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“The Juggle Is Real”: An Examination of the Realities Faced by Working Mothers at the University of San Diego and the Impact of Institutional Policies on Their Quest for Work-Life Balance

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**“The Juggle Is Real”: An Examination of the Realities Faced by Working Mothers at the
University of San Diego and the Impact of Institutional Policies on Their Quest for
Work-Life Balance**

Colleen K. Smith

Prepared for the Degree of
Master of Arts in Higher Education Leadership

University of San Diego

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Abstract

The purpose of my action research was to gain a better understanding of working mothers at the University of San Diego (USD) and the influence of institutional policies in their lives. My research question was: What can I learn from the lived experiences of those who identify as women and mothers and work at USD that will bring awareness and changes to the policies and practices affecting them? As a mother working at USD, this research has significance in my life. Participants included 14 full-time staff and administrators with children 5 years old or younger. My findings indicate USD mothers are stressed and frustrated with pay, limitations of sick and vacation time, murkiness of maternity leave policies, and lack of affordable childcare; they also crave flexible schedules and additional campus resources. Recommendations include revisions to institutional policy to be submitted to Human Resources.

Keywords: mothers, employees, children, maternity leave, institutional policy, institutional benefits, pay

Social Location and Introduction

My connection to this topic is all around me and in every aspect of my life and the decisions I have made in the last 4 years. I have worked at the University of San Diego (USD) for over 7 years and I am a mother of two children, ages 5 and 2. I have taken maternity leave as a staff member and administrator and felt differing levels of support via institutional policies in each experience. I am a member of a small and informal USD mom's group that meets for lunch either in person or virtually once a month and shares personal joys in life and family, talks about work, and commiserates. In these meetings, I have realized I am not the only mom who is frustrated by USD's differing maternity leave policies for staff and administrators. In addition, we have spoken about the lack of support, resources, or understanding of the duality of holding the identities of mother and employee. When I became keenly aware of the differences in maternity leave benefits, I decided to apply to the School of Leadership and Education Sciences (SOLES) to pursue my master's degree in higher education leadership. It was my hope this added educational level on my resume would make me a desirable candidate for administrator positions, partly to gain better benefits. However, an additional reason was to make use of all resources USD provided to its employees, like tuition remission.

Currently, I am an administrator working full-time at USD and pursuing my master's degree part-time. I identify as a cis-White woman, wife, and mother. In the research I conducted, I served as a co-participant as I am also a member of this slice of the USD community. Challenges I experienced included the influence and indirect authority I brought into a space as a cis-White, married woman whose identities fall into traditional heteronormative roles. Undoubtedly, assumptions may have been made about me as a White woman and a mother who has a spouse to share child-raising responsibilities versus the differing experience of a single,

marginalized mother. These factors may have changed the dynamics and initial comfort of participants' willingness to share their stories with me and the group. Nevertheless, I was intentionally curious to uncover how White privilege contributed to USD viewpoints for myself and others and what disparities exist between White mothers and Black and Indigenous people of color (BIPOC) mothers at USD. Are we losing talented employees who are mothers because of USD's strict policies? Is the loss even more pronounced for BIPOC mothers? In addition, and as an overarching caveat, it is worth mentioning and recognizing mothers are busy and often have competing responsibilities and conflicting schedules. As such, it was a challenge to ask potential participants to add another time obligation like participating in this research study.

This research presented an opportunity to promote the betterment of USD at large by strengthening a large portion of its employees: mothers. There is a saying, "You cannot pour from an empty cup"; in that same vein, to be an effective and impactful employee at USD who serves students and the community well, the question is: Are mothers who work for USD okay? Has anyone even asked them? Is USD supportive or turning a blind eye to them and what can I do to contribute toward progressive change to existing policies? Considering this, my research question is: What can I learn from the lived experiences of those who identify as women and mothers who work at the USD that will bring awareness and changes to the policies and practices affecting them?

Background and Literature Review

From the literature, I have gained the historical context and timeline of maternity leave at the federal level and new vocabulary on the subject such as mom guilt, motherhood penalty, daddy bonus, and invisible workload. Furthermore, data on diversity and inclusion at Catholic higher education institutions bring the full picture into focus. I have learned my frustrations with

the system and structure are shared and far from new. The quantitative data uncovered illuminated just how many mothers who work full-time are monetarily undervalued and overworked throughout a day. Although USD has a better maternity leave policy than many other regional institutions, and particularly those outside of the state of California, it does not mean the maternity leave policies they have created are sufficient or adequate.

Literature that informed my knowledge base for this project included the U.S. Department of Labor's Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) and Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978. Examining what protections and provisions exist allowed me to better understand with which a proposed revision to the current USD maternity leave policies would need to be framed. There was a congruence in theory and lived experiences, but a deeper understanding of these theories was needed.

Maternity Leave

In the United States, the first legislative building block put in place toward a federal maternity leave policy was the 1984 Family Employment Security Act (FESA; Sholar, 2016). Although FESA never made it to Congress, it gave 26 weeks a year of unpaid leave and job security to employees who are new mothers, need to care for an ill child, or need to care for their or a spouse's disability. FMLA passed in 1993 and was one of the first major campaign promises former President Bill Clinton successfully delivered (Sholar, 2016). FMLA provided the minimum leave and pay entitlement, job security, and discrimination enforcement, but it is up to each individual state and employer to set the rest of leave terms. Over the years, many amendments have been made to FMLA to cover more workers, such as the revision to the definition of a spouse in 2015 to be inclusive of same-sex marriages (Sholar, 2016).

As women joined the workforce over the last century, higher educational institutions have not kept up with creating policies for women, such as maternity leave (Sallee, 2007). According to the U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics, women now hold most U.S. jobs at 50.04% (Law, 2020). Yet, a formal maternity leave policy still does not exist at many higher education institutions; instead, a culture of dissuading pregnant faculty members from taking full maternity leave remains (Gilbert, 2008).

Invisible Workload and Compensation

As Taylor and Bloch (2018) summarized, “Mothers are often faced with a discourse of inadequacy when the impossibilities of new femininity-full-time job, perfect mother, domestic goddess-become untenable” (p. 28). Invisible labor is defined as:

the planning, coordinating, monitoring, and anticipating that many mothers do to keep things running smoothly at home . . . [W]e consider it to be invisible because it is often this internal mental checklist of what needs to be done, when it needs to be done and how it needs to be done. We also consider it invisible because it doesn’t tend to get the recognition that it deserves (Ciciolla, 2019, para. 3).

With this knowledge, the invisible load translates into an invisible workload when mothers work full-time jobs outside of the home. There is a persistent issue of a nonexistent work-life balance for many higher education employees who are also mothers of young grade-school children (Burk et al., 2021). A case can be made for the correlation between productivity expectations remaining the same for remote work and the extreme lack of work-life balance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Burk et al. (2021) suggests we put humanity back in our working lives and recognize that employees who are also mothers of young children are asked to multitask job responsibilities and childcare at an unprecedented and unattainable pace.

The U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee (2015) pointed out trends for working mothers in the U.S. labor force and highlighted the increased importance of women to economic and family income stability. The 2015 data encompassed rates of women in the workplace from 1975 to 2013 and noted whether women were single mothers and the sole provider, married but both parents were working, or married but is the sole income earner in the household. Per the U.S Department of Labor (2023):

Overall, women are not paid as much as men, even when working full time and year-round. On average, women working full time, year-round are paid 83.7% of what men are paid. This inequity is even greater for Black and Hispanic women (para. 1).

Disparities between working mothers and working fathers are so great that the terms “motherhood penalty” and “daddy bonus” have been coined, with motherhood penalty describing the phenomena of women with children earning less than women without children (Zalis, 2019). Data from Bright Horizons’ annual Modern Family Index concluded “72% of both working moms and dads agree that women are penalized in their careers for starting families, while men are not” (Zalis, 2019, para. 1). And yet, the daddy bonus still exists. Hodges and Budig (2010) defined daddy bonus as (predominately White) men who see an income increase once they become fathers compared to men who are not fathers. The acknowledgment of these terms and phenomena add to the context and conversation of a working mother’s worth in the workforce and underlines how monetarily undervalued they are in the United States.

Wade (2016) found similar data after meeting with 23 dual income couples in traditional heterosexual marriage roles (i.e., husband and wife). Wade’s study asked the following question: On average, which spouse spent more time in the office, completed more household maintenance (e.g., laundry, cleaning), took care of the child (if applicable), and purchased groceries and other

services. The data were clear: women with full-time jobs completed more unpaid tasks than men on top of their paying job. Wade characterized women as those who “notice, the planners, and the executors” (para. 1) and although most men performed some household duties, women still did more. I suspect data could illustrate notable generational differences in the invisible workloads of men and women and perhaps a correlation between women’s invisible workload and their underearning men. This may be resulting in women experiencing higher rates of burnout than men. In fact, out of 65,000 U.S employees from 88 different companies, 42% women in 2021 considered resigning from their job compared to 32% of women in 2020 (McKinsey & Company, 2021).

Diversity and Inclusion at Catholic Institutions

Examining White supremacy, privilege, racism, and anti-racism education, Ross (2021) addressed USD’s history as a predominantly White institution (PWI) and recent prioritization of diversity, equity, and inclusion. In examining the constraints placed on those who identify as mothers at USD, it is critical to detail my experiences as a White woman and how other racial and ethnic populations’ experiences may vary at this PWI. This work of exposing White supremacy at USD is important for me as a White woman administrator at USD. As I examined how family leave policies are helping or harming working mothers, White privilege and White gatekeeping was certainly also a factor.

Adding a layer to this discussion, Ravizza and Peterson-Iyer (2005) examined the experiences of faculty members who are also mothers, asking: Are Catholic universities serving their employees well? Ravizza and Peterson-Iyer (2005) provided a background on Catholic thought on the importance of family, the tenure system, and the visible and invisible workload of faculty members who are mothers. This work made important points about what changes are

needed at both the policy and cultural level. In addition, the authors also discussed arguments some who do not want policy changes or do not see the necessity of changes might make (e.g., considering having children as an “individual choice” but failing to recognize the societal impact of raising well-adjusted children who grow up to join the workforce). The authors also discussed the economic and social disadvantages of being a mother and further expanded on the shortcomings of being a faculty member in a patriarchal tenure system. I appreciated the critical eye to Catholic institutions’ traditional values and how policy and culture are not always aligned. The outstanding question is this: If Catholic institutions should lead the charge to become family-friendly institutions, why are they not doing so? Gaps in Ravizza and Peterson-Iyer’s (2005) study included a missed opportunity to expand upon the on-campus childcare recommendation and address a common barrier: affordability. Also, USD is directly mentioned as a Catholic university leading in family-friendly initiatives, which seemed promising; however, more recent data and context is needed to understand its relevance today.

Spierling (2022) shared the successful creation and launch of Denison University’s new global commerce major by fostering healthy and productive departmental culture. Spierling detailed how leadership intentionally placed value on diversity and inclusion with working mothers at the center. They further detailed their model by including the following framework:

- Do not expect employees to ignore their personal life. Rather, meet them where they are and what needs exist to keep all aspects of their lives running.
- Lead with empathy and communicate intentionally and before issues arise. Every voice is valid and must have the opportunity to be heard while remembering perspective and personal experiences shape each narrative.
- Include students as key stakeholders and benefactors of creating healthy cultures.

I was particularly interested in learning more about how Spierling and her colleagues supported working mothers by way of work hour flexibility and addressing different employees' work styles. In my experience of being a mother and employee at USD, Spierling's framework is only reached at a surface level. The true work and policies to back up the words with actions are absent.

Context

My research was based at USD, a private Catholic university with 2,456 employees as of Fall 2022, per USD's Institutional Research and Planning (IRP, 2022). Although I found no available IRP data on how many employees have children, 57.8% of USD employees identified as female. Of the full 2,456 employee headcount, 56.3% identified as White, 39.9% as minority, and 1.3% as international; 2.5% were not specified. As a full-time employee in an administrator role at USD and a mother of two, I sought participants who were full-time employees in a staff or administrator role and who identified as a woman and mother of a child or children ages 5 or younger. I hoped to also recruit participants who had taken maternity leave while working at USD, though it was not a prerequisite to participate in the study. The purpose of my research was to determine if my experiences of feeling devalued by USD due to institutional policies once I became a mother was shared by others. This personal experience sparked a desire to peel back the layers of this population's sense of purpose, feel heard, and examine if they too felt devalued by USD's policies like maternity leave.

Project Rationale

The purpose of this research was to create a safe and welcoming space for USD staff and administrators who are mothers of young children and to hear their stories, validate them, and build community. In doing so, I could paint a picture of their life, hear about their stressors, and

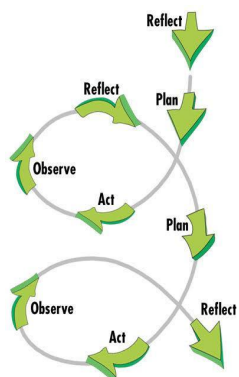
amplify their voices and stories by way of acknowledgment and incremental change. The root of my research was to determine if these moms feel supported by USD and whether institutional policies like maternity leave are helpful or harmful in making them feel supported, with special attention to the divide between staff and administrator leave policies. My curiosity grew to include uncovering whether USD is losing talented employees who are mothers without realizing the reasoning behind their decision to leave USD and seek employment elsewhere. Furthermore, I was curious whether staff felt less supported than administrators and whether this feeling was more pronounced in BIPOC staff. It was relevant and necessary for this research to be conducted because I lived this experience at USD. I saw the potential for the anticipated research outcomes to create a microscopic lens on the lives of USD mothers and for my ability to lend a voice and create a microcosm for a change in trajectory both at the social and the policy level.

Research Design

I used a mixed methods action research approach to collect qualitative data from my participants. I used Kemmis and McTaggart's (1988) action research model (plan, act, observe and reflect) in my cycles, as reflected in Figure 1, so I would have the opportunity to make adjustments as needed in the process.

Figure 1

Kemmis and McTaggart's (1988) Action Research Model



Note. From “Action Research Model by Kemmis and McTaggart.” *Scribd*.

<https://www.scribd.com/doc/232329702/Action-Research-Model-by-Kemmis-and-Mctaggart>

I was purposeful in holding each cycle outdoors so participants could reset and center themselves, breathe in fresh air, and be removed from the confines of an office setting with four walls. Each cycle involved either physical movement or artistic expression. Validation groups include my cohort in SOLES, Dean Linda Dews (a mentor of mine), and my director, Kellie Nehring. Although Dean Dews and Kellie have positions of authority at USD, they were informed of my research journey and alerted me of potential roadblocks or workarounds with USD bureaucracy. As I continued to deepen my relationships within my cohort and we continued our action research journey, I entrusted them to sound off on my process, findings, and potential blinders.

Campus partners from whom I gained permission and information included Michelle Rohde from Human Resources (HR) and Sarah Kimball from the Manchester Child and Family Development Center (MFCDC). In my meeting with Michelle Rohde, we spoke about the structural differences between the leave, sick day, and vacation usage by staff and administrators and the unpopularity of these policies. Other topics we discussed included HR’s desire to shift toward transparency of information for its employees and how HR can and cannot assist due to confidentiality. Next, I connected with Sarah Kimball at the MFCDC, where my oldest child (5 years old) attended for 2 years.

Data Collection

In addition to the activities in my cycles which are detailed in this section, I collected quantitative data which informed my research study via a demographic survey (see Appendix E). The survey was completed by participants in Cycle 2 to gain information on the number of

children they had and their age(s), whether they were staff or administrators, and if they had used USD's maternity leave policy.

Description of Cycle #1

In early December 2022, I digitally distributed a recruitment flier (see Appendix A) to potential research participants via the MFCDC app, Brightwheel, and also emailed the flier to the informal USD moms' group. I received 19 initial inquiries from potential participants. Once participants completed their consent forms, I sent a Google calendar invitation with the date, time, and meeting place for Cycle 1's activity: a 30-minute mapped "walk and talk" on campus (see Appendix D). Although the walk and talk was 30 minutes, my calendar invite to participants was listed as 1 hour to account for my opening script, the walk time, and the possibility of continued conversations once the walk concluded. My desire was to create a safe space to reflect upon and share in my later cycles; however, it was necessary to first build a sense of community and develop rapport in Cycle 1. With this in mind, Cycle 1 was not audio-recorded and had a different structure than Cycles 2 and 3.

Cycle 1 took place in mid-December 2022 before the end of USD's Fall 2022 semester and included eight participants. Due to the feedback I received from multiple interested participants who could not make Cycle 1 in December 2022, I offered a make-up session held in early January 2023 for three participants. I refer to participants who attended Cycle 1 in December 2022 as Group A and participants who attended the makeup session held in January 2023 as Group B. The "walk and talk" was a mapped path along the perimeter of campus and occurred before lunch time. We gathered in front of the outdoor plaza at the nursing building on campus. During the walk, I was mindful to observe the following: What conversation subjects were flowing, which were stagnant, and which were perceived only scratch the surface? What

themes arose? What stressors were present? One \$10 gift card was given away at random the day after this cycle. Finally, the protection of the identity and confidentiality of my participants were of the utmost importance, so I used pseudonyms in place of their names in all cycles and data.

Cycle 1: Results and Findings

Because Groups A and B varied in group size and when they participated in the study, there were notable observable differences in the groups. Leading and introducing the purpose of the research study and activity felt more clunky and cumbersome with Group A due to the group's large size (eight participants) and because it was my first interaction with participants. Participants in Group A included Wendy, Brynn, Antoniette, Zoe, Clementine, May, Isabella, and Aaliyah. As we began the walk, it became clear that because I had not printed the mapped route for participants, I would have to lead the walk from the front. Choosing not to audio-record Cycle 1 limited my interactions with all participants and my ability to observe or recall all conversations that occurred on the walk. However, because the purpose of Cycle 1 was to get to know one another and develop a sense of community, the choice to not record the conversations proved to be reassuring to the participants.

We quickly paired up into groups of two or three and engaged in conversation during the walk. Some participants already knew each other but most seemed to pair with a participant they had not met before. Topics I observed the participants discussed included the departments everyone worked for at USD, the ages of everyone's children, the schools our children attend, and the perfect San Diego weather conditions that day. At about the halfway point of the walk, I observed the conversations focused on the differing experiences in using USD's maternity leave policies. A theme that arose was the murkiness around how much paid and unpaid time was provided by FMLA versus USD. Wendy, Zoe, and Aaliyah shared they had received conflicting

advice from colleagues who had taken leave previously and from USD's HR. At this time during the walk, multiple participants agreed the maternity leave process was stressful and seemed more complicated and burdensome to figure out piecemeal than it needed to be. In response, and paired with a brief conversation about all the invisible workloads moms balance, I said, "The struggle is real," to which Brynn quickly responded with, "The juggle is real." When the walk and talk concluded, four participants stayed and continued their conversations, surpassing our scheduled time boundary. I felt encouraged to see these conversations and interest in each other develop beyond the research activity.

In contrast to Group A, Cycle 1's make-up session, Group B, occurred in early January 2023 and consisted of only three participants: Araceli, Skye, and Abigail. Perhaps due to the smaller size of the group or my gained confidence having already completed Group A's walk and talk, Group B felt more jovial than my overall perception of Group A. All participants expressed excitement in participating in the study. Topics I observed in participant discussions included: the departments in which everyone worked at USD, the ages of everyone's children, the schools each of our children attend, and the struggles and frustrations of having young children at home during the COVID-19 pandemic. Deeper conversations seemed to develop at a faster pace in Group B than in Group A. One theme that arose was school safety in light of the surge of school shootings. Araceli and Skye found commonality in their lack of confidence in school safety measures paired with the COVID-19 pandemic. These factors impacted Araceli's and Skye's decision to have their children skip transitional kindergarten (UTK) and instead keep their children at home with family for one more year before entering kindergarten. To aid the conversation, I shared my experience having a child in UTK and my shared fears of gun violence and school shootings.

Description of the Outcome and Changes as a Result of the Research

Both Groups A and B of Cycle 1 mentioned more than once how nice it was to get outside and have conversations with one another. Both groups also repeatedly asked if I was getting enough data for my research in the walk and talk because the format felt so informal. Common themes in both groups included seeking similarities with each other via questions such as the department in which one works, ages of their children, daycares and primary schools, and external stressors. In reflecting on Cycle 1 and before Cycle 2, analyzing these themes informed me of the appropriateness of my questions in Cycle 2. In reviewing the overall goal of Cycle 1, which was to create familiarity with and between participants and create the foundational building blocks of community, brick by brick, the goal was met. The need for community, a place to share stories and validate one another, was evident and recommended by Rendón's (1994) validation theory.

Description of Cycle #2

In Cycle 2, we again gathered at the outdoor plaza of the nursing building for 1 hour. However, this time we stayed in the outdoor plaza and congregated at two connected tables. Cycle 2 was held in mid-January 2023 and lunch was provided. The 11 participants began the session by completing a brief paper questionnaire (see Appendix B) that gathered demographics and employee classification information while enjoying lunch. The information I gained from the 14 total participants (some participants could not make the in-person activity at the last minute, so I emailed them the questionnaire) is included in Table 1.

Table 1*Focus Group Meeting #2 Questionnaire Responses*

| Participant Pseudonym | Race and Ethnicity | Number of Children and Ages | Current Staff of Admin? /Taken Maternity Leave at USD? |
|------------------------------|---|------------------------------------|---|
| Wendy | White | 2 under 5 | Admin./Yes, as Staff. |
| Araceli | Race: American Indian/Native American; Ethnicity: Hispanic/Latino | 2 under 5 | Admin./Yes, as Admin. |
| Brynn | White | 2 under 5 | Admin./Yes, as Staff. |
| Antoniette | White | 1 under 2 | Admin./Yes, as Admin. |
| Skye | Asian, Filipino-Chinese | 1 under 4 | Admin./No |
| Zoe | White | 2 under 7 | Admin./Yes, as Admin. |
| Ivy | White | 2 under 6 | Admin./Yes, as Admin. |
| Abigail | White | 1 under 2 | Admin./Yes, as Admin. |
| Clementine | White | 2 under 4 | Admin./Yes, as Admin. |
| May | White, Filipino, Spanish | 1 under 4 | Admin./No |
| Isabella | White | 2 under 5 | Admin./Yes, as Admin. |
| Aaliyah | White, Hispanic/Latino | 3 under 10 | Admin./Yes, as Admin. |
| Sunny | White, Hispanic/Latino | 2 under 5 | Admin./Yes, as Admin. |
| Catalina | Hispanic/Latino | 3 under 11 | Staff/No |

The 30-minute audio-recorded mixed methods activity was to create a Tree of Life (Appendix F) using the provided paper, pens, pencils, and highlighters. The overall task was to illustrate the participant's current support systems, where additional resources were needed, and how USD can factor into the equation. The roots of the tree represented the reasons why participants worked at USD and the grass represented the support or community they had. The trunk represented challenges of being a mother and working full-time, the branches signified strategies they used to overcome challenges, and finally, the leaves were additional support they might need.

In advance of the activity, I informed participants I would be creating my own Tree of Life alongside them. I asked participants to adhere to a time boundary of 30 minutes to complete their Tree of Life so we would have time for group discussion afterwards. One \$10 gift card was given away at random the day after this cycle.

Cycle 2: Results and Findings

At the beginning of the activity, I observed how participants used humor to cut the potentially uncomfortable quiet moments during the activity with comments like, "I have emergency crayons in my car if needed, but most are melted" and "Your tree is invisible, what does that mean?" or "The challenges of being a mother and working full-time, that's gonna be a pretty thick trunk." I validated participants who had additional questions about the format of the activity or were questioning their artistic ability by encouraging them to make it their own and telling them there was no right or wrong way to do it. Once the group discussion portion began, Ivy shared:

I jokingly tell my husband all the time. I need a wife because he's in the Navy and he's gone a lot so I single mom it a lot. And it's like, is my job, is any job, worth the time and

the money that it takes for me to be away from my kids? Daycare is expensive. Like having a job is just expensive. Like, I'm hybrid, I'm lucky at least, but like being full time remote would really help. Just that more flexibility. I count myself lucky. Like we have grandparents in town we can afford the daycare. It's still hard. Like there's no way so I just don't understand how we're supposed to do everything like this concept of like, you can have it all. And it's like, yeah, but I'm kind of miserable sometimes I don't understand?

The myth of "having it all" or striking a balance between juggling work and home became a theme of the conversation and many participants voiced trying to manage it all leaves them feeling scatterbrained and the incoherence was present in their tree via this creative outlet. Another theme presented in artwork and conversations was the lack of a mom-specific community and how beneficial it would be to have a knowledge base from which to draw for questions about maternity leave, daycare, and local resources. Additional flexibility, summer hours, and flex weeks were also discussed. Within this conversation, participants compared their departments' remote work policies and flexibility and found them to vary greatly which was shown in participant's trees (Figure 2). See Appendix H for additional participant tree drawings.

Figure 2

Individual Tree of Life Activity Responses



Next, the conversation shifted organically to pay inequities, as Zoe said:

I wanted to mention something about some of the struggles I have and I think this is a little bit more specific to USD because USD is like the lowest paying University in San Diego. It's also a higher ed thing, but I think it's exasperated (sic) here. But the discrepancy in pay between me and my husband creates some inequities. So when the kids get sick, I take them because he's like, I can't afford, he runs his own business. I can't afford not to do that project, or I can't afford, like, as a family, we can't afford to do that. And so that then ends up falling on me, he's very progressive, we have a great relationship. We're not like fighting. And even still, we have a lot of inequities. Because

then it's my responsibility to come up with who else is going to cover for me, like when I need to work and like, you know, then I'm using all of my vacation time for sick kids or school, you know, so you don't ever get recharged. But I think that, like, is really tough. Aaliyah expressed her past frustrations with USD HR's inconsistent information and advice on maternity leave:

On my last maternity leave, HR actually called me and said, oh, are you ready to come back tomorrow? And I even had it mapped out for me before I left. And before that benefits person left USD, I was given a whole different amount of time. And I was like-no, I'm not, I'm going to be out like two more months or whatever it was. And they said, well, you don't have that time anymore. So, I ended up having to pay USD to keep my benefits to stay on leave.

During this time, I observed how visually fired up participants seemed and how the conversation sparked with verbal and nonverbal signs of agreement. There were many layers to this conversation, one of which was about pay and vacation time calculation, accrual, and usage.

Isabella cut the tension:

It's funny because I'm not Catholic, and so I had this vision of working at a Catholic institution. They have lots of babies. *(Group laughter)* And like, if I hear the culture of care one more time. Are we caring for the buildings and the landscaping or?

It was inferred and spoken about at length that USD could provide more resources or expanded and equitable policies to better understand and serve USD moms.

Description of the Outcome and Changes as a Result of the Research

The hearty conversation created by the merging of Cycle 1's Group A and B, paired with a shared meal and creative activity, yielded a sharing of participants' experiences, frustrations,

commonalities and wishes. All the gathered data, post activity discussions, and reflections informed me I did not need to alter my Cycle 3 trajectory of another shared meal and activity requiring artistic expression.

Description of Cycle #3

For the final and third cycle, I asked the 9 attending participants to gather at the same outdoor spot in the plaza of the Nursing Building. Cycle three was held in late January 2023 and lunch was once again provided. Participants would enjoy lunch together and create a vision board using the provided paper, pens, pencils, crayons, and markers. The intention for the mood was introspective yet celebratory because this would be the last meeting time for this research study. I prefaced the activity with the question: Where do you want to go from here? What would the ideal future look like for you at USD? Or, if USD is not represented on your vision board, reflect on the reasons why it is not.

I encouraged participants to use words, imagery, or any creative output that came to them. As in cycle two, I created my vision board alongside the participants while keeping with the time boundary of creative time to a maximum of 30 minutes to leave time for discussion. Once most participants had completed their vision boards, I asked those that felt comfortable to share their takeaways and their own observations with the group. One \$10 gift card was given away at random the day after this final third cycle.

Cycle 3: *Results and Findings*

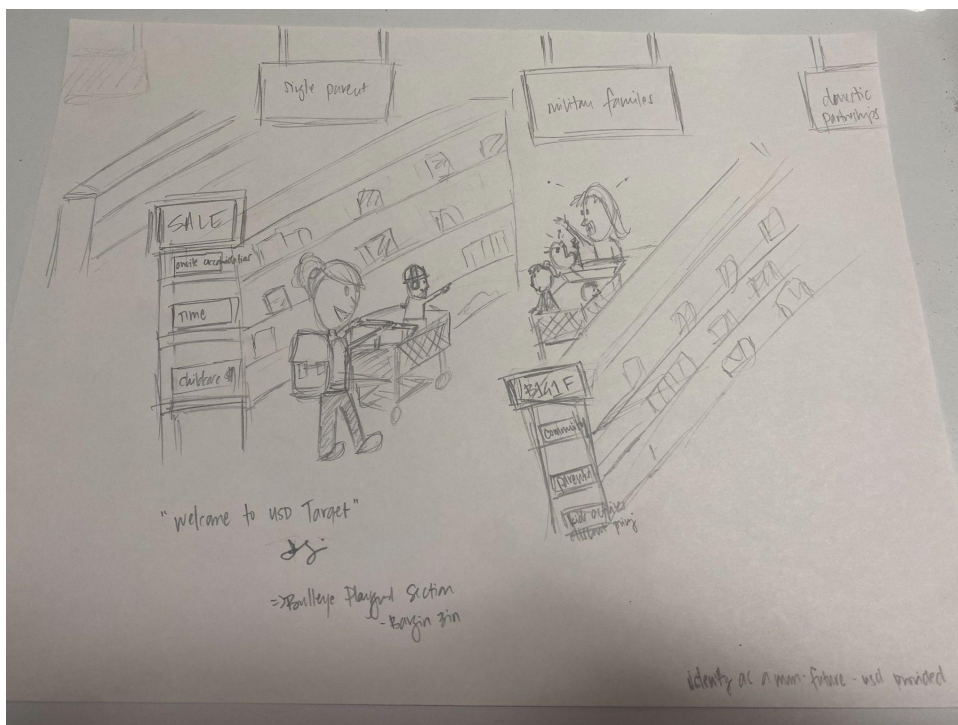
As in cycle two, at first participants were wary of creating something artistic and with even less direction than was given in the previous cycle. There was some light conversation on the varied marker selection and the need for some light background music to inspire creativity. Wendy began the conversation with her vision for what she needed from USD,

For me, it's over and over again, it's just more flexibility. And that's just not the culture at USD. And from my experience, I'm really lucky right now because I have a manager who's super flexible, but we're doing all of this stuff under the table, you know, and it's like, hey, we're gonna be flexible, but you have to keep it hush, hush. Like, it's unfair that I just am lucky that I have a manager who gets it and it's like, oh, your kids are homesick.

This theme was echoed throughout this session, when flexibility is in the equation, stress level goes down, productivity goes up and work life balance feels attainable. Ivy was next to share,

I think mine was just a basic need of humanity. Some of the things that we've been talking about are just like, these are just basic needs of people. I wrote a little terrible poem about that. But it says, "to have what I need shouldn't feel like greed for in the future to succeed. USD must lead, with intention for equity and humanity as the basis for every deed."

A continuing theme present was USD's culture of care, a catchphrase that is often applied to the way we treat students. In this conversation, it was perceived as not applicable to employees. In response to the conversation around basic needs, Syke visualized shopping in the aisles of Target where USD would offer affordable resources, accommodations, and products at the ready as seen in Appendix I and below in Figure 3.

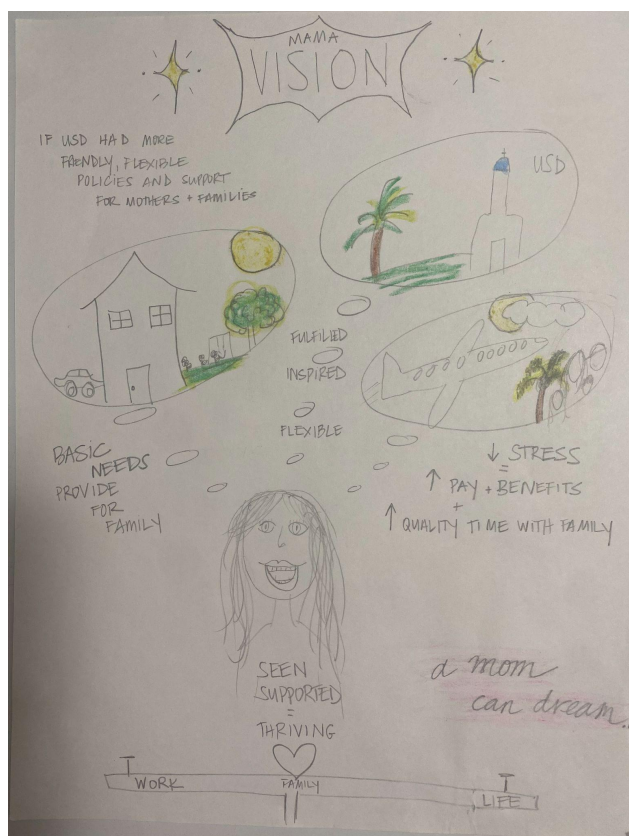
Figure 3.*Individual Vision Board Activity Responses*

Other conversations and topics included the desire for USD to have better offerings to families like family friendly events, meetups, discounted or free tickets to local attractions. Conversation lingered on USD's Manchester Family Child Development Center (MFCDC) for some time and the disconnect between MFCDC's closure days and USD's calendar. In addition to this, MFCDC is closed for two weeks during the summer. These discussions presented many frustrations for participants and yet also yielded creative solutions to the problem (outlined in Recommendations section). Next, May and Ivy summarized their diminished understanding of HR's maternity leave policies and likened the process to filing your taxes-you hope you did it right, but you might find out later that you in fact did not and end up owing money back.

Overall, it was evident that many more congruences existed than differences between the participants. Participants' visions for their future with USD are not unattainable, they are better categorized as basic needs that are lacking. This summary is best represented in Figure 4 (full image in Appendix I):

Figure 4.

Individual Vision Board Activity Responses



Description of the Outcome and Changes as a Result of the Research

No changes were present as this was the third and final cycle, but a takeaway gained includes that these conversations could have continued if I had designed the cycles to have longer sessions. I had been conservative on the total session time I requested from the participants to be mindful of their busy schedules; however, none seemed to be too concerned

with the time boundary when the conversation was flowing. The cycles were intentionally held close together so participants could gain familiarity with one another, the task at hand and the conversation. In this way, this model seemed to have succeeded. Although participant attendance was solid, there were only five participants who completed all three cycles. The additional participants only attended one or two cycles. This was to surely alter the outcome of each cycle's conversation trajectory but perhaps it also aided in livening up the group dynamic.

Limitations

Although this research subject matter received a high amount of interest by way of inquiries and referrals from participants, it must be noted that my final participant pool of 14 only included one employee classified as staff, the remaining 13 were administrators. This limited the depth of perspective and insight into the experience of mothers who are staff at USD versus the amplified collective voices of mothers who are administrators. However, I am grateful that 3 participants elected to note in the margins of the paper questionnaire (see Appendix E) in cycle two that yielded this information that they had previously been staff members when they used USD's maternity leave. This distinction allowed them to compare their experiences and could speak to some of those past experiences as staff members. Based on the same questionnaire, I determined a slight majority of my participants were White women like myself (8 out of 14). In addition to this, I observed that White participants spoke up most frequently and at length in each cycle. This had the potential to continue to highlight the experience of white mothers at a PWI institution while marginalizing the experiences of BIPOC mothers.

In addition to these, another limitation that existed was the lack of availability of quantitative data of mothers with young children who work at USD. In fact, the number of mothers who work at USD in general is also not available for use per Institutional Research and

Planning (IRB) and after conversations with Human Resources (HR). Use of this data could have helped me understand the population size and potential participant pool on campus.

Recommendations

I used Rendón's Validation Theory (1994) by listening and confirming other mothers and in turn empowered them to know their self-worth. I heard USD mothers voice their stress level and how they do not feel as supported and/or understood by USD. My overarching goal is to validate USD mothers' experiences and use this research to amplify our voices and stories into institutional policy change while being mindful to not place the work solely on this newly formed community. While it is my hope that participants will continue to make connections with one another and create an established and lasting supportive community, this alone is not enough to create change. Therefore, my recommendations are focused on what USD can do for mothers, and not the other way around. I have 4 overarching recommendations-2 for Human Resources (HR) and 2 for Manchester Family Child Development Care (MFCDC).

My first recommendation to HR is to update the USD maternity leave policy. This update would merge staff and administrator leave packages into one policy that is equitable and inclusive regardless of employee classification. This equity would put humanity into policy and demonstrate USD's commitment to a culture of care for mothers rather than a tiered level of total paid time off available.

Second, I recommend HR create a clear and progressive flexible and remote work policy. Currently, there is no visible policy published and participants voiced that they are wary to bring it up in conversation for fear of retribution of any flex or remote offering. Flex and remote work approvals vary greatly across the campus in participant's experience. While office needs are sure to vary, transparency in how flex and remote work is determined and approved or why it is

denied is critical. The COVID-19 pandemic reshaped the acceptability of remote work yet there are pockets of divisions at USD who lag in embracing work innovation. By creating a flexible and remote work policy, USD mothers could better advocate for themselves by having a clear and confirmed benchmark to work with.

My third recommendation is for MFCDC, the on-campus childcare facility for ages 2.5 to 5 years old. I recommend the expansion of care offered to include infants and toddlers under the age of 2.5. This addition would create a smoother return to work after maternity leave for USD mothers in providing the reassurance of guaranteed, proximity care.

Finally, based on participants' themes and conversations centered around creative solutions relating to benefits and affordability of childcare, my fourth recommendation is for MFCDC to offer childcare stipends. Many participants shared that although they have heard glowing reviews of the teaching staff and educational programming offered by MFCDC, they ultimately chose not to enroll their child. Reasons cited included the high cost compared to other local daycares and the numerous closure dates, specifically the 2-week closure time each summer. Providing childcare stipends could incentivize enrollment at MFCDC and meet employees in the middle for out-of-pocket childcare expenses for closure dates that do not match up with USD observed holidays.

Conclusion

Mothers with young children working at USD are at a precipice, to continue riddled with stress, feeling the ripple effects of inadequate pay, limited sick and vacation time, murkiness of maternity leave policies and lack of affordable childcare is unacceptable. I am hopeful we have begun building this community with one another, brick by brick, and can freely offer our voice and vision for our futures at USD to institutional policy stakeholders. Doing so must not merely

be an exercise or demonstration but a call-in for USD to make meaningful equitable change for their employees who are mothers. The time is now.

This research demonstrates that while a perfect work-life balance may not always exist, we can create incremental movement toward equilibrium through equitable institutional policies for employees. Such policy updates would include an updated and merged maternity leave policy, transparency of remote work accommodations in the form of a progressive and flexible policy, and the expansion of childcare options and accommodations available at USD.

The journey toward the completion of this research and my master's degree is very similar to what many say about parenthood-the days are long, but the years are short. Four short years ago, I began this academic adventure which held long days ahead with a young family including an 18-month-old daughter at home. Within me, there was a fire lit to reach for more for the betterment of myself and my family. Within my first semester in Fall 2019, I identified my research interests-the experiences of mothers at USD. Over the course of this program, each SOLES class has offered a different lens, framework, theories, and structure to view my research interest as an adaptive leadership opportunity. When this research finally began in December 2022, I could not have asked for a better cast of characters included as my participants. Thank you for trusting me with your stories and experiences, it has been an honor of a lifetime.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Flier

**MOTHERS ARE STRONG
AS HELL:
EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH
THEIR LIVED EXPERIENCES**

SEEKING RESEARCH STUDY PARTICIPANTS WHO ARE:

- MOTHERS WITH CHILD(REN) UNDER THE AGE OF 6
- FULL-TIME STAFF OR ADMINISTRATORS AT USD

THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY IS TO EXAMINE THE WORKING LIVES OF MOTHERS WHO ARE EMPLOYED FULL TIME AT USD IN RELATION TO THE INSTITUTIONAL POLICIES AND PRACTICES THAT AFFECT THEM.

PARTICIPANTS WILL MEET ON CAMPUS FOR 3 ONE HOUR FOCUS GROUPS. QUESTIONS ASKED INCLUDE: HOW LONG HAVE YOU WORKED AT USD? HOW DO YOU LIKE WORKING AT USD? HAVE YOU TAKEN MATERNITY LEAVE WHILE WORKING AT USD? WHAT MIGHT BE A SERVICE OR SUPPORT THAT USD IS NOT PROVIDING NOW THAT WOULD BE MEANINGFUL TO YOU IF THEY DID?

ACTIVITIES INCLUDE A WALK AND TALK, AND CREATION OF A TREE OF LIFE & VISION BOARD.

Lunch will be provided at the 2nd and 3rd focus groups. The 2nd and 3rd focus groups will be audio recorded.

All participants will be entered in a \$10 gift card raffle after each focus group.

For more information, contact Colleen Smith:
colleensmith@sandiego.edu or 619-260-2238
(Faculty Advisor: Dr. Cheryl Getz cgetz@sandiego.edu)

Appendix B

Email Solicitation

Hello,

My name is Colleen Smith. I am a student in the Higher Education Leadership MA program in SOLES. I am conducting a research study about those who identify as women and are mothers with a child or children under the age of 6 years old and working full time at USD as a staff of administrator-I would like to invite you to participate.

The purpose of this study is to get a sense of those who identify as women and mother's experiences and feelings of purpose and worth at USD. You are being asked to participate because you are someone who identifies as a woman and a mother with child or children under the age of 6 years old and working full time at USD.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to participate in 3 on-campus, in-person meetings in a public but secluded meeting place that will last about 60 minutes each. You will be asked questions like: How long have you worked at USD? How old is/are your child(ren)? How do you like working at USD? Did you take maternity leave while working at USD? What might be a service or support that USD is not providing now that would be meaningful if they did? You will also be asked a few questions about yourself such as your ethnicity, whether you are a staff member or administrator at USD, years employed at USD, and familial life.

Focus group activities include a mapped campus "walk and talk", creating a "tree of life" and creating a "vision board". A "tree of life" is a creative outlet using words and imagery, specifically to describe your experiences working at USD. A "vision board" is defined as a collage of images and words representing a person's wishes or goals, intended to serve as inspiration or motivation. This "vision board" will reflect on what participants see in the future for themselves as a mother working full time. As compensation to your participation, lunch will be provided as focus group meetings #2 and #3. In addition to this, all participants will be entered in a \$10 gift card raffle at the end of each focus group.

This study involves no more risk than the risks you encounter in daily life. The sessions will be audio recorded but your responses will be kept confidential, and all your information will be coded with pseudonyms. I will keep the study data for a minimum of 5 years. Taking part in this study is entirely optional. ***Choosing not to participate will have no effect on your employment status, grades, or any other benefits to which you are entitled.*** You may also quit being in the study at any time or decide not to answer any specific questions. If you would like to participate or have any questions about this study, please email me. Thank you for your consideration.

Colleen Smith colleensmith@sandiego.edu

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Cheryl Getz cgetz@sandiego.edu

Appendix C

Adult Consent Form

University of San Diego

Institutional Review Board

Research Participant Consent Form

For the research study entitled:

Mothers Are Strong As Hell: Empowering Women Through Their Lived Experiences

I. Purpose of the research study

Colleen Smith is a student in the Higher Education Leadership MA program in SOLES at University of San Diego (USD). You are invited to participate in a research study she is conducting. The purpose of this study is to get a sense of those who identify as women and mother's experiences and feelings of purpose and worth in working at USD. You are being asked to participate because you are someone who identifies as a woman and a mother with a child or children under the age of 6 years old and working full time at USD.

II. What you will be asked to do

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to:

- Meet on campus, in an outdoor, public yet secluded location, for in person meeting for 3 focus group sessions that will last about 60 minutes each time, for a total meet time of 3 hours for the full study. You will be asked questions like: How long have you worked at USD? How old is/are your child(ren)? How do you like working at USD? Did you take maternity leave while working at USD? What might be a service or support that USD is not providing now that would be meaningful if they did?
- Complete a paper questionnaire gathering data on ethnicity, whether you are a staff member or administrator at USD, years employed at USD, and familial life.
- Additionally, you will be asked to complete 2 art projects during focus group #2 and #3 that will be discussed and collected.

Focus groups #2 and #3 will be audio-recorded and art projects will be collected. All focus groups will happen in person in a group setting within an outdoor, public yet secluded location. All participants will be provided lunch in focus groups #2 and #3 and every participant will be entered to win a gift card at a raffle that will be held at the end of each focus group meeting.

III. Foreseeable risks or discomforts

Sometimes when people are asked to think about their feelings, they feel sad or anxious. If you would like to talk to someone about your feelings at any time, you can call toll-free, 24 hours a day: San Diego Mental Health Hotline at 1-800-479-3339. Additional community resources are below.

- University of San Diego's Counseling Center (619) 240-4655
 - Therapy and group counseling is available
 - A counselor is on-call 24/7, 7 days a week
- University of San Diego's Department of Public Safety-x2222 on any campus telephone; or call their direct line at (619) 260-2222
- The 24 hour San Diego Access and Crisis Line (1-888-724-7240); they also offer crisis intervention, information, and referrals
- Mental Health America of San Diego County (619) 543-0412
- San Diego Family Care (858) 279-0925
- National Institute for Mental Health (NIMH) (866) 615-6464

IV. Benefits

The direct benefit to you for participating in this study is being entered to win a gift card which will be raffled at the end of each focus group meeting. The indirect benefit of participating will be knowing that you helped researchers better understand how those who identify as women and mothers, experience and feel a sense of purpose and worth, while working at USD.

V. Confidentiality

Any information provided and/or identifying records will remain confidential and kept in a locked file and/or password-protected computer file in a google drive for a minimum of five years. All data collected from you will be coded with a pseudonym (fake name). Your real name will not be used. The results of this research project may be made public and information quoted in professional journals and meetings, but information from this study will only be reported as a group, and not individually. The information or materials you provide will be cleansed of all identifiers (like your name) and *may* be used in future research.

VI. Compensation

a) All participants will be provided with lunch in focus groups #2 and #3 and will be entered to win a \$10 gift card at a raffle that will be held at the end of each focus group meeting. You will receive this compensation even if you decide not to complete the entire study.

VII. Voluntary Nature of this Research

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You do not have to do this, and you can refuse to answer any question or quit at any time. Deciding not to participate or not answering any of the questions will have no effect on any benefits you're entitled to, like your health care, raffle winnings, or your employment or grades. **You can withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.**

VIII. Contact Information

If you have any questions about this research, you may contact either:

1) Colleen Smith

Email:colleensmith@sandiego.edu

2) Dr. Cheryl Getz

Email:cgetz@sandiego.edu

I have read and understand this form, and consent to the research it describes to me. I have received a copy of this consent form for my records.

Signature of Participant

Date

Name of Participant (**Printed**)

Signature of Investigator

Appendix D

Cycle 1 Session Guide

Focus Group Framing

Welcome, thank you for coming. To start us off, I deeply appreciate your interest and participation in this study, I am grateful to share this space with each of you. As a reminder, in order to participate, each of you has signed a consent form and a copy has been printed and given to you for your records.

The purpose of this study is to examine the working lives of women who identify as mothers and are employed full time at the University of San Diego (USD) in relation to the institutional policies and practices that affect them. Your identity will be kept confidential in this study, but I will be audio-recording our 2nd and 3rd session and collecting art projects completed then as well.

In this 1st meeting, we will be taking a mapped campus walk and talk as a group to get out of our indoor workspaces, take in some fresh air, and get to know one another. We will start and end here in the Nursing Building Courtyard. See mapped walking path below:



We will use the following prompts to get to know each other:

Focus Group Questions

- 1) How long have you worked at USD?
- 2) How old is/are your child(ren)?
- 3) How do you like working at USD?
- 4) Have you taken maternity leave while working at USD?

(At the end of the walk)

Thank you for your time on this first event of this study, you are welcome to continue your conversations or continue to walk, but we are now at the time boundary.

Cycle 2 session guide:

Focus Group Framing

(At the start of the meeting)

Welcome, thank you for coming. To start us off, I want to again express my appreciation for your continued interest and participation in this study. I am grateful to share this space with each of you.

As a reminder, the purpose of this study is to examine the working lives of women who identify as mothers and are employed full time at the University of San Diego (USD) in relation to the institutional policies and practices that affect them. Your identity will be kept confidential in this study, but I will be audio-recording this second session and third session and collecting art projects completed then as well.

In our 2nd meeting, we will be staying here in the Nursing Courtyard. Lunch has been provided today, so please help yourself to the spread whenever you would like. First, please complete the questionnaire attached to the clipboards I will distribute. Next, you will be creating a “tree of life” in relation to your life at this moment and to your experience as a USD employee and mom. Imagery and words or phrases are recommended, I have included an example “tree” with directions.

I will set a timer for 30 minutes to complete your tree of life with the pens, pencils, markers, clip boards and paper provided. After 30 minutes, I will call time and we will share our “trees” as a group and what came up for you.

Focus Group Questions

(After 30 minutes)

We are now at 30 minutes, please finish up and we will begin the discussion portion.

1. Would anyone like to share their “tree” first?
2. Did you notice any themes come up?
3. Is your experience as a USD employee and mom integrated in your “tree” or separate?
4. What are the reasons that might be?

(At the end of the activity and discussion)

Thank you for your time today, you are welcome to continue your conversations and please grab more food, but we are now at the time boundary.

Appendix E

Cycle 2 Demographics Questionnaire

Focus Group Meeting #2 Questionnaire

Please include your name here:

Please indicate your race & ethnicity:

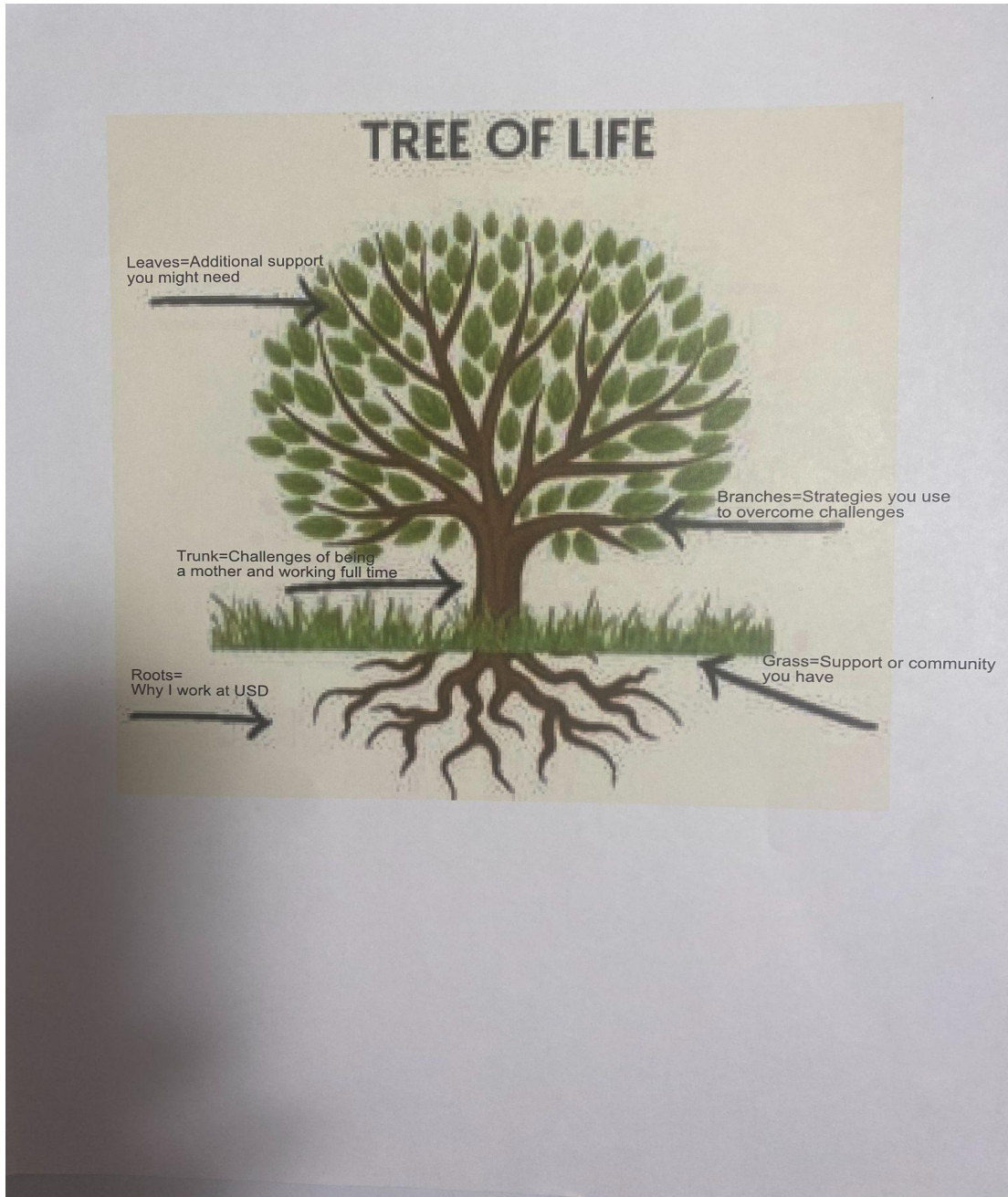
How many children do you have? What are their ages?

Are you in a Staff or Administrator position at USD?

Have you used USD's maternity leave policy?

Appendix F

Cycle 2 Tree of Life Example with Instructions



Appendix G

Cycle 3 Session Guide

Focus Group Framing

Welcome, thank you for coming. Thank you for your participation in this study. I am grateful to share this space with each of you.

As a reminder, the purpose of this study is to examine the working lives of women who identify as mothers and are employed full time at the University of San Diego (USD) in relation to the institutional policies and practices that affect them. Your identity will be kept confidential in this study, but I will be audio-recording this third session and collecting art projects completed in this session like the last session.

In this third and final meeting, we will be staying here in the Nursing Courtyard. Lunch has been provided today, so please help yourself to the spread whenever you would like. You will be creating a “vision board” and reflecting on what you see in the future for yourself as a mother working full time. A “vision board” is defined as a collage of images and words representing a person’s wishes or goals, intended to serve as inspiration or motivation. I will set a timer for 30 minutes to complete your “vision board” with the pens, pencils, markers, clip boards and paper provided. After 30 minutes, I will call time and we will share our “boards” as a group and what came up for you.

Focus Group Questions

(After 30 minutes)

We are now at 30 minutes, please finish up and we will begin the discussion portion:

1. Would anyone like to share their “vision board” first?
2. Did you notice any themes come up?
3. Is USD included in your “vision board” or in your future for yourself? Why or why not?
4. What might be a service or support that USD is not providing now that would be meaningful if they did?

(At the end of the activity and discussion)

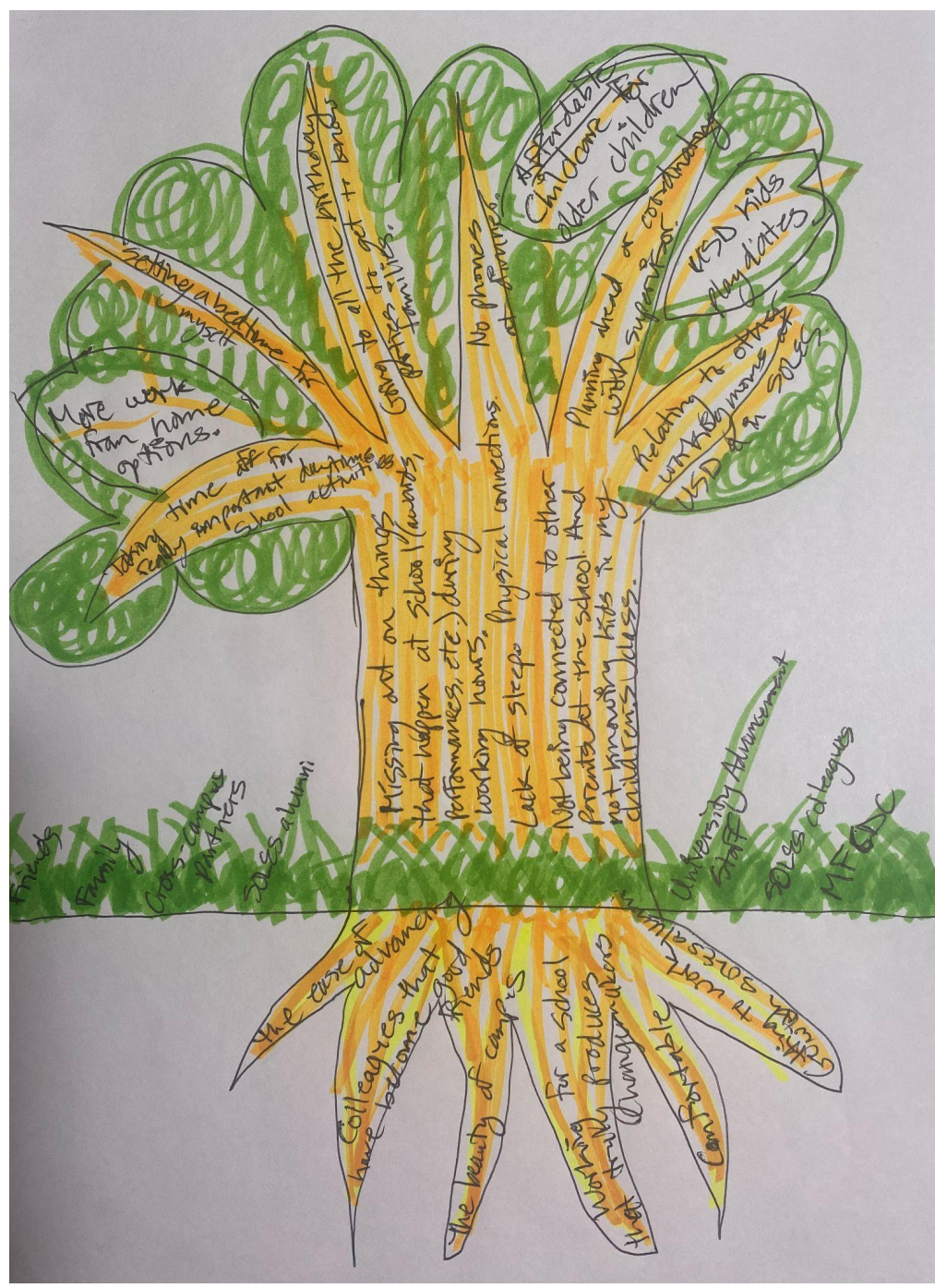
Thank you for your time on this third and final event of this study, you are welcome to continue your conversations and please grab more food, but we are now at the time boundary.

Appendix H

Artwork Photos from Cycle 2

Figure 1.

Individual Tree of Life Activity Responses





Appendix I

Artwork Photos from Cycle 3

Figure 2.

Individual Vision Board Activity Responses

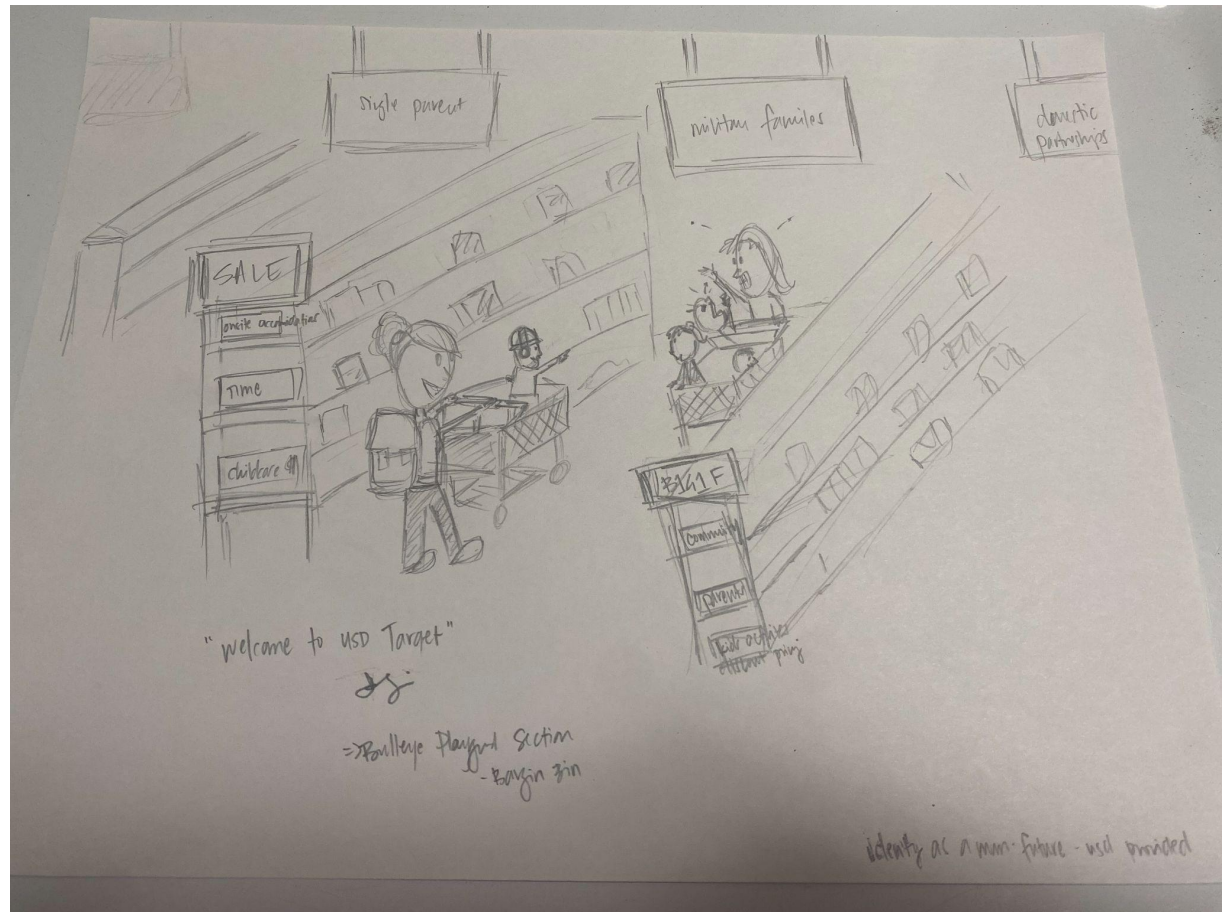


Figure 3.

Individual Vision Board Activity Responses

