Marta entered my office, set down her bags, and began pressing me for advice regarding her schedule for the spring term. She had graduated over twenty years earlier from a local community college with an associate’s degree in business administration and was now ready to resume her college career by pursuing a bachelor’s degree in sociology. Her educational career had been temporarily postponed in the early 1990s by the birth of her daughter, which was followed soon after by the birth of her son. She initially put off her education to focus on caring for her children, and later used her associate’s degree to leverage a job to pay household bills. Now that her daughter is enrolled in graduate school and her son is preparing to receive his bachelor’s degree, she feels it is “her time”—she is ready to go back to school. Within five minutes of our meeting I knew Marta’s family’s educational history, and within ten minutes she was sharing pictures of her daughter, son, and cousins, describing each family member and listing their educational accomplishments. Marta was incredibly proud of her children and excited to be “back on track,” in college, once again pursuing her dream of completing her bachelor’s degree.

Yet, as we talked more, Marta expressed concerns regarding the costs of a college degree, not just in terms of money but also in terms of time. She did not need this degree for her job—she was working for the state of Connecticut and had what she described to be “a decent salary and benefits.” She was still helping out her daughter, paying for her graduate school tuition. Also, with a full-time job, she was limited as to when she could enroll in classes—anything offered during the day would be impossible for her. Most of the core curriculum that she would eventually need was offered only between 9:00 A.M. and 4:00 P.M., Monday through Friday. She would be an ideal candidate for online programs, which cater to busy working adults, but she was not interested in that kind of educational experience, preferring instead a traditional classroom with teachers and
classmates. She wanted to engage face-to-face, eye-to-eye. Pursuing a degree at this particular state university did not seem to me to be a practical option for Marta. Nevertheless, she wanted back in.

Although she didn’t explain in any detail why finishing up her degree was so important to her, I understood her desire. As she flipped from one picture to the next on the screen of her phone and described her family members’ educational accomplishments, I was reminded of other women in my life who were not expected to go to college. My mother and my mother-in-law were driven by the same desire in the mid-1970s and 1980s, when the passing of Title IX increased college access and resources for women. At that time feminist activists were demanding that the “personal was political,” and I saw that mantra lived out on the home front as my mother went to work, bought her first car, and went to class. Neither my mother in California nor my mother-in-law in New York had been expected by their families to attend college, but with public college systems in both of these states expanding, both women found opportunity on opposite sides of the country. They attended classes in between their hours working government jobs and tending to their families, eventually receiving baccalaureate degrees that enabled them to identify as college graduates. My mother, my mother-in-law, and the parents interviewed for this study understand that we live in a world where a college degree confers not only economic advantage but also respect. My mother and mother-in-law, like Marta, wanted in.

Marta’s children are grown, and so she has moved into a stage of her family life that fundamentally differs from the student parents in this study who are actively parenting infants, young children, or adolescents. However, I share her story here because it so clearly exemplifies the complex interplay of interactional, cultural, and institutional dimensions guiding students’ decision to attend college, particularly those students who have familial obligations or are returning to school after a multiyear absence. Marta’s current job status and the fact that her children are older and will soon be self-sufficient free her from having to consider how her education might shape her job opportunities, and so she differs from most of the student parents in this study in that she is not overly concerned about how this degree might influence her career. However, like many of these student parents, Marta yearns for the respect of her children. When she discusses her educational hopes and dreams, she describes herself as excited to learn, to read Shakespeare, to take advantage of what she believes is an educational opportunity and not just a job requirement. This collegiate “club” that Marta, like so many others before and after her, seeks to join will provide her with a level of social prestige that has so far eluded her and cannot be conferred by her middle-class job alone.

My conversation with Marta reveals that students choose to go to college for a mix of reasons that are not all directly career related and that are not explicitly addressed in much public discourse about the purpose or value of college.
It is no surprise that Marta and the student parents interviewed for this study believe a college degree to be both possible and necessary. As I highlight in the following pages, possibility is revealed in the relatively open admission policies of many public universities and community colleges, their geographical accessibility, the rise of for-profit educational institutions that target working adults, the rise in distance learning through online programs, and the widespread availability of financial assistance.

However, as I continued to advise Marta, I began to feel conflicted; as much as I believe in helping students to advance educationally, I held reservations about encouraging her to pursue this degree. As far as I could tell, she didn't want or need this credential in order to advance in her job. Also, it soon became clear that she was going to have to make some significant sacrifices that would disrupt the current balance of her life. She worked full time and so stated that she could take only evening classes. Further, she is still helping her children to pay for college. This would be the third college tuition bill that she would be paying. Mesmerized by her energy, I wanted to support her as she planned for her educational future. I wanted her to get the degree that she desired, but the reality of her current situation made me question both her and my motivations. Why should she invest her time, energy, and dollars in this way at this time? What does Marta stand to gain from this experience?

Every one of the forty stories by student parents that I share in these pages is unique, but the narratives reveal struggles, motivations, aspirations, and successes comprising similar threads. Most of the parents I interviewed for this book confess to having very little, if any, time to consider the value of their college experiences as they shuffle between caregivers and classes. Instead, they are concerned with ensuring that laundry baskets contain clean clothes and with carving out hours to complete college homework. Children need feeding, and rides between home and campus need to be arranged. These student parents' day-to-day routines are frequently mundane yet complicated by the many external forces—people, homes, schools, jobs—requiring constant attention. Tending to these various obligations leaves them with very few opportunities to leisurely reflect upon what they want out of their education.

Although parents' lives are rife with competing obligations, fulfilling daily tasks doesn't in every case and at all times produce conflict or tension. When student parents feel themselves being stretched, as they inevitably do, they often respond with creativity, challenging traditional conceptualizations of what it means to be a mother, father, provider, and college student. Rou, at fifty-four years old, never thought he would have the opportunity to be a father, but that changed four years ago when his daughter was born. When I ask him if his wife is supportive of his educational goals, he responds that because she is the bread-winner and because his college schedule is flexible, he can devote time to fathering in a way that previous generations could not, and so she appreciates
that he can be a “Mr. Mom.” That said, not everyone in his family has been so supportive—his in-laws have explicitly challenged his masculinity, questioning his choice to return to school after having been laid off a year ago. And Rou has had a tough go of it, moving from job to job over the years, in part due to a medical condition that impairs his ability to take on more physical work. But Rou relishes both his fathering and his student roles and brushes off their criticism, asserting, “We are not living in the old school anymore. We’re living in an entirely different mode of society.”

No doubt, some student parents have it easier than others. Some, like Rou, have supportive partners, dependable and affordable caregivers, and sympathetic professors and mentors. These reinforcements ease the demands of the day and allow them to focus their attention as needed. A mother who knows that her child is well cared for in a comfortable and safe setting can better concentrate on an in-class review for midterm exams. Others, however, run into overwhelming obstacles, like Rose, who is battling an oppressive husband with a gambling addiction, or Lucille, who regularly navigates labyrinthine medical and state bureaucracies to address her autistic son’s educational and mental health needs. Student parents facing such barriers are likely to receive lower grades or to experience internalized feelings of inadequacy and bouts of depression. Nevertheless, all the students in this study share stories of survival. Whether they are motivated by economic or social mobility, a love for learning, or a feeling of recognized accomplishment, these students are actively working toward their academic goal of earning a college degree. They are moving forward as they strive to weave together their various identities, aspirations, and expectations.

Back in School celebrates these students’ achievements. It also examines their educational aspirations and highlights the social processes and institutional resources that facilitate their successes or obstruct their long-term goals. Because these students are attending community colleges and regional comprehensive state universities, this study addresses public institutions, which are locally focused and educating the majority of our nation’s college students (NCES 2016). I ask, how do policymakers, professors, college administrators, counselors, or social workers provide or deny access to child care, tutoring, financial aid, or other campus- or community-based resources? How do social norms and governmental and organizational policies influence access to these resources and influence student parents’ experiences on campus? More broadly, I seek to understand the cultural, economic, and political forces that shape contemporary conceptualizations of education and work as we venture forward in the twenty-first century. What do we expect from a college education, particularly in our public colleges and universities? And how are our educational expectations and opportunities shaped by public policies, the economy, and cultural beliefs regarding the perceived function of higher education?
At the state university in central Connecticut where I teach, I am no longer surprised by the sight of baby strollers on the pathways and children playing by the center court fish pond. And our campus is far from unique in this regard. Campus administrators, faculty, and staff—particularly those working for public universities or two-year community colleges—are ever more likely to encounter in their offices and classrooms students who are parents negotiating the multiple demands of work, family, and school. These changes are in part due to increasing numbers of older students returning to college, eager to attain a degree that they may have deferred in order to start a family, engage in paid work, or enter the military (NCES 2018). Many of these older students are returning to school with the hopes of redirecting their career paths or, like Marta, finishing up degrees that they started years ago but never finished.

With access to college and the perceived need for a college degree steadily rising, the number of older and returning students on postsecondary campuses has reached historic highs over the past few decades, a trend reflected across the United States and in other industrialized nations around the world (OECD 2015). According to the U.S. Department of Education, approximately 25 percent of undergraduate students in the United States are raising children under the age of eighteen, and over half of those students are single parents (NCES 2015a). The largest percentage of these student parents are found on community college campuses; just over 30 percent of the students attending two-year public colleges report caring for dependents as compared to nearly 15 percent who attend four-year, baccalaureate-granting public institutions (Gault et al. 2014; Noll, Reichlin, and Gault 2017). Although it is clear that student parents are more likely to be found enrolled in two-year associate- or graduate-level programs, over the past thirty years all categories of postsecondary institutions (two-year, four-year, private, public, for-profit, and nonprofit) have experienced record levels in their enrollment of student parents (Choy 2002; NCES 2018).

In response to this rising demographic, many postsecondary institutions have increased their distance learning opportunities, providing flexible learning options that would appeal to many student parents (Mettler 2014). Advertisements on late-night television and via various internet searches explicitly acknowledge the perceived needs of student parents and older, returning adults desiring a college degree. For-profit programs, such as the University of Phoenix, compete with public state schools, such as Arizona State University, which in 2017 offered over seventy baccalaureate degrees online in majors ranging from art history to technical entrepreneurship and management. In 2011 U.S. News and World Report added a new category, “Best Online Programs,” to its annual inventory of best colleges, indicating the increased presence, relevance, and institutional acceptance of online learning in higher education (Haynie 2014).

For those student parents who prefer a traditional campus experience and can afford the often higher tuition, a small number of private, liberal arts
colleges have long offered comprehensive academic support programs to facilitate the success of student parents on their respective campuses. Several of these programs have historically catered to mothers returning to school. The founders and directors of programs such as Smith College’s Ada Comstock Program, Tufts University’s REAL Program, and Endicott College’s Keys to Degrees program focus on the needs of nontraditional students and caregivers. These programs have helped student parents in various ways, with some providing access to affordable, high-quality child care and others offering family residential living opportunities.¹

However, comprehensive residential programs for students with children are the exception rather than the norm. According to analysts at the Institute for Women’s Policy Research, over 90 percent of private, nonprofit colleges did not provide any on-campus child care, undeniably the most important institutional resource for student parents with young children (Miller, Gault, and Thorman 2011: 17). The lack of child care can be partially explained by the rise in number of private, for-profit colleges, which is the least likely type of postsecondary institution to provide on-site child care—less than 1 percent offers such a resource. Many private, for-profit colleges don’t have to offer child care because they are more likely than all other types of postsecondary institutions to offer distance learning options so that students can pursue their degrees from home (Aud et al. 2012). In emphasizing distance learning options, these colleges are freed from having to provide a number of on-ground student services, including counseling offices, student activities, and resources such as child care.

Public colleges have been significantly more likely to offer such care—in 2003, 55 percent of four-year and 53 percent of two-year colleges provided some form of on-site, early child care program (Gault et al. 2014). However, in recent years, students attending public colleges have seen their on-site, campus child care options dwindling, as college administrators wrestle with the enduring effects of the 2008 economic recession on their campus budgets. A report from the Institute for Women’s Policy Research reveals that 32 of 572 child care centers located on a community college campus closed between the years 2007 and 2009 (Miller, Gault, and Thorman 2011: 18). As the economies of many states continue to suffer and as public colleges struggle to balance their budgets in the wake of austerity and diminished state funding, it is highly likely that the proportion of campuses offering on-site child care will continue to decrease in the years to come (Mitchell and Leachman 2015).

Clearly the responses of postsecondary institutions to this emerging student demographic group of older students are mixed. Over the past four decades, colleges have responded in varying ways to the needs of students with disabilities or those who are first-generation students, athletes, or veterans, providing necessary institutional supports to address their distinctive situations and facilitate their success on campus (Hamrick, Evans, and Schuh 2002; Long 2012). These
resources—including tutoring, mentoring, targeted counseling, and learning and testing accommodations—serve these students in important ways that ultimately increase their long-term likelihood of academic success. Unlike these various student constituencies, however, student parents remain a largely invisible group and are often left to figure out campus life by themselves, particularly when it comes to arranging for child care, weaving domestic and student obligations, and “coming out” as a parent to their professors and student peers. They are very much aware that as students, they are not perceived to be the “norm,” particularly in bachelor’s and graduate programs, and that the academic road ahead of them will likely be filled with obstacles that traditional students do not face.

In these pages are the words of student parents who are forging a way to weave together their student and parent identities at work, at home, and on campus. Some are young parents and so blend in with the general student body, and others are returning to campus after many years of working, military service, or raising families. Some qualify for public assistance and others are comfortably middle or upper-middle class. All of them have decided to attend public regional universities or community colleges that are geographically accessible and less expensive than most private nonprofit or for-profit alternatives. All of them believe that in going to college, they are improving their lives and the lives of their family members. Through their experiences, we gain insight as to how these students define success and strive to attain dignity within the various social spheres in which they travel. Through their experiences, we also gain a deeper understanding of the role of public higher education in the twenty-first century.

**The Twenty-First-Century Student**

Although the experiences that I describe in *Back in School* are specific to the student parents interviewed, anyone who is or has been a student will recognize many of the interactional, institutional, and cultural influences analyzed. Most students understand the difficulties of managing their time and negotiating the competing demands of various professors, family members, friends, or employers. And, of course, most students are challenged with managing their campus identities and responsibilities, all while maintaining strong personal relationships and tending to their physical health. Friends and family members may push and pull, hoping to wield some influence over students’ demanding study schedules. Professors may slip in additional assignments with only a week’s or even a day’s notice, and employers may request additional hours during finals week to accommodate the needs of their businesses. All-night cramming sessions before an exam are both a cultural cliché and an all-too-real experience, revealing the pressures and stressors that often mark the college years.
In recent years, many students, not just student parents, additionally share a heightened awareness of the economic implications of their day-to-day educational choices. College has never been more expensive. The College Board, which annually tracks college and university tuition trends, reported that the cost of college has steadily increased over the past three decades, outpacing general inflation and levels of state funding and financial assistance (Baum and Ma 2013). It is therefore not surprising that instrumentalist logic, which defines the value of a college degree in terms of its practicality and the likelihood of procuring a specific job, dominates both public and private discourse. In an era of growing inequality, stagnant wages, increasing educational costs and student debt, and a culture in which branding and commodification are norms rather than exceptions, politicians, policymakers, and students are today more likely than past generations to talk about the value of their degrees in economic terms.

Instrumentalist discourse and logic, however, have not gone completely unchallenged in the public sphere. In The Knowledge Factory, Stanley Aronowitz (2000) laments the steady rise of “corporate universities” and the ways that they are shaping education and ultimately failing “to prepare students for a world of great complexity” (p. 158). More recently, sociologist Gaye Tuchman (2009), university president Michael Roth (2014), and journalist Fareed Zakaria (2015) join a chorus of critics who argue that too many twenty-first-century postsecondary institutions have deferred to the whims and needs of a fickle marketplace. When university administrators appropriate the language of corporations, we become accustomed to hearing educational objectives discussed in the context of customer service and returns on investment. These critics are fearful when colleges use such language and emphasize training over critical inquiry and sacrifice a broad education to narrow job preparation. The ostensible goal of such an educational system is to develop malleable employees rather than an educated citizenry. Instead, critics like Tuchman, Roth, and Zakaria advocate for a postsecondary liberal arts education that promotes clear and creative thinking, debate, democracy, and freedom.

Yet it’s near impossible to forgo the language of the marketplace and a narrow focus on skills and jobs when the cost of college increases faster than the rate of inflation and shows no sign of slowing down. As the price of college tuition and student debt increases, anyone who has a stake in the issue is discussing the role of higher education in regard to how it shapes personal lives and contemporary society. What do we expect from a college education? What kinds of classroom learning do we value? Perhaps most importantly, how do we imagine students’ lives will be improved by their college or university experience?

Past research has clearly revealed that how we come to value a college education is very much determined by our access to particular kinds of educational institutions, our understanding of the purpose of college, and our expectations regarding the kind of learning that takes place in college classrooms (McDonough...
In very important ways these beliefs are influenced by not just a student’s academic capabilities but also a student’s resources—economic, social, and cultural—that collectively influence the student’s position in the larger social sphere. That is, an individual’s educational access and views regarding the purpose of college and the value of learning are all very much shaped by the kinds of postsecondary institutions that others in a student’s social milieu are likewise attending. Their perspectives and college access are also affected by their familiarity with and adherence to the cultural norms and values that are reflected in an institution’s mission, curriculum, organizations, and resources. And educational researchers have repeatedly affirmed that students’ cultural and social capital are highly correlated with their economic status (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Mullen 2010; Stuber 2011). As wealth increases, so does one’s knowledge of the college game and how to access selective colleges, lucrative internships, and promising entry-level jobs.

Further, an examination of life course experiences paints a more complicated picture than is often revealed in contemporary debates regarding the purpose of college. Even those students enrolled in applied career and technical programs, particularly in for-profit colleges, are far from assured a job that they might consider to be a career upon graduating (McMillan Cottom 2017; Mettler 2014). This is not to say that short-term or skill-based degrees are of no value; associate degrees or vocational and technical certifications can most certainly provide the necessary skills training or credentials that allow for personal opportunity or upward mobility (Rose 2012). However, most of the student parents in this study have found those short-term degrees or vocational certifications to be insufficient to attain either the standard of living or the type of job that they desire at this point in their lives.

For some of these college students, acquiring specific skills in order to succeed in a particular job is their primary expressed goal. Other students are less concerned with skill building and instead seek a credential in the form of a degree that they believe will provide them with a competitive edge over other uncredentialed job applicants. Many of these students also reflect upon their gain of social status once they are able to refer to themselves as college graduates. And yet, others talk about the desire to learn about themselves and their world in order to share that knowledge with their children.

Jeffrey J. Selingo (2013), editor at large for the Chronicle of Higher Education, maintains that college in the twenty-first century is “no longer a one-size-fits-all experience” (p. xv). Although we may think of “American higher education as a cohesive system,” he contends that “there is nothing uniform about it” (p. xvi). My findings in this study confirm that what we expect from and experience in college in the twenty-first century has never been more varied and complex. Particularly in public community colleges and universities, whose budgets are significantly affected by local and national legislators and who serve
highly diverse student bodies, the purpose of higher education is fiercely debated and contested.

These issues regarding the role of higher education in the twenty-first century concern all students as they prepare to devote precious energy, emotion, time, and financial resources to their postsecondary educational experience. Those student parents who lack financial resources or whose emotions and time are stretched thin due to their obligations to family are most likely to have their commitment to a college education tested. All college students, particularly those who are caregivers, are asking what sacrifices—in regard to not just money but also time and emotion—are acceptable in their lives? In short, just how much is a college education worth?

The “Good Parent”

Not only will students, even those who are not parents, recognize some of the interactional, cultural, and institutional processes examined in Back in School, but most parents, even if they are not now in school, will likely understand the external pressures and demands described in the pages that follow. Most parents have dealt with the stress and concern that come along with caring for an ill child, making frantic phone calls to doctors or caregivers, and rearranging daily schedules to accommodate a child’s immediate needs. They have struggled to coordinate the scheduling demands of various household members, and they have found themselves seeking creative solutions when caregiving programs or schools are closed for national holidays or, in colder climates, unexpected snow days. Further, all parents are challenged with negotiating relationships with other adults—partners, siblings, their own parents, cousins, friends—who either aid in this complex process of parenting or compete for attention and assistance. Some of these family members and friends make parenting easier, providing child care at a moment’s notice or chauffeuring children between school and soccer. Others add to the demands of parents’ already complicated daily schedules, requiring counseling, transporting, or general caregiving.

And for all parents these responsibilities and relationships are often very much shaped by gender. Many mothers feel pressure to live up to mythical expectations imposed by what Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels (2004) describe in The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women as the “new momism,” or what Sharon Hays (1996) defines in Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood as “intensive mothering.” Such expectations dominate public discourse regarding what it means to a good mother in an age of increasing economic inequality. A good mother not only provides food, clothing, and shelter for her children but also invests an extraordinary amount of time, emotion, and money to ensure that her children are personally and relationally successful. Within the neoliberal political and economic spheres, the
children of a good mother are financially independent from the state and are expected, as a result of her careful guidance and self-sacrifice, to become successful in their careers and active contributors to the economy. These “good mothers” are not “takers” from welfare, relying on public assistance to provide food, shelter, or child care. They are instead altruistic providers, who—in the words of Sarah Palin, the 2008 Republican vice presidential candidate—are “mama grizzlies,” doing anything and everything to defend and provide for the needs of their young.

Most mothers, particularly single mothers, fully realize the impossibility and impracticality of such ideological and politicized social constructions of motherhood. Despite knowing this, most mothers find it difficult to ward off feelings of inadequacy when falling short of such idealizations. The student mothers interviewed for this book were no exception. Many student mothers talked at length about feeling overwhelmed by the many demands of the roles they were juggling and the moral pressure to live up to contemporary conceptualizations of the “good mother.” They rarely felt that they were doing enough at home, at school, or at work and nearly always felt that their energies were divided and insufficient. Joy, a fifty-two-year-old mother of three, describes the quandary many parents, particularly mothers, experience when faced with an ill child on a school or work day. Joy exasperatingly confesses, “There’s just worlds colliding.”

Although ideologies surrounding fatherhood likewise exert constraining moral pressures on fathers, the historical context producing that pressure and its effects are significantly different. Most fathers have not been exposed in the media or in public policy discourse to the same level of cultural monitoring and critique as have been mothers. This is not to say that all fathers escape public critique—low-income African American and Latino fathers have been frequent targets in public discourse regarding the problems of teen motherhood and the plight of the urban poor (Connor and White 2006; Hamer 2001). However, fathers in general and active fathers in particular have benefited from a shift in public perception that has redefined masculinity to encompass hands-on fathering. As a result, fathers may receive praise for engaging in mundane caregiving or household work that mothers are simply expected to perform.²

The double standard is even more glaring when the case of single parenthood is considered. Desyre, a social work student, has been raising her two-year-old daughter by herself, with little to no assistance from her daughter’s father. When I ask Desyre whether or not she believes parenting is generally valued in our culture, she immediately describes how perceptions of single parents vary along gender lines, lamenting, “If you see a father . . . a single father, it’s like ‘Oh, he’s the greatest thing in the world.’ But you see single mothers all the time, and it’s just like, ‘Yeah,’ you know?” Adding further sting to this painful double standard, low-income women are often blamed for their single-parent status. Whereas
single fathers are presumed to have been abandoned and left on their own to raise their children, single mothers find themselves stigmatized as promiscuous or lacking in control (Duquaine-Watson 2017; Roberts 1997). In both cases, women are perceived as primarily responsible for creating the problem of low-income, single-parent households.

Fathers do not have it uniformly easy though. Many more men have begun to take on traditionally feminine or womanly activities in the household as conceptualizations of masculinity and femininity evolve; however, such changes are not unconditionally accepted, much less celebrated, in all communities or homes. Several fathers in this study speak candidly about the skepticism they face when expressing their desire to forgo the traditional role of breadwinner in order to pursue a college degree—they face their masculinity being questioned and their sense of self being challenged. In regard to going back to school, prioritizing education over job can be an emasculating experience for many student fathers, particularly in families or communities in which traditional gender roles prevail. These men, like the fathers interviewed by Andrea Doucet (2005), author of Do Men Mother?, find that fathering is a complex, identity-forming activity that is very much influenced by the social contexts in which it is performed. Their fathering behaviors are as much shaped by the immediate demands and structuring of their day as they are by cultural norms reflected in their immediate family and in society at large.

Both mothers and fathers are trekking new ground as they reconceptualize their familial roles in the twenty-first century. When a mother feels guilt as she leaves her infant with a caregiver so that she can go to class, she psychologically engages in a war between competing, morally infused ideologies regarding the best way to parent. Should she be devoting time and energy to address the present needs of her child? Or should she attend to her academic self-development, for which the outcomes are abstract, long-term, and, as a result, far from clear? Such contradictory feelings are exacerbated when it is so difficult to find and retain affordable, high-quality child care, when concerned family members question her devotion to their needs, or when professors question her dedication to their courses. When student parents’ experiences do not match the expectations that they and others have regularly relied upon for meaning making, they reveal the sometimes deep tensions between their individual actions and the social systems in which they are enmeshed. But so too is created an opportunity for alternative meanings and, ultimately, the possibility for transformative cultural and social change.

**Sociological Lenses: Linking the Particular with the Structural**

In the mid-1980s, I entered college as an eighteen-year-old with no family members dependent on my income or time. I never really thought about not going
to college, having watched my mother struggle over the years as she pursued her own college degree, first at the local community college and then at a nearby state university. I abstractly believed in the value of college, even if I only vaguely knew what I wanted out of my education beyond a credential. I worked off campus to earn money to pay for my car and leisure activities, but my parents could afford the then-reasonable state school tuition fees, and my hours for the most part belonged to me.

Jumping ahead twenty years, my familial and educational experiences were vastly different—I was then six years into a doctoral program, all while teaching full time and raising two young girls. I was intellectually invigorated by my studies, which provided me with an opportunity to engage in multidisciplinary analyses of key issues that personally and socially resonated, and I loved teaching in the college classroom. Nevertheless, I felt profoundly different from most of my graduate student peers as I plodded around campus in my pregnancy pants with my schoolbag stuffed with emergency diapers. I watched cohorts of students come and go as they moved through the program more quickly than I because of my part-time student status. I had chosen to attend this particular university because it was the only institution nearby that would allow for me to enroll in graduate school part time. Within a few months of my daughter being born, I found other graduate students who shared my experiences, nursing babies while leafing through tomes from our respective disciplines. We shared strategies for tending to fussy eaters while voicing our concerns regarding whether or not we would actually make it through to graduation. Many a day, I wondered why I felt such guilt when I went to the zoo in lieu of the university library. I would chastise myself for not being able to stop obsessing about a project on my desk back home while at the park with my daughter.

This is not to say that all moments during those years were wracked by contradictions—there were plenty of times when I felt my identities as student and parent blended harmoniously. For one, I was fortunate to have an incredibly supportive, if equally busy, partner whose academic schedule similarly provided him with flexible work hours. We were able to schedule our teaching obligations so that one of us was nearly always available for our daughters, and we actively attempted to share as equally as possible the work of caregiving, cleaning, and cooking. I also had supportive professors, several of whom had young children of their own, who invited my daughters into their offices and homes and encouraged me to share rather than hide my needs as a mother and an academic. Further, my experience as a parent significantly influenced my teaching and scholarship as I began to direct my intellectual energy into research on education and parenting. In the late 1990s, just before the birth of my first daughter in 2000, I became interested in exploring the effects of the U.S. 1996 welfare reform law on students’ educational opportunities. By 2003, I was conducting interviews with student parents while visibly pregnant with my second
daughter. My large belly during those months served as an unusually successful icebreaker as I met with students, who, in addition to sharing their experiences managing school and home, were sometimes eager to provide me with advice about how to best manage my impending labor and delivery.

Three years later, I began a tenure-track position while my daughters were then three and six years old. My office mate, a new hire in a different department, was pregnant and concerned about how she was going to manage her spring teaching load—her baby was due at the end of December, right in the middle of a month-long break between fall and spring classes. Unlike my experience in graduate school, which I’ve come to learn was more atypical than that of most of my peers in academia, she was not encouraged to share her parenting needs on campus. I’m still not quite sure how she survived that spring term, negotiating class preps, grading, and committee meetings with a newborn’s erratic sleeping and feeding schedule. Before the semester started, we had no lactation rooms on campus—at least by the end of January after the birth of her son, we had one (although it was hardly ideal, located in an old faculty bathroom with cold tile floors, no windows, and a practical steel chair circa 1970s). Parents on campus had no paid maternity leave (unless of course one was eligible to purchase short-term disability insurance—such insurance generally considers pregnancy a “disability”), no infant care, and no parent support group. Although twelve years later, our university still has no paid maternity leave and no infant care, we at least have two groups and our faculty union advocating for such resources and actively working to change the culture on campus for all parents.

Collectively, these personal experiences have deeply informed Back in School and shape the perspective that I bring to this project. As a sociologist, I am practiced in exploring the connections between what C. Wright Mills, over half a century ago in The Sociological Imagination (1959), described as “personal troubles” and “public issues.” Mills maintained that to make full sense of our individual experiences, we must turn to history while simultaneously examining how social structures have influenced our comprehension of the past and present. Further we must interrogate power and explore its functioning in our biographies and social world as these histories are constructed. Our biographies, Mills contended, are very much constrained by social and historical realities and the limited choices that those realities make available to us. Mills nonetheless advocated for transformative action, positing that we “by the fact of this living,” can contribute “however minutely, to the shaping of this society and to the course of its history” even as we are borne of and subject to its “historical push and shove” (p. 6).

Most sociologists concede that the “push and shove” of history and social structure upon our lived biographies is strong. Attempting to bridge the gulf between agency and social structures, sociological theorists have examined the powerful influence of culture as a structurally embedded yet potentially
transformative mediating force shaping social action (Bourdieu 1990; DiMaggio 1997; Hays 1994; Sewell 1992). One highly influential theory of culture is provided by Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1984), who explores the dynamics shaping the relationships between culture, structure, and agency in his theoretical construction of habitus. It is one’s habitus, a set of “systems of durable, transposable dispositions” (1977: 72) that guides individual action and increases a person’s likelihood of responding in a particular way within historically situated social contexts. As Bourdieu so artfully describes, even though we may perceive ourselves as individual actors in our social world, each one of us is like a “train bringing along its own rails” (p. 79). We may lay the track, but we are also wedded to its materials and sources in complex ways. Importantly for Bourdieu, one’s habitus is clearly informed by and influences one’s position in the social class structure. For these reasons, a number of educational researchers have come to identify habitus as a key site for examining the role of culture in the process of reproducing inequality in schools and society (Dumais 2002; Lareau 2003; Mullen 2010).

Although Bourdieu is duly credited for shedding light on complex social processes that help us to understand how inequalities are reproduced, his theory of habitus is criticized for its near exclusive emphasis on “signals of socioeconomic and cultural status” (Lamont 1992: 181) and its fixed “determinism that makes significant social transformation seem impossible” (Sewell 1992: 15). In addressing the limitations of any theory that diminishes or even erases the interconnections between structure and agency, sociologist Sharon Hays (1994) calls for a more integrated and dynamic conceptualization of culture. She advocates for “a conception of structure as more than a pattern of material, objective, and external constraints engendering human passivity; for a conception of agency as more than action that is un-structured, individual, subjective, random and implying absolute freedom; and for a conception of culture as a part of social structure” (p. 58). Such a theory of culture would acknowledge the prevalence and durability of social structure while allowing for transformative, albeit limited, agency.

With this objective in mind, Hays defines culture as systems of meaning that transcend the individual yet influence and are influenced by individual action and are an integral part of social structure. These systems of meaning include “not only the beliefs and values of social groups, but also their language, forms of knowledge and common sense, as well as the material products, interactional practices, rituals, and ways of life established by these” (p. 65). Hays highlights here the various dimensions of culture that guide action, drawing much needed attention to the complex process of meaning making. In this way, Hays reminds us that culture influences “not only what we think about, but how we think about it” (p. 68), leaving sociologists of culture to explore the vast intricacies of these social processes.
One of the more provocative turns in the sociology of culture that examines “how we think” is advanced by Ann Swidler (1986, 2001), who shifts our gaze to this messy process of meaning making. Swidler encourages analysts to explore both the “what,” the cultured capacities—the skills, habits, and styles—that constitute social actors’ cultural “toolkits” and the “how,” the ways that social actors, singularly and in the aggregate, nurture, select, and use their capacities in the context of social institutions and interactions. In line with many contemporary theorists of culture, Swidler maintains that culture is embedded and reflected in ourselves, our actions, and our environments and is therefore ultimately fragmentary and dynamic, not existing “out there” in any stable and unified fashion (DiMaggio 1997; Hays 1994; Sewell 1992). Instead, culture’s influence lies in strategies of action and so is “facilitative rather than determinative” (p. 105). Swidler acknowledges the complex and varied ways cultural theorists, going back as far as Max Weber ([1958] 2003), have used the concept of logics to elucidate processes of meaning making and action. She herself advocates for an understanding that conceives of such logics as “tools or resources that cultivate skills and capacities that people integrate into larger more stable ‘strategies of action’” (Swidler 2001: 187). The task for social analysts, then, is to research how competing cultural logics emerge at particular historical moments and how social actors turn to and use such logics, or not, in the dual processes of meaning making and the shaping of dispositions toward action.

Anita Ilta Garey (1999), in her book Weaving Work and Motherhood, provides a compelling example of a potential path forward for exploring these cultural social processes, specifically as they shape contemporary parenting. Garey’s interview study examines how women hospital workers with children use what she refers to as “strategies of being” to “reconcile their identities as mothers and as workers” (p. 13). In doing so, Garey focuses her analysis on a strand of strategies or dispositions that refer to ways of thinking that “reconcile actions with a sense of self” (p. 23). While so much work and life balance research focuses on conflict between parenting and worker roles, Garey instead relies on the metaphor of weaving to illuminate both the process of merging mothering and worker identities and the product of having woven a coherent sense of self in the context of otherwise constraining cultural and institutional structures.

In the pages that follow, I explore the various ways these student parents negotiate the “push and shove” of history, culture, and various social institutions as they forge tracks that they hope will lead them to fulfilling their educational and familial goals. Along the way, these student parents encounter obstacles that halt their progress. At other times, they gain access to resources and ways of meaning that fuel them forward. Here I not only highlight the effects on student parents of organizational structures and public policy but also explore how they embrace, reject, or modify competing cultural logics. Collectively, these social processes shape and are shaped by these students parents’ strategies of
being as they make sense of parenting and the purpose of higher education—fifty years prior, most of these students would not likely have attended college at all. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, these students can now choose to pursue a college degree, and, just as importantly, they feel the pressure to attain such credentials. Their perspectives provide insight into the various ways individual identities, social institutions, and culture are reproduced or are challenged and changed.

Learning from Student Parents

To better understand these social processes, I interviewed forty students—twenty-nine mothers and eleven fathers—between the years 2007 and 2014 in the state of Connecticut. Finding these student parents was not easy. Most college campuses do not collect data that allow for the distinct identification of students who are parents, a problem that has hindered researchers hoping to better understand student parents’ needs (Goldrick-Rab and Sorenson 2011; Miller et al. 2011).

For one, not all student parents define their parental status in ways that might be represented in various campus-based surveys. Although students who are applying for financial aid—including grants and loans—will provide information regarding dependents, not all student parents apply for financial aid. Just over 14 percent of the students in my sample reported not relying on any loans or grants to pay for their education. Even when student parents do answer questions regarding their dependents, either on financial aid or other surveys, their answers may not reflect their home situations in ways that allow us to identify them as student parents. For example, young student parents living with their own parents may not claim their own children on their tax returns. Instead grandparents who are claiming their own children (as long as those children are full-time students, they may be claimed as dependents until they reach the age of twenty-four) may also claim their grandchildren. Or parents who are not married but live together with their children or who are divorced and share partial custody may very well not claim their children as dependents on financial aid applications because their partner instead claims them. In short, the term dependents denotes a tax status and not the lived caregiving experience of many of these parents, shaping their responses in such surveys in sometimes unpredictable ways.

Given these existing limitations, I relied on purposive, nonrandom sampling methods to identify potential participants. Student parents responded to posters that I distributed around campuses of two public universities and two public community colleges, all four of which were located in the northeastern U.S. region. These colleges and universities primarily serve students from within the state, with less than 5 percent of admitted full-time university students coming
from outside the state. In 2013, the average annual cost of in-state tuition, room, and board for an undergraduate student was almost $20,000 at the four-year state universities, and tuition was just under $4,000 at the community colleges. Most students in this study responded to the posters, which were placed on student center billboards, on cafeteria walls, in the stairwells of classroom buildings, and outside library entryways. At least six parents stated that they learned of my study from a parent whom I had previously interviewed—at the end of my interviews, I provided participants with a small business card–sized flier that briefly described the study and encouraged them to pass on the information to other potentially interested parents.

All forty parents interviewed are raising children under the age of fourteen years, with twenty-nine students raising children ages five years and younger (see the appendix for more information about the sample). I paid student parents $25 for participating in the study—a nominal fee that I hoped would aid in their paying for child care while they met with me. Full interviews lasted from one to four hours, with most interviews averaging two hours. At the beginning of the interview, student parents completed a brief written questionnaire, covering basic demographic information regarding themselves, their family, and their work and educational history. After they completed the questionnaire, I utilized a semistructured interview format, asking them a series of questions regarding their familial and educational experiences. I asked them to share the story of their transition to college and to explain their reasons for pursuing a college degree at this particular juncture of their lives. I also asked them to share the stories of the birth of their children and to describe their approaches to parenting. Finally, I asked them to voice their perceptions of cultural beliefs pertaining to education and parenting and to explain how their beliefs correlated with or diverged from those beliefs promulgated in popular discourse.

In addition to talking with student parents, I informally interviewed over twenty-five various campus and community representatives—faculty, program directors, and administrators. Some of these people have worked with student parents, and others have actually advocated for increased student parent resources on college and university campuses over the years. Directors of campus-based women's centers have long argued for child care services and counseling support, particularly given the past and still present reality that woman more often than men are primarily responsible for family caregiving responsibilities. In response to prevailing popular discourse regarding caregiving demands and the workplace, many campuses in the past few decades have hired work life coordinators to address the unique needs of faculty, staff, and, in some cases, students who are tending to the caregiving of family members, including spouses, children, and elderly parents. The public colleges attended by these student parents did not have work life or student parent coordinators, but in talking to administrators from other private and public colleges and universities, I came to
understand how campuses can work to create family-friendly cultures for students, faculty, and staff. These supplemental interviews in conjunction with analyses of higher educational history, public policy, and national data—all of which allow me to contextualize these findings—complement the stories and perspectives shared by student parents, providing culturally and institutionally based counterpoints to students’ stated beliefs regarding what it means and what it takes to be a student parent in the twenty-first century.

The Shape of This Book

I begin chapter 2 by historically situating this analysis, providing an overview of higher education that helps us to understand how a seat in a college classroom came to be both open to and expected by these student parents. The contemporary social institutions and cultural logics that currently influence these student parents’ educational opportunities and strategies of being are profoundly shaped by this history. A review of the emergence of higher education reveals an ever expanding network of colleges and universities over the past two hundred years. As access to postsecondary institutions increased, in part due to changes in funding sources providing aid not only to colleges but also to college students themselves, so did the expectation that one would attend college after high school. I also explore debates regarding the purpose and function of college at the beginning of the twenty-first century. I review various cultural narratives that inform higher educational policymaking and influence the ways in which many students have come to articulate the purpose of a college education, particularly as it is connected to future employment. As the price of college tuition and student debt increases and as varied critics, including Florida governor Rick Scott and CNN journalist Fareed Zakaria, present competing views about the purpose and role of public colleges and universities, anyone who has a stake in the issue is discussing the role of higher education as it shapes personal lives and contemporary society.

Chapter 3 examines the specific college-going experiences of these student parents, with an emphasis on the ways that institutional and organizational social norms, resources, and processes shape those experiences. By examining their choices to attend public colleges and universities, their access to financial aid, the availability of on-campus child care, and their interactions with faculty and peers, we gain insight as to how students enact their cultured capacities in the context of a particular campus culture. The culture that a campus develops may or may not recognize and address the unique skills, habits, and styles of particular student subgroups. Students’ experiences with programs and with the professors, coaches, and case managers who represent those programs collectively impact student parents’ educational trajectories, fundamentally influencing their sense of belonging on campus and their success in an academic environment.
In chapter 4, I shift the focus from macro-oriented frames exploring educational history and organizational culture to examine the cultural logics that students draw upon to make sense of the role of higher education in their lives. Student parents have decided that pursuing a college degree is worthy of their investment of money, time, and energy, but what is it that they expect to gain? In an age of rising tuition and indeterminate job opportunities, just what do students want from their college experience? As I explore student parents’ descriptions of their educational expectations and aspirations, three distinct dispositions emerge—job seekers, practical explorers, and self-reflective learners. In this chapter, I trace the ways that students draw upon sometimes competing and sometimes complementary cultural logics that reflect distinct educational dispositions. These dispositions possess the potential to shape their college experience and influence their likelihood of educational success. The tensions that exist in public debates about the value of higher education are very much at play in how these students discuss their expectations of college and reveal their strategies of being.

Chapters 5 and 6 explore the potential implications of students’ strategies of being as revealed in their home lives and career trajectories. To facilitate this exploration, I focus on two ideologically common cultural logics that strongly influence contemporary narratives of parenting, work, and education: gendered separate spheres and instrumentalist framings of schooling, jobs, and the economy. In chapter 5, I turn to the home front and analyze how students align with or challenge cultural ideals of gender, parenting, and work. I examine how student parents conceptualize their student and parent identities, engaging in strategies and interpreting their effects in ways that bolster their sense of well-being and worth. This section reveals how students negotiate their household, caregiving, and educational labor at home in the context of a gendered separate spheres logic. I also explore morally infused cultural idealizations of parenting and how student parents come to understand and sometimes challenge what it means to be a “good” mother or father (Hays 1996; Moen and Yu 2000). As these student parents seek to affirm their parenting and student identities, they encourage those around them to likewise value their caregiving, domestic, and educational labor. This analysis provides a glimpse into the struggles that students experience at home, struggles that some days weigh them down but other days free them from social constraints and stretch their imaginations.

In chapter 6, I examine how students’ past experiences and aspirations align with or challenge dominant cultural framings that emphasize the positive relationship between education, job skills, and the economy. Tracing the job and educational histories of three students—a job seeker, a practical explorer, and a self-reflective learner—I analyze the connections and disconnects between these student parents’ prior educational credentials, past jobs, and future educational and career aspirations. Public and political discourse tends to portray higher
education as a cure-all for the shortcomings or failures of individuals within the contemporary economy. However, a close examination of these students' histories reveals that such a message oversimplifies the complexities of a twenty-first-century capitalist economy in which declining real wages, increasing income inequality, gendered jobs, outsourcing, quickly evolving technology, and a weakening influence of labor are collectively shaping individuals' career trajectories.

In the final chapter, I conclude by reviewing the various ways these student parents' experiences reinforce or challenge dominant cultural logics regarding parenting and the role of public higher education in the twenty-first century. A majority of these student parents have chosen to be a part of a traditional campus culture where they can grow, learn, and prepare themselves for not just a job but a life in which they are empowered to become better mothers and fathers. Such growth is evidenced in the ways that many of them feel their lives have changed for the better as a result of their educational learning and accomplishments. Further, in advocating for caregivers' rights and resources, these students are also, not always consciously, calling for changes that will produce greater gender equity both on college campuses and in their lives. However, their experiences also reveal stark problems with the landscape of higher education—a college degree does not promise economic stability or social mobility. We must face the fact that education alone cannot solve the problems of an economy that is grounded in rising inequality.

Ultimately, this study highlights the complex cultural, organizational, and institutional forces shaping student parents' interactions and experiences, providing a unique perspective that both draws upon and contributes to the sociological literature on education, social policy, gender, and culture. Back in School reveals that these student parents are challenged with addressing many of the same questions that other students and parents are facing at this historical moment. What do we expect of our institutions of higher learning? What makes for successful parenting? In an era when the answers to these questions are far from clear or straightforward, student parents are making sense of their lives each and every day and are negotiating contradictions when experiences and aspirations collide.

The stories shared in these pages reveal that most of these student parents expect and believe that they are improving their lives and doing the right thing by going to college. These stories also reveal how cultural logics and institutional resources facilitate or hinder their ability to weave together their student and parent identities. These student parents’ perspectives and experiences help us to understand the tensions resulting from intersections between individuals and social structures and provide valuable insights regarding both parenting and the social role of higher education at the beginning of the twenty-first century.