Back in School
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Carolyn, a twenty-seven-year-old graphic arts student, hopes to use her skills one day to open a small business of her own. She recently separated from her husband after he returned from serving overseas in Iraq. Receiving very little support from her ex-husband, her in-laws, and her own mother (she hasn’t seen her father in years), Carolyn now maintains primary custody of her two young children, ages three and six. When I ask her how she conceptualizes student success, she declares, in exasperation, “College is for kids that don’t have kids. That’s what it’s made for—kids that don’t have kids.” After a brief moment of silence between us, she continues, “But life takes its toll. You know, I’m not looking for handouts. That’s not what I want. I’m just looking for some kind of understanding.” Carolyn’s words reveal her deep frustration on campus, where she often feels she has to erase her identity as a mother as she endlessly toils to succeed as a student.

Returning to college, particularly after many years of absence, can be a daunting prospect for many of these student parents. They must engage in the practical concerns of accessing previous transcripts, completing application materials, and taking entrance or placement tests. Students with prior college experience must also juggle their transfer credits, figuring out how past accomplishments—or, for some, failures—are going to fit in to their proposed program of study. For those younger student parents who had their children while in their teens or early twenties, weaving together student and parent identities can become exceptionally challenging when peers, professors, and counselors consciously or tacitly stigmatize them. Other parents, like Carolyn may be in the midst of tumultuous relationships or struggling to raise children on their own, all while managing the demands of their professors and campus administrators.

These student parents share concerns about a campus culture that at times feels out of alignment with their complex needs and student parent identities.

“I’m Just Looking for Some Kind of Understanding”

Academic Resources and Campus Culture
In chapter 1, I introduced Swidler’s concept of culture as a toolkit and highlighted the importance of examining how specific historical and institutional contexts shape students’ meaning and decision making. To that end, in chapter 2, I explored historical policies and cultural trends that reveal just how these student parents came to believe that a college education is available and necessary for success. In this current chapter, I look more closely at institutional policies and resources that ultimately influence both campus culture and student parents’ strategies of being. In this way, I follow in the footsteps of many influential educational researchers who have studied the ways that institutional structures and campus culture affect students’ college experiences. My intent in this chapter is to reveal the ways that students like Carolyn come to feel supported or alienated as a result of the way social institutions respond to their parenting and educational needs.

Student parents’ dispositions, decisions, and interactions are distinctively shaped by a campus culture that consists of classrooms and offices—faculty, admissions, financial aid, academic advising, counseling, athletics—that historically has reflected an organizational logic structured to address the needs of young, childless students. Even the terms that are used in the world of higher education to describe student parents, “nontraditional,” or in the case of older students “adult learners,” bring to light how they are perceived as distinct from the campus norm. In truth, very few people on campus know which students are parents—they are often an invisible, unacknowledged population. Unless students arrive at a professor’s office hours with a child in tow or bring up their familial obligations in conversation, faculty, staff, and administrators are unaware of these students’ parenting identities. Such a situation exists in part because parents perceive campus to be a sphere separate from both work and home, and so rarely, if ever, bring their children to campus. Only when in crisis—when a child is ill or child care falls through—do they reveal their identities as mothers or fathers by “outing” themselves, a process that can be fraught with tension or pride. Like the needs of veterans, athletes, first-generation students, and students with psychological, emotional, or learning disabilities, the needs of student parents are often not visible and so can easily be ignored by an institution unless it devotes specific resources to support those students and normalize their presence on campus (Grubb 1999; Morest 2013).

All of the student parents in this study ended up enrolling in regional public colleges or universities due to a complex interplay of individual, cultural, and institutional factors. Once on campus, various interactional and cultural factors determine whether or not the experience of coming out as a parent is one of self-affirmation or stigmatization. A student’s age, marital status, race or ethnicity, and gender collectively affect the way professors, staff, and administrators might respond upon learning that a student is a mother or a father. Further, access to key resources, including financial aid and child care, can determine whether or
not a student parent is likely to succeed on campus and feel connected to his or her student identity and the larger campus community. These interactions and resources both reflect and shape a campus culture that is felt to be welcoming to student parents or not.

In this chapter, I begin by examining prior literature that explores the cultural logics that shape students’ decisions regarding where they choose to pursue their education. This research helps us to understand why these student parents stayed local and how their experiences fit into larger research narratives regarding college in the twenty-first century. I then examine the various ways that these student parents’ identities were either challenged or validated as a result of the presence or lack of institutional financial and child care resources made available to them both on and off campus. I also explore their interactions with professors and peers, interactions that either contest or legitimize their student parent identities. In examining these processes, I intend to highlight the ways that institutional policies and organizational culture function in the context of the public colleges and universities that these students attend.

**The Decision to Attend a Public College or University**

The student parents in this sample, like many students, did not fully consider their options when deciding on a college to attend. Instead, these student parents—of which almost half reported annual incomes of less than $30,000—restricted their educational options, confining themselves to state colleges and universities that are within driving distance of their homes and familial support systems. The thirty-five student parents in this study who were pursuing baccalaureate or master’s degrees did not seriously consider attending any of the other at least seventeen private colleges and universities in the small state of Connecticut. They instead chose to attend one of the four regional comprehensive state universities that was nearest their homes and social networks and that was familiar to them.

McDonough (1997) similarly revealed the various ways that families, friends, and schooling organizations establish boundaries regarding the college choices that students perceive as available to them. McDonough relied on case studies of students and counselors in four very different California high schools, highlighting the social dynamics that shaped students’ pathways to college. Based on their familial and schooling experiences, she found that students grow to feel “entitled” to a particular kind of college experience and so base their college choices on what feels appropriate for them. Importantly, McDonough highlights the cultural and organizational processes that substantively and differentially shape these feelings of “entitlement,” processes that ultimately serve to reproduce social inequalities. Just as many of the low-income students interviewed by McDonough came to believe that community colleges were their best option
in regard to postsecondary education, the student parents in this study have come to accept that local state schools best suit their personal and educational needs.

Similar conclusions were drawn by Mullen (2010) in her analysis of interviews with students who attended Yale University and a regional state university in Connecticut, a public university that several of the student parents in this study also attended. Mullen found that the state university students in her sample primarily based their college selection on convenience, affordability, and program offerings. She describes these students’ college choices as adhering to a “logic of efficiency,” in which cost and expediency are paramount (p. 106). When Mullen interviewed Yale students about their college choices, she found that, like the state university students, most of the Ivy League students limited their choices, only in a very different way—they expected to attend only an elite or highly selective school.

Tellingly, both the state and Ivy League students in her study expressed a desire to attend a campus where they felt comfortable. Citing Bourdieu’s classic work on cultural and social reproduction, Mullen suggests that “these remarks reflected the students’ habitus in their perceptions of the possible and the sense of one’s place” (p. 115). In other words, if one’s decisions are in concert with one’s sense of place, those decisions feel sensible and normal. Both McDonough and Mullen highlight the effects of a complex intersection of social forces that result in these students deciding upon a particular college, a decision that has significant ramifications in regard to their experience on campus and their likelihood of graduating.

The student parents in this study are certainly similar to the state university and working-class high school students interviewed by Mullen and McDonough, respectively. In describing their process of college selection, all of these student parents relied on the very same “logic of efficiency” identified by Mullen. This is not to suggest that these students are making unsound decisions—far from it. As stated earlier, their logic is based on a particular understanding of their position in the larger socioeconomic structure and the system of higher education, even if they do not articulate it precisely in those terms.

For example, these student parents are, on average, correct in their assessment of affordability. A private nonprofit university that is only ten miles away from one of the regional state universities that thirty-one of these student parents attended is similarly rated in terms of its selectivity yet posted tuition in 2013 at just over $30,000 a year, well over three times the cost of the nearby state university the same year. The six-year retention rates for both those universities—that is, the percentage of students who received their college degree within six years—are relatively similar, with the public university reporting 52 percent compared to the private university’s 56 percent graduation rate. However, the four-year retention rates of these two universities differ significantly in that only
21 percent of the students at the state university graduate in four years, whereas 46 percent of the students attending the private university graduate in that same time (NCES 2014). One less year in school results in one less year of paying tuition and one more year available to work and potentially reap the financial rewards of having a job for which a college degree was required. When the facts are read in this way, it soon becomes clear that the decisions regarding the costs of a college degree are far from straightforward and are dependent on a variety of complex factors that require careful consideration, a reading that is often belied by these students’ “logics of efficiency.”

As described earlier, most of these student parents never explored going to college anywhere else. The idea never crossed their minds. First, they are not willing to leave the local area, to move their families—much less move away from their immediate families—or to move away from extended families or friends, who provide important supportive networks. Second, and this is explained by the way culture functions, most of these students did not bother to research alternatives to the community and state colleges that are closest to their homes. They have come to accept the belief that state colleges and universities will provide them with the education that they need to succeed. Those students, and there were none in this sample, who are most likely to possess knowledge of retention rates and to analyze a college degree’s “return on investment” are more likely to research their college options and select a campus that provides an educational setting that meets their perceived educational and social needs. Those students are more likely to be from higher socioeconomic backgrounds and have access to more resources that provide them with such information (McDonough 1997; Mullen 2010; Stuber 2011). Such knowledge, or human and cultural capital, to use the language of sociologists who have intensively examined these social processes, ensures that individuals from higher social classes select colleges from which they are likely to graduate. And this is important, particularly when students have a high number of needs due to their socioeconomic status, academic demands, or responsibilities at home.

An institution’s average retention rate does not tell the whole story. As already described, some students enter a university with more advantages, many of which result from their families’ socioeconomic status. In her examination of working-class and middle- and upper-class students attending two very different colleges, a small liberal arts college and a large flagship state university, Stuber (2011) identifies the various ways that the culture of the campus itself shapes the “experiential core” of students’ campus life, influencing their academic and social integration on campus. For the middle- and upper-class students, a particular college’s culture had very little effect on their involvement levels on campus—many of these students arrived on their respective campuses with preexisting social networks and predispositions to integrate themselves in ways that will enhance their college experience and improve their likelihood of
graduating. Working-class students, on the other hand, are much better off at the slightly more expensive liberal arts college due to a variety of campus-based programs and opportunities, including study abroad programs, clubs, and a vibrant Greek culture, that have been put in place to connect them to the larger campus community. Their chances for long-term educational success are very much influenced by their choice of college.

Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) likewise determine that college choices tend to matter most for low-income women. In their study *Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality*, these two researchers examine women students’ experiences at a public research university, revealing how an institutionally sanctioned party culture shapes students’ academic success along social class lines. Such a culture, they argue, is produced in part because of the type of students—that is, out-of-state and international students with the means to pay for college but without the drive or academic qualifications to enter a more elite university—that these public universities are pushed to accept during an era of shifting demographics and funding cutbacks. Many of these students come from families that can afford the high tuition and that have provided their daughters with the social connections and cultural capital to survive both at school and upon graduation when entering the workplace. The working-class women, however, are distracted by the “party pathway” that is fostered by their upper-class peers and by institutional practices that support a strong Greek culture. This “party pathway” ultimately renders divergent effects on the educational experiences and futures of these young women, with upper-income women surviving the “party” due to their possession of a network of resources and lower-income women falling behind in school and work. Like the qualitative studies described earlier, Armstrong and Hamilton provide yet more insights regarding the interconnectedness of culture, college experiences, and social inequality.

The pathways that Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) portray play out very clearly in the educational story shared by Drew. Drew, a twenty-three-year-old communications student and father of a two-year-old, transferred from a college over four hours away to a local state regional university when he found out his longtime girlfriend was pregnant. He wanted to be closer to his girlfriend and to the familial networks that would provide them with support as they embarked on the journey that is parenthood. Drew also made it clear that because his father owned a local fast-food franchise, Drew had a ready job as well as a great deal of family support nearby as he worked through his immediate life changes.

However, that was just part of the story. When Drew made the decision to leave a university in a neighboring state, he cites the very different campus cultures at each respective institution as contributing to his decision. He describes his prior school as “expensive” and as having a “party school” atmosphere that did not align with his changing sense of self as he was preparing to become a new father. Certainly he was influenced to return to his home state because a
job in his family’s business awaited him there as well as a strong network of supportive family and friends. However, he also finds that the regional comprehensive university near his home town is not only more affordable than his prior out-of-state college but also provides a campus culture that he believes will support his educational and long-term career goals. Over 75 percent of the undergraduate students on his current campus are commuter students, and many are similarly working full time (CCSU 2008). These working students have very little time available to pursue the “party” culture that is typically associated with the residential college experience. In sum, Drew found his nearby, public regional university to be a good fit given his changing responsibilities as a new father.

Most private colleges, particularly smaller nonprofits, continue to target what are considered by college administrators as “traditional” students, who most often do not have children, are able to live on campus, and have time to engage in extracurricular activities and programs. Many of the resources described by Stuber (2011) that improved the academic success and retention rates of working-class students would not aid most student parents, who are rarely able to participate in study abroad programs due to their caregiving responsibilities and have neither the time nor the inclination to become involved in a variety of student clubs or Greek life.

So it is very possible that the state colleges and universities that student parents frequently choose to attend are indeed the “best option.” Students’ “logic of efficiency” may well be working in their favor. Although it may be true that state colleges and universities can provide student parents with the on-campus experience that they desire, it’s important to acknowledge that most of these students didn’t even explore their options. They have not researched campus resources to determine which colleges might best address their complex educational and familial needs and are not aware of the various campus climates that are cultivated to enhance retention and graduation. Not that there is much information out there regarding campus climates—much of that knowledge comes by way of one’s social networks, acquaintances, friends, and family who are familiar with the various campuses or from campus visits, if one has the time and money to travel.

Although student parents’ logics of efficiency are steering them toward state colleges and universities, public institutions have experienced severe cutbacks in recent years. Their tuitions are increasing, and students are increasingly expected to pick up the difference. In 2016, state spending in forty-six states remained well below prerecession 2008 spending, and states were spending on average 18 percent less on higher education. In Connecticut, where these student parents are attending college, spending on higher education in 2016 had decreased 12.6 percent since 2008, which translated to approximately $1,951 less spending per student (Mitchell, Leachman, and Masterson 2017). To make up for these cuts, public colleges have both consolidated services and increased tuition. Tuition at
Connecticut’s four regional public universities more than doubled over a fifteen-year period from $4,153 in 2001–2002 to $10,079 in 2016–2017. During that same period, tuition at the states community colleges likewise doubled from $1,888 in 2001–2002 to $4,168 in 2016–2017 (Constable 2017). The promise of an affordable college education that students have come to expect is no longer what most will receive—students are paying significantly more than past generations for their college degrees, and with attrition rates so high, the risk of their investment has grown. The students interviewed here are, for now, the survivors. But for far too many students who wish to enter the doors of college, this part of the American dream is increasingly being deferred.

**Why Not Enroll in an Online Program?**

Interestingly, these student parents have chosen to forgo online degree options that are readily available and aggressively market themselves as convenient alternatives for working adults. Concerns regarding the high attrition rates of such programs and the quality of instruction have permeated public discourse as researchers and legislators question whether or not some of these online programs, particularly online bachelor’s programs offered by for-profit colleges and universities, are providing quality instruction and the resources necessary to ensure students are able to succeed (Deming, Goldin, and Katz 2013; Mettler 2014). These concerns are borne in the context of increasing postsecondary enrollments and the diminishing resources for state colleges and universities as outlined earlier (Mettler 2014; Mitchell, Palacios, and Leachman 2014).

When asked about the possibility of enrolling in an online college, over half of these students confessed to trying online courses, but they claimed to prefer a traditional classroom environment, a preference that led them instead to local community colleges or state regional universities. Some students expressed concern regarding the quality of instruction and learning in a purely online classroom format. Lindsey, who is studying to be a high school history teacher, had taken four online classes throughout her college career. As a single mom of an energetic one-year-old, she admits that online classes in general are “a great way to get a course done and not interrupt your daily life too much.” However, she states that she would never take an online course again. Of her experience, she laments, “I felt that I was just really on my own. And you know, somebody was just correcting my work and that was it.” Lindsey perceives the teaching and learning in the online courses that she took to have been detached and ultimately inferior. At that time, she longed for the accountability and personal response that a traditional classroom provides and now declares, “I’d just rather put a face to the professor and know that this person is going to be angry with me if I don’t come to class prepared.” Ultimately she determines, “I just find that online courses are not for me.”
Lindsey’s desire for face-to-face contact was repeated by several other student parents, including Matt and Molly. Matt, a twenty-five-year-old criminology student and single father of a two-year-old, withdrew from the one online course that he attempted because the educational experience lacked a physical immediacy that he prefers. Matt contends that he has “to physically see a teacher, a professor, and I have to connect with him somehow.” Molly, a thirty-four-year-old accounting student and married mother of a nine-year-old, echoes these students’ comments admitting to preferring on-campus versus online classes because “I like to be here, listen to the professor, take notes, you know, hear the inflection in their voice, get things from them in person, and I think that that’s how I learn best.”

Jose, a forty-five-year-old father of three, like Lindsey, is studying to be a history teacher after having worked many years in the public school and foster care systems. When asked about his experience with online classes, Jose responds, “I’m more of a visual [learner] and because of all my work experience, I like to be face-to-face and discuss things.” Later Jose admits that several of his colleagues and friends suggested that he enroll in a local public college that targets working adults by offering online programs and degrees. Jose rejected that option saying, “I think I’m going to find it boring. I think I’m going to be missing something.” What he would miss, he later clarifies is “dialoguing,” which is important to him because many of his ideas are developed during the process of interaction and discussion: “I might not know the answer now, but while we’re discussing it I’ll figure it out.” Jose values the process of learning and discovery that can occur within personal interactions, and he has not yet found an online classroom environment that fully replicates that experience.

Other students express appreciation for the convenience that online options provide but question their ability to discipline themselves or focus on their coursework. Ed, a twenty-three-year-old father of two studying computer science, admits, “If I have an online class, I can get easily distracted, and being on your computer right there online, you have the games you can be playing... if I’m sitting at home, it’s more like, ‘I’m at home.’” Elizabeth reiterates Ed’s concern when she confesses, “I don’t have the self-discipline. I really need to be in the classroom... I can’t even check my email without my daughter being on my lap, so it just wouldn’t work for me.” These parents have come to appreciate the routine and structure that leaving the house and participating in a college classroom provides.

Additionally, time spent in a classroom provides a social respite for many parents. For some of these students, their time on campus was their sole opportunity to interact with other adults without their children around. When asked if she had ever taken an online course, Allie answers, “No. I needed to get out, to be with people, because I’ve been home for so long with just my children. I needed to be out and socialize.” Just under a quarter of the student parents whom
I interviewed referenced their appreciation for the opportunity to engage in adult conversation and interaction in a face-to-face classroom environment.

In 2013, only 17 percent of public colleges and universities offered some courses online as compared to 5 percent of private nonprofit research universities and 2 percent of private liberal arts colleges. In contrast, 34 percent of for-profit institutions provided all of their courses online (McPherson and Bacow 2015). These numbers reveal the underlying objectives and missions of various types of institutions of higher education. For-profit colleges are driven by credentialing and a steadily increasing bottom line, which can be facilitated by offering conveniently accessed and administratively less expensive online instruction. On the other hand, more selective schools address their bottom line by ensuring high-quality college experiences that encourage face-to-face social networking with faculty, staff, and students. Most public colleges and universities fall in the middle of this spectrum, preferring to offer satellite campuses or community colleges to online instruction for those students who are geographically remote from their nearest full-service, public university. However, public colleges are increasingly offering some online options to provide flexibility to address the diverse needs of their student body.

Overall, these students prefer face-to-face instruction, which allows them the opportunity to meet with professors and fellow students and to more clearly separate their home and school lives. Although some of these student parents believe that having online options for some classes is beneficial, they would rather attend classes on a college campus, and none of them are interested in taking all of their courses online.

Where’s the Money? Access to a College Education

One important factor shaping a student’s sense that they belong on campus is access. All of these students qualified academically for their respective programs at these state colleges and universities, and so access was primarily determined by geographic proximity and affordability. Approximately 85 percent of the student parents in this study rely on some kind of financial aid to pay for their college experience, be it in the form of grants, scholarships, or loans. As described in chapter 2, many aid programs emerged following World War II to address the needs of the evolving economy in the United States and to redress social inequalities. Among the most prevalent forms of aid that these student parents have taken advantage of are the GI Bill, Pell Grants, and Stafford Loans. In the following sections, I briefly describe these various forms of financial aid, in addition to forms of non-education-related financial aid and child care assistance that students sought out but were denied. Collectively this overview provides a window into ways that college affordability has ebbed and flowed for these student parents in recent years.
The GI Bill

The most generous combined federal and state financial aid package is available to veterans. Seven of the forty students in this study benefit from the Post-9/11 GI Bill and Connecticut state tuition waivers, which cover most if not all the costs of tuition, fees, books, and living expenses during the months when students are in school. At the time when I conducted these interviews, Connecticut was one of the few states to offer tuition waivers that veterans can use to attend any of the state colleges or universities as long as they served a minimum of ninety days in active duty, were honorably discharged, and have been officially accepted to the state college or university of their choice. This tuition waiver makes Connecticut a particularly attractive educational destination for veterans, who are expected to pay out-of-state tuition in many other states until they can establish residency status.7

These seven students chose to enter the military rather than immediately attend college right out of high school for a variety of reasons—some were pushed to go to college but did not feel ready or were simply not interested in continuing with school, while others felt they could not afford college and so chose to join the military as a means of financing their future education. Whatever their initial reasons for joining the military, these seven student parents are all now enrolled in a public university, and the educational benefits provided to them have made that possible.

It became very clear that these GI educational benefits are a vital financial resource that provides access to low- and even middle-income veterans who might not otherwise consider pursuing a college degree. However, such benefits are more likely to be available to men than they are to women. Because the military remains a male-dominated institution, only 9 percent of all veterans are women, it is no surprise that numerically many more men than women have taken advantage of the comprehensive assistance provided by the GI Bill (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs 2015).

In the fall of 2015, I met with the director of the Office of Veterans Affairs housed at one of the state universities attended by five of these seven student parent veterans. At that time, the director admitted to being concerned about the lack of women veterans returning to campus to pursue their degrees. He shared with me some of his attempts to reach out to women veterans—for example, offering a complimentary spa day, which he used to promote available educational benefits. Overall, however, he conceded that such events to reach out to women veterans had been unsuccessful. Although the women veterans who participated in these events were generally interested in what he had to say, many of them expressed concern about being able to balance family and work with the demands of going to school. Importantly, veterans are limited as to how long they have available to take advantage of their educational benefits.
The most generous benefits, accorded by the Montgomery GI and Post-9/11 GI Bills, must be used within ten to fifteen years of release from active duty (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs 2013). If these women don’t use their educational benefits within this limited time frame, they lose them.

**Pell Grants and Stafford Loans**

The Pell Grant and Stafford Loan programs, implemented in the 1970s, continue to enable millions of low-income students of all ages to attend college. According to researchers at the National Center for Educational Statistics, over 36 percent of the students receiving a bachelor’s degree in 1999–2000 had at one time or another during their academic career received a Pell Grant. They found that women were much more likely than men to have relied on a Pell Grant, and over 45 percent of those students were aged twenty-five or older (see table 3.1). Pell Grant recipients were also more likely than nonrecipients to identify as racial/ethnic minorities and more likely to be caring for dependents and to identify as single parents (Wei and Horn 2009). These numbers make it clear that the population of Pell Grant recipients who are pursuing a college degree are much more racially diverse and are more likely to be women, older and/or caring for children than are students who do not qualify for such aid.

In my sample of student parents, 63 percent rely on Stafford Loans to cover their educational costs, a figure that is in line with national trends (NCES 2015b). Fourteen students have incomes low enough so that they qualify for and receive Pell Grants, and of those students, 86 percent, that is all but two, are also taking out loans. Although student parents did not share with me exactly how much debt they had accrued up to that point in their college career, researchers have found that the level of debt of Pell Grant recipients on average exceeds that of students whose incomes were too high to qualify for a Pell Grant in the first place (see table 3.1).

The availability of Pell Grants has no doubt improved access to higher education, yet even in 2000, Pell Grant dollar amounts were not enough to equalize the effects of college debt. And over the past two decades, Pell Grant dollars have come to cover increasingly less of the cost of full tuition at public state universities across the nation. Over a ten year period, between 2003–2004 and 2013–2014, tuition and fees at public institutions steadily increased 44 percent from $5,900 to $8,890 (College Board 2014). These increases occurred primarily in response to reduced state funding on higher education, which has been decreasing steadily since 2000 and dropped even more dramatically in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. Between 2008 and 2013, average state spending on higher education decreased by 28 percent, and 2010 marked the first year that, in public colleges and universities, revenue from tuition was higher than revenue acquired from state and local appropriations (Desrochers and Kirshstein 2012; Oliff et al. 2013).
In 2013, in-state tuition and fees for one of the state universities attended by approximately two-thirds of these student parents came to almost $9,000, whereas Pell Grants in 2012–2013 were limited to a maximum award of $5,645, with most awards averaging $3,678. In-state tuition and fees at Connecticut’s state flagship research university during that same year were over $11,000, well above the average Pell Grant distributed to eligible students. It is clear that the Pell Grant alone is not sufficient to cover the educational costs of these student parents, who have chosen to attend public community colleges or comprehensive regional colleges in part because of their comparative affordability. This helps us to understand why most of these student parents subsequently rely on loans to make up the difference.

### TABLE 3.1

**Comparison of Demographic and Financial Aid Characteristics of College Graduates by Pell Grant Status, 1999–2000 (Percent)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pell Grant Recipients</th>
<th>Nonrecipients</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>55.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>44.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ages 24 and under</td>
<td>54.3</td>
<td>72.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ages 25 and older</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Race</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
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<td>79.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
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<td>American Indian</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other or more than one race</td>
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<td>2.7</td>
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<td><strong>Caregiving Status</strong></td>
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<td>Has dependents</td>
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<td>Single Parent</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Loan Status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borrowed</td>
<td>86.8</td>
<td>47.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not borrow</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>52.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average cumulative amount borrowed</strong></td>
<td>$18,500</td>
<td>$17,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Totals may not equal 100 due to rounding.

Low-Income Parents and Child Care Assistance
Six student parents—Cynthia, Caroline, Drew, Lindsey, Jackie, and Dave—were all told by case managers in local social service agency offices that despite their very low incomes and single-parent status, they were ineligible to receive state supports because they were pursuing a four-year degree rather than engaging in paid work or job training programs. Due to changes in 1996 U.S. welfare laws, many of these student parents, who would have previously qualified for public assistance due to their low-income status, are no longer eligible for cash or child care benefits that would help them to stay in school. According to revisions of welfare policy, which were signed into law in 1996 by then-president Bill Clinton, all welfare program participants are expected to attend workforce training classes or locate paid jobs in order to receive cash and child care assistance. This emphasis on work-first resulted in many states severely limiting their postsecondary education options for parents attending college, resulting in many student parents being counseled by their case managers to put their college goals on hold indefinitely (Pearson 2007, 2010).

At the time when these six students were interviewed, pursuing any degree above an associate’s was not considered a legitimate means of fulfilling participants’ required “work” hours in the state of Connecticut. Lindsey laments, “I heard from the state that I don’t qualify because I’m not in a job training program. That because I’m a student trying to not milk the system, you know, for the rest of my life and trying to make something of myself, that they can’t pay for day care.” Dave similarly admits, “Obviously the state wants me to get off of them, so I think they try to push me to go to the working programs, but I’m not going to go there and look for a job at Target or anything ’cause I’m getting a four-year university degree!” Both Lindsey and Dave see the requirement of attending job training programs as shortsighted—they do not believe that such programs will help them to attain their long-term career goals, which require a four-year college degree. Dave is studying business and hopes to continue on to graduate school to earn an MBA, and Lindsey is completing her bachelor’s degree in secondary education with the intent of teaching high school history. Both are frustrated by the strict welfare requirements that push low-income parents to take resume-writing classes and low-wage jobs in lieu of pursuing four-year degrees and careers.

Dave is the only student parent in this sample who serendipitously found a way around the system because he was assigned a “lenient” case manager with whom he has a good relationship. As long as his girlfriend enrolls in and attends the job placement classes, his case manager is not pushing him to attend them as well. Dave confides, “She just understood how much me being in school helps out. She was real lenient about not making me go to programs and all that kind of stuff but still giving us the assistance.” Dave’s case manager is breaking with
established guidelines and protocol so he can continue to pursue his college education, which both he and his case manager believe to be in his family’s long-term, best interests.⁸

Cynthia, Caroline, Drew, Lindsey, and Jackie were not so lucky—their case managers interpreted state and federal regulations more strictly and told these student parents that although they financially qualified for the program, to be eligible for public assistance, they needed to put aside their goal of pursuing a four-year degree.⁹ Case managers denied all five of these students’ applications for public assistance through Connecticut’s Temporary Family Assistance (TFA) and Care 4 Kids programs. Caroline clearly expresses her irritation with the limitations such programs put on students who wish to pursue undergraduate degrees:

CAROLINE: With Care 4 Kids they don’t help women who go to school. Why? I don’t know. That does not make sense to me, like if a woman’s trying to better her education and better herself to get a good paying job, why can’t you help pay for day care while she’s in school? That does not make sense to me. Like they only go up to associate’s. They won’t go up to bachelor’s. That doesn’t make sense to me.

FIONA: A case manager talked to you about that? Did you actually talk with someone about all that?

CAROLINE: Yeah. But they can’t! They [say] “I’m sorry but there’s nothing I can say. There’s nothing I can do. It’s documented.” Oh my God! That’s full of crap! Like here is a, here’s a female in front of you that’s trying to better herself. . . . When you’re on state, they tell you the job’s first—it’s called Jobs First. And if you’re on state you have to abide to these rules for Jobs First, where they help you find a job, they help you put a resume together. And I’m telling them, “I’m in school I have a job, why can’t you pay for my school?” “Because you’re going for your bachelor’s.” “But I’m bettering myself!” They just couldn’t give me an answer. They didn’t know.

Caroline’s experience reveals the ways federal and state regulations restricting students’ qualifying educational experiences result in uniformly pushing parents toward short-term, not long-term, solutions. These five student parents were financially eligible for public assistance through the TFA and Care 4 Kids programs, but they were unwilling to amend their educational goals to fulfill the programs’ requirements.

Connecticut’s welfare regulations regarding the Jobs First Employment Services (JFES) program were temporarily relaxed in June 2010, in part a response to record high levels of unemployment in the state. The Connecticut state legislature passed and then-governor Jodi Rell signed into state law a provision altering local welfare policy, allowing students pursuing four-year or graduate degrees to take advantage of child care benefits as long as state unemployment levels
remain high. When I called the Connecticut Department of Children and Families at the end of 2011 to inquire as to how many participants in the Temporary Family Assistance (TFA) program were taking advantage of the opportunity to enroll in baccalaureate programs, I was told “not likely many, if any.” Legislative changes are notoriously slow to trickle down to case managers and their clients. By 2015, the legislative provision allowing for flexibility in state welfare work requirements had expired and college students enrolled in four-year baccalaureate programs were again no longer eligible for cash assistance and child care benefits.

**Forgoing Marriage**

Three of the seven student parents who are cohabiting with the fathers or mothers of their children stated that at least one reason why they are not choosing to marry their partner was due to their concerns about how marriage might affect their financial aid status. Marrying their respective partners would increase their annual income, possibly making them ineligible for or reducing the amount of money they might receive from Pell Grants. Jaime, a twenty-six-year-old mother of one, who was pursuing her bachelor’s degree in accounting confesses, “That’s why [I’m] kind of debating on getting married right now, because if I get married, who knows what happens to my financial aid. Then I won’t be able to go to school, which is a problem [laughs]. You know, ‘cause, I have like a year left in school, and then after that I’m not even sure if I’m—I might go on to get my master’s. So . . . it’s all up in the air.” Like many of these student parents, Jaime is unclear exactly how changing her marital status will affect her financial aid. She is twenty-six years old and so is not claimed by her parents as a dependent. It is likely that marrying her partner will increase her household income and decrease her needs-based financial aid. But much depends on how much income she and her fiancé make from year to year. He works in construction, and his income varies considerably season by season, year by year, making estimating the financial implications of getting married even more complicated.

Ed, on the other hand, clearly understands the financial implications of such a decision and states that the primary reason he and his partner were choosing not to get married was purely financial. He declares, “Yes, we’d like to get married, but it just doesn’t make financial sense right now.” Although the GI Bill covers his tuition and books and some living expenses, it does not cover child care. His partner receives child care under Connecticut’s Care 4 Kids public assistance program, and because they are not married and Ed is not the biological father of her children, his income and benefits are not considered when she goes to apply for public assistance.¹⁰

Ed shares that his partner also wants to pursue her bachelor’s degree, but given the limitations of the welfare program described above, they together
agreed that she will continue to work the relatively low wage jobs that are currently available to her and that allow her to receive the Care 4 Kids child care subsidies. Once he completes his degree and becomes the primary breadwinner and once their child is older and not in need of regular child care, she can then pursue her college degree in education. Ironically, one of the stated goals of welfare reform was to increase the number of marriages among low-income families, yet Ed and his girlfriend are forgoing marriage in order to make the existing complex system of financial assistance work in their favor.

**Family Savings**

Only six of the student parents in this study are not dependent on federal or state grants or loans to fund their education. Three of those five students—Emma, Leslie, and Joy—are married, have relatively stable incomes and adequate savings, and feel that they can now afford to pursue their college degrees. The fourth student, twenty-three-year-old Drew, is very much supported by his family and is able to use his earnings from a family-owned franchise and his job at a local university to pay for his tuition and school costs. He and his girlfriend live with his parents, who also help out significantly with child care. The fifth student, forty-nine-year-old Snow, recently divorced after many years of marriage and is using her savings so that she may now pursue a degree in counseling with the hopes of attaining a job in a public school. Starting over in midlife, Snow is focused on her career, seeking a job with a reliable income and benefits now that her children are growing older and she is on her own.

The sixth student who is not dependent on federal or state grants or loans is thirty-four-year-old Molly. She had never expected to go to college. Back when she was eighteen, Molly had no intention of continuing with her schooling—never took the SATs—and instead married and gave birth to her daughter soon after graduating from high school. Several years ago, she began caring for her ailing grandfather and grandmother and was designated their conservator, taking on responsibility for their finances and assets. An uncle, who lives across the country and whom she had never met before, wanted to express his appreciation for her caring for her grandparents by sending an assistant to help her. He also wanted to provide her with a gift for taking on the responsibility of caring for his parents and so offered to pay for her college education. Molly says of their first encounter, “My first conversation with him was the day of the probate hearing when I took over my grandfather’s conservatorship. And just as the relationship blossomed and he had sent someone out to help me and said to this middle person, ‘I want to do something for Molly.’ And she said I think that she needs to go to school. It was kind of—I guess she saw something in me that she, she said, ‘You know, she needs to go to school.’ And just kind of blossomed from there, and so, that’s why I’m here!” [laughs]. She started taking classes and was conditionally accepted as long as she did well during her first term,
which she did, earning a 4.0 grade point average that confirmed for her that her uncle’s investment in her education was worthwhile. Molly is now well on her way to earning her degree in accounting and has gained a newly found appreciation for the learning that can take place in a college classroom.

**How Money Matters**

The vast majority of the student parents in this sample did not receive much if any financial assistance from extended family members and most relied on state or federally sourced funds, including the GI Bill and a complex system of grants and loans. Any form of financial aid is increasingly necessary as more and more individuals are pursuing postsecondary degrees and as college costs continue to increase. Without such financial aid, many of these student parents are at risk of leaving college altogether.

In response to the failing economy, reduced state and local funding, and increasing college tuition costs, in the fall of 2007 Congress passed and President George W. Bush signed into law the College Cost Reduction and Access Act. This was followed in the winter of 2009 with President Barack Obama signing into law Congress’s American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. The acts were hailed as victories for low- and middle-income students because they included provisions that increased the maximum amount available to individuals for Pell Grants, which had remained at the same level since 2003 and increased the amount of income students could receive before they might experience reductions to their financial aid.

Despite these changes, financial aid experts and educational researchers have long noted the decreased purchasing power of the Pell Grant, which in the early 1970s covered nearly 80 percent of the college costs for the average four-year public university but by 2012–2013 covered only 31 percent of those costs (Mettler 2014). Although the U.S. government more than doubled its contributions to the Pell Grant program between the years of 2007 and 2012, almost twice as many students now qualify for the grant, meaning more money has to be disbursed to more students. When evaluated in terms of constant dollars, the maximum individual Pell Grant awards have remained relatively stagnant over the past two decades, while tuition costs have soared (Baum and Ma 2013; College Board 2014).

Further, just because students may have family incomes that are too high for them to be eligible for a Pell Grant does not necessarily mean that they are financially stable or comfortable, as Desiree’s and Lucille’s respective stories make clear. Desiree gave up a dancing career in New York City at age eighteen when she learned she was pregnant. In order to make ends meet, she now lives in her hometown with her mother, who herself was a single mom. Desiree is receiving no financial support from her daughter’s father, although he stays in
touch and visits with her two to three times a week when he can. Desiree does not qualify for the Pell Grant because she is, in tax terms, a “dependent.” That is, her mother claims both twenty-year-old Desiree and her two-year-old daughter on her income tax forms, and so Desiree reports her mother’s relatively high income as a registered nurse on her financial aid forms for college. As a result, she is ineligible for the federal Pell Grant and so pays full tuition at a local community college. One of Desiree’s two brothers is also in college attending a public university in another state, and her mother is helping him out as well with his education.

Of her own and her mother’s financial situation Desiree confesses, “It’s been a struggle,” but the entire family is for now able to make ends meet even if the household budget runs tight from month to month. Desiree is taking out loans to cover most of her tuition fees and pays for her remaining tuition, fees, and books with her earnings from a part-time job at a local women’s shelter. She is fortunate in that her mother and a close friend watch her daughter three to four times a week—she pays her friend twenty to thirty dollars a week for helping out even though her friend doesn’t ask for anything. Without her mother’s support in providing housing, food, and occasional child care, Desiree would not be able to afford to go to school.

Of her current situation, Desiree confides, “I mean everything’s pretty stable, and you know, I get everything I need. I make enough money to survive at the level that I’m at.” But she admits, “I just wish I had more savings because now that I’m a parent, I think about what if this happens, what if that happens, what if I need money to fix my car? What if . . . you know? What if something happens, and I have to move out of my house? There’s a million things that can go wrong, and when you have nothing to fall back on, you’re that much more worried about what’s going to happen ’cause you have another life on your hands.” Although she has all the basic resources to survive, Desiree is fully aware of how dependent she is on her family’s and friend’s generosity in providing shelter, food, and child care, and she is aware of the debt she is incurring as she takes out loans every semester to cover her tuition costs. Desiree’s financial situation is secure for now but could change at any moment as she is not able to set aside any savings, and her debt grows with each semester.

Lucille’s story differs in the details but is similar in effect. Just over ten years ago, when Lucille was in her early twenties, her parents listed her as a dependent on their tax returns and helped her out with her college tuition. They earned just enough income so that she didn’t qualify for needs-based aid but found that they could cover the gap between her own financial contributions from two part-time jobs and the tuition costs for a public state college. However, when her younger sister became pregnant, her parents needed to pull back from assisting Lucille to aid her sister during her time of need. Unwilling to accrue large amounts of debt, Lucille chose to withdraw from college and began working full
time in a grocery store bakery, making enough to live on but never enough ever
to accrue any savings. She focused instead on getting married, maintaining a
household, and starting a family. Now over a decade later with two children, one
of whom is autistic, and with her husband recently unemployed, she has decided
that the only way for her family to get ahead is for her to go back to school to
earn a degree. And the one positive unintended outcome of her husband being
laid off is that they currently have a household income low enough so that she
qualifies for a Pell Grant. She is augmenting her grant with loans, but unlike
before, she has now determined that the long-term debt is worth taking on.

Desiree’s and Lucille’s stories reveal that many students are struggling on
the sidelines, caught in between not or barely making enough to cover their
basic household and educational costs, but often making too much to qualify
for needs-based grants. As described earlier, even for those students who
do qualify for needs-based aid, Pell Grants are not nearly enough to cover increas-
ing tuition costs at many of our nation’s public universities. Further, for those
low-income student parents like Caroline, Cynthia, Drew, Lindsey, and Jackie,
their choice to pursue bachelor’s degrees rather than short-term, certification
programs results in their ineligibility for public assistance programs that would
provide access to child care and cash assistance.

As public assistance programs retain their restrictions, needs-based finan-
cial aid stays flat, and states disinvest in their public colleges and universities,
we see tuition costs and borrowing levels increase. Ultimately, students are left
to decide what level of risk and debt their education is worth. The answer for
many of these students is to turn to loans, which is why we have seen student
debt emerge as the second-highest consumer debt category in the United States,
following mortgage debt. In 2017, over forty-four million borrowers incurred
approximately $1.3 trillion in debt, with the average borrower owing $37,172
(Friedman 2017). And as student debt continues to creep up past the $1.4 trillion
mark, the Federal Reserve chairman, Jerome Powell, cautioned U.S. senators
in 2018 that such growing debt could soon affect national economic growth
(Bauman 2018).

These students’ realities reveal an important shift in the funding of higher
education in recent decades. That is, we are seeing a steady transfer of risk and
responsibility from institutions to individuals. Instead of the government sub-
sidizing public colleges and universities to keep tuition costs low as in years past,
financial aid via grants and loans is disbursed to individual students, attending
both public and private, both nonprofit and for-profit institutions. And even
those students who choose to attend the often more affordable, local public col-
leges and universities in their communities are now collectively paying more
than are states and local governments to fund those institutions (Desrochers and
Kirshstein 2012). In sum, we are seeing access to higher education moving out
of reach. A college degree is increasingly becoming a private, not a public, good.
Campus-Based Child Care

Child care centers are key organizations that shape a culture that is perceived by student parents to be family friendly or not. Not only are on-campus child care centers an integral resource for parents but they provide symbolic acknowledgment and validation of parents’ caregiving work. As these students describe the various child care resources on their respective campuses, they cite the importance of convenience, access, quality, and affordability. But they also talk about feeling that they belong and are accepted on campus when they see children and other student parents both in these centers and walking across college grounds and in buildings.

Angie, Heather, Cynthia, and Desiree all attended the same community college and describe the child care center located on that campus. This particular community college–based child care center offers services for students at a discounted rate, three dollars an hour, and is conveniently located on campus. All four of these students used this center, usually to cover hours when family members were not available to watch their children, and found the care to be of high quality and the price affordable. However, that changed when they transferred from the community college to a local four-year university. The child care center at the public university that they now attend is both expensive and limited in terms of the number of students it can accommodate. At the time of these interviews, the center did not provide hourly drop-in care, was inconveniently located off campus, and could accommodate only twenty-six children on a campus with over twelve thousand students.

Desiree expresses her frustration regarding the limited child care resources provided by her current university: “My daughter’s been on the waiting list for the day care here since I was pregnant. . . . I went down there about two weeks ago and they told me it’s going to be another year and a half.” Cynthia ends her comparative description of the community college and state university campus cultures by confessing, “I think there’s a day care here [at the university], but I don’t really know anything about it.” Seven of the thirteen students who compare their community college experiences with their four-year university experiences cite the visible presence of child care or preschool programs on their community college campuses as evidence of a family-friendly culture, a sight not evidenced at the four-year public universities where they are currently enrolled.

Nationally, the Institute for Women’s Policy Research (IWPR) found that four-year colleges are more likely than community colleges to have some kind of child care center. However, the IWPR also recently reported that despite increasing numbers of student parents evidenced on college campuses, resources for child care have been steadily dwindling since 2000 (Gault et al. 2014). In
2003–2004, 53 percent of community colleges provided some form of campus-based child care—in 2013, that number dropped to 46 percent. On four-year public college and university campuses, the percentage with on-campus child care fell from a 2002 high of 54 to 51 percent in 2013. Although the decline in child care centers for all postsecondary institutions began in 2004, the most precipitous decrease occurred after the recession of 2008, when public institutions, in particular, began to be hit hard by reduced levels of state support.¹²

Not only is the number of child care centers decreasing but so are the funds that are available to student parents to assist in paying for child care, such as the stagnant funding of the Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) competitive grant program (Gault et al. 2014). The CCAMPIS program, which was first offered in 1999 under the Clinton administration and provides financial assistance to subsidize student parents’ child care costs, has been flat funded since 2003. The number of CCAMPIS grants awarded to college and university campuses has fallen from a high of 341 in 2004 to 86 in 2014 (U.S. Department of Education 2014). Most recently, the current secretary of education, Betsy DeVos, has recommended eliminating the grant program altogether, but legislators in 2018 agreed not only to keep but to increase funding for CCAMPIS (Dzigbede and Bronstein 2017; Kreighbaum 2018). The future of the program remains unclear, but even with increased funding from approximately $15 million to a proposed $35 million, the CCAMPIS program only begins to address the steep child care needs of student parents in college.

Admittedly, nearly a third of the students in my sample would not even need formal child care because they are able to turn to family members or close friends for caregiving assistance. It is because of these networks of support that they were able to return to college in the first place. However, when I ask students to offer recommendations to improve student parents’ experiences on campus, nearly all mention the importance of providing on-campus child care. In frustration, Jackie argues, “Even high schools like [City] High have a day care! It’s like, they have day care, so why can’t the university have a day care?” When child care is visibly present or absent on campus, the symbolic message is clearly communicated to parents.

These students are acutely aware that as parents, they are a distinct minority on four-year college campuses. A visible child care center on campus serves as an affirmative acknowledgment of their parenting identity and provides a place where parents might seek out community resources or meet other parents.¹³ Although these students were able to cobble together child care networks that in most cases worked for them, they nonetheless cited the relevance of providing campus-based child care as a means of helping out students who might need such assistance. Doing so would acknowledge the needs of and legitimize the institution’s commitment to students like them.
Age, Stigma, and Academic Norms

Most of these student parents attribute their perceptions of acceptance or lack thereof to a campus culture shaped by not only financial aid and child care resources but academic norms and policies. Those student parents who over the course of their college career attended both community colleges and four-year universities additionally describe some of the differences between those two types of campuses. Heather, a forty-year-old mother of four who is now pursuing her bachelor’s degree in psychology, specifically addresses the issue of students’ age and the norm of bringing one’s children to campus and class:

HEATHER: Now, I don’t think it’s accepted to bring your babies into class like I did when my oldest was little. . . . Maybe that was the school I was in or the area I was in. I don’t know, ’cause a lot of girls did. Here I don’t see that [laughs] you know? I think at [the community college], I had a Saturday class. There was a mom who brought a couple of her kids and then they just sat in the back, but they were fine. The teacher, I think, the professor, they worked it out.

FIONA: But here you feel there’s a different culture?

HEATHER: I’m the oldest in my classes [at State U], so nobody has kids. I think there’s one girl who has a two-year-old in my class, but I don’t think anybody else does.

Heather reveals that not only did she more often see children on her two-year campus but also she perceives professors to have been more open to having children in class than on her current campus. Although most parents in this study did not express a desire to bring their children to class—instead these students described having their child in class as distracting—nearly all of these students describe a time when they brought a child to class or campus because their child care for that day fell through.

These different campus cultures also create a distinct effect on student parents’ peer and faculty interactions, and those effects can vary depending on a student’s age. Cynthia, a twenty-three-year-old psychology student who previously attended a community college, maintains that “the majority of people” at her local community college “have kids, so it’s different there ’cause all the professors know that most of the students in the classes have kids and they’re working adults.” She contends that the faculty understand “that most [students] really don’t have the time to be in school but they try to do it anyway.” In contrast she describes the students attending her current university as “younger, they’re like eighteen, nineteen, out of high school” and she believes that faculty “don’t really know what’s going on with the student body—they know most of them work, but they don’t know that they have families.” Cynthia’s perceptions regarding age differences on community college and four-year universities are
validated by actual numbers. In 2016, the average age of students enrolled in a community college across the country was twenty-eight (AACC 2016). In contrast, at the four-year state university where thirty-three of the student parents in this study were once enrolled, only 17 percent of the undergraduate student population was over the age of thirty. Nearly 70 percent of the students at that university were age twenty-four or younger (CCSU 2011).

Cynthia confesses to feeling that she is an “outsider,” particularly when her professors at the four-year university emphasize the youth and inexperience of their students. She admits to feeling riled when her instructors presume that young college students are irresponsible and know little about the “real” world. Although her young age allows her to assimilate on a four-year campus in a way that older student parents cannot, Cynthia is frustrated when faculty or staff presume that her life emulates that of many of her young peers who devote much more time to managing their social lives than they do their family lives. However, like many of the younger parents whom I interviewed, she also expresses a fear of being perceived and stigmatized as a teen or young parent “statistic,” and so she often hesitates to “out” herself in class to professors and peers. Either way many of these younger mothers and fathers feel that they lose, and so they choose instead to remain silent about being a parent.

On the contrary, older students are sometimes reluctant to reveal their identities as parents because they do not wish to present themselves in front of their younger peers and professors as seeking special treatment. Lindsey, a twenty-six-year-old history education major, shares,

Now that I’m getting into like the professional program, I have a few more parents in the classroom but in just a lot of my lower-level classes or some of my history classes, I’m the only parent in the room. I’m the only person over twenty-two in the room. . . . I’m looked at as the parent in the room, and I think that if I was to ask for an extension because I was sick or anything, if I were to ask for something of the teacher and the teacher gave it to me, the rest of the class would think, “Oh, it’s ‘cause she’s a parent.” Or, “It’s because she has a kid. She’s playing the kid card.” Or, you know, like there’s some reason that I’m getting this, and the professor would probably give it to anyone in the room, you know, whatever I was asking for, whether it be an extension or to leave early or something like that. “Oh, she must have a day care crisis.” I remember last semester, I did get some roll of the eye when a professor who knew I had children, we bonded. We would talk. Like, I’d come to class early, she was in class early. We would talk about our children, and people. Other students would walk in and probably hear this and think, “Oh, she’s kind of friends with the teacher. That’s not cool.” I think people are intimidated of bonds that parents have that maybe nonparents don’t have.
Lindsey sees the pros and cons of outing herself as a parent in class—although sharing her parenting identity with her professor provides moments of connection, those moments come at the risk of alienating her from usually younger, nonparent student peers.

Further, even when Lindsey believes most of her professors to be understanding of her parenting needs, she feels guilty for needing to request assistance. She admits, “You know, I never know how a new professor is going to respond, and I don’t want them to think that I’m going into some long like soliloquy about, ‘Oh, I’m a single parent. I’m on disability.’ I don’t want them to think that I’m trying to swing their grade or anything like that.” Lindsey does not want to be perceived as different or needing special favors. Like Carolyn, who asserts at the beginning of this chapter that she’s not looking for “handouts,” many students simultaneously want to be treated like every other student but at the same time want professors to understand how their caregiving responsibilities might interfere with their ability to get to class or complete an assignment.

Communicating with professors and classmates that student parents do not expect special favors while nonetheless sometimes needing differential treatment is not at all easy, particularly when regular or emergency child care is unavailable. Elizabeth shares such a moment:

Last weekend next to me in my logic class there was a girl there who had a baby with her, and I’m like, “Wow! You brought her to school.” And she’s like, “Well, I had a paper to turn in” and her father had an emergency and he couldn’t be there and she’s like, “I had no other choice.” And I said, “I give you a lot of credit. That’s dedication.” And she didn’t go in the class because they were watching a movie or something, but she made sure she was there to hand it in because she didn’t want to disturb the class with her baby, but she was there to hand it in.

Elizabeth chooses to emphasize the lengths to which this student parent went to fulfill her parental and student roles simultaneously. Although not an ideal solution for the mother, child, and professor, the act of coming to school to submit her work was perceived by Elizabeth to be a show of “dedication” worthy of acknowledgment in a difficult situation.

Most of these student parents recognize that their professors are similarly placed in a difficult position when students’ familial needs conflict with their educational requirements. Matt describes a time when he was enrolled in an intensive winter session course and his son’s day care was closed. Matt knew he could not miss a day of school because one class during the compressed term was the equivalent of a week’s worth of classes during a regular fifteen-week term, so he contacted the professor, who allowed Matt to bring his young son with him to class. Matt was grateful to his professor for providing this opportunity, which
allowed him to keep up with his class attendance. However, Matt admits that “by like the second hour” his son “was ready to start screaming and go play,” and that the entire situation “was kind of rough.” He eventually left class early that day and reflects now that neither he nor the professor knew how best to address the situation—locating emergency backup care was really the only feasible solution, but none was available.

Finding a professor who is willing to work with the competing demands of student parents’ lives, even if the solutions are not ideal, is far from guaranteed. Matt describes his professors at the four-year state university as being “surprisingly accepting in vast contrast to his prior experience at a private liberal arts college. Of his previous college, Matt contends, “They probably wouldn’t know how to react to [parents]. It was just a totally different atmosphere. Whereas here, you have a wide range of different types of people, and there’s a large part of the student population that do have children. And the professors are definitely aware and they help out. . . . I appreciate it. It makes my life a lot easier.” And most of the student parents find their professors on the four-year state university campus to be supportive as long as students maintain clear and steady contact with them. Lindsey, described earlier, recalls a time when she had to miss class because her daughter was ill. She was concerned because the professor of the class maintained an attendance policy, but when she wrote to her professor explaining her situation, her professor replied that she would not “penalize” Lindsey for the “stresses that are life.” Lindsay admits that she “didn’t expect that at all, especially coming from a woman with such a strict attendance policy.”

But not all professors are supportive when student parents’ caregiving responsibilities come into conflict with their classroom responsibilities. Amber, a twenty-five-year-old mother studying English, shares that when her one-year-old daughter was ill, she could not attend class on an important day when a paper was due. She describes bundling up her daughter and trekking over to the university to submit her work, even though she would have to miss the class. The reception she received, however, was unexpected: “I went to school to drop that darn paper off to show that I was a good student, and I didn’t want it to be late and ten points off it, etc. etc. And the teacher yelled at me in class in front of the students!” Amber continues, “It took all my composure to leave that classroom, get in the elevator with my daughter, and come home without crying because I wanted to be a good parent and be home for my sick daughter.” Amber believes that she was doing the right thing, being a good mother and a good student, but was instead publically humiliated for what her professor perceived as not fulfilling her student obligations.

Jackie describes an instance during finals week, when her exam time conflicted with the time that she usually dropped her daughter off at school. Because she knew that the professor was not issuing an exam and was instead going to use that time to return papers and facilitate a discussion about those papers,
she asked if she could pick up her paper at an alternative time so that she could drop her daughter off at school. The professor instead suggested that she bring her daughter to class during the scheduled exam time. Jackie understood that he was trying to be accommodating but felt that he didn’t understand that it was more important that her daughter be at her school and not her mother’s university. Jackie reflects,

I told him I couldn’t make it, and he said, “What do you mean?” and I’m like, “Um, I have a daughter and she goes to school. You know that.” He’s like, “What do you mean? I don’t understand,” and he repeated, “I don’t understand.” And I took it as an insult. I’m like, what do you mean you don’t understand? Like why am I arguing with him? This is ridiculous. Obviously he doesn’t understand what it’s like. I’m like, “I am a single parent. I don’t have anyone else to bring her. What do you want me to do?” “Well then bring her to class.” And I felt so pressured by this man that I had to basically shorten my daughter’s day [and] bring her to the college campus to the class just so he could sit there for an hour and discuss. I’m like this is ridiculous. My daughter is missing a half day at school because you wanted me to come in here because you couldn’t understand that I have a daughter. You know what I mean? I took it as an insult and I felt hurt. I felt like he didn’t understand me or anything. It felt so wrong.

Jackie states that she did not feel comfortable pressing the issue any further because the professor held positions of power at the University. She admits, “You don’t know how people are. You don’t know if they are going to take you personally and hold something against you.”

As she relates this story, she mentions several times that this professor made it clear that he did not have children, and she attributes his lack of understanding of her situation to his unfamiliarity with the responsibilities of parenting. She ultimately arrives at the conclusion, “That’s probably why he doesn’t understand. . . . He doesn’t have children. . . . I guess he was honest like he really didn’t understand.” Her beliefs were confirmed when she brought her daughter to class that day. She states that her classmates welcomed her daughter, exclaiming how “cute” and “well-behaved” she was. When I ask whether or not her professor interacted with her daughter during their two-hour discussion, she responds “Not at all.”

Students also perceive that faculty who themselves divulge that they have children are perceived to be more open and understanding of their caregiving obligations. Nicole maintains, “If the faculty member doesn’t have children, it tends to make a big difference.” When I asked Snow to share an example of a time when she felt her parenting needs were acknowledged and supported on campus, she provides not one but two anecdotes. The first is of a professor who was likewise in a child care bind during a day when the local schools were closed due a teacher’s professional day. Snow recalls, “When I asked her ahead of time,
can I bring my son, she said, ‘Absolutely. You know, my daughter’s coming in, too. We can put them in the back, and we’ll give them something to do.’ So she really made an effort to make me feel comfortable in doing that, and even had a little something planned for the kids.” Snow felt comfortable talking to this professor about her child care needs because she knew in advance that this instructor fully understood her obligations as a parent. Snow goes on to describe an encounter with a different professor when she missed class in order to trick-or-treat with her son on Halloween. She was hesitant to ask her professor, whose parenting status was unknown to her at that time, but was surprised when her instructor validated Snow’s desire to be with her son—according to Snow, her instructor claimed that she respected Snow’s decision to “put family first.”

When I ask Allie if she finds the campus to be supportive of her educational goals and family needs, she answers by differentiating the organizational structure of the campus from the human dynamics of students and professors. She maintains,

I think it’s more the teachers than the campus itself because I think the campus is more concrete than the teachers. The teachers have feeling, understanding, warmth as people; whereas the campus is an organization with just the written policies and things. So I really do think it’s, it’s the teachers that count. I had a sociology teacher who had children… she had a younger child, so she didn’t experience any of this. She had child care and all that lined up. This [other] teacher, he had two or three children and he commuted from Massachusetts or something. But he understood. Things come up, kids get sick, you’re commuting, whatever, and he said that in class. So there was one day I had to call him and tell him—this may have been one of the days it was a snow day—and I said I’m going to be late for class or I can’t make it to class because it’s a snow day. And he understood. And I was very grateful for that—that he understood.

Allie highlights a key point here—although she unwittingly denies the influence of “policies and things” to shape campus culture, the campus itself is not structured to accommodate the needs of parents. That is, the campus, like most workplaces, is structured to address the needs of the organization, sometimes at the expense of the individual people moving within that organization. Instead, Allie attributes the creation of a family-friendly campus culture to individual professors. And for most campuses, the institution’s stance on the presence of children is left to the discretion of professors, thereby freeing the institution from having to take a principled position.

One of the community colleges that six of these students attended had created clear policies regarding the presence of children on campus—those policies require that children be supervised at all times and require students to receive permission of the instructor before bringing a child to class. The four-year state
universities that thirty-five of these students attended did not have any formal policies in place, reaffirming these student parents’ perspectives that the presence of children in class is not a paramount concern on these campuses. It is by default that, at the four-year university, discretion is left up to the professor or staff member who is faced with addressing the needs of a student parent who has a child in tow on campus.

When the needs of student parents are not acknowledged, much less legitimized, on a college campus, even the academic opportunities available to mothers and fathers can be limited. Nowhere is this more clear than in Lucille’s experience that resulted in her leaving her original program of study due to scheduling conflicts. Because Lucille has to put her nine-year-old son on the school bus every weekday morning between 7:45 and 8:00 A.M., she has not been able to register for a core class in her social work curriculum. Each semester, the class is only offered at 8:00 A.M. She met with the chair of the department, who stated that if she planned to remain a social work major, she would have to rearrange her family schedule so that she can take this 8:00 A.M. class. Because her husband works the early shift, she does not have anyone else whom she could depend on to put her son on the bus each morning. So Lucille decided to switch majors. She knew that regularly attending an 8:00 A.M. class would not work for her at this time in her life.

Ultimately these students feel trapped in an institutional setting that functions most efficiently when their parenting identities are not acknowledged. As a result, these student parents are reliant on individual-level supports during times of crisis. Although most did not expect administrators and professors to treat them differently, the fact is that at times they needed those individuals and the institution to treat them differently. Believing that the campus culture is not likely to change anytime soon, they are left to their own devices to seek support from potentially sympathetic individuals. In some cases they find it, and in other cases they don’t.

What Institutional Support Can Look Like

Colleges and universities are ever concerned about retaining students, which is why entire administrative divisions devoted to student life have emerged over the years to address students’ nonacademic needs (Barr and Dessler 2000). First-Year Experience programs, learning communities, and extensive student and faculty mentoring programs are increasingly present on college campuses as a means of recognizing and responding to students’ academic and social needs. Veteran’s programs, disability services, and equal opportunity programs target the distinctive needs of specific student populations, helping those students to identify and navigate available resources. In recent decades, educational researchers have closely examined how these programs and offices, as well as
social organizations, including Greek life and student clubs, collectively shape a campus culture where students feel connected, or not.  

None of the campuses attended by these forty student parents had an organization, office, or club devoted specifically to addressing the needs of student parents. However, some of these parents found institutional support in unexpected places. Next I describe the experiences of Dave, Heide, and Nicole, who shared with me the contexts in which they found validation of their parenting identities and responsibilities on campus. These examples demonstrate how supportive networks or services might take shape so that student parents can succeed on campus.

In Dave’s case, institutional commitment came by way of a program designed to serve the needs of another student minority—athletes. Due to their intense training schedules, athletes are provided with priority registration benefits and scheduled study halls that are facilitated by academic coaches. Dave entered the state university as a scholarship athlete but had to leave the track team at the end of his first year of college, when his son was born. At that point, Dave found that he was not able to maintain his strict academic training schedule while simultaneously caring for his newborn son. However, the coach allowed him to continue with the team so that he could continue running part time and maintain some of the academic benefits accorded to team members. Dave was therefore able to use his priority registration benefits to arrange his classes around his son’s day care and his partner’s work schedules. In addition, he continued to attend athlete study halls as he found that they helped him to keep up with his schoolwork. He admitted that receiving these perks helped to keep him in school.

Dave’s former coach not only allowed him to continue to receive special services and benefits reserved for athletes but also helped him to land a summer job at as a camp counselor working for a local town. As Dave put it, his coach “had a lot of pull” and chose to use his influence to help out Dave in his time of need. His coach also actively worked with residence life in an attempt to provide campus housing for Dave, his partner, and their child. At the time of our interview, Dave had little hope that such a benefit would be provided, but he expressed sincere appreciation for his coach going to such lengths to provide support for his family and demonstrating such respect for his responsibilities as a father as he pursued his degree. Dave admits that without this assistance and mentoring, he likely would not have made it through his second year of college.

Dave’s experience was unusual in that most student parents did not identify specific individuals or programs that assisted them in multiple ways as they wove together their student and parenting identities. As I highlighted earlier, most students describe a specific moment when they experienced support or ran into obstacles. Dave’s experience reveals how institutionalized assistance by way
of priority registration, study halls, and an encouraging mentor can provide the
support necessary to manage one's student and parenting labor. Comprehensive
programs like those provided to athletes are similarly provided on many cam-
puses to veterans, students with disabilities, or those who are first generation.
Colleges and universities have come to recognize that if they are to graduate
students and maintain high retention levels, they must acknowledge the unique
needs of these particular populations of students and so provide them with the
resources necessary to succeed (Hamrick, Evans, and Schuh 2002; Long 2012).

Additionally, several students identified particular departments on campus
that they perceived to be family friendly, or at least child friendly. Heide entered
her fall semester when she was just over six months pregnant and ended up
delivering her baby earlier than expected at the end of October in the midst of
the term. She shared that all of her professors were very understanding of her
situation and allowed her to make up missed assignments and complete her
coursework. She attributed the willingness of many of the faculty to work with
her during her time of need to their being psychology professors who themselves
study infants and children. Heide explains, “I think that taking psychology really
helped . . . they were really nice . . . Dr. [X] she studies infants’ cries. And the
other class I was taking, she was my Child Psychology teacher, so they allowed
me to bring the baby into class and show the class and stuff because we were
learning about birth, and I got to bring in the pictures and stuff, so she kind of
liked me being there because then I was her example!” [laughs]. Three other stu-
dents likewise stated that they in part selected psychology as a major because
they believed that the professors and students in those classes, in other words
the department as a whole, would be more supportive of their parenting identi-
ties and needs. Within the context of this educational environment, which was
shaped by both the subject matter of the discipline and the attitudes of the pro-
fessors and peers, these student parents believed that their attempts to be good
mothers and fathers were not only validated but respected.

Finally, Nicole described a weekend retreat hosted by the university's
Women's Center as rejuvenating and empowering as she transitioned to cam-
pus life. Nicole is twenty-nine years old and so is older and more experienced in
life than many of her student peers in her four-year program. By the end of her
first term, she was feeling disconnected on campus, but after participating in
the retreat, she admits to experiencing “more of a sense of community that I
didn’t feel last semester.” During that weekend, she connected with both the
director of the Women's Center and a group of women students with whom she
remains in contact. The director and several of the women students who regu-
larly associate with the center have long been working to create a family-friendly
campus that addresses the full range of needs of student parents. In addition to
providing household financial advising and stress reduction workshops, they are
an integral force in ensuring the construction and maintenance of lactation
rooms and have continuously advocated for increasing child care resources on campus. When I ask the director of the Women's Center how student parents on campus use the center's resources, she shares her view that “such spaces on campus are crucial to supporting the needs of student parents.” She continues, “Very often when such spaces are provided to student parents, they provide student parents networking opportunities, academic support, emotional support and the ability to engage socially with those balancing similar life experiences . . . [allowing] for relationship building, which leads to additional child care support, academic and parenting tips, ability to schedule classes to support one another’s child care needs.” It is, therefore, unsurprising that Nicole would find support and legitimization of her mothering and parenting identity within this campus-based space and group.

Importantly, Heide's and Nicole's experiences reveal not only how student parents can benefit from having access to a supportive department or center but also how the academic environment for all students can actually be enhanced by the presence of student parents. Nicole found that many of the nonparent students working in the Women's Center were very much interested in learning more about her parental experiences and needs as they sought to address large-scale gender inequalities on campus and in the world of work. Heide found that her classmates and professors in her psychology classes were very much interested in learning more about her experience as a new mother, for reasons both personal and academic. Students who were not yet parents learned from these mothers and fathers, demonstrating quite clearly how a diverse student body can increase opportunities for the creative exchange of ideas and information.

A CAMPUS'S ORGANIZATIONAL culture influentially intersects with each student's individual needs and dispositions. Student parents are more likely to succeed when a college's or university's culture legitimizes those students' identities as parents and acknowledges and addresses their unique needs. When needs-based grants do not go as far as they used to in covering the costs of state college and university tuition, when students are prohibited from applying for public assistance, when child care is not provided on campus, when face-to-face interactions with professors and campus staff result in stigmatization or even punishment, student parents do not feel welcome. When federal and state-based aid covers all tuition and even provides a living stipend as do recent GI Bill programs, when students are provided with affordable and convenient child care, and when professors and staff recognize, acknowledge, and understand the challenges facing student parents, then mothers and fathers on campus are more likely to feel that they belong. Ultimately, when students feel that they are expected to be there and to succeed, they are much more likely to persist and fulfill their educational dreams.
The examples at the end of this chapter detail the ways that institutions can both recruit and retain student parents by working to create an organizational culture that validates their needs and provides concrete supports. These examples are limited to student parents’ experiences on a team, within a department, or in a center, yet they reveal how a culture can be created that facilitates student parents’ attaining their college goals. These student parents and the people on campus who helped them or learned from them have created a culture where “understanding,” as Carolyn calls for the beginning of this chapter, can be cultivated. And understanding is necessary for substantive, sustained cultural and structural change to occur.