth gap. In particular, Gilmore employs Smith’s scale model to explicate the recent history of the State of CA (1982-near present) from body to nation, with heavy emphasis on the connection between bodies and state. Gilmore broadly contextualizes the late 20th century in light of western expansion (the creation of a CA economy), WW2 (The New

Deal), and 1968 (the convergence of political ideologies) to reveal the genealogies of ideology and policy that create the conditions for such a sharp increase in racialized mass incarceration. She aligns her argument with cultural theorists, geographers, economists, activists, and political scientists (Stuart Hall, Cedric Robinson, David Roediger, George Lipsitz, Edward Soja, Greg Hooks, and Wendy Brown) to examine government infrastructures' relationships to land (spatiality), political currency, and white supremacy. Gilmore situates people's lived experiences among ontologies of race, class, gender, and embodiment to provide a powerful lens for eventual undoing, or abolition, of the conditions that feed economies of carcerality. Notably, Gilmore elevates the stories of mothers who are resistant agents against the California State penal system and racialized violence more broadly, which provides an important opening in the study of student mothers within a US education system that has a documented pipeline to prisons. In short, Gilmore's examination of the role of the state in not only perpetuating but *creating* conditions of racialized disinvestment and erasure is an essential component of the institutional ethnographic work of community colleges.

The Politics (and Economics) of Gendered Care Work

Ultimately, the study of gendered, racialized, and classed labor, and its articulation with community college political economies, is a key component to understanding class ascension, economic security, and physical survival for 70% of the US poor who are women and children (Women's Legal Defense and Education Fund). Debates surrounding the relationship between racialized motherhood, unpaid labor, economic parity, and schools as gendered career pipelines are vital topics across subfields of Women's Studies. Likewise, the complexity of working-class women's educational access requires epistemologies built to study them. Activists and critics of Women's Studies as an academic field have rightfully questioned the elitist, white roots of

original university departments, spawning the scholarly sparring between white (predominantly upper class) feminists and women of color and working-class feminists. While my research dips into and critiques white feminist constructions of motherhood that are often privileged in popular culture, the ideological foundation for my work is best situated within the field of Women Studies under the umbrellas of Black Women's Studies and Women of Color (BWS/WOC) feminist scholarship. Within these subfields, I've identified authors who address politics of racialized motherhood identities, the cost of minoritized subjectivity, the debates regarding the right to exclude, and the value of lived experience as an epistemology. Furthermore, placing white and women of color feminists in conversation with one another in this section of my dissertation prospectus reveals the important role race plays in both the history of the field and the relational, co-construction of mothering identities. For clarity's sake within this paper, and to establish my theoretical positioning on the reading community college mothers' lives, I've conflated these subfields to Women of Color feminisms.

For clarity's sake within this dissertation, and to establish my theoretical positioning on the reading community college students' lives, I will use the non-gendered term "care work" in place of motherwork, while acknowledging the frequent overlap in these descriptors. I choose care work because motherhood is a hegemonic term that flattens the complex and interlocking systems that animate it as a common, unifying identity. However, being a mother (a woman or non-binary person responsible for a child) magnifies the barriers to higher education and economic parity. According to Ann Crittenden, economist and author of *The Price of Motherhood: Why the Most Important Job in the World is Still the Least Valued* notes that "...motherhood, as opposed to simply being female, is a key source of women's inequality" (iix). In fact, Crittenden's research asserts and demonstrates that "motherhood is the single biggest risk factor for poverty" (xiii).

While the focus of Crittenden's work is not higher education, she does briefly dip into the problems for faculty in tenure-track positions, noting that systemic, economic, and cultural choices lead to "women adjust[ing] their lives to accommodate the needs of children; who do what is necessary to make a home; who forgo status, income, advancement, and independence. Nowhere is this more dramatically illustrated than in the experience of the nation's most educated women -- the ones who had the best shot at having it all" (27). While Crittenden's argument is racially monolithic, a repeated gap in white feminist scholarship, her assertions are useful in considering the cultural climate of higher education as it relates to motherhood and the broader economic impact caretaking has on anyone who performs this labor -- not just mothers. In the case of community college students, working class women and men who are geographically tethered to their home due to caretaking responsibilities frequently enroll at two year schools because of their affordability and the presence of other "nontraditional students" who form a supportive academic environment.

While many black woman scholars discuss motherhood in their work, Patricia Hill Collins' scholarship is foundational. Broadly, Collins pieces *Shifting the Center: Race, Class, and Feminist Theorizing about Motherhood* (2013) and *Black Women and Motherhood* (1992), draw care work (as labor) into the intersection of gender, race, class, nationality, and sexuality. Collins coins the term "motherwork" while critiquing the notion of a unified experience of mothering. Instead, she claims "motherwork" as labor that extends beyond raising biological children (to include teaching), and calls for an examination of motherhood from multiple, overlapping, identity perspectives: "Mothering occurs in specific historical contexts framed by interlocking structures of race [and] class" (65). Collins, who speaks to the cost of invisible, unpaid care work within and outside of the home also speaks to its cultural power and personal

joy. Her contributions to the field of Black Women's studies includes theorizing four domains within a matrix of oppression: structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal.

Motherhood and motherwork, she explains bleeds over and into several of these domains.

Specifically, the theoretical foundation Collins' creates for feminized labor scholarship is where my work on community college student mothers begins: as an acknowledgement of the precarity, power, and possibility of mothers' agency, and the varied ways women experience systems of domination as a result of its construction.

To contemporary readers, Collins' works invokes the (frequently misappropriated) 21st century term "intersectionality," coined by legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw who's *Demarginalizing the Intersections of Race and Gender* (1989) and *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color* (1991) and made Black Feminist Thought visible and legible through legal case studies. In terms of genealogy, Crenshaw and Collins' were (are) contemporaries working in adjacent fields drawing from the same theories established by the Combahee River Collective and a long genealogy of black feminist thought. Crenshaw's intersectionality framework uses the spatial metaphor of "intersecting axes of domination" to argue for a new way to interpret discrimination law.¹⁰ She claims that black women, who are subject to increased levels of physical violence and sexual subjugation as compared to their white / female and black / male counterparts, are treated unfairly by the law. Crenshaw critiques existing feminist and legal scholarship, asserting that they erase black women's experiences by ignoring the relationship of race and gender; therefore, current legal precedent fails to represent and protect black women within the legal system. Crenshaw's prolific

¹⁰ *A Black Feminist Statement* by The Combahee River Collective of 1977 embodies the goals of Black Feminist Thought, indicating that a coalition of Black consciousness across identity signifiers is necessary for full incorporation and equity for women of color in American life. See Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahtta. Ed. *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*. Haymarket, 2017. Pg 26-27.

career recently includes an activist agenda. Recently, her free public webinar series “Under the Blacklight: The Intersectional Failures that COVID Lays Bare,” highlights the global pandemic and the overt violences black and brown people are subject to within structurally racist US systems. Her contributions to critical race and feminist studies cannot be understated, and her intersectional framework undergirds my exploration of women of color student mothers within higher education.

Women’s Studies scholarship extends frequently to the study of marginalized students in education, perhaps most famously by bell hooks. In the book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, bell hooks — a pillar of feminist and womanist scholarship — began calling for a racially intersectional recognition of motherhood a quarter century before Douglass and Michael wrote *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined All Women*. The academic and cultural insistence that motherhood, and feminism for that matter, is a monolithic experience of oppression is an ongoing contestation in the field, noting that workingclass women and women of color often do not view motherhood as an identity of disempowerment (hooks 135). “Historically, black women have identified work in the context of the family as humanizing labor, work that affirms their identity as women, as human beings showing love and care, the very gestures of humanity white supremacist ideology claimed black people were incapable of expressing” (hooks 133). For my work, it is important to state that mothering itself is not oppressive, but in fact the gendered scripts and material consequences of 21st century American maternity, to include the attainment of a college degree, are devastating, in particular, to single mothers.

As recently as 2019, the role of racialized motherhood in the academy has become an important scholarly topic within American Studies. *The Chincana M(other)work Anthology* was published by a collective of scholars who presented a panel at the American Studies Association 2014 national conference titled “Mothers of Color in Academia.” The anthology, edited by Cecilia Caballero, Yvette Martinez-Vu, Judith Perez-Torre, Michelle Tellez, and Christine Vega, aims to “center mothering as an act of transformative labor within academic and community spaces through an intersectional lens” (3). They note:

In our research, we found that much of the small but expanding body of scholarship on academic mothers narrowly focuses on white, middle-class, and married women (Evans and Grant 2008; Mason, Wolfinger, and Goulden 2013). For this reason, we draw attention to issues of heteropatriarchy, racism, and classism by highlighting the lived experiences of working-class Mothers of Color.

(4)

However, within the anthology, just one article addresses community college mothers, an imbalance I can’t resolve given the number of WOC attending community colleges. However, I am pleased to see that much of their theoretical grounding matches my own, though we are addressing different aspects of community college student experience. *Herstories of Sobrevivencia: Chicax/Latinx Community College Student-Mothers (Re)claiming and (Re)defining the Educational Pipeline and CalWORKS* by Nereida Oliva and Hortencia Jimenez, centers the unique barriers of student mothers in California and the state-sanctioned labor systems at work in their ongoing marginalization. As I move forward with my research, I look forward to connecting with the few other scholars employing epistemological and methodological frameworks from Black Women’s Studies and Women of Color Feminisms to

critique the Academy's white supremacist foundations and its impact on women and other subjectivities that absorb unpaid care work in their homes, workplaces, and communities.

Concluding Thoughts and A Pivot Towards Lived Experience

My synthesis of critical geographic, educational, and feminist approaches to the study of community college students is a necessary component to untangling higher education political economies for student caregivers. Specifically, the methodologies and ontological lenses offered by women of color feminist scholars and feminists studying gendered labor informs a research framework that includes the role of cultural capital assigned by identity politics. Specifically, the study of community college student caregivers within their historic and geographic place, and in relationship to the construction of other racial, gender, and class scripts in the region, is essential to understanding student struggle, success, and ultimately, resistance. As the reader transitions to Chapters 3 and 4, which center the students-caregivers lived experience, these scholarly lenses will be crucial to interpreting the current contexts and impacts of care ideologies on community college campuses.

While this chapter offered a synthesis of the literature relevant to community college histories, the varied definitions of caregiving and care labor across fields, and proposed useful theoretical frameworks for studying "care" at community colleges, Chapter 3 moves towards action. What comes next is an explanation of the methodology I created to position student caregivers within their campus histories and public-facing marketing materials to understand how care labor constructs the individual and campus experience of community colleges.

Chapter Interlude: Dina

As I was beginning my own doctoral studies as a single-mom in Fall 2016, I had a student named Dina¹¹ in my community college English 101 class, a gate-keeping course required by the Maryland Higher Education Commission for a two-year associate's or a four-year baccalaureate degree. Dina was 28 and the single mother of three children under six, and she worked full-time as a Geek Squad manager at Best Buy. Her goal was to earn her Associates degree in STEM and transfer to a four-year program for engineering. She and her children lived with her parents who are undocumented immigrants from Central America, a fact she shared in an open-forum campus discussion about the 2016 presidential election. If it were not for her parents, she would not have been able to exit her eight-year abusive marriage and she would not be able to attend college part-time. She was a bright, curious, critical, and invested reader and writer -- an instructor's dream.

Twelve weeks into our fifteen weeks together, and towards the end of her culminating, chosen research project on Universal Childcare, Dina emailed me to let me know she'd been hospitalized for a transient ischemic attack (TIA, or mini-stroke) most likely caused by an undiagnosed heart condition magnified by stress and delayed access to health care. She apologized for missing class, said she would need to miss one more, but that she'd hopefully be back in class the next week. She was.

Dina returned to class, presented a stellar research presentation at our college-wide honors conference, and in the last week of class could not complete the final paper due to a backlog of work from her hospital stay and two children who had come down with strep. Since she had a medical reason, I was able to give her an incomplete in the course, and she wound up

¹¹ All student names in this document at pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

with an A in EN101 and an invitation to present her research at the regional honors conference. She thanked me privately for believing in her and for seeing her as a scholar. In spite of her success that far outpaced her classmates, she still couldn't see her way clear of her circumstances, a heart-breaking process to witness as her instructor.

While Dina clearly has everything it takes to be successful as a college student, she told me during an emotional, private conversation, that she questions if she is capable, or worthy of, earning a degree. She knows, and actively resists (as I witnessed in the campus political discussion), racialized narratives of illegality and gendered stereotypes of single motherhood. Yet, what I know from my nineteen years of teaching experience (and in spite of my personal belief in her success) is that in terms of higher education success, Dina is not seen as an ideal student. In order to fully "pass" as a student through higher education, Dina must negotiate not only the physical and economic load of caretaking, she must do it in a system designed for young, able-bodied, white, male students.

Sadly, following the semester Dina was in my class, she did not return to campus. I have no idea if she continued with her education at another institution, if she needed to move due to the rising cost of housing in Maryland (which is a common occurrence for students and employees at the Colleges), or if she dropped out of college all together due to the physical stress of managing school, work, and family life. Regardless, she did not return to MMCC. While what I need in order to fully understand Dina's choice to not re-enroll at MMCC is her personal account of her experience, in its absence, I can only reflect on all of the extra labors Dina had to negotiate in order to succeed. Regardless of where she was, her life as a students will require her to exhaustingly perform multiple competing identities and responsibilities as a caregiver, worker, and student. And, if community colleges are built as they purport to be -- full of structures and

support systems that account for Dina's barriers to completion -- there is no doubt she would be a powerful agent in the classroom and workplace who is capable of resisting racist, classist, and gendered assumptions about who can legitimately produce knowledge.

Chapter 3

A Critical Methodology: Collecting Narrative and Care as Method

“School is a prime locale for the subversion and challenge of hegemonic ideologies; it is both the ‘stake’ and the ‘site’ of ideological racialized, class struggle. Reconfigurations of power can occur, and outcomes are not fixed.”

~ Wendy Cheng, The Changs Next Door to the Diazes: Remapping Race in Suburban California

“Collective freedom provides the basic conditions for people to narrate their own lives, hold power accountable, and embrace a capacious notion of human dignity.” ~ Henri Giroux

“But it’s where people coming together in the context of deep democracy – understanding radical interdependency – create for themselves the subjectivities that make life precious at every round of activity.” ~ Ruth Wilson Gilmore

On January 24, 2024, the Lumina Foundation, in conjunction with Georgetown University’s Center for Education and Workforce Research released a report documenting the continued racial equity gaps in higher education degree attainment and the persistence of gender and racial workforce pay gaps (Carnevale et al). The report, titled *Learning and Earning by Degrees: Gains in College Degree Attainment Have Enriched the Nation and Every State, but Racial and Gender Inequality Exist*, showed that while 6.7% more people earned degrees between 2010 and 2020 (notably excluding the pandemic), degree attainment for people of color remained stagnant. The report also documents that more women earned a degree than men (nationally and across degree types), yet women across racial identities continue to earn less at their jobs (Meristotis). According to Jeff Strohl, one of the report authors and Georgetown research directors: “Women need much more education than men to earn the same pay.” The data also reveals that people of color continue to work more low wage service and caregiving jobs than white workers regardless of gender. This massive report drew on large data bases such as the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center and the Department of Education's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) to share out important information about the status of degree and pay gaps, but it does not go on to posit a *reason* that racialized and

gendered pay gaps persist. This dissertation, while it does not attempt to empirically measure the care labor / graduation rate numbers, it hypothesizes that unpaid care work, assigned through cultural narratives of caregiving, is a key contributor to lower completion rates of students at community colleges and the abundance of caregiving students who attend them.

This study presents a methodology that examines the connection between care rhetoric, care labor, and community college place-making as an alternative approach to understanding the process of earning a college credential when also providing physically, emotionally, and financially for biological or chosen family. Instead of centering quantitative completion data, which is a common research and assessment approach at two-year schools, this study centers the student caregiver experience and triangulates it with college marketing / recruitment material and a longer history of community colleges. To do this, I bring together theoretical frameworks from Cultural Geography and methodological tools from Cultural and Literary Studies to gain new insight into where, why, and how caregiving students talk about, and experience college as intersected with their care labor. This framework allows me to see how individual and institutional language about care and care work on campus squares with the promises community college deploy to their public as well as the impact these ideologies have on caregiving students.

Foundational Claims, Frameworks, and Questions

This study examines unpaid care labor as a fundamental barrier to degree attainment and attempts to trace the cultural rhetorics of care and the impacts of care work on community college students. Because working-class women and students of color, who are often caregivers to biological or chosen family, are hyper represented at community colleges across all states, I draw together in this study three methods to (1) understand the historical, cultural, and political processes that produce both care work and care rhetorics, and (2) the impact care labor has on

student caregivers. At the root of the methodology is an attempt to describe how resources (time, money, physical and emotional energy) are spent from the scale of the student body to the scale of the institution in the service of “care.” In short, the study hypothesizes that the expenditure of unpaid care labor by students impacts their ability to earn a degree, which corresponds to narratives of financial security in America’s “college economy.”¹² At the root of this expenditure of time and energy is a question about the relationship between the culturally loaded language of “care” and the behaviors, decisions, and resource costs to a predominantly female and person of color student demographic at community colleges. The study explores this relationship through in-depth student interviews, the examination of the College’s recruiting materials, and the longer history of community colleges in the US.

This dissertation also asserts that unpaid caregiving labor is performed predominantly by women but is assigned differently depending on cultural group and seeks to understand the deployment, intake, and impact of unpaid care labor on community college students. The study also specifically targets unpaid caretaking labor (care work), not a specific caretaking identity like motherhood, fatherhood, or professional categories of care, largely because of the slippery nature of identity category construction across cultural groups, and also because of the financial precarity, or material consequence, caretaking labor reveals and produces.

In order to prioritize a depth of understanding surrounding the use and deployment of care narratives at community colleges, I chose a single site of study (called Mid-Maryland Community College, or MMCC, here) for the student interviews and for the close reading of college marketing materials and program recruitment. My goal was to establish a new

¹² Jamie Merisitis uses this term to describe the 21st century American political economy whereby a college degree is fundamental for financial security and accrual of generational wealth.

methodology for studying community colleges from within them, and to identify the gaps, overlaps, and differences in student experiences of care and a college's care rhetoric as reflected in marketing materials, policies, and program investment decisions. For all of the data evaluation, I used critical discourse analysis to sort, code, and evaluate themes across materials and interview transcripts, a method consistent with the examination of language, rhetoric, and the distribution of power in and across institutions. The analysis of data were methodologically lensed through what Wanda Pillow calls "self-reflexivity of discomfort," a kind of accounting for positionality discussed later in this chapter (187).

While my theoretical framework is steeped in American Studies theories of constructions of difference, the enactment (or methods) of my research is grounded by my home-discipline training in English language studies and the close reading of texts, images, and storytelling. Specifically, using critical discourse analysis (a methodological tool used across critical humanities and social sciences fields) of interviews and an archive of the place of study will allow me to thread multiple fields and, hopefully, articulate the potential power and harm housed in two-year colleges. Critical discourse analysis is a form of linguistic and textual analysis, to include oral, written, filmic, and multimedia communication, "that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in social and political contexts" (Van Dijk). Critical discourse analysis is frequently used to study institutions and their impact on individual and group access to material and social capital. It is frequently used alongside Marxist epistemologies, and is likewise, a good fit for my questions of interest.

Developing Study's Methodology

The origin story of the research questions is important to name since it also informs the theoretical and methodological choices I've made in this study. Unequivocally, the research questions for this dissertation study emerged from my lived experiences as a single mother, community college English professor, and PhD student. As I looked at both the "success data" being placed in front of me as a department chair, and the American Studies scholarship I was reading as a PhD student, the empiricism of course completion or graduation data (that are used to make institutional resource decisions) caused me to question how qualitative, interdisciplinary research could answer the questions I have about my students' investments in a two-year degree. I went on to seek a new way to understand the intersections of care work and community college place-making from the inside out; that experimental methodology is laid out in this chapter. My goal is to present a unique way of studying educational structures that incorporates methods to address student representation, exclusion, and agency holistically, meaning that the structures and the students are linked and analyzed together.

It is important to note that one of the key methods I use in the analysis is the close study of the longer history of community colleges within the US. I began this study by examining the historical and existing (varied) structures of community colleges, discovering that they are a uniquely American construction created to serve the US capitalist economy, the US military, and as a safety net for failing k-12 public school systems that promote the class stratification reflected in university system graduation rates.

In choosing an embedded researcher approach, I wanted to counter the bulk of existing community college scholarship that is produced by people outside of two-year institutions. I researched how community colleges are studied within academia and evaluated the degree to which existing research adequately centers lived experience on community college campuses, as

well as who is doing the research about community colleges. Most of the respected body of research on community colleges is conducted by scholars at 4 year universities (The Community College Research Center at Columbia University, the Georgetown Center for Workforce and Education, the Office of Community College Research and Leadership at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and the Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research at North Carolina State), and by non-profit advocacy or think tank groups, like Achieving the Dream, Inc., The Urban Institute, the Center for the Study of Community Colleges, and New America. Therefore, this methodology intentionally interprets data from within the institution where it was gathered *by* a practitioner familiar with the campus landscape. In this way, the research is antithetical to the majority of academic studies done about community college structures from outside their walls.

As noted in the literature review of this dissertation (Chapter 2), the bulk existing research focuses on “student success” rates and promotes neoliberal narratives of success that are inconsistent with the dismal completion numbers of students for whom a college credential would have the biggest class impact. Among these students is a population whose racial, gendered, ethnic, and class intersections uniquely magnifies the question of “care”: students who are parenting or caregiving while attending college. This study, instead, provides an embedded, scholarly lens on “care” that uses tools from Marxist Geography and Cultural Studies – a fields that openly critique the human impact of neoliberalism and academic capitalism – to examine community college political economy and the laboring scholars who invest significant personal resources into them, including their care.

Researcher Positionality and “Uncomfortable Reflexivity” as Method

"The Laboring Scholar" is born from my 25 year teaching career in the English classroom and the interdisciplinary questions I have always asked as an ardent advocate for the Arts and Humanities. While I spent the first half of my career in high school and four-year regional university campus teaching (in Alexandria, VA and San Antonio, TX), for the last twelve years, I've been a community college professor. I began as an adjunct instructor teaching in the evening and moved to full-time, seven years ago. I am now tenured and have been the Chair of English and Humanities department for three years, managing over 50 faculty members across 11 campus sites and maintaining a 2-2 teaching load. In addition to being English faculty (teaching a variety of writing-intensive courses centered on the structural inequities and histories of gender, race, and class in America), I am the innovator of *Parents Lead*, a scholarship and degree-pathway program at FCC that provides students, who might not otherwise be able to attend classes due to the cost of childcare, the funding and academic support to pursue a degree. Due to my positions as both a professor teaching at FCC and as an academic administrator, I have identified multiple barriers for students both nationally and at my institution, and I frequently question my own participation in predatory inclusive practices. Therefore, my position in this study is not neutral nor removed. I am deeply embedded in Frederick Community College's institutional formation, and I am equally invested in the political advocacy for my students but am aware of my potential complicity in upholding damaging College policies.

Because of my lived experience, I stand in a unique position to study the complexities of gender, race, and care work in higher education. Furthermore, my personal subjectivity as a divorced, single-mother of two multiracial children positions me to see gaps I could not see when I was married and without children. The physical and emotional labor involved in managing a community college teaching career, a PhD program, and the growth of a son and daughter into

adolescence during the Trump era is nothing short of colossal. Daily, I feel the weight of the financial underfunding of community colleges at both a personal and professional level, and I simultaneously witness the gendered and racialized difference in my children's educational experiences from my own white, upper-middle class upbringing. When I initially began the study of race, gender, and community college studenthood several years ago, I worried that my lived experience would cloud my vision of what is real, material, and of consequence in my life. It definitely has, *and* I now understand my embedded subjectivity as an essential and powerful window into the complexities at the intersection of care work, race, gender, and higher education. However, simply naming my positionality is not enough for the ethical deployment of self-reflexivity as method. In fact, one of the most difficult parts of enacting this study was and is my embedded position as the primary and solitary investigator, or what Wanda Pillow calls the "insider/outsider researcher" (182). I structured the methodology to capture both the insider *and* the outsider perspective I uniquely have that both enriches and "thoroughly contaminate[s]" my analysis (Pillow 183). I make this position clear throughout this dissertation by offering my autoethnographic and personal reflections between chapters as an implicit nod to readers of my singularity in the analysis of the content, and as a person with a deep emotional and intellectual investment in the people and places I study here. Also, in addition to a critical history of community colleges as institutions (both in scholarship and in the literal infrastructure of higher education in the US), I attempt to allow the texts, images, and interview language from the project data set to stand on its own wherever possible. This can be seen in the full inclusion of the in-vivo transcriptions and assigned coding language presented in Appendix 1. I present that as evidence to the reader of transparency and self-reflexivity – an invitation to discuss and reveal where my subjectivity clouds and shapes interpretation. For some readers, this methodology may be too experimental and too experiential. I encourage this critique and present my work as an

alternative to the traditional methodologies of Education, which problematically privileges artificially constructed interpretive tools of objectivity, or what Pillow defines as “self-reflexivity of transcendence” (186). Instead, my positionality is ever-present in this study and never asserted as the only possibility for reading the data or understanding the community college student experience. In sum, this methodology is constructed with “uncomfortable reflexivity,” defined as “a reflexivity that seeks to know while at the same time situates this knowing as tenuous” (Pillow 188).

Research Questions:

The process of distilling my research questions into measurable components for this dissertation study has been difficult, precisely because of the ubiquity and magnitude of the problems I am addressing. While American Studies projects provide some methodological tools to uniquely uncover veiled hegemonic structures (like community college care rhetoric) cloaked in “common sense” ideologies, narratives, and social behaviors, I’ve chosen to ask questions (and to create a methodology) in this study that explicates rhetoric and articulates its impact on both structures and people. As such, readers will notice that my questions and methods operate at multiple scales, from the level of the individual through to the examination of overlapping institutions. When individual student stories are told, the ways that educational structures combine with caregiving labor reveal race, gender, and classed experiences of college *and* the reality that community colleges are important places of belonging and joy for student caregivers. This chapter names and contextualizes my research questions, situates them between and across disciplinary arguments of “care” ideology in public education, and grounds them in American Studies theories and methodologies.

The Methodology: Why these frameworks? Why these methods? Why this Way?

The Laboring Scholar: Community College Geographies and the Politics of Care is an interdisciplinary, qualitative analysis that investigates care rhetoric in higher education by examining the language used across selected institutional archives, digital marketing materials, and student interviews. The central methods are linguistic with a primary focus on the use and deployment of the term (and related ideologies) of “care.” My methodology combines critical discourse analysis as the unifying method for drawing conclusions from in-depth, open-ended interviews as well as the historical and digital archives of the study site. The analysis of both data sets is grounded in the longer history of community colleges, which provides a unique way to map how disembodied College policies and institutional structures are predictably re-membered on the bodies of caregiving students. Explicating “care” as a flexible and sometimes manipulated term that is culturally coded differently across race, gender, and class categories is essential for evaluating its use as a primary justification for recruiting and “serving” students, particularly those who rarely earn a degree. The study examines the definition of care at the individual and institutional level and seeks to measure the impact of care rhetoric on caregiving students’ lives by asking how they define, experience, co-create, and see college as a site of care and caregiving as a source of both joy and extraction.

The scholarship addressing “Predatory Inclusion” by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, Neil Smith’s frameworks for examining the uneven development and cyclical disinvestment in working-class / poor communities, and Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s models of both organized abandonment and the possibilities of place-remaking are the foundation of the methodological and interpretive processes in the study. A description of these scholars’ work, and the interrelationship in the study, are detailed in Chapter 2; however, it should be noted that their

methodological tools of qualitative, structural analysis of Black, urban housing in the 1970's, processes of gentrification in the city scape, and the political economy of carcerality in California, are *applied* here to community colleges, not replicated. In short, Taylor, Smith, and Gilmore's scholarship are useful lenses for bringing together the complexities of race, gender, class constructions and institutional place-making within specific political economic contexts.

A Few Words About Centering Caregiving Students in Method and Methodology

Caregiving students are the human node I tap to examine and target the overlapping, material, physical, and emotional impacts of gender, race, class, and care working realities at community colleges. While a number of student groups experience the failures of higher education caused by systemic racism and sexism, unpaid caregivers to biological and chosen kin at two-year schools are among the most failed. Specifically, mothers seeking degrees disproportionately attend community colleges over four-year institutions because they are often tied to the location of their families; however, collegiate structures rarely facilitate a path forward for this population (Rose & Hill 2013). Nearly 40% of women at community colleges are mothers and more than half of mothering students (58%) are raising children without the financial support of a spouse (Goodman & Reddy 14). Of the single mothers at two-year schools, who are predominantly women of color, 89% are considered low-income and 63% are living in poverty (IWPR). These statistics laid next to the same group's dismal degree attainment rates (6% over six years) situate them as a particularly important set of students to consider (IWPR). Furthermore, most institutions currently do not collect data on parental status, rendering the impact of mothering on students invisible in higher education "success" reports (Goodman & Reddy). Hearing individual experiences of caregiving students that can be critically analyzed in the context of specific community college political economies, will hopefully provide a window

into not only the gendered and racialized impact of degree access, but also for a focused examination of the financial and physical consequences of unpaid, caretaking labor.

At the center of this issue is the methodological problem of naming, quantifying, and valuing unpaid care work; this is why the approaches collect definitions of care in an attempt to define it. It may surprise some readers to learn that caregiving and/or parental status is not collected by colleges in Maryland, and just recently has begun. Over the past 6 years of research for this project I've been a part of a larger national movement to make unpaid care labor visible to college structures by helping to develop statewide definitions for unpaid care work that can be (electively) disclosed by students and translated to new identity categories collected at the point of student enrollment. The point of the larger movement is twofold: (1) to identify student caregivers so they can receive appropriate fiscal and academic support congruent with the true cost of attendance for a person enrolled in college who also must pay for childcare to attend, and (2) to help institutions with the highest percentage of caregiving students, like community colleges, to justify additional state-level funds to matriculate these students. Our bill Maryland House Bill 0463¹³ currently is on the floor with a hearing in Annapolis on Feb 27, 2024. I will be testifying and speaking to the institutional and student impact of identifying caregiving college students. The bill, and its caregiving status mandate for all Maryland public Universities and Colleges, is the first step in making the labor, and its impact on students visible and then funded.

This project and its exploration of a new methodology for studying the intersections of caregiving and studenthood inform this political movement.

¹³ MD HB0463 <https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/mgaweb/Legislation/Details/hb0463?ys=2024RS>

IRB Approval, Ethical Research Approaches, and Anonymity

I should mention at this point that prior to the study's start, I moved through a rigorous IRB approval process at both The University of Maryland and at Mid-Maryland Community College, the study site. Because one component of my study involves human subjects, I was required to secure the consent of all participants. In the consent forms I ensured their anonymity, which is why all student in this document, including in the interludes, are named with pseudonyms. An additional condition of my research at the study site was to not mention the name of the College in my final report; however, they were aware that the site's history and institutional archives would be explicated. Therefore, I use a mock name for the College (MidMaryland Community College) but geographic, demographic, and historical markers of the place have not been modified so as to honor the histori-specificity of place-making at the study site. However, in order to protect the student participants, in addition to changing their names, I also have changed identifying markers of their experiences throughout the entire dissertation and appendices.

Recruitment and Execution of Open-Ended Interviews

In constructing my methodology, I had a number of choices for studying student experiences of care. I was lucky enough to already have participated in and led an initiative at the study site that deployed an extensive survey to parenting students and led focus groups of the same population. The data gathered through these methods were important for justifying the fiscal support of caregiving students at our college, but the data lacked depth in terms of understanding how students' lives as caregivers connected with and are informed by the college experience. While I draw on this grant data for other part of the dissertation study – essentially in framing and measuring the magnitude of the problem and the specific resources student need –

the choice to conduct in-depth interviews with 23 self-identified caregiving students documents the poignant stories of caregiving studenthood at community colleges that are unseen in College marketing and also allow us to trace rhetorics of care and to complicate them.

In the Fall of 2022, in compliance with my approved IRB at both my doctoral program site and the study site, MMCC's Office of Student Affairs published a call for study participants in its weekly email news blast. This news blast is sent to all students currently enrolled in credit and non-credit coursework at the College and methodologically controlled for an overrepresentation of any particular student demographic. I also hung paper flyers around the campus and digitally advertised the project through social media and asked others to share the call as well. The call for participants asked "Are (or have you been) an MMCC student who is also an unpaid caregiver to biological or chosen family?" The blast asked interested participant to reach out to me directly through an email address listed.

The call for participants asked for a 30-60 minute, recorded, Zoom interview with me where we would discuss their lives as MMCC students who are also unpaid caregivers to biological or chosen family. I did not attach any kind of monetary or gift reward to participation, only the encouragement to share their stories and hopefully improve the college experience for caregiving students. I received over 30 emails of interest and ultimately ended up conducting 23 in-depth, open-ended interviews by the end January 2023. There are the five interview questions:

- 1) Tell me a little bit about yourself and what brought you to [Mid-Maryland] Community College?

- 2) Tell me about your role as a caregiver to biological or chosen family. What kind of time, energy, and resources do you put into caregiving?

- 3) What was it like to be a community college student who is also a caregiver?

- 4) Do you feel you have been able (or will be able) to meet the goals you came into [MMCC] to accomplish? Why or why not?
- 5) What could the College community do to support you as a caregiving student?

Because these are open-ended interviews, I told each participant that our time together was designed to be a conversation and that the questions help guide our exchange. Participants were incredibly generous with their time with most conversations lasting well over the 30-minute mark and always closing with my gratitude for their time and the promise to share the final dissertation study with them. The process was poignant and revealing, reinforcing the efficacy of using interview methods to both ground and answer my research questions.

Data Collection and Analysis Processes

Because the methodology of this project includes human subject research and the close textual analysis of digital media and historical archives, a brief explanation of how these elements fit together methodologically and logistically for a cogent analysis is necessary. After completing a full literature review of community colleges' care rhetoric and determining the best way to theoretically ground the research questions, I separated the data collection into two categories: (1) student interviews, and (2) the digital media / historical archives of the study site. I narrowed the second category to the college website in order to focus my analysis on the most publicly accessed information about the college. I began with student interviews and their analysis, which is the largest data set in this study, and then proceeded to the close analysis of the digital and historical archive. The final step in the data assessment was looking at these two sets together and examining the differences, overlaps, and similarities between a college's care

rhetoric, the student experiences of caregiving and receiving, and the longer history of community colleges that situates the analysis politically and temporally.

Then, I spent several months manually coding the Zoom transcripts while concurrently rewatching the interviews to responsibly account for body language, conversation hesitations, word emphasis, and emotional tone shifts in both the participant and me. I conducted two rounds of coding to distill themes from the interviews. First, I explicated the transcripts using both *in vivo* codes (or exact quotes from subjects) as well as descriptive codes (or summative words/statements assigned by the researcher) in order to capture the specifics of individual student experiences. Then, I looked at the list of codes and created meta-codes that identified the significant trends or themes from the full 23 interview set.

Finally, and in conjunction with the meta-codes, I scanned the data for stand-out experiences that may not be representative of the entire interview set, but which speak to experiences perhaps lived only by the most extreme or marginalized students or life situations that must be made visible in the context of care. For example, one student shared the unique exhaustion she experiences as a Black, French-speaking, immigrant, single mother of three who also works 96 hours a week as a certified nursing assistant (mostly night shifts) providing inhome care to dying patients while also earning a social work degree. While her experience is not typical, it also is not uncommon at community colleges and certainly not in a set of students who would likely have the time to be able to participate in an elective research study. Therefore, this final round of analysis captures the outliers in the data set whose experiences deeply matter for an accounting of student care.

As is hopefully evident in this description of my data collection and analysis, the use of this particular form of interview method was intense, time-consuming, and invaluable for grounding the rhetoric of care in real people's lives. Critical Discourse Analysis, according to

Johnny Saldana's *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, as well as Esposito and Evans-Winters *Introduction to Intersectional Qualitative Research*, demands this rigorous and close examination of conversation dynamics and positionality – a process that, when done ethically, is far deeper than a mere counting of word repetition by a computer program. Admittedly, the use of computer software in my analysis would have been faster but would not have been congruent with the rigorous linguistic and relational study CDA calls for. I found the interview analysis process to be immensely fruitful for distilling the nuance, diversity, and complexity of care rhetoric in its performed, expressed, and lived form.

Analyzing fixed, visual language on the college's website using critical discourse analysis follows a similar, but not identical process as interpreting interviews. Because a website is a curated, constructed set of media it requires the application of visual and textual explication. Interviews, because of their spontaneous, informal, and unrevised nature, reveal different dynamics than a strictly visual (though multimodal) data set like digital marketing and informational material deployed on the internet. One primary difference is the transparency of authorship, audience, and the choices made to curate the information. In interview, the author of the text is obvious, and quite literally happening, in front of the interviewer. With media analysis, the intended audience and the actual speaker of the texts is veiled. In fact it is assumed that the creator / author of the content is "the college." Therefore, in my explication, I had to assume, as every viewer does, that the messaging is approved and endorsed by the college administration.

In conducting the fixed text explication of the website in this study, I applied the process used in my literature studies training to formally decode meaning in a poem, passage, or dramatic situation of a text. It is a form of close-reading, and it calls for specific attention to word choice, word order, repetition of words, themes, images, or symbols, the speaker's point of view, and the silences or gaps in argument. While literary explication is a formalist approach to meaning-

making, it is often used in critical approaches, like critical discourse analysis, as an attempt to quantify the intensity and rhetorical turns in a piece. Therefore, explication is used to establish and distill a text's argument. As I moved through the pages of the website where the internal search bar took me to topics of "care," "help," "support," or "caregiving," I explicated selected texts, images, and videos for the message themes that the author (the college administration) deploys to prospective and current students through their public-facing website.

Owning the Complexities of an "Insider's" Analytical Gaze: Clouded, Closer, or Clearer?

In the next chapter (Chapter 4: Findings), I share the summary statements of each participant, and as a student of Critical Discourse Analysis aware of the powerful role positionality plays in the interpretive process of CDA, I continue to remind the reader that I am the primary person whose story and experiences shape the analysis of rhetorics examined here. As a single mother student who has spent a total of 11 years as a pregnant or parenting student (through my MA and PhD), I can't help but see gaps, inconsistencies, supports, and student narratives that deeply impacted my experience earning degrees and teaching within these same systems. As a result of my lived experience, I've become an advocate for structural change at colleges, including creating a unique, cohort-based scholarship and academic program for parenting students, leading a college-wide taskforce to study and address caregiving students' needs, presenting our grant-funded study results across the county, and leading state-level legislation campaigns to draw resources to community colleges where caregiving students are most-likely to attempt a degree. I've also developed deep and lasting relationships with many students I've worked with over the years as an English professor shaping their writing and reading their powerful stories of caregiving and the many life-compromises it entails. Because of my position and lived experiences, my follow up questions and connections made during the

interview were prompted from my knowledge of MMCC as a worker and as a parenting student who has experienced exclusion and student disinvestment.

I make no attempt to conceal the fact that the people interviewed in this study are far more than “subjects”. Approximately half of them are former students, friends, and neighbors who chose to participate because they know my personal story of being a working single mom who has both advocated formally for and struggled with students who are also parenting and caring for family in the midst of earning a degree. While I did not actively recruit any particular set of people, many of the participants showed up and generously made time to talk with me because they trust me and my use of their experiences. I’ll add that these folks are not people with time on their hands. As all studies on caregiving studenthood reveal, time is among the scarcest resource for this population. The willingness to share an hour of time with me to advance my degree completion is a form of care I recognize, honor, and cherish.

Selecting and “Reading” a Digital Archive for Explication of Care Rhetorics:

To streamline and simplify the definition of the institutional archive of marketing and recruiting materials, I chose to explicate the College website because it is the public hub for the majority of the College’s messaging to students and the community about their programming, resources, and “student success” stories. The website is also, arguably, the most accessible and has the broadest reach to students not specifically targeted through mail or other forms of print material.

In explicating the MMCC website, I searched within the in-site search box for “care” and related terms, including caregiving, parenting, child care, help, and encouragement. Once I filtered the searches that were irrelevant (like health care programs, for example), I examined photos, narrative explanations, testimonials, and resource directions to synthesis how the College

defines “care” for students, how it positions caretaking labor (like child or elder care) and made note of hyper representations and silences gaps in addressing specific needs highlighted in the student interviews. For example, elder care and naturalization support is not addressed anywhere on the site, but care giving student “success” stories are overrepresented, especially giving the percentage of these students who actually graduate compared to other populations. A section of Chapter 4 provides a summary of these findings and Chapter 5 discusses the extent to which this archive helps us understand the College’s definition of care and its impact on students attending or planning to attend community college.

Choosing the Study Site: Why MMCC?

The short answer to the question regarding site selection is that MMCC is the campus I, the embedded researcher, work at and have been a part of for thirteen years – first as a part-time adjunct instructor and now as a full-time faculty and department Chair. This site choice and project methodology affords an insider’s-look at caregiving at community colleges, and it also presents limitations that are discussed later in this chapter. While my study uses MMCC as a case study type location for understanding the impact of care rhetoric and care labor on students, I never claim that the conclusions drawn here are universal to all community colleges. I do, however, assert that MMCC is not unique in its structure and governance among community colleges in Maryland, and it also is a place that is regularly reaccredited/recognized by the state and regional higher education accrediting body (The Middle States Commission) as an aboveaverage two-year school.¹⁴

¹⁴ Middle States reports not included due to IRB conditions of masking the school name.

Situating the Specific MMCC Student Experience in Longer View:

A Brief History of the Land, Settler Colonialism, and Maryland's Plantation Economy

One of the interpretive methods I used in this study is the longer history of MMCC and its positioning within the longer view of community college-as-institution in the US. This section condenses this research and provides the interpretive context for Chapters 4 and 5. In short, MMCC's policies and its students' experiences must be considered in the broader historical frame of the land, built environment, and cultural attitudes that created and maintains the campus. Because this dissertation is grounded in Critical Geography, this section of Chapter 3 provides the geographic, historical, and political context of MMCC to understand its location among community colleges. Like all schools, it is a place created and maintained by multiple intersecting and overlapping systems that are also part of a longer, American-specific history of places called "community colleges." I add this history here as a reminder to readers that the student experiences and institutional representation of MMCC is both unique to its location in

Maryland, and it is similarly (but not identically) constructed to other community colleges in the US. I assert that the experiences of caregiving students at MMCC and the institutional care rhetorics deployed there are connected to broader American ideologies about work, school, and caregiving. Because of this link, the conclusions drawn from this dissertation can be considered for their universal and specific applications to other campuses.

Mid-Maryland Community College is a mid-sized, accredited, two-year college located in the northwest gentrifying skirts of Washington, DC and three miles from the city center of Mid-Maryland¹⁵, Maryland. It is the only two-year school in Mid-Maryland County, which is also

¹⁵ In compliance with the IRB, I have masked the county and town name here. "Mid-Maryland" will stand in for the city and county name.

geographically the largest of the 16 counties in the state of Maryland. While many people moving to the region consider Mid-Maryland a bedroom community of both Washington, DC and Baltimore, Mid-Marylanders hail their deep colonial roots dating back to its founding in 1745 and predicated on a plantation economy. This colonial “hailing” as an important part of the region’s identity and shapes the way insiders and outsiders are viewed and treated in MidMaryland. I mention this because the on-going, colonial racial projects that constructs whiteness here through claims to bloodline, property ownership, and “family name” is evident on the MMCC through the naming of buildings after important colonial figures or places. In this way, the campus of Mid-Maryland Community College, as predominantly and historically white institution, is not exempt from a post-colonial critique. While difficult to “prove,” I think it is not too far a stretch to consider how this kind of colonial identity may imply ideologies and policies that construct studenthood through specific lenses of illegality as well as raced, classed, and gendered legitimacy.

The county’s history and geography is punctuated with several military encampments and “crossroads” of French and Indian, Revolutionary, and Civil War battles, with perhaps the proudest claim being that Mid-Maryland City was the site of the first Revolutionary War skirmish that protested the Stamp Act. Hometown heroes include Francis Scott Key, author of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” and Roger B. Taney, the supreme court justice who delivered the majority decision in the Dred Scott vs. Sandford case that upheld slavery in the territories and prohibited citizenship to African Americans. Red brick streets, clustered church spires, and historic row houses mark the “charming” colonial aesthetic of Mid-Maryland’s downtown. The

Hessian Barracks, the Catoctin Furnace, The Barbara Fritchie House, and multiple monuments to Washington, Lincoln, Whitman and other towering American statesmen draws visitors interested in the “authentic” historic American town experience.

In terms of industry outside of tourism, Mid-Maryland’s economy is historically agricultural and much of its privately owned property remains farmland. The largest industry generators of jobs, however, are supplied by a US Army base (a biomedical research center), biotech companies, and healthcare. Mid-Maryland Community College is the fourth largest employer in the county, and it simultaneously provides a large portion of the trade-trained / skilled workers for the region. It is important to note, however, that 37% of Mid-Maryland households live below the ALICE (asset-limited, income-constrained, employed) threshold, indicating that the rising cost of living in Mid-Maryland county is a struggle for a large portion of working families ([United Way](#)).

Mid-Maryland Community College was founded in 1957, three years following Brown vs. the Board of Education and the same year the Mid-Maryland County Public Schools officially desegregated. While the first community college in the country was founded in 1901 in Joliet, IL, the rapid expansion and community college “movement” took hold in earnest following World War II. According to John R. Thelin’s book *A History of American Higher Education*, community colleges (originally called “junior colleges”) began as a way to offer local access to the first two years of college coursework and “demonstrated the generosity and innovation of American state legislatures in supporting new higher education structures that were affordable and accessible -- and whose educational effectiveness was unknown” (206, 300). Thelin also notes that the rapid expansion of community colleges in the post-World War II era was contingent upon the US government's issuance of the GI Bill which sent many veterans back to school for a college

education. Mid-Maryland Community College was founded in this period with a clear articulation with Fort Detrick, a US Army Garrison.

Historically speaking, MMCC's institutional emergence follows the national community college founding trends almost exactly. MMCC was initially part of the Mid-Maryland County Public Schools, the pre-K-12 system that still provides public education for all of Mid-Maryland County. According to *[Mid-Maryland] Community College: A Narrative of Progress* (the single pamphlet-sized history I can find of the college outside of the course catalog), "The initial educational purpose of [MMCC] was to provide two-year transferable courses. This would enable students to further their college educations by transferring to institutions granting baccalaureate degrees. Later, occupational programs were added to prepare students for immediate employment" (3)¹⁶. Additionally, the college history states: "[MMCC] became part of the community college movement to democratize higher education and to provide educational facilities for the thousands of veterans who, subsidized by the GI Bill, returned to the classroom at the close of World War II and the Korean conflict."

Articulation with the state beyond the US government's national projects is evident through the college's conception within the federally funded public schools. In 1956 Dr. James A. Sensenbaugh, the superintendent of FCPS, asked Duval Sweadner, the supervisor of high schools: "How would you like to start a junior college here in [Mid-Maryland?]" He agreed, and in October of that year, the Mid-Maryland County Board of Education authorized funds to operate the community college in the evening at Mid-Maryland High School. The college functioned from the high school for nine years, when it moved to a building on N. Market Street

¹⁶ Due to the conditions of the IRB, I am unable to provide the full citation because it will disclose the College name.

in downtown Mid-Maryland for seven more years. In 1973, the college moved to its present location which is one mile from city hall and directly adjacent to Fort Detrick.

The Mid-Maryland County Public Schools Board of Education served as the governing body of the college until 1977 when the state recognized the college as autonomous by appointing an independent Board of Trustees. This is the system in place currently, one that remains internally top-down but outwardly appearing to function as a higher education shared governance system that is continually assessed and contested in each accreditation cycle with the Middle States Commission. A Maryland state law allowing community college employees to unionize that went into effect in Sept 2023 has begun to unsettle these structures. Full-time faculty at MMCC were the first in the state to charter their union, and contestation regarding the reality of “shared governance” and resource allocation, labor, and compensation across campus is currently being questioned, negotiated, and debated.

It is important to recognize that MMCC, like most public colleges / universities, sits on stolen land. The land belonged to multiple native civilizations (as verified through archaeological material dating back 10-12 thousand years), including the Paleo people and later, early archaic groups. Four sites in the county document the lives of the Montgomery and Luray Complexes beginning at around 1000 BC. The Biggs Ford dig site, approximately four miles from campus, contains evidence of a large settlement that existed there for over 900 years along the Monocacy River. Three other dig sites in the county (all within 10 miles of the college) similarly document the continued presence of indigenous communities, many of which were networked into larger regional confederacies. The Conoy (also called the Piscataway), Iroquois, and Tuscarora all lived in Mid-Maryland County with records of ongoing massacres beginning in the colonial period (Gordan & Gordan 4-7). One particularly devastating example of local genocide occurred on an island in the Potomac River (also ten miles from MMCC) where the Conoy people moved to

escape settler violence, only to be delivered the smallpox virus that killed them all. According to *History of [Mid-Maryland] County*, which painstakingly documents in two volumes and approximately 1,600 pages the region's colonial past as the authoritative account of the land, acknowledges the "problem" of indigenous people in the area until "the early part of 1754 [when] every Indian suddenly and mysteriously disappeared from [Mid-Maryland] County" (Williams and McKinsey 28). Williams and McKinsey go on to explain that "the solution" to the Indian problem was the French and Indian War, which brought the formal establishment of colonial military forts to the area which have expanded and persist to this day. Fort Frederick, Camp David, and Fort Detrick are all located in Mid-Maryland county, and Fort Detrick -- a US Army post with a history of developing chemical weapons -- shares a fence line with MidMaryland Community College.

The indigenous and military history of the land upon which MMCC sits and is surrounded by may seem distant and unrelated to my current project that questions the role of present-day community colleges in the neoliberal academic industrial complex; however, in addition to critical geography and feminist theory, an understanding and application of Patrick Wolfe's concept of settler colonialism is central to my claims about the subaltern status of community college student caregivers, who are mostly people of color. In Wolfe's article "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," Wolfe grounds current (modern) political conflicts in the "logic of elimination" that undergirds the structure of settler colonialism, which is not located in the past, but ongoing. Additionally, the article serves to provide a systemic framework for understanding how settler colonialism functions in a concrete way, so that it may be recognized and disrupted in its present manifestations. While I am not claiming that the invisibility of care labor is genocidal, I do assert that the community college functions as a technology of the settler colonial state that uses neoliberal rhetorics of "care" and related

justifications for withholding of resources for students who do not fit the ideal student typology to maintain existing structures of dominance. The result is the presence of a racialized and gendered student body within its system whose unpaid or underpaid care labor is used to maintain existing patriarchal, capitalistic structures. I am not alone in this claim; la paperson, also known as K. Wayne Yang, claims in *A Third University is Possible* similarly states in the chapter “Land. And the University is Settler Colonial,” that US higher education – despite its critical departments of scholarship – is not exempt from recognizing its histories, policies, processes, and rhetorics that maintain systems of inequality (25). They also posit, as the book title suggests, that new, insurgent university formations are possible.

In addition to the conflicted indigenous history in MMCC’s geography, the land on which it sits is proximal to slaveholding farms. MMCC is surrounded by hundreds of miles to the south, east, and west of a plantation economy history that the locals have worked hard to literally bury. During the Jim Crow era, a slave burial ground located one mile from the MMCC campus was paved over to erect a playground for white children. It wasn’t until 1999 when protesters took to the streets of Mid-Maryland to denounce the city park that the “Laboring Sons” burial park was restored as a sacred space. Additionally, the Mason-Dixon line is just thirty miles to the north, making the land and plantations in Mid-Maryland County a particularly contentious space with regards to access to freedom in the pre-Civil War South. Elizabeth Comer, an archaeologist for the city of Baltimore, is currently leading a dig approximately 15 miles from the MMCC campus that reveals the slave history in the region. Her personal experience with the active resistance and denial by the community is further evidence of Mid-Maryland’s ongoing “plantation bloc” project that continually works to supplant narratives of genocide with narratives of progress (Woods).

The longer and landed history of the Mid-Maryland Community College campus is important for interpreting the modern cultural narratives of care within Mid-Maryland County that assign gender responsibility to unpaid care work, like motherwork, as well as naming the dominant racial and ethnic groups that have occupied and maintained the land in service of their own political and fiscal wealth growth and on the backs of unpaid, in many cases forced, laborers. Care work is included in this history and should be named when framing community care in this same location.

Limitations:

One of the most important parts of reporting the process and findings of a research study is also defining what the study does *not* do. In this case, this project is limited to the single interpretation scope of the primary researcher. My methodology does not require the College or the student participants to verify my interpretations of their statements, and it does not look deeply at other College sites for comparative experiences. Therefore, unlike attempts in decolonial methodologies to disrupt this kind of one-sided assignment of meaning to others' experience, participants' representations are filtered only through me and are likely incomplete.

Additionally, this is not a comparative study. (Although, as noted in the findings, several interview participants speak about their experiences at other colleges by way of comparison to their experiences at MMCC.) While the project uses qualitative completion data to frame the problem of care work and studenthood, it does not use data from other institutions to measure caregiving students in the study against non-caregiving students, or MMCC students. In this way, the methodology chosen helps to describe and define the conditions of caregiving students at community colleges, but it does not attempt to assess who has done “better” or “worse” in terms of degree completion. It also does not offer solutions, though Chapter 5 suggests ideas for further consideration based on these findings/

Also, this project does not look at the scale of the classroom (pedagogy), like much of the previous scholarship on community colleges, and it also does not give voice to community college faculty or leadership beyond the author. The goal in centering student experience and written materials by and about Colleges is to unpack rhetoric's impact on students and not to introduce frameworks of care through teaching or student affairs work. This would, however, be a valuable addition to the study of these questions in future research.

Finally, this project and its methodologies are situated with the academic supra discipline of American Cultural Studies which seeks to innovate new ways to understand the creation, disruption, and maintenance of American institutions, like community colleges, that shape collective cultural values and unevenly impact different groups of people. Therefore, this is not a traditional educational methodology that "measures" impact of one discrete variable on another; instead, the methodology aims to describe and define experiences related to student caregiving at community colleges.

Conclusion: On Studying The Laboring Scholar and Community Colleges

The final work of this dissertation is to explore the correlation and impact (if any) between stated institutional goals/mission, student goals, and the role of unpaid care labor and "care" as a value cultivated in a community college ecosystem. My analysis is framed by national, regional, and campus-level data narratives that sets-up 2-year college students as populations that "need care." Public and professional discourse about community colleges amplifies the presence of students with lower GPAs and less financial support and the fact that more undocumented students, students of color, single, pregnant, and parenting students are hyper represented at two-year schools. What is often underreported is the degree to which this same population tends to persist, sometimes taking upwards of 5 breaks from coursework before

finally completing a credential and incurring significant debt (Goodman et al). The methodology I've developed and enacted in this study is an attempt to define and describe "care" for community colleges by intersecting close readings of the longer history of community colleges within higher education with the study of a single site and its deployed recruitment and student caregiver experiences. What emerges is a new perspective on the physical, financial, relational, and emotional impact political, cultural, and college recruiting care rhetorics have on scholars performing enormous amounts of care labor.

While higher education professionals generally agree on what a community college is, their constructions are varied and complex. In spite of these complexities, it can be argued that a popular understanding exists of what junior colleges are, who they serve, and why they are a thing separate from high schools or "regular" colleges. I contend that the generally accepted, common sense concepts of the thing known as a community college – and how that varies across groups – is a vital component in understanding who attends them, how they function, and why they exist. In the next chapter, I discuss the findings from this methodology. I begin by explaining how the findings are organized and thread, by method, the connecting points between student interviews, institutional messaging, and the longer histories of community colleges to analyze how care rhetoric and experiences of care labor shape campus ecosystems.

Chapter Interlude: Repair

In the Spring of 2020, a number of prestigious scholars and thinkers opened their hearts, homes, and minds to the world as a means of collectively engaging in a moment of global solidarity through a free, online web conversation about definitions of care. The COVID-19 crisis presented both the opportunity and the impetus to connect folks around issues of caretaking and human rights. Among the greats who digitally presented their raw responses to the historic moment was activist, essayist, and novelist Arundhati Roy, who said: “The pandemic is a portal.” She went on to engage in a thoughtful conversation with Imani Perry, a notable American Studies scholar, around the ways in which COVID-19 “exposes the bones of structures.” Perry furthered Roy’s assertion by asking how the pandemic questions notions of borders and social architectures, and how “the idolatry of capitalism” calls us all “to educate ourselves on where the answers for care lie.” Perry asked, “What does it look like to imagine the possibilities of seeing the world around us as not extractive/exploitable, but as needing to be repaired/restored?”

Perry and Roy’s exchange calls for new access to the portal of our everyday social architectures: our concepts of self and other, our relationships, our everyday engagement in work and care. For me, these questions came together at a particularly poignant intersection of my personal life as a single mother and student, as a daughter helping to care for my father with Parkinson’s disease, and as a mid-life community college professional who has always seen my work as a site of caretaking and activism. In fact, I listened to Perry and Roy’s webinar from the couch in my parents’ living room (where I visited a week out of each month during COVID to help care for my Dad) so that I could work adjacently to my children who were engaged in virtual learning in the dining room and my dad who was in his recliner dozing peacefully.

Halfway through the Q&A, I had to help Dad to the restroom and reassure him that he was safe from the Louis Body dementia hallucinations he was seeing. My daughter, a high school sophomore, always leapt from her work to help when he'd fall, which he did often.

During COVID, but also under non-pandemic conditions, caretaking is labor that falls predominantly to women, and it disproportionately impacts the time and energy we have to devote to our work worlds. But the assignment of care work is also more complicated than gender; it is culturally specific and deeply impacted by class. The overlapping and intersecting configurations of care labor assignment and responsibility is complex and undeniably a source of exhaustion, time poverty, and financial stress for those who absorb the work. The cultural narratives of care and care work also translate to profession choice for folks who feel “naturally equipped” or ethically “drawn” to underpaid care work. The cultural impact of care rhetorics are reflected in the work pipelines that are feminized: teaching, nursing, dental hygiene, medical paraprofessionals, childcare, and cosmetology -- all professionals credentialled through community colleges.

On a daily basis, I field emails, texts, phone calls, and writing conferences with students who are struggling to varying degrees to survive while in college. For some, the survival is literal: like Olive, a single mother and future nursing student who contracted COVID, was hospitalized, and continued to attend virtual sessions from her bed (with her 8 month old beside her) so she would not lose her scholarship. Or like Monica, who lost her fingers on her right hand in a devastating car accident seven months before our class started. She attends classes at night and manages two Dunkin' Donuts during the day to provide for her multigenerational, Myranmarian household. It wasn't until after Monica failed a typed, timed essay in my class that she apologetically requested testing accommodations for her inability to complete the task. When I asked them why they hadn't shared their situations with me sooner, both women said the same

thing: (1) They were ashamed and embarrassed that they were asking for “special treatment,” and (2) they literally couldn’t find the time to meet with me. It was easier in many ways to just keep plowing forward. As their instructor, I too felt ashamed for having a class that created so many arbitrary measures of “success.” As I was teaching, I wondered: In higher ed, who cares for the caregivers, particularly the ones carrying enormous caregiving loads? How does their presence (and hyper representation on community college campuses) shape the places they attend? And, what are the physical consequences and fiscal benefits of pressing through coursework under such stressful conditions – both for students and colleges? Finally, why do we keep telling students it’s OK to sacrifice everything for an education that is rigged against them?

Chapter 4

Findings: Threading Theory, Institutional Rhetorics, and Experiences of Care

“I had something to prove...I had a lot to prove. I had to prove that I wasn’t a dummy, and that I could succeed in school. And I tended to associate with other women that were also caregivers. We clung to each other....We saw the possibility of being more.” ~ Paula¹⁷

“There’s a different culture in regards to caretaking of the elders in the Philippines. It’s expected of us. It’s the standard...What happens to the people that don’t have those [people to care for them]?” ~ Jenni

“It was important to me to show him that there’s not many places you can go without an education...I didn’t want him to think ‘Mommy’s a quitter’...I didn’t want him to feel like it’s ok to finish high school and go to work without getting a trade or a profession...And I didn’t want [my son] to think that being a mom was a profession” ~ Tammy

“I am just so tired.” ~ Cara

When I greet Cara on Zoom for our 9 am interview, she is sitting in her bed in a sweatshirt with pillows propped behind her. Her hair is wrapped, and her hoop earrings and make-up are still perfectly in place from work. She shares that she just completed a double, overnight shift providing in-home care for sick and dying patients as a Certified Nursing Assistant. Cara is a 45-year-old, black, single mother of three who works 96 hours a week as a CNA, commutes an hour each day to Baltimore for her bachelors of social work courses at a 4 year university, and is also completing a 16 hour-a-week, unpaid internship as part of her degree requirements. She barely sleeps. She tells me before we get started (and multiple times throughout the interview) that she is exhausted, and I can see the toll it is taking on her. She’s heading into her last semester of her degree, after six years of course work, and she shares that she’s not sure she can make it through the last semester.

¹⁷ All student names in this document at pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

I've known Cara for several years. She was my student the first semester of her experience in Parents Lead, the program I began at MMCC to support student parents returning

to school. Our exchange is warm and familiar, and before the interview begins, I express my gratitude and disbelief that Cara is making time to participate in my dissertation study after she's been up all night working. She tells me she wanted to help me with my project: "I owe you," she says. These words leave me staggering, especially since she is visibly exhausted yet committed to helping me with my dissertation. The words also disarm me because they are so steeped with obligation and gratitude, *and* because they are untrue from my point of view. These three words, "I owe you," are also the starting point and eventual ending point for my analysis of how neoliberal care ideologies are deployed at, near, and about community colleges to maintain historically exclusionary higher education structures and workforce pipelines, and how targeted people, relationships, and narratives within them are the scaffolding upon which they are built. From my perspective, Cara owes me none of her (precious) time any more than any student owes me for preparing lessons or grading papers. Yet, her perception is that I have done something exceptional (as a part of an institution of higher education) by simply providing access and support to community college coursework – the job I am paid to do and the promise MMCC makes to students when they are recruited to enroll. Cara's response reflects an attitude set apart from the entitlement I experience from some of my younger, traditional aged students who regularly ask for extensions when they need them, or who do not hesitate to request my time for support. Both sets of students – the returning single mother students and the "regular" (or traditional aged) college students – demonstrate a clear understanding of what is standard operating procedures for higher ed as well as what are "reasonable" care requests of the

institution, even if those services are offered unevenly, unpredictably, or with only one kind of ideal student in mind.

As an entry point to the many conclusions and questions I've drawn from this study, and as an illustration of the way my embedded position as researcher has opened a new portal of insight into the everyday impact of caregiving rhetoric on community college students, I begin and end this findings chapter by describing my interview with Cara because, while not necessarily representative of all caregiving students, her experiences highlight several of the key overlaps that the thematic synthesis explained later in this chapter risks missing. I also begin here with Cara's interview, because it reflects how those most impacted by exclusionary practices in higher ed are also the most impacted when structures do change in service of improved access. At the root of this change is documenting, tracing, and clarifying what we mean when we claim to care about students and how they accept, reject, internalize, and resist these offerings. When I set out to study care rhetoric at community colleges and its impact on caregiving students, I knew I was situating myself in an emotional minefield of experiences that overlap with my own relationships to schools, mothering, teaching, and feminist politics. What I didn't expect was the degree to which this overlap provides a powerful magnifying glass for examining the co-constructions of race, gender, and class in higher education and its articulating economies. All the theory and praxis of my academic and professional career could not have prepared me for the things I've learned in enacting research that required me to engage directly with the students and institutions I work with every day but haven't closely listened to – or as critical discourse analysis calls for, “read.” In summary, this chapter will detail the findings from the 23 in-depth student interviews and the critical analysis of public-facing websites of Maryland community colleges situated within a longer history of community colleges' role in the broader higher education landscape.

Organization of Findings

One of the benefits of multimethod research (that includes conducting in-depth, openended interviews) is the variety of unexpected themes and details that emerge from individual conversations and in the triangulation of data sets that may not be relevant to the study's focus. While my methodology has been fruitful in generating a tremendous amount of data, the analysis of findings requires a framework for reporting that both streamlines the content and remains focused on the central research question and its components. Using the methodology described in Chapter 3, what follows here is a synthesis and analysis of the data collected to answer the research questions articulated in Chapter 1.

These findings begin with (1) a concise overview of the study findings, followed by (2) a catalog of the central themes that emerged from the in-depth interviews. I then move to (3) a close examination of the most pervasive and/or significant interview responses as they relate to the study questions by grouping participant responses, and then turn to (4) a synthesis of dominant narratives of care deployed by Maryland community colleges through their institutional websites. The chapter concludes with an evaluation of what these triangulated data reveal about the impact of various care rhetorics on caregiving students and returns to Cara's experience for a grounded launching point of Chapter 5's exploration of the possibilities for future study.

The reader will note that there is overlap in findings across methods and questions, reinforcing common experiences of community college care rhetoric across time and place. Put succinctly, the key concepts explored in these findings are (1) the definition and experiences of care according to student caregivers, (2) the variability and impact of "caring policies" across gender, race, ethnicity, and other dimensions of difference, (3) the deployment of neoliberal

rhetorics of care according to the College, and (4) the impacts of care rhetoric on policy and student experience. At times I will reference the Interview Coding Synthesis Grid (Appendix 1), which provides the in-vivo or direct quotes from participants, the Condensed Participant Summary and Individual Analysis document (Appendix 2) for demographic information, biographical summaries, and extended analysis of individual participants.

Concise Overview of Study Findings:

The broadest conclusion of this study is that the rhetorics of care deployed at and about community colleges is deeply fused with broader, coercive, historical narratives of American exceptionalism and structures of white supremacy and patriarchy that position them as the postsecondary option that “cares” about working class and working poor people. However, the students who attend community colleges frequently live in families where competing care rhetorics and financial needs trump those of the “ideal college student” for whom higher ed structures are built; these students (who are often also caregivers) both challenge and comply with college structure, sometimes in the form of dropping out. While community colleges began as sites of labor force retooling for the white middle class, increasingly in the last decade (and in parallel with the co-opting of diversity as a lucrative, neoliberal value), community colleges also market themselves as places that “care” for students of color, first generation, and caregiving students who frequently are also women, first gen, and people of color. In spite of this particularly paternalistic framing of care, student caregivers’ attendance at community colleges infuses different, resistant, and (at times) defiant counter narratives of care into the college culture, creating a place that “feels” distinctly more nurturing and connected. Students report “feeling known” and encouraged to believe in their goals at community college while earning a degree that has both social and financial value with an affordable price tag. Unfortunately, for the

80% of community college students who attempt a degree but do not earn one, they frequently leave with significant student debt and no credential to show for their financial investment.

In marketing materials, Colleges recursively amplify single mothers' student experiences, in particular, to validate their existence as a public good that gives even the most stigmatized student populations a "second chance" as a place to "change your path," from presumably the least desirable and most stigmatized life situations. In keeping with the construction of all categories of identity and belonging, my findings demonstrate that caregiving students internalize cultural norms of student fitness and frequently feel ashamed of slow degree progress and "not cut out" for college. The degree to which students feel ashamed and unfit for college follows gender, race, and class category stigmas, reflecting the historical origins of community college as a place built for white, middle-class men without caregiving responsibilities. Finally, the structures of community colleges employ neoliberal ideologies of (dis)investment, austerity, and abandonment to create and maintain labor pipelines that perpetuate race, gender, and class stigma and geographically trap a local labor force with few options absent a college degree. However, in spite of the ways in which community colleges are used by labor markets, students experience the place as caring.

Catalog of Dominant Themes the Emerged from In-depth Interviews:

While this study draws upon three main methods, the largest data set is the open-ended interviews. In keeping with my methodology grounded in Cultural Geography, I report these findings at various scales in order to capture the nuance and specificity of each individual story, as well as the breadth of the collective experiences that are synthesized into the dominating themes student caregivers at community colleges express in their interviews. I present clusters of

participants whose juxtaposed stories highlight a common experience rooted in larger structures and narratives.

One of the most important findings from the open-ended interviews is the degree to which gender, race, ethnicity, and other dimensions of difference impact the student definition and experience of giving and receiving “care.” The total interview set includes a total of 23 people: 18 women (9 white, 6 Black, 1 Asian, 2 Latina/Hispanic), 5 men (all white, no ethnicity claimed), an age range of 21-75, and 6 students who identified as immigrants or as the child of an immigrant. All participants self-reported their identity categories.

Gender was the clearest delineation of care responsibility, with female or woman-identifying students reporting feelings of both joy and obligation related to caregiving. While it is difficult to distill from 23 interviews the way race explicitly impacts student experience, the role of ethnicity (and cultural expectations of care outside the US) and immigration status was bold from students identifying with ethnically specific and non-US citizen identities. Part of what complicates an intersectional reading of the data is that all of the male-identifying participants are white.

Below is a list of the key concepts that emerged across interviews. A detailed explanation of where these themes emerge and replicate are analyzed in the section that follows this, and the details of the coding and interpretive process are documented in Appendix 1 and 2. I encourage the invested reader to explore the appendices at length to grasp the complexity of each student experience through the many direct quotes captured there, and to observe the degree to which caregiving emerges across participant experience as both the most personally significant and satisfying work they do, as well as the most exhausting and obstructive for earning a degree.

The themes that emerged from the interviews are: (1) internalized neoliberal rhetorics, (2) “juggling,” emotional load, and the gendered currencies of caregiving, (3) sacrifice: prioritizing

care of biological or chosen family over all else, (4) feeling of displacement, shame, or isolation from “regular” college students, (5) institutional encouragement as care vs. material resources as care, and (6) rage, frustration, and defiance related to the difficulty of earning a degree. In the following few pages, I offer more details about themes with the sub-themes bolded throughout the text.

I. Internalized neoliberal rhetorics

This study finds that many caretaking students internalize paternalistic, neoliberal, and popular rhetorics of care that include **caretaking as a private or domestic matter** that is not paid for by the State, **caretaking as feminized**, and **caretaking as antithetical to paid work outside the home**. Almost all of the interview participants saw their unpaid care for biological or chosen family as a **personal choice and a private responsibility**, and **deep gratitude for any help** that College personnel provided. Students also saw the **decision to return to school as a personal choice**, regardless of the degree to which they reported needed a degree for financial stability or personal growth.

Participants also described **community colleges as sites of “opportunity”** and a chance to “change their life” and “have something for themselves.” In this way, they discussed **a degree as a thing to own**, reflecting concepts of Education as Property. They also used **language of renewal or self-repair** in discussing their academic goals at the community college, such as “becoming better,” “making a better life,” and “being more than just a mom.” Participants who stopped out at some point during their degree progression either at community college or in subsequent degrees, expressed **shame related to being unable to persist**. Approximately half of the students recognized that college systems were not built for caregiving students and the other half considered **their degree failure a personal one unrelated to college structures**. More than half of the participants reported **an urgency to complete their degree** for financial, time, and

stress reasons, but also because they felt they were “behind” the cultural standard of finishing a degree by a particular age and in a particular 2 or 4 year timeframe. Together, I understand these as **Internalized neoliberal rhetorics**.

II. “Juggling,” Emotional Load, and the Gendered Currencies of Caregiving

Students identifying as female, and non-white reported **extreme levels of both exhaustion and responsibility related to caregiving and studenthood**. Those women who are also single / heads-of-household versus married demonstrated even higher levels of exhaustion, financial precarity, and fear of degree non-completion. They also spoke passionately about the importance of academic credentialing as well as the barriers that have caused them to stop out. Among the most significant is health emergencies (their own or loved ones) and lack of financial resources to cover tuition, childcare, and basic living expenses. Of note is also that observation that all women across race, ethnicity, and marital status mentioned the importance of wanting to be “something more” or “something for themselves” (or similar language), while male participants spoke with confidence about of the degree attainment and without this particular kind of ownership of a degree as being personally important to them. Females in the study also shared with **pride** the strategies they’d discovered to **“juggle” the multiple demands of caretaking and going to school** as well as **the joy they derive from simultaneously caretaking and earning a degree**. Men in the study explicitly said the opposite: that without support of a partner or close family member, they’d “never be able to do it.” The degree to which cultural scripts of **women being the “natural” caregivers in families** (which varies by generational, ethnic, and sexuality norms) most likely informs these responses by men. Their commitment to care work, means they sacrifice a great deal of themselves.

III. Sacrifice: Prioritizing Care of Biological or Chosen Family over All Else

A theme that emerges over and over again across all interviews is **the prioritization of unpaid care work over all else**. Students talked about their care work in the forms of parenting, sibling, spousal, or elder care. For all 23 participants, care labor comes before schoolwork. However, many participants spoke about **the unpredictability of care labor** and **the stress associated with meeting rigid academic deadlines** (from professors and program schedules). This stress is exacerbated by work schedules that also must supersede school in order to provide for their families. As one participant noted, “If it’s between a professor’s deadline and a sick kid who needs me, my kid will win every time.”

Most participants spoke about the cost of attending school in terms of **the time, money, and energy shortages** they experience due to caregiving while attending college. Single mothers in particular reported **climbing student debt** and the **physical and emotional health issues directly related to attempting to attend college while raising children**. Several participants referenced or alluded to hospitalizations and stopping out of college because of the physical and emotional toll it took on them. Navigating those dynamics leads to complicated feelings and comparisons to traditional college aged students.

IV. Feeling of displacement, shame, or isolation from “regular” college students

All but one of the interviewees reported **feeling out of place** on the community college campus. Participants report feeling like they look different from most of the student body because they are older, or **feeling socially isolated** because they can’t participate in campus life. Several interviews said “I don’t fit in.” Most participants reported that they do not engage in campus life because they have care responsibilities at home or work to tend to, or that they need the time to study. Another added component of feeling displaced is that

approximately 25% of the participants report feeling like professors, in particular, have **different expectations in the classroom for them than non-caregiving students**. For some, the expectation was to “have it more together because I’m an adult” or to take care of or “babysit” younger students by asking them to lead groups of immature students. Still other participants mention that they voluntarily take on the work of being the “class mom” and **giving their nurturing and organizational labor to younger, struggling students** who “need help.” And yet, they persist but are aware of the critical differences between rhetoric and support.

V. Institutional Encouragement as Care vs. Material Resources as Care

One of the repeated themes in the in-depth interviews across participants was the importance of **interpersonal encouragement from college employees** and the **counter-harm caused by people who verbally discouraged** them from pursuing a degree. Participants name these interactions as “care” and as evidence of the **community college being a place that “cares more”** than either high schools or four-year colleges. In many cases, students name specific people who encouraged or resourced them, and several participants became emotional describing the extra time, expertise, or directives towards resources these people gave them. **Powerful emotional connections between professors and advisors** are described, and students with these experiences express extreme gratitude for these relationships. In these moments, several students describe the **community college as “more like a family”** and less transactional than other places they’ve attended. A number of female students describe the peer reliance and **peer-to-peer support** they received or created in their classes or programs, but there were also some students who articulated a different perspective about their experiences.

VI. **Rage, Frustration, and Defiance Related to the Difficulty of Earning a Degree**

A handful of the participants defiantly expressed their **deep frustration with the difficulty of earning a degree** as a caregiving community college student. These same students describe asserting themselves to College employees who do not understand their barriers to success. Several students described altercations with professors, a few expressed their frustration to the Financial Aid officers regarding scholarship and aid requirements, and one participant spoke directly to the president of the College on multiple occasions. Many participants noted that their participation in my study was a way to express their opinions to the College and broader higher education community. Many students, however, also expressed that when they stopped out of classes (and most interviewees have stopped attending at least once due to caregiving responsibilities), they just left silently, too exhausted to tell anyone what they needed. Three black women and the single Filipino student shared that they felt their **race and ethnicity were additional barriers they faced in earning a degree** compared to other racial and ethnic groups.

Defining and Distilling Care Rhetorics from Student Caretaking Experiences

In this section of findings, I take the six large thematic categories that emerged from the 23 interviews (detailed above as elements I-IV) and expand on them using the responses from participants. In an effort to fairly represent the data set while simultaneously honoring each participant's story and answering my research questions, I've grouped student experiences by thematic heading and interpreted them together. All 23 voices are present here and are part of the totality of my findings. Each cluster of students is grouped via key finding, a biographical sketch of the student experience as interpreted by me, and a summative synthesis of the student experiences.

I. Internalized Neoliberal Rhetorics and Competing, Uneven, and Identity-specific Experiences of Caretaking

Nancy, Jack, Jenni, Tonya, and Nina are five participants who spoke explicitly in their interviews about the conflict between their varying identities (including the identity of caretaker) and being a student. In this participant cluster, the repetition of neoliberal rhetorics of education and care emerge, reflecting the age, class, ethnic, and gender expectations of both studenthood and caretaking. These often opposing notions of who is fit to be a college student and who is meant to do care work magnifies the intersectional challenges of being a college student and a caretaker. Within these interviews I heard the internalization and overlap of neoliberal rhetorics of education and care with their experiences of studenthood, which scholar Kathleen Lynch describes as “antithetical to care” (Lynch). These include college as “the way out of poverty” and “hard work and responsibility” as the key to “student success.” Neoliberal rhetorics of care, such as “caregiving as natural,” similarly compete with ideals of studenthood. This discomfort is especially prevalent for those participants who are navigating non-dominant, ethnically specific expectations of studenthood and caregiving. For example, Jack – a financially secure, married, 55-year-old, white father – experiences less frustration and difficulty moving through a degree at MMCC than Nina, a financially struggling, single, 24 year old, Togolese mother.

All five of the participants in this cluster express an internalization of the common, neoliberal, understanding of American collegiate studenthood through their repeated use of the expressions of noted difference like “non-traditional student,” and “not a regular college student,” and reification of the neoliberal education trope of community colleges as exceptional sites of “opportunity.” In particular, this cluster of students reveals the gendered, raced, and class difference in how caretaking identity and definitions of care are constructed.

Nina: *“The West African culture is very, very different...things are stronger like values and traditions, like the hierarchy of the family and things like that.”*

Nina is a 24 yo, Togolese American woman who also identifies as Black. She is the single mother of a 2 yo daughter, and she receives no support from the father who now lives in out of state. Her family, who she repeatedly describes as “traditionally African,” immigrated to the US when she was 2. Her mother was a medical doctor, and her father was an accountant (both hold multiple graduate degrees) but their credentials were not recognized in the States. Her father returned to Togo and her mom worked as an overnight nurse to financially stabilize the family. Her father did not return from Togo (“He abandoned us.”) and the parents divorced, which Nina marks as the beginning of major life changes for her. A key part of this transition was the disappointment of being accepted into, but not being able to attend, American University because her father reneged on his promise to pay for college. To this point, she describes herself as an excellent student who speaks three languages and has a 3.8 GPA – a daughter her parents were proud of.

She enrolled at a community college in Maryland because it was the only affordable option, and she was successful the first year. In her second year, she joined a new peer group (through her cousin) and had a somewhat circuitous experience in College, exacerbated by becoming pregnant. She describes multiple overlapping barriers to success including intimate partner abuse, earning “caps” because she hasn’t earned her degree, family disappointment, car accidents that have set her back financially, and child care issues. She is currently enrolled at MMCC (studying Psychology) but she is unsure if she will be able to continue because of the overwhelming stress she experiences.

It is important to note that this was a very long and very emotional interview, particularly when she talks about her family of origin, the child’s father, and dropping out of

school. However, her 2-year-old daughter is present for a large part of the interview, and Nina’s demeanor and lightness shifted each time she engaged with her daughter with gentleness and love.

Jack: *“If I work with her [his daughter], my grades are going to suffer. And so, for instance, I could have done better on the final. I probably could have done better. And this is my choice. It’s not the professor. I want to be clear: it’s my responsibility.”*

Jack is a 55 yo, self-identified “rich white guy” and “very involved dad” who is attending MMCC to retool his tech career. He attended a prestigious, private high school and has a BA in Professional Writing. He is now a successful IT strategist. He is married with two “very, very intelligent” kids – one who is attending The University of Wisconsin and one who will be attending Emory in the fall. He and his wife share caregiving responsibilities, and his return to school is supported by the whole family. If Jack can finish his prerequisites in highlevel Math at MMCC, he plans to apply to graduate schools for a Masters in Data Science so he can change the trajectory of his career. He notes that his attendance at MMCC is completely optional (so not driven by economic or work insecurity). He also mentions multiple times throughout the interview that he is (1) a champion of community colleges, (2) interested in making MMCC a better fit for “retooling” students, and (3) aware that as difficult as it has been to parent, hold down a job, and work, that he has it “easy” compared to other students with fewer resources.

Jack mentions race and class (including his own white privilege) multiple times in the conversation. He also says there is absolutely “no way” he could do this if he was earlier in career with less financial security and more caretaking responsibilities. It is also important to note that Jack is contemplating stopping out of MMCC because – despite his resources and job flexibility – he earned a C in a course last semester because he prioritized his daughter’s senior year activities and support over Calc II. Since his goal is to get into grad school – a C is unacceptable for him.

Jack’s interview is an important foil to Nina’s (and others) because it demonstrates that caretaking, in particular, is the factor that makes earning a degree so difficult. Even with all of the supports, resources, and identity privileges, Jack is still struggling to stay in MMCC coursework. He is a powerful voice that demonstrates how college systems and schedules are at odds with the needs of working and caretaking adults. He also asserts a stronger critique of the College than any other person I interviewed and offered to speak directly with the President if necessary.

Tonya: *“I feel like if [other students] don’t have families they’re not as held back”*

Tonya is a 35-year-old mother of three who self-identifies as Hispanic (ethnically Mexican) and white, or “mixed.” She is a military wife and part-time substitute teacher who holds a BA in Geology and Oceanography. She is currently enrolled at MMCC, and moved to

Maryland 1.5 years ago because her husband was stationed here.

Tonya describes the way she studies, which is wildly innovative, efficient, and self-aware. She uses Instagram Reels to practice translations and keeps a sheet in her purse of the lines she needs to practice for each week so that she can use her few minutes of downtime (like standing in line at the store) to study.

Tonya's relationship with her husband is interesting because while she reports it as balanced in terms of labor, she also nods to needing permission to volunteer and his caretaking labor as "helping" not as an expectation of equal engagement. However, her husband's recommendations sound like protection against other people exploiting her time. This feels like paternalism to me as the listener, yet she experiences it as care/love/support.

Jenni: *"Especially in the Philippines, teachers were someone you have to obey. If you don't obey, there's repercussions....but in America it's different. So maybe you can look at this in your research."*

Jenni is a 21 yo, Filipino, student slated to graduate in Spring 2023, and she is a primary caregiver to her father who needs full-time care for his dementia. She is also a fulltime nanny to twin toddlers and is a full-time MMCC student. She speaks with confidence and authority about her experiences at college and challenges me to consider the cultural differences in caretaking responsibilities for students. She is empathetic, curious, assertive, and equally self-effacing & self-aware.

Jenni explains that her Dad's rapid decline came in the last year, in conjunction with a severe case of COVID. He was hospitalized and in a care facility which racked up \$20,000 in medical bills. Jennifer had already chosen MMCC for other reasons (see Appendix 1), but his inability to work, and his need for FT care, exacerbated existing financial stress on the family unit.

Jenni shares here that she grew up in the Philippines, and she explains the cultural differences/expectations of caring for family. This interview highlights that care work is culturally specific and at odds with the individualistic structure of college "success." Specifically, Jenni discusses the tension between racialized expectations of attending college ("In Asian families, it's like you need to go to college or else you're considered kind of a failure") and opposing cultural norms regarding self-advocacy with authority (see Jenni's quote above.) It also documents the incredible labor and time caregiving requires and the near impossibility of working, going to school, and caring for someone full time, especially when financial aid structures require full-time attendance. Somehow, however, Jenni is doing it all.

Nancy: *“Caregiving is nearly something natural...it was embedded in me from a young age to...take care of babies.”*

Nancy is a 39 yo mother of two who self-identifies as a Black/African stay-at-home

mom. Her boys are 16 and 11 years old, and her husband is a Marine in the United States Marine Corps. They both emigrated from West Africa in their teens and met in Minnesota. Nancy attended community college for a year in MN but stopped out because she “wasn’t ready” and because working and attending school was too hard. In her interview she describes the ease with which she cares for her family (described as “natural” for her), and the ways in which she has coached her husband into being a supporting and “hands-on” dad. She plans to complete her Business Administration AA at MMCC and transfer to a 4-year school for a BA in Business.

In this interview, Nancy defines caretaking as changing diapers, cooking, nursing children when they are sick and taking them to doctor’s appointments, knowing where chargers are in the house, and picking kids up from school. (I offered the concept of being the central nervous system of the family, and she liked that metaphor.)

She also talks about teaching her husband these things (except cooking) and how that was a cultural shift from their home country where men “earn money and that’s it.” She speaks of how her Dad who lives in Georgia modeled this for her and who helped her care for her young children when her husband was deployed with the military. She presents the gendered tension of being “naturally” better at caregiving but also questioning and pressing for shared caretaking labor, and her attendance at MMCC also reflects an important intersection between community colleges and the US military. In short, students who are veterans or the dependents of veterans enjoy additional financial support while non-military students do not.

These students replicate racialized, gendered, and class scripts of both studenthood and caregiving across interviews. While Jack describes himself as “an involved father,” indicating that childcare as a secondary role to breadwinning, Nancy describes her role as a stay-at-home mom as “natural.” Similarly, Jenni carefully explains the cultural care expectations she navigates in her family as a student and daughter with a dying father. Nina also describes the problematic intersection of being an American college student, a single mother, and a Togolese daughter to two parents who are professionally successful in Togo but unrecognized as legitimate in the US. She feels like a disappointment to her mom, in particular, because she is living a life that is very separate from the traditionally accepted versions of motherhood and studenthood in

West Africa. Tonya, too, describes with exhausting precision the routine she moves through to study American Sign Language and be a military spouse who is uncertain of when they will move next and how her credits will transfer – another experience-specific intersection of motherhood and studenthood.

II. “Juggling,” Emotional Load, and the Gendered Currencies of Caregiving

Tammy, June, Heidi, and Mary’s experiences reflect the drive and motivations of student caregivers to “persist” towards “a better life.” For all four of these students, the motivations are financial, personal, and generational. One thing that clearly emerged in the student interviews is the emotional load of both giving, as well as the counter-currencies of hope, joy, and pride that buoy many students through their degree programs. The emotional load, repeatedly expressed as “exhaustion” from the physical labor of caregiving and the social-cognitive work of decisionmaking and relationship building, is also accompanied by positive emotional currencies of the hope, joy, and pride of caregiving and going to school simultaneously. Students across interviews use the term “juggling” to explain the constant shifting and lifting of roles and responsibilities in their lives. Students also experience a tension of gratitude and shame from accepting “help” or generosity from others and reflect a very individualistic notion of (particularly domestic) caretaking responsibility. Interviewees express excessive gratitude for financial resources extended by the College, emotional resources given by advisors and support staff (academic advice, encouragement, and connections to community resources), and time resources (deadline extensions) granted by professors. What appears to be at work under these repeated attitudes is a common sense understanding of what a college student *should* be able to do without help. There also is notably little critique of the College’s responsibility to provide resources, like childcare, to caregiving students.

Tammy: *“Your passion is your purpose.”*

Tammy is a self-identified 43 yo African American woman of non-Hispanic descent. She is the mother of 2 boys, now 25 and 17 years old. She had her first child as a single

teenager and her second child as a married person. In addition to her care work as a mother (which she describes as changing significantly over time due to her resources, relationships, health, job status, and age of children) she is a part-time employee at MMCC. She is also a practicing CNA/GNA and a licensed minister.

Her commitment to community service, transformational relationships, mental health awareness, and supporting mothers, in particular, is evident in her interview. Tammy is a Social Work major with a post-secondary certificate in Nursing and the goal of becoming a community social worker focused on overlapping systemic issues that drive mental illness and financial instability.

Tammy got very ill during COVID and was unable to continue work or school. She has had several stop outs earlier in her life, especially when she was a single mother. Her commentary on this stretch of her life provides an opening to examine single mothers as disposable to higher education and is worth reexamining for a separate article. In sum, caretaking across personal, professional, and spiritual realms is Tammy's passion and a site of joy, advocacy, and purpose.

June: *"Oh my gosh! I don't even know how to verbalize...there's no vocabulary words that can really explain the immense, positive feeling [of academic success]. It's like a high – seriously."*

June is a 46 yo, divorced, white mother of three who is deeply passionate and grateful for the opportunities MMCC has afforded her through the student parent cohort program. She describes her past with a mixture of regret and gratitude for the care she's both received and given in the past 20 years. She originally planned to attend College in high school and had a successful academic experience, complete with teachers who encouraged her. She took a year off post-high school to work-and-earn tuition money, but her plans were thwarted by becoming pregnant at 19. She married, had 3 kids, and eventually divorced from what she describes as an unhealthy marriage. In 2016 she saw an ad for the student parent cohort program at MMCC, which offered her financial and programming support to finally come to school. She is currently in her last courses at a University of Maryland campus studying business administration to earn her bachelor's degree. She will graduate with her BA Spring 2024.

Of particular interest with June is the deep identity as a caregiver which began with the care for her mother as a young child. June asserts and reasserts this caregiving identity throughout the interview; she describes the early formation of this identity in caring for her mother who had bipolar disorder and a father who left when she was 4. She describes signing/depositing her mom's disability check and paying the bills plus ordering the house when she was a child. She also describes in this section the ways she has cared for others in her life with addiction, cancer, depression, and other physically debilitating diseases.

Heidi: *“I love that I’m showing my kids that you can go back to school. I think it’s been the coolest thing. My kids always talk about me being in school...[they’ll ask] ‘Can you read to me from your college book?’”*

Heidi is a 35-year-old, divorced mother of 5 who did not attend college out of high school because she became pregnant at 19. Her dream has always been to be a kindergarten teacher, and she will graduate with an Associates of Arts in Teaching from MMCC in 2024. She and her boyfriend live together as a blended family with kids ages 16, 9, 6, 6, and 5. Heidi will graduate from MMCC the same time her oldest son graduates from high school.

She self-identifies as the primary caregiver of all 5 children and as a “stay at home mom.” She also notes that she has always been a caregiver of some kind during her life, caring for younger siblings growing up and working as a paid childcare provider later in life.

She also talks about how sometimes she is learning about the same things her kids are studying, just at a higher level. This gives her intellectual authority in the home, which she takes great pride in. She also notes that these conversations would never happen if she wasn’t in school, and also creating a very interesting power dynamic in their family initiated by her coursework.

Mary: *“I just want to say ‘No’ sometimes...I feel like I can’t because, you know, they’re family and it’s not like you can just do that. We have the same blood. We share the same blood, so it’s more like an obligation sometimes.”*

Mary is a 25-year-old, pre-nursing major who self-identifies as a Central American immigrant who financially cares for her parents out-of-county and physically/emotionally/linguistically cares for her nieces, nephews, siblings in the US. She is engaged to be married and also cares for her two (soon to be) twin stepdaughters who are 5 years old. Mary is the 9th of 12 kids, she is 25 yo, and attends MMCC full time while also working full-time at a wholesale grocery store.

Mary explains in the interview that she chose nursing as a major “to help people.” She mentions that with nursing training she can provide care to her parents who live in rural El Salvador with little access to health care. She also likes that nursing is a field she can earn and learn with, gradually adding credentials. Major barriers for her are time, tuition money, and high stakes credentialing tests given only in English.

Mary’s interview grants a window into the experience of a young person who is also an immigrant navigating the naturalization process, American educational structures (an accompanying biases of legitimacy as non-native speaker of English), and caretaking labor. Her interview exposes the emotional load and responsibility carried differently by traditional age students like Mary for whom caretaking is not wholly a choice but an obligation as the family member who is fluent in English. At the same time “helping” is deeply important to her as a personal value and professional goal.

What these four interviews with Tammy, Heidi, June, and Mary reveal is that the uneven distribution of resources also leads to uneven access to “opportunity,” and those who work hardest often, in fact, are doing so because the educational system doesn’t recognize their care labor as part of the work they juggle. All 23 participants in the study, across identity intersections, spoke about the importance and personal value of caregiving in their lives. This value is described in a variety of ways, including the material cost of child or elder care and the relational/emotional value of hope, joy, and love experienced when helping or being needed by another person. All folks interviewed deemed caretaking as more important than degree attainment regardless of education level. (Several interviewees had/have advanced degrees.) Unmarried students, particularly those who were teen or young parents and those who are single

due to domestic abuse or substance abuse disorders, experience the highest levels of emotionality when discussing the importance of caregiving and the hope related to “changing their lives” through college.

Financial precarity and the hope of “a better” life” that is tethered to a college degree is prevalent in these interviews. Participants who described “living paycheck to paycheck” express the greatest levels of emotionality and hopeful language in describing their goals, and several of these students described the amount of debt they have incurred to achieve a degree. This commitment to a narrative of opportunity, “overcoming obstacles,” and wanting a “better life” for their children strikes me as an echo of many other neoliberal, boot-strapping tropes of success that draw on a deeply American cultural belief that those who work hardest, do best.

III. Sacrifice and Prioritizing Care of Biological or Chosen Family over All Else:

A theme that surfaced in every interview is the unpredictability of caregiving and the antithetical rigidity of college structures. With this unpredictability comes prioritization and decision-making around how to navigate a sick child, a parent’s doctor’s appointment where translation is needed, an unexpected dental bill for a family member, a moved-up work deadline, or a car issue when a spouse needs to get to work. The students in this section all speak to the sacrifice and exhausting prioritization that caregiving while attending college requires. Amy, Shawna, and Scott (as well as Cara) speak in varying ways to the time, money, and energy sacrifices that they feel are necessary to earn a degree; the extent to which they must sacrifice these resources align with their caregiving load. Specifically, physical health is frequently sacrificed and financial debt is almost universally incurred.

Amy: *"I had to stop out multiple times, because I was a mom first."*

Amy is a 39 yo white woman who is now an RN. She has one daughter who she had when she was 20. Amy was a "gifted and talented" high school student and was accepted to a prestigious university. She decided to take a gap year (against her parents' wishes) and became pregnant in that year. Having the baby was a "reality check" that she needed to have a career and a way to support her daughter. Amy enrolled in MMCC when her daughter was 2, and she eventually earned her RN after 7 years of attending FT and had three stop outs (twice during pre-reqs and once during clinicals). She notes that nursing was her chosen field not because she loves it, but because it is a career that she could become credentialed in locally and make a good living.

Amy notes that she had family support with childcare and financial support from her daughter's father which allowed her to attend FT. She states that as hard as this journey was for her, she is aware that it would be almost impossible without those two prongs of support.

Amy tells a powerful story here of being in a nursing class where everyone was asked why they chose the profession. When it was her turn, she was honest and said she picked it because she'll make good money and always have a job. Her classmates "looked at her like [she] was Satan." She speaks honestly about the expectation for women to do care work and the willingness to sacrifice pay for that work.

Shawna: *“I’m always thinking ahead, like I don’t have class on this day, so I’m going to make this for dinner, but wait I work late tomorrow so let me go ahead and make 2 dinners tonight because I don’t know how hubby’s going to feel later on...you know, it’s constant forecasting – you’re in this moment, but you’re constantly in the next moment.”*

Shawna is a 40yo African American / Indigenous, non-Hispanic mother of 5 who is married to a disabled veteran. She is currently enrolled at MMCC’s and has worked as a certified medical assistant (CMA) for 17 years. Her children are 21, 21, 20, 18, and 8 years old, and she is the primary caregiver for the children and her disabled husband. She is positive, energetic, and determined to complete her degree. Much of her interview is focused on the strategies she uses to be successful, including the boundaries she sets with her family to ensure her degree completion. For Shawna, this degree means financial security, something that has hung in the balance since her husband was medically discharged from the military several years ago.

Shawna is back at school after attending a for-profit school during her first marriage. At that school, she worked 11pm-7am CNA shifts while raising young children. She accrued significant debt and no degree. She emptied her 401K to attend a for-profit college in VA and maxxed out her FAFSA, or federal financial aid, allotment.

Of note in Shawna’s interview is that she unapologetically prioritizes taking care of herself, which predominantly means investing resources like time and money on saving her own energy (e.g. getting takeout when she’s exhausted.) Shawna confidently and clearly states the difficulty and power of making time for her education. There is no wavering in her belief that this is best for her family.

Additionally, Shawna provides a powerful explanation of the labor involved in “mom” (affective) knowledge production and action. She speak explicitly about gendered labor:

Even when I’m at work and my child has a fever of an asthma flair, my husband doesn’t know what to do....[men] don’t know what to do...and I’m not saying this to be sexist or feminist but we do a lot behind and they’re in front...even [in other families] it’s all the same. You still see women kinda’ in the same dynamic....The main aspect is – I don’t want to say [men] ignore [what other people need], but they don’t pick up on it...but it’s all the extra work [that makes] for us.”

Scott: *“I know my situation is not like most. I think, you know, the stay-at-home spouse / spouse works from home flexibility...it’s multiple things that kind of line us up to be in a decent place...I assume that most people don’t have that...having these resources is really nice.”*

Scott is a 35 yo, self-described “white dude” who is backward transferring his general education requirements from his BS in Business Technology Systems from Virginia Tech to earn an audio production degree at MMCC. He is employed full-time, and his wife is a stay-

athome-mom. They have 3 children: a 16 yo, 6, and 2 year old. He does not have caretaking responsibilities for aging parents and they live locally. His degree at MMCC is for fun/learning.

Scott shares the way he and his wife share caretaking responsibilities, and their mutual decision to not put their young children in paid childcare. Scott acknowledges that his family is in a unique position to have him work at home and simultaneously care for their young children. He describes this as a “juggling act” of work and tending to the immediate needs of his children.

He speaks with ease and authority about educational processes (degree vs. certificate; gen eds) and he has not needed to access any support resources on campus. He also is self-aware that he is in the minority as a caregiver who does not need additional resources to attend college.

During Scott’s interview he kept telling me he wasn’t sure he was the kind of person I was looking to hear from for this project. He was aware that care work impacts some people differently than it impacts him (or doesn’t). I shared with him that his testimony works as an important example of how care work can be lightened and shared across people, and also how certain subjectivities take on caregiving in heavier and more costly loads. I present his experience here in the same way – as a foil to Amy’s, Shawna’s and Cara’s. As an educated, white, able-bodied, man with site-flexible employment and a stay-at-home spouse, earning another degree feels easy. He knows how to navigate higher education systems, he does not have to arrange or pay for daycare, and he has the financial means to pay tuition to expand his interests and skills. His interview – especially against Amy’s experience as a single mother with tremendous familial support and Shawna’s experience as a worker, mother, and caregiver to a disabled spouse – reveals the intersections of possibility for easing the exhaustion reported by caregiving students.

The sacrifice of physical and financial health to earn a college degree is profoundly evident in the interview of Shawna, and also in the reported experiences of Cara, Tammy, Sasha, Jenni, Jalisa, Melissa, and Jojo. Several participants report being hospitalized or severely ill due to

physical exhaustion, and many mentioned their climbing student debt. In addition to these consequences being experienced predominantly by women, they also are largely experienced by single mothers without generational wealth. The stakes, then, of both the physical and material consequences of attempting a college degree for these groups are extraordinary.

IV. Feelings of Displacement, Shame, or Isolation from “Regular” College Students One of the most ubiquitous experiences of student-caregivers is “feeling out of place,” displaced, and unfit to be a college student on college campus. Narratives of what a “real college” and “real college student” stretches across all 23 interviews, regardless of age, gender, socioeconomics, and previous college experience. One participant (Amy) said: “I felt like an outcast.” Another (Melissa) mentioned at the very beginning of her interview: “I felt like college wasn’t built for me.” And still others, like Tammy, mentioned feeling not just isolated but excluded from student groups to the extent that it caused her to drop out:

I was not accepted by my [traditional aged] peers...they felt like I was disruptive to them...I was the single mom who did not have [help]. I wasn’t afforded that...and I’m not even from the area so I didn’t even have a friend. So I had to do what I had to do because my kid still had to eat...so that took me out of school for a little bit.

Frequently, conversations on community college campuses describe “adult” learners as at risk of feeling displaced, but this study reveals that it is caregiving labor that distinguishes a “regular” college student (who historically is 18-24 years old) from an “adult learner.” This distinction reveals that the ideal college student is indeed a college “kid,” not someone like Jenni who is 21 years old but who has “real life responsibilities” that also prevents them from participating in campus life and social events.

The interview data reveals that caregiving students generally find community colleges to be welcoming and accommodating places to them (despite, as mentioned earlier, their lack of material support for caregiving). In contrast, all of the students who attended MMCC and then went on to a four-year institution reported that the community college was a much more inclusive place than the four-year schools they attended. Jalisa, Melissa, Paul, and Sasha all describe separate four-year institutions that they describe as problematically exclusionary to caregiving students. In this way, the participants perceive community colleges to be caring places, and four-year institutions to be antagonistic to students who have dependents.

Paula: *“I really lacked confidence...I would go home, especially after microbiology, and just cry the whole way home, because I thought there’s no way I can learn all of this...”*

Paula is a 75 yo white woman who returned to MMCC in 1964 to be a nurse. She was in a “rocky” marriage, and she needed to earn money to support her children. She had several stop outs due to work and the death of a close family member, but she managed to complete an AA degree at age 34 from MMCC, a BA at age 40, and an MBA at age 60. She also worked at MMCC, teaching English and Business. Her greatest regret remains that she was not able to be a nurse.

Paula notes that in 1964, the nuns discouraged most of the women from attending college by telling them they weren’t “college material.” She notes the harm this caused her and other classmates. When she finally returned to school but had to pause course work due to caretaking responsibilities, Paula notes the disappointment she felt each time she had to drop out. However, by the time she reaches her late 50’s, she knows how to ask and press past arbitrary stop-out policies.

She remembers the encouragement she received from individual counselors and teachers, one who said, “You can always come back.” She also mentioned a very encouraging math professor several times. Paula is a strong advocate for MMCC, noting that she chose to work there once she finished her degrees and her pride in having sent all three of her children there as well. Paula also comments here that she thinks the fact that many employees at MMCC were also mid degree (like me) creates a different kind of climate for students. She nods to the empathy and possibility she felt both as a professor and employee at MMCC.

Paul: *"I felt [MMCC] was a little bit more understanding about people having other things going on in their life. I felt the relationships were a little more casual, a little closer... [At the private college where I earned my BA] there were a little bit more expectations of their students because they were younger and many of them lived on campus. They cater to that community whereas a non-campus living student, or older students with families were expected to sort of, you know, pick up the slack and fit in."*

Paul is a returning student who attended MMCC for the first semester after his daughter was born. He is married and his wife is the primary breadwinner. Paul transferred to a local, private college to study Education and remained the primary caregiver to their daughter through his bachelor's degree. He is now a middle school social studies teacher.

It is interesting to note that Paul's discomfort is less about time poverty or financial strife and more about not fitting in with the student body, as compared to other interviewees whose discomfort comes in different forms. Paul also mentions the urgency to complete multiple times in the interview. I didn't dig in here to why it felt urgent, but he did mention at one point that there is a cost to delayed completion, a financial cost I'm familiar with as a doctoral student in year 8 of my studies.

He describes the private college where he earned his bachelor's degree as "more professional" because the professors are less flexible and less accommodating. His perception is that the rigor and quality of a college is rooted in adherence to existing timelines and structures of student fitness.

In Paul's interview, I pointed out that his successful navigation of college may have as much to do with his planfulness as it has to do with the fact that he comes from a family system that has done college. (Both parents are college educated and he attended private schools through elementary school.) Paul repeats several times in the interview that he doesn't think it's reasonable to ask the college to provide babysitting or caregiving.

In this section I've placed Paula and Paul in conversation because both experience feelings of exclusion at the same campuses 30 years apart. Sadly, Paula and Paul's testimonies reveal that little has changed in college structures in decades. For Paula, a significant part of feeling out of place came from a lack of confidence in her ability to do school that originated in the messaging she received in high school. Her anxiety and feelings of isolation in college came from those internalized beliefs about herself but were magnified by the fact that she was also an older, caregiving student who was (a) juggling many other priorities, including the tragic death of her 19-year-old son, and (b) she had been out of the classroom for a long time. Paul's experience

30 years later reveals the same anxieties of being “different” from the younger students and also expected by professors and administrators to be more prepared because of his age.

In addition to feelings of age discrimination related to higher performance and timeliness expectations, several female participants mentioned the experience of expected caregiving labor in the classroom whereby older, parenting students are asked to lead or care for younger or less mature students in the class because of their parental status. Some participants (Jalisa, Jojo, Cara, and Melissa) resented this expectation, and others (Brie, Tammy, Heidi) embraced being the “mom of the class” and took this added labor on with pride and joy. Either way, the added expectation based on parenting status can be claimed as discriminatory. Jojo shared a particularly poignant example of this added labor when she described a conversation about race that she led in one class. She said: “There were definitely moments when I felt that I was leading a conversation or letting people know they can talk to me...it was a lot related to race...I had a very unique conversation with traditionally aged students in my class...a lot of students were very grateful I facilitated that kind of conversation [about race]”

Another important finding revealed in Paul, Paula, and others testimonies is the urgency to complete a degree on a prescribed 2-year or 4-year timeline. Institutional language and labeling in higher education reinforce these anxieties as well as feelings of inadequacy and displacement when students can’t complete a degree in the assigned timeline or “pathway,” to use current high ed jargon. These temporal expectations on time-to-completion set caregiving and working students up to fail in comparison to their non-working or caregiving counterparts. Some programs and scholarships even go so far as to require full time student status, excluding part-time students from their offerings. Students note that 2-year colleges recognize the importance of part-time status and slower degree progress better than 4 year institutions.

V. Institutional Encouragement as Care vs. Material Resources as Care

One of the repeated themes in the in-depth interviews across participants was the importance of interpersonal encouragement from college employees and the counter-harm caused by people who verbally discouraged them from pursuing a degree. In this themed section, I pull together the experiences of Melissa, Jalisa, and Brie who all speak to the power of encouragement and the alternating harm and motivation that doubt from authoritative voices also inspires. In the case of Melissa, doubt from people in her life fueled her academic goals but largely because she also received encouragement from College professors and advisers telling her (and showing her) “You can do this.” Brie, in particular, describes college employees as her “life coach,” and Melissa and others recall by name the professors and student affairs folks who gave them the time and information resources to be successful.

Interestingly, a few participants also mention college marketing materials that feature caregiving students as important signals that they are cared for. Only two people critiqued the marketing materials for misrepresentation issues which are mentioned below by Jalisa. Her frustration with the overrepresentation of student caregiver success stories is taken up later in this chapter in my examination of college narratives of care and studenthood.

Melissa: *“I was NOT cleaning houses for the rest of my life. No!! Just No!!”*

Melissa is a 47 yo single mother of two. She identifies as a white, Italian-German American woman. She is currently a middle school English/Language Arts teacher, and she holds an AAT from MMCC, a BA, and MS in Elementary and Special Education. She is in the process of completing a graduate certificate in the Teaching of Gifted and Talented students, and she aspires to earn a doctoral degree someday.

Melissa began college at a community college immediately following high school but had little focus due to poor advising and discouragement from high school teachers who told her she wasn’t college material. She bounced around at 3 different community colleges, taking predominantly business classes, and never earning a credential. She got married, had two boys and returned to college at MMCC at age 35 because a family member who works there encouraged her. She was a “part-time stay at home mom,” and she was cleaning houses to help

contribute to the family financially. When she divorced, she decided she wanted to return to the “boss” mentality her dad instilled early in life and was determined to have a career that she loved and could grow in financially and intellectually.

It’s important to note that Melissa became tearful at a few points in the interview as she described the women who supported and encouraged her through out her degrees. I was one of these people, so the emotional tension in the interview escalated as I became emotional too. Melissa and I have reciprocated support for each other over the past 10 years.

Jalisa: *“It’s so stupid. I’m like –Wait a minute – I see these commercials all the freaking time that say you can work and be a student, and you can be this and you can be that. But the one thing I notice is that in every single one of those commercials, if they show a mom or a dad who’s going back to school, they always show the person with a partner, and they show extended family in the commercial because that’s their cue” You’re not gonna be able to get through this unless you’ve got other people backing you up. And I have a real issue with that.”*

Jalisa is a 45 yo white woman with 7 children. She was married for 20 years and divorced a few years ago when her husband was incarcerated for life for “being a monster.” She did not reveal this fact until the very end of the 1-hour interview.

In the first part of the interview, Jalisa shared that she earned her bachelor’s degree after becoming pregnant with twins. She switched schools several times before completing and married the father of her 7 children at some point in her college journey. While married she did not work but volunteered extensively in her kids’ schools. When she divorced, she had to find a way to support herself and has done a number of varied and creative jobs to make money. Most recently, she started a caretaker business where she provided end-of-life and disability care in people’s homes.

Jalisa describes being homeless with 7 kids. Traveling for a few weeks and then living in an efficiency apartment with a friend and her children. They stayed up all night drinking coffees and talking because there was literally no floor space to sleep.

She closed the interview critiquing the academic program she is in at MMCC for a number of reasons, including gender-biased practices and lack of access for people already engaged in care-taking work. She defines care as people “making you feel like everything will be ok,” and she simultaneously makes a powerful argument here about the monetary value of time.

Brie: *“The adult services at [MMCC] was phenomenal. They helped me pick my classes. They helped me...they were kind of my life coach at [MMCC].”*

Brie has 4 children under the age of 8. She is a stay-at-home mom and she attended MMCC part-time and fully online. Brie recently graduated with the AA in Early Childhood Education.

Brie has a lot on her plate, yet she labels her overwhelm as something intrinsic to her – as being an anxious person or an overthinker, rather than her anxiety being a product of her caretaking circumstances. She refers to her husband has a “helper” with the children and considers herself primarily responsible for their care. She cites the inaccessibility of affordable childcare as well as the difficulty in finding a course pathway that aligns with her childcare needs.

Brie’s interview also acknowledges the importance and power of strong advising and the positive impact care in the form of advice and encouragement played in her degree journey.

Many of the 23 participants describe the unique experience of attending a community college and the encouraging and nurturing experiences they deeply value and cite as key components of their success. Every participant who has additional experience with other higher education sectors (especially residential four-year universities) spoke to the helpfulness of MMCC professors, advisors, and employees. By comparison, community colleges made them feel better cared for and “understood” as caregiving students. Some participants described MMCC as feeling “like a family” where their skills as a caregiver were valued and even called upon in the classroom to support other students. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, I assert that part of what makes community colleges a place that feels uniquely nurturing is this openness and valuing of caretaking knowledge and the hyper representation of caretakers on two-year campuses.

One of the tensions in my findings is that care is defined by students in tangible and intangible ways. Material resources like scholarship dollars and child care vouchers are elements several participants name as needing to “earn,” and intangible elements of student service, like advice, time extensions, and information about where to find help are named as “care” or the things that make them feel as though the College is invested in them. What remains undefined is the degree to which students define institutional care, like programmatic schedules that account

for caregiving, and the ways in which policy and structure should be a part of also caring for students.

VI. Rage, Frustration, and Defiance Related to the Difficulty of Earning a Degree A clear

thread in over half of the interviews was the rage, frustration, and defiance related to the difficulty of caregivers to earn a degree. Sasha, Molly, Ted, Nate, and Jojo who all express high levels of emotionality when discussing how hard it is to earn a degree as a student caregiver. Participants cite the cost of attendance, the lack of available and affordable childcare, professors who have rigid assignment deadlines, scholarships that require full-time student status, program schedules that don't accommodate work schedules, and cultural norms that "support full-time moms but not full-time dads," a lack of affordable family housing for students, racialized and gendered inequities, and domestic abuse to name a few. While generally participants who have experience at two-year and four-year schools name community colleges as more "caring" of students in terms of encouragement and interpersonal encouragement as well as affordability, they do not see collegiate programs and policies as tremendously different from four year counterparts.

Sasha: *"I would have more to say about UMD and how they need to do things differently. Oh my God! Family dorns would have saved my damned soul!...I had a fantastic experience [at MCCC]. I was close to campus...I'm not going to say it was easy but it was manageable. There were situations that happened at The University of Maryland that were not so manageable."*

Sasha is a brilliant and spunky 38 yo white "cis-female" who earned an associate's

degree with honors at MMCC while raising two children. She shares the difficult story of raising two children (one with autism) while surviving domestic violence and divorce from the children's father. She describes the process of trying to leave her ex-husband and the difficulty she experienced trying to transfer to UMD to earn a bachelor's degree. She is just a few credits shy of earning her BS in a scientifically rigorous field. She stopped out because the commute

and barriers to completion outweighed her need to earn money to support her children. She is currently a high-end wedding florist.

Interestingly, she notes that her ex earned his degree from a prestigious university after transferring from MMCC, but that he was only able to do so because she took on the full caretaking of children. Sasha is a powerful speaker and advocate. Her interview reflects resistance and anger directed towards college structures. Additionally, Sasha speaks directly to the geography of college structures and the ways in which physical distance made it nearly impossible for her to finish her bachelor's degree at UMD as a commuting caregiving student.

Molly: *"I think being in an abusive marriage makes it really, really hard – makes it harder for me when you don't have that support system. It makes it really hard for returning to school."*

Molly identifies as a 35 yo, white, stay-at-home mom who works part time as a substitute teacher. Her kids are 1.5, 4.5, and 13 years old and she reports being unhappily married in an emotionally abusive marriage that she can't get out of for financial reasons. She attended a state university and earned a degree 12 years ago but has never used it because her husband "wouldn't let me" after the birth of her first child, which happened in her final year in college. She is currently enrolled at MMCC where she hopes to earn a degree that will allow her to make a livable wage and change her life situation.

Molly reports that the faculty at the university where she earned her BA were accommodating and inclusive of her child. Faculty within the program at MMCC have also been very accommodating, but she notes that so far all of her courses have been online, and she has no idea how she is going to make the clinical component of her degree work when she has to be in person. I shared with Molly that one question I keep asking is "Who cares for the caregiver?"

Ted: *"I don't think I would have thought of doing it [returning for a Music Performance degree] if it wasn't for the GI Bill...I don't know that I'd be able to justify the time of doing it."*

Ted is a 32 yo, (reluctantly) self-identifying Caucasian male. The identity he closely aligns with is being a "stay at home dad" and former Marine Corps officer. He is married with three young children (3, 18 mos, and 2 mos), and is studying Music Performance, part-time, at MMCC to become a classical guitarist and instructor. He holds a BA in Mass Comm and plans to transfer to a nearby university to complete his Music Performance BA and eventually a masters degree.

Ted notes that he doesn't do any other kind of caretaking outside of his children. He also notes that they do not have to pay for outside childcare because they have family who help watch the kids. This system of support, he says, makes it "worth it" to go to school, but he admits to feeling isolated as a student father. There is some real anger and envy in Ted's answers related to the dismissal of male caregiving.

Ted speaks at length in his interview about 3 things: The cultural complexity of being a stay-at-home dad, the support he receives from his wife and family to extend his education (to take on a career he loves), and the role the GI Bill plays in his college journey. He also mentions his physical disability, which also plays an important role in his government support and this decision to be the primary caregiver for the family while his wife works full-time outside the home. It is also important to note that Ted is involved in a special educational program for veterans with disabilities.

Nate: *"I'm a grown-ass man. Give me a syllabus and a book. I'll get it taken care of"*

Nate is a 38 yo 'Caucasian male' who has returned to MMCC to earn a certificate in addictions counseling. He attended a four-year university right out of high school and dropped out due to "partying," returned to Maryland to earn his associate degree in general studies from MMCC and eventually transferred to earn a BA in Communications. He studied abroad in London during his time at the four-year school and describes himself as a guy who will never stop learning. He shares custody with his 8yo daughter's mother and describes the challenges and benefits of being a student parent, which includes the difficulty in scheduling classes around work as well as affordable, flexible childcare and the delight he experiences in "changing his life and the world" for his daughter. He is critical of social systems, stating "I weep for America," and "I can't keep making garbage money doing garbage jobs." He states that he is aware of the role power plays in American family/work systems, and deeply curious about the human condition.

Nate describes himself as "crippled" and able to get funding from Department of Education's DORS (Department of Rehabilitative Services) program to return to school and retool. He also explains how he and his child's mother share/juggle childcare, and how they are supported largely by the maternal grandmother who is a preschool teacher. This also indicates the use and importance of informal childcare systems for folks connected to a community.

Nate shares that being a dad and caregiver caused him to look at the world differently. This stretch of the interview there was a shift in Nate's demeanor from anxious to joyful. This delight and investment in his daughter is palpable.

Jojo: *“‘I’ve tried doing it all – I’ve tried doing it. I’ve tried carrying it all, and it doesn’t work. My instinct used to be ‘I can do it. I can do it. Persist. Persist. Persist.’ but ultimately that wasn’t serving me...I was running on empty...I would guilt trip myself.*

Jojo is a 32-year-old Black/Hispanic mother of 2 who is pregnant with her 3rd child. She is an employee and student at MMCC and has had multiple stop outs in her degree progress because of caretaking. She was a teen mom with her first child, and with her second child was also the caretaker of her mother who had a stroke. She describes this time period of triple-caretaking as devastating to her own mental health. She is now happily partnered with a third baby on the way.

In the interview, Jojo talks about her role as a black woman in the classroom and the burden of raising race-consciousness with other students. She connects this work to the stress and exhaustion of the full scope of being a caregiving student at MMCC. Her repeated use of the word “hard” causes me to reflect on and consider what a threshold for “hard” looks like for caregiving vs. non-caregiving students.

Jojo is an informed conversant in this interview, as she serves in a capacity at the college to support student parents. Her interview reflects frustration with the slow progress of care for parenting students and a deep awareness of the toll caretaking takes on black women in particular.

This last thematic thread reveals the scope of personal, institutional, and cultural issues that impact student caregivers seeking a degree. The overlapping nature of these issues also provides a justification for the rage, frustration, and defiance in participants' answers. In these interviews, participants spoke with defiance towards the collegiate structures, at multiple scales, that have failed them and spoke with candid anger about the broader systems that make caregiving and studenthood so difficult. Nate stated: “I can’t keep making garbage money doing garbage jobs...I weep for America.” Jojo says by way of recommendation to colleges: “[Pay attention to] the unique needs of parenting students, like housing, maybe financial issues...these things aren’t uncommon.” And June takes a big swing at the complexities of overlapping systems’ failures in her critique: “It’s ridiculously expensive here, and the people that need a college education don’t have a college education, and the people that don’t have a college

education aren't earning enough money to be able to GET a college education. And so it's a vicious, vicious cycle of never ending poverty."

At the same time, participants' rage and frustration frequently transitions to defiance at the systems of inequity that make earning a college degree so difficult, sometimes using it as motivation to "make it" or to beat the rigged system. Heidi, for example, shifts her focus and motivation to the generational impact "making it through" will have on her daughters: "I'm hell bent on making them grow up as strong women, so if they see me doing something, I know for sure they will do it in their own lives." Over half of the participants shared this belief that successfully navigating a college degree would "prove" themselves to their children and families as a hard and legitimate worker. Repeated language around wanting to be "more than just a mom" reflects the devaluing of caretaking labor and the elevation of a college degree as a measure of cultural success. This variety of defiance or making-it-at-all-costs is complicated because it also upholds the higher ed structures that trap caretaking students.

Another variety of defiance is seen particularly in Sasha's interview where she stopped six credits short of her bachelor's degree after accruing student debt "approaching six figures" and six years of taking classes. Her decision to stop was intentional – a stop out of the system that she sees as inequitable because of her caregiving status. Fundamentally, Sasha expresses that finishing her degree is not worth any more of her time, energy, and money in its current construction. Her strike from higher ed is a resource decision, not a value of education decision. She beautifully captures the importance of learning and her perspective that education should be a public good: "You know, the day you stop learning is the day you die. I feel like it should be just like medical [care]. It should be like food. It should be something that is accessible to every single human."

I also see the variability of impact that uniform, patronizing, college policies have across dimensions of difference. Uncompromising assignment and registration deadlines, program requirements that are only offered in daytime or semester-long, on-campus formats, cost of attendance calculations that do not consider the added cost of childcare for student parents of young children, are just a few examples Sasha point to in her interview as the rigid college policies that ignore the needs of caregiving students whose lives are, by definition, less predictable, more expensive, and more demanding across all resources categories. Students' experiences of being excluded from this kind of "care" stand in contrast to the culture of helpfulness promoted in college marketing materials, which is discussed in the next section.

"Media"ting the Constructions of Care: Explicating Coercion and Community College's Public-facing Website and Digital Marketing Material

I contend that part of the maintenance of community college structures (and their 20% graduation rate) is the coercion of students and employees into believing that the system is good, helpful, and working. The student experience of community college is generally pleasant; as many participants reported, it is a "helpful," "caring," "understanding," and "happy" place. The on-going explication and critique of College informational and marketing material in an important barometer for assessing Neil Smith's theories of cyclical disinvestment (under the guise of "improvement"), Gilmore's concepts of community abandonment, and Taylor's assertions of predatory inclusion. Together, these three theorists' ideas create a frame for understanding how many community college students become unknowingly trapped at 2-year schools – saddled with student loan debt but no degree and still "happy" with their experience at MMCC.

When traced, a keen observer can see that students of color and caregiving students are hyper recruited in college marketing materials, but less successful than white, non-caregiving students¹⁸. This replicates Taylor’s observation of lending practices that recruit working-class folks (often people of color) with the expectation that they will default on their loans, driving them into debt and leaving them with no property or investment to show for it. In fact, they are left in a worse financial position while lenders profit. The mirror process happens with students who come to a community college being told they can earn a degree, but realistically having an 80% chance of never graduating. The College’s cycle of recruitment (particularly one’s that use a small scholarship as a carrot to get students in the door) that does not provide the specific resources to the populations known to need them for success, reflects Neil Smith’s cyclical disinvestment that intermittently rewards fundamentally failing system for the purposes of maintaining status quo. It should be noted that the broader system of community colleges as well as the individual students experience cyclical disinvestment leading to the collective abandonment of the same student populations the community college project purported to “help.”

In coding the student interviews and the College website, the themes that emerged from students complicate the institution’s commitment to creating a culture of care and respect. On the opening page of the website, the first visible text on the main page reads “[Mid Maryland Community College] is dedicated to creating a culture and climate that respects people of all identities to ensure a welcoming and inclusive environment for all students, faculty, staff, and

¹⁸ Due to IRB restrictions requiring the masking of the College name of the study site, the full citation cannot be included.

visitors.” The rhetoric of care deployed by the College reflects the broader political climate within which it is situated. In the case of MMCC, the College’s website reflects both Blue State

values and wider democratic ideals of “opportunity,” the rewards of hard work, and the importance of cultural “progress.” So ubiquitous are these themes in the College marketing that the College’s official seal features the motto: “Avec progress, nous marchons,” French for “With progress, we march forward.”

The audience for the College website and the digital marketing material appears to be prospective students. The website also features demographics of the student body which is 70% part-time students, disproportionately female identifying, 60% white, 25% first generation college attendees, 25% Pell eligible, and 22% over the age of 26 or “non-traditional”¹⁹. However, the images of students on the website are overwhelmingly young students of color, causing an informed consumer to wonder if the website visuals are an effort to recruit a particular kind of student to enroll.

Ironically, student caregivers’ stories are the kind of success narrative Mid Maryland Community College tells about its students, and many students like those I’ve interviewed who chose junior college because of its affordable and geographic accessibility to higher education. From a position of privilege, community colleges appear boundary-free, and in comparison to most four-year public and private institutions they are, offering dramatically reduced tuition and accessible admissions processes. For many students without the money, mentorship, or pedigree, two-year colleges offer entry into the world of higher education, and presumably increased

¹⁹ Due to IRB restrictions requiring the masking of the College name of the study site, the full citation cannot be included.

earning potential. However, barriers extend beyond the fiscal and the social, including the confidence to persist in spite of inevitable collegiate setbacks. I've observed that for many students entering college, especially the population that two-year colleges attract, perceiving themselves as candidates worthy and capable of academic success is often a struggle.

Interviewees' experiences of difficulty completing a degree at MMCC is not uncommon, though the College does not stop its recruitment of caregivers, in spite of their frequent failure. In fact, I have watched the bodies and stories of other underserved student populations be used to promote positive branding for the College while simultaneously erasing the funding and labor necessary to support them in material ways. In particular, single mother students' success is often elevated in college marketing of inclusivity, despite the marginal investment of institutional resources to provide tuition or childcare help. Currently, the MMCC website features graduation speaker Liz, a West African, single mother of two who inspired and wowed community audiences with her story of "grit" and perseverance²⁰. She is quoted on the College's website: "As a working adult and parent, pursuing my associates degree has been a challenging journey. However, the staff has always been available, lending a hand to support with childcare, transportation, and academic advising every step of the way." And while I have been privy to the incredible transformations and the relationships built at the College to facilitate success, it feels dishonest to portray Liz's (and others) story as the norm. They are not the norm; my study participants' stories or stop outs and debt is the norm. However, the College does not track

²⁰ Due to IRB restrictions requiring the masking of the College name of the study site, the full citation cannot be included.

failed or financially harmed students; its data tracks “success,” a slippery term that renders student experiences like this study’s participants invisible and unaccountable.

From my vantage point as a teacher of 22 years with experience at the high school, 4-year public, and community college levels in multiple states, I’ve watched the repeating patterns of inclusion and abandonment happen to students, particularly those who are not young, white, able-bodied, and male. Among the students with the most overlapping markers of difference are student caregivers. And while they are frequently lauded for their hard work and devotion to

included.

scripts of self-improvement, they are also subject to the most damaging of gendered, racialized, and sexualized narratives of moral insufficiency. These narratives are compounded by classed stereotypes of “being a drain on the system,” since nearly 70 percent of two-year college students with dependents are living at or below 200 percent of poverty (Gault et al 3). In this way, I see caregiving students at community colleges as a canaries in the mine of education: they are among the most vulnerable to failure and the first sacrificed for proof of programmatic concept. And as they continue to fail, we will continue to have evidence that -- contrary to the politics of educational democracy -- our higher educational structures are not built for all students.

Synthesis of Findings: Threading Themes and Theory

The central research question in this study asks: How do the politics of “care” – ideology, policy, and lived experience – shape community college structures and the lives of the students who attend them? The question is a colossal one that when answered in a few key words, draws together the words paternalism, internalized sexism, devalued labor, predatory inclusion, scarcity of resources, and the maintenance of geographic and historic-specific labor pipelines. I would also use the words hope, survival, joy, connectedness, cultural specificity of care, and community. In short, defining “care” in the context of a community college and tracing the many uses and implications of its deployment is a tangled set of ideologies rooted in the constructions of gender, race, and class.

Across public and private sectors in the US, care rhetorics denote a sharing of resources (financial, emotional, physical, spiritual) between people, typically when one person has fewer of these resources and requires “help” because either (1) the care-receiver perceives themselves or is identified by others as “in need”, or (2) the caregiver is assigned as capable of providing

support that the care-receiver is unable to create, maintain, or execute. Inherent to care rhetorics in the US is a power differential rooted in both ableist language (a ranking of capacity) and commodity language (care as a thing to be exchanged): The receiver is unable or incapable of meeting their own needs and the caregiver is fit provide a the “things” (or commodities) that are in need. Generally speaking, rhetorics of care in the US follow this script: Caregivers are capable. Caregivers are valued for their selflessness. Caregivers provide honorable and valuable work.

The irony this study reveals through its triangulation of methods and data sources is that paid and unpaid caregivers in the US – though lauded for their important service – are among the most financially strapped and the least likely to change their fiscal precarity by earning a degree or being fairly paid for their time and labor. However, the student experience of caregiving while attending community colleges, in particular (and which approximates 20% of the student body at MMCC²¹), generates hope for a pathway out of generational poverty and a sense of pride in owning “academic” knowledge that has cultural capital, as well joy derived from learning, and as relief from the exhaustion and boredom of domestic labor. In the interviews, this emerged as language related to “wanting something more” for themselves and their families and expressions of pride and joy related to being part of an academic community. Even more ironic is that the same caregiving students attending community colleges who report being underserved by their institutions, also significantly contribute to the positive, “care culture” of the college that attendees value and express exists uniquely at community colleges²⁴.

²¹ Due to IRB restrictions requiring the masking of the College name of the study site, the full citation cannot be included. ²⁴

See Appendix 1: Many of the students interviewed have experience at other community colleges and at four year institutions. Over half of the participants spoke comparatively about community colleges and four year institutions, expressing the difference between how a community college “feels” different than four year schools.

What strikes me about neoliberal narratives of student fitness and student need is the underlying rhetoric of care that aligns with neoliberal values of investment. Students report being “grateful” that the College invested in them or “took a chance” on them. Conversely, scholarship programming is founded on evaluative processes that balance measurable fiscal need (like Pell eligibility) with past academic performance. This determination of who “deserves” fiscal support (interpreted by most interviewees as care), therefore, is rooted in a performance of a particular standard of student fitness that often relies with cultural stigmas associated with who is a “responsible” recipient. A teen mother, for example, is often deemed an unfit and unreliable recipient of scholarship dollars. These interviews reveal that students internalize these stigmas, making caretaking students reluctant to self-advocate or request support they need.

An important finding in this study is the universal precarity and unpredictability of access to resources that student caregivers experience, the scarcest being money, time, and energy. Across identity groups – from the self-identified, “professionally successful” 55-year-old, cisgendered, white, married, “involved dad” returning to MMCC to sharpen his math skills (Jack) to the 32 year old, Black, Hispanic, pregnant mother of 3 who had her first child at 15 (Jojo) – all 23 participants report the unpredictability caregiving presents in their lives. Some cite the unpredictability of children getting sick or changes to school/day care schedules and others report the seasonal change of sports practices, teacher conferences, and doctors’ appointments that caregivers must consider and work around. For single participants, financial precarity and the lack of another adult to help absorb this labor exacerbates the stress and cost of unpredictability. For married participants and those closely connected with other tight-knit communities (churches, neighborhood groups, friend groups), the burden is lighter, which they observe and name in their interviews as support they are deeply “grateful” to have. All of the

participants, regardless of race, gender, class, marital status named the importance of making caregiving labor visible to the College and advocated for increased support particularly in the areas of affordable, geographically accessible, and flexible childcare as well as less rigid academic schedules and degree offerings.

For all participants, time poverty and the “cost” of caregiving unpredictability within inflexible College policies (particularly classroom late policies and programmatic scheduling structures/deadlines) translates to physical and emotional stress caused often by the “juggling” act of navigating “real life” and studenthood. Of note is the binary thinking that caregiving, domestic life, and breadwinning is “real life” while studenthood is culturally perceived as superfluous or non-essential, fueled by neoliberal narratives that a high school diploma alone, combined with plenty of “hard work” perhaps in the form of the trades, will suffice. These participants accurately report from their lived experience that earning a college degree is fundamental for landing a job that pays enough to live independently and support dependents. This lived experience is supported by the local ALICE report, conducted by the United Way across hyperlocal through regional geographic, which documents that families making less than \$95,000 annually live pay-check-to-paycheck in the MMCC county (United Way).

Most students interviewed spoke to the urgency they felt to complete their degree on a specified timeline and the ways in which not completing in the 2 year (for an Associates degree) or 4 year (for a Bachelor’s degree) impacted their confidence as a student. For some students, like Sasha, as their student debt climbs their confidence in being about to make degree attainment “worth it” wanes; for others, like Melissa, education that allows you to eventually “be the boss” is always worth debt.

Students interviewed repeatedly mention the prioritization of family (private) life over their schooling, and – for those who are the most financially insecure (“living paycheck to

paycheck”) – the material needed for a degree. In short, the drive stems from a desire to better support their families financially and also to “show” their children that, as Tammy put it “being a mom isn’t a profession.” Her language here, while not explicitly feminist does resist rhetorics of care that claim to value motherwork while ignoring the time and energy resources care work consumes without a financial benefit.

At the same time that students clearly and unanimously assert the need for a college degree, they also fluctuate in the way they accept and resist caregiving and studenthood as appropriately separated in terms of supports a college should provide. This private vs public life distinction reflects an internalization of neoliberal care rhetoric that identifies “work” as paid labor outside the home, aligns studenthood with the public, paid realm, and leaves care work inside the home as something they must uniquely navigate. Most of the students interviewed did not critique these concepts, but several of the single mothers did, definitely pressing for colleges to better bridge this gap. As Cara notes: “I have a child. I have a mortgage. I have stress. I just feel like – oh my gosh – How are you going to put us in the field of Social Work [when you don’t understand human needs]? Why are you stressing us? [Their policies] don’t make sense.”

Another primary finding in this study is that, similar to other cultural constructions of identity like race, ethnicity, and gender, “care” as a binary identity concept – caregiver / carereceiver – is formed differently across time, place, and class and is built in relationship with other dimensions of difference. For example, the expectations for how a child receives care and how a mother gives it, is very different from how an elderly Vietnam veteran receives care from the State. In both cases, the conditions for giving and receiving care is mediated by cultural expectations of caregiving by age, gender, relationship, and political investment. The difference in cultural constructions of care were most evident in interviews with students who claim a nonwhite racial category and a specific ethnicity. First generation American students and

immigrant students also articulated the differences in how “College” sees their responsibilities and how their family set expectations of care. The best example of this dynamic is the interview with Jenni, a 21-year-old Filipino student who chose MMCC for a number of reasons, a primary one being that her mother felt she was too young to go away to school and because her family expected her to help care for her father who is declining with dementia.

Kissing cousins to “care” are similarly loaded words like “responsibility,” “duty,” “natural,” “owed,” and “need.” In recent years, the term “privilege” has been explicated through a dialectical lens to allow for an understanding of the white, male, hetero-cis power in the US. This study attempts an intersectional approach to understanding the historical specificity of the term “care” in educational politics and why resources in higher education are extended to some people and denied to others. By listening to students who are simultaneously identified as “caregivers” and also “in need” of support by community colleges, new insight can be gained about the operation, internalization, and manipulation of being a giver and receiver of care, how this term mutates when employed by non-white and immigrant students, and how the hyper representation of caregivers or care receivers in a given site shapes the reputation and effect of the place.

Competing Narratives of “Caring”: Intersectionality, Magnified Harm, and the Internalization of Neoliberal Care Rhetorics

I close this chapter by sharing more about Cara, the student who showed up for the interview following a double shift of nursing dying patients because she felt indebted to me. Her interview in particular calls out the coercion at work in neoliberal care narratives. She defiantly identifies extractive practices explicitly in her language and offers a counter-narrative of care through her personal deployment of resource allocation to her children, patients, and even to me.

In her interview, she names that the system is broken: “Education should be accessible. It’s not fair.” She names that her internship labor should be paid: “[The Social Work program] internship is UNPAID...you’re taking this time. This semester it is 240 hours of my time for FREE.” She also names these practices as extractive. Interestingly though, even Cara, who is matched only by Jojo, Tammy, Sasha, Melissa, and June in her defiance and exhaustion, still views MMCC as a place of kindness and care, revealing that care is experienced not only as help towards success, but also as encouragement and community – two things she found at MMCC through the student-parent cohort program.

Cara is still connected with the College. She shared in her interview that she started at MMCC because she saw the ad for the Parents Lead program (the program I started) which “spoke to her.” Her 17-year-old son filled out the application and she was able to complete her general education requirements quickly and “without stress” because of the program's structure and support. She notes that she was too exhausted from the immigration process and raising kids to try to navigate the international transfer process. She notes repeatedly that the systems are so different, and they didn’t seem to align for the social work degree she wanted in the US. Cara also says that the commute to UMBC for coursework is a central stressor, because while her youngest (12) is old enough to stay home alone, communicating with text and having the geographic distance from him is problematic in meeting his emotional needs. Her kids are 21, 19, and 12: the 21 and 19 yos are away at college (that she is helping to fund), and the 12 yo is at home. For Cara, the precarious balance of time, distance, money, and energy requires her to constantly generate, navigate, and “juggle” resources as almost every study participant noted. Geographic accessibility, access to citizenship, international transfer complications, transportation, divorce, low-wage or unpaid labor, and the emotional load and exhaustion of caregiving in multiple forms all overlap for Cara to produce an almost impossible set of

conditions for earning a degree. Her tenacity is unusual; only 8% of single mothers who start at a community college earn a degree (Cruse et al). But she did it! Our interview was completed in December 2022, and I received an invitation to her graduation in May 2023. Her oldest son graduated from the University of Maryland, College Park the same week she graduated with a bachelor's in social work.

In spite of it all, Cara notes that MMCC was “easy” for her. She credits the student-parent cohort program community and the geographic proximity of her classes for her success. Attending UMBC has been very difficult because (1) the program lacks community, (2) the geographic distance from her home, (3) the cost of commuting and unpaid labor of the internship, making the transfer to UMBC exceedingly difficult, as she is working 96 hours a week as a CNA, commuting 3 days a week to Baltimore for classes, and completing a 16 hour a week unpaid internship as part of her degree requirements. It is only by comparison to UMBC that MMCC seems easy, and perhaps the reason that community colleges as places feel “kind” and “understanding” of the student experience. However, the financial, emotional, and physical toll the degree process has taken on Cara and virtually all of the students I interviewed is immense.

Final Words: The Stakes and Urgency of Converting Testimony into Change

Given the terrible degree completion rates at community colleges for “non-traditional,” working-class students, the physical and economic stakes of community colleges’ failure are extremely high. Therefore, a different, transformational, interdisciplinary framework is necessary to carefully unpack the multiple (and unique) overlapping labor systems each community college serves. Additionally, untangling political economies of community colleges demands a deep understanding of the cultural constructions of race, class, and gender that positions students

unevenly, and often invisibly, within paid and unpaid labor markets. To date, community colleges have not been viable sites of economic security, yet they cast themselves as a panacea, a “bridge to success,” for minoritized, working-class individuals. However, in the welfare-resistant climate of the 21st century, the stakes of giving up on community colleges entirely as sites of economic transformation for working-class/ working-poor mothers are high, given that few other options exist for secure upward mobility. Therefore, analyzing how experiences converge or diverge from other minoritized individuals in varying geographic and fiscal markets, each with its own histories of exclusion, erasure, and displacement, will be an essential component of my study, as will the possibilities of community college students as agents of change and resistance to hegemonic power structures.

Cara’s experiences – her exhaustion, her drive to “persist,” her 11-year contested citizenship status, her divorce, her financial and emotional responsibility to care for three children, her underpaid labor as a low-wage medical worker, and her hypervisibility as a black woman – overlap in ways that illustrate Kimberle Crenshaw’s intersectional framework for understanding the heightened risk Cara is at for being un/underprotected by institutional policy or law (Crenshaw). She is also, therefore, at increased risk for violences / harm of all kinds – a polarity that is important when considering how and if “care” is withheld from some students, if we consider care and harm as opposing ends of an experience spectrum. I contend that the degree to which Cara must struggle to earn a geographically and financially accessible bachelor’s degree is – and the physical toll it takes on her – is in fact a form of harm collegiate structures must account for.

Chapter Interlude: Intimacies of Care

My parents live in Charlottesville, VA, just a few miles from the famed Robert E. Lee statue that incited the 2018 white supremacy march defending a confederate memorial and killing a young marcher. Coincidentally, my dad's decline with Parkinson's disease coincided almost exactly with the rise of Trump's racist, sexist, xenophobic populace, which means I spent a tremendous amount of time in Albemarle County from 2015-2021 and felt a visceral connection to the mid-Virginian landscape. By the time Dad died in the summer of 2021, I'd spent what totals months of time in VA caring for him alongside my mother, sister, and number of paid care workers to whom we felt quite close. Dad slept a lot, and I had the chance to talk with the people who helped us care for him about their lives. Every single one of the women who persisted to his death was Black. Every single one of the caregivers who came in the earlier days was either a woman or a person of color. And almost all of them were either attending or had attended community college. Several had significant student debt and some credentials. None had a bachelors' degree. In spite of the poor pay and often terrible treatment from the people they worked for, almost all of them shared how much they loved their work and the important contributions they make to people suffering through their final days on earth.

The intimacy of the work we were doing caring for my dad side-by-side was both profound and troublingly anachronistic. Chastity²², a young black woman with a joyful laugh and the physical strength to support my dad's 6'8 frame, taught me how to shower my dad and how to help him use the bed urinal. Tina and Shemica were a mother and daughter team who showed my mom and me how to keep my dad's mouth clean when he was no longer responsive and how to clean his body before the undertakers came. Their presence -- especially in the

²² All names in this interlude are pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

context of rural, Jeffersonian Virginia -- felt similar to the texts I've read about the deep American history of Black women caring for white families under the auspices of "work," but stitched so closely with domestic and familial relationships. The pay they receive feels inadequate and exploitative of their skilled labor and incongruent with the way we claimed to value them as "a part of the family." In short, the experience reflected a reconfigured, modern -- but as I mentioned previously, anachronistic -- version of plantation life where caretaking labor is racialized, gendered, undervalued, and tied to class structures that maintain labor pay gaps.

The experience of caring for my dad in Virginia led me to a number of questions about the definitions and construction of care work, specifically how whiteness functions in the racialization of care workers and the role of community colleges, which are the primary sites for low wage care work job training, play in maintaining gendered and raced pay gaps. And mostly, I'm sitting with the way intimacies -- real or perceived -- are created through shared care labor and the possibilities they reveal about a different way to care for our communities.

Chapter 5

Conclusions, Complications, and Possibilities for Further Study

*"To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn.... To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin."
- bell hooks, Teaching to Transgress*

*"We do not attach ourselves longingly to anything that does not cost us care, labor, or longing."
~Honoré de Balzac*

"Abolition is about presence, not absence. It's about building life-affirming institutions." ~ Ruth Wilson Gilmore

When Governor Wes Moore was elected the first Black Governor of Maryland in 2022, a key part of his election platform was his commitment to community colleges. He came to

campuses, took countless photo ops with students (usually students of color) and pointed repeatedly to his class ring from his two-year alma mater which he claims means more to him than his degrees from Hopkins or Oxford. His commitment seemed genuine and his promise to “support” seemed hopeful for those of us who have worked in the two-year sector for years and watched community colleges, and student-voters’ stories of success, name-dropped into the campaign speeches of Republicans and Democrats. Governor Moore has visited Mid-Maryland community college multiple times during and following his election, including an appearance as the keynote speaker for the College’s first Black woman president’s inauguration on September 18, 2023. His keynote speech hailed the “opportunity” of a community college education, the “hard work” students and faculty demonstrate under extraordinary conditions and named MidMaryland Community College “a jewel of the state.” When Moore visited Mid-Maryland community college in March 2023, three months after he took office, he said:

“We can make investments in curriculum adjustments and make sure that strong partnerships exist,” Moore said, “but if you still have students who are going to school in aging buildings, if you still have students who are in institutions of education that are not really sending the right message about what we hope for them, then we’re going to repeatedly miss the point...I think the fact that we brought the entire cabinet here, it should be a statement from both myself and the lieutenant governor...People can and should expect more support.” (Atelsek)²³

However, on January 18, 2024, just four months following his speech decrying the value of community colleges and his commitment to investment, Governor Moore unveiled his State budget proposal calling for a \$22 million cut to the 16 community colleges across Maryland. The proposal changes the existing “CADE” formula (discussed in Chapter 2), allowing for

²³ Due to IRB restrictions requiring the masking of the College name of the study site, the full citation cannot be included.

disinvestment specifically in community colleges while 4-year college funding goes untouched. Some community colleges across the state will see a 25% reduction in state funding if the Governor's budget passes (Blake). This severe cut to two-year colleges is particularly puzzling given that the Governor's support of Maryland's Blueprint for Education, a massive pre-K through university public school overhaul, explicitly names community colleges as a primary site of responsibility for carrying out the State's Career and College Readiness charges (Maryland State Department of Education). The current, state-level funding politics in Maryland are just one, recent example of the way community colleges are uplifted in political rhetoric as an invaluable public good – "a jewel" – yet they regularly experience cyclical devaluing and inadequate funding to adequately invest in the students they teach.

In this final chapter, I connect the dots between theories of disinvestment, the long histories of structural exclusion, predatory inclusion, and organized abandonment in higher education, and the competing rhetorics of care that marginalize caregiving students at community colleges. I assert that these components together – the external political economics and the internal, on-campus experiences of unpaid care working students – create the "place" we know as a community colleges. By examining the language and visual arguments deployed by one college's public-facing website and broader political narratives about community colleges, I trace the link between two-year schools' reputation as both places of "opportunity" and "second chances" (for a presumably "needy" population of students), and as a stigmatized, subpar alternative to "real college." In this tracing, I define care, as experienced by caregiving community college students and as deployed by colleges and neoliberal politics and conclude (2) from the study's interviews with caregiving students that both sets of these beliefs are

internalized by students, particularly those with the fewest financial and time resources. Additionally, I claim that the overlap between race, gender, and unpaid care work reveals those students who are the least likely to graduate from college and the most likely to accrue significant debt and physical or mental distress due to their attempts. At the core of this conclusion is the way unpaid care work functions (and varies) culturally in relationship with historically white, patriarchal institutions. Yet, caregiving students at community colleges report gratitude for the opportunity to attend college and joy associated with simultaneously being a student and caregiver. I question how the climbing debt, exhaustion, extended time to completion (for the low percentage of students who do earn a credential) squares with feelings of gratitude to the College and how it impacts the participant reported “feelings” of caring on community college campuses. This conclusion threads structure, rhetoric, and student caregiver testimony to assert a few final claims and questions about the processes, experiences, and definitions of care at community colleges.

I recognize that many higher education scholars and community college practitioners may disagree with or be threatened by my critical positioning of two-year schools as sites of care labor extraction and exploitation, in spite of the fact that most of them would agree that community colleges are certainly locations of fiscal austerity, unstable and cyclical disinvestment, and organized abandonment -- all hallmarks of neoliberal logics at work (Gilmore). The work of this dissertation is not to prove that community colleges are failing institutions, though by traditional higher education success measures like graduation rates, they are. Instead, I argue the opposite: Community Colleges are succeeding terrifically for the purposes they were built, which is to create a local labor force of able-bodied, young, white, male students that ensures the financial security of this group. In turn, and as a way of surviving over time, the neoliberal logics at work in community colleges clearly operate in the service of

this population and sometimes at the expense of other tuition-paying, often minoritized students. The assertion that community colleges support systemic racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia should not be a huge surprise, although it's a claim that stated plainly upsets most people who view a college education, particularly one that begins at the site of a community college, as a great equalizer and savior. In their current construction, and despite their openaccess policies advocating social mobility opportunities for all, community colleges – at the institutional scale – maintain and perpetuate existing structures of dominance. At the individual level, however, students experience personal joy and fulfillment, even at the high costs of deep exhaustion and student debt.

(1) Conclusion #1: Care Labor is largely unaccounted for by community colleges, but it is a critical component of caregiving students' college success.

The first, and potentially most significant, conclusion I draw from this study is that the material consequences of unpaid care work is a primary reason many students attend community colleges (geographically tied to the area plus affordability of tuition), and it is one of the primary reasons the struggle to complete a credential. According to student interviews and broader studies that examine community college degree completion, well-intended though they are, most community colleges' classrooms, financial aid, and academic scheduling policies do not account for students' unpaid care labor. I note in previous pages of the dissertation that some community college scholars, like Dr. Luke Wood and classroom practitioners like Jonathan Mauk, are currently working to disrupt racialized and gendered access gaps, they do not specifically intersect unpaid care labor as a key, and measurable, barrier to higher education access. Likewise, scholars working at the broader, education-to-workforce pipeline levels, such as Dr. Andrew Carenvale and his team at Georgetown's Center for Education and Workforce Research,

acknowledge the persisting race and gender wage gaps and their puzzling relationships with degree attainment. However, this study asserts that exclusion of unpaid care labor, as a part of the “equity gap” analysis across education and career fields, is a missing and critical component to understanding why and how generational poverty and wealth persist among the same groups over time in the US.

(2) Conclusion #2: Definitions of “care” vary according to institutional and individual positionality.

This study finds that the definition of “care” varies widely according to institutional and individual positionality. At the institutional recruitment level, “care” is expressed through the valuing of student stories of struggle, the promise of an affordable degree, and “help” navigating and encouraging all students who come to the campus. The first component, valuing students' stories of struggle, is complicated by the fact that the site in this study uplifts struggle/success stories that are not representative of the populations that are collectively successful on their campus. The second component, the promise of an affordable degree, is true enough in relation to the cost of tuition at four-year regional or private schools, but it ignores the added cost of attendance for students who, for example, must also pay for childcare to attend classes and find uninterrupted time to study. The third component of “help” navigating and encouraging all students who come to campus is true for some students, but according to the student interviews, caregiving students do not receive adequate material resources to complete a degree without mounting debt and physical/emotional stress.

At the individual level, student interviews revealed a wide-ranging set of experiences and expectations related to care. Holistically speaking, many students expressed the joy of tending to

the physical, emotional, financial, and spiritual needs of another person; however, they did not expect the College to similarly “care” for them. “Care” according to the student interviews is expressed as a private and intimate act reserved for family or close relationships, and while students expect the College to educate them, they do not expect physical, emotional, financial, or spiritual help from the College or its agents. This may explain why caregiving students expressed enormous gratitude towards College employees who did provide this kind of care. Of note is the way gender, race, class, age, and ethnicity impacted students' expectations of caregiving and receiving. (Explained in Conclusion #4).

(3) Conclusion #3: Student caregivers internalize neoliberal narratives of success and care and also draw joy and encouragement from them.

As discussed in Chapter 4, this study finds that many caretaking students internalize paternalistic, neoliberal, and popular rhetorics of care that include caretaking as a private or domestic matter that is not paid for by the State, caretaking as feminized, and caretaking as antithetical to work or student outside the home. The commonsense understandings of “care” are translated to “care work,” whereby regardless of the time or energy it takes to perform, and regardless of the private or public context, it is without monetary value and the calculation time spent laboring is not a “reasonable” expectation of the College to consider as help for students. This internalized value stands in stark contrast to the actual cost of childcare or eldercare in the private sector and confusingly low wages earned by Certified Nursing Assistants for childcare professionals. Of note is (1) that several interview participants are also low-wage care workers in addition to being unpaid caregivers and students, and (2) those interviewees who do recognize the disproportionate cost of under or unpaid care labor in their lives are among the most defiant and critical of college structures.

This conclusion also names the joy and encouragement student caregivers experience by meeting success markers defined by the College and assigned by neoliberal rhetorics of care. All students interviewed noted that their unpaid care labor to biological or chosen kin was more important than College success measures. In this way the “juggling act” (explained in Chapter 4) of successfully balancing care labor and studenthood was the most satisfying. Participants also noted the related property-esque value of a college education, the intrinsic and social benefits of “having something just for myself.”

(4) Conclusion #4: Race, ethnicity, and gender impact students’ care labor responsibility.

The open-ended interview, the College archive, and the longer histories of community colleges all reveal that race, gender, and other culturally constructed categories of difference play a critical role in how unpaid care labor is assigned. In addition to culturally specific expectations for intergenerational caretaking, broader popular constructions of American motherhood and idealized, classed, feminized representations of domesticity play a role in female participants’ willingness to sacrifice educational time to caretaking. Male participants similarly reflect expectations of paternity as impactful in terms of sacrificing education, but in a less robust way (coded in the Appendix as “involved dad”). Additionally, within the student interviews, the degree to which students feel responsible for unpaid caretaking labor is deeply dependent upon their role in the family. While the student sample size isn’t large enough to conclude that race and ethnicity unequivocally impact the uptake of unpaid care labor, the longer histories of caretaking and higher education tell me that unpaid, underpaid, or forced caretaking labor is an important dimension to explore in further studies.

(5) Conclusion #5: Community college place-making that “feels caring” is shaped by the hyper representation of caregiving students on their campuses; this climate sits at odds with evidence that many student caregivers feel “out of place” in classrooms and advising spaces.

This dissertation study reveals that students who perform large quantities of unpaid care labor (single parents, students from cultures that value intergenerational care of elders, mothers who take on the bulk of domestic labor, and middle to working poor students who perform lowwage work and cannot afford the exorbitant cost of childcare) are also the students who feel the least “fit” and the most “out of place” in college classrooms. This conclusion is particularly interesting because it potentially reveals a class and age intersection that community college caregiving students uniquely experience.

At a broader scale, I claim that because community colleges are the most decentralized, locally-governed sector of public higher education, they are particularly vulnerable to neoliberal rhetorics of “success” and rising academic capitalism prioritizing institutional profit over student poverty; however, they also are key sites for both maintaining or changing higher education’s participation in cyclical disinvestment and abandonment of many working-class, women, and people of color who need a college degree to survive financially. While Neil Smith documented this phenomenon in the rent gap of urban spaces, I assert in this study that the process of uneven development and cyclical disinvestment is also at work across two-year colleges in American Higher Education. Community colleges, in particular, face an added challenge and responsibility in recognizing these patterns because of their known history as places intentionally designed to (1) absorb historically and culturally perceived “unfit” students for retraining, (2) exclude these

students from residential, four-year universities, and (3) be the most flexible set of postsecondary institutions in or order to meet local workforce needs (Brint and Karabel).

(6) Conclusion #6: Students who perform the most care labor and who report the most financial instability experience the highest levels of physical and mental exhaustion.

The degree to which caregiving students who are also financially strapped experience extreme physical and emotional exhaustion is perhaps the most urgent conclusion from the student interviews in this study. The explication of College marketing and recruiting materials reflects a praise of students who “persist” at all cost, but it also does not depict the costs and health consequences of this behavior. The broader view of college and career data conducted at Georgetown’s Center for Education and Workforce Research that shows uneven degree and wage-earning gaps across race and gender, however, does potentially, provide an opening for studying the relationship between unpaid care labor, low wage work, and health issues (Canevale et al). However, the degree to which caregiving community college risk their physical and emotional health cannot be ignored nor dismissed, particularly when earning a degree is also reported by participants to be critical to their financial survival.

(7) Conclusion #7: Community colleges in Maryland are sites of cyclical disinvestment that financially hinder more caregiving students than they help.

This claim is grounded in the on-going political uptake of community colleges as a valuable public good and the ultimate funding rejections observed in the Maryland State system, as articulated at the top of this chapter. To the extent that this claim can be applied to community

colleges more broadly, remains unstudied. However, as the sector of public higher education that nationally serves the most working-class, caregiving, and students of color, on-going study is required. The maintenance of programming that disproportionately harms caregiving students because of the way unpaid care labor – both at home and in the classroom – extracts resources from these students, can and should be considered in evaluating the manner in which material investment occurs. Explicating the way that care rhetorics are deployed, internalized, and ultimately practiced by students is particularly disconcerting. However, the critique, anger, and defiance read from a few of the most exhausted and harmed students lends hope towards a source of powerful change agents if, in fact, they possess the physical energy, social power, and political agency, and time to do so. Fundamentally, this dissertation study concludes that “care” in the form of “opportunity” is a complicated term if situated within systems that knowingly underserve the populations they recruit in material and temporal ways.

(8) Conclusion #8: The methodology used in this dissertation is a useful but incomplete way to understand the complexities of community college geographies and the politics of care.

Critical Geography’s neoliberal logics of investment and abandonment are underutilized frameworks for untangling the purpose of schools in the 21st century. While my goal as an educator and scholar is to move towards the possibilities of liberation and freedom-making for community college students, an analysis of politics and economics rests at the center of this project, but I also recognize that it is an emerging approach to the questions I’ve asked. I maintain that in order to unsettle and remake schools, it is essential to understand how institutions are connected, and quite simply to examine the question: Who profits from community colleges? I nod to this question throughout the project but acknowledge that the role

of community colleges is not transparent, nor is the cyclical and uneven development of their students, programs, and campuses. Their development fluctuates, as Neil Smith notes in his book *Uneven Development*, at multiple scales, which obfuscates the many ways these institutions maintain the distribution of racial, material, and social capital. The methodology in this study steps towards innovative, spatial, political economic answers to the broad research questions I've asked about community college, care rhetoric, and care labor, but does not adequately nor fully answer them. However, this methodology is an important starting point.

Proceed with Caution: Institutional Recommendations and Possibilities for a Better Way

During my dissertation defense, one committee member suggested I add a list of recommendations for institutions based on my deep study of community colleges and caregiving students' experiences, which an earlier draft of this study intentionally omitted. I contended in the defense that the point of this study is to recognize the depth and breadth of the overlapping inequalities community colleges as institutions and the students within them experience. I bristle at the current "playbook" convention produced by large educational research bodies, which are well intentioned in their design, but also miss the complexity of real structural change. In my oral defense, I said: "The problem with a list of recommendations is that it suggests improving caregiving students' lives can be accomplished through a check list, like plugging holes on a sinking ship. That may help some students, but it will barely keep them afloat. The issue is that we probably need a whole new ship and crew of leaders who are willing to reengineer the existing vessel."

In short, while I do believe community colleges can do better by all of their students, caregiving students especially, I also strongly believe that the shifts must start with the way community colleges are studied and critiqued. The lack of outrage towards a 20% three-year

graduation rate nationally for community college attendees is a problem. The ambivalence towards care of all kinds –child care, student care, elder care – is a problem. The acceptance of no other post-secondary option beyond a failing one is a problem. More studies like this one that take on the campus and local contexts that make both the individual and collective college-going experience so difficult for many American families is the first, and perhaps most important, step towards change. Empowering community college practitioners to do this critical research at their institutions as an “insider/outsider,” as Wanda Pillow describes, is paramount (186).

That said, I will offer some key recommendations I’ve made to Mid-Maryland Community College over the past three years and neutralized here for application and consideration across most community colleges with similar governance and operating structures. Some of these recommendations come from this dissertation study (student interviews) and some come from other research and action projects I’ve led at the College. Still others come from my experience as a faculty leader and program administrator. I caution though, please read these recommendations as a model for things to investigate within a researched framework of each individual community college. As mentioned in Chapter 2, there are a variety of ways junior colleges are structured, funded, and governed across the US. Knowing the specifics of each site must be understood before considering any of the recommendations below:

Recommendations to College President:

- Develop an institutional plan for structural support focused on student parents’ / caregiver needs.
 - Create an annual strategic goal related to caregiving students based on feedback from students
 - Create a cross-institutional task force with representatives from all areas of the College for decision-making related to caregiving students
 - Allocate a central, institutional location and responsible parties for connecting students with necessary resources; name accountable support leaders in all areas across campus to scale the work

- Amplify student parent / caregiver status as an important category of difference to be included in campus's DEIB agenda and programming
 - Aligning child care center goals with College's student success goals
- Fund institutional budgets for College infrastructure that support student parents and caregivers
- Support direct aid to student parents and caregivers in the forms of scholarships or tuition waivers
- Expand proven student support programs and the staffing to run them
- Consider hiring more student parents and caregivers as FT and PT College employees
- Implement affordable, flexible, on-campus childcare for student parents and caregivers
- Support research and data collection of student parent / caregiver population with funding and personnel to complete the work across divisions
 - Mandate implementation of caregiver identification at point of registration (not at point of application as some colleges currently do) to accurately locate and resource students as parenting/caregiving status changes
 - Require on-going assessment of student parent/caregiver success using to-be-built data collection and evaluation infrastructure
- Invest in policy review with a student parent / caregiving lens
 - Expand the Title IX policy beyond just "parenting" language; also consider moving it beyond just parent of a "child" to someone who may also be caregiving for a family member or adult child.

Additional Student-Parent / Caregiver Support Recommendations for Upper-Mid-Level Leaders:

- Create spaces on campus that are family-friendly (toys, books, coloring pages in waiting areas; space in study areas for students with children in-tow)
- Prioritize the use of child care center s (if the campus has one) for students. Make it available, affordable, and flexible with drop-in care options.
- Apply for the US Department of Education's CCAMPIS grant (Child Care Also Means Parents in School), which provides direct child care dollars to students at participating campuses
- Participation or engagement in external programs and organizations that are dedicated to expanding support for caregivers and other marginalized groups (Generation Hope, Aspen Ascend, Achieving the Dream, Transform Mid-Atlantic, AmeriCorps VISTA)
- Develop positions that focus on specialized supports and resources for student parent success
- Consider the impact in academic decision-making of the overlapping struggle, trauma, and identities that are hyper-represented among caretaking students. The added weight of such challenges directly impacts student wellness and success.

Recommendations for Student Affairs

Division Priorities

- Lead campus in visibility and students support for caregiving students; Cultivation of inclusive culture and visibility that includes representation of the parenting community

- Maintain cross-institutional student parent task force to ensure on-going innovation and data collection on caregiving students
 - Collaborate with Office of Institutional Research to identify students at the point of registration so caregiver success can be collected and measured
 - Collect qualitative data on experiences of student caregivers and advocates for stories, experiences, and input as a valuable and true source for resource allocation
- Develop questionnaires in Navigate (or similar student communication software) to connect student-caregivers to resources This could trigger an intervention and outreach for the student with a person in Student Affairs.
- Develop a digital Adult and Family Resource Center; Share link widely in Advising and Student Success / support offices
- Assess and address any on-campus childcare waitlist issue and continuous lack of accessibility; Advise and connect students with affordable childcare
- Provide reports on the number of individuals who have requested Title IX accommodations (as long as the information can be disaggregated).

Additional Student-Parent / Caregiver Support Priorities for Student Affairs Division:

- Identify potential student parents in the enrollment process, start to connect students to resources and potential funding options (scholarships, grants, community programs)
- Have a Toys-for-Tots style collection of clothing or toys for kids (this could be done throughout the year as opposed to simply around holiday periods). This could be done similar to the food-pantry.
- Seek outside funding for student-parents/caregivers. Work with the County and other organizations on potential funding streams (like the local United Way's annual fundraising campaigns).
- Family friendly space with children in mind so student parents feel a sense of belonging when inquiring about FA. Through toys, coloring pages, and crayons the College can communicate the inclusion students say they want.
- Creation of Leave of Absence policy that can include a focus on parenting. This could also be done in conjunction with potential changes/additions to the Title IX Pregnant and Parenting Accommodations policy (in collaboration with work Academic Affair division).

Student Affairs Office-specific Priorities:

Multicultural Center	Acknowledgement and visibility of heterogeneous and overlapping identities of caregiving students (See data above indicating hyperrepresentation of women, low-income students, and students of color) • Discussions of topics that impact and include our parenting student population • Guest speakers that empower and include student parents and caregiver stories
-----------------------------	---

	Hosting kid friendly events to recognize to whole student and their families (2Gen approach) to reflect the inclusion and visibility of student parents
Student Engagement and Leadership	Development of events focused on parenting students, caregivers, and their families Consideration of accessibility to existing College events and leadership opportunities when it comes to parenting / caregiving students • Evening or Zoom options for club meetings • Differentiate club options to recognize heterogeneity of caregiver population (exA: • Dad's club; Teen Mom club; Moms for Change club) Celebrate big and small milestones for caregivers (in conjunction with events), possibly recognizing these students at graduation or while enrolled. Hosting/ creating events that support parenting students, like family fun day or dinner with childcare resources, scholarship information and/or application assistance available. Consider spotlighting caregiving as form of leadership and service

Student Advising /Success Coaching	Create, develop, and scale programs with a focus on the specific needs of the student parents' population (in collaboration with the Office of DEIB) Advocate for creation of study spaces on campus that are family friendly and accessible (in conjunction with Plant and Operations) Expanded staff to assist students with adult / parenting / caregiving needs that may require additional guidance, resources, and flexibility. (ex. Childcare, accessing CCAMPIS, student success funds, community eldercare, and mental health resources) Creating events and programming for student parent families to build social connections, reduce isolation, promote connection to campus resources, and foster a supportive experience for students and their families. Collect and consider ongoing data collection and storytelling of the student parent experience in order to identify the unique and urgent
	needs of our student parent /caregiving population (in collaboration with Office of Institutional Research)
Enrollment Services	Collect and report institutional-level data on student-parent enrollment, retention, completion, finances, and financial aid to the U.S. Department of Education via surveys Balance adult student recruitment with advocacy for proper / known supports for caregiver success once enrolled (ethical enrollment practices)

Financial Aid	Ensure that financial aid advising includes a complete assessment of “cost of attendance” which includes child and elder care; Be sure student know how to detail this on the FAFSA Exploration of funding outside of Pell Grants provided for student parents / caregivers to alleviate financial hardships Intentional outreach to make students aware of additional funding or scholarships Access to affordable childcare or budget to address child care discrepancies Evening hours At time of completing FAFSA and other ”packaging”, perhaps connecting students to the relevant departments (Student Affairs) and resources
----------------------	--

Recommendations for Academic Affairs:

Division Priorities:

- Training and assessing levels of cultural competency of faculty and senior leaders. · Implementation of cultural awareness and understanding of unique needs of studentparent / caregiver needs and how they intersect with other dimensions of difference and belonging
- Communicate best-practices in teaching and learning for parenting/caregiving accommodations and flexibility within syllabus
- Evening or Zoom options for meetings and courses
- Promotion of relationship building models of teaching and tutoring that foster better faculty-student dynamics and consider the learning impacts of intersecting identities with overlapping needs
- Representation of student parent / caregiving experiences within readings, assignments, and projects
- Develop and scale course scheduling that “bundles” courses that accounts for adult learner lifestyles
- Expand and include caregiving resources, community, and visibility within Continuing Education and Adult Education (collaborate with Academic Affairs)
- Collaborate with community organizations in non-English speaking and immigrant communities to offer culturally-specific models of care support

Academic Affairs Office-specific and Job-specific Priorities:

Faculty	Acknowledge student-parent / caregiver needs through syllabus by setting tone and offering reasonable flexibility for those who may need it in advance. Practice Culturally Responsive Teaching by building relationships and connections; Consider building a cohort-style training program for faculty focused on equitable pedagogies that include caregiving status as a noted student identity category Acknowledge and understand the power dynamics and the role it plays in the classroom; Encourage students to self-advocate and communicate by providing multiple ways to seek support Consider time poverty and student care-giving circumstances when assigning workload or group projects Participate in student-parent / caregiving specific professional development sessions to learn students' experience Connect students to supportive staff Link to digital Adult Students and Family Resource Center (mentioned above as a recommendation for Student Affairs) in syllabi
Deans / Department Chairs	Develop a list of student-parent / caregiving informed faculty leaders who can serve as mentors and outreach coordinators for departments

	Creation of Leave of Absence policy that can include a focus on parenting. This could also be done in conjunction with potential changes/additions to the Title IX Pregnant and Parenting Accommodations policy (in collaboration with work Student Affairs). Develop student parent centered scheduling practices Conduct focus groups with student-parents on their scheduling needs Conduct focus groups with faculty to assess teaching and learning competencies for caregiving students Consider an “early registration” period for student-parents/caregivers that would allow them to register before other students (to secure a schedule that works for them)
Center for Teaching and Learning	Develop student-parent / caregiver unit in orientation Student parent training/PD (addresses what are the needs, how a faculty member can build accommodations into the classes, red flags to monitor, etc.) Reference: Maryellen Weimer, Learner Center Teaching (2ed) practices Guide faculty through course design, attendance, and late policies revisions for student parents and caregivers

Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion	Make student-parent / caregiving students visible in College's DEIB Strategic Plan Include examples of how to respond to student parents' needs in culturally responsive teaching assignments and syllabi (in collaboration with CTL) Incorporate programming in DEIB calendar that invites conversation with and about student parents Consider hosting a story-tellers event (akin to the book talks that we have done) that focus on student-parents/caregivers and their challenges and overcoming them. College could potentially have a contest/prize for the best story(ies). This could be done in conjunction with other departments like English, Student Affairs, Foundation, etc.) Partner with other areas on campus to advocate for student-parent needs through funding and collaborating on projects.
Dual Enrollment	Research, identify, and extend Dual Enrollment opportunities to teen parents • Emphasize 2Gen approach to education Regular outreach to families to explain support for student parents

Recommendations to the Board of Trustees:

- Prioritize student-parent needs in institutional budget
- Envision a childcare center as a key form and location of student support
- Balance adult student recruitment with necessary supports (fiscal, curricular, support, staff)
- Invite student-parents and caregiving students to report their experiences to the Board (perhaps in September, which is National Student-parent month) **Recommendations**

for the Office of Institutional Research:

- Create, maintain, and continually improve existing data collection processes for the purpose of resourcing students
- Develop strategic goals that prioritizes student parent / caregiving visibility in data collection and student success assessment; Incorporate into strategic plan

- Articulate with other institutions in the state to compare data; create a repository for colleges to share data

Recommendations for College Scholarship Foundation Board:

- Raise funds for student parents and caregiver scholarships
- At time of completing FAFSA and other "packaging", connect students to the relevant departments (Student Affairs) and resources

Recommendations for On-Campus Childcare Center:

- Work with Student Affairs, Academic Affairs, and Continuing/Adult Education to facilitate and communicate CCAMPIS offerings
- Do active outreach to students who may be caregivers to let them know about services, funding options, etc.
- Advocate for student-usage of Center; Collaborate with Office of Institutional Research and Student-Parent/Caregiver Task Force (recommended above) to access data and research

Recommendations for Human Resources:

- Conduct outreach to current staff/faculty who may be parents/have been student-parents who need resources / support
- Collaborate with Marketing to find employees who would be willing to share their stories for current/prospective students that they can do it too. Have this as a tools, tips, tricks, and uplifting stories on making it as a parent while working or in school
- Create College-service option for faculty/staff to be ambassadors for current studentparent/caregivers
- Collaborate with Student Affairs to work with HR to co-create tools and resources for parents. Staff/faculty may also struggle and be interested in some resources.

Recommendations for Finance:

- Ensure that line items are developed in the annual budget for student-parent events or resources (Other departments should be developing their budgets, but finance can ensure that they are included in the final rounds).

Recommendations for Marketing / Communications:

- Develop a campaign (for students who are willing) to tell their stories and publicize the struggles/challenges that student-parents face and point toward departments/resources that offered them solutions
- Ensure that students who are featured in Marketing campaigns are properly resourced by the College (ethical / non-extractive Marketing: use of story for be balanced by ensured and on-going support for featured students)

- Ensure the representation of student parents / caregivers is congruent with student population; Be sure student stories are created, told, and deployed with approval of student

As mentioned at the top of this segment, these recommendations should be considered after a complete institutional scan and historical-political assessment is done of a campus. Certainly, this list can and should be used as a framework and model for colleges to create their own list of institutional recommendations to improve the access, support, and resourcing of student-parents and caregivers attending community colleges.

Possibilities for Further Consideration:

I tell my students that the best measure of a good book or class is that it leaves you with more questions than answers. In many ways, I feel the same way about this dissertation project. I'm concluding the formal pursuit of this particular project, but I am left with many, many more questions about the interconnectedness of community colleges with unpaid and underpaid care work in the US. Specifically, this project has prompted me to consider the follow ideas for further study:

- 1) **Who benefits from community colleges failing? Are they intentionally structured to fail most of the students who enter?**

While community colleges do provide more affordable access to post-secondary education, they only graduate 20% of those who attempt a credential. Sociologically speaking, and certainly by neoliberal logic, it doesn't make sense that an institutional structure that fails 80% of the time would continue to exist, much less expand over time. In fact, community colleges have grown alongside an expanding, globalizing, free market, world economy and fiscal

austerity in social welfare programming in the US. With the first junior college founded in 1901 in Joliet, Illinois, “by 1940 there were 610 colleges with 400 students each. By 1980-81, there were 1,231 public and private colleges” (Ackerley). Today, there are 1,006 public and private community colleges and 35 tribal colleges (American Association of Community Colleges). By this measure of expansion of place and investment of resources, the question emerges: Who benefits from community college students’ failure? Furthermore, is unpaid caretaking labor being protected by systems with which community colleges explicitly articulate, like the US military and career adjacent industries like cybersecurity (which directly benefits from spouses who “stay home” while soldiers deploy)? Gilmore’s theory of surplus labor in the CA prison system could be useful for considering how community colleges may function as a surplus labor holding tank (with affordable tuition as a self-reinforcing funding stream) for people who are unskilled or under skilled in the current education-to-workforce pipeline. Community college may function similarly in terms of offering a solution to containing groups of people who fall outside of the traditional paths of education and workforce development.

2) Where does Abolition fit as a framework for community colleges?

If my claims here are that community college institutions are systems that reproduce social inequalities and neoliberal claims of open access in the absence of accountability for completion (even at the cost of financial harm to students and communities), I wonder then: how can Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Betina Love’s call for “abolition” in prisons and k-12 schools be applied or considered for community colleges? I suggest that, like prison abolition that calls for building what Gilmore calls “life-affirming institutions,” consistent – not uneven or intermittent – investment in adult educational pathways that account for and include the presence of care labor for biological and chosen family is essential.

Final Synthesis: The Feminist Past and Futures of The Laboring Scholar

While higher education professionals generally agree on what a community college is, their constructions are varied and complex. In spite of these complexities, it can be argued that a popular understanding exists of what junior colleges are, who they serve, and why they are a thing separate from high schools or “regular” colleges. I contend that the generally accepted, common sense concepts of the thing known as a community college – and how that varies across groups – is a vital component in understanding who attends them, how they function, and why they exist. This project answers who attends them, and how they function in relationship to caregiving students, but it does not answer why they continue to exist if they only graduate 20% of the total students they enroll, regardless of caretaking status (Marcus).

However, in public high schools and among adult learners across the country, community colleges remain the only option for most lower, working-class, and increasingly middle-class students. The same is true for students who are geographically bound to a region-- student parents who must work and attend earn a credential near their children’s school, military personnel, and students living in a rural area or on a reservation with few post-secondary options. Therefore, for a significant portion of the population, community college is *the* public good for educational class ascension and is likewise lauded for this role. The myth, however, that community colleges are adequately supported to be *effective* pathways for upward mobility is one of the concepts I challenge in this structural analysis.

Much like property value fluctuates according to buyers’ perceived value of the space, so too does the investment in public goods like community college. The degree to which individual students, local municipalities, and state governments spend on education correlates to the return on investment (ROI) a degree, program, or campus generates at scale. The uneven investment across student groups, programs, and campuses is likewise reflective of the cultural narratives

and popular understandings of those things. Therefore, marginalized, historically underrepresented, and “non-traditional” students -- and their accompanying educational spaces -- are frequently the first set of programs to get the ax at all levels of funding and representation.

Most people’s idea of what a community college is is rooted in their lived experience (or those they know) and their experience of community college through popular culture. Popular culture’s renderings of community college are simultaneously reflective, reductive, and reproductive of stereotypes on campus, as well as an amplifier of the great service they provide for students who are otherwise out of educational options. While this study does an excellent job of capturing the student caregiver experience, it does not effectively connect the role of popular culture and opinion across time and region to account for its impact on student’s attitudes towards the college experience.

I assert that one of the foundational technologies of the state for creating and maintaining a flexible labor force is the American Community College. A uniquely American institutional construction, its birth and shifting structural changes parallel U.S. economic histories in ways that reveal local, regional, national, and global investment and disinvestment in particular groups of people and educational institutions in an effort to maintain the US’s position of economic dominance. Groups that have been consistently invested in at community colleges are able-bodied, white men (as evidenced by support of the U.S. military), and working-class individuals who can move quickly through certificate and degree programs to hold full-time jobs in their community to support the economic growth (and potential gentrification) of the city or region. It is not difficult to see how and why student caregivers, who face child or elder care and school schedule barriers, do not fit into this category of “ideal workers” deemed worthy of consistent state investment. Nevertheless, in spite of the current welfare-to-work regime, students who perform unpaid care labor for biological or chosen family have historically

“...resisted, understanding that higher education is critical to their capacity to provide for their family’s longterm economic self-sufficiency and their ability to make autonomous decisions about their lives, their children’s academic and social development, and their community’s well-being” (Polakow et al 2). This dissertation study has explored the role of the community college within rising neoliberalism, academic capitalism, and gentrification, and the caregiving student serves as a touchstone of the non-ideal workers within higher education who are cyclically invested and disinvested in to suit the needs of the immediate, local political economy and neoliberal narratives of improvement.

The broader conclusion of this study is that the construction of care work (including sibling or elder care as well as motherhoods, fatherhoods, and other kinship care), magnify the difficulty of crossing into and through a higher education pathway that allows access to material wealth, social capital, and class mobility. Community colleges promise “open access to all,” unlike four-year public and private institutions and are often cited as the solution to class inequality in the US (Martin et al 2). My research demonstrates that community colleges as flexible and vulnerable spaces susceptible to exploitation and extraction. Moreover, I define the creation and negotiation of a particular student identity, *the laboring scholar*, which emerges in spite of and alongside competing racist, sexist, and classist cultural narratives of student fitness. Because of the way caretaking labor is made invisible in US institutions in ways that maintain current structures of dominance, the laboring scholar endures a particularly problematic form of subjectivity -- one that all but guarantees her failure within higher education.

However, the attitude of defiance I heard from several participants in the student interviews of this study gives me hope. I do believe the community colleges – if structured radically differently – could provide access to educational and career pathways to currently and historically excluded populations. Institutions are not fixed; they are governed and resourced by

people with the power to change ways of being and living in the United States. In fact, because of the hyper locality of community colleges, the possibilities to create educational spaces that reimagine not just workforce but also *care* in communities is feasible. But, rhetorics must change to center collective practices of giving over individualistic, neoliberal, rhetorics of earning. My future research and praxis will strive to examine the contradictions, assumptions, and polemics

of the laboring scholar, their restricted access to higher education, and the resistant role community college campuses can play in abolishing neoliberal education and centering care.

Appendix 1: Interview Coding Synthesis Grid

Pseudonym ²⁷	In-vivo codes	Interpretive Codes	Comments
Mary	“He [fiancé] kept on pushing me to go back to school...it was kind of scary.” “I wanted to give up but he kept on pushing me.”	Family encouragers as motivation and confidence to return to and stay in college	Mary is a pre-nursing major who self-identifies as a Central American immigrant who financially cares for her parents out-of-country and physically/emotionally/linguistically cares for her nieces, nephews, siblings in the US. She is engaged to be married, and also cares for her two (soon to be) twin step daughters who are 5 years old. Mary is the 9th of 12 kids, she is 25 yo, and attends MMCC full time while also working FT at a wholesale grocery store.
	“It was hard because of financial aid.”	Financial stress	
	“I have no relationship with them anymore.” (Speaking of godparents who helped her when she came to the US)	Relational strife in family	

	“When I came to the US I was 17. I was a minor. How can I say, like they wanted to make sure that if anything happened..they can take legal action so they talked to my parents...my parents understood that it [an adoption by Mary’s godparents] just	Immigration issues	What does care look like for a family navigating citizenship litigation? How does this process financially and emotionally drain students? Are any
--	--	---------------------------	---

²⁷ All student names in this document are pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

	needed to happen....but I think it’s affecting me now because I want a position for my parents now that I’m a citizen but legally they’re [the godparents she’s had a falling out with] my parents not my biological parents.	Legality of access to resources and care	supports available at the College for these students?
	“I’m not sure how it’s all gonna work” (repeated later) ”I’m not sure how this is gonna work.”	Uncertainty	
	“I’m going for nursing” “I’ve been studying non-stop for three weeks [for the TEAS test].”	Choosing a caretaking field of study	Mary explains in this part of the interview that she chose nursing as a major “to help people.” She mentions that with nursing training she can provide care to her parents who live in rural Central America with little access to health care. She also likes that nursing is a field she can earn and learn with, gradually adding credentials. Major barriers for her are time, tuition money, and high stakes credentialing tests given only in English.

	“But I can do it, and I do everything and anything I can.” “I feel that yeah, I would be able to complete them [her academic goals at MMCC].” “I’m aiming to get into the [nursing] program...at MMCC. And it’s very competitive, but I’ll do everything I can do to do it.”	Confidence in hard work	
	“I feel like I care for my parents a lot...the money I can send them so	Supporting family financially	

	that way they can buy what they need.”		
	“She [sister] doesn’t speak English and she doesn’t drive so when it comes to that, she needs me to read letters from the school for my nephew...or to order things on line...or if she needs some money I also do that for her.”	Supporting siblings with translation, transportation, and childcare	
	“My fiance has twin daughters. I like caring for them sometimes.”	Cares intermittently for fiance’s twin, 5 yo step daughters	
	“I just want to say no sometimes...I feel like I can’t because, you know, they’re family and it’s not like you can just do that. We have the same blood. We share the same blood, so it’s more like an obligation sometimes.”	Caretaking as obligation; wanting to say no but can’t	

	“It’s a lot”	Overwork and overwhelm	In this section Mary pulls together all of the pieces of caretaking, school, and work.
	“I also have a job that even though I have a status of a part-timer, I still get full-time hours.”	Exploitation of labor	Mary recognizes that her workplace exploits her part-time status but does not name her domestic responsibilities as exploitive – instead “obligation”
	“I also feel like I'm supported when it comes to the financial situation, as in like last semester I’m pretty sure that some Miss from Financial Aid, she reached out to me and sent me some emails regarding some Maryland scholarship that I got approved. And then she told me that I denied it by mistake, and she, like, did everything she could and...they gave them back	Feels supported by Financial Aid at MMCC	The special care from one Financial Aid worker translates to the school supporting her.

	to me.” “I feel supported by the school.” “I feel very supported by her [names a specific person in Financial Aid].		
	“I’m definitely going back to school to pursue something higher than that [the AAS]...because I’m like what is the point of just, you know, working all the time and not challenging myself to do something better?”	Motivation for future academic plans	

	“[I could] do it through Frostburg I think it was, yeah, because apparently mainly all of the classes and the extra classes you have to take are on line so I thought htat was something that would work for me.”	Good advising at MMCC that considers her life situation	
	“Some of the professors are not, like, they don’t really work with you when it comes to, like, when you have an emergency and they don’t really get that, you know. You also have to care for all the people, all the family members.”	Professor as barriers to success	Mary suggests professional development for professors to help them understand the competing needs of caregivers.
	“No, I don’t have any questions. I just, I just kind of want to say I’ll miss you. I’m not going anywhere, I’ll still be around. I will. We know how it is. Sometimes I don’t see you or stuff like that. I know you are like one of the greatest teachers – sorry professors – I ever met. I seems you love what you do.”	Student professor relationship My comments to her: “Just trust yourself. Trust yourself. You are brilliant, and you are going to do fine.”	Here is where I see the power and relationship dialectic emerging; Mary shares her gratitude with/for me being a professor who understood and helped her. Is this why she agrees to be interviewed? What impact does this have on her answers? I also notice that my response to her are merged with advice,

			encouragement, and informal academic advising. What role does MY caretaking of students play in data collection?
	“I want to keep on. If I don’t pass...I try again.”	Persistence	

	"I don't want to keep wasting time."	Urgency to complete	
Brie	"I attended MMCC back in '08 when I graduated from high school. Um, I unfortunately was there for two semesters but I was doing some illegal activities and substance abuse, so I moved..to separate myself from the people I was doing those things with. I moved to Alabama." "I loved my hometown but wanted a place where my four children would experience different cultures." "I had to start over."	Substance abuse as reason for stop-out Dislocation / move interrupted school MMCC as place of opportunity	Brie has 4 children under the age of 8. She is a stay at home mom and she attends MMCC PT and fully online.
	"I want to be a first grade teacher."	Choosing caretaking major / profession	
	"All of my time. All of my resources [are spent on caretaking]."	Caring for children as all consuming	
	" My husband, obviously has no other choice but to help out when he can."	Father as caretaking "helper"	
	"I have a good community up here...my neighbors are really awesome and great. They help out too. We help each other out, so it's not just family."	Importance of non-family community	
	"I need to have community, and I need to talk."		

	“I’ve done every class online which has been so helpful to me...because it’s not just my schedule I have to juggle. I have children who are in sports and dance and so it’s all of these schedules I have to juggle. So the online aspect really has [made it possible]. Really, if it wasn’t online, there is no way I could have done it.” “I do all of the mom stuff and the caregiver stuff during the day, and then after bedtime I go in there and I read my books.”	Online coursework makes access possible	Repetition of the word “juggle”
	“I’ve talked to an advisor there [at Frostburg]. Most of my classes the first year are online. I get in trouble the second year, so we’ll have to juggle that and figure that out.	Uncertainty in completion pathway after MMCC	
	“I felt like this day [graduation] would never come...because it takes me longer because I don’t take a full course load. I’m like ‘this will never happen’ and here we are!” When asked if she feels she’ll be able to meet her future academic goals: “I do.”	Confidence in completion at MMCC	Brie recently graduated with the AA in Early Childhood Education
	“The adult services at MMCC was phenomenal. They helped me pick my classes. They helped me...they were kind of my life coach at MMCC.” “[Math Professor] has been absolutely phenomenal. I signed up for his class and didn’t realize it was in-person...He has been so wonderful. He brings a computer to class everyday, and he’ll literally turn	Specific people’s encouragement and care made degree possible Feeling uniquely cared for and not a “bother”	

	his laptop around so I am in a discussion with my table.” “I love him. He said ‘Don’t drop the class. We’ll figure it out.’...He didn’t hesitate at all, he just did it. That’s definitely my highlight. He was amazing.”		
	“I have tried to sign up for childcare at MMCC. That thing fills up so fast.” “I did want the in-person experience, so I did kind of miss that [because I didn’t have childcare].” “I wouldn’t be working right now because of the cost of childcare. I would be working just to send the [two year old] twins to childcare.”	Inaccessible and expensive childcare	
	Brie repeats throughout the interview: “Nervous Nancy over here,” “I like to plan and know everything ahead.” “When I first started out I was so nervous and overwhelmed. Having that in-person class would have helped kind of settle my nerves.” “I’m an anxious person.” “I’m an overthinker.”	Anxiety	Brie has A LOT on her plate, yet she labels her overwhelm as something intrinsic to her – as being an anxious person or an overthinker, rather than her anxiety being a product of her caretaking circumstances.
	“That’s who I am. Always wanting more.” “I have all this extra time. I should do something important with it, and it’s like raising children isn’t important in my head.”	Wanting “more” / being “just a mom” isn’t enough	

	"I'm glad I went for it because I'm	Happy with	Brie really relied on her
	enjoying it."	decision to return to school at MMCC	advisors for direction on courses and professors. She claims to have only had one difficult professor and Adult Services helped her navigate that situation too.
	"I always make GroupMe's in every course I'm in to create a little community. Some other them [students] accept my invites but not all. It's usually the females who will accept [or join] the group." "So a lot of the people are in the same one [GroupMe chat] because we're all in Early Childhood. So [we're] kind of creating our own little team, your people that are doing it together. So that's really cool."	Caretaker to other students	I'm noticing women form and join community more readily than men

Scott	“I’m 35. I’ve got 3 kids....I’m a white dude” “I don’t know if I’ll ever use this degree professionally.” “I’ve got a family. I can’t really just, you know, sit down here for 12 hours messing with audio technology so here I am.”		Scott is a 35 yo, selfdescribed “white dude” who is backward transferring his general education requirements from his BS in Business Technology Systems from Virginia Tech to earn an audio production degree at MMCC. He is employed FT (and his wife is a SAHM. They have 3 children: a 16 yo, 6, and 2 year old. He does not have caretaking responsibilities for aging parents and they live locally. His degree at MMCC is for fun/learning. He speaks with ease and
---------------------	---	--	--

			authority about educational processes (degree vs. certificate; gen eds) and he has not needed to access any support resources on campus.
	“My wife stays home. She worked up until our third one was born, at which time it would have been more expensive and not really worth her working to send them both to daycare because she’s end up pocketing about 8 grand at the end of the day, So why, you know, take that time away from you kids for that.”	Cost of Childcare	Question I didn’t ask: Why didn’t Scott stay home?

	“Yeah. We share evenly. I guess the differentiating thing would be when I’m at work she’s the primary”	Division of domestic labor	
	“It’s not too bad...a little bit more stress but it’s something I care about, something that I’m interested in.” “I don’t know if I would be able to do this if I didn’t [work from home full time.] My boss is super flexible. Since I’m writing code we’ve got things that we have to close out through the quarter and as long as they’re done it’s not a big deal...that additional flexibility is something I’m super grateful for.” “I know I’m privileged to have that and don’t take that lightly...it’s kind of how I’ve crafted my career path so I could get to this point and do that.” “I’ve worked at home since 2017 and I definitely enjoy the flexibility and work-life balance stuff.”	Attending MMCC and caregiving with ease	Interesting tension here between acknowledging privilege and asserting that he “set his career up this way”; part of why he says it’s easy for him to take classes is because of the built-in support he has (a stay-at-home wife) AND he takes credit for being able to live this way.

	“The 16 yo [who he references earlier in the interview as difficult] is technically my stepdaughter...when my wife was in school she was younger so she was always either working or going to classes, so my daughter was at the grandparents house all the time. Kinda kept to herself all the time, and I didn’t want that for the other ones. You know, that’s got to have some kind of effect, I would think.”	Negative impact of parents return to school on kids	In this portion of the interview, I shared a bit about having teenagers and the ways COVID has impacted them; I know my turn in the interview was a kind of deflection from his assertion that kids are negatively impacted by single parents returning to school with little acknowledgment of the choice NOT to return to school and earn a degree. My tone turns to advisory, which he seemed to appreciate and feel supported by.
	“I got all As in both of my courses this semester. I set out to achieve a goal. I’m not going to squander that, you know.” “I think I’m much more focused and appreciative of the opportunities...than when I was 18 and fresh out of high school.”	Pride in high achievement	
	“It’s just a balancing act.”	Balancing life and school	

	“Everybody I’ve interacted with has been supportive. I have no complaints right now. MMCC has been great so far.” “Maybe as the younger ones get older and, you know, if my wife goes back to school...but since she’s home we haven’t needed it.” “I know my situation is not like most. I think, you know, the stay at home spouse / spouse works from home	Not needing / denying support from MMCC	Self-aware that he is in the minority as a caregiver who does not need additional resource to attend college Interesting denial of resources because not “needy” enough; what does it mean to “need” resources? Who is willing to accept them? Is that gendered?
	flexibility...it’s multiple things that kind of line us up to be in a decent place...I assume that most people don’t have that...having these resources is really nice.” “I don’t think I would take advantage of the [childcare] rebate stuff just because I know there’s other people that probably need it more than I do, and I don’t want to take those resources away.”		

Jenni	“I’m a FT student with mostly hard classes, like I’m taking anatomy, microbiology, statistics, sociology...not only that I also work more than 30 hrs a week...then on top of that, I take care of my dad with dementia.”		Jenni is a 21 yo, Filipina student slated to graduate in the Spring. She speaks with confidence and authority about her experiences at MMCC, and challenges me to consider the cultural differences in caretaking responsibilities for students. She is empathetic, curious, assertive, and equally self-effacing & self-aware.
	“My professors right now...if I needed an extension, I would email them and explain my situation and they’re very flexible. They really help me with that.” “I’ve had professors that are like ‘No extension. Sorry. I can’t do it.’ but most have been flexible...as long as you don’t abuse it....so your work ethic has to show professors [you deserve it]...show them, like, I’m really working hard in your class and develop a relationship with them.”	Professor flexibility as helpful but conditional Proving or earning extensions Cracking the code: knowing to ask for help	What does extension “abuse” look like? Who gets the extensions? Those who can tell their story with confidence? Those who feel entitled to ask? Lots of room for equity disparity here, especially among populations with lower levels of confidence approaching authority Jenni mentions at

			multiple points in the interview that her professors are very helpful and flexible (particularly [names Asin-American faculty member] who offered to make all lectures available online for students with children who couldn't attend class).
	“If this [father's decline] were to happen when I was in my freshman year, I would not even have the confidence to email most of my professors.”	Having the confidence or humility to ask for help	Jenni notes the important role multicultural services and counseling services has played in her success; she mentions one of the college bridge programs multiple times as critical to her success
	“The food too [is helpful]. You know they have food boxes and stuff next week where they're giving out food boxes”	Food insecurity	Jenni doesn't explicitly mention that her family uses the food pantry, but she knows the schedule and immediately begins to discuss financial insecurity in this same stretch of the interview.

	“My dad was our main breadwinner, and since he lost his job my mom has to work 12-16 hr shifts. My sister and I have to work too because now we have all the bills.” “He has insurance...Medicare..but it only covered a fraction of it [the cost of COVID hospitalization and rehab]”	Financial instability caused by medical condition	Jenni explains that her Dad’s rapid decline came in the last year, in conjunction with a severe case of COVID. He was hospitalized and in a care facility which racked up \$20,000 in medical bills. Jenni had already chosen MMCC for other reasons (to be discussed later) but his inability to work, and his need for FT care,
			exacerbated existing financial stress on the family unit. CDA Note: In this portion of the interview, I share my experience caring for my Dad in his decline with Parkinson’s disease. It opens a discussion about emotional labor and the weight of losing someone you love slowly.

	was experimenting...so if I went to university and I didn't have good study habits I would really fail at university and, you know, all the money I would have spent on that!"	MMCC as a place of safety; a place where people help you succeed Community college as the "safe" option for underprepared or undecided students	Was Jenni really underprepared or was her mother's fear of her leaving a message Jenni internalized and now sees as her lack of ability/preparation?
--	---	---	---

	“Let me give you some background...I grew up in the Philippines, and I was born and raised there. Now, in the Filipino culture, it’s very community/family tight-knit...it’s not really normal that when kids grow up they go and separate from their families, move out...even with our elders, our elders live with us. Our grandparents live with us. So my mom was not ready to give me permission to go to the military.” “I get him up in the morning, exercise him, make him breakfast, help him go to sleep, do activities like word searches, practice his memory skills like ‘Oh Dad, do you remember your	Cultural difference in (Filipina) caregiving	Jenni shares that she gets her dad up each morning, exercises him, makes him breakfast, goes to work as a nanny for twin toddlers, comes home and cooks for the family / does meal prep for the next day, and does cognitive exercises with her dad. This interview highlights that care work is culturally specific and at odds with the individualistic structure of college “success”
--	--	---	--

	best friend in college? Do you remember your name? And surprisingly my dad does not forget about his favorite band, which is the Beatles. He loves the Beatles. He really likes music, so we sit in our living room and I just watch him play his guitars – which stimulates his mind.” “Sometimes it, it’s a little...it’s a little...it’s getting a little bit hard now because i ask him his phone number and he forgets a number or two...He’s only 67...you know, seeing him decline is taking a very emotional toll on us because as of recently he’s been having a really hard time breathing.” “There’s different cultures in regards to caretaking of the elders in the Philippines. It’s expected of us. It’s the standard...What happens to the people that don’t have those [people to care for them]?”	Joy in caretaking Emotional toll of caretaking Sharing load with other family members	Clear love, connection, and care for her father and joy in the caretaking of him; Also a clear emotional load in actively losing him Jenni also talks about caring for other primary caregivers in the family – her sister and mom. Beautiful question asked at the end of this statement about the responsibility of care for other
--	--	--	--

	“What made me love it? The community: The professors, the	Connection to specific MMCC	
	advisers, the multicultural student services that was there to help. People that get into what the College is like.”	offices as critical (multicultural student services and bridge program) Connection to individual employees as critical	
	“I chose dental hygiene.” “I take care of twin toddlers for my day job as a nanny.”	Choice of care work for major and/or current job	
	“When you hear something like that [that her dad is at the end of his life], it’s as if all this [school] stuff doesn’t even matter anymore. And THIS is what matters.” “I get to spend time with my dad...but I have to make up that time by maybe getting less sleep, maybe omitting the gym.” “I think life right now is just school, work, and family.” “I have real life responsibilities.”	Prioritizing family over school and self	Jenni is only 21 yo. Comparing her life to that of a “traditional” college student as represented in popular media is a stark and dramatic comment on who gets to focus ONLY on college. (Race, gender, age, ethnicity)
	“It’s really, really hard to even find the balance.”	Balancing act	

	“My scholarship said you need to be full time.” “Timewise, I decided it was better to take the class separately [to lighten her FT load] and just pay for it outright...finding time to study and do your schoolwork is the very challenging aspect”	Choice to attend college FT or PT Time poverty = increase cost of attendance	Why do scholarships or programs require FT enrollment? Discriminates against caregivers and increases cost of attendance for those who must attend PT
	“I would say that I have been able to accomplish what I want at MMCC.”	Confidence in completing goals	Weird disconnect between all of the

		at MMCC	challenges and perception of being supported
	“I’ve seen first-hand how much [childcare costs] because I’m a nanny. This is like my natural birth control!”	Cost of childcare too high No support for eldercare	
	“Especially in the Philippines, teachers were someone you have to obey. If you don’t obey, there’s repercussions....but in America it’s different. So maybe you can look at this in your research.”	Cultural relationship with authority impacts Asian students	Jennifer politely nods towards the difficulty some students have in asking for extensions or exceptions to deadlines and highlights the cultural gaps this creates in college success. She takes pride in having cracked that code.

Paul	“I went back to college as a second career..after working for almost 10 years in the electronics field...I was looking for a new career”	Returning to college as an adult	Paul is a returning student who attended MMCC for the first semester after his daughter was born. He is married and his wife is the primary breadwinner. Paul transferred to a local, private college to study Education and remained the primary caregiver to their daughter through his undergraduate studies. He is now a middle school social studies teacher.
	“I was able to work on the weekends at Target. Target allowed me to shift my schedule from being almost FT during the week to working on the weekends.”	Flexibility that comes with being married and not the primary breadwinner	
	“It was a little bit stressful because I was an adult learner [going to school] with the kids right out of high school.” “[At the local, private college where Paul earned his bachelor’s degree] there was a little bit more expectations of their students because they were younger and many of them lived on campus. They cater to that community whereas a non-campus living student, or older students with families were expected to sort of, you know, pick up the slack and fit in.”	Discomfort of being an adult learner among younger students and/or in a system build for them	It’s interesting to note that Paul’s discomfort is less about time poverty or financial strife and more about not fitting in with the student body, as compared to other interviewees whose discomfort comes in different forms

	“So there was a lot of pressure to try to get it done in a timely manner and, you know, not mess up. And then, of course, balancing that with...being available for [his daughter] when she needed me.” “I wanted to make sure I wasn’t putting myself further backwards.”	Urgency to complete Balancing act Financial investment in education perceived as a stress on the family	Paul mentions urgency to complete multiple times in the interview. I didn’t dig in here to WHY he felt urgent, but he did mention at one point that there is cost to delayed completion. Is this gendered?
	“I felt that support at MMCC, especially with the head of the education program.”	Impact of individual connection with employees at MMCC	
	“MMCC I felt was a little bit more understanding about people having other things going on in their life. I felt the relationships were a little more casual, a little closer.”	MMCC more flexible and “closer” than the 4 year school	It’s interesting that he describes the local, private college as “more professional” than MMCC because the professors are less flexible and accommodating
	“I don’t expect them to provide	Family-friendly	Paul repeats several
	childcare. I don’t think that’s a reasonable ask...but it would be nice if there had been a little bit more kidfriendly zones that a parent could study and not feel like you were imposing.”	spaces	times in the interview that he doesn’t think it’s reasonable to ask the college to provide babysitting or caregiving. It made me wonder, why not?

	“I mapped out a plan on what courses I needed...I made a checklist. I literally made a checklist...I had to go to her [his advisor’s] office and knock on her door and stand and wait on advisory day [to be sure I took the right classes].”	Individual responsibility for navigating college Confidence to ask questions	In Paul’s Interview, I pointed out that his successful navigation of college may have as much to do with his planfulness as it has to do with the fact that he comes from a family system that has done college. (Both parents are college educated and he attended private schools through elementary school)
Jack	“I am 55 years old, and I’ll be direct. I am professionally successful. I’m in the last quarter of my career...I am an organizational consultant with IT...and I’m sort of tiring of it.” “I’m a really involved Dad.” “I don’t have a small income...I have a very good income.”	Choice to attend community college related to family obligations Involved parent identity & obligation	Jack is a 55 yo, selfidentified “rich white guy” who is attending MMCC to retool his tech career. He attended a prestigious, private high school and has a BA in Professional Writing. He is now a successful IT strategist. He is married with two “very, very intelligent” kids – who are both attending 4-year colleges out of state. He and his wife share caregiving responsibilities, and his return to school is supported by the whole family. If Jack can finish his prerequisites in highlevel Math at MMCC, he plans to apply to

			graduate schools for a Masters in Data Science so he can change the trajectory of his career. He notes that his attendance at MMCC is completely optional (so not driven by economic or work insecurity). He also mentions multiple times throughout the interview that he is (1) a champion of community colleges, (2) interested in making MMCC a better fit for “retooling” students, and (3) aware that as difficult as it has been to parent, hold down a job, and work, that he has it “easy” compared to other students with fewer resources. He mentions race and class (including his own white privilege) multiple times in the conversation. He also says there is absolutely “no way” he could do this if he was earlier in career with less financial security and more caretaking responsibilities. It is also important to note that Jack is contemplating stopping out of MMCC because – in spite of his resources and job flexibility – he earned a C in a course last semester because he prioritized his daughter’s senior year activities and
--	--	--	---

			support over Calc II. Since his goal is to get into grad school – a C is unacceptable for him. Jack is a powerful voice that demonstrates how college systems and schedules are at odds with the needs of working and caretaking adults. He also asserts a stronger critique of the College than any other person I interviewed, and offered to speak directly with the President if necessary.
	“[Bunker Hill community College] is what allowed me to do enough to prove myself academically to get back into school and finish at [name of four-year university].”	Community college as stop gap for public schools and 4 year school	
	“Even though I thought I knew what the work would require academicallywise, I did not anticipate that my daughter would need more help with things like [college] admissions...There was no way for me to know the additional work my daughter will require.”	Unpredictability of caregiving responsibilities	

	“So I tanked Linear Algebra...I got a C in Linear Algebra, and let me tell you, I’m much better than a C. The C represents to me the fact that I made the right choice, because my daughter is going to Emory and, you know, I can repeat Linear Algebra.” “My God! If I was in my 30s and starting out, it [trying to attend MMCC while working and caregiving] would be	Choosing family over school Caregiving impacting grades Additional cost of caregiving	
--	---	--	--

	devastating...Nevertheless, I feel like it puts me at risk because I can’t make certain meetings.”	“Devastating” risk of attending College	
	“If I work with her [his daughter], my grades are going to suffer. And so, for instance, I could have done better on the final. I probably could have done better. And this is my choice. It’s not the professor. I want to be clear: it’s my responsibility”	Personal accountability for failure Protection of professor’s / institution’s standards	
	“I had to squeeze in studying.”	Time poverty	

	“I wasn’t fast enough essentially on the exam...it’s because the exams are timed. If the exams weren’t timed, I would probably get a much higher grade.” “If there were other nontraditional ways to demonstrate knowledge, like if you said to me, ‘Here’s a project. Can you apply this to a project?’ I’d been totally like ‘Let me get my – when I talk to my boss –let’s me bring my work stuff into the equation. That would have been great.”	Problems with high-stakes tests Need for alternative and applied pedagogies	
	“It [struggling this past semester in Linear Algebra] does make me think twice about maybe taking next semester off because it’s her last semester [in high school].I don’t anticipate anything, but I think my work suffered a little bit too.” “Do I withdraw? You know, which I didn’t really want to do – I didn’t want to withdraw.”	Stopping-out of coursework because of caregiving and work responsibilities	Jack’s comments are important here because there is a belief that students tend to do well if they can just get through their first semesters in college and “learn how to do it all.” However, Jack points out here that as course rigor increases, so do time demands for learning, which is important in advocating

			for supports throughout the adult learner's degree. Jack offers several helpful suggestions to the College, including (1) the ability to stop a course and resume it in the same place the next semester to account for unexpected, life interruptions, (2) study and professional work spaces for taking calls on campus if you need privacy or if you have kids in-tow, (3) course timed during the day for building a contiguous work day (and child care), (4) marketing towards adults looking to "retool" their skills, not necessarily to earn a degree
	"I'm having a really hard time, you know? When do I say to my daughter 'Sorry, honey, I'm not going to do this thing with you.'" "The choice is going to be bad for me. Either I end up not being the involved parent or I let my grade tank here a little bit."	Double-bind where caregiving wins	

	“I’m proud of the decisions [to focus on his daughter]. It shows me that I made the right choices.” “I like being a community college student. It’s fun. I love being on campus in my happy place. In my opinion it’s easy, accessible opportunity. You just have to do the	Pride in being an MMCC student and caregiver Student identity	A cultural value of “Family First” is emerging from these interviews. Students seem to feel good choosing the kids over their schooling. Who benefits from this value? Who is harmed by it?
--	---	---	--

	work...so I’m proud ...I’m an MMCC student. I’m thrilled by that. I’d like to make it part of my identity.”		
	“Both of my professors were extremely flexible.”	Professor flexibility valued	
	“I’m assuming my commitments are probably different than other people who are doing more basic things like being with their kids and going to the grocery store. And I do that too, but Marching Band is an all day commitment.”	Valuing certain kinds of care labor (Definition?)	
	“Involved parent”	Involved parent identity and obligation	What is the difference between being a caretaker and being an “involved parent”? Is one visible or does it connote contribution to a community. Like a school or team?

	“This is sort of white guy privilege stuff, ...but I would hope that if there is somebody who doesn’t have the resources I do – that’s what I feel bad for – because I think there’s a lot of people who need to retool and I don’t need to.” “I do want to continue my education. I do want to retool, but I have to think about that, because I don’t want my work to suffer.”	Race and Class position Risk connected to attending College	Jack essentially asks here: Who needs or deserves access? I note in this segment of the interview that there is a discrepancy between workforce retooling needs and structures of high ed. Jack agrees.
	“As I got near the end of the semester, I just got burned out..I got over, over-tired. I just couldn’t raise the energy. I eventually felt like I’d mentally exhausted myself.”	Exhaustion	
	“I wish there were a few other older students around because a couple of	Feeling like you don’t fit in as an	Feeling of displacement

	people are like ‘Are you the professor?’”	older student	
	“There is no way this would be possible if my kids were in high school. It wouldn’t even be an option. The only way it would work would be if I could take one class across like an entire year.”	Impossibility of student and caregiving success	And yet – students like Mary, Cara, etc do it!!
	“Education should be accessible, and that’s what MMCC is. That’s why I’m here.”	Accessibility narrative	Jack is passionate about the community college mission and replicates the accessibility narrative in spite of all the ways he just listed all of its accessibilities for adult learners.

Nancy	“My husband found a job here in Maryland and that’s that. We decided to move to Maryland and why I decided to quit my job and stay home – be a stay at home mom. I was like ‘why not just go for that – my education – you know, since I have all this time on my hands. I don’t want to sit around the house all day shopping. So I decided to go to school.”	Toppling the “Stay at home mom” narrative; being productive *Nancy doesn’t mention cost of attendance; she may be using the GI Bill from her husband?	Nancy is a 39 yo mother of two who selfidentifies as a Black/African stay at home mom. Her boys are 16 and 11 years old, and her husband is in the US military. They both emigrated from West Africa in their teens and met in Minnesota. Nancy attended community college for a year in MN, but stopped out because she “wasn’t ready” and because working and attending school was too hard. In her interview she describes the ease with which she cares for her family (described as “natural” for her), and the ways in which she has coached her husband into being a supporting and “hands-on” dad. She plans to complete her
-------	---	---	---

			Business Administration AA at MMCC and transfer to a 4 year school for a BA in Business.
	“It’s for convenience, you know. That’s why I chose MMCC.”	Attending MMCC because it is geographically convenient	

	“Caregiving is nearly something natural...it was embedded in me from a young age to...take care of babies.” “There was nobody around, so it was just me and my husband. So we did everything on our own and we took turns doing it, like if the baby was crying in the night, he would stay up with the baby. Or when he needed to work the next morning, I will watch the baby while he sleeps.” “Back home [in Liberia] the dads don’t really help. You just support the family. You just financially support. I told him he [her husband] wouldn’t just support the family financially. He would actually help – like sweep the house or play. They [men in Liberia] would never do that. I told him...when we start having a family, you will clean and help with the baby. That’s how it’s been!”	Definition of caregiving Caregiving as natural for some people Negotiating shared caregiving labor Caregiving as culturally specific and learned	In this interview, Nancy defines caretaking as changing diapers, cooking, nursing children when they are sick and taking them to dr’s appointments, knowing where chargers are in the house, and picking kids up from school. (I offered the concept of being the central nervous system of the family and she liked that metaphor.) She also talks about teaching her husband these things (except cooking) and how that was a cultural shift from their home country of Liberia where men “earn money and that’s it.” She speaks of how her Dad who lives in Georgia modeled this for her and who helped her care for her young children when her husband was deployed with the military. She presents the gendered tension of being “naturally” better at caregiving but also
			questioning and pressing for shared caretaking labor. By all accounts, she has negotiated this well in her relationships.

	“My kids have little cousins that live in Georgia, and I [would] pick them up on the weekend so they can come over to my house and play...because we had a big yard...they were living in an apartment so they couldn’t go outside to play.”	Caring for family members in addition to children Caregiving as relationship building	Nancy mentions that when they lived in GA, she would work FT and pick her nieces/nephews up on the weekend to help the family and to nurture relationships for her children with their cousins.
	“I split my time with the kids when I schedule my classes so that ...I can pick them up or [do] grocery shopping.”	Juggling schedule	
	“While I’m doing papers, they [the kids] constantly come asking me for stuff: ‘You know where this is, mom? Can I have this, mom? Where is my stuff?’ 24/7!” “Usually the older one doesn’t bother me, but the younger on...[exasperated sigh]...even my husband does the same thing!”	Unpredictability of caregiving Younger children harder to balance / Older children “get it”	
	“He is very, very supportive...He’s a really hands-on dad.”	Supportive partner as key to success	
Cara	“I was reading an email from [the public K-12 schools advertising the student parent support program at MMCC]...there was something about the title just spoke to me. I was like ‘You should try....I just feel like ‘Why not?’ It was just a good opportunity.”	Education as “opportunity”	Cara is a black, single mother of 3 children who is studying social work at UMBC. She is divorced and emigrated to the US from France after completing 2 years of University as a Child

	That's one of the reasons why I just [recently] went back to school because I feel like I'm always pushing my kids to education, education, education. So when I saw [the student parent cohort program at MMCC], I ...have to do it by example." "My son did it [filled out the application]. He was just like 'you just need to follow up.'" "My kids are really cheering me up. 'Okay, mom, you can do it – you can do it!'" "It [encouragement from your kids] does matter, because sometimes I'm sitting in front of my laptop, and I'm doing [makes exhausted expression], but I say 'Let me wash my face and get back to it!'"	Lead by example Kids encouraging parent's education	Psychology major. She returned to school after spending 11 years navigating the immigration process and caring for her then-small children. She started at MMCC because she saw the ad for the Parents Lead program which "spoke to her." Her 17 year old son filled out the application and she was able to complete her general education requirements quickly and "without stress" because of the program's structure and support. However, transferring to UMBC has been exceedingly difficult, as she is working 96hrs a week as a CNA, commuting 3 days a week to Baltimore for classes, and completing a 16 hour a week unpaid internship as part of her degree requirements. This interview was completed in December 2022, and I received an invitation to her UMBC graduation in May 2023. Her oldest son graduated from UMD the same week.
	"I do not have my papers for like 11 years, so by the time I have my green card...school was not on my mind."	Immigration issues	

	“I went to college in France...I do not try to go back to that [to attempt to transfer credits]”	Prior College experience	Cara notes that she was too exhausted from the immigration process and
			raising kids to try to navigate the international transfer process. She notes repeatedly that the systems are so different and they didn’t seem to align for the social work degree she wanted in the US.
	“All. It just suck the life out of me....Yeah, I feel like all. For most part of my life my mind was focused on my kids.” “I am super, super drained.” “It [CNA work] is mentally draining.” “I’m so tired.”	All resources go to raising children Exhaustion	Cara notes that MMCC was “easy” for her. She credits the Parents Lead community and the geographic proximity of her classes. Attending UMBC has been very difficult because (1) the program lacks community, (2) the geographic distance from her home, (3) the cost of commuting and unpaid labor of the internship

	“It [raising teenagers] is so, so stressful. The moods...when they were younger I knew how to do it, and then when they are older they need you in a really different way...I stay in touch with their feelings, what they are going through, and I know there is so much pressure on them. My 12yo is in middle school and trying to be grown, so it is very stressful. It is very stressful right now.”	Challenges of older children	Cara talks later in the interview about how the commute to UMBC for coursework is a central stressor, because while her youngest (12) is old enough to stay home alone, communicating with text and having the geographic distance from him is problematic in meeting his emotional needs. Cara kids ar 21, 19, and 12. The 21 and 19 yos are away at college, and the 12 yo is at home.
	“I still have a couple of days to decide if I’m going for my Masters, but I am still debating – hopefully if I have the strength.”	Confidence in attaining more education Doubt because of exhaustion	

	"I owe you."	Sense of "owing" the College (or me) back for support	On the day of the interview, Cara shared before I began recording that she had just worked a double, overnight shift for her CNA job – work that requires her to care for sick or dying patients in their homes. This quote was her response when I asked her why she agreed to the interview: "I owe you." That left me staggered, especially since she was visibly exhausted yet committed to helping me with my dissertation. Cara was my student in her first semester at MMCC. She also knows I started the Parents Lead program, which she credits with making it possible for her to return to school. This makes me uncomfortable because, in my mind, I am doing a job – the job I was hired for – to make College possible for all of my students. The belief that Cara "owes" me or the College for supporting her success is interesting...its the OPPOSITE of entitlement.
--	---------------------	--	---

	“I’m getting old. My classmates are 21/22. It’s not the same as Parents Lead where you can talk to people who understand you.”	Urgency to complete Discomfort being and older student Importance of community with other caregiving students	
	“I believe that [I will accomplish the goals I can to MMCC to achieve]. I’m very thankful for that. I’m VERY thankful that I started at MMCC because I see that it babysat me! [Laughter] I was able to get the tools...because MMCC was very structured. It was like a community – not a family but like the program wanted to fix it for me so I could be like everyone else...I feel like I could do this. I have resources. I have people like Janice who I’m still friends with today...It was easier for me.”	MMCC as supportive (overly?)	
	“At MMCC you see people from your life...I could connect with people more so we could have a support system and the school is not that big. “ “At UMBC I don’t even know where the library is. I know where my class and the bathroom is. That’s it. It was very, very different.”	Community “feeling” of MMCC vs 4 year school	

	“...and it was close to home. I don’t know if I would have been able to do it if I’d started at UMBC [instead of MMCC].” “Gas was ridiculous. I was spending \$100 on gas everyday...because I was picking up my daughter in Urbana	Geographic proximity to campus helps	Geography is particularly important for the single parent student. Time, cost, logistics all add to the collective emotional and financial price of earning a degree.
	and driving to Baltimore.” “It’s ridiculous. It’s an economic issue.” “That was the most added stress. The commute.”	Additional cost of attendance when commuting long distances Additional stress from commute	

	“I don’t need that extra support...any childcare. I just...need to schedule my classes in the morning when my son is at school. I take no evening classes...I feel like they don’t understand.” “I have a child. I have a mortgage. I have stress. I just feel like – oh my gosh – How are you going to put us in the field of Social Work [when you don’t understand human needs]? Why are you stressing us? They don’t make sense.” “[The UMBC Social Work program] internship is UNPAID...you’re taking this. This semester it is 240hrs of my time for FREE.”	Disconnect between college schedule and work life expectations / caregiving responsibilities Unpaid labor as degree requirement; incongruent with work students’ realities	Cara’s needs stand in opposition to Jack’s, who needs evening classes because of his 95 tech job. As a CNA and single mom, Cara needs daytime classes.
	“But today I am proud of myself.”	Pride in degree completion	

	“It [MMCC] should allow more hybrid....you know, when you’re in your class or on Zoom? So if you want to be on Zoom you can be on Zoom and if you need to be at home, you can be at home? Sometimes it just does not make sense, especially when you acknowledge that it is so far...I have an hour to be there and an hour [to drive each way]”	Suggest more course format flexibility to accommodate geographic distance	Students seem to be saying that professors are flexible but the structures are not (degree requirement and course formats)
	“I feel like they [FCPS] don’t want us or you to succeed if the zip code you live in is different.” “I feel like the access to education is not fair. It’s not fair.”	Abandonment by public school system	
	“Especially my youngest one...I started school and I think he is the one who really suffers. So when I talk, I would explain to him that ‘Ok, you know soon I won’t have to work that hard. I will be making more money...that’s the life you’re gonna have. That’s a normal life.’”	Guilt about choosing to go to school Hope for a better life	

Paula	“Well, I was married to my husband, and that was really a rocky marriage. And I was a homemaker...I was taking care of my 3 kids all that time, so I didn’t have a degree or anything beyond high school, and I knew I needed to do something.” My money is paying for this. I’m not going to throw it away.”	Chose MMCC out of necessity Value of college // not wasting money	Paula is a 75 yo white woman who returned to MMCC in 1964 to be a nurse. She was in a “rocky” marriage, and she needed to earn money to support her children. She had several stop outs due to work and loss (her son was killed at age 19), but she managed to complete an AA degree at age 34 from MMCC, a BA at age 40, and an MBA at age 60. She also worked at MMCC, teaching English and Business. Her greatest regret
---------------------	---	---	---

			remains that she was not able to be a nurse. What stands out in Paula’s interview is how little the culture and structures have changed over the past 50 years for returning adults, particularly single mothers.
	“I had something to prove...I had a lot to prove. I had to prove that I wasn’t a dummy, and that I could success in school.”	Having something to prove	

	“The nuns at my high school didn’t think I was college material. They wouldn’t give me a recommendation” “I really lacked confidence...the harm they [the nuns at her high school] did was horrible. “I would go home, especially after microbiology, and just cry the whole way home, because I thought there’s no way I can learn all of this for the test.”	Discouraged by high school teachers Lack of confidence	Paula notes that in 1964, the nuns discouraged most of the women from attending college by telling them they weren’t “college material. She notes the harm this caused her and other classmates.
	“I had 3 small children...2, 4, and 6. I had to get a babysitter for the youngest one when I went to school. I had to pay her.” “There was the child care center on campus but it was too expensive then.” [I shared that it’s STILL too expensive for students.]	Cost of childcare	
	“It took me several years, I did really well and I got accepted into the nursing program. But my husband was out of the house by then, and I knew I needed to work.”	Stopping out due to divorce	Paula notes the disappointment she felt each time she had to drop out.

	“I had to drop out and it killed me because I had gotten the State Senatorial Scholarship for nursing.” “The second year I was doing that program, my son was killed. I just could not continue. I dropped out, and seven years later I wrote a letter to Frostburg to ask to be reinstated even though I knew the period had ended, and they let me jump back into the program..I finished. I graduated – at age 60 – I graduated on the day of my birthday.”	Financial and educational impact of divorce and caregiving Stopping out due to family catastrophe Knowing how to advocate within high ed	However, by the time she reaches her late 50’s, she knows how to ask and press past arbitrary stop-out policies.
	“You can always come back”	Impact of individual employees at MMCC	She remembers the encouragement she received from individual counselors and teachers, one who said “You can always come back.” She also mentioned a very encouraging Math professor several times.
	“I was a secretary...in the early 80’s. I saw how valuable education would be...it would give me credibility when I met with customers...because everybody would ask ‘Where’d you go to school?’”	Value of the College degree (granting credibility)	
	“I made something up and lied because I didn’t want anyone to know I didn’t go to college.”	Shame associated with not having a college degree	

	“As a smaller school, MMCC was able to cater to us, or catered to me...[What about at the local, private college? Did you feel similarly supported there?].No, because I was in the minority there...almost everyone was younger.” “I think they [MMCC] made an effort	MMCC vs. 4 year school	This supports what Melissa and Scott claimed about the local, private college 30 years later...the 4 year culture there has remained the same.
--	--	------------------------	--

	to get to know students.”		
	“They all went to MMCC.”	Community commitment to MMCC	All 3 of Paula’s children attended MMCC
	“I would stay up til 3 in the morning memorizing and memorizing...I would just stay up at the dining room table and study.” “I’d rush up for class...and then I’d hurry right back home so that I wouldn’t be gone that long.” “We couldn’t get McDonald’s...I didn’t have the luxury of grabbing something and bringing it home.”	Physical toll of being a student caregiver (loss of sleep) Constant hurry / juggling Time and labor cost of being primary caregiver and breadwinner	
	“And then when I started getting As in these courses, I thought ‘Gee, I’m not dumb! You know, I can do this!’”	Gaining confidence through academic success	
	“It certainly was a lot of responsibility, but I tended to associate with other women that were also caregivers. We clung to each other.”	Importance of peer support / camaraderie	I’m noticing the language of survival in single mother interviews.

	"I just saw the possibilities of me being more."	Wanting to "be more"	
	"I had some great professors at MMCC. I always tell people that [the local, private college] was actually easier than MMCC, so if you think it dumb it down, they don't!"	Debunking community college stigma	
	"The professors tried to get to know you."	Community college professors as "better" than 4 year schools	Paula also comments here that she thinks the fact that many employees at MMCC were also mid degree (like me), that it creates a different kind of
			climate for students. She nods to the empathy and possibility she felt both as a professor and employee at MMCC.

Heidi	“I was a stay at home mom for a long time, and I did a daycare ting, and my ultimate dream was to become an elementary school teacher.” “I was like ‘Yeah – I think I’m gonna do something for myself. All I ever do is run these 5 kids all over the place – dance, gymnastics, football, you know, EVERYWHERE. So I just wanted something for me, and I wanted to go back to school to get my teaching degree...I’m just a mom, basically.” “I’m hell bent on making them grow up as strong women, so if they see me doing something, I know for sure they will do it in their own lives.”	Caregiver in multiple settings across time Wanting to be “something more” Returning to college as claiming a sense of self “Just a mom” / dismissal of unpaid carework as valuable Setting example especially for daughters	Heidi is a 35 year old, divorced mother of 5 who did not attend college out of high school because she became pregnant at 19. Her dream has always been to be a kindergarten teacher, and she will graduate with her AAT in Early Childhood Education in May 2024. She and her boyfriend live together as a blended family with kids ages 16,9, 6, 6, and 5. She self-identifies as the primary caregiver of all 5 children and as a “stay at home mom.” She also notes that she has always been a caregiver of some kind during her life, caring for younger siblings growing up and working as a paid child care provider later in life.
	“Oh my goodness. I feel like all of me is given to care. I’ve always been a caregiver of some sort, whether I was forced into it or I [did it] voluntarily...I’ve always been the sole caregiver.”	Giving ALL of self to caregiving Involuntary caregiver	
	“It literally will take up all of my time if I allow it, so I have to make sure I schedule time where I have to do my school work. I have to set a lot	Need for caregiving boundaries	

	of boundaries with my kids when I'm going to be doing my school work. So I need to let my boyfriend know I need this time away to do x, y, z."	Asking permission for time to do school?	
	"A lot of times I find myself doing the school work during dance practice or gymnastics...while I'm sitting in the car waiting for them – doing reading or taking notes...or if they're in bed." "It's definitely not easy. I guess, as all the other students, being a caregiver. It's so hard having to juggle. If you're not organized...if you don't have the will power to catch up when things are hard, it probably won't work out for you."	Squeezing in schoolwork / multitasking "Juggling" Self-discipline is the only way you'll "make it" (Rugged individualism)	
	"I have to make sure I have an alternative plan, like arrangements." "I do my best to schedule around it, but there's been a lot of times where I just have to be home, like this week. I didn't account for my two getting COVID, so I had to miss classes this week...you cannot fall behind...It's definitely not easy. It is very hard to be an adult student and a caregiver." "I'll be in this room if you need me. Just knock if you need me. So you're showing tha you have priorities for yourself"	Unpredictability of care work Falling behind Difficult being a student caregiver Interruptions when studying / Need boundaries Showing family that mom has priorities for herself	

	“My kids are always going to come first, so my kids school is definitely going to come second, and	Kids come first Regret about	
	unfortunately there have been times where I’m like ‘why did I do this? I should have waited til they were older.’”	returning to school Ambivalence about returning to school	
	“I just wish I had a break, but there is no break for me. My break is school...I really enjoy school. When I do get the time to sit in the cafeteria and do my reading or whatever I have to do...it’s like I’m working my brain.”	No breaks (Constantly laboring) School as pleasurable	
	“I’m not the same age as most of these people...it’s nice to still interact with adults. I talk to a lot of my professors...it’s nice to have that adult interaction, and I really do think that’s important for anyone because...I’ve been the isolated stay at home mom who basically had noone.”	Need for peer support as student Isolation of being a stay at home mom	

	“I always fall back into the mom role, like, I feel like I’m talking to my 16yo kid and his friends...and I just try to give some adult wisdom...I tend to give a lot of advice...just making sure these kids are taking care of themselves”	Caretaking role in the classroom	In this part of the interview I shared with Heidi my thoughts on the impact caregiving students have on the classroom and campus climate – possibly making it a more nurturing and warm place from institutions without a hyper representation of caregiving students. I’m interested in the degree to which how students self-identify as caregivers competes with their identity as a student.
	“It’s just really nice that I can offer some kind of support for them [younger students in her classes]. Of course that falls into my natural caregiving role.”	Caretaking as “natural” Joy and purpose in caretaking	How do the students themselves value the unpaid care they provide?

	“I love that I’m showing my kids that you can go back to school. I think it’s been the coolest thing. My kids always talk about me being in school...[they’ll ask] ‘Can you read to me from your college book?’” “ ...it just makes it all worth it...being able to have that conversation [about outerspace] with them and show them, like, ‘School is cool!’” “I really love having conversations about school...if they have questions, I love that they come to me...it just makes me really happy. I guess before when I was a stay at home mom I didn’t have much that was making me feel worthy...like I was worth anything, like, contributing to society. But now that i’m back in school, even though it’s hard, I feel like I’m contributing not only to society but as an adult in education, like I can talk to the students I substitute [for]. I can talk to my own kids. It’s nice. It’s a good feeling.”	“Setting example” for kids” “Worth it” Power of 2 Gen model of education Feeling worthy and “worth” something	Heidi will graduate for MMCC the same time her son graduates from high school. She also talks about how sometimes she is learning about the same things her kids are studying, just at a higher level. This gives her intellectual authority in the home, which she takes great pride in. She also notes that these conversations would never happen if she wasn’t in school. This is a really interesting power dynamic in their family initiated by her coursework
	“She’s younger – way younger than I am, but she was helping me set up my ipad...I’m super old school and I use pen and paper, so I really enjoyed her help showing me how to do that.”	Benefits of intergenerational learning in the community college classroom	
	“It might not be in a timely fashion, but I’m going to accomplish my goals	Confidence in earning a degree	

	no matter what.” “It’s not the College’s fault...it’s just a lot of my own scheduling issues.” “As an adult student I can’t expect them to have to jump over hoop for me, one student...it’s our job.”	Degree delayed because of caregiving (“not College’s fault) Low expectations of College and professors to accommodate caregiver needs	
	“Offer more classes when kids are in school...that’s my biggest struggle right now.”	Scheduling classes as biggest struggle	
	“Gary Hull”	Power of individual faculty and employees	
Nate			

	“I just want to change society...affect some actual change [in ways that] is able to impact a lot of people” “Childcare has a ridiculous waitlist.” “I can’t get government help because I make too much money...you gotta be in this narrow window in order to get any kind of public funding.” “It just sort of hit me what I want to do. I’ve spent my entire life selling booze, cigarettes, and drugs, and partying...making people do stupid stuff. And now I want to do the exact opposite...I have a lot to atone for...it’s why I’m starting with the certificate in addictions counseling”	Purpose in returning to school is to “make a better world” Unavailability of childcare Govt supports not accessible to middle/working class “Better life”	Nate is a 38 yo ‘Caucasian male’ who has returned to MMCC to earn a certificate in Addictions counseling. He attended college outof-state right out of high school and dropped out due to “partying,” returned to MD to earn his associates degree in General Studies from MMCC and transferred to a 4-year university in MD where he earned a BA in Communications. He studied abroad in London during his time at [a 4-year university in MD] and describes
	“I realized I never was going to be all that I could be for my daughter if I kept still living the life I was living.” “I’m going for my daughter. Since her birth my entire idea of the world changed.”	Struggle with addiction Making world better for child	himself as guy who will never stops learning. He shares custody with his 8yo daughter’s mother and describes the challenges and benefits of being a student parent, which includes the difficulty in scheduling classes around work as well as affordable, flexible childcare and the delight he experiences in “changing his life and the world” for his daughter. He is critical of social systems, aware of the role power plays in American family/work systems, and deeply curious about the human condition.

	“I broke my neck...knowing I’m going to be crippled for the rest of my life, I needed to get out of a job that required a lot of physical labor.”	Disability Citizenship enables access to fiscal support	Nate describes himself as “crippled”; Able to get funding from Dept of Education’s DORS (Dept of Rehabilitative Services) program to return to school and retool.
	“It’s always a war of power, and you know, those with power don’t want to give up the power.”	Awareness of power structures	
	“We’re all really kind of close in proximity...and function as a weirdass family unit.” “I only need help, like, an hour and a half a day.” “[Full time, in-home, childcare] was like 600 to 800 bucks a week...it was stupid how much she was charging	Proximity to campus, childcare, and family Geography matters Need for flexible, PT childcare	In this part of the interview, Nate explains how he and his child’s mother share/juggle childcare, and how they are supported largely by the maternal grandmother who is a preschool teacher
	people”	“Juggling” care with family Cost of childcare Informal systems of childcare as important Informal systems of childcare as unreliable	This also indicates the use and importance of informal childcare systems for folks connected to a community

	“Dads with little girls... just really think about things in a whole different way. Dads with a couple of boys – yeah, you don’t change. You don’t really start thinking about it from the other side’	Gender roles; power of paternal caregiving in shifting gender constructs	Being a caregiver caused Nate to look at the world differently
	“I routinely try to just completely scramble her brain with talking to her about physics and quantum entanglement, and just all sorts of stuff. I don’t hold back. Then I make her ask questions about some really heady things about the physical world.”	Importance of and delight intellectual engagement with child	This stretch of the interview was a shift in Nate’s demeanor. This delight and investment in his daughter is palpable.”
	“It’s always a scheduling nightmare” “I’m a grown-ass man. Give me a syllabus and a book. I’ll get it taken care of”	Need for scheduling that accommodates childcare and work Online work as a solution Paternalism of higher ed and traditional class formats	
	“I was so burnt out.”	Exhaustion /	Nate describes the

		burnout from work and school	terrible work conditions of the job he just quit at Dollar General
--	--	------------------------------	--

	“I weep for America.” “I cannot continue working garbage jobs making garbage money.”	Critical of American Social Systems Working class exhaustion and financial insecurity	
	“If I was younger and taking regular classes, I would need some sort of daycare on campus”	Ideas for improving care giving supports at college Affordable, oncampus childcare Lab school for AAT students that provides daycare	Nate make a few suggestions here I haven’t quoted directly but are in the language that follows this quote
Tammy	“[As a teenage mom] coming to Fredrick, leaving my hometown ...not being able to establish that education for myself alongside my son [and] the idea that I had to work to take care of this person – this little human I was responsible for – ...brought me to MMCC.” “I was a single mom then...I had limited time...everything was limited” “It’s always so different, especially when the children are younger versus when they are older, because they are a little bit more independent” “Your passion is your purpose.”	Geographically dislocated from family Pressure to provide financially for family Driven towards education by need to provide Single mom; resource constraint (time / money / energy) Demands of older	Tammy is a self-identified 43 yo African American woman of non-hispanic decent. She is the mother of 2 boys, now 25 and 17 years old. She had her first child as a single teenager and her second child as a married person, In addition to her care work as a mother (which she describes as changing significantly over time due to her resources, relationships, health, job status, and age of children), she is a parttime employee at MMCC. She is also a

	“I tried to transition to college life after completing the nursing assistant program. It was almost impossible.”	vs yonder children Hope / joy / purpose College as “almost impossible” as a caregiving student	practicing CNA/GNA and a licensed minister. Her commitment to community service, transformational relationships, mental health awareness, and supporting mothers in particular is evident in her interview. Tammy is a Social Work major with a post secondary certificate in nursing and the goal of becoming a community social worker focused on overlapping systemic issues that drive mental illness and financial instability.
	“[MMCC] gave me the opportunity to throw myself into college life. It gave me the opportunity to do continuing education first, and it had a lot of flexibility...I was able to bring my kid to class if I didn’t have childcare.”	Flexibility of community college “Opportunity” Stackable credentials Able to bring kid to class	
	“I wasn’t shunned upon”	Feeling “not shunned” / included as nontraditional student	

	“I wanted to be a nurse, and that was only because I thought that nursing would give me stability...it wasn’t any passion of mine...but financially my kid and me would be better off”	Nursing chosen because of job stability Choosing major for job security not love of field	
--	---	---	--

	“I want to do something that makes me happy.”	Changing major to do a spiritually fulfilling job	Transgressive? Why is the right to study what you love and change your mind only afforded to yonder students? Fixed way of thinking about age and class
	“Two year hiatus from being ill” “I was not accepted by by [traditional aged] peers...they felt like I was disruptive to them...I was the single mom who did not have [help]. I wasn’t afforded that...and I’m not even from the area so I didn’t even have a friend. So I had to do what I had to do because my kid still had to eat...so that took me out of school for a little bit” “You know, you’re offered pampers but not an education”	Stop outs Single mom stigma Isolation / outcast Survival in a context of middle class comfort Single mom students not being offered an education	Tammy got very ill during COVID and was unable to continue work or school She has several stop outs earlier in her life, especially when she was a single mother This entire section about single mothers as disposable to high education is worth reexamining for a separate article

	“My area [of interest] is mental health...I think a lot of things can cause you to have mental illness”	Mental illness caused by stress (not endemic to the student but by the student’s living conditions)	
	“I just want to be that connection...those tree branches to make sure that everything is connected”	Desire to “give back” to the community as form of caretaking	
	“We’re just one big happy family and everybody is working towards the	Community college as family	Tammy’s remarks mark a shift in how she feels

	same goal” “It’s like I’m not alone” “Inviting environment”		about MMCC now that she is older and married I sense ambivalence is her feelings about the College – possible due to her differing experiences as she has navigated different parts of her life and the College’s programming It is important to note that what brought Tammy back to MMCC was the student-parent cohort program; however, while it seems she feels stigma has melted away, she is still not done with her degree
	“When I went to NY in my first semester, I felt uncomfortable being the oldest person in the classroom” “I feel supported at MMCC”	Started at 4 year; 4 year vs 2 yr school	

	“It was important to me to show him that there’s not many places you can go without and education...I didn’t want him to think ‘Mommy’s a quitter’...I didn’t want him to feel like it’s ok to finish high school and go to work without getting a trade or a profession...so you could make a living for yourself. And I didn’t want [my son] to think that being a mom was a profession”	Going back to school “for kids” Want kids to value education Want kids to have stable career Want kids to see her “be more” to Wants children to expect more than domesticity for women	Transgressive; Futuremaking
	“Am I going to be able to finish?”	Self-doubt	

	Doubt starts to creep in.”		
	“I have foggy brain...which is a longterm side effect to all the medications that I was on... and I have people around me who don’t make me feel uncomfortable because I have an issue”	Disability accepted at MMCC	
	“I have a little quarrel with how we define non-traditional students, because everyone that’s 18 on campus is an adult...I find that family dynamics make it non-traditional”	Definition of nontraditional student being linked to caretaking	Here Tammy takes on the code for “not regular: college student and distills it to student who have complicated lives with caretaking responsibilities

	“The school has a lot of resources that they can offer but the community knows nothing about it” “Can we get this information out to the community so that [they] can actually survive?”	Suggestions for improving student caregivers’ experience: Connect with community Better articulation of resources to students	
	“if you’re an adult student and you’re at a community college, no one really pays attention to you” “We are, for lack of a better word, aliens on campus” “9 times out of 10 you’re going to give back to the community. You’re already established in this community an you’re already here. We’re not going to uproot ourselves to move because we’re transferring to a university. No, we’re going to remain in the community and whatever we gain from our educational experience	Invisibility of student caregivers “Aliens on campus” Geography of care; impact of student caregivers	Tammy started a club for caregiving students at MMCC and has taken it upon herself to deliver food and care packages to families who need extra support. She is not paid for this labor, but it brings her great pride and joy. I also think the labor Tammy takes on here in caring for her fellow students makes a case for the “climate” MMCC

Ted	“I generally try to not identify, but I guess if I have to, I am white.” “It’s a neurological disease...I have flare ups...there were stretches I had 2 years ago when I couldn’t do anything...and my parents had to come over and watch the kids.”	Reluctance to acknowledge race Disability	Ted is a 32 yo, (reluctantly) selfidentifying Caucasian male. The identity he closely aligns with is being a “stay at home dad” and former Marine Corps officer. He is
------------	--	---	---

	“I wanted to start asking bigger questions about my life and what I’m doing.” “The GI Bill is awesome. They literally pay you to go to school and you get a housing allowance...I was like ‘OK! Let me do that!’” “And then COVID happened. I could not do online learning” “I’m really proud to cling to that title [stay at home dad]” “I would describe myself as a stay at home dad...at times it feels very challenging but it’s obvious what [the kids] need...it’s all the other little things in life that I think make it more challenging...dad to day you don’t know what’s going to happen” “I’m sensitive about it still a little bit, but I used to get very sensitive to like ‘Oh, here’s a mom hack’...if the father is doing...the care of the kids and they’re stepping into a different rule [it shouldn’t be called that]....We did a gymnastics thing...the program name was Mommy and Me, and...I would just rage inside about it.”	Wanting more out of life / Job satisfaction GI Bill as primary driver for completion Spot outs bc of COVID and online learning struggles Stay at home dad Uncertainty of caretaking that is difficult Stay at home dad sensitivity about gendered language Anger about gendered nature of caretaking	married with three young children (3, 18 mos, and 2 mos), and is studying Music Performance, part-time, at MMCC to become a classical guitarist and instructor. He holds a BA in Mass Comm from a small, liberal arts college and plans to transfer to a state university to complete his Music Performance BA and eventually a Masters degree. Ted speaks at length in his interview about 3 things: The cultural complexity of being a stay at home dad, the support he receives from his wife and family to extend his education (to take on a career he loves), and the role the GI Bill plays in his college journey. He also mentions his disability, which also plays an important role in his gov’t support and this decision to be the primary caregiver for the family while his wife works FT outside the home. It is also important to note that Ted is involved in a special educational program for veterans with disabilities.
--	---	--	---

	“I expected to practice less, but I didn’t expect it to be like 4 times less”	Unexpected challenge of how much time school and caregiving for young children takes Time poverty / Hard to find time for practicing (homework) “Squeezing in” schoolwork between caregiving	Ted notes that he doesn’t do any other kind of caretaking outside of his children. He also notes that they do not have to pay for outside childcare bc they have family who help watch the kids. This system of support, he says, makes it “worth it” to go to school Ted and his wife benefit from the unpaid, volunteered caretaking labor of their parents.
	“I don’t think I would have thought of doing it [returning for a Music Performance degree] if it wasn’t for the GI Bill...I don’t know that I’d be able to justify..the time of doing it.”	GI Bill	
	“I was a captain in the Marine Corps. I’ve done a lot of things...that I never thought a single person would be allowed to be responsible for...” “There’s a very famous Marine officer from WW1 that equated being an officer to being much more like a parent/child relationship more than a boss/employee relationship...I was expected to know how my marines’ marriages were going...if a marine didn’t clean up their barracks...I would find out about it” “I showed up at 23 yo, and I re	Caretaking definition: Marine Corps Captain Paternalism in the military / “caretaking” definition	This stretch has me really thinking about paternalism in organizations like schools and the military; who is the recipient of care in these organizations? Why?

	"I wouldn't say I'm the black sheep but it definitely feels like I'm the only one who's got kids."	"Black sheep" in the classroom	
	"I kind of feel almost envious that I don't get to have these kids grow inside of me."	Dad envious of mom's role in growing/birthing children	There is some real anger and envy in Ted's answers related to the dismissal of male

			caregiving. He also mentions feeling isolated
	"...it would have made it more appealing...if it was just like, you know, when you have your classes"	Recommendations for college: Drop in childcare Lab school	

June	“I wanted to go to college right after high school, but I didn’t think it was a real possibility because I didn’t have the financial means – my family didn’t have the financial means for me to go to school.”		Jun is a 46 yo, divorced, white mother of three. She describes plans to attend college in high school and a successful academic experience complete with teachers who encouraged her. She took a year off post-high school to work-and-earn tuition money, but her plans were thwarted by becoming pregnant at 19. She married, had 3 kids, and eventually divorced from what she describes as an unhealthy marriage. In 2016 she saw an ad for the student-parent cohort program program at MMCC, which offered her the financial and programming support to finally come to school. She is currently in her last 5 courses at UMGC studying business administration to earn her Bachelor’s degree. Of particular interest with June is the deep identity as a caregiver which began with the care for her mother as a young child.
--------------------	--	--	--

	“I wanted something better for myself than just struggling on a high school degree...every job I applied for to try to gain a better income and have better financial stability required more, and it just felt too difficult” “I was always waiting for that right time.”	Wanting something “better” for self Needing degree for financial security Waiting to return to college	
	“I don’t think I would have been able to do it [without the resources from the student parent cohort program]...I could fit it in!”	MMCC’s student-parent cohort program allowed for return to college Scheduling, peers, and financial support	
	“I’m a lifer..I think I’m always going to be a caregiver...I was a caregiver from a real early age” “I think [being a caregiver] always played a huge role in my life that, like, NOT being a caregiver would be so incredible foreign to me that I don’t know what I would do with myself.” “I don’t know how much of it was grown into me because of my mom and taking care of her at such a young age...it was grown into me because of my mom” [Crying]: “I promised [my first son] I would screw him up as little as possible”	Deep Caregiver identity Origin of caregiver identity Fear and responsibility of parenting	June asserts and reasserts this caregiving identity throughout the interview; she describes the early formation of this identity in caring for her mother who had bipolar disorder and a father who left when she was 4. She describes signing/depositing her mom’s disability check and paying the bills plus ordering the house when she was a child. She also describes in this section the ways she has cared for others in her life with addiction, cancer, depression, Huntington’s disease, etc.

	“It took me a really long time to really understand what caregiver	Definition of caregiving vs	Who IS ethically and morally responsible to
	meant, and I think it took me even longer to understand the difference between caregiver and codependent, because I’m a classic codependent” “There is a difference between codependent and caregiving...caregiving and parenting. I think they’re in the same basket as one another, but at the same time they’re different, because when you’re a parent and you’re really truly responsible for you kids, like not just morally an not just ethically, but legally..and financially from every different side of the spectrum...” “Caregiving is such an important role. It can’t take a backseat to anything you do, but at the same time you can’t let it cost you your own dreams and goals and finding the right balance is difficult.”	codependency Difference between caregiving and parenting Balancing identities; Personal “Costs” of caregiving	caregive? (Structure of Welfare State)
	“I had to get [my son] help and substance abuse help while caring for his younger siblings [and while taking Statistics]...it was nuts.” “I just compartmentalized everything”	Substance abuse Managing crisis	
	“I had a goal in mind and reaching my goal...”	Tenacity in finishing degree	How classed is the “dream” of going to College?

	“Oh my gosh! I don’t even know how to verbalize...there’s no vocabulary words that can really explain the immense, positive feeling [of academic success]. It’s like a high – seriously.” “Schooling has done so much for me positively, like not just in the	Immense pride in accomplishing academic success Short term and long term impact	
--	---	---	--

	moment, but in my long term dreams. It’s like a domino effect”	on confidence	
	In describing a fiend who will be an empty nester soon: “She doesn’t have anything else, really, once her kids are out the door...being in school and still going after [my kids are gone] sor of helps”	Student identity as balance to caregiving identity	
	“Schooling has done so much for me positively, like not just in the moment, but in my long term dreams. It’s like a domino effect”	“Dream” of going to college	How classed is the “dream” of going to College? A dream indicates that it is a far reach, unattainable, requires things we don’t see ourselves having in this reality...is that true for middle and upper class people? (I don’t think so!!)
	“I’ve always struggled financially, and I’ve always had to tie up my all of my time working just to make ends meet...I grew up so poor”	Growing up poor	

	“I wouldn’t have survived without food banks. I don’t know how we would have survived without the turkey boxes at Thanksgiving...the holiday toy shops put on by the community. I want to be able to help in those areas.” “So when school is done and I have free time because all I have to do is work my regular job, I’ll have so much more time to give back, which is such a huge thing to me because I’ve always felt such huge gratitude for all the people that always help in those things...”	Wanting to “give back” Wanted to be the giver	June doesn’t see that she IS the giver, even now...even in the time she is giving me in this interview
--	--	---	---

	“[The College’s financial support through Parents Lead] motivated me to try much harder to prove myself out of gratitude...like, ‘Look, I’m not taking this handout, this assistance, lightly. I’m going to show you I’m worth it.’”	“Deserving” financial support Internalized rugged individualism	I didn’t hear any of the GIs feeling as though they don’t deserve support; What do we say about student who “need” support vs those who deserve it?????
	“Thanks to the Parents Lead program – you, Janice Brown, Brittany Carter in financial Aid...the professors...they were all so supportive and they never made me feel like I couldn’t do it...Staff and professors underestimate the value of what they give their students”	Unique support at MMCC; individual people’s support Value of faculty/staff encouragement AND tangible support structures	
	“I just couldn’t juggle it all”	“Juggling”	

	“It’s ridiculously expensive here, and the people that need a college education don’t have a college education, and the people that don’t have a college education aren’t earning enough money to be able to GET a college education. And so it’s a vicious, vicious cycle of never ending poverty	Geography of MMCC Working class “caught” in making too much to be Pell or support eligible “Vicious” cycle of poverty connected to lack of access to tuition	LOOK AT THIS: Pell Eligibility too low? Catching the true working class???
	“It’s a puzzle [that Parents Lead solves]. You have a financial piece. You have a flexibility piece. You have a supportive staff piece...if one piece is missing the puzzle is not gonna work.”	Overlapping issues / need	
	“I’m never focused on speed as far as how quickly I finish”	Pace / speed of completion	June has been working on her degree
			consistently for 7 years.

Jojo	“I always wanted to go back to school but because I was a teen mom, my efforts always fell short. When I attempted to attend MC, I very quickly learned that the structure wasn’t going to work for me as a single parent” “[Discontinuing school at MC] was very discouraging and disheartening, so I just put my academics on hold”	Putting college on hold College structures not working for parenting students Discouragement	Jojo is a 32 yo black - Hispanic mother of 2 who is pregnant with her 3rd child. She is an employee and student at MMCC and has had multiple stop outs in her degree progress because of caretaking. She was a teen mom with her first child, and with her second child was also the caretaker of her mother who had a stroke. She describes this time period of triplecaretaking as devastating to her own mental health. She is now happily partnered with a third baby on the way. Jojo is an informed conversant in this interview, as she serves in a capacity at the college to support student parents. Her interview reflects frustration with the slow progress of care for parenting students and a deep awareness of the toll caretaking takes on black women in particular.
	“I feel like I could talk about that one all day...all of [my energy and resources]. Every bit of me went into parenting and balancing caregiving. There was nothing left...it prompted my postpartum depression”	“All of it”; Energy and resources that go into caretaking Mental health	Here Jojo talks about the stretch of time when she was parenting, caregiving for her mom, and trying to work/go to school

	“It’s definitely easier now that I’m not caring for my mom”	consequences of being overtaxed	
	“I was being shamed...The load was difficult...caring for a loved one but when you're caring for them they are belittling you along the way or just mistreating you”	Shame Impact of abusive relationships	
	“I think the biggest challenge is the ongoing management of your time, your energy, and just balancing your priorities and the things that are most urgent and the things you can’t plan for in life, like when your kid get s sick” “You have to choose between your school work and work. You’re going to chose work because that’s how you survive ”	“Balance” of resources Unpredictability Survival – choosing work over school work	There is energy that goes into constantly reorganizing your day/week and trying to plan for the unexpected
	“That balancing act is ongoing and It’s exhausting.” “I will feel like crap if I don’t prioritize the things I value most [like her children eating healthfully]...the mom guilt creeps up and then evolves into shame	Exhausting Mom guilt Shame	What is everyone’s threshold for “Hard”?

	“I’ve tried doing it all – I’ve tried doing it. I’ve tried carrying it all, and it doesn’t work. My instinct used to be ‘I can do it. I can do it. Persist. Persist. Persist.’ but ultimately that wasn’t serving me...I was running on empty...I would guilt trip myself. “I had to withdraw from classes...between work and being pregnant, my body was telling me that I was trying to do too much.” “Making the time to replenish –	Choosing to do less in order to survive Physical consequences of caretaking and going to school Making time to	Later in the interview, Jojo talks about her role as a black woman in the classroom and the burden of raising raceconsciousness with other students. She connects this work to the stress and exhaustion of the full-scope of being a caregiving student at MMCC
--	--	---	---

	making it, not finding it – that’s what I’ve learned...there’s always a cost.” “There were definitely moments when I felt that I was leading a conversation or letting people know they can talk to me...it was a lot related to race...I had a very unique conversation with traditionally aged students in my Human Growth and Development class...a lot of students were very grateful I facilitated that kind of conversation [about race]”	replenish The “cost” of not replenishing Labor of leading race conversations	
	“I’ll take classes when I feel prepared. I’ll make adjustments along the way”	Rejecting “timeline” model of higher ed Deciding to move at a slower degree pace as protective of hope	“Timeline” model of higher ed worth exploring

	“It appears that unless you have a degree, you are not competent enough or good enough to do the work”	Needing a degree to get job and to establish financial stability Not “good enough” without a college degree	Jojo worked as a behavioral therapist prior to working at MMCC, a job that typically requires a bachelor's degree but she was hired anyway because of her certifications and experience
	“Prioritize and identify who your caregiving students are” “Listen to our needs and consider our solutions” “Have a space dedicated to parenting students” “Relationship-based models of advising”	Suggestions for MMCC for supporting caregiving students	

	“[Pay attention to] the unique needs of parents students, like housing, maybe financial issues...these things aren't uncommon”		
	“I don't think there is any support...I still have very positive feeling about MMCC, but as a student, I feel less supported.”	Frustration with College supports	I comment here that in many ways the “feeling” of caring comes from the students not the structures. She agrees
	“It's a lot of knowledge and a lot of expertise that we just share.”	Sharing of insurgent knowledge	Explore insurgent, caretaking knowledge....

Molly	“I’m with my kids 24/7...even when my husband is home, I’m still doing everything – even when I’m working. He goes to work, and he feels like he can come home and he doesn’t have to do anything. I just feel like my job is never done. Even when I was sick with the stomach bug, I still had to care fo the kids.” “He’s almost more of a babysitter towards the kids...they don’t realize how much you do until they’re actually doing it, and how important [caretaking] is.”” “Once I finish school, I could get a full time job, and I could get out [of the marriage] if I need to”	Gendered and patriarchal notions of caretaking Trapped in abusive marriage Unable to change life circumstances because of inability to caretake and earn money Having a degree but no job	Molly identifies as a 35 yo, white, stay-at-home mom who works part time as a substitute teacher. Her 3 children are 1.5, 4, and 13 years old and she reports being unhappily married in an emotionally abusive marriage that she can’t get out of for financial reasons. She earned a BA degree 12 years ago but has never used it because her husband “wouldn’t let me” after the birth of her first child, which happened in her final year of her BA. She is currently enrolled at MMCC where she hopes to earn a degree that will allow her to make a livable wage and leave her husband.
	“It’s a lot...I feel drained...I feel burnt out...I feel like I can’t or shouldn’t do anything for myself.”	Exhaustion Deprioritization of self	
	“Offer more caregiving services to	Childcare issues	Molly reports that the

	students” “They’re behind. I mean I know people that have been trying to get vouchers for months and they qualify for them”	are a major barrier; suggests caregiving services on campus Accommodating faculty but inflexible structures College is behind in offering state vouchers they promise to students	faculty in her BA program were accommodating and inclusive of her child. Faculty within the program at MMCC have also been very accommodating, but she notes that so far all of her course have been online and she has no idea how she is going to make clinicals work when she has to be in person.
	“I have no support [from my husband and family]” “I think being in an abusive marriage makes it really, really hard – makes it harder for me when you don’t have that support system. It makes it really hard for returning to school.”	Importance of family support Abusive marriage	In this part of the interview, I shared my experience as a returning student trapped in an abusive marriage. I shared with Molly that one question I keep asking is “Who cares for the caregiver?”
	“I got pregnant with my son and it was unexpected”	Left holding the bag of caretaking responsibilities when pregnancy is unexpected	
	“They won’t let me register for classes until I pay a \$300 bill; if they had a payment plan or something...it’s ridiculous...they need more flexibility with payments and payment plans”	Withholding enrollment for a \$200 balance	This story prompted me to reach out to Financial Aid to see if we can be more flexible with payment.

Tonya	“I’m trying to figure out ‘alright: where can I go? How long are we going to be here? Is it worth it for me to go back? I started sign language and I’m like ‘Am I going to be able	Military spouse Already has a degree	Tonya is a 35 year old mother of three who self-identifies as Hispanic (ethnically Mexican) and white, or
	to finish?” “Its great. Since I already have a degree, I just need a few classes.”	Impact of dislocation and unpredictable nature of military family life	“mixed.” She is a military wife and parttime substitute teacher who holds a BA in Geology and Oceanography. She is currently enrolled at MMCC and moved to [mid-Maryland 1.5 years ago because her husband was stationed here.
	“Being in the military we don’t have a lot of people, you know, when you’re new here, so you really have to rely on yourself” “I don’t have any resources. I just, you know, do it. ‘Fake it til you make it’ [laughs]”	Lack of family support beyond nuclear family Self Reliance /Rugged Individualism No expectations of College to provide childcare support	
	“This [extra expectation of 15 hours of required tutoring] wasn’t mentioned ahead of time in the course description...how and I going to do that? So now I have to fit that into my schedule somehow.”	Problems with unexpected assignments not made clear in the course description	In the interview I promised to move these concerns forward to the College, and I have.

	“It’s exhausting...there are so many things to take care of...I have 100 plans.” “What kind of time and energy? ALL OF IT.” “I have no energy.”	“All of It” (Referring to energy and resources that goes into caregiving) Using every minute to be productive Exhaustion	Every female participant said this in response to the question “What kind of resources and energy do you devote to caregiving?”
--	--	---	--

	“My husband is really good about taking [kids] to extracurriculars...he’s so great...so great about saying ‘Leave mom alone’”	“juggling” childcare with husband	
	“My husband said ‘You can do Girl Scout [troop leading] if you get someone to split it with you’”	Patriarchal ideas of “permission to work” Paternalism in marriage; “caretaking” as protection	Tonya’s relationship with her husband is interesting because with she reports it as balanced in terms of labor, she also nods to needing permission to volunteer and his caretaking labor as “helping” not as an expectation of equal engagement. However, her husband’s recommendations sound like protection against other people exploiting her time. This feels like paternalism to me, but she experiences it as care/love/support.

	“I study in the cracks...I take my backpack everywhere.”	Studying “in the cracks” Innovation in studying	Tonya describes the way she studies, which is wildly innovative, efficient, and self-aware. She uses Instagram Reels to practice translations and keeps a sheet in her purse of the lines she needs to practice for each week so that she can use her few minutes of down time (like standing in line at the store) to study.
	“I feel like if [other students] don’t have families they’re not as held back”	Parenting / Caretaking as something that	
		keeps you “held back”	

Amy	Her mom said “You’re throwing your life away.” “I had no education, and now I had a child to provide for, so that’s why I went to MMCC. I wasn’t able to go away, so MMCC was my only option.” “MMCC has a high pass rate on the Nursing boards than The University of Maryland.”	Parenthood as life changing (negative) Community college as “only option” but also a great option Choosing Nursing because could earn a credential locally and make a living Single momhood	Amy is a 39 yo white woman who is now an RN. She has one daughter who she had when she was 20. She was a “gifted and talented” high school student and was accepted to a prestigious university. She decided to take a gap year (against her parents’ wishes) and became pregnant in that year. Having the baby was a “reality check” that she needed to have a career and a way to support her daughter. Amy enrolled in MMCC when her daughter was 2, and she eventually earned her RN after 7 years of attending FT and had three stop outs (twice during pre-reqs and once during clinicals). She notes that nursing was her chosen field not because she loves it, but because it is a career that she could become credentialed in locally and make a good living.
		Financial support from family made college possible	Amy notes that she had family support with childcare and financial support from her daughter’s father which allowed her to attend FT. She notes that as hard as this journey was for her,

			she is aware that it would be almost impossible without those two prongs of support.
	“I wouldn’t have been successful if it wasn’t for [the Office of Adult Services at MMCC].” “[The women in the OAS] were wise, they were helpful, and they were encouraging.” “[Daughter’s name] went to the MMCC Child Care Center...so that was very convenient, and what a great daycare program!” “MMCC’s programming paid for over half of [daughter’s] child care’	MMCC as supportive: Office of Adult Services; Gender Studies Professor Childcare center great AND financial support Clinical structure difficult	
	“I felt like an outcast.”	Marginalized as parenting student	Amy describes not being able to socialize with peers because she had to go home and care for her daughter
	“I had to stop out multiple times, because I was a mom first.” “[Daughter's name] would take baths for over an hour. I’d sit on the toilet and I would read my textbook to her in a really high voice so she thought I was reading to her(<i>laughter and smiling</i>).”	Mom first	

	“It was a lot. I remember [daughter’s name] saying ‘All you do is read. All you care about is school.’ And I was like, ‘Well, at least I’m not at the bar every night, Honey!’”	Negotiating “Mom guilt” – knowing the long term goal outweighed the short term family discomfort “College	
--	--	---	--

		experience” as altered / different from traditional college students	
--	--	---	--

	“Oh my gosh! Everyone looked at me like I was Satan because everyone else was like ‘I’ve always cared about people’ and I was like ‘I had a child and I wanted job security.’”	Picking nursing for financial stability not to “help” people	Amy tells a powerful story here of being in a Nursing class where everyone was asked why they chose the profession. When it was her turn, she was honest and said she picked it because she’ll make good money and always have a job. Her classmates “looked at her like [she] was Satan.” She speaks honestly about the EXPECTATION for women to do carework and the willingness to sacrifice pay for that work. My response to here here is a kind of analysis that contributes to the interview. I note that noone challenges that a lawyer or investment banker would choose their job because it’s lucrative. I note that there are interesting expectations in helping professions that are socially coded as female. (Teaching is another example of this.)
	“ If I dropped out I was deemed irresponsible and would lose my financial aid.”	Financial aid impact of stop outs caused by caregiving	

Nina	“The West African culture is very, very different...things are stronger like values and traditions, like the hierarchy of the family and things like that” “In a sense [my father] abandoned us here. So my mom took the reigns and [took] care of my sister and me...but I was 5 years older so I could see things clearer...It was on all of us indirectly.” “[Her father’s daughter] was a really good distraction, and the older I got I realized that too (begins to cry)...feeling not good enough for people who are supposed to stay in your life.” (Mentions later that she can see now that she was really depressed at this point) “African parents are really prideful. If their child doesn’t do things – like they don’t agree with their values it’s like ‘No. My child is bad...they’re a disappointment.’ That’s what it comes down to: ‘I no longer love you. I no longer respect you. You are the issue.’” “Catholics, we’re not supposed to consider abortion, but for honest, I was not feeling great about myself at the time and I was like ‘I know what this means. This is a life sentence.’” “I was living with my friend...” “My child is not safe.” “I had protective order after protective order.”	Immigration issues (financial precarity bc degrees aren’t recognized here) Immigrant assimilation stress: Expectations of a Togolese, Catholic daughter Pregnancy disrupting College Stop outs due to single parenting No financial safety net Double bind of needing to make money to survive and needing a degree to make enough money to survive Domestic violence // Abusive relationship Parents’ divorce as financially devastating to attending College Regret: “Life sentence”	Nina is a 24 yo, West African woman who also identifies as Black. She is the single mother of a 2 yo daughter, and she receives no support from the father who now lives out of state. Her family, who she repeatedly describes as “traditionally African,” immigrated to the US when she was 2. Her mother was a medical doctor and her father was an accountant (both hold multiple graduate degrees) but their credentials were not recognized in the States. Her father returned to Togo and her mom worked as an overnight nurse to financially stabilize the family. He father did not return from Togo and the parents divorced, which Nina marks as the beginning of major life changes for her. A key part of this transition was the disappointment of being accepted into, but not being able to attend, American University because her father reneged on his promise to pay for college. To this point, she describes herself as an excellent student who speaks three languages and has a 3.8 GPA – a daughter her parents were proud of.
--------------------	--	---	--

		Depression	
--	--	------------	--

		Overlapping stressor, including safety of the child Housing insecurity Self-sacrifice	She enrolled at Montgomery College because it was the only affordable option, and she was successful the first year. In her second year, she joined a new peer group (through her cousin) and had a somewhat circuitous experience in College after that, exacerbated by becoming pregnant. She describes multiple overlapping barriers to success including intimate partner abuse, earning “caps” because she hasn’t earned her degree, family disappointment, car accidents that have set her back financially, and child care issues. She is currently enrolled at MMCC, but she is unsure if she will be able to continue because of the overwhelming stress she experiences. It is important to note that this was a very long and very emotional interview, particularly when she talks about her family of origin, the child’s father, and dropping out of school..
--	--	--	---

	“It was a really, really rough semester. My kid was sick with fulltime [classes] and working...I’m still struggling sometimes with daycare.”	Unpredictability of caretaking and availability of childcare	The 2 year old daughter is present for a large part of the interview, and Nina’s demeanor and lightness shifted each
	“My kid is great. She’s great. She’s a lot (laughs), but she’s great.”	Exhaustion Joy in daughter	time she engaged with her daughter with gentleness and love.
	“Honestly, White people scare me sometimes.” “[The Courthouse] used to be a plantation...driving up you could see the cotton in the field...I was joking [with the cop]: ‘So if I have to stay overnight, what section do I have? Is there like a little bucket that I get?’ And he was like ‘We’ll get you gloves!’ He was joking and really nice.”	Race-conscious	This whole exchange about the police officer who arrested her was really interesting because she speaks about race and racial politics with candor and transparency.
	“(Furious) I’m never letting anyone baby-mom me again for one, and then I’m never fast and furious jumping in front of a car for someone else again. So I’m learning. I’m not doing certain things anymore...I think it’s be ok. I don’t think it’ll be as quick as I’d like it to be, but I’m trying to accept that fact.”	Defiance Narrative of Urgency	
	When asked what MMCC could do to help her as a caregiving student: “I just need a nap!”	Exhaustion Drop in childcare	

		Frustration with MMCC Childcare and textbooks Can't do extra credit if it requires her to get childcare	
Melissa	"College stinks. There is noone here to help me." "It felt like college wasn't built for me." "PGCC was 13th grade. Going there	Not "College Material" Feeling out of place Multiple stop outs	Melissa is a 47 yo single mother of two. She identifies as a white, Italian-German American woman. She is currently a middle school English/Language

was worse than not going to college at all.” “I’m a grown-ass woman!” (Story about Statistics professor taking her phone away in class.) “I can’t say MMCC should have done more. Other schools, yes.” “I felt like I was held to a different standard because I’m older.” “My stepmom told me to quit....’You’ve got to stop and take care of your kids!’ [She responded] ‘Why am I the only one who can take care of kids? What about their dad?’” “I haven’t stopped!” “One day you’re going to call me Dr.!” “I was NOT cleaning houses for the rest of my life. No!! Just No!!” “I always told all of my professors: ‘I’m a mom first.’” “My schedule revolve around my kids.”	Persistence Attitude of defiance or reliance / fiercely independent 4-year experience very difficult as caregiver compared to 2 year school Prioritized momming over everything else Active decision to carve out time for school Age discrimination at 4 year	Arts teacher, and she holds an AAT from MMCC, and a BA, and MS in Elementary and Special Education. She is in the process of completing a graduate certificate in the Teaching of Gifted and Talented students, and she aspires to earn a doctoral degree someday. Melissa began college at PGCC immediately following high school but had little focus due to poor advising and discouragement from high school teachers who told her she wasn’t college material. She bounced around at 3 different community colleges, taking predominantly business classes, and never earning a credential. She got married, had two boys and returned to college at MMCC at age 35 because a family member who works there encouraged her. She was a “part-time stay at home mom,” and she was cleaning houses to help contribute to the family financially. When she divorced, she decided she wanted to return to the “boss” mentality her dad instilled early in life
---	---	--

			and was determined to have
--	--	--	----------------------------

			a career that she loved and could grow in financially and intellectually.
	“I had no money. I was on food stamps and cash assistance. I made \$14,000 one year and still had to pay out of pocket for childcare.” “I recommend MMCC to everyone.” “...Almost 6 figures in student debt...”	Financial insecurity Childcare Student debt	Melissa describes the degree of her poverty when her ex cut her off financially during separation and before divorce proceedings were finalized. She was on food stamps, was pet sitting and cleaning houses to pay for afterschool care for her boys. It’s important to note that Melissa became tearful at this point in the interview as she described the women who watched her children so she could go to school. I was one of these people, so the emotional tension in the interview escalates here as I become emotional too. Melissa and I have reciprocated support for each other over the past 10 years.

Jalisa	“If I can’t be an actor or a director, I’m going to be a mom....and I’m going to put everything into it” “I still remember I had my first meeting with my adviser. She was also the head of the program and was incharge of the cap course, and she told me, since I have 4 children there was no way I would ever be able to make it – to get a degree. And I	Divorce causing financial precarity Motherhood impacting school and career goals Multiple stop outs due to having children	Jalisa is a 45 yo white woman with 7 children. She was married for 20 years and divorced a few years ago when her husband was incarcerated for life for “being a monster.” She did not reveal this fact until the very end of the 1 hour interview.
---------------	--	---	--

	would never [begins to cry] ...sorry...[pauses and cries]...I would never work in the field because I already have kids. But I did. I got Dean's list. I graduated on the Dean's list. It wasn't easy. It wasn't easy at all." "The school really cared." [Montgomery College] "Right now I have one foot in and one foot out of this program"	Discouraged by college personnel at 4 year schools. Told she would never be able to do it [earn a degree with kids] or work in the public relations field Emotionality around being told no Incarceration Overlapping caregiving roles "High flyer" brought down by caregiving Impact of individuals on campus who encourage CCs as caring Programmatic issues in PT (STEM) with caregiving	In the first part of the interview, Jalisa shared that she earned her bachelor's degree Orleans after becoming pregnant with twins. She switched schools several times before completing and married the father of her 7 children at some point in her college journey. While married she did not work but volunteered extensively in her kids' schools. When she divorced, she had to find a way to support herself and has done a number of varied and creative jobs to make money. Most recently, she started a caretaker business where she provided end-of-life and disability care in people's homes. She closed the interview critiquing the MMCC program she is in at MMCC for a number of reasons, including gender-biased practices and lack of access for people already engaged in care-taking work.
	"My sister stopped college to come back and help me with the twins."	Caregiving help from family made earning a degree possible	Jalissa notes that her little sister dropped out of college to come help care for her 4 children so she could complete her degree.

	"She was paying all my bills because	Financial	At the end of the
--	--------------------------------------	-----------	-------------------

	she needed a lot of stuff done"	precarity as single mom, even with a degree Intersections with domestic violence / abuse	interview, Jalisa revealed that her ex-husband – the father of her 7 children – is incarcerated for life without a chance of parole. She did not provide details, but mentioned him as a "monster" to her and her children.
--	---------------------------------	--	--

	“You’re aggressive.” “There’s a hypervisibility that’s not necessary that is uncomfortable and inequitable in the classroom...It’s very obvious, A teacher even told me she thought that the people who have children that are in the program would gravitate towards each other...and she would call me ‘Mama [Jalisa]’” “It’s so stupid. I’m like ‘Wait a minute – I see these commercials all the freaking time that say you can work and be a student, and you can be this and you can be that. But the one thing I notice is that in every single one of those commercials, if they show a mom or a dad who’s going back to school, they always show the person with a partner, and they show extended family in the commercial because that’s their cue” You’re not gonna be able to get through this unless you’ve got other people backing you up. And I have a real issue with that.” “I don’t know how I will make it work through clinicals.I don’t know how I will pay the rent, I have to pay the electricity. I have to pay the food...I”m paycheck to paycheck.”	Gendered issues at MMCC in PT Assist. Program Experienced discrimination from professors bc a mom Labeled as caretaker in classroom Critique of recruiting materials Critique of clinicals structure / financial precarity “Paycheck to paycheck”	Jalisa describes being homeless with 7 kids. Traveling for a few weeks and then living in an efficiency apartment with a friend and her children. They stayed up
	“When I kicked my ex out, we were technically considered homeless for a couple of months.”	Homelessness	all night drinking coffees and talking because there was literally no floor space to sleep.

	“My time is money, and my time is energy, and my time is mine.” “Yes, I’m a mom. But that’s not the only thing I am.”	Time as resource / Time as money Defiance towards devaluing caretakers time	Powerful argument here about the monetary value of time
	“Like giving me a hug and making me feel like things would be ok...she [Jeanni] makes you feel like she really cares	Experiencing “care” as encouragement at MMCC	Care here is about “making you feel like everything will be ok”.
Sasha	“I did life backwards.” “I suffered a lot of domestic violence, and it took me about nine years before I got the courage to move out.” “My identity was Mom.” “My entire life has been caregiving.” (Describes caring for her dad) “I had a fantastic experience [at MMCC]. I was close to campus...I’m not going to say it was easy but it was manageable. There were situations that happened at The University of Maryland that were not so manageable.” “[My son had] a lot of behavior issues...he basically, uh, all he knew was domestic violence, homeless shelters, and just – you know – disruption. He didn’t have any real stability, and as much as I was trying my ass off to give it to him, it was a struggle. It was a struggle. I had to spend a lot of time at the school with	Domestic violence Homelessness Overlapping caregiving roles “Highflyer” high school student / Option to attend college pulled last minute Proximity to campus as a resource Gender penalty for caregiving 4 year schools not accommodating for caregiving students CC as great location for student parents:	Sasha is a brilliant and spunky 38 yo white “cisfemale” who earned an associate degree with Honors at MMCC while raising two children. She shares the difficult story of raising two children (one with Autism) while surviving domestic violence and divorce from the children’s father. She describes the process of trying to leave her ex-husband and the difficulty she experienced trying to transfer to UMD to earn a bachelor's degree. She is just a few credits shy of earning her BS in Agriculture with a focus on IPM (a pesticide alternative) and Etymology. She stopped out because the commute and barriers to completion outweighed her need to earn money

	him and a lot of time in doctors' offices."	"Made it easy" Teenage pregnancy	to support her children. She is currently a highend wedding florist. Interestingly, she notes that her ex earned his degree from a prestigious university after transferring from MMCC, but that he was only able to do so because she took on the full caretaking of children.
	"It took me longer to finish my classes, because I was only able to focus on maybe one class at a time rather than, you know, a whole course load. It was just draining me financially, and I was looking at college debt that's starting to creep up to six figures." "It's difficult to raise a family in midMaryland."	Student Debt (almost 6 figures in debt and no degree) Housing issues Affordability of a college degree as an important part of a region's political economy	Sasha tells a story of a friend with a degree in Chemistry who was hired at AstraZeneca (Drug Development Company) but she turned it down bc the 6 figure salary was not enough to live comfortably in midMaryland.
	"I couldn't be involved in any of the extracurriculars"	Feeling isolated	
	"I would have more to say about UMD and how they need to do things differently. Oh my God! Family dorms would have saved my damned soul!"	Recommendations for UMD: Family dorms	
	"You know, the day you stop learning is the day you die.I feel like it should be just like medical [care]. It should be like food. It should be something that is accessible to every single human."	Value of a degree / Pride	Sasha is a powerful speaker and advocate.

	“I think it’s stigma. It’s stigma. It’s people feeling like they have to have the status quo...it’s like life has to be	Stigma of being a non-traditional student	I need to be sure to spend some time unpacking the way
	done in an order, and if it’s not done in an order, these types of people get their panties in a wad. They just can’t wrap their heads around it...I think particularly when women have young children it’s like ‘Heaven Forbid! They have young children and out of wedlock!’”	Stigma of being a young single mom going to college Doing life differently / “normal” college life Discrimination	participants internalize norms related to collegegoing

Shawna	“I never stopped. I’m always going.” “I’m always thinking ahead, like I don’t have class on this day, so I’m going to make this for dinner, but wait I work late tomorrow so let me do ahead and make 2 dinners tonight because I don’t know how hubby’s going to feel later on...you know, it’s constant forecasting – you’re in this moment, but you’re constantly in the next moment.” “I had to learn limits...when I’m exhausted I’ll say ‘you know what, I’m done. I’m not doing nothing today, and I have those moments like ‘That’s it – we’re doing take out tonight.’” “I need my workout...I need my tea...Let me eat. Let me sleep good.” “People from work say ‘I don’t know how you do it.’ ...I tell them ‘This is my goal, and I want this to happen.’” [In describing a time the family had a triple crisis, but she took a major exam anyway]: “It’s not about me. I can’t fall behind.”	Overlapping caregiving roles “Highflyer” in high school For-profit College exploitation Constant forecasting / hypervigilance because of unpredictability of caregiving Success strategies: Prioritizing selfcare, hyperplanning, YouTube playlists Need for boundaries with family to complete degree Exhaustion “I don’t know	Shawna is a 40yo African American / Indigenous, nonHispanic mother of 5 who is married to a disabled veteran. She is enrolled at MMCC’s and has worked as a certified medical assistant (CMA) for 17 years. Her children are 21, 21,20, 18, and 8 years old, and she is the primary caregiver for the children and her disabled husband. She is positive, energetic, and determined to complete her degree Much of her interview is focused on the strategies she uses to be successful, including the boundaries she sets with her families to ensure her degree completion. For Shawna, this degree means financial security, something that has hung in the balance his her husband was medically discharged from the military several years
----------------------	--	---	--

		how you do it.” Military life	ago. Of note in Shawna’s interview is that way she unapologetically prioritizes care of herself, which predominantly means investing resources like time and money on saving her own energy (e.g. getting take out when she;s exhausted) There is an interesting consideration to be made her in terms of defining care: What is self care and what is care for others?
	“It’s a lot. It’s just so much...you know it’s a lot. In my mind I’m like ‘I need my job...I need my paycheck.’” “It’s more of a struggle when you're living paycheck to paycheck. You don’t have a choice to just take the leisure time off. You still have to make those ends meet with the kids, and this is what caused me to stop school before.”	Financial insecurity / must prioritize work Stop outs because must work Living paycheck to paycheck	Shawna is back at school after attending a for profit school during her first marriage. At that school, she worked 11pm-7am CMA shifts while raising young children. She accrued significant debt and no degree Shawna emptied her 401K to attend a forprofit university and capped out her FAFSA

	“It creates different conversations as home...I don’t know the research on this, but ‘ve watched make a big difference for my kids...I find them to be more engaged. They’re more inquisitive. They want to know, like ‘What does THAT mean?’ It poems a whole new realm.”	Benefits to family of earning degree process “Opens a whole new realms”	
--	---	---	--

	“I definitely battle [mom guilt] feelings so that’s why I’m very open about communication...if I don’t say ‘I have a test coming up,’ they feel ignored. “When she’s in dance class, I’m in the corner doing my homework.” “Even when I’m at work and my child has a fever of an asthma flair, my husband doesn’t know what to do....[men] don’t know what to do...and I’m not saying this to be sexist or feminist but we do a lot behind and they’re in front...even [in other families] it’s all the same. You still see women kinda’ in the same dynamic.” “The main aspect is – I don’t want to say [men] ignore [what other people need], but they don’t pick up on it...but it’s all the extra work [that makes] for us.” “Don’t brush kids off, because we’re teaching our children to have a voice. You can’t teach them to have a voice and not hear them when they’re talking to you.”	Gendered nature of caregiving Balancing mom guilt with caregiving Time for mom Powerful model for girls Studying in the cracks Mothering knowledge Caregiving labor Valuing children’s ideas is part of caretaking	Shawna confidently and clearly states the difficulty and power of making time for her education. There is no wavering in her belief that this is best for her family. Powerful explanation of the labor involved in affective knowledge production and action
--	--	--	---

	“I can go to the food pantry and grab a snack to be sure I can get through class and focus...People don’t realize it, but that is hug – HUGE for people who are caregivers...they’re huge for people who have kids.” “The crazy part is that while you’re figuring this out, you think you’re alone. That’s the thing – 100% of people think they’re alone, and that’s a big thing. I think that would be	Suggestions to College: Food, Affordability of tuition, caregiver support group Isolation	
	huge for caregiver support – letting you know you’re not by yourself.”		

Appendix 2: Condensed Participant Description and Individual Analysis

Demographic Summary

The interview set includes a total of 23 people: 18 women (9 white, 6 Black, 1 Asian, 2 Latina/Hispanic), 5 men (all white, no ethnicity claimed), an age range of 21-75, and 6 students who identified as immigrants or as the child of an immigrant.

Pseudonym ²⁴	Self-identified Gender, Race, Ethnicity, Age, Student status, Caregiving status, and Marital	Researcher's Description and Synthesis of Key Concepts
-------------------------	--	--

²⁴ All student names in this document are pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

Jenni	Gender: Woman Race: Asian Ethnicity: Filipina Age: 21 Student status: Fulltime Employment status: Full-time Marital Status: Single	Jenni is a 21 yo, Filipino student slated to graduate in Spring 2023, and she is a primary caregiver to her father who needs full-time care for his dementia. She is also a full-time nanny to twin toddlers and is a fulltime MMCC student. She speaks with confidence and authority about her experiences at college, and challenges me to consider the cultural differences in caretaking responsibilities for students. She is empathetic, curious, assertive, and equally selfeffacing & self-aware. Jennifer explains that her Dad's rapid decline came in the last year, in conjunction with a severe case of COVID. He was hospitalized and in a care facility which racked up \$20,000 in medical bills. Jennifer had already chosen MMCC for other reasons (see Appendix 1), but his inability to work, and his need for FT care, exacerbated existing financial stress on the family unit. Jennifer shares here that she grew up in the Philippines, and she explains the cultural differences/expectations of caring for family. This interview highlights that care work is culturally specific and at odds with the individualistic structure of college "success." It also documents the incredible labor and time caregiving requires and the near
-------	---	--

		impossibility of working, going to school, and caring for someone full time. Somehow, however, Jenni is doing it all.
--	--	--

Tammy	Gender: Woman Race: African American Ethnicity: Nonhispanic Age: 43 Student status: Parttime Employment status: Full-time Marital status: Married	Tammy is a self-identified 43 yo African American woman of non-Hispanic descent. She is the mother of 2 boys, now 25 and 17 years old. She had her first child as a single teenager and her second child as a married person, In addition to her care work as a mother (which she describes as changing significantly over time due to her resources, relationships, health, job status, and age of children) she is a part-time employee at MMCC. She is also a practicing CNA/GNA and a licensed minister. Her commitment to community service, transformational relationships, mental health awareness, and supporting mothers in particular is evident in her interview. Tammy is a Social Work major with a post secondary certificate in nursing and the goal of becoming a community social worker focused on overlapping systemic issues that drive mental illness and financial instability. Tammy got very ill during COVID and was unable to continue work or school. She has several stop outs earlier in her life, especially when she was a single mother. Her commentary on this stretch of her life provides an opening to examine single mothers as disposable to high education is worth reexamining for a separate article.
Brie	Gender: Woman Race: White Ethnicity: None claimed Age: Undisclosed Student status: Parttime Employment status: No paid work outside	Brie has 4 children under the age of 8. She is a stay-at-home mom and she attended MMCC part-time and fully online. Brie graduated with the AA in Early Childhood Education this past Spring. Brie has a lot on her plate, yet she labels her overwhelm as something intrinsic to her – as being an anxious person or an overthinker, rather than her anxiety being a product of her caretaking circumstances. She refers to her husband has a “helper” with the children and considers herself primarily responsible for their care. She cites the inaccessibility of affordable childcare as well as the difficulty in finding a course pathway that aligns with

	the home Marital status: Married	her childcare needs. Brie's interview reflects the internalization of gendered carework.
Jojo	Gender: Woman Race: Black Ethnicity: Hispanic (Spanish-speaking / Puerto Rican) Age: 32 Student status: Was Part-time Employment status: Full-time Marital status: Repartnered	Jojo is a 32 yo black - Hispanic mother of 2 who is pregnant with her 3rd child. She is an employee and student at MMCC and has had multiple stopouts in her degree progress because of caretaking. She was a teen mom with her first child, and with her second child was also the caretaker of her mother who had a stroke. She describes this time period of triplecaretaking as devastating to her own mental health. She is now happily partnered with a third baby on the way. In the interview, Jojo talks about her role as a black woman in the classroom and the burden of raising race-consciousness with other students. She connects this work to the stress and exhaustion of the fullscope of being a caregiving student at MMCC. Her repeated use of the word "hard" causes me to reflect on and consider what a threshold for "hard" looks like for caregiving vs. non-caregiving students. Jojo is an informed conversant in this interview, as she serves in a capacity at the college to support student parents. Her interview reflects frustration with the slow progress of care for parenting students and a deep awareness of the toll caretaking takes on black women in particular.

Nancy	Gender: Female Race: Black Ethnicity: African Age: 39 Student status: Fulltime Employment status: No paid work outside the home	Nancy is a 39 yo mother of two who self-identifies as a Black/African stay at home mom. Her boys are 16 and 11 years old, and her husband is a Marine in the United States Marine Corps. They both emigrated from Liberia in their teens and met in Minnesota. Nancy attended community college for a year in MN, but stopped out because she “wasn’t ready” and because working and attending school was too hard. In her interview she describes the ease with which she cares for her family (described as “natural” for her), and the ways in which she has coached her husband into being a supporting and “hands-on” dad. She plans to complete her Business Administration AA at MMCC and transfer to a 4 year school for a
	Marital Status: Married	BA in Business. In this interview, Nancy defines caretaking as changing diapers, cooking, nursing children when they are sick and taking them to dr’s appointments, knowing where chargers are in the house, and picking kids up from school. (I offered the concept of being the central nervous system of the family and she liked that metaphor.) She also talks about teaching her husband these things (except cooking) and how that was a cultural shift from their home country in West Africa where men “earn money and that’s it.” She speaks of how her Dad who lives in Georgia modeled this for her and who helped her care for her young children when her husband was deployed with the military. She presents the gendered tension of being “naturally” better at caregiving but also questioning and pressing for shared caretaking labor.

Heidi	Gender: Female Race: White Ethnicity: None reported Age: 35 Student status: Parttime Employment status: Stay-at-home mom Marital Status: Divorced / repartnered	Heidi is a 35 year old, divorced mother of 5 who did not attend college out of high school because she became pregnant at 19. Her dream has always been to be a kindergarten teacher, and she will graduate with her AAT in Early Childhood Education in May 2024. She and her boyfriend live together as a blended family with kids ages 16,9, 6, 6, and 5. Heidi will graduate for MMCC the same time her oldest son graduates from high school. She self-identifies as the primary caregiver of all 5 children and as a “stay at home mom.” She also notes that she has always been a caregiver of some kind during her life, caring for younger siblings growing up and working as a paid childcare provider later in life. She also talks about how sometimes she is learning about the same things her kids are studying, just at a higher level. This gives her intellectual authority in the home, which she takes great pride in. She also notes that these conversations would never happen if she wasn’t in school, and also creating a very interesting power dynamic in their family initiated by her coursework
		In this interview I shared with Heidi my thoughts on the impact caregiving students have on the classroom and campus climate – possibly making it a more nurturing and warm place from institutions without a hyper representation of caregiving students. Her interview caused me to consider the degree to which how students self-identify as caregivers competes with their identity as a student.

June	Gender: F Race: White Ethnicity: None reported Age: 46 Student status: Parttime Employment status: Full-time employed Marital Status: Divorced / repartnered (was a single mom while at MMCC)	June is a 46 yo, divorced, white mother of three. She describes plans to attend College in high school (accepted at UMBC) and a successful academic experience, complete with teachers who encouraged her. She took a year off post-high school to work and earn tuition money, but her plans were thwarted by becoming pregnant at 19. She married, had 3 kids, and eventually divorced from what she describes as an unhealthy marriage. In 2016 she saw an ad for the student-parent cohort program at MMCC, which offered her the financial and programming support to finally come to school. She is currently in her last courses at UMGC studying business administration to earn her Bachelor's degree. She will graduate with her BA Spring 2024. Of particular interest with June is the deep identity as a caregiver which began with the care for her mother as a young child. June asserts and reasserts this caregiving identity throughout the interview; she describes the early formation of this identity in caring for her mother who had bipolar disorder and a father who left when she was 4. She describes signing/depositing her mom's disability check and paying the bills plus ordering the house when she was a child. She also describes in this section the ways she has cared for others in her life with addiction, cancer, depression, Huntington's disease, etc. June's interview prompts me to consider: (1) How classed is the "dream" of going to College? A dream indicates that it is a far reach, unattainable, and requires things we don't see ourselves having in this reality. Is that true for upper class people? Also (2) Who IS ethically and morally responsible to care
		give? What is the role of caregiving for the Welfare State vs the Neoliberal State?

Melissa	Gender: Female Race: White Ethnicity: American (German / Italian descent) Age: 47 Student status: Graduated Employment status: Full-time Marital Status: Divorced (was a single mom while at MMCC)	Melissa is a 47 yo single mother of two. She identifies as a white, Italian-German American woman. She is currently a middle school teacher, and she holds an AAT, BA, and MS in Elementary and Special Education from MMCC, and 2 other 4 year colleges. She is in the process of completing a graduate certificate in the Teaching of Gifted and Talented students, and she aspires to earn a doctoral degree someday. Melissa began college at a neighboring community college immediately following high school but had little focus due to poor advising and discouragement from high school teachers who told her she wasn't college material. She bounced around at 3 different community colleges, taking predominantly business classes, and never earning a credential. She got married, had two boys and returned to college at MMCC at age 35 because a family member who works there encouraged her. She was a "part-time stay at home mom," and she was cleaning houses to help contribute to the family financially. When she divorced, she decided she wanted to return to the "boss" mentality her dad instilled early in life, and was determined to have a career that she loved and could grown in financially and intellectually. It's important to note that Melissa became tearful at a few points in the interview as she described the women who encouraged her to go to school. I was one of these people, so the emotional tension in the interview escalated as I became emotional too. Melissa and I have reciprocated support for each other over the past 10 years.
Sasha	Gender: Cis Female Race: Caucasian Ethnicity: None reported Age: 38	Sasha is a brilliant and spunky 38 yo white "cisfemale" who earned an Associate's Degree with Honors at MMCC while raising two children. She shares the difficult story of raising two children (one with Autism) while surviving domestic violence and divorce from the children's father. She describes the process of trying to leave her ex husband and the

	Student status: Not currently enrolled Employment status: Full-time Marital Status: Divorced /Single (was a single mom while at MMCC)	difficulty she experienced trying to transfer to UMD to earn a bachelor's degree. She is just a few credits shy of earning her BS in Agriculture with a focus on IPM (a pesticide alternative) and Etymology. She stopped out because the commute and barriers to completion outweighed her need to earn money to support her children. She is currently a high-end wedding florist. Interestingly, she notes that her ex earned his degree from a prestigious university after transferring from MMCC, but that he was only able to do so because she took on the full caretaking of children. Sasha is a powerful speaker and advocate. Her interview reflects resistance and justified anger directed towards college structures. She reminds me that I need to be sure to spend some time unpacking the way participants internalize norms related to college-going.
--	--	---

Paula	Gender: Female Race: Caucasian Ethnicity: Age: 75 Student status: Graduated Employment status: Retired Marital Status: Widowed (was a single mom while at MMCC)	Paula is a 75 yo white woman who returned to MMCC in 1964 to be a nurse. She was in a “rocky” marriage, and she needed to earn money to support her children. She had several stop outs due to work and loss (her son was killed at age 19), but she managed to complete an AA degree at age 34 from MMCC, a BA at age 40, and an MBA at age 60. She also worked at MMCC.. Her greatest regret remains that she was not able to be a nurse. Paula notes that in 1964, the nuns discouraged most of the women from attending college by telling them they weren’t “college material. She notes the harm this caused her and other classmates. When she finally returned to school but had to pause course work due to caretaking responsibilities, Paula notes the disappointment she felt each time she had to drop out. However, by the time she reaches her late 50’s, she knows how to ask and press past arbitrary stop-out policies. She remembers the encouragement she received from individual counselors and teachers, one who said “You can always come back.” She also mentioned a
		very encouraging Math professor several times. Paula is a strong advocate for MMCC, noting that she chose to work there once she finished her degrees and her pride in having sent all three of her children there as well. Paula also comments here that she thinks the fact that many employees at MMCC were also mid degree (like me), that it creates a different kind of climate for students. She nods to the empathy and possibility she felt both as a professor and employee at MMCC. What stands out in Paula’s interview is how little the culture and structures have changed over the past 50 years for returning adults, particularly single mothers. In particular, I notice the language of survival in single mother interviews.

Ted	Gender: Male Race: White/Caucasian Ethnicity: none Age: 32 Student status: Parttime Employment status: stay-at-home dad Marital Status: Married	Ted is a 32 yo, (reluctantly) self-identifying caucasian male. The identity he closely aligns with is being a “stay at home dad” and former Marine Corps officer. He is married with three young children (3, 18 mos, and 2 mos), and is studying Music Performance, part-time, at MMCC to become a classical guitarist and instructor. He holds a BA in Mass Comm from Goucher College and plans to transfer to Towson University to complete his Music Performance BA and eventually a Masters degree. Ted notes that he doesn’t do any other kind of caretaking outside of his children. He also notes that they do not have to pay for outside childcare because they have family who help watch the kids. This system of support, he says, makes it “worth it” to go to school, but he admits to feeling isolated as a student father. There is some real anger and envy in Ted’s answers related to the dismissal of male caregiving. Ted speaks at length in his interview about 3 things: The cultural complexity of being a stay at home dad, the support he receives from his wife and family to extend his education (to take on a career he loves), and the role the GI Bill plays in his college journey. He also mentions his disability, which also plays an
		important role in his gov’t support and this decision to be the primary caregiver for the family while his wife works full-time outside the home. It is also important to note that Ted is involved in a special educational program for veterans with disabilities. Ted’s interview leaves me really thinking about paternalism in organizations like schools and the military; who is the recipient of care in these organizations? Why?

Molly	Gender: Female Race: Caucaisian Ethnicity: Age: 35 Student status: parttime Employment status: Part-time Marital Status: Married	Molly identifies as a 35 yo, white, stay-at-home mom who works part time as a substitute teacher. Her kids are 1.5, 4.5, and 13 years old and she reports being unhappily married in an emotionally abusive marriage that she can't get out of for financial reasons. She earned a BA degree 12 years ago but has never used it because her husband "wouldn't let me" after the birth of her first child, which happened in her final year of her BA. She is currently enrolled at MMCC in the nursing program where she hopes to earn a degree that will allow her to make a livable wage and leave her husband. Molly reports that the faculty in her BA program were accommodating and inclusive of her child. Faculty within the program at MMCC have also been very accommodating, but she notes that so far all of her courses have been online and she has no idea how she is going to make clinicals work when she has to be in person. I shared with Molly that one question I keep asking is "Who cares for the caregiver?"
Jalisa	Race: White Gender: Female Ethnicity: none Age:45 Student status: Parttime	Jalisa is a 45 yo white woman with 7 children. She was married for 20 years and divorced a few years ago when her husband was incarcerated for life for "being a monster." She did not reveal this fact until the very end of the 1 hour interview. In the first part of the interview, Jalisa shared that she earned her bachelor's degree after becoming pregnant with twins. She switched schools several times before completing and married the father of her 7 children at some point in her college journey.

	Employment status: Full-time Marital Status: Single	While married she did not work but volunteered extensively in her kids' schools. When she divorced, she had to find a way to support herself and has done a number of varied and creative jobs to make money. Most recently, she started a caretaker business where she provided end-of-life and disability care in people's homes. Jalisa describes being homeless with 7 kids. Traveling for a few weeks and then living in an efficiency apartment with a friend and her children. They stayed up all night drinking coffees and talking because there was literally no floor space to sleep. She closed the interview critiquing program she is in at MMCC for a number of reasons, including genderbiased practices and lack of access for people already engaged in care-taking work. She defines care as people "making you feel like everything will be ok," and she simultaneously makes a powerful argument here about the monetary value of time.
--	---	---

Shawna	Gender: Female Race: AfricanAmerican Ethnicity: Nonhispanic Age: 40 Student status: Parttime Employment status: Full-time Marital Status: Married	Shawna is a 40yo African American / Indigenous, non-Hispanic mother of 5 who is married to a disabled veteran. She is enrolled at MMCC and has worked as a certified medical assistant (CMA) for 17 years. Her children are 21, 21,20, 18, and 8 years old, and she is the primary caregiver for the children and her disabled husband. She is positive, energetic, and determined to complete her degree Much of her interview is focused on the strategies she uses to be successful, including the boundaries she sets with her families to ensure her degree completion. For Shawna, this degree means financial security, something that has hung in the balance since her husband was medically discharged from the military several years ago. Shawna is back at school after attending a for profit school during her first marriage. At that school, she worked 11pm-7am CMA shifts while raising young children. She accrued significant debt and no degree. She emptied her 401K to attend a for-profit college and capped out her FAFSA.
--------	--	---

		Of note in Shawna's interview is that way she unapologetically prioritizes care of herself, which predominantly means investing resources like time and money on saving her own energy (e.g. getting take out when she's exhausted) Shawna confidently and clearly states the difficulty and power of making time for her education. There is no wavering in her belief that this is best for her family. Additionally, Shawna provides a powerful explanation of the labor involved in "mom" (affective) knowledge production and action. There is an interesting consideration to be made her in terms of defining care: What is self-care and what is care for others?
--	--	--

Tonya	Gender: Female Race: Hispanic Gender: Female Ethnicity: Mexican Age: 35 Student status: Parttime Employment status: Part-time Marital Status: Married	Tonya is a 35-year-old mother of three who selfidentifies as Hispanic (ethnically Mexican) and white, or “mixed.” She is a military wife and parttime substitute teacher who holds a BA in Geology and Oceanography. She is currently enrolled at MMCC and moved to Maryland 1.5 years ago because her husband was stationed here. Tonya describes the way she studies and practices her ASL interpreting, which is wildly innovative, efficient, and self-aware. She uses Instagram Reels to practice translations and keeps a sheet in her purse of the lines she needs to practice for each week so that she can use her few minutes of downtime (like standing in line at the store) to study. Tonya’s relationship with her husband is interesting because while she reports it as balanced in terms of labor, she also nods to needing permission to volunteer and his caretaking labor as “helping” not as an expectation of equal engagement. However, her husband’s recommendations sound like protection against other people exploiting her time. This feels like paternalism AND she experiences it as care/love/support.
Cara	Race: Black / African	Cara is a black, single mother of 3 children who is

	American Gender: Female Ethnicity: French Age: 45 Student status: Parttime Employment status: Full-time Marital Status: Divorced / Single (was a single mom while at MMCC)	studying social work at UMBC. She is divorced and emigrated to the US from France after completing 2 years of University as a Child Psychology major. She returned to school after spending 11 years navigating the immigration process and caring for her then-small children. Cara talks later in the interview about how the commute to UMBC for coursework is a central stressor, because while her youngest (12) is old enough to stay home alone, communicating with text and having the geographic distance from him is problematic in meeting his emotional needs. Cara kids are 21, 19, and 12. The 21 and 19 yos are away at college, and the 12 yo is at home. Cara notes that she was too exhausted from the immigration process and raising kids to try to navigate the international transfer process. She notes repeatedly that the systems are so different and they didn't seem to align for the social work degree she wanted in the US. She started at MMCC because she saw the ad for the Parents Lead program which "spoke to her." Her 17 year old son filled out the application and she was able to complete her general education requirements quickly and "without stress" because of the program's structure and support. Cara notes that MMCC was "easy" for her. She credits the student-parent cohort community and the geographic proximity of her classes. Attending UMBC has been very difficult because (1) the program lacks community, (2) the geographic distance from her home, (3) the cost of commuting and unpaid labor of the internship However, transferring to UMBC has been exceedingly difficult, as she is working 96hrs a week as a CNA, commuting 3 days a week to Baltimore for classes, and completing a 16 hour a week unpaid internship as part of her degree requirements. This interview was completed in December 2022, and I received an invitation to her UMBC graduation in
--	---	---

		May 2023. Her oldest son graduated from UMD the same week.
--	--	---

		On the day of the interview, Cara shared before I began recording that she had just worked a double, overnight shift for her CNA job – work that requires her to care for sick or dying patients in their homes. This quote was her response when I asked her why she agreed to the interview: “I owe you.” That left me staggered, especially since she was visibly exhausted yet committed to helping me with my dissertation. Cara was my student in her first semester at MMCC. She also knows I started the student-parent cohort program, which she credits with making it possible for her to return to school. This makes me uncomfortable because, in my mind, I am doing a job – the job I was hired for – to make College possible for all of my students. The belief that Cara “owes” me or the College for supporting her success is interesting...its the OPPOSITE of entitlement. In fact, Cara claims to owe me for support and notes that she’s shown up for the interview because she feels indebted to me.
--	--	---

Amy	Race: Caucasian Gender: Female Ethnicity: None Age:39 Student status: Graduated Employment status: Full-time Marital Status: Married (was a single mom while at MMCC)	Amy is a 39 yo white woman who is now an RN. She has one daughter who she had when she was 20. She was a “gifted and talented” high school student and was accepted to a prestigious university. She decided to take a gap year (against her parents’ wishes) and became pregnant in that year. Having the baby was a “reality check” that she needed to have a career and a way to support her daughter. Amy enrolled in MMCC when her daughter was 2, and she eventually earned her RN after 7 years of attending FT and had three stop outs (twice during pre-reqs and once during clinicals). She notes that nursing was her chosen field not because she loves it, but because it is a career that she could become credentialed in locally and make a good living. Amy notes that she had family support with childcare and financial support from her daughter’s father which allowed her to attend FT. She notes that as hard as this journey was for her, she is aware that it would be almost impossible without those two prongs of support.
		Amy tells a powerful story here of being in a Nursing class where everyone was asked why they chose the profession. When it was her turn, she was honest and said she picked it because she’ll make good money and always have a job. Her classmates “looked at her like [she] was Satan.” She speaks honestly about the EXPECTATION for women to do carework and the willingness to sacrifice pay for that work. My response here is a kind of analysis that contributes to the interview. I note that no one challenges that a lawyer or investment banker would choose their job because it’s lucrative. I note that there are interesting expectations in helping professions that are socially coded as female. (Teaching is another example of this.)

Paul	Gender: Male Race: White Ethnicity: Christian (?) Age: 47 Student status: Parttime Employment status: Full-time Marital Status: Married	Paul is a returning student who attended MMCC for the first semester after his daughter was born. He is married and his wife is the primary breadwinner. Paul transferred to a local, private college to study Education and remained the primary caregiver to their daughter through his studies at the local, private college. He is now a middle school social studies teacher in a neighboring county It's interesting to note that Paul's discomfort is less about time poverty or financial strife and more about not fitting in with the student body, as compared to other interviewees whose discomfort comes in different forms. Paul also mentions urgency to complete multiple times in the interview. I didn't dig in here to why it felt urgent, but he did mention at one point that there is cost to delayed completion. It's interesting that he describes the local, private college he attended for his BA as "more professional" because the professors are less flexible and less accommodating. His perception is that the rigor and quality of a college is root in adherence to existing timelines and structures of student fitness. In Paul's Interview, I pointed out that his successful navigation of College may have as much to do with his planfulness as it has to do with the fact that he
		comes from a family system that has done college. (Both parents are college educated and he attended private schools through elementary school.) Paul repeats several times in the interview that he doesn't think it's reasonable to ask the college to provide babysitting or caregiving. It made me wonder, why not? We provide special services to other populations like Veterans and Students with Disabilities because we recognize equity gaps in educational access for these populations?

Nate	Race: Caucasian Gender: Male Ethnicity: None reported Age: 43 Student status: Parttime Employment status: Full-time Marital Status: Single	Nate is a 38 yo ‘Caucasian male’ who has returned to MMCC to earn a certificate in Addictions counseling. He attended college out of state right out of high school and dropped out due to “partying,” returned to MD to earn his associates degree in General Studies from MMCC and transferred to Towson where he earned a BA in Communications. He studied abroad in London during his time at Towson and describes himself as guy who will never stops learning. He shares custody with his 8yo daughter’s mother and describes the challenges and benefits of being a student parent, which includes the difficulty in scheduling classes around work as well as affordable, flexible childcare and the delight he experiences in “changing his life and the world” for his daughter. He is critical of social systems, aware of the role power plays in American family/work systems, and deeply curious about the human condition. Nate describes himself as “crippled” and able to get funding from Dept of Education’s DORS (Dept of Rehabilitative Services) program to return to school and retool. He also explains how he and his child’s mother share/juggle childcare, and how they are supported largely by the maternal grandmother who is a preschool teacher. This also indicates the use and importance of informal childcare systems for folks connected to a community. Nate shares that being a dad and caregiver caused Nate to look at the world differently. This stretch of the interview there was a shift in Nate’s demeanor from anxious to joyful. This delight and investment
		in his daughter is palpable.

Jack	Gender: Male Race: Caucasian: Ethnicity: Age: 55 Student status: Parttime Employment status: Full-time Marital Status: Married	Jack is a 55 yo, self-identified “rich white guy” who is attending MMCC to retool his tech career. He attended a prestigious, private high school and has a BA in Professional Writing. He is now a successful IT strategist. He is married with two “very, very intelligent” kids, who will both be attending college out of state. He and his wife share caregiving responsibilities, and his return to school is supported by the whole family. If Jack can finish his prerequisites in high-level Math at MMCC, he plans to apply to graduate schools for a Masters in Data Science so he can change the trajectory of his career. He notes that his attendance at MMCC is completely optional (so not driven by economic or work insecurity). He also mentions multiple times throughout the interview that he is (1) a champion of community colleges, (2) interested in making MMCC a better fit for “retooling” students, and (3) aware that as difficult as it has been to parent, hold down a job, and work, that he has it “easy” compared to other students with fewer resources. He mentions race and class (including his own white privilege) multiple times in the conversation. He also says there is absolutely “no way” he could do this if he was earlier in career with less financial security and more caretaking responsibilities. It is also important to note that Jack is contemplating stopping out of MMCC because – in spite of his resources and job flexibility – he earned a C in a course last semester because he prioritized his daughter’s senior year activities and support over Calc II. Since his goal is to get into grad school – a C is unacceptable for him. Jack is a powerful voice that demonstrates how college systems and schedules are at odds with the needs of working and caretaking adults. He also asserts a stronger critique of the College than any other person I interviewed and offered to speak directly with the President if necessary. Jack’s comments are important here because there is a belief that students tend to do well if they can just
------	---	---

		get through their first semesters in college and “learn how to do it all.” However, Jack points out here that as course rigor increases, so do time demands for learning, which is important in advocating for supports throughout the adult learner’s degree. Jack offers several helpful suggestions to the College, including (1) the ability to stop a course and resume it in the same place the next semester to account for unexpected, life interruptions, (2) study and professional work spaces for taking calls on campus if you need privacy or if you have kids intow, (3) course timed during the day for building a contiguous work day (and child care), (4) marketing towards adults looking to “retool” their skills, not necessarily to earn a degree.
Scott	Gender: Male Race: White Ethnicity: None reported Age: 35 Student status: Parttime Employment status: Full-time Marital Status: Married	Scott is a 35 yo, self-described “white dude” who is backward transferring his general education requirements from his BS in Business Technology Systems to earn an audio production degree at MMCC. He is employed full-time (and his wife is a stay-at-home-mom. They have 3 children: a 16 yo, 6, and 2 year old. He does not have caretaking responsibilities for aging parents and they live locally. His degree at MMCC is for fun/learning. He speaks with ease and authority about educational processes (degree vs. certificate; gen eds) and he has not needed to access any support resources on campus. He also is self-aware that he is in the minority as a caregiver who does not need additional resource to attend college

Mary	Race: Latina/Hispanic Gender: Female Ethnicity: Salvadorian Age: 25 Student status: Part-	Mary is a pre-nursing major who self-identifies as a central American immigrant who financially cares for her parents out-of-country and physically/emotionally/linguistically cares for her nieces, nephews, siblings in the US. She is engaged to be married, and also cares for her two (soon to be) twin step daughters who are 5 years old. Mary is the 9th of 12 kids, she is 25 yo, and attends MMCC full time while also working full-time at a wholesale
	time Employment status: Full-time Marital Status: Single (Engaged)	grocery store. Mary explains in the interview that she chose nursing as a major “to help people.” She mentions that with nursing training she can provide care to her parents who live in rural Columbia (?) with little access to health care. She also likes that nursing is a field she can earn and learn with, gradually adding credentials. Major barriers for her are time, tuition money, and high stakes credentialing tests given only in English.

Nina	Race: African American / Black Gender: Female Ethnicity: TogoleseAmerican Age: 24 Student status: Parttime Employment status: Full-time Marital Status: Single	Nina is a 24 yo, Togolese-American woman who also identifies as Black. She is the single mother of a 2 yo daughter, and she receives no support from the father who now lives in Ohio. Her family, who she repeatedly describes as “traditionally African,” immigrated to the US when she was 2. Her mother was a medical doctor and her father was an accountant (both hold multiple graduate degrees) but their credentials were not recognized in the States. Her father returned to Togo and her mom worked as an overnight nurse to financially stabilize the family. Her father did not return from Togo and the parents divorced, which Nina marks as the beginning of major life changes for her. A key part of this transition was the disappointment of being accepted into, but not being able to attend, American University because her father reneged on his promise to pay for college. To this point, she describes herself as an excellent student who speaks three languages and has a 3.8 GPA – a daughter her parents were proud of. She enrolled at a nearby community college because it was the only affordable option, and she was successful the first year. In her second year, she joined a new peer group (through her cousin) and had a somewhat circuitous experience in college after that, exacerbated by becoming pregnant. She describes multiple overlapping barriers to success including intimate partner abuse, earning “caps” because she hasn’t earned her degree, family disappointment, car accidents that have set her back financially, and child care issues. She is currently enrolled at MMCC (studying Psychology) but she is unsure if she will be able to continue because of the
------	---	---

		overwhelming stress she experiences. It is important to note that this was a very long and very emotional interview, particularly when she talks about her family of origin, the child's father, and dropping out of school. However, her 2 year old daughter is present for a large part of the interview, and Nina's demeanor and lightness shifted each time she engaged with her daughter with gentleness and love.
--	--	---

Works Cited and Bibliography

- Abrams, Stacey & Ali Bustamante. COVID's Impact on Women and Their Families in Georgia. Institute for Women's Policy Research. 21 December 2020. <https://iwpr.org/media/in-the-lead/covid-19s-impact-on-women-and-their-families-in-georgia/> Accessed on 14 January 2024.
- "Academics." *Office of Undergraduate Admissions*, admissions.umd.edu/academics. Accessed 7 Apr. 2024.
- Ackerley, Ed. "The History of Community Colleges." North Arizona University. <http://dana.ucc.nau.edu>. Accessed on 14 February 2024.
- American Association of Community Colleges. "Number of Community Colleges in The United States in 2023, by Type." *Statista*, Statista Inc., 9 Mar 2023, <https://www-statistacom.frederick.idm.oclc.org/statistics/421266/community-colleges-in-the-us/>. Accessed on 14 February 2024.
- Asmelash, Leah. "DEI Programs in Universities Are Being Cut Across the County." *CNN*. 14 June 2023. <https://www.cnn.com/2023/06/14/us/colleges-diversity-equity-inclusionhigher-education-cec/index.html>. Accessed on 11 February 2024.
- Blake, Jessica. "Maryland Community Colleges Face \$22 million Budget Cut." *Inside Higher Ed*. 08 February 2024. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/government/statepolicy/2024/02/08/maryland-community-colleges-face-22m-budget-cut>. Accessed on 11 February 2024.
- Boggs, Meyerhoff, Mitchell, and Schwartz-Weinstein. *Abolitionist University Studies: An Invitation*. 28 August 2019. Abolition Convergence. 2020. <https://abolitionjournal.org/abolitionist-university-studies-an-invitation/> Accessed on 22 March 2020.
- Bordieu, Pierre. "The Forms of Capital." *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education*, edited by J. G. Richardson. p. 241–58 New York: Greenwood Press, 1986.
- Brint, Steven G, and Jerome Karabel. *The Diverted Dream : Community Colleges and the Promise of Educational Opportunity in America, 1900-1985*. Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Caballero, Cecilia, editor. *The Chicana M(Other)Work Anthology*. University of Arizona Press, 2019.

- Care Team - LCCC - Wy.Edu,
www.lccc.wy.edu/Documents/Services/CARE_Team/LCCCCARE-Team-Handbook-March-2016.pdf. Accessed 7 Apr. 2024.
- Carnevale, Anthony Patrick, et al. *Quality Education : School Reform for the New American Economy*. U.S. Dept. of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1994.
- Carnevale, Anthony L, Jeff Strohl, Kathryn Peltier Campbell, Artem Gulish, Ban Cheah, Emma Nyhof, and Lillian Fix. "Learning and Earning by Degrees: Gain in College Degree Attainment Have Enriched the Nation and Every State, But Racial and Gender Inequality Persists." *Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce*. 2024, https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/CEW-attainment-gains-full_report.pdf. Accessed on 11 February 2024.
- Clark, LaToya Baldwin. "Education As Property." *Virginia Law Review*, vol. 105, no. 2, 2019, pp. 397–424. <https://umaryland.on.worldcat.org/oclc/8099632469> Accessed on 15 March 2023.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd edition. Routledge, 2000.
- "Shifting the Center: Race, Class, and Feminist Theorizing about Motherhood." , Evelyn Nakano, et al., editors. *Mothering : Ideology, Experience, and Agency*. Routledge, 1994.
- Contreras-Mendez, Susana, Tessa Holtzman, and Lindsey Reichlin Cruse. "Candidates' "Free College" Proposals Must be More Inclusive of College Students with Children. Here's How." *The Education Trust*. 30 July 2019. <https://edtrust.org/resource/candidates-freecollege-proposals-must-be-more-inclusive-of-college-students-with-children-heres-how/> Accessed 15 Aug 2023.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé W. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43, No. 6. 199. Pp. 1241– 1299.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé W, et al. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *Droit Et Société*, vol. 108, no. 2, 2021, pp. 465–465, <https://doi.org/10.3917/drs1.108.0465>.
- Crenshaw, Kimberle and Daniel HoSang. *Under the Blacklight: The Intersectional Vulnerabilities that the Twin Pandemics Lay Bare*. Haymarket Books. 2023.
- Crittenden, Ann. *The Price of Motherhood: Why the Most Important Job in the World is Still the Least Valued*. 2nd Ed., Picador, 2010.

- Cruz et al. "Access to Higher Education, Investing in Single Mother Higher Education." Student Parent Success Initiative. 18 December 2019. <https://iwpr.org/issue/employment-education-economic-change/student-parent-successinitiative/> Accessed on 10 March 2023.
- Democracy Now. "The Case for Prison Abolition: Ruth Wilson Gilmore on COVID-19, Racial Capitalism & Decarceration." Webinar with Ruth Wilson Gilmore. 5 May 2020. https://www.democracynow.org/2020/5/5/ruth_wilson_gilmore_abolition_coronavirus. Accessed on 12 January 2021.
- Douglass, Susan and Meredith Michaels. *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined All Women*. Free Press, 2005.
- Drury, Richard. "Community Colleges in America: A Historical Perspective." *Inquiry*, vol.8, no.1, Spring 2003, pp. 3-6.
- "EMCC Opportunity-Ready." *Credly*, www.credly.com/org/maine-community-collegesystem/badge/emcc-opportunity-ready. Accessed 7 Apr. 2024.
- Esposito, Jennifer, and Venus E Evans-Winters. *Introduction to Intersectional Qualitative Research*. SAGE Publications, 2022.
- Gault, Barbara, Elizabeth Noll, and Lindsey Reichlin. *Family Friendly Campus Imperative: Supporting Success Among Community College Students with Children*. 2016. https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/ACCT_Paper-3-8-17-final.pdf. Accessed on 5 May 2023.
- Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. University of California Press, 2007.
- "Fatal Couplings of Power and Difference: Notes on Racism and Geography." *Professional Geographer* 54: 15-24, 2002.
- "Geographies of Racial Capitalism."
- Giroux, Henri. "Utopian Thinking Under the Sign of Neoliberalism: Towards a Critical Pedagogy of Educated Hope" *Democracy and Nature*, (Vol. 9, No. 1, 2003), 91-105.
- Goldrick-Rab, Sara, et al. *Paying the Price : College Costs, Financial Aid, and the Betrayal of the American Dream*. University of Chicago Press, 2016.
- Goodman, Sandy and Mina Reddy. "No Matter What Obstacle is Thrown My Way: Report from the Single Mothers' Career Readiness and Success Project." World Education. July 2019.

- Gordon, Paul and Rita Gordon. *A Textbook History of Frederick County*. Board of Education of Frederick County, 1975.
- Harris, Cheryl. "Whiteness as Property." *Harvard Law Review*. Vol. 106: No. 8, 1710-1791. 1993.
- hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. 3rd Ed., Routledge, 2015.
- *Teaching to Transgress : Education As the Practice of Freedom*. Routledge, 1994.
- Institute for Women's Policy Research. *Parents in College by the Numbers*. Ascend Institute & IWPR. 2019.
- Kelling, George L, and Catherine M Coles. *Fixing Broken Windows : Restoring Order and Reducing Crime in Our Communities*. 1st Touchstone ed., Simon & Schuster, 1997.
- Kerr, Kenneth. *Maryland House Bill 0436: Maryland Higher Education Commission Demographic Data Collection, Parental Status*. 22 January 2024. <https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/2024RS/bills/hb/hb0463f.pdf>. Accessed on 11 February 2024.
- Klein, Ian M. Analysis of the FY 2023 Maryland Executive Budget: Aid to Community Colleges.2022. <https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/pubs/budgetfiscal/2023fy-budget-docsoperating-R2I0005-Aid-to-Community-Colleges.pdf>. Accessed on 08 Feb 2024.
- Kurtz, Annalyn. "The US economy lost 140,000 jobs in December. All of them were held by women."CNN.8January2021.<https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/08/economy/women-joblosses-pandemic/index.html>. Accessed on 17 January 2021.
- Levin, J., et al. *Community College Faculty: At Work in the New Economy*, Macmillan, 2006. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/frederick-ebooks/detail.action?docID=307680>. Accessed on 4 April 2019.
- "Preservation of Community College Logic: Organizational Responses to State Policies and Funding Practices in Three States." *Community College Review*, vol. 46, no. 2, Apr. 2018, pp. 197-220. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1177/0091552118758893. Accessed on 12 May 2019.
- Lynch, Kathleen. "Care, Capitalism and Politics." Social Europe, 26 November 2020. <https://www.socialeurope.eu/care-capitalism-and-politics>. Accessed on 11 February 2024.
- Mauk, Jonathan. "Location, Location, Location: The 'Real' (E)states of Being, Writing, and Thinking inComposition." *Relations, Locations, Positions: Composition Theory for*

Writing Teachers, edited by Peter Vandenberg, Sue Hum, and Jennifer Clary-Lemon, NCTE, 2006, pp. 291-327.

Marcus, Jon. “The Reckoning is Here: More Than a Third of Community College Students Have Vanished.” *The Hechinger Report*. 3 April 2023. <https://hechingerreport.org/the-reckoning-is-here-more-than-a-third-of-communitycollege-students-have-vanished/>. Accessed on 02 December 2023.

Martin, Kimberly, Richard Galentino, and Lori Townsend. “Community College Student Success: The Role of Motivation and Self Empowerment.” *Community College Review*, vol. 42, no.3, 2014, p. 221-243. *Academic Search Premier*. DOI: 00915521. Accessed on 13 Dec. 2023.

Maryland State Department of Education. Blueprint for Maryland’s Future: Career and College Readiness. August 2022. Pp. 13-80, https://blueprint.marylandpublicschools.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2022/12/CCRReport_December2022_A.pdf. Accessed on 11 February 2024.

McGuinness, Aims. *Community College Systems Across the 50 States*. National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, January 28, 2014. <https://www.leg.state.nv.us/interim/77th2013/committee/studies/commcolleges/other/28january-2014/agendaitemvi.nationalcenterforhighereducationmcguinness.pdf?rewrote=1>. Accessed on 08 Feb 2024.

Mehl, Gelsey. Joshua Wyner, Elizabeth Barrett, John Fink, & Davis Jenkins. *The Dual Enrollment Handbook: A Guide to Equitable Acceleration for Students*. The Aspen Institute and The Community College Research Center. October 2020. <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/dualenrollment-playbook-equitable-acceleration.pdf>. Accessed on 15 January 2020.

Meristotis, Jeff. “Equity in Higher Education Attainment – When Good Isn’t Good Enough.” *Forbes*. 24 January 2024. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jamiemerisotis/2024/01/24/equity-in-higher-educationattainment-when-good-isnt-good-enough/?sh=eb12147b7b1d>. Accessed on 13 February 2024

Miller, Clain Cain. “Mothers Are Regaining Jobs, Even While Shouldering Pandemic Burdens at Home.” *The New York Times*. 4 March 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/04/upshot/mothers-jobs-pandemic.html>. Accessed on 12 February 2024.

Murray, Stephanie. “Why Parents Struggle So Much in the World’s Richest Country.” *The Atlantic*. 5 January 2024. https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2024/01/america-failed-parents-rich-countries-raising-kids/677023/?utm_campaign%3Dlater-linkinbiotheatlantic%26utm_content%3Dlater-

- [40346163%26utm_medium%3Dsocial%26utm_source%3Dlinkin.bio&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1707232815410210&usg=AOvVaw0hjYAtnic669nBdRam5TWN](https://www.linkedin.com/company/40346163/?utm_medium=social&utm_source=linkedin&utm_campaign=posts&utm_content=1707232815410210&utm_term=0&utm_source=AOvVaw0hjYAtnic669nBdRam5TWN). Accessed on 25 January 2024.
- “New Jersey Community College Opportunity Grant.” *County College of Morris*, 24 Aug. 2022, www.ccm.edu/ccog/.
- O’Banion, Terry. *13 Ideas That are Transforming the Community College World*. Rowman and Littlefield, 2019.
- Oliva, Nereida and Hortencia Jimenez. “Herstories of Sobrevivencia: Chicax/Latinx Community College Student-Mothers (Re)claiming and (Re)defining the Educational Pipeline and CalWORKS.” *The Chicana M(Other)Work Anthology*. Edited by Cecilie Caballero. University of Arizona Press, 2019.
- Pillow, Wanda. “Confession, Catharsis, or Cure? Rethinking the Uses of Reflexivity as Methodological Power in Qualitative Research.” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, vol. 16, no. 2, pp. 175–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0951839032000060635>.
- Polakow, Valerie, Sandra Butler, Luisa Stormer Deprez, and Peggy Kahn. Editors. *Shut Out: Low Income Mothers and Higher Education in Post-Welfare America*. SUNY Press. 2004.
- *Who Cares for Our Children? : The Child Care Crisis in the Other America*. Teachers College Press, 2007.
- Reed, Matthew. *Confessions of a Community College Administrator*. Jossey-Bass. 2013.
- Rhoads, Robert A. *Multiculturalism and border knowledge in higher education*. Educational Resources Information Center (U.S.) Microform. 1995.
- Rhoads, Robert A, and James R Valadez. *Democracy, Multiculturalism, and the Community College : A Critical Perspective*. Garland Pub, 1996.
- Richtel, Matt. “How the Pandemic is Imperiling a Working-Class College..” *The New York Times*. 29 December 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/28/us/college-coronavirus-tuition.html>. Accessed on 12 January 2021.
- Rochester Community and Technical College, www.rctc.edu/services/student-affairs/care-team/. Accessed 7 Apr. 2024.
- Rooks, Noliwe. *Cutting School : Privatization, Segregation, and the End of Public Education*. New Press, 2017.

Rose, Andresse and Catherine Hill. *Women in Community Colleges: Access to Success*. American Association of University Women, May 2013.

Rothstein, Richard. *The Color of Law : A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*. Liveright Publishing Corporation, a Division of W.W. Norton & Company, 2018.

--- *Class and Schools : Using Social, Economic, and Educational Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap*. Teachers College, Columbia University, 2004.

Roy, Arhundhati and Imani Perry. *The Pandemic is a Portal*. May 2020.
<https://aas.princeton.edu/news/pandemic-portal>. Accessed on 08 Feb 2024.

Saldaña Johnny. *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. 3E ed., SAGE, 2016.

Sardoc, Mitja. "The Language of Neoliberalism in Education." *The Impacts of Neoliberal Discourse and Language in Education: Critical Perspectives on a Rhetoric of Equality, Well-being, and Justice*. Routledge. 2021.

Schulte, Brigid. *Overwhelmed : How to Work, Love, and Play When No One Has the Time*. First Picador ed., Picador a Trademark Used by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015.

Slaughter, Sheila and Larry Leslie. "Expanding and Elaborating the Concept of Academic Capitalism." *Organization: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Organization, Theory, and Society*. v.8. i.2. 2001, p. 154-161.

Smith, Ashley. "Community College to Bachelors." *Inside Higher Ed*. 26 March 2015.
<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/03/26/nearly-half-four-year-college-graduates-attended-two-year-college>. Accessed on 11 Nov. 2023.

Smith, Dale M. *Poets Beyond the Barricade: Rhetoric, Citizenship, and Dissent after 1960*. University of Alabama Press. pp. 153. 2012.

Smith, Darren. "The politics of studentification and '(un)balanced' urban populations: lessons for gentrification and sustainable communities?". *Urban Studies*, 45(12), 2541-2564. <https://journals-sagepub-com.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/doi/pdf/10.1177/0042098008097108>. Accessed on 12 Nov 2023.

--- "'Studentification': the gentrification factory?" Atkinson, R. and Bridge, G., eds. *Gentrification in a Global Context: The New Urban Colonialism*. Housing and Society Series. Routledge, UK, p. 72-89.

Smith, Neil. *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City*. Routledge. 1996.

- “Contours of a Spatialized Politics: Homeless Vehicles and the Production of Geographical Scale.” *Social Text*. No. 33, 1992, pp. 54-81.
- Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space, 3rd Ed. University of Georgia Press, 2008.
- Soto, Victoria M. DeFrancesco. America’s Recovery from the “Shesession: Building a Female Future of Childcare and Work.” White Paper for The University of Texas LBJ School of Public Affairs and the YWCA. October 2020.
https://www.ywca.org/wpcontent/uploads/COVID_WOMEN-CHILDCARE_R4.pdf
 Accessed on 16 January 2021.
- St. Amour, Madeline. “Few Positives in Fall Enrollment Numbers”. Inside Higher Ed. 16 Dec 2020. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/12/17/final-fall-enrollment-numbersshow-pandemics-full-impact>. Accessed on 08 Feb 2020.
- Stout, Karen A. “We can and must do better to help black students enroll in college and succeed.” May 2023. *The Hechinger Report*.
<https://hechingerreport.org/author/karenstout/>
- Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahtta. Ed. *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*. Haymarket, 2017.
- *Race for Profit*. UNC Press, 2019.
- “The College Promise: Warren County Community College.” *The College Promise | Warren County Community College*, www.warren.edu/ccog/. Accessed 7 Apr. 2024.
- Thelin, John R. *A History of American Higher Education*. 2nd ed. ed., Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011.
- “Tuition Free / CCOG.” *UCNJ*, <http://www.ucc.edu/tuitionfree/> Accessed 7 Apr. 2024.
- United Way of Frederick County, *ALICE (Asset-Limited, Low Income, Continuously Employed) Report*. 2023. <https://www.unitedwayfrederick.org/challenge-ALICE>. Accessed on 08 Feb 2024.
- “Unlocking Opportunity: Rethinking Community College Programs to Ensure Equitable Post Graduation Success.” *Community College Research Center*, ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/easyblog/unlocking-opportunity-rethinking-community-collegeprograms.html. Accessed 7 Apr. 2024.
- Valenzuela, Angela. *Subtractive Schooling : U.S.-Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring*. State University of New York Press, 1999.

- Van Dijk, Teun A. "Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis." *Discourse & Society*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1993, pp. 249–283.
- Vo, Kelly. "Are Business School Neighborhoods Becoming More Gentrified?" MetroMBA. 14 August 2018.
- "Welcome to the University of Maryland!" *YouTube*, 3 Sept. 2014, <http://youtu.be/sN4ynr6QbtA?si=uwulI4zZ1evVHeaJ>. Accessed 7 April 2024.
- Williams, Thomas J. C, and Folger McKinsey. *History of Frederick County, Maryland*. Regional Pub, 1967.
- Women's Legal Defense and Education Fund. *Women and Poverty in America*. June 2019. <https://www.legalmomentum.org/women-and-poverty-america>. Accessed 2 Oct 2023.
- Wolfe, Patrick. "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native." *Journal of Genocide Research*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2006, pp. 387–409.
- Woods, Clyde Adrian. *Development Arrested : The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta*. Verso, 1998.
- Wood, J. Luke. *Leadership Theory and the Community College: Applying Theory to Practice*. 2013
- Yang, K. Wayne. *A Third University if Possible*. University of Minnesota Press. 2017.
- Yosso, Tara. "Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural Wealth." *Race Ethnicity and Education*. 8 (1): 69-91, 2005. doi 10.1080/1361332052000341006. Accessed on 15 September 2023.

