Collapsing borders: How online education shapes student-mothers' experiences in higher education

Margaret Sallee*, University at Buffalo, United States of America

Danielle Lewis, University at Buffalo, United States of America

Sara Kieffer, University at Buffalo, United States of America

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*mwsallee@buffalo.edu

The Covid-19 pandemic led many higher education institutions to pivot to online education. In part, institutions made these shifts to avoid losing revenue from declining student enrolment, a concern in many countries given a shift toward neoliberalism, in which the market dominates and concern for the public good fades (Harvey 2007; Saunders 2010). The change in course delivery brought both challenges and opportunities to all students, but the consequences of the transition were especially heightened for student-mothers. In this article, we explore how 57 student-mothers in the United States navigated online education during and after the pandemic. Participants in this national, longitudinal study discussed the challenges they faced engaging in coursework while caring for their children who were at home with them. However, many acknowledged that increased online offerings allowed them greater access to pursue education since they did not have to secure childcare. Using Clark's (2000) work-family border theory as a guide, the data demonstrate how online education enabled student-mothers to address their responsibilities associated with each role by integrating rather than segmenting these competing domains. Such action is contrary to the neoliberal state, which suggests that caregiving is a private act and incompatible with participation in the public sphere (Maker 2022). Although institutional actions were not taken to be care-full (Lynch 2009), ultimately online education facilitated increased access for student-mothers.

Keywords: *student-mothers; online education; neoliberalism; work-family border theory; Covid-19 pandemic*

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Introduction

> *Molly is a single mother to two boys, aged ten and eight years old. When she decided to pursue an associate's degree[1] in early childhood education, she had been working at a daycare for eight years and understood that a degree would afford her the ability to provide for her children through increased employment opportunities. Molly has virtually no support from her family and directly attributes her ability to pursue higher education to the option to pursue her academic program entirely online. She shared: 'I don't have anyone to watch my kids or to help move my kids, so when I am not working, I can't go to school 'cause I can't leave my kids home alone, so [with online courses] it definitely works out.' However, because of this limited family support, a full-time job, and her single parent status, Molly often finds herself completing schoolwork while watching her sons' basketball games, after their bedtime, or while waiting for dinner to cool. Molly shared that the option to enrol in a fully online program is what enables her to pursue higher education, stating: 'I love online work...It makes it able for me to do it, otherwise I wouldn't be able to go to school.'*

Molly's experience is representative of many of the student-mothers in this study who enrolled in online programs as a strategy for balancing their caregiving responsibilities and pursuit of higher education. The Covid-19 pandemic, while catastrophic in many ways, led to a wider institutional adoption of remote coursework that expanded access for individuals who previously could not enrol in higher education due to competing demands on their time and resources. Many institutions shifted from in-person to remote instruction with their students' safety as a main priority, yet others did so to avoid potential loss of revenue from students withdrawing from the institution (Turk, Soler & Vigil 2020). Lynch (2010) would characterise the latter as emanating from the culture of carelessness that characterises contemporary higher education, resulting largely from public sector reforms. This concern, coupled with decreasing student enrolment, reflects a larger societal shift toward neoliberalism, where the market becomes the priority and concern for serving the public declines (Harvey 2007; Saunders 2010). As neoliberalism also views parenting as an act that should occur privately within the home, it deems engagement in public spaces (i.e. education and employment) incompatible with caregiving (Maker 2022), implying that student-mothers cannot attend to both roles successfully. Although outside the bounds of this article, as we have argued elsewhere (see Sallee & Stefanese Yates 2023), student-mothers experience some challenges that are unique from those experiences of parents of all genders, though we know that student-parents of all genders are impacted by balancing caregiving and academics (Estes 2011). For consistency's sake, we use the language of student-mothers in this article to reflect that mothers constituted our participant pool.

Although previous literature does not always disaggregate the experience of student-mothers and fathers, the impact of gender on parenting creates disparate lived experiences (Cruse, Holtzman, Gault, Croom & Polk 2019; Gault, Milli & Cruse 2018). Student-fathers are one and a half times more likely to be married than women (Cruse et al. 2019), who are more likely than men to be

[1] The US higher education system has two types of institutions – two-year colleges that award short-course certificates or associates degrees, and four-year universities that award bachelor's degrees (American Council on Education, 2019).

single heads of household (Glynn 2019). Although student-parents represent nearly one quarter of all enrolled undergraduates in the US, mothers comprise 70% of that population (Cruse et al. 2019). Given that women comprise the majority of student-parents, are likely to be single heads of household, and are more likely than peers without children to have incomes that fall well below the poverty line, student-mothers face a myriad of additional challenges that student-fathers may not as they care for their families while pursuing higher education (Gault et al. 2014; Huelsman & Engle 2013; Institute for Women's Policy Research 2014). Additionally, higher education has been and continues to be a space dominated by patriarchal norms. As a result, care often goes unnoticed in higher education, with most institutions assuming students hold no caring responsibilities (Hook, Moreau & Brooks, 2022; Moreau 2016).

Higher education institutions vary in their response to student-mothers, ranging from very little or no support to 'mainstream' support which puts the needs of student-mothers on par with those of 'mainstream', or non-parenting, students (Moreau 2016; Sallee, Lewis & Collier 2023). At institutions that ignore caregivers, student-mothers can be seen as demanding special attention (Moreau 2016) but even institutions that implement more comprehensive support systems do not do so equitably, leaving student-mothers as outsiders in universities (Sallee et al. 2023). The ways in which some institutions address student-parents' distinct challenges vary but can include: financial support and preference for placement in on-campus childcare centers (Gault et al. 2018; Long 2017; Institute for Women's Policy Research 2014); targeted academic skill development (Dickson & Tennant 2018; Yakaboski 2010); and intentional academic advisement (Bone 2010; Cerven 2013). However, these services do not facilitate access for student-parents and can only support students once they have enrolled in an institution. Yet, even student-mothers who attend institutions that fund support programs still experience bureaucratic challenges since care does not contribute to the business of higher education (Hook, Moreau & Brooks 2022; Sallee et al. 2023; Sallee, Hine & Kohler 2024).

Due to the additional responsibilities that student-parents have, they are more likely than students without children to indicate a preference for academic programs that could be completed entirely online, which suggests that online instruction can facilitate access to higher education for this population (Gardner et al. 2021). Although many institutions shifted to remote instruction to preserve revenue (a characteristic of neoliberalism) (Felson & Adamczyk 2021) and not to be care-full, findings from this study indicate that remote instruction facilitated access for many student-mothers who, like Molly, otherwise would have been unable to pursue higher education. However, most institutions have since reverted to pre-pandemic modes of operation. This shift away from online education and return to in-person instruction has removed the ability for many student-mothers to integrate their parenting and school responsibilities, a strategy that was effective for many participants.

In short, this lack of access to online education may negatively impact this population's ability to persist to graduation. As student-parents represent 25% of all students enrolled in higher education in the US (Cruse et al. 2019), institutions should consider how they can create care-full (Lynch 2009) environments for student-parents, and particularly for student-mothers who experience additional challenges that fathers do not, in the post-pandemic era. Crafting intentionally supportive environments has the potential to support the persistence and academic success of student-mothers (Brown & Nichols 2013; Cox 2019; Yakaboski 2010) who, due to their

simultaneously-held roles as caregivers and college students, experience lower graduation rates (Wladis, Hachey & Conway 2018). Campuses that focus on building care-full climates for student-mothers can help address the multitude of challenges that come with pursuing higher education. For student-mothers, the unique issues they experience, like financial hardship, difficulty balancing competing priorities, and alienation within the classroom, often compound, negatively impacting academic success, persistence, and retention (Cerven et al. 2013; Dickson & Tennant 2018; Duquaine-Watson 2007; Wladis, Hachey & Conway 2018).

We begin this article with a discussion of Clark's (2000) work-family border theory, which we use as a lens to examine how and when student-mothers segment or integrate their parenting and school responsibilities. After describing the methods used, we share our findings, which demonstrate how online coursework facilitated access for many participants, while also discussing the challenges that remote education created for some student-mothers. We conclude with an examination of how work-family border theory operates in this particular context, with some participants finding success due to integrating roles and others highly segmenting responsibilities and boundaries.

Theoretical framework

Work-family border theory demonstrates how individuals create boundaries between distinct areas of their lives and can serve as a lens for exploring potential connections between different domains and the impact that other individuals may have on how borders operate between these various domains (Clark 2000). Implicit in the idea of work-family border theory is the notion that the areas of work and family are two separate yet interconnected domains, each with borders that need to be effectively managed in order to achieve balance, which Clark (2000) equated with satisfaction and minimal role conflict. In this article, we adapt work-family border theory by replacing the domain of work with school to explore how students navigate these different domains. This frame was offered by Clark (2000) as a mechanism for examining the ways in which individuals separate the two spheres, as segmenting work and family became especially prevalent after the Industrial Revolution, and employment outside of the home became more widespread. Historically, employment and family-related activities occurred in different spaces and times, each possessing their own expectations, practices, cultures, and border-keepers (i.e. individuals like spouses or children; or in work settings, coworkers or supervisors, who influence how individuals manage and engage in each domain) (Coontz 2016; Morf 1989); however, with the increase in virtual work and school options, combined with changing family structures, work-family border theory offers a lens to explore how individuals might segment or integrate their varying responsibilities, including continued education. Individuals may create temporal (time), psychological (emotional), and spatial (location) boundaries or borders between their various roles (e.g. parent, student, employee, partner), often in an attempt to segment and, thus, focus on different responsibilities at varying points in time (Clark 2000). Yet, as many of the student-mothers in this study suggest, dissolving boundaries and integrating multiple roles might serve as an effective strategy to accomplish the responsibilities associated with caregiving and the pursuit of higher education.

In applying Clark's (2000) framework to student-mothers' approaches to managing coursework with parenting responsibilities, temporal borders can be illustrated by the times in which student-mothers prepare for class or complete homework versus reserving a specific time of day to devote to childcare (e.g. dinner or bedtime). However, during the pandemic and the turn toward online

education, student-mothers often engaged in remote coursework alongside their children, integrating both their student and mother roles. For example, student-mothers may have enacted spatial boundaries while engaged in remote coursework by reserving a particular area within their home to conduct schoolwork or requesting that children not enter such a space while parents are logged into a virtual class. Psychological borders, or actions that are intentionally enacted to ensure that particular practices or emotions are reserved for specific domains, could be illustrated by an individual mentally disengaging from domestic duties while listening to a lecture from their kitchen table.

A critical component of work-family border theory is the act of either segmenting or integrating roles, which Clark (2000) suggested occurs on a continuum. The degree to which segmentation or integration may occur is dependent on several factors, including the permeability and flexibility of boundaries as well as the actions of border-keepers. Permeability refers to the extent that a border permits any factor associated with one domain to influence another; and flexibility, similarly, references how adaptable a boundary is to the demands of another domain (Clark 2000). For example, a home office with spatial boundaries, like a door, can be viewed as highly permeable if children enter the space often and without announcing themselves; however, if an individual creates rules around specific times that interruptions are not allowed, this border becomes less flexible than if there were no limits on when family members can enter the space. Clark (2000) indicated that similar domains (for example, completing administrative work for employment and a presentation for class) can often result in weak borders that ultimately facilitate balance between work and family, while strong borders are critical when domains vary significantly (e.g. preparing dinner for a family and developing a presentation for class). However, border-keepers, or individuals who can shape the timing of and ways in which participants engage in and manage both the work and family domains, can influence the permeability of boundaries enacted by student-mothers. In this study, children or professors are examples of border-keepers who can impact the ways in which student-mothers manage their roles.

Although previous studies have highlighted the utility of work-family border theory in examining individuals and contexts with multiple roles and responsibilities (for an example, see Sallee & Lewis 2020), they differ from this study in that they either focus on the benefits of segmenting work and family responsibilities or the context varies from that of the present study. For example, Adisa and colleagues (2022) found that individuals in the academy working from home during the Covid-19 lockdowns experienced decreased flexibility due to an inability to segment work and family responsibilities. Although findings from the current study vary from previous research that utilises work-family border theory, these particular results underscore the value of integrating roles in the context of student-mothers.

Methodology

Using Bartlett and Vavrus's (2017) comparative case study approach (CCS), we compared longitudinal data across horizontal, vertical, and transversal axes to study the experiences of student-mothers attending two- and four-year institutions. The vertical axis is concerned with how participants' experiences are shaped by policy, while the transversal axis is focused on data collection over time (Bartlett & Vavrus 2017). In this article, we focus on the horizontal axis, which interrogates how a phenomenon occurs in various locations (i.e. a multi-site comparison) (Bartlett & Vavrus 2017). We examined the impact of remote education on student-mothers'

abilities to manage each of their roles across the US (horizontal) with data collection occurring over a one-year period (transversal). As experiences can and often do vary based on individual contexts, we specifically explore how the experiences of student-mothers across 20 US states, a wide geographical range and number of sites, compared and contrasted as they navigated in-person and online courses post-pandemic.

Participant recruitment and selection

Participants were low-income, undergraduate student-mothers in the US who were eligible for the Pell grant[2], a federal government-funded program to assist low-income students with higher education costs. Recruitment occurred through emails to national listservs and offices that serve student-parents on campus. As a result, 57 student-mothers were recruited for the first round of interviews. Of the 57 participants, 28 are white,[3]11 are Hispanic or Latina, 11 are Black, African, or African American, three are multi-racial, three are Asian or Pacific Islander, and one declined to state. 29 student-mothers were enrolled in four-year institutions (bachelor degree-granting institutions), 28 were enrolled at community colleges, which typically grant vocational certificates or prepare students for transfer to bachelor's degree institutions, and four were transferring from a community college to a bachelor's degree-granting institution during the first interview. One participant identified as gender-queer, but all participants identified as mothers. Starting in spring 2022, 57 student-mothers participated in the first round of interviews; 42 of the 57 original participants returned for the second round in late 2022, and 35 returned for the third round in spring 2023. Ethics approval was secured through the authors' Institutional Review Board. All participants are referred to by pseudonyms.

Methods

Three semi-structured interviews, conducted over the course of a year, serve as the primary sources of data. The first round of interviews lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and centered on the participants' educational history, the influences that motivated them to pursue a degree, and the types of support they received from their institutions and other aid sources. The second interviews focused on the participants' academic and parenting experiences over the prior six months as well as their feelings concerning the overturning of Roe v Wade, US legislation which guaranteed women the right to abortion. The last set of interviews focused on updates regarding the participants' lives as mothers and students as well as the impact of state politics on their experiences. While the interviews, as part of a larger research endeavour, were not intended to centre on the student-mother's experience with online and in-person courses as they pertain to boundaries between home and school work, many student-mothers naturally expressed feelings regarding those boundaries. Before the first and third interviews, participants were asked to complete a short survey about the types and amounts of aid they received from their institutions and social services. As an incentive to participate, participants were given a gift card for each completed interview: $25 for the first and second interviews and $50 for the third interview.

[2] Pell grants are awarded to students with the most exceptional need, which is qualified as having an expected family contribution less than the total maximum Pell Grant amount. For the 2024-2025 award year, the maximum Pell award is $7,395 (National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities 2024)

[3] We intentionally choose not to capitalise 'white' in reference to race to create rhetorical distance from white supremacy.

Data analysis and trustworthiness

For the purpose of this article, we focused on data that reflected how student-mothers experienced online or in-person classes and their interaction with their responsibilities as a parenting student. Using Atlas.ti, we explored how mode of course delivery affected boundaries between the student-mother's academic and family lives. This was done by examining codes regarding conflict, decision making, academic difficulty, and modes of delivery. In our analysis we found that 47 student-mothers mentioned a preference for online courses, or that online courses allowed them to better manage their parental and student roles. Thirty student-mothers expressed a preference for in-person courses, or noted that in-person courses resulted in firmer boundaries between their academic and parental roles. It is worth noting that some student-mothers held mixed feelings regarding both in-person and online courses, which is why the total of the two groups above exceeds the sample size.

To establish trustworthiness, we engaged in both method and investigator triangulation (Lincoln & Guba 1985). We collected data using both interviews and surveys and had multiple investigators engaged in data collection and analysis. We jointly generated a codebook and coded initial transcripts together to ensure agreement on application of codes.

Positionality

Margaret is a white professor and a solo mother to young twins. She has spent the past two decades studying work-family issues for faculty, staff, and students at universities and brought both her professional and personal experiences to the project. Her parenting identity allowed her to develop empathy with all participants; she felt a particular sense of connection with single-mother participants as well as those parenting young children. Like many of the participants, Margaret also transitioned to online courses during the first two years of the pandemic, which allowed her to manage her own work-family conflict. She has since valued a return to in-person teaching, but has tried to keep her experiences from shaping her analysis of these data.

Danielle is a white-passing Puerto Rican woman who at the time of data collection was a doctoral student. She is married and the mother of an eight-year old child. Her shared identity as a student-mother may have facilitated rapport with participants, especially those whose school-aged children were engaged in remote school during the pandemic. The blurring of boundaries between school and home in her own life enabled her to uniquely empathise with and relate to participants. However, the differences in age, marital status, and class between Danielle and many of the participants may have impacted the level of detail shared in interviews.

Sara is a white doctoral student and although she does not have children, Sara spent a decade caring for an aging parent while working and attending school. Sara joined the project midway and did not interview participants, but was actively involved in data analysis. Like many participants, she also found herself enrolled in online courses during the pandemic and felt conflicted over the balance between work and family, factors which she tried to keep out of her data analysis. Her caregiver identity and the shared online schooling phenomenon allowed her to empathise with participants despite not sharing a parenting identity.

While we each shared some identities with participants, as parents or students, we did not share all identities. Positioning ourselves as insider-outsiders (Mercer 2007) allowed us to share those

similarities to better facilitate discussion through mutual understanding without impeding upon the significance of the topics discussed. Our outsider status also allowed us to stay curious and ask questions to interrogate various aspects of participants' experiences.

Findings

Although students in the US were forced to transition to online courses because of the Covid-19 pandemic, many student-mothers discussed the ways that such courses were beneficial for their lives as mothers, students, and, in some cases, employees. Although some students discussed challenges with online courses and missing the interaction and support that comes with in-person courses, the majority of participants praised online courses for facilitating their access to and persistence in tertiary education. In what follows, we discuss the benefits that online courses brought for student-mothers while also acknowledging some of its challenges.

Online Courses Facilitate Access to Tertiary Education

Of the 57 student-mothers we interviewed, 47 reported that they took online courses at some point in their degree program. Many in this group appreciated the delivery of online courses, such as Audrey who said, 'I just wish all of the classes could be online….The more online, the better', and Alexis who said, 'I've been able to take everything online…It's very helpful because my life is chaotic cos I can work everything into my schedule when I have time for it'. Similarly, Raya described her online courses as 'very, very convenient'. Many of the participants did not intentionally select online courses, but found themselves suddenly taking online courses in March 2020 due to the shifts necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic. But many mothers commented on how beneficial such a move was. For example, Aria described how moving to online courses allowed her to stay enrolled during and after her pregnancy. 'When the pandemic hit, it actually was sort of convenient for me…cos the lectures…switched to online. So I was able to even, up until [being] eight months [pregnant], I was able to keep being in school'.

Aria was not the only one to have such an experience. Candace gave birth during the middle of the semester and logged on the next day to introduce her son to her professor and classmates. Candace's experience underscores the importance of both supportive border-keepers and high flexibility of borders. In welcoming Candace to visit with the class post-delivery, the professor signaled that Candace was an important member of the community, and the visit was only possible because the instructor enabled flexible borders between the participant's student and parent roles. Candace lamented that many institutions were no longer offering such courses: 'I wish that they continued at least some things online, but it's so minimal now. There's nothing. And you didn't have to worry about childcare expenses or anything either….I almost wish it would just go back online'. Aria noted the benefits of saving money on childcare while she pursued her education, though for many women, lack of access to childcare was both a benefit and a drawback. As institutions started to shift away from online education, this closed avenues for some women to participate in higher education. As Emily concluded, 'I hate to make it sound like Covid has been like a great thing, but I don't know that I would've gotten through college had the timing been what it was with everything being virtual'.

Student-mothers took a variety of online courses to facilitate their success, ranging from completely asynchronous courses to synchronous courses and, in some cases, hybrid courses. Some discussed appreciating asynchronous courses, which allowed them to complete work

whenever they had the time, such as Melissa who reported that she completed all of her assignments for the semester for some classes as soon as she could. Karen described how helpful it was to be able to complete her asynchronous courses 'at [her] own pace' because it was 'really, really helpful for [her] work schedule'. Karen was not the only one to comment on how online courses were critical for her persistence in higher education. When we asked Luna if she would ever take an in-person class, she replied, 'Probably not. While I'm working, it's just not realistic'. Like Karen, she also appreciated taking asynchronous courses because completing the requirements was just 'easier', in part due to the flexibility to integrate domains.

Other participants discussed how they completed their courses around their work and parenting responsibilities. For example, Audrey shared how she fit her first year of coursework around full-time work, usually doing her schoolwork and courses after her kids went to sleep:

> I really liked it because I was working full time and because I'm a mom, I feel like every single time I have the opportunity to take a class online, I will. It's just easier. I have a lot more freedom and I can [study from] 9 pm to 2 am if I need to and still have time to be with my kids and work a job.

For Audrey and others, online courses allowed them to more easily integrate their academic and mothering responsibilities, due to permeable boundaries.

Many participants discussed how online education allowed them to be more present for their children. Several discussed taking online courses with infants and other young children, including several mothers who credited online courses with allowing them to continue breastfeeding with minimal challenges, suggesting that highly permeable and flexible boundaries benefitted participants. For example, Candace described how she navigated coursework and caring for her young son. 'If I had to nurse him, I would usually message the professor in the chat and be like, "Hey, sorry, my camera's off. I'm nursing my son". And they'd be like, "Okay, it's fine"'. The professor's response signaled that student-mothers belonged in the classroom and is indicative of the criticality of supportive border-keepers. As we described earlier, she lamented the end of online education multiple times throughout the interview, telling us:

> It was honestly a really great experience. And I wish you could go back to some sort of online, I think in that way it benefitted me a ton because I got to stay home with my baby. I got to establish breastfeeding with him without having to worry about school or credits besides just getting it done.

She was not the only mother who described how she appreciated online courses for facilitating her ability to parent, though simultaneously noted the challenges of doing so. Devika described the challenges of attending her all-synchronous courses while parenting her toddler:

> I usually am off camera. I'm with my daughter and I'm not able to be on camera, but other times I just have my phone and her on the side and I'm just paying attention to class, trying to take notes on the side, and checking in on her every now and then to make sure that she's okay.

Veronica had two children, aged eight and ten, who needed less direct supervision, which allowed her to focus more on her classes, though she wrestled with tremendous guilt as she felt that she

was ‘spending a lot of time on [herself], not engaging with [her] kids’. She shared that she would occasionally leave her study area to check on her children when all of them were home during the pandemic, illustrating the permeability of boundaries in her home. Daniela, like many mothers, described how during the pandemic she took online courses alongside her son: ‘All we did was spend time all day together. He was in online school. I was in online school. It went really well’. Although there were many challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic for students and families, many of these participants found ways to make integrating their two roles work.

Many mothers discussed the ways that they fit school around their parenting responsibilities. For example, Gianna discussed how she completed ‘a lot of [her] classes in the car, watching [her] kids’. She went on to say that ‘it could be really stressful, like really stressful, but I think it's worth it. Cause if I just like power through the really hard parts, it'll be a lot easier when I'm done’. Another mother shared that she only came back to higher education because she saw they had online courses and, as a single mother, would not have been able to enrol in higher education otherwise. Molly, whose vignette opened the article, also indicated the necessity of a fully online program to facilitate her success - and also the flexibility it provides to continue to meet her family’s needs:

> We went to the beach last week and I was able to work ahead and finish my schoolwork so I didn't have anything due while I was at the beach. So I could take that time and spend with the kids, solely with them and not worry about schoolwork.

Although some professors might balk at the thought of a student going on vacation during the semester, Molly reminds us that many students have multiple responsibilities that come before their student identity and permeable borders can enable the successful accomplishment of tasks associated with various roles. Not only were online courses critical for her enrolment due to a lack of other support in her life, but fully asynchronous courses allowed her to achieve family fun while also attending to her academic responsibilities.

Challenges with online education

Despite the praise that many participants gave to online courses, many still noted the benefits that in-person classes brought. While some cited specific reasons for their desire to return to or be in a face-to-face environment, some simply preferred the in-person experience such as Carmen who chose a campus near her home so the commute would not interfere with her ability to take in-person classes, and Sophia who stated, ‘[I] really love being in a classroom’. Others wished for an in-person experience like Harper who, in her final year after having all her prior coursework online or in hybrid format, stated, ‘Please be in person. I don't want to have hybrid classes my whole time’. Of the student-mothers who discussed a preference for in-person courses, many discussed the difficulties they faced in their social and academic lives after being pushed into online classes during the pandemic. For them, the move to online education was challenging because the blurred boundaries between family time and school work posed difficulties for both spheres.

In-person classes can give students the opportunity to make connections and collaborate with their classmates, which can be difficult to replicate in an online format. Amanda, for example, did not find connection with her classmates in the online setting stating:

> There wasn't a lot of like-minded and similar people that you have online discussions with… You didn't connect with them outside of the discussions in the class. I would have to be like actually there in person to get more social connection with people.

Valentina also missed the in-person connection with classmates, but found that she also struggled to get to know her instructors and felt a general disconnect with her campus as a whole:

> When the pandemic hit, that was really hard to get to know people and connect with staff and even just instructors, it wasn't the same. So that was really hard. And I feel like now that classes are online, I'm barely starting to get to know people and really connect with the campus.

The social experience of attending courses in person can be a large part of the higher education experience, which was an important factor to Jackie who regretted missing out on these connections by taking online courses, saying, 'I felt like I would have been able to have a better college experience… I would have been a normal college kid as opposed to a mom struggling to go to college'. For some students who had the opportunity to take in-person classes prior to the pandemic, connecting with others was one of the more noteworthy parts of their classroom experience. For example, Violet said that 'having everything done in person was better. I think I understood more having to interact directly with my instructor. It was great to work with friends [and] classmates'.

In-person classes also gave some student-mothers the opportunity to focus on their coursework in a way that may not have been possible in an online format, either because it did not fit into their schedule or because the boundaries between their home and academic responsibilities were undefined. As Anna shared, 'the time balance between schooling and parenting is really hard in online classes'. Alexis also struggled with accomplishing both online coursework and spending time with her son. She recalled one interaction with him:

> I was in the middle of a statistics quiz. I had to finish it, I couldn't just leave it there. And I'm finishing it but I can't, "Mom look at this! Look at this! Look at this!" I feel like I brush him off a lot.

Similarly, Charlotte reminisced about leaving the house to take classes, mentioning the difficulty she experienced trying to focus and the struggle with managing her classes while also caring for her daughter. Just finding a quiet place to do classwork proved difficult for some student-mothers, like Madeline who said, 'quiet places to focus on homework, it's impossible within the house'.

Although a majority of student-mothers discussed the balance that online courses brought to their lives in terms of scheduling and caregiving, some participants found online classes created ambiguous flexibility and in-person classes allowed for more concrete barriers between the academic and parenting domains. Sophia found that online classes did not allow her to schedule boundaries into her day the way in-person courses did. Evelyn also battled with the challenges of online versus in-person scheduling saying, 'the pandemic was great for school because I could get all my homework done…but also it wasn't great because it was unstructured time and I had to

figure it out myself'. For some student-mothers, being on campus allowed them to get more work done, structuring their time efficiently so they had fewer school-related tasks once they got home, ultimately segmenting the academic and family domains. For example, Madeline used some of her time on campus for self-care, stating, '[I] did a swim class too because, if I give myself that time, that's like my me time'. While not for self-care, Gemma used her time on campus to do her school work which allowed her to focus on parenting while at home:

> I typically go right to campus and I utilise as much free time as I can on campus with my readings, or just catching up on assignments…I try to get that done because by the time my girls get home I don't have time to do the things that I need to do for me.

For Gemma and others, in-person classes separate the school day from their home life. Being on campus allowed for the space to accomplish school tasks without having to also juggle family responsibilities, an effective demonstration of segmentation. Their experiences stand in contrast to those of participants who valued being able to integrate their competing responsibilities.

Discussion

The Covid-19 pandemic forced many higher education institutions to shift courses online, with higher education institutions motivated by both safety, and a desire to be care-full, and financial concerns, as an embrace of neoliberalism continues (Felson & Adamczyk 2021; Lynch 2009; Turk, Soler & Vigil 2020). The transition to remote education created both challenges and opportunities for all students as well as student-mothers in particular (Evans 2024). As we discussed, many student-mothers credit the shift to online education for allowing them to maintain enrolment in higher education as they could combine their two roles. In contrast, others expressed a preference for in-person courses, noting that sometimes being able to segment their competing responsibilities allowed them to more easily focus on each. We return to Clark's (2000) work-family border theory to help us make sense of these findings and consider how the emergent turn toward online education (Adedoyin & Soykan 2020; Gillis & Krull 2020) actually helped many student-mothers persist in higher education.

Work-family border theory suggests that individuals have competing roles that come into conflict; these roles often emanate from responsibilities in competing domains, such as work and school (Clark 2000). These domains are separated by borders that can be temporal, spatial, or psychological. Temporal boundaries suggest that responsibilities for each domain happen at different times. Many participants discussed completing their courses or homework when their children were not present or sleeping, signaling the influence of border-keepers on decisions related to segmentation. However, some were able to collapse temporal boundaries by bringing their children with them to online courses or doing homework alongside their children, ultimately integrating the work and family domains. Spatial boundaries refer to where responsibilities occur. Some participants valued separating their parenting and academic responsibilities by taking in-person courses; this allowed for a strict spatial segmentation. However, even students who took online courses frequently discussed going into a different room or space to do their coursework, thus creating borders that were sometimes flexible and permeable. Some exceptions existed, such as Devika who attended synchronous courses while her toddler played nearby. Psychological

boundaries refer to the cognitive boundaries individuals construct about their ability to integrate two roles. For some participants, being a parent and student simultaneously was not compatible while others were able to bring the two responsibilities together. Ultimately, border-keepers and the flexibility and permeability of boundaries greatly affected the decisions that student-mothers made around when, where, and how they attended to their varied responsibilities.

In some instances, constructing strict boundaries between the roles allows individuals to thrive while in others collapsing the boundaries facilitates success. Clark (2000) posited that when domains are similar, weak borders will facilitate work-family balance while strong borders are necessary when domains are different. Given that parenting and schooling require very different demands from individuals, some student-mothers' preferences for segmentation, or separation between the roles, makes sense. Recall Violet and Gemma who both suggested that it was much easier for them to focus when they were able to attend to their school responsibilities while on campus, likely as they were able to control and reduce the permeability of the boundaries constructed between responsibilities for their families and coursework, as well as the influence of certain border-keepers (i.e. children). Others shared that they found being able to engage in conversation with classmates and professors much easier when they were in an in-person setting without the demands of their children standing in the way.

In contrast, many student-mothers found that taking online courses, and thereby collapsing borders between work and home, allowed them to thrive. Some, including Audrey, shared that they likely would not have been able to continue their education without access to online courses because of their other responsibilities. This was particularly true at the height of the pandemic when some student-mothers were also facilitating online education for their own children, such as Daniela who shared how she completed her own courses at the same time as her child did online schooling. Some student-mothers shared that asynchronous online courses were more helpful for facilitating their persistence in higher education, which makes sense in light of work-family border theory. Although they were completing their coursework at home, they usually did so after their children were asleep, so they could schedule it around their parenting responsibilities, a reminder that border-keepers can greatly impact the permeability of boundaries.

Work-family border theory and studies that have utilised this frame (Sallee & Lewis 2020) suggest that strong borders between different domains lead to more success. Some student-mothers were able to successfully attend to accomplishing tasks from the two domains at the same time (e.g. helping their children with a craft while completing a homework assignment). However, for most, the move to online education did not facilitate success because student-mothers could accomplish two roles at the same time. Rather, it allowed student-mothers to determine when and where they did their work that most benefitted themselves and their families - and not on a schedule pre-established by their institutions. As discussed earlier in the article, the transition to online education was made not only for health reasons, but for financial reasons as well, due to many countries' shifts towards neoliberalism. Regardless of the rationale for transitioning to remote coursework, it ultimately proved to be a care-full (Felson & Adamczyk 2021; Lynch 2009) undertaking, allowing student-mothers to better integrate their parenting and student roles. The irony, of course, is that most institutions are not designed to be care-full (Lynch 2010), but rather this accommodation occurred in spite of, not because of, the policy. These findings lead to several implications for practice.

Implications

Student-mothers thrive when they can determine when and where they do their work. Many participants expressed a deep loss at the turn away from online courses; as such, we encourage institutions to continue to offer online courses to cater to students with multiple responsibilities. Such courses could take multiple formats, including asynchronous, synchronous, and hybrid options. We would also strongly advise institutions to consider offering courses - both seated and online - at multiple times throughout the day. Some student-mothers could only do their schoolwork in the evenings because of their parenting responsibilities. Institutions might consider offering synchronous and seated courses in the evenings to create opportunities for students to interact with their peers and professors without the demands of parenthood interfering.

As many student-mothers indicated that a lack of childcare precipitated the need for options to enrol in online education, providing resources for parents to secure daycare or afterschool care for their children may address a critical concern for this population. Institutions could help student-parents navigate this issue by providing financial support for childcare and reserving spaces in on-campus daycare centers for enrolled parents.

Given the difficulty that some student-mothers experienced in building social connections, one strategy that institutions could employ to support this population is facilitating opportunities to create community. This intentional cultivation could occur in partnership with family and parent resource centres and include critical support services that are not always easily accessible to students who are primarily enrolled in online coursework. For institutions that may not have dedicated services for families and parents, a listserv that regularly disseminates information could be a valuable and low-cost investment in this particular population. Student-mothers at institutions across the globe could benefit from more intentional consideration of their unique needs as parents pursuing higher education. Ultimately, we would encourage institutions to shift their practices from being care-less to care-full, thus creating space for student-parents of all genders to thrive.

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