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To cite this article:

Hail, T. M. & Kearney, K. S. (2023). Completing college after foster care: A retrospective lens. *International Journal on Social and Education Sciences (IJonSES)*, 5(3), 571-604. <https://doi.org/10.46328/ijoneses.558>

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Completing College after Foster Care: A Retrospective Lens

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Article Info

Article History

Received:

27 March 2023

Accepted:

12 June 2023

Keywords

Higher education

Educational leadership

Foster care

Child welfare

Abstract

Completing a college degree is a major accomplishment under the best of circumstances. The economic and societal value of a college degree has the potential to produce critical benefits for vulnerable populations. For youth who “age out” of foster care, existing data reveal an obvious discrepancy in actual outcomes in comparison to their peers without foster care experiences. Despite implementation of state and federal programs and funding to support college students with foster care experience, national statistics indicate that these students continue to complete college at significantly lower rates than their non-foster cohorts. This qualitative multi-case study consisted of nine participants representing graduates from five different public colleges in Oklahoma with unique individual experiences in “aging out” of the foster care system and completing a college degree. Four themes emerged as critical to participants’ ability to persist and complete college: accessing tangible and intangible support, belief that a degree would improve their quality of life, the need to improve lives of others and “give back,” and being proactive yet cautious when accessing support from others. Their lived experiences and shared commonalities of what helped them to persist and complete college provide valuable insight for professionals in the social service and educational arenas.

Introduction

For students formerly involved in the foster care system (having been in placement at some point between the ages of 13-18), data reveal significant educational disproportionalities in comparison to their non-foster peers, and they are considered one of the most vulnerable populations in terms of education (Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004). Additional national statistics for youth aging out of foster care reveal further disproportionality in their adult experiences with social problems including housing and food insecurities, substance abuse issues, incarceration, reliance on government assistance, early pregnancy and struggles with behavioral and mental health issues (Dworsky et al., 2013; Keller et al., 2010; Longhofer et al., 2011). The United States Department of Health and Human Services (2018) estimated 19,954 youth aged out of foster care (between the age of 18-23, contingent on the state they reside in, without a permanent family through reunification or adoption). The terms “aging out” or “emancipation” are often used for this particular faction of youth. When considering the fiscal impacts of dependency on welfare, incarceration, lack of education, and subsidized health care for former foster youth as adults, enhancing postsecondary opportunities for youth aging out of foster care is a sound investment for the collective interest, in addition to improving quality of life at the individual level (Dworsky, 2005). This sentiment

has been echoed by many researchers, noting that youth formerly in foster care aspire to attend college and have an awareness of the economic and personal implications a college degree may offer (Courtney et al., 2014; Herlocker, 2006). Research by Day et al. (2011) estimate that only 3-11% of youth formerly in foster care have completed a bachelor's degree, in contrast to 36% of the general population. From a quantitative standpoint, Packard et al. (2008) conducted a cost-benefit analysis of extending foster care from 18-23 years of age for foster care youth in California and ensuring provision of financial, educational, and emotional support during this critical transitional period to independence. They projected that a 75% success rate of college completion of students formerly in foster care has the potential to accumulate a "net benefit for the first 40 cohorts of \$1,458,224,758" (p.1276) over the course of their career spans; this is through reduction of incarceration and dependence on social services and increase in tax revenues. Another study by Trostel (2010) estimated that the "extra tax revenues from college graduates are more than six times the gross government cost per college degree" (p. 220). When considering the rate of return for a population with an established disproportionate impact on government resources, these findings solidify the need to increase attention and enhance support for vulnerable populations pursuing higher education.

Although it has been established that completing a college degree increases opportunities and decreases the likelihood of dependence on social resources, it has not been well established how experiences with support systems for college students with foster care experience influence outcomes for the small percent that persist and complete college (Salazar & Schelbe, 2021). The existing literature does substantiate the critical importance of tangible and emotional supports for populations seeking a college degree and highlights a lack of necessary supports for youth who age out of the foster care system (Courtney et al., 2011; Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Hass et al., 2014; Perry, 2006; Rosenberg & Kim, 2018). In their comparison of retention and persistence of students with foster care experience at a four year university to that of first generation non-foster alumni college students, Day et al. (2011) found a lack of academic preparation for postsecondary education, perceived lack of support from student personnel services, and a lack of ability to manage the demands of college life as barriers to persistence in college for those with foster care experience. Findings further indicated that students with foster care experience who were also first generation and low income had dropout rates of 21% for the freshman year and 34% prior to degree completion in comparison to their non-foster, first generation, low-income counterparts with dropout rates of 13% for the freshman year and 18% upon degree completion.

In the U.S. state of Oklahoma, 255 youth "aged out" of foster care in 2017 (Oklahoma Policy Institute, 2018). Recent research on outcomes for Oklahoma's foster youth who "aged out" coincides with national outcomes. Crawford et al. (2015) found 79% received mental health or substance abuse services, 25.61% experienced homelessness, 10% had involvement with the Office of Juvenile Affairs, and 62% accessed public services upon exit from foster care. The majority of existing literature related to adults with foster care experience tends to highlight poor outcomes and does not sufficiently address the ingredients for success, including support among the small percent of students who persist and complete college despite the odds. An understanding of the lived experiences of former foster youth who have attained a college degree, from their insider perspectives, is believed to be key to understanding how to maximize potential and best utilize existing resources for navigating higher education.

Relevant Literature

Relevant literature for this study primarily included work on college students with foster care experience. Because it was used as an analytical theory for data collected, self-determination theory is also briefly discussed. Despite the significant variances in long-term outcomes between students with foster care experience and their non-foster care peers, their hopes and desires for completing a college degree are similar. Courtney et al. (2001) found that youth in foster care have a strong desire to obtain higher education that is comparable to their non-foster peers, yet their goals are less likely to come to fruition. In response to addressing unique needs of foster youth in transition from dependence to independence, the federal government expanded independent living services with the implementation of the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 and the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, allowing states the opportunity to receive matched federal funds to enhance independent living programming (Stott, 2013). In 2002, the Chafee Care Independence Program established Education and Training Vouchers (ETV), providing eligible participants with \$5000 in aid for higher education expenses. In 2008, as part of ongoing efforts to address needs of youth experiencing foster care in their transition to independence, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 was implemented with the intent to further expand services by extending the ages for youth to remain in care beyond age 18 and mandating participating states to provide personalized assistance and support for transition 90 days prior to aging out of foster care (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010; Shinn, 2012). In sum, it has been established that state and tribal entities receiving federal funding must ensure the provision of financial, emotional, and educational support to youth who “are likely to remain in foster care until age 18, youth who, after attaining 16 years of age, have left foster care for kinship guardianship or adoption, and young adults ages 18-21 who have ‘aged out’ of the foster care system” (Children’s Bureau, 2012, para. 1). Within the aforementioned requirements, financial support, counseling, and housing services are measurable and easily defined; however, the ambiguity of what constitutes personal/emotional support and interactions with dedicated adults’ merits further investigation.

One way to promote optimal outcomes for college students formerly in foster care is to further explore how they perceive support and how campuses are working to meet individual needs in college. Campus support programs are not mandatory; rather, they are contingent on individual states to determine provision of additional funding, levels of collaboration with other networks, the framework utilized to provide support on their campuses, and to what degree the programs are evaluated for effectiveness of service delivery (Hernandez et al., 2017; Watt et al., 2019). Given the subjective nature of what constitutes “support” for students formerly in foster care while they are in college, it is critical to investigate subjective meanings from those with the lived experiences to help guide our understanding and improve service delivery with the goal of maximizing resources and supports.

In a study of campus support programs for college students with foster care experience, Dworsky and Perez (2010) found that relationships, a sense of belonging, and support held more value in college than the tangible support offered by campus programs. To further consider, students formerly in foster care may have unique barriers to developing the skills for reliable and healthy relationships (Zimmerman et al., 2013). However, the criticality of relationships for success in college has been established, and the benefits may be profound in terms of retention and completion (Singer et al., 2013). A study by Lemon et al. (2005) found that while former foster youth

transitioning to college benefit from concrete information (day-to-day life skills and information), the incorporation of a strong connection with a source of support that extends beyond teaching basic living skills is critical. Essentially, the relationship is more important than the information, and currently, independent living services struggle to address this crucial component of success (Greeson et al., 2015). Propp et al. (2003) observed that while services provided focus on the more objective, basic information necessary for independent living, the subjective components such as relationships were lacking and more difficult to incorporate into the independent living program requirements. While relationships are a key component in successful transitions for both foster and non-foster youth, specific challenges are more likely for youth who were involved in the foster care system.

Student organizations, counseling services, housing services, financial aid allies, mentoring, and development of campus support programs are just a few ways in which institutions have the potential to address this critical component for students with foster care experience. According to Bustillos et al. (2022), extended care services for students who have experienced foster care are offered by 26 states, and 37 states offer tuition and fee waivers as initiatives to improve educational outcomes for this population. Nationally, many college campuses have implemented formal campus support programs for students formerly in foster care, and researchers have evaluated strengths and challenges of various models to establish effectiveness and outcomes (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Lenz-Rashid, 2018; Miller et al., 2017; Okpych et al., 2020; Schelbe et al., 2019). Currently, the state of Oklahoma is reliant on a loose network of campus-based grassroots initiatives.

Previous scholarly literature addresses several issues relating to college students with foster care experience. The catalyst for much of the quantitative research derives from the foundational Midwest Study by Courtney et al. (2007) that highlights long term outcomes since the implementation of the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999. In contrast to the quantitative works, Hernandez and Naccarato (2010) conducted an exploratory, qualitative study examining the effectiveness of support programs for former foster care youth on twelve college campuses through a series of interviews with campus advocates across the nation. The findings echo the need for support; however, the interviews did not include the perspectives of college whose journeys included foster care.

Limited research exists that provides the perspective of the student formerly in foster care; however some research examines perspectives of this population during their journeys that address the significance of support. Tobolowsky et al. (2017) conducted a qualitative study with 12 students formerly in foster care as they were pursuing their college degrees and stated the participants “spoke about the importance of relationships at various points in their journey. Participants credited individuals with helping them stay on their successful path” (p. 95). Additionally, Hines et al. (2005) conducted a qualitative study and found that former foster youth cite the desire for a different life than they experienced in their childhood as primary motivators to their pursuit of a college degree. These studies are significant as they reflect students’ experiences from an insider perspective; however, they do not address the experiences of the students who persist and complete college.

In a recent quantitative study, Salazar (2012) addressed retention of college students with foster care experience and found “in addition to insufficient empirical evidence of support program effectiveness, there is also very little empirical information regarding what factors differentiate foster care alumni [stet] who do and do not drop out of

college” (p.140), concluding with a statement of the need for collaboration between child welfare agencies and higher education. Watt et al. (2018) examined data from the National Youth in Transition Database to understand the effectiveness of fiscal and social supports in enrollment and reiterated the need for a holistic approach to meeting the needs of students formerly in foster care to increase the likelihood of retention and completion stating, “If they do enroll, but college campuses do not provide the additional support needed, their post-secondary experience may be short lived” (p. 99). In their findings regarding the effectiveness of tuition waivers and campus support programs, Okpych et al. (2020) found a positive correlation among students who received tuition waivers and engaged in campus support programs in terms of their ability to persist in college. In contrast, another study by Watt et al. (2018) examined outcomes of the post-secondary tuition and fee waiver program, the first to be implemented nationally, in the state of Texas. They found that, although waivers were beneficial in promoting higher education for foster youth, they did not make a substantial improvement in outcomes and recommended supplementing waivers with other initiatives specifically geared toward retention and utilization of existing resources.

It is imperative to consider ways in which higher education may have the capacity to meet the need for relational support on their campuses. While a growing number of higher education institutions across the nation are responding to the needs of college students with foster care experience, Emerson (2006) found student services personnel at most postsecondary institutions are not familiar with or prepared to address the unique needs of this population. Given the range of support services available to a multitude of at-risk student groups in higher education institutions, it would benefit institutions without any designated campus support programming to consider the ways to increase services that are applicable; however, this requires familiarity or willingness to learn more about the challenges of being involved in the foster care system. Miller et al. (2017) suggest that college campuses may benefit from staffing programs initiatives “with individuals familiar with the public child welfare system in general, and foster care, specifically” (p. 66) and postulate this approach would help reconcile gaps between programmatic goals and the complex nature of the needs of students formerly in foster care.

Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory provides a theoretical framework for understanding human motivation in pursuing goals and has been influenced by previous theories related to needs and motivation. Rooted in an organismic theory of motivation, self-determination theory is based upon the following assumption:

People are active organisms with evolved tendencies toward growing, mastering ambient challenges, and integrating new experiences into a coherent sense of self. The natural developmental tendencies, do not, however, operate automatically, but instead require ongoing social nutrients and support (“Self-determination theory,” para. 1).

Further, the social environment can serve to help or hinder an organism’s innate desire to be engaged and strive for both physical and psychological development. This interaction is the foundation for the premise of self-determination theory. Self-determining individuals are flexible and able to adapt even in situations where the availability of options are limited, versus the non-self-determining behavior of inflexibility and inability to adapt

(Deci, 1980). Stone et al. (2009) further explained, “Humans are inherently motivated to grow and achieve and will fully commit to and even engage in uninteresting tasks when their meaning and value is understood” (p. 77). The levels and orientation of underlying motivations are significant in understanding goal-directed behavior.

Understanding the concept of motivation is significant in many aspects; in terms of higher education, it is also beneficial to consider ways to facilitate growth and development as a potential means of improving student engagement, increasing retention, and improving overall outcomes. Intrinsic motivation has materialized as a critical phenomenon in the educational arena as a source in which achievement may be facilitated or destabilized (Ryan & Stiller, 1991). Furthermore, Ryan and Deci (2000) state, “Intrinsic motivation refers to doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable and extrinsic motivation refers to doing something because it leads to a separable outcome” (p. 55).

Intrinsic motivation is facilitated through promoting the inherent psychological need for satisfying feelings of competence, relatedness, and autonomy. Autonomy is the notion that people make decisions independently and are in control of their behavior as they pursue their goals. Competence refers to one’s ability to master tasks or perceive themselves as having the ability to develop mastery. The final concept, relatedness, is the idea that a sense of connection and belonging to other people serves to elevate levels of motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Organismic integration theory contends that extrinsic motivation is contingent on the extent to which autonomy exists. Ryan and Deci (2000) define extrinsically motivated behaviors as regulation, external regulation, introjected regulation, and integrated regulation:

Identified regulation “reflects a conscious valuing of a behavioral goals or regulation.” *External regulation* consists of “behaviors to satisfy an external demand or reward contingency.” *Introjected regulation* is a “relatively controlled form of regulation from which behaviors are performed to avoid guilt or anxiety or to attain ego enhancements such as pride.” *Integrated regulation* occurs “when identified regulations are fully assimilated to the self” (pp.72- 73).

Intrinsically or extrinsically motivated behaviors are both useful in helping to understand persistence. Self-determination theory is a useful lens in considering the “how” and “why” people are motivated to achieve goals. For the population of college students who were in foster care, it is important not only to understand the sources of motivation but also to understand what circumstances help to facilitate and regulate behaviors geared toward persistence. Implementation of programming and reducing barriers in efforts to support college students with foster experience are both important factors in gaining momentum toward shifting educational outcomes from a macro perspective; however, it is important for institutions to understand how support is perceived and pursued from the micro perspective of the experts in this matter, the college students themselves.

Method

Research Design

This qualitative research utilized a multiple case study methodology to gather knowledge related to the

experiences of college student with experience in foster care. According to Creswell (2009), social constructivists operate under the assumption that individuals “develop subjective meanings of their experiences” (p. 8). The collaborative nature of a multi-case study methodology is inherently well positioned upon the constructivist philosophical worldview. For the purpose of this study, symbolic interactionism served as the theoretical perspective. The assumptions of this theoretical perspective are that construction of meaning occurs as individuals engage with others, actions are a response of the individuals’ interpretations of those meanings, and reality is not fixed but is fluid and subject to modification based on individual interpretations (Crotty, 2009). This perspective further explains how individuals assign meaning to their experiences and their engagement with the world. The following two research questions, related to individuals with foster care experience, guided this work:

1. What did individuals with a bachelor’s degree, completed from a public four-year college in the state of Oklahoma, perceive as contributors to their ability to persist and complete college?
2. How did individuals with foster care experience seek and utilize formal and informal support while in college?

Study Context and Participants

Criterion sampling (Creswell, 2009) was utilized to ensure participants met the specific criteria of being in foster care between the ages of 13-18 and completing a minimum of a bachelor’s degree at a public institution in the state of Oklahoma between 2005-2015. All participants in this study aged out of the foster care system (turned 18 without achieving permanency through reunification or adoption). In this study, a case was defined as the experiences of each individual student who had foster care experience. This study targeted multiple cases to highlight individual uniqueness as well as common experiences of students with foster care experience who persisted and completed college. As shown in Table 1, nine individuals who met the criteria were participants in this study.

Table 1. Participants

Participant	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Degree Major
Maria	37	F	Hispanic	Social Work
Faith	27	F	Caucasian	Accounting
Brittany	22	F	Caucasian	Animal Science
Brandon	23	M	Caucasian	Accounting
Anthony	24	M	Caucasian	Human Services
Malcolm	23	M	African American	Psychology
Isabella	24	F	Hispanic	Criminology
Jennifer	25	F	Caucasian	Human Services
Heather	24	F	Caucasian	Human Development & Family Sciences

Data Collection

Participants were asked to participate in two semi-structured individual interviews that lasted approximately 45-

60 minutes each. During the first interview, participants completed a timeline activity that identified significant events in their engagement with their respective higher education institutions. A study by Kolar et al. (2015) found the use of timelines “consistently helped in making participants’ life stories the center of the interview space, and brought contextual depth” (p. 24). In the second interview, participants shared an artifact representative of their ability to persist and complete their college degrees. According to Wildemuth (2009), artifacts may provide a “more accurate representation of the phenomenon of interest than data collected through self report” (p. 165).

The semi-structured interview questions consisted of 12 open-ended questions related to participants’ lives at the present time (e.g., Tell me about yourself?), decision to attend college and experiences in college (e.g., What made you decide to go to college? How would you describe your life during college?), challenges encountered (e.g., What was most challenging to you while you were in college?), ways they navigated those challenges (e.g., How did you overcome those challenges? What kept you moving forward?), and how they might advise others to support college student with foster care experience (e.g., What do others need to know about students with foster care experience and persistence in college?). Interviews were recorded and transcribed; physical artifacts and timelines were photographed. During the data collection, participants shared very intimate pieces of themselves for the purposes of promoting better outcomes for others and in hope of transforming the system they came from.

Data Analysis

Individual participants were the primary unit of analysis and the focal point of the study. While data analysis began almost simultaneously with the start of data collection, focused data analysis began upon completion of individual interviews, which included participants’ discussion of their artifacts and timeline activity. The computer software program MAXQDA was utilized for organizing the processes of both open and closed coding of the data. Both inductive and deductive analysis was conducted. In order to expand on the data corpus, analytic and reflective memos were used, which included “questions, musings, and speculations about the data and emerging theory” (Creswell, 2007, p. 290). Patton (2002) describes deductive analysis as using data in accordance with an existing theoretical framework. This section of the analysis relied on the theoretical framework of Ryan and Deci’s (2000) self-determination theory. A second component of analysis consisted of “open coding” or inductive analysis. According to Patton (2002), “inductive analysis involves discovering patterns, themes, and categories” in the data, “through the analyst’s interaction with the data” (p. 453) and without the framing of a specific theory. The analytical memos produced during data analysis, as well as the results of two rounds of coding, were used for “cross referencing codes and emerging categories” (Creswell, 2007, p. 290) and sense-making related to “identify[ing] core consistencies and meanings” (Patton, 2002, p. 453). This layer of analysis revealed patterns and themes across the data corpus that were translated into findings.

Trustworthiness & Positionality

Trustworthiness for the study results were pursued through addressing issues of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Erlandson et al., 1993). Table 2 details the techniques, application, and criterion used.

Table 2: Trustworthiness

	Technique	Application
Credibility	Member check	Cross-reference interview transcriptions
Transferability	Thick rich description Purposive sampling	Re-presentation
Dependability	Reflexive journaling	Analytic memos
Confirmability	Confirmability audit	Audit trail

Data, described in thick, rich description from multiple sources (participants), increased transferability (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Credibility was pursued through conducting member checks, which also served to reduce researcher bias. A researcher log ensured dependability. According to Creswell (2007), reflexivity is awareness by the author of “biases, values and experiences they bring to a qualitative research study” (p. 243). Triangulated reflexive inquiry consists of self-reflexivity, reflexivity of those studied, and reflexivity about audience provided a framework for self-awareness throughout the interpretation and representation of data (Luttrell, 2010; Patton, 2002).

The first author 1 is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker who spent almost ten years working with at-risk youth in residential and home-based settings prior to becoming a faculty member in social work. She was also a kinship foster parent. Author 2 is a faculty member in higher education and student affairs with a primary focus on research and advocacy for hidden populations in college, which includes students with foster care experience. As a mother, she adopted of two of her three children.

Limitations

Limitations of this study included a strong reliance on semi-structured interviewing to gather data, which relies heavily upon participant recall. While, due to sample size, a limitation to this study is the ability to generalize, the intention is to illustrate, through in-depth study of college students with foster care experience, the resiliency of members of a marginalized group who are more often in the spotlight for poor life outcomes.

Case Reports / Findings

This section presents individual level case reports and findings. Our intention in the individual narrative presentation is to capture the depth and understanding of unique individual perspectives and experiences. According to Patton (2002), it is imperative that “each case study in a report stands alone, allowing the reader to understand the case as a unique, holistic entity” (p. 450). To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms are used for all individuals. A later section will integrate the emergent themes and findings that resulted from cross-case analysis.

Maria

By the time Maria reached her 18th birthday, she experienced a total of 15 placements in foster care, including an adoption that was later terminated due to abuse. According to Maria, growing up in foster care meant that support and relationships were minimal. Her transition from foster care to adulthood left her with a harsh realization that she was on her own and lacked any real connection to others.

In addition to not having relational support during the critical to adulthood, she also developed an awareness that tangible support for her basic needs was no longer provided for her. She recalled, “I was given a \$200 voucher to Wal-Mart and my case was closed and that was it; there was no follow up.” Maria did not feel as if she had many options at that point in her life. She stated, “Nobody really encouraged me to finish [high] school or to get my GED, so I just kind of floundered around.” By age 21, Maria was divorced and a single mother, living in public housing, and reliant on public transportation to work. True to the statistical forecast for someone on the “aging out of foster care” journey.... she had arrived. Maria struggled to meet basic needs for her and her son and recalled spending many years working multiple jobs to make ends meet. When she reconnected with a former foster care caseworker, Deborah, whom she described as supportive despite Maria’s resistance, she found a consistent, positive source of support that ultimately instilled the message that life “didn’t always have to be so tough” and that she had options to change her circumstances.

Maria described Deborah as a “mother figure” who provided ongoing encouragement and support and credits her with her decision to enroll in junior college, although she felt ill-prepared. “The one I call mom now [Deborah], she gave me \$200 for graduation [from community college] and I literally was like...if I go on and get my bachelors’ degree, how much will I get?” The support and incentive Maria described, and her desire to do her best for her son, were strong motivators for her to pursue a bachelors’ degree. Maria’s goal was to provide a better life for her family, but also “to make change in the [foster care] system that is broken.” Maria shared a photograph of herself as a young child and tearfully explained that it was the only picture she had of herself. She said the photo was representative of her innocence and vulnerability. The idea that she once had a “clean slate” inspired her to push herself forward. She realized she could have a new beginning in life if she chose to be vulnerable again and to work to realize the strength she has within her. At the time of our interview, Maria had completed her Master of Social Work degree and was working with children in the child welfare system.

Maria Single Case Findings

Maria acknowledged her resistance to others and frustration with her circumstances during her transition out of the foster care system. She needed and desired support but was not adequately prepared to receive it due to a lack of past healthy relationships. Maria attributed becoming a mother as a source of motivation for having a better life, as well as accepting the need to be vulnerable enough to receive support and encouragement through healthy relationships that led her to pursue her education. Maria described her initial motivation to be one of necessity for survival; however, she eventually began to feel empowered and realized she had an opportunity to not only provide a new life for her and her son but also serve as an agent of change in a system that seemingly failed her as a child.

Faith

Faith entered the foster care system at the age of 12 and “aged out” of foster care at 18 years of age. She attended 21 schools during her K-12 studies and shared the challenges of finishing high school because of her multiple placements. Faith’s ability to complete college was a direct result of seizing opportunities that came her way no matter what her circumstances. She stated, “I knew I wanted to better myself. I wanted to be better than what my mom was, you know, like how she took care of her kids.” More specifically, Faith “wanted to be financially stable so that [she] didn’t have to rely on the government and state assistance to help, and [she] wanted to live in the good part of the neighborhood.” She recalled having a keen awareness early in high school that she would need to take the initiative to achieve her life goals, specifically completing college as a way to help her dreams of safety and security come to fruition.

According to Faith, a key requirement in her ability to pursue and complete higher education was stepping outside of her comfort zone. She acknowledged it was challenging to accept help from others and stated she “didn’t want to put anyone out. [She] wanted to be on [her] own, like independent, very independent and didn’t want to ask for help from anyone.” She recalled how she had to be proactive in her high school studies to graduate and how this translated for her into her ability to reach out to others to continue toward a college degree. She recalled the difficulty in “putting pride out there” when she was in need and coming to terms with the notion that asking for help was a positive in this regard, as she saw the temporary vulnerability as a means to an end. Faith described preparing for her college journey as “intense” due to the fact that she did not have stable housing and lacked any type of security net. Faith felt overwhelmed about the logistical aspects of aging out of foster care and was not optimistic that she could afford to live on campus. She recalled negotiating an agreement with her foster mother to rent the room she had lived in prior to becoming 18 years old. She stated, “I offered to pay her “\$300 to rent the room. IL [Independent Living] funds helped pay for it. She [foster mother] was very low income so she needed extra income.” Her foster mother agreed and Faith stayed there until she found a house for the same monthly amount. This was the beginning of many ways she negotiated instability to complete her college journey.

In college, Faith accessed resources, secured housing, and chose a career path in nursing. Faith reflected, “There were several times I missed an electric bill or something because I wasn’t used to it; I never had the responsibility of having to do it or have someone show me how to do that.” After failing half of her courses in the first semester of her nursing program, Faith felt like “quitting everything” but sought guidance from her ETV (Educational Training Voucher) specialist, who validated her difficulties and encouraged her to pursue a career path that she enjoyed, not one chosen based upon money. Faith trusted her ETV specialist and chose to implement the advice she received against other learned instinct. She credited a great deal of her success to being proactive and utilizing the support system she had, as well as choosing to pursue a degree that would allow her to assist others transitioning from care to independent living.

Faith presented a page in her Bible as the artifact representative of her persistence in college. While she held her nursing newborn son, she cited a verse from her bible and recalled that, as a young child, her mother did not attend church and even discouraged Faith from attending. Faith reported she always found a way to attend, through the

church bus or with friends or neighbors. She believed if she made a way to do her part, God would make a way for her. At the conclusion of our final interview, Faith was working toward becoming a Certified Public Accountant and had purchased her first home.

Faith Single Case Findings

Faith's drive and determination to serve as her own advocate, adapt to new situations, and acquire necessary skills to be independent are all reflective of stepping outside of her comfort zone, as well as acknowledging that she needed help. While Faith was very open about the discomfort in seeking help from others, she learned the more she leaned in, the easier things became. She learned to not let her pride override logic and chose to trust in others to achieve her educational goals in college. Her decisions were practical and intentional.

Brittany

Brittany saw her degree as the first step of many in being "able to actually begin" life. Brittany's time in the foster care system began when she was 17 years old; however, she reported having to endure her abusive home situation for 7 years prior to being removed. For Brittany, foster care not only ended the years of abuse, but it also created new possibilities. Brittany did not consider college until in foster care, which "surprisingly pushed me towards wanting to go to college. Before all that happened, I actually didn't even think about it." She recounted having good grades despite the fact that she "hated" high school, and she knew she did not "want to end up like my parents and wanted to have a good life. The only way to do that [was] to step up and go to college." "Going to college was like a new beginning for me. I moved really far away and I didn't know hardly anybody in [town] and so it was a completely new start. It was just like me rewriting my story."

Brittany shared her strategic approach to starting her new life. She stated she had to be conscientious about her priorities and standards she set for herself. She envisioned the finish line and assumed that if she adhered to her strategy of discipline and prioritizing, she would achieve her educational goals. Even the best-laid plans are paved with obstacles along the way, and Brittany's plan for college was not an exception. She was not aware of basic college knowledge and was lumped in with a group of incoming freshman for enrollment. She stated, "I just kept signing up [for courses] and then somebody walked by and they're like, 'you're good, you're done.' They didn't sayyou should probably get rid of some of those classes." It wasn't until much later that Brittany realized attempting 17 hours her freshman year, not studying, and joining a sorority were not a sound approach. While she reported having positive experiences with joining a sorority, she acknowledged the toll it took on her coursework when combined with too many hours and inadequate study habits. She attributed failing a final exam her freshman year as her "wake up call" and vowed to work hard to bring her grades up and strike a balance between her social and academic life.

Brittany entered her sophomore year with new insight and modified strategies for being successful; however, she soon experienced significant health problems that also took a toll on her class attendance and performance. Brittany described dealing with her health problems as "just bringing me down." In addition to mental and physical

challenges, she reported a lack of reliable transportation. This was especially difficult for Brittany as she shared her disdain for asking others for help, something she believed threatened independence. Brittany was very adamant that she was “independent” and “self-motivated,” yet she emphasized the role that her involvement with other people and groups had on her ability to move forward and be successful in college.

Brittany continued to expand her support network in college. Her work in therapy was critical in helping her learn about trust, healthy relationships, and coping with the challenges she faced in her new life. This led Brittany to being very “upfront” and “open” about having been in the foster care system despite perceived “judgment” from others about her past. She decided that she would shift her narrative from a source of “pity” and “stereotypes” to something to be “proud” of and open about. She appeared to be empowered by this shift and realized she would be able to utilize her personal experiences to work in a profession that served to heal and empower others who experienced past trauma. For her artifact, she produced a card she received from her brother upon return from placement in a shelter. She stated it was a token of her ability to survive difficult times and a reminder of the bonds that motivate her. At the conclusion of our interview, Brittany was interviewing for a professional position working with foster care youth transitioning to college.

Brittany Single Case Findings

Unlike the other participants in this study, Brittany did not experience multiple placements in foster care; however, she did share the sentiment of wanting a fresh start in life. She found herself ill prepared for some of the basic knowledge of daily living skills and navigating college. Her reluctance to seek help was challenging and gave her reason to pause and reflect on her thinking. She chose to use tools from her work in therapy to shift her perspective about her lived experiences to a source of pride versus shame, and she viewed this as a pivotal moment in her college journey.

Brandon

Brandon was removed from his biological parents at the age of 13 during one of the many times their home was raided for drugs by law enforcement. He stated that during the previous raids of his home, the officers would call his grandmother, and she would care for Brandon and his siblings until his parents were released from jail. This time his grandmother arrived a few minutes late, resulting in Brandon being placed in the foster care system. He remained in foster care until he aged out at 18 years of age. During his time in the foster care system, Brandon experienced multiple placements but described feeling fortunate for kinship placements that kept him with various relatives. He credits his educational outcomes and decisions to the influences of not only those family members but also the exposure to educational opportunities available to children that age out of foster care.

Brandon attributes much of his ability to persist and complete college to learning how to be dependent on others, which he described as an “emotional journey” as he felt it was unnatural to depend on someone who had no obligation to care for him. He reported strong feelings that he might be “annoying [to others]” and experienced “fits of depression” when, early in college, he felt as if others were helping him out of “pity.” He concluded that

he needed to be able to rely on others without “feeling sorry” for himself and to be mindful that “these people want to help because they love me and care about me.” Brandon credited learning to embrace dependence as foundational in his ability to “learn how to be independent.” He stated, “My favorite thing of learning how to be dependent is finding the value that people see in me, but that was a learning process.” Brandon further explained that when he went to college he had to “learn how to live off of my friends” who were “not necessarily responsible” for him. He stated his roommates in college came from “more established families” and, therefore, were better equipped for college than he was. While he was largely dependent on his friends for transportation, basic household items to furnish their living quarters, and contingency funds in emergency situations, he utilized other resources whenever possible. He stated, “I did depend on them taking me to the grocery store, but I took the bus to school.” He also recalled a time when his financial aid was not disbursed as anticipated, leaving him without money to cover his portion of the rent. His roommate loaned him the money until he received his financial aid. In addition to his roommates, Brandon depended on Department of Human Services Independent Living (IL) workers. Brandon stated, “I relied on independent living a ton when I came out of foster care. I got really close with Independent Living.” He learned to depend on support beyond the financial support he received from IL as he recalled reaching out to his IL worker and the IL director when he needed advice or guidance before making decisions. He shared his experience of receiving a phone call from the IL director informing him that someone wanted to donate a car to him. He credited the donation of the car and the relationship with the IL team as instrumental to his ability to gain more independence in college.

He credits his connections to his success, stating “I was always around different individuals that had aspirations, so I developed the same aspirations, just by nature of proximity.” Brandon described how his involvement with the Independent Living (IL) program was of great value to him. “I wanted to do something for myself. I wanted to make something of myself, which was unheard of for people in my family, so if these people, entrusting in them is going to help me accomplish that, that is important.” He stated his IL worker and IL director were not “in this field because it pays well. It's not lucrative; they do it because they want to see people succeed that are in the program.” He assigned a great deal of value to not only the tangible support he received but also to the potential they saw in him and how that instilled more confidence in his ability to do well in college. For the conclusion of our interviews, Brandon brought his business card. He described the artifact as representative of the investment he and others made in his college journey. He stated, “I had a lot of help through college. I didn't want that to be wasted. People saw potential in me . . . and I don't want to waste that, so what drove me through college was knowing that I could be better off.” At the time of our final interview, Brandon was employed as a Certified Public Accountant with a Fortune 500 company.

Brandon Single Case Findings

Brandon utilized a cost-benefit analysis approach in his decision making throughout his college journey. He indicated he experienced interpersonal turmoil when it came to being dependent on others who were not “obligated” to support him; however, he decided the benefit for him long term would outweigh the personal costs of his having to be vulnerable to others. He maintained the mindset of how his short-term sacrifices would merit long-term benefits to him and allow him to live a stable life, something that was unfamiliar to him but he knew

he wanted “better.” He saw getting his college degree as the primary way to accomplish his goals. He opted to develop and maintain connections with people who could help him achieve his goals and was determined to hold up his end of the bargain by completing his degree and maximizing his resources.

Anthony

Anthony reported his “foster career” began when he entered into the foster care system at 11 years of age. He remained in care until he aged out at 18 years of age and experienced multiple placements over this 7-year span. He had one “full blood” brother, who was placed in foster care at the same time, yet they only lived together for 5 months during his tenure in the foster care system. Anthony shared how he experienced his first day at college. He recalled his foster parents helping him get moved in and then leaving him in his dorm. He stated, “I just cried and hugged them” before they left. “I just felt alone. I knew no one. I was starting over. It was scary but it was adventurous. I liked it; it was just I had to get that [crying] out of my system.” He credited his frequent moves as a foster child as a contributor to his ability to cope with fear and uncertainty. He further stated, “I always adjust quickly. I’ve learned to adapt well and adjust quickly from moving to places in foster care.” He identified managing his internal dialogue as critical to adapting to change. He recalled reminding himself that he was “an open-minded person and open to change if it’s going to benefit me” and “they [students in the dorms] are freshmen too so they’re probably going through the same thing I am.” Anthony reiterated how he has learned to redirect the way he views a circumstance or a situation, and he feels as if everything he has learned in his life up until this point has provided a strong foundation for him to become independent.

Anthony, a self-proclaimed “outgoing and positive” person, realized he would need to connect with others and work to integrate himself into college life; however, this would require “self-motivation” and being intentional in his interactions. He reported that as a result of his efforts, he “made a lot of friends and I just felt welcome. I felt like I was actually a part of something.” While some of his friendships and relationships on campus were organic, Anthony acknowledged he had to deliberately seek out some of his support networks. He described how he reached out to a friend from his hometown who knew someone at a church near campus and “got plugged in right away to that church.” Anthony admitted being extremely proactive in finding ways to meet his social and spiritual support needs. He shared his experiences of becoming a resident advisor and described the significance that role had in his ability to continue to develop support networks. He acknowledged that without intentionally seeking a support network it would have been very difficult to have integrated into campus culture and develop those critical connections. Anthony credited seeking out and developing a support system as deliberate and empowering. He stated, “There is nothing stopping you but you at this point. Maybe you never felt empowered, but you can actually be empowered this time.” Lastly, Anthony described how his Education Training Voucher (ETV) specialist was a source of support for him in terms of helping with the financial aspects and provision of tangible resources he needed for meeting his basic needs in college.

For his artifact, Anthony looked toward the parking lot and said, “It’s that car right there.” He stated he had sold the car several months earlier and borrowed it to bring as his artifact. Anthony reported that in his last foster home before college, he was given the opportunity to save half of the money for a car, and the house parents would pay

for the other half. He stated, "I bought the vehicle and it felt like just mine and I kept it all through college. It is something that's one the proudest things I had. Because I earned that money, I earned it. I felt good." He described the support and saving money to purchase a car as a wonderful lesson in working for something that is important and will have a lasting impact on his life. Anthony elaborated, "Yeah, we are foster kids. Yes we do need some support in a lot of areas but we don't need handouts. We can be fine in how we are; just teach us how to earn stuff." He recalled many times in foster care in which folks with seemingly good intentions would want to help them by "just giving stuff" and highlighted the importance of understanding how teaching and supporting youth in foster care should be geared toward upward mobility and to promote independence, not simply offering a "crutch." At the conclusion of our interviews, Anthony was employed in an agency working with children and families involved in the foster care system and was submitting his application to graduate school.

Anthony Single Case Findings

Anthony acknowledged his preliminary fears about transitioning from foster care to independence. He found opportunities by using experiences with his supports to maximize his potential and realize his educational goals. He attributed a great deal of his ability to persist and be successful to the experiences of others "doing with" and not "doing for" him, which facilitated personal growth and was instrumental in his decision to choose a career serving the individuals with foster care experience.

Malcolm

Malcolm reported being in foster care "on and off for about basically my whole entire childhood." He stated he was the fourth of seven siblings, all brothers. He opted to sign himself back into foster care when he turned 18 years old so that he could utilize available funding for college. He credited early influences from his biological father and his desire to work in a field where he can help others as instrumental in his quest for a college degree. While he acknowledged the support from the state was a strong motivation for him to remain in foster care beyond his 18th birthday, he stated that he would have attended college regardless of the available funding provided to him.

Malcolm reported that he never lived with his biological mother, and his involvement with his biological father was never consistent. Malcolm disclosed he felt a need to reconnect with his biological family when he turned 18 years old. This reunion coincided with the time frame in which he began planning to attend college. During his brief reconnection with his biological family, he witnessed firsthand "how unhealthy my brothers are. Sometimes you have to see it to believe it yourself." The need to reconnect with his original source of support in life was met with the harsh reality that his relationships with them might not be beneficial to his educational endeavors. Malcolm recalled, "Coming into college, I didn't really have a strategy. I just knew that I just wanted to graduate." While his initial focus was graduating, he reported finding his "motivation" early on. He attributed his desire to become a helping professional as a motivator but also reported that he made strong personal connections with peers on campus. Malcolm stated, "I never had like a family dynamic in a sense, but I started making friends that became my family." He credited the friends he made at college as instrumental in his ability to successfully

complete college. He recalled meeting one friend in particular to whom he instantly felt connected. Months later, he learned that she also had foster care experience. He described the need for a support system for college students and emphasized how important it is to connect with others on campus who are able to empathize with a foster care background, stating, “We’re not as prone to structure as somebody who grew up in a normal family would be. We always had more freedoms and pushbacks than other children would have growing up, so coming to college is an adjustment.” He attributed his friendships as beneficial to him not only on a social level but also to help him push to maintain the academic rigor needed to complete college. In his intentional and deliberate approach, Malcolm was able to construct a support system to collaborate with his internal drive to graduate from college.

In addition to Malcolm’s need for healthy relationships in college, he decided to incorporate and emphasize some of his core strategies from high school to his college career. According to him, this meant that he needed to “study, make friends, and communicate with teachers” in order to be successful. Malcolm was immersed in various groups and activities during his time in college that gave him an opportunity to recognize and highlight his leadership skills but also allowed him to work toward things he was passionate about. Malcolm began networking with other students with foster care experience on his campus and became involved in engagement, recruitment, promotion, and facilitation of several events across the state targeting youth in foster care. He stated, “We started doing stuff with them [foster youth], and we basically met a lot of good contacts and a lot of former alumni [stet] who have this crazy yearning to help people.” These experiences expanded on his foundational experience as an activities board member, experienced participant in the foster care system, and his innate desire to help others during his college years. His sense of obligation, connection to others, and personal drive were significant contributors to his success in and outside of the classroom.

For our final interview, Malcolm produced a photograph of himself along with his biological father and three of his siblings. Malcolm reported that his father passed away at the beginning of his senior year in college. He hesitated momentarily and then said that this picture was the only photograph he has of him and his father. He cited the picture as “the main reason why I went to college. Even if I don’t have children, I know that I can at least afford to pay for my brothers to have pictures if they wanted it.” The second way the artifact was representative of his persistence was in the way his father lived his life prior to Malcolm being removed from his custody. Malcolm shared the struggles of his father as an immigrant and a person struggling with substance abuse issues but recalled also bearing witness to a man who was generous and kind to others. He felt proud to be able to continue and live his life as a reflection of his father’s positive attributes. Malcolm was in the process of completing his application to graduate school with the goal of becoming a mental health therapist working with at-risk youth.

Malcolm Single Case Findings

Malcolm relied on social supports during his time in college and attributed his aspirations to carrying on the positive attributes of his father while also utilizing his education to provide, in a sense, things for his biological siblings that he was not afforded. He emphasized the significance of connecting with others with foster care

experience, which helped him establish a sense of self and feel empowered to serve as a voice for the community. He attributed his personal experiences as foundational for his choice in his major and future career goals and his connections as drivers to persisting in his journey.

Isabella

Isabella was raised on the West Coast and aged out of foster care at 18 years of age. As a high school athlete, Isabella sought out various colleges offering athletic scholarships. She credited a job she had during her senior year in high school as instrumental in her decision to pursue a smaller school because she “liked the family environment it created,” and she wanted to find an institution that would offer a close-knit setting in the classroom. Isabella reported that she was not an “elite” athlete, but she wanted to pursue college athletics to provide an extra layer of insurance that she could be successful in college. She said, “I knew if I did [athletics], I would automatically have people that I would know and kind of have a network.” She intentionally immersed herself in campus life as a way to “make friends and form a family and they basically will be your support group.” Isabella recalled being elected to the student government association and stated that she placed a lot of emphasis on how others might perceive her. She said, “I started gaining a level of respect not only from my teammates and people I’d worked with through NSGA and I started establishing myself.” Isabella seemingly re-created herself as she wanted the world to see her: strong, hardworking, independent, and intelligent.

Isabella was intentional in her efforts. She reported self-awareness about how a bad reputation might interfere with her ability to complete college. She stated, “I can find myself getting into trouble just by hanging out with people. If you do stuff on campus it’s less likely that it will happen.” In addition to her athletics obligations, her involvement in the office of the student government organization, and her coursework, she also obtained a job at the campus bookstore. While her goals to be very involved on campus and stay on a positive track were planned with good intentions, she found unanticipated consequences of being far away from “home” and managing multiple obligations. Isabella often wanted to go back home to regroup and rejuvenate, but she knew it would not be a good place for her emotionally, so she kept moving forward. She elaborated, “Sometimes all it takes is someone to say, ‘Hey you got this.’” She learned that her personal connections across campus would help her not only have her basic needs met but also serve as a source of emotional support as well. She developed personal connections that served her well in her time of need; however, she still reported feeling like her personal connections truly “didn’t understand” her background in the foster care system. She offered an example of overhearing her peers “talking about how their parents don’t want to buy them another laptop and I’m like, oh, that’s cool like at least you have health insurance.” Isabella also recalled many low points in which she wanted to reach out to her biological family but was hesitant to do so as she was unsure that they could relate to the realities she was facing. She described feeling as if she were a part of two completely different worlds, neither of which she felt she belonged.

In her final interview, Isabella produced a set of car keys as her artifact. She attributed her ability to become independent and develop a higher level of self-confidence to being open to letting other people help her. Isabella recalled letting her guard down for the first time and how that changed so much for her. She stated, “I had this

huge chip on my shoulder about foster care. I felt like everyone would see me as a foster care kid and that I was like basically like some sort of damaged human that no one really wanted.” She reported a situation when she decided to accept an offer from a campus support person:

Dr. Q taught me how to drive and it was interesting because she wasn't my first person I had asked. No one understood what it's like to not have a car and not have a license and have to learn all that while ... they just didn't understand that little tidbit. I have so much more freedom now and it helped me think of like more ideas of how I could help others and like it just made me feel more independent. The second I had that I felt like there was less to stop me. I didn't have to live in an apartment two streets down; I could live some ten minutes away if I wanted to now because I could drive.

At the time of our final interview, Isabella was employed and in the process of applying to law school.

Isabella Single Case Findings

The personal connections with her teammates, coach, and professors and allies for college students with foster care experience had a profound influence on Isabella's college experience. Isabella's comfort level for engagement with personal connections on campus were not instantaneous and required personal reflection and opening up to the idea that she needed others to help her be successful. Isabella reported that she gradually found confidence and comfort, and she attributed having these tools, along with a source of support for college students with foster care experience, as being instrumental in her ability to complete college.

Jennifer

Jennifer reported that she was placed in foster care at the age of 15 and aged out of foster care at 18 years of age. She stated that she considered herself to be “spoiled in foster care” because she lived with the same family for almost 3 years and never experienced being homeless or residing in a shelter. She credited both her biological and foster families for strongly promoting the importance of higher education and said her biological mother and father were first generation college graduates and upper middle class. She grew up with the perspective that “college was never a question. It was assumed.” In addition, her foster father held a terminal degree, and she reported that her foster parents shared the expectation that she would go to college.

Jennifer said she gravitated toward a private university known for “student life.” As a result of encouragement from a high school counselor, however, Jennifer decided to apply for the Presidents Leadership Council (PLC) at the state university. She reported that being selected for PLC was a “deal breaker” in terms committing to a state college. In addition to being innately drawn toward strong student life on campus, Jennifer's involvement in PLC required her to be “involved in [a minimum of] three student organizations at any given time.” Jennifer described this as a “busy time” but “that's the beauty [of PLC]. It created an environment where I was interacting with people of different degree programs.” This resulted in significant, lifelong connections.

As Jennifer progressed through college, she became involved in Greek life, Honors Society, and study abroad. Jennifer attributed her success in college not only to expectations from her family but also to the other people who

realized her potential and invested in her. She recounted, “Once I came into foster care there were people who invested in me,” and “undoubtedly the reason why I’ve been successful can be directly attributed to mentors in high school and in college.” Jennifer shared her experiences of how those with foster care experience are perceived as either “deviant” or to be “pitied.” She elaborated that those stereotypical views, while likely unintentional, are not helpful. She recalled subtle ways she was reminded of the stigma associated with her status through statements like “I can’t believe you were in foster care,” “I can’t believe you’re not in prison,” or “I can’t believe you’re not on drugs.”

In contrast, Jennifer recalled very powerful messages from those who understood her experiences and communicated the message, “You are worth the effort. You are worth the effort that you are putting forth. It’s worth it to us and it’s worth it to you to work that hard.” She elaborated, “Our experiences and our shortfalls that are the result of our trauma are going to be across the board, but so are our strengths.” Jennifer’s high school counselor was the first person she identified as instilling in her a sense of investing in others. She stated, “I really had a sense of purpose in that. I’d been taught in high school that that’s what you do. You reach in[to] the lives of younger people.” Jennifer recalled learning that a member of the selection panel for PLC had also been in foster care and saw her for her strengths- versus the stereotypical deficits-based perspective. This solidified Jennifer’s desire to continue investing in others.

Jennifer shared several artifacts in her office, starting with a desk ornament, in the shape of a light bulb, that belonged to her foster father, who passed away shortly after she graduated from college. She described its significance as communicating support and modeling consistency for her. Situated directly behind the ornament was a painting that was given to her by her foster siblings on her first Christmas in foster care; to her it represented that she was welcome and cared for. Jennifer’s final object was a vase with what appeared to be baby’s breath flowers. She reported that her husband gave her the flowers, which were from her foster father’s funeral. She paused briefly and closed by saying, “Those three things are together on purpose and, consequently, right next to my college diploma.” At the conclusion of our time together, Jennifer was employed in an agency working with at-risk youth and in the process of becoming a foster parent.

Jennifer Single Case Findings

Jennifer attributed her ability to persist and complete college to many layers of support in her life including her biological parents. She was aware of the privileges she had in comparison to some of her foster peers; however, she acknowledged how difficult it is to be viewed in a particular way due to her circumstances. She attributed having strong connections who were proponents of her success as instrumental in her ability to complete college. The continuum of people Jennifer identified as investing in her ranged from her high school counselor to the president of the university.

Heather

Heather lived in the same foster home as her older sister until she turned 18 years old and did not consider college

prior to her placement in foster care. Her plans for after high school were “staying home with my biological family and taking care of my mom.” Heather attributed her lack of job opportunities, her natural knack for making good grades, the hope for a more promising future, and “everyone hammering” her to go to college as instrumental in her initial decision to pursue higher education.

Heather identified several ways she felt her otherness surface at the college campus. She was “the weirdo that had to stay on campus for Christmas” and summers, in which she enrolled for the housing benefits, while most other students went home. In addition to feeling “different,” she observed other vast distinctions between herself and peers. She recalled not having family to attend her presentations and feeling inadequate in a competitive architectural program. She particularly recalls having to complete a biography to apply for jobs and internships in the program in which she felt self-conscious about her background. She recounted,

I never felt good enough. I felt like I was the wrong type of person to be in there because they were all rich and they all had big family supports. I just always felt out of place. It's okay being judged if you don't have anything to hide but when you're trying to keep your dark secrets about your family and your experiences in your closet, that's really hard to be put right in the spotlight.

Feeling out of place seemed to serve as a positive contributor for Heather as she stated she did not “focus on [socializing] but threw myself into homework.” She reported a fear of losing her funding that strongly contributed to her maintaining focus and completing college. While Heather said she did not have strong peer relationships and family support during college, she had a small, yet solid support system through her boyfriend, now husband. She elaborated that he was a “consistent” person for her and “he took a lot of my baggage with him. He was able to hold a lot of it for me and he understood.” The need for a consistent presence, coupled with having relationships with people who knew her from her life prior to college, appeared to be critical components in her support system.

Heather also indicated she had mentors and referred to her ETV specialist as a “lifesaver,” whom she described as nurturing and like family. She said her worker would go above and beyond by making sure she had her basic needs met and would also bring her gifts for Christmas and her birthday, which communicated caring and support to Heather.

Heather recalled not having any social supports or casual friendships on campus; however, she did feel comfort and familiarity with a previous TRIO worker, specifically in her freshman year. Heather stated, “I spent most of my freshman lunch times in her office because I had no one to eat with... I was not sitting in that big cafeteria alone... That's what saved me.” Heather acknowledged the initiative it took on her part to do what she needed to persist when she felt so isolated on campus.

The artifact Heather felt represented her ability to persist and complete college was the first structure she developed in an early architecture course. The assignment came at a very vulnerable time for Heather both academically and socially, and although she continued to struggle with the content, she moved forward and applied to the architecture program. When Heather was not admitted, she stated, “I started to freak out. I knew that my scholarships wouldn't cover me just to take random classes because I wanted to wait a year to reapply.” While

she waited, Heather focused on courses for a minor in human services and family development. She stated, “It really intrigued me. There was a lot about lower income, poverty, and how that affects people. I was able to really connect with that sort of thing.” Although Heather applied to the architecture program a second time, she “didn’t even wait for the results” before she “changed majors” to human services and family development. Heather did not feel “fear of the judgment” on her new path, which was as instrumental in her educational journey. She later acknowledged that “self-confidence was the biggest hindrance.” At the conclusion of our time together, Heather was working with children and families involved in the child welfare system.

Heather Single Case Findings

Heather is unique from the other participants in this study in terms of the limited amount of social support and engagement she had on campus. She chose her relationships very carefully and was not as eager to share her past. Her insecurities and vulnerabilities ultimately served as a significant turning point for her, which led her to a major that she felt well suited for and excited about. With no familial or peer support, she attributed her ability to persist through the times she felt most out of place to her caseworker, a TRIO worker, and her boyfriend.

Cross Case Findings

The abusive events that led to placement in foster care and the relational instability, combined with academic disruptions serve as a negative influence in the long-term outcomes for youth who age out of foster care; however, there are always exceptions to the rule. The participants of my study were the outliers. Each had experienced maltreatment as children, were removed from their homes, and did not achieve permanency, resulting in “aging out” of foster care, yet they were not represented in the categories of negative outcomes in adulthood. They represented the small percent who persisted and completed their college degrees. The following section will present the findings, related to the research questions, that emerged from the cross case analysis of data collected from participants.

Participants perceived both tangible and intangible support as critical to their abilities to persist and complete college.

Every participant in this study identified support from others as a critical factor to persisting in college. Participants shared examples of emotional support they received from both formal and informal sources and the difference it made in their abilities to navigate trials and celebrate accomplishments during their time in college. As discussed in the literature review for this research, the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 specifically mandated emotional support for those opting to remain in care and pursuing postsecondary education. Over the past 20 years, the significance of emotional support for students with foster care backgrounds continues to emerge in the scholarly literature (Day et al., 2011; Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Okumu, 2014; Sims et al., 2008), and the findings of this study echo the instrumental role emotional support plays.

Research by Munson et al. (2010) found that components of positive relationships between those with foster care

experience and non-kin natural mentors consisted of “trust, consistency, empathy, and authenticity” (p. 533) and that participants valued directness, accountability, and respect from their mentors. Although it may be argued that these are important traits of any relationship, it is imperative to remember that children are placed in the foster care system as a result of some form of abuse and/or neglect. The duration and severity of each situation varies; however, the common thread for the participants in this study was that they were neither reunified with their biological families nor were they adopted by another family – either of which may have communicated and instilled a sense of permanency and stability to the child.

During foster care, relationship development with critical caregivers and caseworkers is disrupted by multiple placements and high turnover rates, of approximately 30%, for caseworkers in child welfare (Casey Family Programs, 2017). The ongoing changes in critical relationships may cause foster youth to become “guarded” as a protective factor and may hinder the development of future relationships (Crosson-Tower, 2001). Ways of coping with constant changes as children often translates into a sense of independence and maintaining guardedness with others in the transition into adulthood. Many participants in this study did not view relationships with their families of origin as a healthy source of support; however, a study by Lee et al. (2016) showed that “the idea of being able to craft one’s own family was appealing for these participants who had experienced separation from family during their time in the child welfare system” (p. 445). This “crafting” process was a similar sentiment among many of the participants in this study in terms of how they formed relationships through the process of trust-building, persistence, and perceived authenticity of individuals.

Findings from previous research echo the experiences of the participants in this study in terms of the significance of having emotional support during college. Dworsky and Perez (2010) and Day et al. (2011) found emotional support for college students with foster care experience was significant in terms of their abilities to persist, and emotional support appeared to compensate for areas of deficiency such as being academically unprepared. Like the participants in Day et al.’s study, participants in this study attributed the guidance and support they received during times of difficulty with coursework, scheduling, and balancing personal obligations to their ability to persist and complete college.

Greeson et al. (2015) examined the role of social support for foster youth in independent living programs and reiterated the influence of relationships during emancipation, rooted in a strengths- versus deficits-based foundation with supportive non-parental adults as beneficial during their transition. Although the focal point for practice implications are geared toward the child welfare arena, they appear to translate well into higher education in the sense that provision of natural mentoring opportunities for students formerly in foster care on campuses are evident in many of the ways participants perceived the emotional support they received from former caseworkers, campus advocates, former foster parents, and administrators. In the cases of the participants of this study, the support they cited was a direct result of participants maximizing those opportunities to reach their educational goals.

Participants also reported use of tangible supports (e.g. financial support, etc.); however, the critical ingredient to success appeared to be emotional assistance. To differentiate these two types of support, Sims et al. (2008) also

examined how students with foster care experience who were involved in postsecondary continuing education programs, both completers and non-completers, utilized supports and services. For completers, academic and financial assistance was sought least, and informal supports were most sought in meeting “academic and emotional assistance” (p. 110), whereas non-completers sought academic support but did not report receiving emotional support. Thus, the findings of this study align with Sims et al.’s findings in suggesting that emotional support has a pivotal role in student’s abilities to navigate and complete their college degree, perhaps of even greater importance than some tangible academic supports.

It would be misleading, however, to dismiss tangible supports. The availability of funding for college planted the seed for their academic future decisions for several of the participants. It is also possible that entitled financial support was viewed as more dependable or consistent (less likely to be taken away) than the intangible support needed from people; thus, participants focused specifically on support that could be of concern.

Participants’ beliefs that completing college would improve their quality of life was a main factor in their abilities to persist.

Many of the participants in this study reported upward mobility as a driver in their persistence in college. Upward mobility encompassed improvements to their quality of life, including establishing healthy relationships, financial security, stability, safe housing, and better relationships in adulthood than they experienced as children. Although qualifying “life success” varied among participants, the belief that a college degree would significantly increase their odds of enjoying a better life was prominent across participants. Hines et al. (2005) examined contributors to resilience among college students with foster care experience and identified “the determination to be different from abusive adults” (p. 391) as a critical source of motivation and a contributor to resilience. A later study by Batsche et al. (2014) also reported that participants were motivated during challenging times in college because “they felt their lives would be better if they achieved their educational goals” (p. 180).

Along a similar vein in this study, Jennifer expressed her insight that “dysfunction is generational,” and she was striving, through her college experiences, to establish a functional foundation as she transitioned into adulthood. Her sentiment echoes the findings of a study that serves as a tool for reducing child abuse and/or neglect in the next generation (Child Matters, n.d.). For example, knowledge of child development is a major factor in coping with challenges of parenting and anticipating age-appropriate expectations of children.

A second factor of concern is the security of having access to adequate resources (housing, health care, etc.), benefits that are often associated with higher levels of employment opportunities that are associated with higher education. Salazar (2013) compared the impact of a college degree for graduates with and without foster care experience in areas such as “income, housing, reliance on public assistance, mental health, happiness and other outcomes typically associated with educational attainment” (p. 141). The findings suggest that, although the two groups are not equally prepared for college, a college degree led to improved outcomes for both groups. From a strictly fiscal perspective, Packard et al. (2008) posited that investing in former foster care youth and postsecondary education would generate substantial results over the course of their careers, when factoring in the

increased contribution to paying taxes and decreasing reliance on social programs to meet their basic needs. This serves to enhance not only the individual's quality of life for themselves and their families but also serves to reduce the impact dependent adults have on social service systems. The participants in this study were not only improving their own personal circumstances by completing their college degrees, but they were also building protective factors known to reduce generational abuse and/or neglect for their children and future generations. These residual effects extend the impacts and importance of the desires of participants and their sources of motivation in completing their college degrees.

Students reported a strong need to make life better for others and to give back to others.

In their research examining non-foster college students' motivations for choosing undergraduate degree paths, Skatova and Ferguson (2014) used four classifications to better understand students' sources of motivation, persistence, and degree choice. One of the quadrants was "helping" or "pro social movement" with the underlying notion that "motivation drives behaviors which benefit the community, society overall and/or other individuals" (p. 2). This quadrant was applicable to many participants in this study as they expressed their desire to gain the skills, knowledge, and credentials that would allow them to be a part of a helping profession. They expressed the desire to help others sharing similar situations and felt their status, as former children of the foster care system, would be beneficial in those endeavors. Examples of the degree choices among the participants in this study were social work, animal sciences, human services, psychology, sociology, and human development/family services. In a study of 44 participants, Hass and Graydon (2009) also found that college graduates with foster care experience "highlighted the importance of giving back to the community, which is, in a sense, a mirror of the social support that youth received from their environments" (p. 462).

The theoretical framework of Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory, particularly intrinsic motivation, may offer a deeper understanding of the common desire among these participants to help others and further explain how their desire became a driving force in their abilities to persist and complete college. Self-determination theory emphasizes that pursuing and achieving goals are strongly connected to an inherent, psychological need for growth and development. Three components of self-determination theory, autonomy, competence, and relatedness, are used to better understand goal directed behavior and how this theory may assist in understanding data in the current study.

Autonomy

The concept of autonomy was particularly relevant to the data. Autonomy refers to a conscious, voluntary decision made by the individual as it relates to their pursuit of goals (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The participants in this study were among a small percentage of individuals with foster care experience to complete bachelor's degrees and, for most, they were making decisions about their lives in a very new context.

As a means of survival, youth in foster care are forced to make decisions and establish a certain level of independence at an early age. According to Svedin (2000), children of dysfunctional families are prone to

becoming parentified, which results in children growing up in “a more or less permanent role-reversal pattern sacrificing their childhood” (p. 306). However, the decisions study participants were exercising were geared toward their futures and personal goals, versus the day-to-day required independence they used to cope as children. As young adults, they were in a different context and focused on academic demands, learning to live independently, and adjusting to new relationships. They embraced the opportunity to exercise their own decision making, while using their previous experiences as a motivator to persist toward and complete their degrees.

Competence

The second concept of competence serves to enhance autonomy. Competence is the “propensity to have an effect on the environment as well as to attain valued outcomes within it” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 231). Within felt competence, it is not necessarily reality that facilitates competence; rather, it is the perception of competence that elevates and promotes intrinsic motivation for goal attainment. Ryan and Deci (2000) postulate that “people tend to naturally to internalize the values and regulations of their social groups” (p. 238). Statistically, membership status as former foster care youth would suggest a diminished likelihood of felt competence for completing college; however, the participants of this study felt motivated by perceived messages from others about their ability to be helpers for others. For example, Anthony’s former caregivers paid for half of his vehicle while he was in college. Although the tangible gesture was helpful, Anthony’s perception about the message behind the gesture was most significant. Anthony had a very specific goal of completing his graduate degree and working with teenage males; helping with his car so he could continue in college was perceived, by Anthony, as a message of a belief in his competency and ability to be successful.

Relatedness

A third element of Ryan and Deci’s (2000) self-determination theory, related to intrinsic motivation, is relatedness. Relatedness refers to “the desire to feel connected to others, to love and care and to be loved and cared for” (p. 231). Many of the participants shared college experiences of relationships with previous caseworkers, peers who were in foster care, and others on their college campus such as professors, coaches, and non-foster peers. Support and connections from others reinforced belief that they were where they needed to be with people who genuinely cared. Prior to college, disrupted relationships were a common theme of their lives. However, in college they were able to seek and accept relationships with others who shared common goals, in contrast to being involved in assigned relationships as a means of survival; thus, how participants sought relatedness was also related to autonomy.

In understanding goal directed behavior, Deci and Ryan (2000) posit that “psychological development and well-being cannot be achieved without addressing the needs that give goals their psychological potency and that influence which regulatory processes direct people’s goal pursuits” (p. 228). The majority of participants in this study wanted to become a part of the helping profession, and the power of this need to improve experiences for vulnerable children was a driving force in their abilities to persist and complete college. Participants felt as if completing degrees that allowed them to become part of a helping profession was an opportunity for them to

confront injustice and advocate for others at the individual, family, and systematic levels. This knowledge may offer additional ways to influence an innate desire to help others while contributing to psychological development during goal pursuit. For example, participants in this study were reluctant in seeking help for themselves, yet their desire to help others motivated them to complete college despite the odds. Understanding how to facilitate and maximize opportunities to shift the focus from being recipients of support to being providers of support early in their educational endeavors may contribute to retention efforts.

Participants were cautious about accessing formal and informal support but, once they decided help was needed, they were strategic and proactive about seeking help.

For participants of this study, identification as an individual who journeyed through the foster care system was not a source of strength and pride, but rather a source of shame, particularly in the beginning of college. The related dialogue and reflection throughout data collection highlighted that participants felt vulnerable academically and emotionally. Several participants gave examples of not revealing their status because the response from others was pity, and although it was well intentioned, they reported not wanting others to feel sorry for them or to “give” them things. The way that they viewed themselves, as young adults wanting to learn how to be independent and do well in life, was the way they wanted to be treated by others.

Thematic in the data across all cases was a juxtaposition of participant reports that they did not need others and a heavy dependence on others to meet fundamental needs. For example, participants reported that the basic need for transportation due to a lack of basic driving skill or malfunctioning of a vehicle. Contextually, Oklahoma has few opportunities for public transportation, which left few options other than seeking out and/or accepting transportation help from others. The vulnerability associated with seeking out help felt threatening to participants who wanted to perceive themselves as autonomous.

Research by Samuels and Pryce (2008) delves deeper into understanding not only how individuals with foster care experience may respond but also serves to help others gain insight into why developing and maintaining supportive relationships may require a specific knowledge and approach. The participants in their study identified “pride or stubbornness as their only barrier to success” (p. 1206). The authors explain that disavowal of dependence functions “as a means of protecting their self-reliant identities and pride” (p. 1205), which may interfere with seeking and accepting support from others. For example, the majority of participants in my study described themselves as “independent,” yet they also describe being fiscally dependent to finish college. For many of the participants, a critical point in their educational journey was “breaking down pride” and developing a sense of comfort in seeking and/or accepting support from others.

Implications

The outcomes of this qualitative study are not intended to generalize findings or implications but to provide a deep look into participants’ lived journeys in college. However, useful implications are present.

It is imperative that formal representation for students with foster care backgrounds has a presence on college campuses. Many of the participants in this study were involved in various factions on campus designed for at-risk students, first generation students, sororities, athletics, and leadership; however, none of the students reported having a campus advocate or program designated specifically for those with foster care experience. Although the participants of this study were able to locate resources or learn through trial and error, having an advocate or program that is well versed in needs specific to this population may increase retention for those without the skills or resources to address issues as they arise.

Although stable sources of funding related to students' statuses as former foster youth are present in Oklahoma, rarely do they fully meet the financial costs of college. This made it particularly interesting that financial support was not a major area of concern among participants of this study. Rather, many of the ways that participants felt support were through informal and intangible gestures from individuals with familiarity of their circumstances. Findings from this study suggest that college campuses must include a real focus on emotional support for students who were in foster care that may also reduce students' needs to vet potential supports, which may also be accomplished through formal programming. One approach that has been implemented at some campuses is the use of mentors who have foster care experience. Insider knowledge is difficult to replicate and is a characteristic that participants in this study valued when seeking out support from others. Working with college students with experience in foster care requires designated individuals with very specific knowledge for adequately addressing issues or strategic education and support for key support offices across campus.

As noted by several participants in this study, the pathway from foster care to college is problematic. Thus, higher education institutions and students would benefit from developing early relationships with foster care youth while they are in high school. This may be accomplished through working in collaboration with professionals who have existing relationships.

Future Research

Although the primary goal of identifying *barriers* in college has a strong presence in the research literature, this study provides insight into factors that contribute to persistence and completion of college. Participants valued this strengths-based approach and offered many examples of responding positively to a strengths-based approach during their college years. Academic advisement is one of the first and perhaps most critical opportunities for engagement and building a foundation for success for students, particularly for students more likely to present a mountain of obstacles and uncertainty. A study on first generation students by Soria et al. (2017) found a positive relationship between the strengths-based approach and academic outcomes. It would be useful to further research this approach for all types of support services for students with foster care backgrounds.

As stated earlier, the way students with experience in foster care seek and accept support is unique. Many participants gravitated toward sources of support familiar with their personal history or who were existing stakeholders of the foster care community who did not require participants to explain their backgrounds or re-tell their personal stories. Research investigating student outcomes from higher educational institutions well-versed

in the unique needs of students with foster care experience in comparison to other higher educational institutions would be useful. Likely, this would require also exploring the perceptions of support from those with foster care experience who began college but did not persist.

Using the motivations uncovered in this study and others, further investigation of underlying motivations to complete college would be useful for facilitating ways to maintain motivation during challenging times and improve retention of students with foster care experience in college. For example, several of the participants of in this study reported changing majors after realizing their original choices were not a good fit for them. It is unknown how many students with foster care experience were faced with similar situations who chose to leave college. It would be useful to focus on underlying motivators and how those may need consideration in the advising and support processes for students with foster care backgrounds.

Participants in this study shared an intrinsic motivation to help others that was a driving force in their persistence in college and a way to reconcile past injustices. Self-determination theory, specifically the components of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, was quite useful in understanding their motivations. Further research using self-determination theory as a lens for guiding support services and understanding this population would be useful. The importance of connections, specifically captured in self-determination theory through its concept of relatedness, cannot be overstated.

Conclusions

As previously established, educational outcomes for youth formerly in foster care appears dismal in the scholarly literature. Lack of academic preparation prior to college due to high mobility rates during elementary and secondary school years, lack of support and stability in periods of transitioning from dependence to adulthood, traumatic life experiences, and the consequences of being vulnerable (asking for help) are several factors that tend to direct this population to become stagnant and unsure of their futures. It is not common for individuals without foster care experience to transition from being independent to dependency without a backup plan, source of support, or family to help navigate the challenges associated with becoming an adult. The participants of this research represent the few percent of college students with foster care experience who persisted and completed a four-year college degree. In retrospect, they attributed their abilities to succeed to many internal and external factors. Stepping outside of their comfort zone, establishing or maintaining connections with people they deemed as genuine or as having similar experiences and interests, and a desire for a better life for themselves were deemed as paramount in their abilities to persist and complete college. Further, many participants of this study chose their majors as a means to continue empowering others in similar circumstances with the hopes they will be a source of positive support for someone else in a vulnerable situation. In the time since data collection, participants of this study have continued to thrive and excel academically and professionally. Isabella graduated from law school and passed the bar. Anthony, Brittany, and Heather use their degrees to work directly with youth in foster care and former foster care youth in college in Oklahoma. Malcolm completed his graduate degree in social work and is now a Licensed Clinical Social Worker employed in an agency that provides community mental health services. Jennifer and Maria completed their graduate degrees in social work and work in the social services arena. At the

last contact with Brandon and Faith, both were Certified Public Accountants. In the lived experiences of these participants, people supporting their endeavors prior to and during college mattered. The work they are doing to give back to others matters, just as we hope that this research matters in further guiding the work of higher education toward supporting students with foster care experience.

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