

Project Working Mom: Putting Education to Work

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About this Report

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About The Center for Women and Work

The Center for Women and Work (CWW) is an innovative leader in research and programs that promotes gender equity, a high skill economy, and reconciliation of work and well-being for all. CWW is located in the School of Management and Labor Relations at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. The CWW houses the Sloan Center on Innovative Training and Workforce Development (ITWD). The ITWD is dedicated to assisting state, county, and city government Departments and Workforce Investment Boards institutionalize technologically based flexible education and training alternatives, especially online learning opportunities, for non-college educated workers. More information can be found at www.cww.rutgers.edu.

About Project Working Mom

Project Working Mom (PWM) was established in 2008 to provide working mothers in the United States an important second chance at education. PWM's mission is to connect working mothers with online universities and colleges, by providing education via the Internet, this program is able to offer working mothers an opportunity to further their education in a manner that best accommodates their busy parenting schedules and work demands.

Executive Summary

In the U.S. today women comprise a significant portion of the labor force. The United States Census Bureau reports that in 2009 women reached half of our nation's workforce, and this number is projected to rise in 2010 and beyond. This important moment is simultaneously occurring at a time when the U.S. economy is in a period of deep recession, with millions of Americans fighting to find or keep their jobs, and many families looking to their mothers and daughters to be the breadwinners.

While women have taken on an important role in the workforce many do not earn self-sufficiency wages. Often women need to continue their education in order to increase their wages. Yet, many working mothers—whether married or single— do not have the time, flexibility, or money needed to complete educational degrees and certificates that are necessary to attain and build careers that can lead to economic security. Developing ways to provide education to these women in a manner that complements their work and family demands is needed.

In the past two decades a convenient and flexible new way of learning and skills delivery has exploded on the American educational scene –online learning. Using this type of learning, anyone with a computer and an Internet connection can take courses from accredited institutions in an academic field of their choice. Such technical capacity via the computer provides even the busiest Americans—especially working mothers—an enormous opportunity to further their education. Access to skills training and credentials that can lead to the better paying and more satisfying jobs that education makes possible has been a major missing ingredient in many women's lives.

This report reviews the eLearners.com¹ Project Working Mom (PWM) program, which seeks to address the barriers that women face in accessing education and provide working mothers in the United States with a second chance at education via the Internet.

The report examines the lived experiences of the women in the program and provides an overview of what is working and what is not working in the PWM program. The report includes the following key findings:

- The women involved in this program pursued this educational opportunity for a variety of different reasons including access to better-paying jobs with benefits; a need for credentials, a desire for a certain type of career, a career path, self-esteem, challenge and lack of boredom at work, and role-modeling education for their kids.

¹ *eLearners.com is a website offered by EducationDynamics, L.L.C. which connects working moms to online education, including degree and certificate programs,*

- Many PWM participants could not have completed their education had it not been online. The flexibility in time and space that online learning offers helped to alleviate many of the barriers associated with classroom based education.
- The eLearners.com scholarship award was pivotal for almost all of the working moms in this study. The scholarship provided participants with both the motivation and financial ability to continue their education.
- Overall, the women in PWM are highly satisfied with their educational experience.
- Despite the fact that online learning offers flexibility, PWM participants still struggled with the daily challenge of juggling their work and mothering/care responsibilities with their education.
- Online learning requires self-discipline and self-direction.
- While PWM participants enjoyed the online environment, they reported that there are elements from a traditional classroom that PWM participants missed including in person social interaction.
- PWM participants worked to combat the solitary nature of online learning by studying with family members, friends, children and others.
- PWM scholarship participants felt nervous about going back to school and were conscious of being different as older learners.

The following recommendations emerged out of the report:

- Many women stated that they would benefit from being able to speak and interact with other PWM scholarship recipients. Further rounds of this program should include an online forum, along with other virtual connections (Facebook page, Twitter updates, etc) for scholarship winners.
- As PWM continues to grow, creating a PWM alumni network is important. This network would provide an opportunity to encourage peer mentoring among recipients and would help to develop a community of learners, a network for job opportunities, and other connections for the women.
- PWM recipients are working mothers and as a result it is important that the schools they are placed in continue to pursue and develop policies that respond to the need these mothers have for flexibility in their educational programming. Schools should design and utilize matriculation and continuation policies that accommodate some of the crisis that these learners experience. One example of this would be instituting open enrollment and exit policies for courses.
- Universities should reevaluate their use of team projects as an integral part of the online experience in light of the almost universal criticism of the team experiences that they offer online. This is also true in classroom learning, but seems from the data to be particularly problematic in the online environment.
- Teachers are still an important factor, even in an online learning experience. Some teachers are far more responsive and interactive than others at these

universities. One idea maybe to include a mentor for each of the students to help them navigate their learning experiences.

Section I: Overview

In 2008 eLearners.com² launched an innovative new program—Project Working Mom (PWM)—to provide working mothers in the United States an important and necessary second chance at education.

PWM’s mission is to connect working mothers with online universities and colleges. By providing education via the Internet, it is one of the few programs able to offer working mothers an opportunity to further their education in a manner that best accommodates their busy parenting schedules and work demands.

In addition to the flexibility afforded via online learning, PWM also helps reduce the financial barriers to education. This program is designed as a competitive scholarship program offering free online tuition for working mothers. The participating educational institutions include the online universities of American Sentinel, Ashford, Capella, Everest Universities, and Penn Foster College. The scholarship was first advertised on the Internet, television, and in print media, and as a result 50,000 applications were received and reviewed.³ Each applicant completed an essay of 1,500 words or less in which she stated her reasons for wanting to return to school online.

In 2008, eLearners.com contracted with Rutgers University’s Center for Women and Work, to conduct an evaluation of PWM. Twenty-nine scholarship recipients agreed to participate in the research study. While each of the 29 participants was interviewed or surveyed during the study period, they did not all respond to every survey and interview request. As a result there are varying numbers throughout the report detailing the number of participants who responded at each point in the survey. This report summarizes our findings.

² *eLearners.com is a website offered by EducationDynamics, L.L.C. which connects working moms to online education, including degree and certificate programs,*

³ The participants report learning about *eLearners.com* and *Project Working Mom* from wide variety of venues. Most learned from the Internet, mainly surfing the web at in search of educational opportunities or from chat rooms, or in one case a ‘pop up.’ Internet sites mentioned include so-called Mommy websites; MSN online; iVillage advertisements; streaming videos such as YouTube; Cheapskate.com; My Daughter’s Keeper; and assorted articles on line. Print media was also mentioned including Redbook magazine, St. Paul Pioneer Press, St. Paul, MN., and other local newspaper articles and columns [not identified] that dealt with money-saving tips. T.V. was how one mom learned of it, “Maybe I heard it on Oprah. Another stated that she saw it mentioned on ABC. Several other participants reported hearing about the program through family members or a friend forwarding emails with flyers concerning the scholarship program.

In Section II, we provide background on the importance of education and credentials for working mothers' success in the U.S. laborforce. We also discuss the role of online learning as an innovative heuristic device that has finally become an accepted form of education and training. In Section III, we describe the project, detailing the demographic composite of the participants, and our evaluation research methodology. Using our data, we then answer two pivotal questions: why the participating women came to the project with such an unusually high level of motivation and what being in the program means to them. We then report on the participants overall satisfaction with the program, along with the ways in which these working moms fit PWM into their busy lives. Section IV reports on what's working best, and where work still needs to be done in the program, including the role of the online universities. In Section V, we use the data to summarize some important outcomes of the program. Finally, in Section VI, we provide recommendations based on our findings.

Section II: Background

In the U.S. today women comprise a significant portion of the labor force. The United States Census Bureau reports that in 2009 women reached half of our nation's workforce, and this number is projected to rise in 2010 and beyond. This important moment is simultaneously occurring at a time when the U.S. economy is in a period of deep recession, with millions of Americans fighting to find or keep their jobs, and many families looking to their mothers and daughters to be the breadwinners.

While working mothers have been key players in the economy for decades, more recently they have become the veritable backbone of the economy and their families in its time of trouble. In fact 71% of all mothers in the U.S. with children less than 18 years of age are in the labor force, with a majority of these women working at full-time jobs. Their income can and does make a difference as to whether a family has financial security or is in poverty. In 2006 working wives' contribution accounted for 36% of the family income, and economists project that this percentage will grow larger.

While women's incomes are critical to two-earner homes, another 11 million working single mothers shoulder the full economic responsibility for clothing, feeding, housing and otherwise sustaining their households. Specifically 76% of single mothers with children younger than 18 years of age are working, and 82% of those women work full time. While 71% of non-working single moms are clearly living in poverty, another 13% of *working* single moms and their families face poverty daily.⁴

⁴ U.S. Dept. of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Women in the Labor Force: A Databook, 2007 edition.; Also, National Women's Law Center, "The Reality of the Workforce: Mothers Are Working Outside the Home," February, 2008.

What can be done to help working mothers advance in this economy? What can be done to help them move ahead in their jobs and careers? Often women need to continue their education in order to increase their wages. Yet, many working mothers—whether married and single—do not have the time, flexibility, or money needed to complete educational degrees and certificates that are necessary to attain and build careers that can lead to economic security.

Online Learning: An Educational Win-Win for Working Mothers in America

In the past two decades a convenient and flexible new way of learning and skills delivery has exploded on the American educational scene—online learning. Using this type of learning, anyone with a computer and an Internet connection can access courses offered by accredited institutions in an academic field of their choice.⁵

Such technical capacity gives even the busiest Americans—especially working mothers—an enormous opportunity to further their education. Getting skills training and credentials that lead to better paying and more satisfying jobs has been a major missing ingredient in many women’s lives. In addition to not having time to attend classes, most working moms do not have the money to pay for essential child care and the transportation costs involved in ‘bricks and mortar’ schooling. These costs, plus tuition, can be huge barriers to education for this population.

Helping working mothers via online learning is also a win-win for the U.S. economy. As the U.S. faces an increasingly competitive global economy, the skill potential of every American worker must be developed. A key way to increase Americans’ skill levels through post-secondary education and training. Indeed, President Barack Obama said that: “regardless of educational path after high school, all Americans should be prepared to enroll in at least one year of higher education or job training to better prepare our workforce for a 21st century economy.”⁶ These remarks reflect data showing the high correlation which exists between earnings/income and higher education, including even just one year of college education.⁷ There is also new data that shows that 72% of

⁵ A 2007 study on the nature and extent of OLL supported by the *Alfred P Sloan Foundation* found that almost 3.5 million students were taking at least one online course during the full 2006 term in some 2,500 college and universities in the U.S.; a large majority [69 percent] of academic leaders believe that student demand for online learning is still growing; virtually all [83 percent] institutions with online offerings expect their online enrollments to increase over the coming year; that two-year associate’s institutions have the highest growth rates and account for over one-half of all online enrollments for the last five years; and that the appeal of online instruction to non-traditional students is indicated by the high number of institutions which cite growth in continuing/and/or professional education as an objective for their online offerings. [Allen, I. E. and Seaman, Jeff. *Online Nation: Five Years of Growth in Online Learning*, Sloan-C, October, 2007]

⁶ www.whitehouse.gov/Issues/Education. December 11, 2009

⁷ The U.S. Census and Occupational Outlook in 2006 released numbers that show that college graduates will earn \$1 million dollars more than those with only a high school diploma; with financial gains predicted at each successive level of schooling completed, with an Associates Degree resulting in \$400K more dollars in a lifetime; and a doctoral degree showing lifetime earnings on average of 3.4 million dollars more than a high school diploma. www.census.gov/population. See also *Wall Street Journal*, 12.16.09: “Weighing the Value of that College Diploma, p. D1-2.

students who did not complete their post-secondary education stated that one of the reasons they dropped out of school was because of family commitments; and 75% of students who left post-secondary education stated that one of the reasons they had to leave school was because they needed to work full time. Another 48% of college dropouts feel that no school nearby has classes to fit their schedule.⁸ While many working adults find it hard to complete education at their local college, research shows that working mothers are at a particular disadvantage.⁹ Some of the biggest barriers they report facing are time, money, and in some cases, low educational self-esteem.

Several early research projects conducted by the Center for Women and Work have investigated online education, with its flexible and convenient universe of in-home learning. These studies suggest that online learning can offset some of these barriers for different populations of women. Our research has found that such learning has a special appeal to certain working women. It is particularly attractive to many women who found themselves mothers at a young age, and who had to drop out of high school or college. It also appeals to some non-traditional students whose past educational experiences went sour somewhere down the line and who are afraid, especially at an older age, of revisiting a classroom filled with young people. Online learning is also appealing to families with tight budgets who have little disposable income for traditional education with its accompanying commuting and child care costs.¹⁰

What we have not understood well is how online education works to help reduce these barriers women face. What does it feel like to take courses online? Is the experience different based on the individuals background? How can it best be designed? The sections below report some preliminary answers to the questions learned from Project Working Mom data.

Section III: Research Findings

PWM is a rich research project, offering insights based on a year's worth of qualitative survey and interview data into why and how working mothers are attracted to and complete online learning for advanced education.¹¹ In the pages below we

⁸ Johnson, Jean, John Rockind, Ott, Amber N. and Dupont, Samantha. With Their Whole Lives Ahead of Them: Myths and Realities As to Why So Many Students Fail to Finish College Public Agenda: California, 2009.

⁹ Gatta, Mary L., Ph.D; Not Just Getting By: The New Era of Flexible Workforce Development, Lexington Books, 2005.

¹⁰ Ibid. and McKay H. and Murphree M. Raising the Bars: Early Findings from the Prison to Community Project. 2008.

¹¹ Methodology: The participants' experiences and attitudes have been evaluated using a wide variety of social science techniques and methods. Demographic data was collected from two surveys distributed online to 29 participants studying at five online universities. Twenty-four persons responded to the first online survey distributed in the spring of 2009. Twenty-one persons responded to the second online survey distributed Fall of 2009. Note: the universities themselves did not participate in this research. All facts and opinions expressed reflect only the point of view of the participating working moms. Demographic data are supplemented with qualitative data collected from individual telephone interviews with 21 of the participants. [All 29 women did not

document who the working moms are, and what meaning the project holds for them in their lives and the lives of their families.

Who Are the Working Moms? A Summary of Demographic Data

The participants in PWM are diverse in terms of their age, family configurations, educational background, and kinds of jobs they currently hold. The sample is skewed to a white/Caucasian population; and quite unlike a large number of working moms in the general U.S. labor force since the majority are American citizens; finally, almost all of these moms are employed full-time.

The first survey data of 24 participants reveal the following: ¹²

Age: Four women participants are between the ages of 18-30; there are 13 women between age 30-45; and six women above age 45, with the oldest being 54.

Family Status: The majority of the working moms are married (N=14), eight are divorced or widowed, and one is single/never married. All of the participants have between one and four children each. Eight of the children are infants to four years old; 12 children range from 5-10 years; 18 from 11-17 years; and 16 of the children are 18 years or older.

Race/Ethnicity: Seventeen moms identify themselves as White/Caucasian population; three are Black or African American, two are Hispanic/Latino, one is identified as an American Indian/Alaskan Native, and one as Asian.

Immigrant status: Twenty-two women are United States citizens and one is not. All but one of the participants reported English as their first language.

Employment: Eighteen of the women hold full-time jobs, three are working part-time, and two are currently unemployed. The majority of the women report that they are the primary earner for their family (N=12), three report that they bring in fifty percent of the family income and eight working moms say that they are not primary earners.

The current jobs held by the participants represent a range of occupations; i.e., secretary, proofreader, office manager, diabetes counselor, shipping clerk/warehouse worker, family day care operator, human resource administrator, accounts receivable

participate in all aspects of the research and one participant formally resigned from the study.] The average telephone interview lasted from a half hour to 45 minutes. We also conducted a content analysis of all the forty-eight winning essays looking for emergent themes and representative stories.

¹² Not all of these numbers add up to 24 since on different variable not all participants responded.

clerk, insurance claims handler, preschool coordinator, healthcare coordinator. Industries represented include agriculture, government, education, health care, information technology, real estate and beauty consulting.

Education: Of the reporting 24 participants, six were high school graduates or held GEDs; ten had less than one year of college; one held an Associate's degree; two held a Bachelor's; and one had a Master's degree. Two participants stated that they had learning disabilities.

Parents' education: Ten of the participants had mothers with educational levels of one year of college or more; 13 reported that their mother's had a high-school diploma or less. Eleven of the fathers had a high-school diploma or less, two had less than a year of college; but nine had one year of college or more.

Why Did the Women Come to Project Working Mom?

Many motives drove the participants in PWM. They range from the concrete—such as access to better-paying jobs with benefits; a need for credentials, a desire for a certain type of career—to the abstract, including self-esteem, challenge and lack of boredom at work, and very importantly, role-modeling education for their kids. Yet the overall motive driving these women is their deep-seated belief in the power of education to improve their lives.

A Belief in the Power of Education

The women saw education as both a means for personal and economic fulfillment. As one respondent told us: “Education can take you on a rainbow ride.”

The PWM participants were explicit in telling us just how much education—or the lack thereof—mattered in the lives of these working moms as a goal to work toward.

“Education is one of those rare things that can change the course of someone's life.”

Almost all of the women noted in their application essays that it was the desire for more education and a real degree of some sort that drove almost all of them to apply to PWM. It is a desire for more education that seems to underlie their determination to stick with the program, and it is the hopes of getting a degree that propels their daily discipline in signing on and doing their course work.

All have an informed view of “education” as a missing factor in their lives that has seriously “held them back” in a cut-throat, competitive American economy. One mom with only her GED said simply: “A high-school diploma is almost worthless in

today's tough world." And most of the moms are stymied by their lack of higher education. The majority of this group of moms have less than a year of college, and six moms have only a high-school education. They were clearly aware of the price they have paid, as the following participants summed up for us:

"When I got out of high school, I really didn't have any desire to go on to college. I wanted get married and start a family, and that is exactly what I did. I thought I would be an at-home mom until... I was a grandmother. But I went through a divorce and had to go to work... And unfortunately, that didn't really work without an education!"

"College is really important; if I [had gone] to college, I probably would have a pretty safe career right now."

"Being educated gives you an edge... It allows you to stand out among the rest... The more education you have the more doors of opportunity will open for you."

Their reasons for not attending or finishing college were typically financial, or a product of work and family demands that got in the way. As one put it:

"Originally I wanted to be a registered nurse, and that was my goal; and that was when I was age 15, and I was set on that career, but then life happens, you know?"

Family demands also derailed women's educational progress in the past. One participant saw education by-pass her because of a sick sibling and a home situation that demanded she drop out of school:

"I have always wanted to go back to school, forever... My sister became ill when I was a sophomore in high school... I was taken out of high school at the time because I had younger siblings. My dad and I had to take care of the house... that was kinda' that... I wanted to go to college, but girls weren't encouraged to go to college... I got a job, got married and had children so I felt like I lost my opportunity."

Beyond the Abstract: Tangible Bread and Butter Motives

Most PWM participants are driven to get more education by highly practical 'bread and butter' motives. These include:

- the need for a good paying job with benefits;
- the desire for a post-secondary degree, i.e., a credential and/or certification that makes them more marketable;

- the desire for a real career path—which can provide better job and long-term economic security.

As the interviews and applications essays make clear, bread and butter issues—most importantly a good paying job—are at the forefront of their reasons for education. Many mothers speak movingly about how their immediate families are struggling financially, and how education is the only path they see to increase their earnings and financial security, especially in this time of great economic insecurity.

“My husband and I work very hard to provide for our family, but always feel we are just one step ahead of financial disaster. As we get older, we feel more and more trapped by our jobs, feeling that we cannot just up and start something new, and fear what would happen should either of us lose our jobs.”

Another noted that:

“I hope to receive a Bachelor’s degree in Accounting, and then get a better paying job that pays me more than minimum wage... .benefits and insurance, a 401k --- all of the things that I do not currently receive.”

Many articulated the importance of finding or just keeping their jobs:

“My goal... is to be a viable asset to my company. In these uncertain economic times, and my aging, I worry about my ability to keep my job or find a new one. I am hoping by...this educational path to maintain, if not increase my value as an employee.”

“In today’s economy, having a degree gives one more of a chance of obtaining and retaining employment, so I’d like to attain this degree for financial purposes, as well as personal fulfillment.”

One participant simply wants to be rid of financial anxiety and get on with her family life:

“My goal... is to have a high enough income so I not have to worry about the little things in life like my bills, and be able to concentrate on the bigger things like my son’s baseball career.”

Participants are also planning for their long-term futures. As one noted:

“My career goal... is to move on to something I feel has more of a change to still be ‘there’ in years to come.”

Participants like the one above are informed about the correlation between good paying jobs and the appropriate degrees and educational credentials;

“I don’t want to flip burgers at McDonalds; and no matter what your experience, you need a degree. Everybody wants the little letters at the end of your name.”

“I hope to earn my degree once and for all.”

“I have always worried, especially with the economy, about what I would do if I have to go back out and start all over [at another job] that I won’t be able to replace my salary because of not having my degree.”

[This education]... will help me to feel more confident when I fill out applications of various types, because, currently, I can now only check off “some college” and eventually I’ll be able to check off that I have a degree.

Many spoke of the need to become more marketable via the right credentials, both in their current companies and the job market:

“I am satisfied with my current employment but I hope that this will make me more marketable, and considering the economic climate, when the company looks at me, they [will] say: ‘Well, She is a keeper!’”

I am concerned about my ability to find other employment in this very competitive job market... As I get older, I worry that I may end up going backwards should I lose my job, because I have not completed my degree.”

“Where will this lead for me? Well, I hope to be more secure in my current position... or in my marketability, [including] if ... if positions open up in the company I work for.”

They understand how times have changed in the U.S. No longer is it that one can leave high school, find a job and then “you are pretty much set for life.” Now, as one respondent puts it: with the economy changing, “people like me aren’t getting the salaries... that those who do go to school get.” Indeed, she praises the project for seeing how women like her are “just put in a Catch- 22 type of situation.” Another participant stated:

“I commend... the idea of PWM and the great minds who got together to start this, because it all makes so much sense. Because a person like myself, who has worked all these years since high school, and... have all this experience, but [goes] for an interview and doesn’t have a certain degree on the resume, well, that automatically puts one in a certain[lesser] category.”

Others spoke about being “passed by” at work because they did not have the right educational credentials:

“I began to notice limitations that resulted from my lack of education. I was unable to perform seemingly simple tasks due to regulations and restrictions. For example, if for any reason the librarian was unable to attend to her duties, such as reading to a group of first graders, I could not pick up a book and read to that group.”

“Not having the college education has always prevented me from going to the next step with my job... I just couldn’t; I was too restricted; I can’t be in the planning process.”

“At my job there are engineers that design irrigation systems and I kind of... talked to my boss a little bit about it because it was something I was interested in doing and he talked to me about [and said] ‘you know you need a minimum of an associate’s degree to get into that position’.”

One student, a home entrepreneur, spoke about how her learning online could enhance her business and “mak[e] my clients feel more confident in me and my skills.”

“I have been doing this work without a degree, and maybe [getting the degree] will push business a little farther and maybe I will get bigger clients.”

While these moms were keen on developing dependable careers with decent benefits and job security, many moms wanted to enter fields, with tangible career ladders where they could advance.

“I hope to get my associates degree in Civil Engineering to advance my career with NRCS. I want to change fields from administrative to technical to hopefully make a better living for my family”

“[This education]... will help me to advance in my personal and professional career. I will have accredited documentation to prove that I am capable of being successful in the arena that I choose to be in. I will be able to increase my income due to my years of work experience AND have a degree to go along with it. Also, it will help me apply for positions that were once closed to me for not having a degree.

“My goal is to have doors open for me. For example, there were positions in my field that required a degree, which I currently do not have. Once I obtain my degree, more employment opportunities will open.”

Data on their actual career aspirations are revealing as well. Most are aiming for degrees leading to higher level jobs in growth or high-demand occupations, i.e., jobs such as nurse, health care administrator, medical assistant, physical therapist, early childhood educator, graphic designer, and civil engineer.

Many of these occupations have very specific career ladders, especially in health care, and of course depend heavily on credentials. Most also are occupations in fields associated with—though not guaranteed to have—fairly good benefits.

One of the scholarship winners, however, spoke touchingly on another aspect of education. She was seeking higher education and a new career path because of her exhaustion, performing a very physically demanding job at an older age. She wanted to find careers that utilize her brain rather than her brawn.

“It is a very tough job market right now. Without further education, I see no way out of my dead-end employment options, and envision myself pushing my body to its physical limits until retirement age.”

While financial issues were usually mentioned first, the working moms also offered subjective and psychological motives in explaining their determination and the source of their discipline to succeed in PWM. These motives included:

- a need to improve their self-esteem through education
- a desire to do work in which they are psychologically invested
- their perception that this is a unique opportunity to do something for themselves
- a wish to be a role-model for their kids by modeling education as a goal

Self-Esteem: “Look What I Did, Look What I Can Do!”

The cry that one working mom wants to share with her kids—Look What I Did: Look What I Can Do!—sums up many PWM women’s sentiments about the relationship between hard work, getting more education and improving their self-esteem. It is a powerful theme running through the qualitative data.

The women first mentioned their need for greater self-esteem in the essays submitted to the competition:

“More than anything [education] will improve my self esteem. I will feel more equality among my peers.”

“With education I will be able to hold my head up high with pride knowing I graduated!”

The joy and power of building self-esteem and self-confidence through education was evidenced in the interviews:

“My confidence has sky-rocketed. I just can’t wait to have a real degree and be a career woman and a mom.”

“I was taught as a young child by my mother that knowledge is something that is taught to you and can never be taken away. What you know dictates how much achievement you will have in society... You may see a lot of things along the way, you may even take a pause here and there, but remember: the pot of gold is at the end of the rainbow. And that is where you want to strive to be. The gold is the reward for all your hard work. So don’t stop until you reach the end.”

“Education... is great for my confidence as a woman. I have noticed that my understanding and knowledge of current events has blossomed.”

Many referred to moments in their lives when they were in a social situation or work situation in which not having gone to college was hurtful to them. As one woman now studying for a health field job said:

“I felt very ashamed at not having graduated high school, and it was always one of those questions that I shied away from when everyone was talking about high school and graduations. I never wanted to say I didn’t and I really didn’t admit that to anyone. Now, I actually feel good about [all of it] since I am in college!”

Some connected their growing self-esteem directly to achieving the degree they were pursuing here:

“What do I hope to get out of the program? Self-esteem! Having a degree will feel good. While I am really fortunate and God has blessed me with a fair amount of intelligence, I am around all of these people with degrees. All I did was go to high school and I only went for the social scene. So to get a degree and know that I worked hard for it, that [the degree] has validity that means something to me.”

One working mom said simply:

“I want to be able to ‘call myself something’ in life.”

A few women spoke about seeking education and better jobs because they are bored with their current, less intellectually-demanding low wage jobs, and seek “a challenge.”

“I applied for a scholarship... because I felt that it would challenge me. I have been at my present job for over 10 years, and you get kind of comfortable. I knew this would challenge me to learn new things.”

Others simply reported that they wanted to work at a job that they enjoyed. .

“What do I hope to accomplish through the program: Not just a new job[but] a career- something I enjoy doing every day... a job where I can wake up in the morning with a grin on my face because I know I’m working at a great place.”

As one respondent in the survey wrote:

“[This] will provide a broader choice of career option for me. I just might be able to CHOOSE something I’ll like to stick with instead of something I am stuck with!”

Many mothers, in particular those who are now well entrenched in the program, explained their deep commitment to their school work: this educational experience has been the first time in years, or ever, that many of these moms had been able to focus on doing something for themselves.

“This program is working great for me... life is full of choices: make the right one, do something for yourself for a change!”

Completing an education, building their confidence, improving their odds in the labor force, after many years of doing without a degree, is their gift to themselves. If most seem to have once “blown school off” or “given up ever going back to school” because of childbirth or financial necessity, they now feel the scholarship has given them an opportunity to “get back on track” and take advantage of a ‘second chance.’

Walking the Talk: The Importance of Modeling Education for Children

Finally, and this was articulated by almost all of the participating moms, their drive and determination to enter and do well in their online education was born not just by their desire for financial security for their children, but equally by the working moms’ desire to be an educational role-model to their children .

“I need to be a role model for my children; to have them see I am pushing ahead with my own education — because I am always stressing the importance of education to them. [I want them] to grow up and model good behavior through studying and participating in their education.”

"I want to show my kids that... going to college is possible. I want them to go to college and I want to set a good example for them. We push them their whole life to get good grades... I [want] to show them that you go through hard times, you have to buck up, and college is really important."

Many speak of the opportunity provided by the scholarship as something that affects all their family positively¹³:

"It is a phenomenal life event for us. I say this because it really has affected my whole family... One of my kids is in school and one is not and it's like: 'if I can do it, then you can too.'"

One mom, who has done rather well in the work force but has never had a degree, had another take on role-modeling:

"I want to provide a good example to my daughter. Be a role model for her, so she will go out and get what she wants from this world... just keep going!"

Another mom, working on her studies almost 20 hours a week, said that her decision to learn online was driven significantly by her role as a parent. Her two daughters are in high school and she wants them someday to be able to say: "Hey, you know my mom did it when she was 40 and I can do it whenever." She wants them to go on to college, and believes the importance she attaches to her schooling they "inevitably see."

Another even wants to model behavior for her grandchildren:

"Because I never went past the high school level, I felt it hard to encourage my children to continue their education. I now feel like a role model to not only my children but my grandchildren. I may not live to see my grandchildren graduate from college, but I know that they will at least [know] that it is possible."

Participants spoke of the support and enthusiasm they were receiving from their families. Families and friends were cited as offering encouragement to apply for the scholarship; and encouragement to get help the women get their school work done:

"It has been well-known to all of my children and my husband that [not getting a college education] is something I have regretted my whole life. They always wanted it for me, yes. They encouraged me to do [PWM] and they have been, all of them—I have four children—an incredible support system. "

¹³ Not once, in fact, did we hear about resentful family members. There are other populations we have studied, including very low income TANF moms, where women's efforts to advances in education can be sabotaged by husbands or boyfriends. This was never reported with these working moms.

“My fiancé [has] helped me... He really encouraged me. He helped me edit my essay for grammar. He really stood behind me 100%. He has his Masters and he has never considered me any less educated than him even though I have no degree.”

“When I had won the scholarship, [my daughters and son] were so excited for me. It made it a little more special; you know, that they were involved and they knew what was going on... They are just so proud that this is happening to me.”

One mother, with two children, who was concerned that her studies would take time away from her kids, happily reflected that this was not the case:

“I don’t feel it has taken anymore time away from them. In a sense I feel that maybe it has made me a little bit more of a ‘fun mom’ because it is kind of cool that I go to school when they go to school.”

“I have always been involved in my kid’s lives, but [now] I just do a lot more things, even as far recreation and things like that. Going to school is just sort of bringing out the kid in me... it has only been positive for me as far as being a mom.”

One laughed about being in a store with her children and finding a sweatshirt in a store that says: YOUR MOM GOES TO COLLEGE.

“I mean my kids think it is the funniest thing. I have 3 kids, 2 of college age, and their mom is in college!”

One learner cited the support that she received from her family and friends as “the best” and most important part of going back to school, especially her family’s support in ‘keeping her on target’ with the work, and honoring her commitment to the process:

“The best experience that I have had is the support from my family and friends for my going to school online... Making sure I am doing my best to meet my deadlines, checking in with me—‘are you caught up on your homework’ and things like that.. Having that support is, I would say, mandatory.”

It is worth noting that some of the participants’ own parents, while not highly educated, still had slightly more education than the participants themselves. In many cases their parents’ higher educational level in contrast to their own was a motivator. One woman seeking a high-tech degree, whose family had suffered bankruptcy, seems almost haunted by her mother who was a ‘career woman.’ While our participant has mainly held down lower level jobs of one type or another most of her life, she returned time and again to the fact:

“I never had a career... I never went to college... and I really wish I would have because I have always wanted a career—after seeing my mom have such a great career, and she worked until she was 78.”

Motivation in and of itself, however, is not enough to produce a degree. The essays, surveys, and personal interviews all emphasize that the PWM design goes straight to the heart of making education work for this population of working women. The project design succeeds here because it engages working mothers in education through 1) its flexibility and convenience and 2) by the financial assistance it offers via the scholarship.

Beyond Motivation: The Importance of Flexible Online Education

In order for education to succeed for America’s busiest citizens—working mothers—it must be flexible. Investigating the mothers’ motives for applying for the program demonstrates the importance of flexibility in time and space that online learning offers.

“My decision to be an e-Learner was the choice for me; it was so convenient.”

“If I had to go somewhere to go to school, I would not be doing this. So that is a definite plus for me.”

Many learners are clear that the decision to enter PWM was driven by the importance they attach to being an “available” parent to their kids:

“If I were to try to go to night school, which I looked into, I had to be there from 6 to 10 p.m. every Tuesday. Well you can have a crisis [at home, but with online] I can do what I need to do today: I can work; I can take my kid to dinner because he is getting an award at school, and then I can go [online] to school at 10 at night... Because I am not on a rigid timeframe, the possibilities of being an online student are unbelievable.”

“I mean honestly: it is just helping me to achieve my goals and my dreams. It is flexible and works into my schedule. I can take my classes when I have time to do so. [That changes on a daily basis for me.] It really works around my job; it really works around my life as a parent. I like to spend time with my daughter. I guess it really is the fit for me. It is the only way I can get the education that I want at this stage of my life.”

“I am a mom, so I need to keep tabs on everybody. I have teenagers now... I have a family and I run a business, and it is just chaos!”

Another spoke of the flexibility online learning offered her vis-à-vis transportation:

“Even though my children are older, I am working full-time. Trying to make it to the nearest college or university would take me at least a 30 minute drive to my classes and at least a 30 minute drive home. [With online] I can pretty much do it whenever I am able to.”

One mother with bi-polar disorder and a son with a severe mental disorder spoke of online education’s convenience vis-à-vis managing their medications and safety:

“There is no other way I could have [gone to school.] There are community colleges here that would let you go to school at night, but I couldn’t leave my son at home at night. ... and a lot of my functioning is taken with the medications [needed] everyday for bipolar people.”

Beyond Motivation: The Importance of the Scholarship

The tremendous motivation that these working moms exhibit demonstrate that destiny is not enough to move them toward a college degree. Neither is simply having a computer at home to take online classes. Many working mothers also need financial backing to get started, and the PWM scholarship was pivotal for almost all of the working moms in our study.

Data on twenty four PWM participants point to the important role that “being chosen for the scholarship” has played in their motivation and in their financial ability to continue their education. Most were very clear that their families’ current financial situation was extremely tight—so tight with little, if any, disposable income, that affording online classes, much less traditional college, was not an option before the PWM scholarship came into their lives.

As one accounting student eloquently put it:

“Having the opportunity as a working adult to go to school and not pay for it, it is unbelievable. I cried. I literally cried because things like that don’t happen to me. I don’t win big scholarships and get to go to school ... We joke: ‘we don’t have bad luck in our family; we have no luck’. So... as an older working parent, this is life changing for us, not only for me but for my family and my kids.”

Others said:

“[M]oney is one of the things that [has] prevented me from going back to school until now.”

“I get to go to school [now] and it’s not costing me anything. Because [before this] I was really kind of [having to decide between] \$100 textbook or feeding the family? Working class people [like me]... they make tough choices every day.”

“[The] expense of going back to school..has always been a road block for me. That is why having this scholarship is just such a wonderful thing.”

“I have been thinking about going back to school for about 15 years, and it has moved to the front of my mind maybe in the last three or four years. My biggest obstacle was that I just didn’t have any money.”

For several of the women the current economic recession has only made things more difficult. One family was in the process of a home foreclosure and several referred to job losses and layoffs in their immediate family. Almost all were in low-wage jobs with little benefits. [While the majority of these moms are working full time, many were in growth service industries and felt that they were likely to keep their jobs.]¹⁴

It is many of these same women, however, who earn low wages, and who felt that their lack of education would prevent them from access to better paying jobs with health and other benefits and financial security.

“We are in our third month of no benefits, no nothing. You quit taking medications; you quit doing things. You quit going to the doctor... And I was the only one in the house supporting all these people... and working 10 plus hour days [where] we don’t leave for a lunch break. ... So it is time for a new change, time for me to get a degree and go back to school so I [can] work in a business where there are some benefits and something to help support my family.”

And, certainly, as several pointed out to us, full tuition scholarships are clearly in short supply.

Indeed only a few participants would have been able to sign up for this online college work without the Project Working Mom scholarship. Those who might have gone back to school anyhow spoke of how much more difficult it would be.

“Without the scholarship it would have been much harder and it would have put a much larger stress on our family financially to achieve my dreams. It would probably take me a lot longer to do so as well.”

¹⁴ Two of the participants are not employed at all and are particularly strapped for money; and three are working part-time.

Finally, just as many of the working moms report that the competition for a scholarship was the motivating factor which led them early on to take the time to draft, perfect, and submit their essay, the data show that now, a full year into the program, ‘winning’ the scholarship has become a motivating force in their commitment to do well and finish their online coursework. The second survey and later interviews are full of adjectives like “happy,” “honored,” “proud,” “privileged,” “grateful,” “thrilled,” when the women describe what it feels like to be part of the program.

Many say things such as: *“I feel connected to a new community;”* and *“I feel like I am part of something monumental,”* Others say: *“I only wish I had known about it sooner.”* *“I think it is a wonderful program.”* *“I am just still floored by what a wonderful opportunity this is. “ It is so awesome, and I feel so blessed.”*

Perhaps one sentence from an interview sums it up the best:

“I am extremely proud to be a part of the Project Working Mom family, and will do my best to make them proud to have awarded me a scholarship.”

These are quite positive statements, especially coming almost a year into the program. To understand them better, we now turn to such questions as: How are these busy moms fitting their online commitments into their lives? Beyond the opportunity offered them here, how is the program being experienced by the participants’ day in and day out?

Section IV: How are the Project Working Mom scholarship recipients doing?

Overall, the women in PWM are highly satisfied with their educational experience. When asked about their level of satisfaction with their educational program the majority of women [N=12] stated that they were very satisfied, four said that they were satisfied, two were neutral and three were very dissatisfied. Some women expressed their satisfaction in interview data stating:

“I am very happy overall.”

“This program is working great for me. I feel if anyone has any doubts about going back to school they should try [this] program...”

Although, the women are studying at different universities and are enrolled in different kinds of coursework the class structure is similar across the group. For the most part the

courses involve some combination of group work, online discussions and online lectures and presentations. As one learner stated:

"I mean every unit has a lecture, a homework assignment, a discussion assignment and a test. Every single unit..."

The women self identify with a variety of different learning styles. Some described themselves as "solitary learners" others stated that the "learn best in groups" or "in discussion" and still others stated that they learned best via technology. These different learning styles have meant that the women are adapting their online learning experience to work best within their skill base and are utilizing the different available features of their online experience to compliment their own learning style.

What does online learning look like for Project Working Mom women?

Even though the PWM educational experience is offered in a flexible online environment, the women in the program have still worked hard to fit their educational experience into their very busy lives. These women are faced with the daily challenge of juggling their work and mothering/care responsibilities with their education. This is an on-going challenge in the lives of the women and their efforts are a testament to their dedication to their education. While each woman finds her own way to fit education into her life, some patterns did emerge.

Almost all women stated that they worked their studying around their mothering responsibilities. For example, as four women told us:

"[I study] in the evenings, at my desk, after the kids are in bed"

"I usually study after my children are in bed for the night"

"I usually study alone, at night after my daughter goes to bed."

"I have to balance my studies either when my husband is home or my little one is off to bed"

Others discussed how they fit studying in their work lives.

"I study mostly at work when I have time. I try to read commuting to and from work and I try to study at home but it is limited... I have a two year old toddler who constantly demands my attention."

“During breaks at work is a great time for me to study. There are one or two times a week where I am taking over for the receptionist and I take my books up there being that it is not a busy spot in the office.”

Several clearly found the flexibility of online learning critical as it allowed them to fit their studying in when they had a spare moment:

“I study whenever I get a free moment. I can log on from the office whenever I have a few minutes, during my lunch hour, at home any time I want to...”

“[I study] in my car while waiting for a client to grocery shop, at night on my job when I have down time at 4 A.M. when I can’t sleep, after church on Sundays when my spirits are lifted..”

“I study every chance I get, on my breaks and lunch hour at work, as soon as I get home from work, rights after the kids have gone to bed, every night, every weekend.”

Despite the fact that online learning offers flexibility in time and space, it is clear that the PWM women worked hard to fit their study schedules into their already hectic work and family lives. While it was a struggle, the women made a concerted effort to incorporate education into their daily regimes, with many women reporting studying at least three hours a day.

For instance, one learner talked about her study time:

“... even an hour a day is a lot and that gets you to your goal! You just feel good about yourself and even if you put in a few minutes you are still doing something to further your education and your career and for your family and all of that.”

Another discussed balancing studying with her role as a mother.

“I am on the computer at least 3 hours a night, at least. So I get home from work, quick what are we eating for dinner. I start dinner and I go right to the computer and I check on my courses. I am making dinner and I am back and forth to the computer and dinner. Dinner is over and the dishes will sit there and whatever and I get back on the computer at the same time you are doing laundry or helping with homeworkand try to be a [good] person to your family.”

Of course, there are only a limited number of hours in a day, so sometimes choices had to be made, and as this one woman told us:

“We didn’t put up any Halloween decorations because I didn’t have time”

The women also talked about the motivation required to be an online learner. Self-discipline and self-direction were described as being essential components of online learning. The women in PWM self-selected to be online learners for a variety of reasons, but still worked hard at keeping their motivation levels high in order to complete their work.

“You have to be really motivated, you have to be able to figure things out on your own and [be] diligent about reading your books because you don’t have someone saying this is due on Thursday.”

“You have to be dedicated; you have to be self-studied...”

“... not everybody can do it. You have to be diligent...”

“... you really have to apply yourself [as an adult student] because you have so many things going on in your world. Everywhere we go, if I pick up my kids from school, I have a text book with me and I am reading... nobody is going to care if I get an A or a B, but I do and if I can work my butt off and get that A, that means something to me.”

Despite the fact that online learning required self-motivation, many women felt that it was the only way in which they could have gone back to school.

“For working parents online is awesome... It is really awesome because there is no way I could be in a building... I would guess the homework would be the same, but you are adding in that extra travel time and that extra sitting in lectures time.”

Another learner, with a disabled son, stated that she could not attend classroom based education because she could not leave her son:

“Where with this, I can sit in my living room and study; I can sit in the kitchen, I can do up in my room... and I can spend time with [my son] and go right back to studying.”

Others discussed how the online platform was helpful to them as learners. Some stated that they were shy or had previously had a bad classroom experience and online learning allowed them to participate in a way they had never been able to before.

“I’m an introverted person, so being able to read the lectures and participate in the discussion without actually being in the classroom works very well for me.”

For the most part the women felt that online learning offered them the advantage of flexibility in education but some also remarked that there were elements that they missed from the in-person classroom experience. Many of the women found it difficult

that they did not have the social interaction of a traditional classroom. They enjoyed the online discussion with their classmates and appreciated the fact that others taking the course were from all over the country, but they still missed the in-person interaction with other students.

“Not... getting to know people face-to-face. That is kind of difficult... it is hard when you only know people through online interaction.”

“Sometimes I wonder if, like the only thing I miss sometimes is maybe having other people to confer with. Like if you are in... a room and you can kind of talk to other classmates about certain things...”

Not having in-person interactions with classmates led many of the women to turn to others in their lives for support in their learning. In fact many of the participants talked about finding a local “study buddy,” many of whom had children who filled this role. This relationship seems to be a very important one to combat the solitary nature of online learning and provides positive reinforcement.

“I study whenever I have a free hour, usually alone or with a willing party.”

“My study partner is often my two-year old.”

Some even stated that their “study buddy” acted as a sounding board for different ideas and discussion.

“When I finish a section I usually discuss it with my son before I take the test.”

“I will discuss what I am studying with my co-workers to get verbal feedback and also different points of view.”

By studying with children and other family members, the women found themselves acting as a role model for their children and a facilitator of family learning.

“[I study] at home with my daughter who is on the computer while I’m on my laptop, she likes to study when I’m in class its great and actually calming. It has motivated her to want to learn by watching me study.”

“I usually do my work while my children are doing their school work, it is sort of like family time.”

“Sometimes I do my homework with my children, because we encourage each other.”

While the experience of online learning has generally been a positive for most PWM recipients there were times when learners discussed feeling nervous about going back to school. They talked about having problems with getting back into the rhythm of learning; anxiety as a 'returning' learner generally; and some special issues of fitting in as an older learner.

As two learners stated:

"The worst part of it has been me getting myself back into the swing of studying and being back in school again... but I finally got myself into a good swing. It took me awhile but I plan on my future semesters taking less time because now I do have a rhythm and a swing that I didn't have in the beginning."

"The worst is the fear of exams, the proctor exams, just because it has been so long. You sit in front of a paper with, you know and you are like, ah, time limit. That is the scariest part"

"... a little nervous. It was the fear of the unknown. I felt like a kid, it was the fear of the unknown. For an older working adult, it is almost the fear that you don't want your classmates to know how old you are because they are talking about 'I'm 21 and I work at Best Buy and I went to the movies last night.'

A few women also talked about the new experience of online learning, and the process of "adjusting" to this type of education.

"It has been over 30 years since formal education. Learning online is something I am still trying to adjust to, however, it is very convenient for my life"

"I have struggled with the tech-based learning, but I think I am improving."

Many of the women in the program felt that their life experience and age made them better learners. Some even felt that their age gave them an "edge" on younger learners.

"... the whole math thing. It is more comfortable to me at my age."

What is working in Project Working Mom?

For the most part, the majority of the participants are happy with their online educational experience. Participants were asked a variety of questions to gauge their happiness. A number of these questions focused on their experience at their different schools. For the most part, schools were responsive to students' needs and provided assistance and information in a timely manner.

As one learner stated:

“Everyone I have spoken to has been very helpful. Whenever I had a question or emailed them they have gotten right back to me.”

Learners also seem happy with some of services available to them from the universities.

“I have had a couple of occasions to calls student services with questions and they were extremely helpful.”

They were also pleased with the available technical support.

“The technical support is available 24/7. I have used it several times and they have always been of help to me.”

“Great service, they are there 24/7 helping you and guiding you through your problems. The good thing about it is it’s an actual person and not an animated recording”

For the most part students were also happy with the feedback from teachers they received.

As two learners said:

“One thing I really love is that whenever you pass an exam, they send you these great little emails with these really encouraging quotes and they are saying great job, we know you can do it. It is really encouraging and it is a great little perk... and it keeps you going and it makes you want to keep going... I actually have them all saved. I read them all again and I think that is wonderful.”

“I guess [the best aspect of the program would be] the feedback from the teachers... I really enjoyed the feedback from the teachers, the encouragement, that kind of thing.”

When asked if they would refer others to their program almost all of the students said yes.

“Yes, as a matter of fact [I referred] my sister, her job is encouraging her to go ahead and further her education and I recommended this school to her.”

“Yes in fact I have [recommended] this program to many of my friends and family, actually clients too”

Interestingly, even some of those who stated that they were dissatisfied with the program overall stated that they would refer people to online learning.

“As a working parent I would. It is really the only way to further your education.”

Learners commented on their “favorite” aspects of the coursework and for the most part people stated that they like the online discussion forums. Learners felt that they got the most out of this portion of the courses and that this course component was done very well.

“but [university name] does an amazing job utilizing all the features available in an online program. They make really good use of the discussion forum. Their use of presentations is very helpful. Just the way the courses are laid out, I think they make optimum use of the online environment.”

“I love the discussion groups, because you get a chance to get different perspectives and views on different subjects. It is really cool.

“[My favorite part] are online discussion groups. I get the opportunity to express my thoughts at any time of day.”

“I was a little nervous at first and especially the part about the discussion boards and things like that... that became a non-issue right away. You know I just jumped right in and I look forward to the discussions.”

Other learners stated that they liked the presentation portion of their classes the best.

“Reading PowerPoint presentations is a nice addition, especially when it teaches you something [new] and just doesn’t repeat what you have read in the text books.”

Learners also commented on the difficulty of the coursework, of those who responded to the question, two felt the coursework was very difficult: six stated that it was difficult: eight felt it was somewhat difficult: three were neutral: one felt it was somewhat easy and one felt it was easy.

As one learner stated:

“I have my Masters degree in social work which I got at a traditional university and this is much more challenging. I think I learned more in this class, because in a regular classroom you go in and there is discussion and then you can make some key comment and nobody is going to check your references... [with online learning] you better know what you are talking about because somebody is going to read it and take

it apart. I think it is more challenging and I think I have learned more because of the online environment.”

The women also felt the accommodations made for working adults by the schools were an important feature of the program. The women talked about problems arising in their lives and many had very good experiences with the schools. As one learner stated:

“Two terms ago my husband, it was at the end of the term and my husband had emergency gall bladder surgery and I wrote to my professors and they were so accommodating and the school was so accommodating. They were willing to extend the course for 10 weeks. It is a 10 week course...they were just like, they didn’t question, they just said ‘No problem, you take care of yourself, you take care of your life and you get back to us when you get back to us and we will arrange when things are due.’ They were great.”

What is not working in Project Working Mom?

Although the women were generally happy with the program, there were some aspects with which they were unhappy. There were also a few learners who were dissatisfied with their learning experience overall. Much of the general dissatisfaction that was expressed was focused on a few aspects of the online learning programs. Interestingly, the bulk of the dissatisfaction was based on teaching pedagogy, with student complaints quite similar to students attending in-person colleges. One of the most common concerns from students was that some teachers were unresponsive.

“... like life, some instructors are better than others. Some instructors get back to you right away, some are a little slower and some do not reply to you at all. I have one current instructor that I have sent two emails to this week and even though his class notes say that he will usually get back to you in 24 hours, that does not happen.”

Similar to in person classes, learners also state that in-class interaction varied with teachers.

“Contact varies from class to class. I have had a couple of classes where there has been very little instruction or interaction in the discussion forums by the instructor. This can be very frustrating as a student because you basically feel you are teaching yourself. For the most part the instructors are interactive and provide additional materials to assure student success.”

“The worst experience—I had one teacher and it took him a month to email me back with one question. And you know, it is like my question was about homework that was [due] in three weeks ago.

The data shows that, like all classroom experiences, the quality of the teacher matters. Interactivity with students is important to student success and happiness, as is answering questions in a timely manner.

Students were also vocal in their views of online group work. In fact, learners commented that the online group projects were not designed effectively:

“... the team projects. Oh they are so bogus.”

“I think schools do it [group work] so you do meet your classmates and build up some sort of relationship. At online school that is never going to happen. We are not going to take the class again next quarter and sit next to each other and share notes. That is just not going to happen. We are not going to build relationships by doing team projects, you just kind of get animosity and angry.”

Many students reported that the need to depend on others to complete their work was difficult. While also true in in-person classes, online learners commented that group work was made more difficult since they did not build personal relationships with their classmates online, which they felt could better ensure that group work would be completed well and on time.

“My finance class, I think last quarter. There were 16 projects and I had to do four of them. It is 11:00 P.M. and the person... says, ‘Yeah I will take care of it’ and doesn’t do it... If I am going to have a project I want it to be my project... Team projects have got to be over!”

“The teamwork is the most frustrating thing... people don’t show up... It is frustrating because we are all adults, we are not in middle school and supposedly everyone is either paying for their class or are like me and received something pretty valuable and they are not taking advantage.”

Some learners were also disappointed by the quality of their classmates. As one learner stated:

“Well I am really surprised at the caliber of student. I would have thought you would have had to pass some kinds of admissions test or submit some kind of documentation that you would be able to take a college class, because a lot of what we do is written and it is all written in front of each other, and I mean there are people in the class that hardly write proper English. So you sit there and wonder is the degree I am getting a valid degree?”

Section V: Preliminary Outcomes

Outcomes for this group of PWM Scholarship recipients cannot be fully determined based on the amount of time that we have followed them. All of the scholarship winners are still completing coursework and have not yet finished their degrees or certifications. Despite this, some preliminary outcomes have emerged that are worth discussing.

One such outcome is grades. As has been stated, the universities did not participate in this study so grades were self-reported by the women themselves. Twenty of the women participating in the study shared information about their grades with us. Overall the grades the learners are receiving seem to be very good. Most of these women stated that they were receiving either A's or A's and B's. One woman stated that she had received some C's.

Another outcome is improvement in jobs. While we cannot make a direct correlation between job improvement and the educational programming the women are receiving, some of the women have stated that their educational attainment has led to a better job.

"They just offered me a position and I am starting the first year in my chosen field accounting."

Others have stated that the education they have received has helped them to do their current job "better".

"... I am doing better in my original job."

Increased self-efficacy is also an apparent result of this educational experience. One learner talked about how her online learning experience has made her more confident in her job.

"... when I am out and about with other business owners, because we own a business, I feel more confident in my speech and I feel like I am increasing my learning and my knowledge in the business world and it is really related to the studies I am doing... My husband even noticed. He was like, 'you are just speaking so well,' and it's like, it is amazing and it is a great confidence boost, a really great confidence boost."

Not only do the women report increased self-efficacy, but they have also begun to see themselves as life-long learners. In many of the early essays and interviews participants did not identify as students and learners, but in later essays they saw themselves in this way. Many even stated that they would like to go on to further their education. As three participants stated:

"[I have] obtained lifelong learning skills such as: analytical thinking, problem solving, planning and decision making."

"I definitely see myself taking classes beyond [this degree]."

"I want to learn Spanish..."

Another participant talked about how learning had become fun:

"... I definitely want to continue and I kind of want to keep continuing. It is just really, it is a lot of fun..."

These comments show a change for many of the women. Their educational goals have shifted from simply being a short-term goal of acquiring a degree to long-term goals. For instance, many of the women seeking their Associate's degree have stated that they now have a desire to get a Bachelor's degree. Women are now beginning to imagine and work towards a career path and their broader dreams.

"I would like to be a writer... non-fiction medical articles."

"I want to be a probation officer... and work with juvenile offenders."

"I would like to open my own daycare."

Many of the women have also started to show an interest in career paths rather than just a good job. The focus in many of the essays and first interviews was the acquisition of a good job. Later interviews show that the women are beginning to be interested in a career.

Women have also shifted their focus over the year to wanting to achieve their degree not just for their children but for themselves. In the original essays much of the impetus for getting their degree was to be a role model for their children or make a new life for their family. In more recent interviews, the women expressed that they were also getting this education to fulfill personal goals, and for their own self improvement. The women have also developed a love of learning.

"I simply love to learn."

"I can't even describe how much I have learned in the past year. It has been amazing."

Another outcome is that everyone in this group has expressed the intent to finish their degree. They all speak about their dedication to the program and to their studies.

“So I am doing 2 classes so I might as well do 3 and keep up that time frame because I should have my Associate’s degree by next July. That is all because of dedication.”

“This degree will give me opportunities I never had before. Doors that were once closed are now beginning to open for me. Now I have a different perspective on life. I will achieve my goal and I have Project Working Mom to thank for that.”

Other women have talked about how being a part of PWM has made them a better mother.

“I kind of feel like it has made me a little bit more of a ‘fun mom’ because to me it is kind of cool that I go school when they go to school. I just kind of noticed that...I have always been involved in their lives, but I just do a lot more things. Even as far as recreation and things like that. It is just sort of bringing out the kid in me. I don’t know why, but it has only been positive for me as far as being a mom.”

“This education has improved my life greatly. I have been able to help my teens with their homework... My confidence is up and I feel smart.”

Still others have talked about their education making them more aware of the larger world.

“I have noticed that my knowledge of current events has blossomed.”

“This education is making me more aware of what is going on around me. Education enables you to think and reason so that you form your own opinions and no one can take advantage of you or tell you what you should be thinking.”

Overall the PWM experience has been a good one for the women involved. For the most part the women are happy with their educational experience and delighted to have had this opportunity. In general the women are also happy with the educational institutions they are attending. Some recommendations for improving the program have been suggested below. Additionally, there are further research questions to be explored. It would be interesting to study this group longitudinally to see how the degrees they are working towards influence their attainment of jobs post-degree and if these women go on to get further education.

Section VI: Recommendations for Project Working Mom

1. Many women stated that they would benefit being able to speak and interact with other PWM scholarship recipients. Further rounds of this program should include an online forum, along with other virtual connections (Facebook page, Twitter updates, etc.) for scholarship winners.
2. As PWM continues to grow we suggest creating a PWM alumni network. This network would provide an opportunity to encourage peer mentoring among recipients and would help to develop a community of learners, a network for job opportunities, and other connections for the women.
3. PWM recipients are working mothers and as a result it is important that the schools they are placed in continue to pursue and develop policies that respond to the need these mothers have for flexibility in their educational programming. Schools should design and utilize matriculation and continuation policies that accommodate some of the crisis that these learners experience. One example of this would be instituting open enrollment and exit policies for courses.
4. Universities should reevaluate their use of team projects as an integral part of the online experience in light of the almost universal criticism of the team experiences that they offer online. This criticism also appears in classroom learning, but it seems from the data to be particularly problematic in the online environment.
5. Teachers are still an important factor, even in an online learning experience. Some teachers are far more responsive and interactive than others at these universities. One idea maybe to include a mentor for each of the students to help them navigate their learning experiences.