

“Pretty Darned Cold”: Single Mother Students and the Community College Climate in Post-Welfare Reform America

Jillian M. Duquaine-Watson

Feminist analyses of the “chilly climate” have documented the ways in which women have been and continue to be marginalized within institutions of higher education. Yet there has been little attention to the relationship between the “chilly climate” and the lived experiences of particular populations in specific educational settings. This article attends to that relationship and draws on a two-year ethnographic study that focused on single mothers attending a community college in the Midwestern United States. Situating their experiences within the particulars of post-welfare reform America and the dynamics of the institution they attend, I argue that the educational climate these women face is particularly chilly, something that is evident in the various attitudes, practices, and policies they encounter in their interactions with faculty, staff, and other students. In addition to analyzing the ways in which the “chilly climate” influences both academic and social aspects of single mother students’ experiences, I offer specific suggestions for ways in which colleges and universities can create a more welcoming and supportive environment for members of this particular student population.

Over the past three decades, researchers have detailed higher education’s “chilly climate,” including both the obvious and subtle ways in which women who learn and work on colleges campuses across America are treated differently than men. While this differential treatment is often unintentional and frequently goes unnoticed, it nonetheless constitutes a form of sex discrimination. Yet these studies (American Association of University Women, 2004; Pascarella et al., 1997; Sandler & Hall, 1982, 1986; Sandler, Silverberg, & Hall, 1996) do little to enhance our understanding of the relationship between the climate of higher education and broader social policies. In this article, I attend to this relationship and examine the experiences of single mother students at a Midwestern community college, demonstrating that the educational climate they face is particularly “chilly.”

Gender bias and discrimination in higher education are well-documented. Although Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972 prohibits sex discrimination in any educational program or activity receiving federal aid, researchers indicate that institutional climate continues to disadvantage female students (Crawford &

MacLeod, 1990; Foster, 1994; Gabriel & Smithson, 1990; Pascarella et al., 1997; Sandler et al., 1996; Seagram, Gould, & Pyke, 1998) and can contribute to inequitable treatment by their peers and limited gains in confidence in their academic abilities (Colbeck, Cabrera, & Terenzini, 2001), decreased satisfaction with their educational experience (Seagram et al., 1998), and may diminish their intellectual growth and achievement (Pascarella et al., 1997). These inequities also affect female faculty members and administrators, particularly as preconceptions about gender shape the hiring process, contribute to the devaluation of women’s labor and accomplishments, and help create a work environment in which women cannot perform in efficient and effective ways, thereby decreasing their likelihood of securing promotions (American Association of University Women, 2004; Sandler & Hall, 1986). These issues are, of course, aggravated by the intersections of sexism and other forms of oppression including those pertaining to race, ethnicity, age, ability, sexuality, and socioeconomic background (Beilke & Yssel, 1999; Clark, Garner, Higgonet, & Katrak, 1996; Liang & Alimo, 2005; Moses, 1989; Nieves-Squires, 1991; Russ, Simonds, & Hunt, 2002).

One theme that has emerged from analyses of the “chilly climate” concerns the relationship between women’s reproductive and intellectual lives. In addition to identifying the challenges facing female faculty and

Address correspondence to Dr. Jillian M. Duquaine-Watson, Texas Woman’s University, Women’s Studies Program, P.O. Box 425557, Denton, TX 76204-5557. E-mail: jduquainewatson@twu.edu

staff who attempt to balance the demands of career and family (Banner, Boris, Kelley, Kolodny, Tichi, & Schlissel, 1987), discussions of the so-called "family track" (Coiner & George, 1998) have attempted to foster social change by fashioning policies designed to make postsecondary institutions more "family-friendly" (Kolodny, 1998). Although most assessments continue to focus on married women (Evans, 2003; Fogg, 2003; Henderson, 2004; Thornton, 2004; Trombley, 2003; J. Williams, 2003; Wilson, 2003), the experiences of faculty and staff who are single mothers are gaining increasing attention (Atkinson, 2003; Fogg, 2002; Frye, 2003; Trubek, 2004).

As important as these examinations are, they provide only a limited understanding of the experiences of mothers on college and university campuses, particularly since *students* who are also mothers have been largely ignored. Though not completely absent, assessments of the social realities and needs of students who are also mothers remains infrequent and tends to privilege the perspective of married women (Detore-Nakamura, 2003; Steele, 2003). Consequently, there is a conspicuous lack of attention to the experiences of women who are pursuing degrees while raising children on their own.

Consideration of this population is particularly important in the post-welfare reform era. Passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) resulted in the virtual dissolution of the social safety net that had formerly provided crucial forms of support to families living in poverty. Prompted by claims that out-of-wedlock births were responsible for a variety of "social problems" and propelled by the well-worn media stereotype of welfare recipients as "irresponsible mothers whose values have been eroded by the welfare system" (L. A. Williams, 1995, p. 1164), PRWORA advocated a "work first" approach to social welfare. It eliminated guarantees of cash assistance in favor of a federal lifetime limit of 60 months of financial support, altered food assistance programs, and increased work requirements. Furthermore, PRWORA gave states the freedom to enact measures they believed would best move individuals off welfare and into the workforce. As a result, welfare policies vary considerably from state to state, including aspects such as time limits, penalties, funding for child care and transportation, and definitions of acceptable job-training activities (Zeigler, 2004).

Perhaps one of the most significant aspects of welfare reform is the way in which federal and state policies have influenced poor women's access to postsecondary education and training. Research consistently demonstrates that access to higher education increases the earning potential and likelihood of self-sufficiency for women of all races (Adair, 2001, Center for Women Policy Studies, 2002, Zhan & Pandey, 2004), reduces the average amount of time poor women remain on welfare (Martinson & Strawn, 2002; Mathur, Reichle, Wiseley, & Strawn, 2002; Smith, Deprez, & Butler, 2002), and decreases poverty rates among female-headed households by more than

half (Cox & Spriggs, 2002). Despite these facts, PRWORA mandated that states could permit no more than 20% of their welfare caseloads to fulfill work requirements through participation in educational activities, including both teen parents enrolled in secondary programs and adults pursuing postsecondary degrees. It also established strict, relatively brief time limits for participation in postsecondary activities, leaving many poor single mothers essentially "shut out" of four-year colleges in the post-PRWORA years (Polakow, Butler, Deprez, & Kahn, 2004). Indeed, from 1996 to 1998, college enrollment among welfare recipients declined 20% nationally (Cox & Spriggs, 2002) and some institutions have experienced decreases as high as 46%, 60%, and even 77% among students receiving public assistance (Applied Research Center, 2001; Kahn & Polakow, 2000; Kates, 1998; Marx, 2002).

Despite these barriers, some poor single mothers have pursued postsecondary education in the post-welfare era with many turning to America's community colleges. This situation has presented both challenges and opportunities. While community colleges often provide education and training for welfare recipients who are approved for postsecondary classroom activities, these institutions must remain mindful of welfare policies—especially those requiring relatively brief time limits for job-training and educational activities—and yet still attempt to provide comprehensive training programs to help these students acquire the skills necessary to secure well-paying jobs (Brock, Matus-Grossman, & Hamilton, 2001). Research suggests that community colleges have been somewhat successful in this regard. They have adapted their programs to provide more short-term training and collaborated with governmental agencies as well as business and community partners to successfully move individuals from the welfare rolls to the classroom and then into the workforce (Bombach, 2001; Fisher, 2001; Higgins, 2001; Mathur et al., 2002; Nitschke, 2001; Pagenette & Kozell, 2001; Pampe, 2001).

There is limited research, however, that attends to the educational experiences of single mother students attending community colleges, including those who receive welfare benefits. In some respects, this is not entirely surprising. There remains a paucity of research on female community college students in general (Garcia, 1995; Gittell, 1986), and examinations of racial and economic diversity among the female student population are particularly scarce (Laden & Turner, 1995; LaPaglia, 1995). Furthermore, existing research tends to analyze the so-called big picture and provide an overview of gender socialization and stereotyping (Townsend, 1995). These examinations are crucial in illustrating the gendered nature of "the American community college" more generally. However, they do little to enhance our understanding of the ways in which gender ideologies operate on a more "micro" level, that is, within certain geographical locations and particular community colleges

and in ways that affect specific populations of female students.

This study documents the ways in which the institutional climate of Mid-West Community College (MWCC) marginalizes single mother students. I begin by providing an overview of study participants including their backgrounds and the reasons they are pursuing postsecondary education. I then illustrate the ways in which various structural aspects of the college and behaviors of faculty, staff, and students affect both the academic and social aspects of single mother students' college experience.

THE STUDY

This study examines the experiences of 13 single mother students attending a community college in the Midwest, situating those experiences within the particulars of the institution as well as the broader political context of post-reform welfare policies. It draws from a two-year ethnographic research project that began in May 2003. Data were gathered through participant observation as well as semi-structured interviews with single mother students and community college faculty and staff members. I illustrate how welfare reform policies have influenced not only the financial security of single mother students but also their academic experiences. As these women pursue their degrees, they encounter a variety of attitudes, practices, and policies at the college that, taken individually, might seem insignificant and be dismissed as "microinequities" (Rowe, 1990). Cumulatively, however, they both reflect and perpetuate an institutional climate that not only renders this particular student population as "ignored" and "unusual" but, at times, indicates they are "unwelcome." As one informant summarized, the resulting climate can be "pretty darned cold" for single mother students.

Social (Political and Institutional) Context

Polakow et al. (2004) argued that welfare reform has left many poor single mothers "shut out" of institutions of higher education. Since the passage of PRWORA in 1996, educational participation rates among those receiving public assistance have dramatically declined (Applied Research Center, 2001; Cox & Spriggs, 2002; Kahn & Polakow, 2000; Kates, 1998), particularly among women who have already earned a high school diploma, GED, or have attended some college (Loprest & Zedlewski, 1999). PRWORA limited participation in educational activities to a maximum of 20% of those receiving Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) benefits. This includes individuals enrolled in high school and GED programs as well as those pursuing postsecondary degrees and job training (M. Cohen, 1998).

While 49 states and the District of Columbia do permit postsecondary education as part of their approved job training activities, access to such programs is limited in a number of ways. TANF recipients who wish to pursue a college education must first obtain approval from a caseworker in order to participate in college courses. Typically, they may only enroll in a degree program that leads to employment, must maintain a minimum grade point average, and make "satisfactory progress" as defined by federal and state guidelines (Center for Women Policy Studies, 2002). Finally, most states permit participation in postsecondary education for a maximum of 24 months (Center for Women Policy Studies, 2002; Polakow et al., 2004), far short of the time necessary to begin and complete a bachelor's degree.

The Setting

Mid-West Community College (MWCC)¹ is a multi-campus community college in the Midwestern United States that works closely with state job-training agencies. Founded in the 1960s as a vocational school, it currently functions as a comprehensive community college and reflects general trends in community colleges across the country (Phillipe & Sullivan, 2005). In addition to providing vocational training and adult and continuing education courses, MWCC offers high school completion, ESL, and GED programs as well as a two-year associate's degree in arts and sciences with credits transferable to public and private universities both within and outside of the state. The curriculum centers on applied science and technology, arts and sciences, and career training programs. Tuition is approximately \$100 per credit hour, making MWCC relatively affordable. The student body includes more than 10,000 students and like the U.S. community college population overall, is rather diverse in regard to race, ethnicity, gender, economic status, and age (T. E. Williams, 2002).

Demographics

The 13 women who participated in this project shared several similarities. Each was enrolled at least part-time at MWCC, raising one or more dependent children, and was unmarried. Despite these commonalities, the women came from diverse backgrounds and life experiences. Twelve were full-time students, taking 12–15 credit hours per semester, and one was pursuing part-time studies. The participant sample is more racially diverse than the MWCC student population as a whole with four participants (roughly 31%) identifying as Black, Mexican-American, or multi-racial and the remaining nine identifying as White. Eleven had never been married and two were divorced. Participants were relatively young with ages ranging from 18 to 26, and

many had become mothers in their late teens. Their children ranged in age from infancy to eight years old, and although 12 had only one child, one participant was raising three children on her own. In addition to attending classes and raising their children, seven participants were working part-time and three had full-time jobs. All received some sort of financial aid, such as grants, scholarships, or student loans.

Economics

All participants indicated that they experienced some degree of financial instability. Over half had applied for public assistance with the hope of receiving some much-needed economic assistance while completing their degree. However, only one participant had been successful in this regard. Those who had not applied for welfare benefits frequently cited welfare reform policies as their primary reason for not doing so. Indeed, they seemed acutely aware that they not only were statistically unlikely of being approved for postsecondary educational activities but also that if they did obtain approval, they would be limited to particular fields of study. Most participants indicated that locating affordable child care was an ongoing challenge for them. Twelve of the 13 single mother students did not receive financial support from the state and were struggling to make ends meet as they paid for child care, transportation, tuition, and living expenses on their own.

Reasons for Attending College

In spite of their economic burdens, informants had made the decision to pursue a college degree. As they explained their reasons for doing so, two dominant themes emerged: respect and economics. For many, self-respect was an important consideration, particularly as they believed completing their education would give them personal satisfaction and increase their feelings of self-worth. Others thought family members, friends, and co-workers would think more highly of them if they had earned a college degree. Most frequently, however, they discussed respect in relation to their children, believing that they were setting a positive example for their sons and daughters. This seemed particularly important to women who had been teen mothers as well as those who had never been married.

Economics emerged as the second dominant reason for attending college. While single mother students have some of the same educational concerns as their non-parent student peers, they face a financial burden that is unique. Due in large part to the expenses involved in raising a child, single mother students are more likely than non-parent students to identify finances as a primary source of stress in their lives (Heath & Orthner,

1999). In addition, although they may receive income from a variety of sources including wages, scholarships/grants, student loans, child support, government programs, and others, they are significantly more likely to live in poverty than their peers, less likely to receive financial assistance from their parents, more likely to take out student loans, and less likely to earn income from work (Schobert, 2000).

Participants discussed their education as an economic investment, financing their education primarily through student loans, frequently taking out the maximum available to them in an attempt to meet their various expenses. While repayment was a nagging concern, most regarded student loans as an essential resource that would help them to earn a college degree and move themselves and their children out of poverty. An example of this perspective follows:

I came from a poor background. We had nothing . . . And when I had my daughter, I was 16 and I dropped out of school. Nobody would hire me so I worked as a housekeeper in homes but I couldn't afford rent and food and diapers and all that. And I decided to come here to get an education so I wouldn't have to work cleaning people's houses all the time, so I could get a degree and then get a better job and get paid more than \$6.50 an hour and get health insurance . . . I want to be able to afford a decent life for us, to buy a house with a backyard [for my daughter] to play in. (Joanna Fitzgerald, white, raising a preschool daughter)²

Experiences in the Community College

Participants also explained why they had chosen a community college in general and MWCC in particular. Cost was especially significant in this regard, particularly as community colleges tend to be less expensive than traditional colleges and universities. In fact, MWCC's tuition is approximately half the amount charged by four-year public institutions in the surrounding area. Furthermore, the majority of participants lived relatively close to the college with only two traveling more than 20 miles from home to campus. This proximity, in addition to easing the time and expense associated with driving to an institution further from their homes, meant the women were familiar with the college, its programs, and reputation. Finally, time considerations had a significant influence on participants' decision to enroll in a community college. MWCC's curriculum allows most full-time students to complete their education in two years or less.

Support for students. Although the primary purpose of community colleges is to provide educational instruction, they also provide a number of other student services. While many fall under the rubric of educational support, recognition of the need to treat students as whole persons has prompted institutions to attend to

the social, spiritual, psychological, and personal development of their learners as well. Indeed, the importance of these services should not be underestimated as academic success is dependent, at least in part, upon the degree to which students feel supported, included, and valued as members of the institutions they attend (Abbott, 2005; Astin, 1993; Brazzell & Reisser, 1999; A. M. Cohen & Brawer, 2002; Helfgot & Culp, 2005; Kuh et al., 2005).

MWCC supports its student population in a number of ways. Academic support includes advising, tutoring, a writing center, and even a course in first-year college survival skills. Socially, students can choose from a number of clubs and organizations, intramural sports, and special events. Furthermore, personal counseling is offered in the areas of stress management, relationships, self-esteem, grief, loss, depression, and anxiety. Finally, and importantly, there are a number of services, programs, and scholarships designed to promote diversity on campus and meet the needs of students from various cultural groups and backgrounds. This includes individuals with disabilities as well as those who are members of racial and ethnic minority groups, veterans, returning adults, low-income, international, and first generation college students.

Child Care Issues

Child care concerns ranked high on the list of concerns the women who participated in this research. MWCC does have a campus child care center, "Kids on Kampus." The center is located within walking distance of the main educational buildings, is a large, well-maintained, state-certified facility, and provides care for over 100 children from infancy through age five. The center also offers a summer program for children in elementary school. In addition to providing child care, Kids on Kampus serves as a hands-on learning laboratory for MWCC students pursuing degrees in Early Childhood Education, Nursing, and other programs and has a reputation for being safe, nurturing, and child-centered.

Despite being physically located on the MWCC campus and claiming to support student-parents by providing child care on campus, Kids on Kampus does not prioritize enrollment for individuals affiliated with MWCC. Instead, it is open to the larger community and, consequently, there is a lengthy waiting list for admission. Hope Nichols, a Kids on Kampus staff member, indicated that "the wait is typically between 6 and 8 months to get in here, but can be longer for the infant and toddler rooms." MWCC faculty, staff, and married student parents may be inconvenienced by this extended waiting period. However, the limited availability of child care on campus poses particular hardships for single mother students. Travel to and from off-campus child care sites

increases transportation expenses, an issue that is particularly relevant given that most informants were struggling to make ends meet. Furthermore, the additional travel time associated with off-campus child care complicates single mother students' already hectic schedules and makes it more difficult to juggle their class, parenting, and, in many cases, work schedules. Rather than being able to go directly to MWCC, they travel to day care before heading to campus. At the end of the day, they must reverse that same route. For several informants, this meant going out of their way and more than doubling their daily travel time. Not surprisingly, those who were unable to enroll their children at Kids on Kampus reported that reliance on off-campus child care reduces the amount of time they are able to spend studying, doing research in the library, and conducting other class-related activities.

Pedagogical Practices

Another structural aspect that can pose particular hardships for single mother students involves pedagogical practices. Many MWCC instructors include group projects and attendance at outside-of-class activities, such as lectures, performances, and even city council meetings, as required course activities. While such activities seem to reflect a move away from a "banking model" of education (Freire, 2000; hooks, 1994) and toward a more interactive approach that incorporates cooperative activities and attempts to link the classroom with the broader community, they can be difficult for single mother students to manage. Sarah Henley, a white mother pursuing full-time studies and working 20 hours per week in addition to raising her son, Dakota, argues:

[Instructors who assign these types of activities] assume everyone here is just a student and that we have all kinds of free time and that we only have school to worry about. I groan every time I go to class and hear that we have a group project and have to schedule time to get together as a group or that we have to attend events during our own time. . . . I transfer out of those classes whenever I can, but some I have to take for my major [in Arts and Humanities] and so I'm sort of stuck having to do those assignments. They're so hard for me because I'm raising Dakota all on my own and I work besides and I just don't have all kinds of time to be able to get together for meetings for group projects. . . . In one class, we were required to go to a performing arts event like the symphony or a ballet. Those things are nice to be able to go to, but it's hard for me to find child care and I can't afford a \$15 ticket plus \$6.00 an hour for a babysitter.

Other informants indicated that they too avoid classes that incorporate these types of requirements. However, when that is not an option, they must devise ways to cope with the situation. Some will stretch their already

meager budgets even thinner to pay for an event ticket and a babysitter. Others have brought their children with them to meetings for group projects although this frequently meets with disapproval from their peers and can create difficulties as they attempt to keep their children entertained while remaining active in the group process. One young woman indicated she could not afford a babysitter so she could attend an evening guest lecture. Consequently, she was unable to complete the required summary-response paper and received a zero on the assignment.

The Individual Experience

Single mother students as "invisible" and "unnoticed."

Many participants indicated they do not feel supported as single mother students. They can and do participate in a number of the support programs listed above. However, the college's definition of diversity has not prompted specific services or programming for women who are pursuing a degree while raising children on their own. Though certainly not an overt attempt to marginalize such students, inattention to their needs nonetheless contributes to an institutional climate in which single mothers and their particular needs simply are not addressed.

We're here, but nobody seems to notice us. Nobody seems to care, to think about what needs we might have. I feel like that part of me is supposed to be invisible when I'm here, like they care that I'm a mixed race person and are concerned about supporting my needs in that respect, but they don't care about the single mom part of me, like they can't see it. Maybe they don't forget about us; it's just they don't pay attention to that in the first place. Single moms are invisible. (Francesca Ramón, Mexican-American, full-time student in MWCC's Banking and Finance program)

Single mother students in the "spotlight." Not all single mother students believe they are "invisible" or that their presence on campus is "unnoticed." In fact, some indicated that faculty members not only know they are single mothers, but also acknowledge this during class discussions or in the context of other interactions. However, as the following examples indicate, this type of "singling out" (Sandler & Hall, 1982) or "spotlighting" (McLoughlin, 2003) is a classic form of "othering" that stigmatizes individuals of a particular group by treating them as different from "regular" or "normal" students. It also indicates a type of superficial interest in the experiences of single mother students and focuses predominantly on the identity that is created at the intersection of their parental and marital identities: single mother. Consequently, single mother students find themselves "defined in terms of [their] stigma," (Goffman, 1963, p. 14) with

"single mother" assigned as their "master status" (Ray, 1989) or "master trait" (Schur, 1983) by some members of the MWCC community.

Renee Newman, a white, 26-year-old mother of three, tells all of her instructors she is a single mother. While it "has never really been a problem with most of them," she said her communications instructor seemed to "be kind of obsessed" with single mothers.

[On the first day of the semester, the teacher was discussing attendance policies and]asked if there were any single mothers in [class] and me and another woman, Katie, raised our hands. And then the teacher told us that being a single mother isn't an excuse for missing class. She said that if your babysitter bailing out on you is the reason why you can't come to class, then you should just bring your kid. She said she would rather have us bring our kid than have us miss a class. And then she said to the whole class, "Wouldn't you like to have Renee or Katie bring their kids to class some day? Wouldn't that be fun? We could talk about communication in a whole different way, between parents and children."

Although she believes the instructor may have been trying to indicate that she was supportive, the experience made Renee "feel kind of uncomfortable." She noted that throughout the semester, this instructor would also "use the example of being a single mother to point out differences in people" and frequently ask her and Katie what it is like to be a single mother. In fact, Renee said that while this was always done in the context of class discussion, it "was kind of weird, actually. Those were the only times [the instructor] called on either of us unless we raised our hands."

Other informants recounted similar experiences. Twenty-three-year-old Sally Atkins, who characterized most of her experiences with faculty members in a positive way, believes that some instructors make assumptions about her because she is a single mother. She described an incident in one of her classes when the instructor, Dr. Mary Evans, asked Sally to stay after class:

We were going to be starting to talk about welfare laws and programs the following week and she wanted to know if I would be comfortable sharing my experiences with the rest of the class. I never even got welfare . . . I guess I should be glad that she was thinking that what I had to add to the discussion is valuable, but I think that sometimes it's just, I don't know, kind of like looking at the single mother as this kind of, well, like an oddity or something, like it's a thing that makes me unusual. She never asked me to share my experiences before, but now all of a sudden because we were going to talk about welfare, then she comes to me . . . And I know there aren't a lot of single moms in my classes or whatever, but [a teacher] would never ask a black person to speak on behalf of all black people, or to give "the black perspective," so I don't think it's really appropriate for a teacher to ask

me to speak like that, like on behalf of all single mothers, to give "the single mother perspective." We don't all have the same experiences . . . She wanted me to say what it was like to be a single mother on welfare. I hadn't ever been on welfare.

While Dr. Evans' request seems to have been, As Sally suggests, intended to recognize and value Sally's experiences, it also reflects an assumption that all single mothers share the same experience of being welfare recipients. Furthermore, it seems that Dr. Evans regards Sally as *only* a single mother, particularly as she had not asked Sally to share her experiences before.

Single mother students encounter similar treatment from their peers. Most of the women who participated in this project indicated that they have few friends among the MWCC student population. This is due, in part, to their time constraints and the limited amount of free time they have while on campus. However, the ways other students respond to them also affect their social relationships. For example, several participants said students in their classes "treat them fine" and interact with them "like all the other students" until they find out they are single mothers. Then, as Elaine Swift, who is divorced and raising her toddler son, explained, "They'll only ask me about my kids and what it's like to be a Mom, never talk to me about other things anymore like homework or what courses I'm taking or assignments that we have to do." Although participants have a number of things in common with their peers, particularly the fact that they are students attending the same institution and enrolled in some of the same classes, at least some other students seem to regard them as "different" or "unusual." Consequently, and in an effort to "fit in," some informants, like 19-year-old Beth Jacobs, will hide the fact that they are single mothers:

I just don't want to talk about it while I'm at school. This is my time for being a student, not a mom. So I don't tell many people, usually only my instructors. And I know that might sound hypocritical or dishonest, but I don't want [other students] to always see me as a mom and only see me as a mom. Once they find out, I don't fit in anymore. They can't relate to me anymore.

The result is a kind of double life for Beth. At home, she is a single mother. When interacting with other students on campus, she tries to be a student and *only* a student. This type of "passing" does enable Beth to blend in with her student peers. Yet Beth also admits it is very difficult at times, particularly as she must refrain from talking about her daughter, the person she calls the "most important part" of her life.

Single mother students as "unwelcome." The aspects of the "chilly" climate discussed thus far are rather subtle. However, single mother students also experience behav-

ior and attitudes that are explicitly unwelcoming and, at times, even aggressive. It is important to point out that these more overt types of treatment are rather infrequent and represent only a small portion of the examples informants provided in relation to institutional climate. Yet regardless of their rate of occurrence, these examples illustrate that at least some members of the MWCC learning community are antagonistic toward single mother students and contribute to a climate that, at times, can be bitterly cold.

Frequently, these more extreme types of behavior take the form of sarcastic or disparaging comments that convey disrespect and a general disdain for single mothers. For example, when her daughter got sick one day during the first week of the semester, Joanna called her professors to let them know she would be absent from class. Two of them "were fine" and told Joanna to "just keep up on the reading." A third professor, according to Joanna, replied that it "was not his problem" that she was not married and did not have anyone else to watch her child. He also clearly stated that he would not consider her absence excused. Rather than spend the semester with someone "who was a real jerk . . . and clearly considered single mothers a problem," Joanna dropped the class. Other informants also indicated that they have heard similar comments from MWCC staff members, although Janet Stanton and Liz Green, both white and in their early twenties, indicated this is frequently done "behind [our] backs" or "under their breath as they walk by" or "when they think we can't hear them."

Most often, however, harsh comments come from other students. For example, Beth recalled one incident in which she was sitting in the commons talking to one of her classmates, Lori Young. They had been discussing homework when Lori told Beth she was also a single mother. Beth said that she had been "so excited [to meet] someone who had that in common" with her, and the two women began to discuss "everything from our day care situation[s] to how [they] pay for everything, to [their] children's fathers . . . [including] whether or not they pay child support and how often they see their kids." Their conversation was interrupted by a group of students seated at a nearby table "who began to sing some of the lyrics to "My Baby Daddy."³ Though Beth tried to shrug it off as "just some people being jerks," it was clear the incident had upset her and she admitted it was one of the main reasons she "learned to be much more careful" about revealing her identity to others at MWCC.

Her reasons for doing so became even clearer as the interview continued. While discussing her financial situation, Beth explained:

[Although I took out some student loans, I also got a Pell Grant for] just over \$4,000 a year because I'm not married

and raising my child on my own. . . . After tuition and books I have a little of my [Pell] Grant left to help with day care.

Our interview was interrupted by a female student who had been seated nearby. Clearly aware of the fact that Beth was being interviewed, as indicated by the recorder and microphone in the middle of the table, the young woman walked up to our table and spoke loudly and angrily:

You know, I'm going to school full time and working 30 hours a week and I don't get any kind of help at all. I have to pay for school myself! I don't get any grants. I have to take out loans . . . I just don't think it's fair. And I'm not saying that she shouldn't get help at all because she does have this kid to take care of, but it just doesn't seem fair that I'm poor and I'm struggling, too, and yet all she has to do is pop out a kid and she gets all kinds of help! It's almost like they're rewarding moms for having kids and not being married, like they're making it easier for them to get through college. Maybe I should go get pregnant and then someone will give me money and I won't have to work any more—I could just go to school and take care of my kid.

She then collected her books and walked away, leaving Beth visibly shaken and near tears. Given this type of treatment, it is little wonder she tries to hide the fact she is a single mother.

In contrast to Beth, Sally does not make an effort to conceal her identity. In fact, in most of her classes, she "will usually say something . . . to let people know that [I am] not married and raising a kid." The responses of her peers have left her "really disappointed and frustrated" and, at times, they have been openly disrespectful. In her "Social Problems" class, for example, during a group project that focused on marriage promotion policies, other students described single mothers by relying on some well-worn cultural stereotypes:

We had to present this in front of the class and debate these policies. And during our presentation, everyone else in my group was just talking about how good they are and how they would solve all kinds of problems. They were saying that if you get pregnant, then you should have to get married. And their logic was that two parents are better than one. . . . They were saying some pretty awful things about single mothers. How they're all lazy. Calling them sluts. Saying they all just keep having babies to get more money.

Sally responded by offering "a very different perspective on marriage promotion policies, telling them why [she] thought they are just a bad idea." And while she believes she was able to get the attention of her classmates and inform them about how her own experiences as a single mother have convinced her of the flaws of marriage pro-

motion policies, it is important to note that the instructor did not intervene. Instructors are required to maintain a classroom environment that reflects institutional and federal anti-discrimination policies and which, at the very least, is respectful. By failing to become involved in the discussion, the instructor missed an important opportunity to point out the ways in which cultural stereotypes of single mothers were reflected in the students' statements indicated above. In addition, by remaining silent, the instructor inadvertently lowered the thermostat in her classroom and left Sally to weather the climate on her own.

CONCLUSION

The narratives of the women who participated in this project illustrate both the subtle and explicit ways in which they are treated differently and marginalized as single mothers. Their accounts provide examples of the ways in which the policies, behaviors, and attitudes they encounter in their interactions with faculty, staff, and other students contribute to their perceptions that they are ignored, regarded as abnormal, and even unwelcome on campus. They chronicled the ways in which these types of treatment have influenced their experiences both in and out of the classroom and affected the academic and social aspects of their postsecondary experience. While there is little research regarding the climate of America's community colleges (Hagedorn & Laden, 2002), this study suggests institutional climate is influenced not only by cultural ideologies of gender more generally but also, in the post-welfare reform era, by some of the same stereotypes that drove welfare reform in the first place.

It would be an overgeneralization to rely on the data presented in this study in order to draw general conclusions about the climate of American community colleges. However, given that welfare reform policies across the nation have increased barriers to postsecondary education for poor single mothers by reducing the support available to them, it is imperative that community colleges devote additional resources to better understanding the experiences of single mother students. Such research can help community college teachers and administrators better recognize the ways in which broader cultural ideologies of gender and class intersect with and influence institutional dynamics. Furthermore, this is a crucial step that must be taken in order to identify the needs of single mother students and to craft policies and practices that address those needs in efficient and effective ways.

In the meantime, there are a number of things that can be done to address the "chilly climate" facing single mother students. Individual faculty and staff members can take an active role in combating negative

stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes about single mothers. Language and behavior that demeans or excludes any member of the campus community not only violates the human rights policies at most higher education institutions, they also have a detrimental effect on the learning community overall, particularly as they discourage the participation of certain groups based on gender, marital status, parental status, class, or other identities. As with other stereotypes, those pertaining to single mothers should be addressed in ways that help all members of the learning community understand why they are harmful.

Faculty members can include a statement for student parents on their syllabi. The women who participated in this research project had much to say about what such a statement might look like. After incorporating their suggestions, I created a "For Student Parents" statement that I now include as part of the "course policies" section on syllabi for the courses I teach. Like all other course policies, I read it aloud on the first day of class:

For Student Parents: If circumstances arise that necessitate your absence from class—such as the illness of a child, closing of day care for inclement weather, etc.—please contact me as soon as possible so we may make arrangements to keep you up-to-date with course material and activities.

This statement does two important things. First, it conveys to student parents, including single mother students, that I am sensitive to their particular needs and recognize that they may, on occasion, need to miss class in order to care for their child or children. In other words, it signals that I, as a faculty member, am supportive of student parents. Second, and equally important, this statement serves as a means of informing (or perhaps reminding) *non-parent* students that some of their peers are not only students but are also raising children. Consequently, the inclusion of this statement serves as a type of consciousness-raising, increasing awareness of the presence of student parents in general. And this increased awareness can provide an important foundation for moving toward an institutional climate that is more welcoming of all student parents, including single mother students.

Faculty members need to be aware of how their course requirements may unduly burden single mother students. While I do support the incorporation of outside-of-class activities as a method of enhancing students learning, I also believe it is unfair to penalize students who cannot participate in such activities because of financial or time constraints. One way to avoid this is to make attendance at such events optional. An instructor teaching a general studies course on "Performing Arts in America," for example, might require her students to attend *The Nutcracker* at a local auditorium. There is

certainly something to be said for taking in the sights, sounds, and emotions of this classic by witnessing a live performance. Yet the price of a ticket to such an event is likely out of the reach of many poor single mothers in addition to the cost of hiring a babysitter. The instructor could easily address this situation: Encourage students to attend the live performance. Those who are unable to attend, for whatever reason, could simply check out a videotaped copy of the ballet from the campus library. Faculty members could also look for a grant or institutional funding that would cover the cost of tickets and allow all students to attend.

Instructors who wish to include small group activities as part of their courses can make minor adjustments to better accommodate single mother students. For example, an instructor could easily allot time *in class* for small groups to meet. This may be 15-minutes once a week, half an hour every other week, or an entire class session once per month. In my experience, this not only makes group projects more manageable for single mothers and other students facing time constraints or who have limited access to child care, it also results in better communication among group members, more engagement with the project, and final projects of significantly higher quality.

Individual actions, such as those described above, may contribute to attitudinal changes that make the campus climate less "chilly" for single mother students. Yet they do not address the structural aspects of community colleges that may marginalize or disadvantage single mother students. Consequently, it is important to advocate for changes in policies and practices at an institutional level.

One area that can easily be addressed is institutional attendance policies. Most institutions have formal attendance policies that permit students to make up work *without* penalty under certain circumstances. A typical campus-wide attendance policy might read something like this:

College regulations require that students be allowed to make up examinations or other class activities that have been missed due to illness, serious illness or death in the student's immediate family, official school activities, active military service of a brief duration, religious observances, or other unavoidable circumstances.

Such a policy could easily be rewritten as follows:

College regulations require that students be allowed to make up examinations or other class activities that have been missed due to illness, serious illness or death in the students' immediate family, official school activities, active military service of a brief duration, religious observances, or other unavoidable circumstances such as the illness of their child.

This seemingly small change could affect institutional climate in a profound way, both because it acknowledges the presence of student parents on campus and provides protection from unfair treatment by faculty who fail to consider taking care of a sick child an “excused” absence.

Institutions need to make child care a priority. Child care must be high-quality with convenient hours to accommodate daytime and evening class schedules. It should be centrally located and should prioritize enrollment for the children of student parents, particularly as their economic resources are often limited and may restrict their access to other child care options in the broader community. Furthermore, an income-sensitive sliding fee scale would help make child care more accessible to single mother students and other low-income student populations. At institutions where providing on-site child care is simply not an option, the creation of child care subsidies to assist single mother students and other low-income student parents is a must.

But perhaps the best way for community colleges and other postsecondary institutions to support single mother students is to acknowledge their presence on campus. Holding forums for single mother students, events for student parents and their children, and even creating a student organization for single mother students (or student parents in general) can help foster dialogue and build community. These types of support can both help institutions better understand the specific needs of single mother students and raise awareness among faculty, staff, and other students about those needs. Thus, these types of activities can serve as a starting point for creating a more welcoming and supportive educational environments for single mother students. Although the current U.S. political climate resembles something of a “deep freeze” for poor single mothers, the institutional climate of America’s community colleges need not leave single mother students out in the cold.

NOTES

1. Pseudonym.
2. Each participant has been assigned a pseudonym.
3. “My Baby Daddy” is a song by rap artist Milli Mae. The song begins by depicting a pregnant, unwed young woman pining for her convict boyfriend, giving birth to her son, and by the end of the song, realizing that the only relationship between the boy and his father will be “through a Goddamn window pane” at the prison. It relies heavily on stereotypes of absent fathers, portraying them as sexually promiscuous, gun-toting young men. However, it also implies that single mothers are dupes for falling in love with such men and failing to recognize that they are more interested in felonies than fatherhood.

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Jillian M. Duquaine-Watson received her PhD in Women's Studies from the University of Iowa. She is currently assistant professor of Women's Studies at Texas Woman's University and her teaching and research interests include social welfare policy, feminist ethnography, pedagogy, and theories of motherhood and reproduction.

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