

# Committed to yourself or have yourself committed: Balancing family life with student success

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Contemporary student demographics in institutions of higher learning include the mature female student. Preparing to enter an academic setting after an extended absence or for the first time can create personal role conflicts for this student cohort. The purpose of this study was to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the family-life roles, student experiences, and different coping mechanisms of mature female dental hygiene students in order to better enable and support individual student success. **Methods:** This study employed a mixed methods explanatory approach whereby quantitative data were obtained from mature female dental hygiene students (N = 12) via a 10-item questionnaire comprising both closed- and open-ended questions. Closed-ended questions were summarized using descriptive statistics. Open-ended questions were examined for common themes. Additional qualitative data were obtained through personal in-depth interviews examining supplementary common themes. **Results:** "Mothering" was identified as the primary family role both prior to and during school enrolment. All participants identified "time" as the greatest challenge and role conflict as being self-imposed. The prime benefit reported was increased self-confidence. The educational system offered the least amount of support according to respondents. **Conclusions:** The mature female student requires support when returning to higher education—from herself, family, and the academic setting. Institutions of higher education should be cognizant of specific characteristics, barriers, and challenges any student encounters to help facilitate student success.

## RÉSUMÉ

**Contexte :** Selon les statistiques démographiques des établissements d'études post-secondaires, les femmes adultes figurent couramment au sein de la population étudiante. Le retour aux études après une absence prolongée ou pour la première fois peut entraîner des conflits de rôle au sein de la famille. La présente étude a pour but d'examiner les expériences de vie familiale et de vie étudiante des étudiantes adultes en hygiène dentaire, ainsi que les mécanismes utilisés pour surmonter les conflits de rôle afin de favoriser et de soutenir la réussite scolaire individuelle. **Méthodologie :** Approche explicative selon laquelle des données quantitatives ont été obtenues des étudiantes adultes en hygiène dentaire (N = 12), grâce à des questionnaires en 10 points comprenant des questions ouvertes et fermées. Les questions fermées étaient résumées à l'aide de statistiques descriptives. Les questions ouvertes traitaient de thèmes communs, approfondis par des entrevues personnelles. **Résultats :** Ces étudiantes adultes avaient pour rôle principale celui de « mère de famille », avant et pendant leurs études. Toutes ont indiqué que leur plus gros défi était le « temps ». Le plus grand bienfait? Une confiance en soi accrue. Elles s'imposent elles-mêmes les conflits au niveau des différents rôles à assumer. La redéfinition de leurs rôles a été favorable pour soutenir le changement, l'apprentissage et l'épanouissement de soi. Le système éducatif n'offrait pas le soutien souhaitable, selon les répondantes. **Conclusions :** Les femmes adultes ont besoin de soutien à plusieurs niveaux lors du retour aux études. Les établissements d'enseignement supérieur doivent être conscients des caractéristiques, obstacles et défis particuliers qu'elles doivent surmonter afin de faciliter leur réussite scolaire.

**Keywords:** coping strategies, dental hygiene education, mature female student, role conflicts, student success

**CDHA Research Agenda category:** capacity building of the profession

## PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THIS RESEARCH

- Educators and institutions need to be mindful of the challenges and barriers faced by an increasingly diverse dental hygiene student population.
- The experiences of mature female students completing or furthering dental hygiene education are shared by their peers. They must realize this and learn how to initiate self-reliance as well as solicit support from family and the academic community.
- An open dialogue among students, staff, and institutions can enhance student success.

## INTRODUCTION

"Student success" in higher education involves a challenging curriculum, quality teaching strategies, and reasonable accommodation.<sup>1-3</sup> The number of adults entering postsecondary educational settings for the first time, returning to higher education or pursuing a career change is increasing. Between 1976 and the mid 2000s, adult learners in general accounted for 11% to

16% of Canadian postsecondary students.<sup>4</sup> Shifts in the demographics of institutions of higher learning include the mature female student as a now-familiar part of the student milieu.<sup>5</sup> Preparing to enter an academic setting after an extended absence or for the first time can create role conflicts for these students.<sup>6,7</sup>

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The concept of role can be viewed as an umbrella consisting of many interwoven sections,<sup>8</sup> determined and influenced by social patterns and demands.<sup>9</sup> Everyone in life assumes a certain role and tries to fit into a particular identity mold.<sup>8,9</sup> Halls<sup>8</sup> attributes this search for identity to the individual's perception of how well she or he can meet the external social expectations. One's identity can change as personal changes and experiences alter perceptions throughout life. Role definition addresses the challenges faced by an individual as she or he works through redefining the conventional roles and responsibilities to which they have conformed.<sup>8</sup> Problems for females arise when conflicts occur among multiple roles or identities.<sup>10</sup> The intensity of the conflict between a commitment to learning and personal obligations varies depending on the level of demands placed on the individual.<sup>6</sup> These adult learners need academic support not only from their learning environment in order to excel in their studies and achieve student success, but also from their families, who can assist them with role conflicts they face while continuing their education.<sup>3,5</sup>

According to Laing, Chao, and Robinson, a traditional student is defined as one who "entered higher education at the age of 18 straight from high school to further education, [and] studied continuously and full time for either three or four years."<sup>11</sup> p170 Traditional postsecondary education students are those who proceed to college or university after graduating high school and fall between the ages of 18 and 22,<sup>12</sup> while other literature identifies mature students as those who are at least 25 years of age.<sup>13,14</sup>

The returning adult female student is not a new trend in institutions of higher learning.<sup>12-14</sup> From the previous generation to the present, the challenges have remained consistent. Besides being students, these women often have multiple roles such as parent, spouse, and possibly employee. Mature females can experience role conflicts such as competing pressures of child care, household responsibilities, financial obligations, and school commitments. These additional challenges can influence their academic success.<sup>5</sup> Despite many studies investigating the issues of female adult learners, the majority of the findings focus on psychological issues such as anxiety, stress or depression.<sup>12,15,16</sup> However, the psychological issues are often caused by challenges that may come from family, self, and school.<sup>3,4,7,14</sup> With the expanding population of adult students in postsecondary settings comes the need for change and adaptation. Higher educational institutions must consider the services required to meet the needs of this population.<sup>3</sup> Adult students often have different motivations and goals, and may encounter barriers not experienced by most traditional students. For the mature female student, in particular, returning to school requires more planning and lifestyle reassessment than what is required of conventional students.<sup>5,7,10,11</sup>

Although there is a vast amount of literature on health care professionals that examines student success and role conflicts of mature female students returning to postsecondary education, there is a lack of such literature pertaining to the specific discipline of dental hygiene. As such, the purpose of this study was to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the family-life roles, student experiences, and the different mechanisms used for coping with role conflicts of mature female dental hygiene students in order to better enable and support individual student success.

For the purpose of this research, concepts were defined as follows: "Mature female student" refers to a woman, returning to postsecondary education, at least 23 years of age, married or cohabitating at the same address as her husband or partner, and with at least one child. "Family" refers to the husband or partner, wife or partner, and dependents. "Role conflicts" include overlapping role demands as wife or partner, mother, homemaker, career person, and student. "Role definition" addresses the challenges faced by mature female students as they work through redefining the conventional roles and responsibilities<sup>8</sup> to which they have conformed and prepare themselves to embrace a new reality in order to succeed academically. Finally "student success" was defined as the achievement of the student's own educational goals, being mindful of the complexity of challenges to achieving these goals.<sup>1</sup>

## METHODS

This study was approved by the John Abbott College Research Ethics Board (JACREB201805).

### Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Mature female dental hygiene students in one community college in Quebec, who were returning to postsecondary education, who were at least 23 years of age, married or cohabitating at the same address as her partner, and who had at least one child, were included in the study. All other students who did not meet the inclusion criteria were excluded from the study.

### Participant selection and description

In order to minimize participant coercion the researcher elicited the assistance of a colleague in the dental hygiene department to initially approach each student who met the inclusion criteria and ask if she was interested in participating. For those who expressed interest in being part of the study, individual informational meetings were scheduled with this colleague where a preapproved "Informed Consent" form was signed by the students to establish their voluntary participation. Consent was obtained from 12 mature female students representing 14% of the total student population of a 3-year dental hygiene program at an English community college (CEGEP) in Quebec. The youngest study participant was 35 years of age while the oldest was 49 years; mean average

Table 1. Demographics of participants

Age	Number of children	Children's age (years)		Years living in Canada	English as second or third language	Years out of school prior to returning to dental hygiene program	Volunteer or work hours (per week) PRIOR to school	Volunteer or work hours (per week) DURING school
37	2	3	4	12	2	3	–	–
38	2	6 mos	9	5	3	14	40	–
38	2	5	11	8	3	14	10	3
49	1	17	–	12	2	21	40	–
42	2	4	9	7	2	11	3	–
37	2	4	9	6	2	16	–	–
35	2	5	10	5	2	12	–	–
39	2	4	14	7	2	15	40	–
37	1	15 mos	–	5	2	15	–	–
40	2	11 mos	5	9	2	13	–	–
42	2	14	18	4	3	14	3	3
38	1	7 mos	–	4	2	16	–	–

age was 39 years. All students had 2 children or fewer, with 25% having one. The ages of the 21 children varied from 6 months to 18 years. Nine preschool children ranged in age from 6 months to 4 years (mean average age was 2.4 years), while the 12 school-aged children ranged in age from 5 years to 18 years (average age of 11.5 years). All participants were immigrants; 75% have resided in Canada for 8 years or less. English was not their mother tongue; in fact English was the third language for 25% of these women. For three-quarters of the participants, their formal education was completed in their mother tongue and English. Furthermore it had been more than 14 years since entering a classroom for 67% of this cohort. Role conflicts included overlapping role demands as daughter or caregiver, spouse or partner, homemaker, mother, career person, and student. A demographic summary of this cohort is provided in Table 1.

### Procedures

Data were obtained during the winter 2018 academic semester, with the students in their second through sixth

semester offering an accurate representation of the dental hygiene program in its entirety. As English was not the first language of these learners, the same colleague who assisted with participant recruitment was available while the female students completed the questionnaire (Appendix) at the college to ensure each fully understood the instructions and the meaning of terms. Anonymous completed questionnaires were placed in a manila envelope and remained in a secure environment until the end of the academic semester. Only then did the author have access to this confidential information.

Subsequently, 30-minute semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions (Table 2) were conducted by the author at a place of each participant's choosing. Through personal, in-depth interviews each participant had the opportunity to further explain feelings and offer additional information and insights into the unique experience of a mature female student in a postsecondary setting. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by the author. Participants were invited

Table 2. Qualitative interview questions

Open-ended qualitative interview questions
When you think of your own life what roles seem most important/predominant to you?
What factors have contributed to identifying these roles to be important/predominant to you?
What conflicts have you experienced between your various roles since entering John Abbott College?
How do you deal with these conflicts... a) within the family? b) when considering your student life?
Have you used any services at John Abbott College to help deal with role conflicts?
What would you say to an incoming mature female dental hygiene student to encourage student success?

to read their personal transcribed dialogue in order to assure accuracy of themes and concepts. Their voices and authentic familiarity allowed for perspective along with the good, bad, and ugly of being a mature female student returning to postsecondary education.

### Instrument

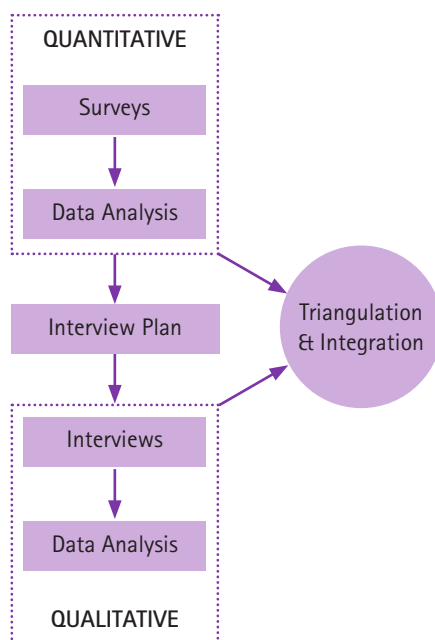
Guided by previous evidence-based literature<sup>2-7,10-13</sup> a 10-item questionnaire comprising closed- and open-ended questions was developed and distributed to participants (Appendix). Changes were made to the questionnaire after consultation with mature female students from other professional programs at John Abbott College. Instructions were reworded and descriptors were changed to facilitate ease of understanding. This study employed a mixed methods explanatory approach (Figure 1) that includes both quantitative and qualitative data. One advantage of this research method is the ease of implementation, allowing the focus of the research to be maintained as the qualitative data build on the quantitative data.<sup>17</sup>

Almalki states: “Explanatory designs are described as a two stage design which sees quantitative data being used as the basis on which to build and explain qualitative data. The quantitative data informs the qualitative data selection process, which [...] is a great strength in that it enables researchers to specifically pinpoint data that is relevant to [a] specific research project.”<sup>18 p293</sup>

### Data analysis

Closed-ended questions from the questionnaire were summarized using descriptive statistics, while open-ended

Figure 1. Sequential explanatory mixed methods design (emphasis on the qualitative phase)



questions were examined for common themes using content analysis. Qualitative data obtained through in-person interviews were analysed employing Braun and Clarke’s 6 phases of thematic analysis, which included familiarising oneself with the raw data, generating initial codes, searching for, reviewing, and naming themes then producing the findings.<sup>19</sup> These qualitative data were examined for supplementary common themes in order to produce a rich description of the students’ life experiences through the voices of the women themselves. Participants had the opportunity to provide feedback to the researcher after thematic content analysis to check the validity of the data interpretation. Thematic analysis was then used to identify recurring patterns within the interview data. Both descriptive statistics and thematic analysis were carried out exclusively by the author.

## RESULTS

### Role identity

Mothering was identified as the primary and most important role (Table 3) for these respondents prior to entering into the academic setting. The roles of wife and homemaker were a close second and third, respectively, during this time in their lives. Upon entering the educational environment these adult learners assumed a slightly different set of priorities. Interestingly, mothering was still the most important and predominant role characterized by 92% of the respondents. They rated their role as a student next followed by that of being a wife. For these mature students, their role as a student was significant. However, as stated during the interview, “You never stop being a mother.”

### Sources of conflict

Once in this new environment, the primary source of conflict (Table 4) identified by 100% of participants was the element of time. In order of importance, time conflicts were ranked as follows: time allotted to be a parent (92%), time to complete academic work (83%) or even time to complete household responsibilities (58%). Identified as a major source of conflict was the weight of conforming to the traditional role of parenting. Another cause of conflict identified in the questionnaire was the reality of being responsible for many of the household tasks.

Together these sources of conflict were identified by 100% of respondents, yet these challenges did not deter them. As respondents stated:

*Household responsibilities and the children’s needs fell onto my shoulders.*

*I was trying to do so much on my own, and it was driving me mental.*

All participants agreed the role conflict they were experiencing was self-imposed. These mature female students felt it was their duty to be all things to all people. Only after

Table 3. Role identity

	Ranking of role identities		
	Most important	Second most important	Third most important
PRIOR to entering school	Mother (100%)	Wife (75%)	Homemaker (58%)
WHILE attending school	Mother (92%)	Student (83%)	Wife (67%)

Table 4. Sources of conflict

Processing conflict	Most important	Second most important	Third most important
The PREDOMINANT (greatest) source(s) of conflict while attending school...	Time (100%)	Parenting (92%)	Completing academic work (83%)
I believe to have experienced role conflict due to...	Self-imposed (100%)	Children (67%)	Society (42%)

completing all tasks could they feel their roles were being accomplished to their high standards. "...I'm the role model for my sons and if I failed for them...it would be a shock. That's why I was always stressed from that."

#### Processing role experiences

While attending school, the respondents experienced a number of negative effects from the constant role conflicts (Table 5). Most common was fatigue. As respondents stated:

*...it's just this little nagging fatigue I've carried around with me.*

*I felt disappointed and exhausted because of the pressure from my role as a mom of dependent children. I carried a lot of responsibility alone, so I needed to change something to help myself.*

Respondents cited being short tempered with family members, especially husbands and children, as one example of the negative impact. The students reported that they usually did not recognize this harmful behaviour until after the damage had been done. Depression or disappointment were identified as additional negative effects these women attributed to the stress of being a full-time student. Even though depression or disappointment were not experienced by all, 67% found these feelings to be

an unforeseen consequence of role conflicts. Interestingly study participants (83%) felt the academic environment offered the least amount of support for these issues and in promoting student success. "JAC [John Abbott College] makes no special provisions for mature students with families who are in career programs. There are no differences—expectations are the same for everyone."

However, on a positive note, all respondents reported having experienced a significant increase in self-confidence while attending school and dealing with role conflicts. "It's not only for the income or to support the family, but also for self-esteem and self-fulfillment." As summed up by one of the participants, her spouse:

*...respects my determination and success where previously he didn't think I could do it and almost made me believe that also. The achievement is not so important as the experiences that I have acquired since returning to school. Rebuilt self-confidence and improved communication skills are far more important to me than the dental education. This has made me a better mother, wife and friend.*

When dealing with role conflicts, all mature female students found the greatest strength came from within themselves (Table 5). They found an internal fortitude to deal with the self-imposed conflicts. During an interview,

Table 5. Processing role experiences

Processing role experiences	Most important	Second most important	Third most important
Negative role conflict attributes WHILE ATTENDING school...	Fatigue (92%)	Shortness of temper with: husband (58%); children (50%)	Inflexible academic schedule (83%)
Positive role outcomes identified WHILE ATTENDING school...	Improved self-confidence (100%)	Support from family (husband, parent or children) (75%)	New time management skills (50%)
Support to deal with role conflict WHILE ATTENDING school...	Self (100%)	Husband (83%)	Children (58%)



Table 6. Coping strategies and outcomes

Role experiences	Outcomes	Percentage of participants (%)
What strategies helped you cope while dealing with role conflicts?	Delegating tasks to husband or partner a) household responsibilities (e.g., cleaning, laundry, cooking) b) child care responsibilities (e.g., babysitting, homework, transportation, participation in child's activities)	100
	Delegating tasks to children a) household responsibilities (e.g., cleaning, laundry, cooking) b) child care responsibilities (e.g., homework, transportation, participation in child's activities)	83
	Eliminating activities or roles (e.g., movies with friends or family, not accompanying family on outings)	100
	Reassessing priorities (e.g., home, school, self)	100
	Redefining personal expectations (e.g., home, school, self)	100
What has been the outcome since applying these coping strategies?	Less stress and fatigue	100
	Personal contentment	83
	Improved family (husband/children) relations and communications	83
	Improved academic standing	75

one respondent remarked: “I think it is important also to recognize the way in which stress and tensions are handled.” Her family, primarily her spouse/partner, was found to be a source of support. “My husband and I discussed a lot about the family responsibilities, and agreements were made about how to share. That’s why I have full support from him while attending school. I think for a mature female student, husband is the most important support for her.” In addition, her children offered support to the mother-student role.

### Coping strategies and outcomes

All participants (Table 6) reported that they had delegated traditional responsibilities to their husband or partner. These tasks included housework, cooking, shopping, and laundry. Delegating certain family responsibilities to the children was found to be an effective coping strategy employed by 83% of the participants. The responsibilities included doing their own laundry, taking care of their bedrooms, making their own lunch or setting and clearing the dinner table. As stated, “The table was never set properly or well but it was very much appreciated.” Along with all these coping techniques, the participants reported that they found it necessary to eliminate personal activities they had enjoyed, such as volunteer work and art lessons, and limit participation in their children’s activities; in general, less socializing. These events were described as “personal relaxation time.” However, due to role conflicts, school commitments, and struggling to find coping techniques the students found themselves too exhausted to pursue these pleasures.

While dealing with the conflicts within the family, study participants found the most effective coping strategy was

to establish a new set of priorities. This could be viewed as role redefinition, as 100% of the participants confirmed this concept during the interviews. “Yeah...I couldn’t be everywhere doing everything, so I learned to live with dust.” These new priorities included new personal expectations; what the participants saw as attainable while “maintaining a sense of balance between the home environment, student success and self-preservation.”

Once the participants realized they could not continue with the present situation, new coping strategies offered positive outcomes (Table 6). The predominant result experienced was a sense of less stress or fatigue as mentioned by 100% of the cohort. “I was too tired to do it all—I just through my arms up and thought...that’s it. After that within a few days, things just seemed easier. I was actually brighter, the kids seemed happier and I felt lighter.” Personal contentment with newfound, redefined priorities and personal expectations helped to optimize this balance. “I can’t be a top student, super mom and be happy. I’m passing and learning, not just memorizing for tests. I know I will not be the top student anymore...and that’s OK by me.” Furthermore, 83% of participants were happier and commented on improved family dynamics.

### Student success

One hundred percent of participants acknowledged empathetic verbal support offered by staff and faculty to promote student success. “Acknowledgement of the difficulties or words of support can go a long way.” Nonetheless as noted in Table 5, 83% of the respondents felt it was the academic environment, specifically an inflexible academic schedule, which hindered individual student success.

*My feeling is that I should be in the same level as other students but sometimes I feel I cannot because there are a lot of things I should do besides my studying like being a mom.*

*I thought when I started the program that really I'm killing myself...I can't believe I'm done with one tough chapter of my life.*

*The three years spent in the program were the most difficult in my life.*

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The data gathered affirm that, prior to entering the academic setting, the women identified their roles as including more traditional commitments. This perception invites speculation as to whether women acquire the intense identity of mothering from personal experiences,<sup>20</sup> nature or society.<sup>21</sup> One must stay mindful of personal values, traditions, and responsibilities. Do mothers feel obliged to fulfill this role should conflicts arise even when pursuing personal interests such as academic studies? All being immigrants, this cohort offers unique results, as their cultural background may affect the relevance of the findings. The participants' responses may have been influenced by cultural factors with respect to role responsibilities as support provided to women within a household is often socially determined. In addition, child-rearing in the form of babysitting was a useful coping strategy used by many respondents. However, the term babysitting denotes that the primary responsibility is still entrusted to the woman. Harris et al.<sup>15</sup> reported that female partners are reluctant to relinquish primary responsibilities within the more traditional roles. One way these adult learners might internalize this new set of priorities is to allow husbands to help in the child-rearing. The women, however, viewed this as a supportive function; they retained the primary role of mothering.

The immediate or extended family rarely applied any degree of pressure that would compel these individuals to push themselves to the extent reported. Hence, a new philosophy for the mature female student could be "committed to yourself or have yourself committed." One can only in the short term be all things to all people. Returning to school is important to these female adult learners who will need to learn how to establish new realistic standards. The individuals' perceptions of and attitudes towards the conflicts are in a period of change and transformation. Possibly this could include redefining certain roles, establishing new priorities or relinquishing certain roles all together. The mature female student needs to commit time, energy, and resources to her studies or risk suffering emotional collapse.<sup>3,5</sup> The student role does not take the place of the other roles but is superimposed, rendering the student at risk of suffering both chronic fatigue and poor health.<sup>13</sup>

Students describe a rebuilt self-confidence and a renewed desire to achieve. These 2 positive outcomes complement each other and are congruent with findings from Roehl & Okun<sup>14</sup> who suggest these are potent internal motivators for life-long learning. Improvement in the lines of communication within the family (especially with the spouse), coupled with the female student's need to achieve, were found to be equally attributable to a successful re-entry into academic life. Since these mature female learners felt most of the conflicts stemmed from their perceptions of a situation, internalization or reflection to develop a more realistic approach would seem to be a logical progression. Along with this new perception of their responsibilities within the family, students also found that delegating certain responsibilities to family members was a useful coping strategy.

Analysing the sources of conflict offered some interesting results, highlighted by the simultaneous occurrence of juggling multiple roles, time management challenges, and the pursuit of academic excellence. The academic workload in a dental hygiene program is frequently heavy.<sup>15,16,22</sup> Lecture and lab time can vary from 24 hours to 30 hours per week for students taking a full course load. Academic work, including lengthy in-depth assignments as well as long laboratory and practical sessions, demanding in both time and energy, adds to the conflicts felt by the students.<sup>15,16,22</sup> As a result, the idea of academic accommodation should be explored by institutional administrators. Traditionally academic accommodations are provided when a student experiences a disability-related barrier that would prohibit demonstrating knowledge or skill.<sup>23</sup> Accommodations are provided to level the playing field so the student can have a better chance at being successful. However, with the mature female student, there are no learning disabilities and no visible or overt barriers hindering academic success. Furthermore, students or staff and faculty may not be aware of the various accommodation options available to support these students. Communicating college policies to students, staff, and faculty is essential for student success. This needs to be addressed during student orientation, at the beginning of each semester or when counselling services are warranted. The institution supporting student success needs to have mechanisms in place to share policies, criteria for student workloads, and support for this segment of the student population.<sup>15</sup>

How can the educational system help the mature female student achieve a balance between family life and the pursuit of student success? Clarification of attitudes towards and perceptions<sup>15,16</sup> of women with families<sup>17</sup> and/or careers<sup>14,18</sup> as they transition through their new roles as students<sup>19</sup> is key. Individual perceptions of institutional attitudes towards academic accommodations for the mature female student need to be defined and applied. One constant in higher education is diversity, not

uniformity; classroom diversity that includes valuing the mature female student is a great strength. There must be an integration of these concepts to reflect the reality of today's student population.<sup>3,6</sup> Accentuating the positive and offering reasonable accommodations are just 2 ways an educator can assist the mature female learner cope more satisfactorily when re-entering the education environment. Educators can respond effectively by offering guidance, understanding, and encouragement for this particular population.<sup>2,3,6,15</sup> Full-time student status, course workload, and course sequencing as defined by the educational institution need to be re-examined to better support student success when dealing with mature students, as multiple roles, stressors or depression are a reality for this population. Courses can be offered online, which will allow for flexibility of scheduling. Further research needs to be conducted to enhance these findings.

#### Limitations and future research

Within the limits of the study, the data confirm the results in the literature with regard to the experiences of mature female students returning to postsecondary education, the competing roles that must be assumed, and the difficulties in coping with role conflicts while completing an education program. However, while this study has offered further insights into role conflicts and gives the participants a voice through the reporting of qualitative data, some caution is required. Considering this particular study cohort, all participants were adult women who were immigrants from other countries and who may endure diverse difficulties when considering pursuing postsecondary education. In addition, these learners have lived in Canada for only a short period of time, thus they may confront specific issues that Canadian-born female students do not. Thus, the results of this study are limited to this very specific population group and cannot be generalized to include all mature students. As a consequence, it would be meaningful to conduct research on barriers and challenges among different ethnic female adult student populations.

Another limitation may be the small sample size. The challenge for the researcher in this mixed methods study design is the selection of participants who meet the relevant criteria.<sup>18</sup> While it may be argued the findings are consistent with the literature, generalities of the findings and conclusions drawn here to other situations and contexts must be considered with caution. Future research should also be conducted to consider mature male students returning to postsecondary education to investigate whether they exhibit characteristics similar to their female counterparts.

In a utopian academic setting, strategies for student success would mirror the client-centred approach to dental hygiene care.<sup>24</sup> Ideally these mature female students would complete "agreed upon" assignments and evaluations to convey to faculty and the institution their learning

objectives within course material. Self-directed learning or previous experience would lend themselves to this task.

#### CONCLUSION

This study offered the mature female student a chance to voice their family-life roles and student experiences. These particular dental hygiene students can balance highly demanding roles, learn specific coping strategies, and maintain resilience in order to complete their education. Academic support is required to improve student well-being while pursuing postsecondary education. Too many of today's educational policies or discussions about higher education with student success are insufficiently connected to a clear understanding of what academic accommodations could be for specific groups of learners. Work is required in order to provide institutions and policy makers with further direction to create evidence-based policies and programs to support the female adult learner. Recommendations have been made based on the input of these adult students. Becoming mindful of any particular student population with specific needs, goals, and obstacles is a positive step forward, starting and continuing the open dialogue for student success.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the Dental Hygiene Department staff, past and present, at John Abbott College whose support and encouragement allowed me to focus on this meaningful study. I also owe a great debt of gratitude to the students who participated in this research, sharing a valuable commodity—their time. Their input and commentary have made me appreciate even further the time and energy these students must expend in order to fulfill both their family and academic lives.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author has declared no conflicts of interest.



## APPENDIX: QUESTIONNAIRE

**Role Identity:** Daughter/Caregiver, Spouse/Partner, Homemaker, Mother, Student, Career, Volunteer work, Other: Specify \_\_\_\_\_, Other: Specify \_\_\_\_\_

From the Role Identities listed above reflect and identify the **3 MOST important** role(s) you perceive.

Number 1: indicates to be the **MOST** important ROLE

Number 2: indicates to be the **SECOND** most important ROLE

Number 3: indicates to be the **THIRD** most important ROLE

PRIOR to entering school: 1) \_\_\_\_\_ 2) \_\_\_\_\_ 3) \_\_\_\_\_

WHILE attending school: 1) \_\_\_\_\_ 2) \_\_\_\_\_ 3) \_\_\_\_\_

For the **REMAINING** questions/statements please reflect, identify to yourself and then rank:

1 = **MOST** predominant/greatest, 2 = **NEXT** most predominant/greatest, 3 = **NEXT** predominant.

Each RANKING NUMBER (1, 2 or 3) can only be used ONCE for any descriptor

1. The **PREDOMINANT** (greatest) source(s) of **CONFLICT WHILE** attending school...

Being a good spouse/partner \_\_\_\_, Parenting \_\_\_\_, Caregiver to parent \_\_\_\_, Time \_\_\_\_, Completing household responsibilities \_\_\_\_, Completing academic work \_\_\_\_, Completing career responsibilities \_\_\_\_, Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_, Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

2. I believe to have **EXPERIENCED ROLE CONFLICT** due to...

Self-imposed \_\_\_\_, Husband/partner \_\_\_\_, Children \_\_\_\_, Other family member (specify) \_\_\_\_\_, Society \_\_\_\_, Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_, Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

3. Negative role conflict attributes **WHILE ATTENDING** school...

Fatigue \_\_\_\_, Depression \_\_\_\_, Anger \_\_\_\_, Emotional collapse \_\_\_\_, Little support from family (specifically with) \_\_\_\_\_, Shortness of temper with family (specifically with) \_\_\_\_\_, Inflexible academic schedule \_\_\_\_, Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_, Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

4. Positive role outcomes identified **WHILE ATTENDING** school...

Improved self-confidence \_\_\_\_, Closer family relations (specifically with) \_\_\_\_\_, New time management skills \_\_\_\_, Improved lines of communication (specifically with) \_\_\_\_\_, Respect \_\_\_\_, Need for achievement \_\_\_\_, Support from family (specifically with) \_\_\_\_\_

5. Support to deal with role conflict **WHILE ATTENDING** school...

Husband/partner \_\_\_\_, Children \_\_\_\_, Self \_\_\_\_, Academic environment \_\_\_\_, Community \_\_\_\_, Peer (Fellow student) \_\_\_\_, Other family member (specify) \_\_\_\_\_, Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

6. What strategies helped you cope while dealing with role conflicts?

7. What has been the outcome since applying these coping strategies?

Please comment further. Do you have any comments, feelings or thoughts you would like to share with the investigator at this time. Remember—there will be an opportunity to elaborate/clarify/ explain concepts or ideas further during the interview process.

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