ABSTRACT

FOSTER YOUTH IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF FACTORS SUPPORTING SUCCESS

By

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Foster youth face barriers unmatched by their non-foster peers, particularly in the arena of academic achievement. Although a majority (84%) of foster youth report aspirations of attending higher education, only 5% graduate by age 22 or 23, compared to non-foster youth in the same age group, who graduate at a rate of 30%. The current study describes factors from the perspective of 13 foster care alumni that supported them in the process of gaining acceptance to college and graduating. Supportive factors and resilience theories provided the framework that guided the research. Utilizing a grounded theory approach, foster care alumni who completed at least a 2- or 4-year degree were interviewed. Five common themes were identified in narratives of these individuals: exposure to validating environments, availability of pre-college informational and appraisal supports, motivating factors, and the presence of expectation.

FOSTER YOUTH IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF FACTORS SUPPORTING SUCCESS

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Foster youth are an extremely vulnerable population. In addition to coping with possible traumas from past maltreatment or abuse, foster youth are displaced from family members and often moved to unfamiliar communities and environments. Learning to navigate new systems can be an extremely stressful task, as youth entering care must adjust to new home environments, new schools, new communities, and even their own internal emotional reactions to these drastic life changes. Approximately 60% of children in care are school-aged (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2013). While in the education system, these children must navigate changes in school settings, teachers, curricula, and peers, while coping with the stress of these changes. High rates of school displacement once the child is in care lead to an ongoing cycle of these changes. Although higher education can serve as an equalizer for these youth by increasing income and opening doors to new opportunities, only a small minority of foster youth further their education (Salazar, 2011). Once these individuals enter college, they have a lower rate of graduation than their peers, often related to a combination of barriers ranging from lack of support to financial need (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010; Kena et al., 2014; Salazar, 2011). Research on the factors that help these individuals succeed in higher education is limited.

Prevalence and Incidence

According to the USDHHS (2013), approximately 400,000 children were in out-of-home care in the United States at the end of fiscal year 2012. The majority of these cases were attributed to child maltreatment, while others were attributed to delinquency or emotional and behavioral issues outside of the parents' control (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). On average, the age of entry into foster care is 7.6 years, meaning that the average child entering care enters towards the beginning of his or her educational career.

The Midwest Evaluation of Functioning is an ongoing evaluation of foster youth outcomes among a sample of youth spanning three states (Courtney et al., 2010; Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004). Based on the study, 84% of the youth sampled disclosed aspirations of attending college, with 49% aspiring to graduate from college and 22.3% aspiring to complete education past college (Courtney et al., 2004). By the age of 22 or 23, only 5% had graduated from either 2- or 4-year institutions compared to their non-alumni peers, who graduate at a rate of nearly 30% (Courtney et al., 2010). Those sampled in the study graduated at a much lower rate from 4-year institutions (2.5%) as compared to their peers, who graduated at a rate of nearly 20%. Nationally, approximately 34% of the general population of young adults between the ages of 25 and 29 had graduated with a 2- or 4-year degree in 2013 (Kena et al., 2014). This discrepancy in graduation rates suggests a deficit in factors that improve college retention and completion for foster youth. Although information is available on the barriers preventing foster youth from attending and completing college, little is known about the factors that help the 5% succeed.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of the current research was to explore the factors that influenced academic success, specifically completion of a 2-year or 4-year degree, among a sample of former foster youth in Southern California. A sample of foster youth was interviewed to gain their perspectives on the factors that supported their success throughout the participants' academic careers.

Research Questions

The present research explored the following questions:

1. What are the perceived factors that assist foster youth in accessing higher education?

2. What are the perceived factors that assist foster youth in completing higher education?

3. How do former foster youth perceive their support systems affected their success in higher education (attending and graduating from college)?

Definition of Terms

Foster care: In the current research, foster care will be defined as means 24-hour substitute care for children placed away from their parents or guardians and for whom the State agency has placement and care responsibility. This includes, but is not limited to, placements in foster family homes, foster homes of relatives, group homes, emergency shelters, residential facilities, child care institutions, and pre-adoptive homes (Public Welfare, 2000).

Foster care alumni: For the purpose of this study, "foster care alumni" is defined as adult individuals who were placed in foster care as a minor and are no longer in care.

Foster youth: Foster youth are minors who have been placed in "24-hour substitute care . . . away from their parents or guardians and for whom the State agency has placement care responsibility" (Public Welfare, 2000, p. 267).

Mobility: Mobility is defined as "non-promotional school change" (Rumberger, Larson, Ream, & Palardy, 1999, p. vi). This refers to changes in school settings excluding moves from elementary to middle school or from middle to high school.

Multicultural Relevance

The foster care system is heavily laden with racial and cultural issues, with many studies finding that children of color are disproportionately over-represented in the foster care system (USDHHS, 2013; Wildeman & Emanuel, 2014). Although based on a 2012 report, the largest ethnic group within the foster care population is Caucasian children (42%), non-White children make up 59% of the population, with a disproportionate representation of African American, Hispanic, and Native American children (USDHHS, 2013; Wildeman & Emanuel, 2014). In addition, African American adults with a history of foster care are more likely to live in poverty and less likely to own a home than Caucasian individuals previously in care (Harris, Jackson, O'Brien, & Pecora, 2009).

Salazar (2011) focused on a sample of former foster youth who received scholarships during college. The large majority of those sampled were female (71%). When comparing these statistics to the overall population of foster youth, there seems to be a discrepancy between the proportion of female and male alumni receiving scholarships versus female and male alumni attending college. Salazar also found that Latino and Native American students have disproportionate rates of attrition as compared to Caucasian, African American, and Asian American students.

Very little information is available on the former foster youth in the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ) population in higher education; however, the LGBTQ population faces unique challenges while in the system. Due to their connection with multiple marginalized identities, many LGBTQ foster youth experience intersectional oppression, which suggests that these individuals face more social obstacles than their heterosexual peers (Collins, 2000). Collins (2000) defines intersectionality as "particular forms of intersecting oppressions, for example, intersections of race and gender, or of sexuality and nation" (p. 18). Perceived and actual stigma prevent many individuals from revealing their sexual orientation (Gallegos et al., 2011). All of the LGBQ foster youth sampled by Gallegos et al. (2011) revealed that they felt the need to hide their sexual orientation at some point in their lives. Two out of 10 (20%) of the foster youth sampled reported experiencing unfair treatment in schools due to their sexual orientation. This also raises the question of placement, particularly for transsexual youth, who may face challenges finding placements in private homes, resulting in their placement in gender-segregated group homes (Olson, 2009). Although the Foster Care Non-Discrimination Act of 2003 (AB 458) prohibits discrimination of LGBTQ youth, often group homes are ill-equipped to address the needs of transgender youth.

Social Work Implications

In order to prepare for college application or attendance, foster youth need assistance while still in care. When introduced to supportive services specific for foster care alumni in colleges, foster youth are most often involved through program outreach (42%), followed by independent living services providers (39%) and caseworkers (33%)

(Dworsky & Pèrez, 2010). In order to expose these students to the opportunity these programs provide, social workers must become better informed of their existence and the options available. Based on Salazar's (2011) research, it seems that there is a need for more supportive mental health services and tangible support for foster care alumni in college. Social workers may be interacting with these individuals on a variety of levels, particularly through the foster care system, but their interactions may also include mental health services outside of the system. Social workers could likely better assist foster youth in college by remaining informed of and providing resources and referrals to alumni of the foster care system. Assisting foster youth in learning about and accessing resources available would likely benefit them.

With the recent extension of care to age 21 in the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, little is known about the effect of extended care on college outcomes (Courtney, Dworsky, & Napolitano, 2013). With the extension of care, social workers will be involved with the foster youth longer, allowing them to provide more referrals and systemic support while the youth is in college. In a study focusing on 45 individuals who exited care at 18, Goodkind, Schelbe, and Shook (2011) found that youth often do not accept extended care due to misinformation or confusion and/or a desire to become independent. Social workers could improve their assistance of these individuals by educating them about their rights and potential assistance they could receive.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

On any given day during the year, approximately 400,000 children are living in out-of-home care nationally (USDHHS, 2013). A majority of youth enter care near the beginning of their education (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). As these children mature, over three quarters will aspire to continue their education (Courtney et al., 2004). While these individuals face significant barriers unparalleled by their peers, a small minority of them persists in their education and go on to earn a college degree from 2- or 4-year institutions. This review of related literature will provide a basis for the present research.

Theoretical Frameworks

The present research takes into account multiple facets of a foster care alumni's experiences of success in higher education. The study will attend to foster care alumni's perceptions of success in higher education through the lens of resilience and social convoy theories.

Resilience

The resilience framework has been the response to deficit-focused models in developmental research, suggesting that children can overcome negative circumstances or events to become well-adjusted individuals (Luthar, 1991; Masten, 2001). Luthar (1991) defined resilience as "remain[ing] competent despite exposure to stressful life

experiences" (p. 600). Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker (2000) explained that resilience is defined by two components: exposure to an initial threat or to severe adversity, and a resulting positive adaptation despite the threat or adversity (p. 534).

Although past research has focused on a set of specific dispositional attributes present in individuals who display resilience, Masten (2001) and others posited that resilience is instead an *ordinary magic*, resulting from basic human adaptational systems (Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005; Luthar et al., 2000). Based on Masten's findings, resilience seems to be part of the developmental process. Drapeau, Saint-Jacques, Lepine, Begin, and Bernard (2007) identified a point of action in the development of resilience within the process. Their study utilized findings from two-part interviews with 12 individuals in care in Canada. The point of action was defined as a turning point in the child's development, which led to increased resilience. Several circumstances were identified as points of action, including the engagement in activities that offer a sense of accomplishment, forming a relationship with a significant, supportive adult, and engagement in self-reflection. Once these action points were met, the foster youth reported experiencing an increase in feelings of self-efficacy, a distancing from the risk factors in their lives, engagement in new opportunities, and an increase in positive outcomes in multiple areas of their lives.

Expanding on the importance of a significant, supportive adult as a turning point of the resilience process, the development of resilience seems to be supplemented by aspects of social support. Hass and Graydon (2009) explored the experiences of 44 foster care alumni who were in higher education or had completed a degree. The study found

that the majority of the youth sampled (84%) reported specific supportive individuals who had assisted those sampled in academic success.

The Convoy Model

The development of an individual's social identity influences his or her relationships and attachments to others throughout the lifespan. The development of social identity and attachments across the lifespan is considered to fall along a spectrum of quality, ranging from beneficial to detrimental (Antonucci, Akiyama, & Takahashi, 2004). Ideal conditions assist in shaping the individual positively, allowing him or her to grow, learn, and succeed. The other end of the spectrum may result in detrimental effects, negating the individual's efforts to grow and succeed and preventing positive growth. Informed by attachment theory (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991), which suggests that infants require a secure base from which to interact with the world, the convoy model presents this same idea over the lifespan.

The convoy model views individuals as the center of a complex social web consisting of three levels of relationship types: inner (very close relationships), middle (close relationships), and outer circle (less close) relationships (Antonucci et al., 2004). Disruption of familial relationships of children in care are often the cause of their out-of-home placement, suggesting that the quality of these primary relationships may be conflicted, particularly during time periods where an average individual may require more support.

Differences in amounts of social support demonstrate a potential variation in need between age groups. Inner circle relationships, which are considered to be the most influential to an individual's growth and development, tend to consist more of

relationships with immediate family members, with friends and extended family falling in peripheral circles. Children ages 8–12 and young adults ages 20–39 tend to have significantly more individuals in their inner circles than older adults groups (Antonucci et al., 2004). The increased number of individuals in the inner circles of age groups 8–12 and 20–39 suggests the importance of this type of relationship for these groups. These two age groups are significant to the foster youth population, as youth enter care at an average age of nearly 8 years, and, under the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, some age out of the system at age 21 (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). Due to the nature of foster care placement, children entering care often experience disruptions in relationships with close family members or caregivers. Navigating the foster care system with a depleted inner circle produces additional challenges in the development of a social identity.

When foster youth age out of the system at age 21, often they are left without the supportive relationships that followed them through their time in the system, such as case workers, court-appointed workers, or other professionals who are no longer able to provide resources once the youth leaves the system. At this age, often foster youth seek the support of their biological families, but, as Geenen and Powers (2007) explored in their research interviewing foster youth, foster parents, and industry professionals, many youth reintegrate into dysfunctional familial relationships.

The complexity of social needs is also seen between genders. Females tend to report more relationships in their inner circles than males (Antonucci et al., 2004). These findings suggest that females may have more social resources and support to pull from

when needed than males. This is significant in the foster youth population, who often lack support due to conflicted family relationships and high rates of mobility.

Types of Social Support

Past research has categorized social support in order to conceptualize individual accounts of support (House, 1981; Malecki & Demaray, 2003; Singer, Berzin, & Hokanson, 2013). Through interviews with 20 foster youth, Singer and colleagues (2013) found a pattern of formal versus informal relational networks. Formal networks included non-parental significant figures, often related to the child welfare system, whereas informal supports are considered to be individuals who are naturally occurring in the youth's life, such as biological family members or peers. Most often, formal supports fall within the middle circle and informal supports more often fall within the inner circle (Antonucci et al., 2004; Singer et al., 2013).

Support has been further categorized into four specific types, including emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal supports (House, 1981; Malecki & Demaray, 2003; Singer et al., 2013). Emotional support includes relationships that offer love and trust. Instrumental support relationships provide tangible resources such as materials or money. Informational support provides information or advice. In the foster youth population, this category may include caseworkers or service providers. Lastly, appraisal support is the provision of evaluative feedback or enhancement of self-worth (Malecki & Demaray, 2003). Although many foster youth report receiving support from at least one individual in their relational network, these individuals may not in fact offer specific support (Singer et al., 2013). Individuals who are important, but are not considered parts of support-based relationships may be classified under informal supports.

Higher Education in the United States

Higher education has been associated with many positive life factors, including a higher income, better health outcomes, and better quality of life for offspring (Porter, 2002). Paralleling the positive findings of research in this area is an increase in college enrollment both in the United States and globally (Kena et al., 2014). According to national report conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, enrollment in higher education in the United States has drastically shifted in recent decades, with a 48% increase in college enrollment between 1990 and 2010 (Kena et al, 2014). High school graduation rates have also been increasing, allowing more individuals to be eligible for 4-year institutions. In 2012, 66% of high school completers enrolled in college in the fall. Across public and private non-profit institutions, the vast majority (88% and 86% respectively) of full-time undergraduates are under the age of 25.

As of 2013, 34% of 25–29 age group had completed a bachelor's degree or higher. Females tended to graduate at a higher rate from higher education than males. The report also observed racial and ethnic trends in higher educational attainment, finding increases in bachelor's or higher degree attainment between 1990 and 2013 for those ages 25–29 across all groups studied. Specifically, the degree attainment increased from 26 to 40% for the Caucasian group, 13 to 20% for the African American group, 8 to 16% for the Hispanic group, and 43 to 58% for the Asian and Pacific Islander group. Although these increases in educational attainment are promising across racial and ethnic groups, the African American and the Hispanic groups have increased at a much more conservative rate than the Caucasian and the Asian and Pacific Islander groups. These statistics represent significant educational trends for minority populations. Along with

the increase in college attendance comes an influx of college-educated workers in the employment pool, leading to more competition in the workforce and a greater need for higher-level jobs. Populations without higher education are left at yet further disadvantage when compared to those with higher education.

Foster Youth in Higher Education

The importance of research in this area is made clear when observing foster youth outcomes. Placement in foster care has been related to higher risk along a spectrum of negative outcomes. Foster youth face long-term challenges unparalleled by their peers, including housing instability, heightened risk of homelessness, increased risk for arrest, higher risk of mental health issues, lower incomes, lower rates of employment, inadequate life skills in adulthood, and barriers to obtaining education, especially higher education (Courtney et al., 2010; Cusick, Havlicek, & Courtney, 2012; Sullivan, Jones, & Mathiesen, 2010). Engagement in higher education has been shown to mitigate many of these negative outcomes in the general population and the foster youth population (Aud et al., 2010; Salazar, 2011).

Aud et al. (2010) found that young adults ages 25–34 with bachelor's degrees earned 96% more over the course of a year than young adults who did not receive a high school diploma. This applies specifically to foster youth, as well, as research findings that suggest foster youth college-graduates make similar individual incomes to their non-foster youth college-graduate peers (Salazar, 2011). However, the high dropout rate from high school among foster youth indicates that many of these individuals will be at an economic disadvantage, particularly as young adults. Even with a high school diploma or

GED, individuals with bachelor's degrees earned 53% more than high school graduates and 18% more than those who completed associates degrees (Aud et al., 2010).

A longitudinal study conducted with data from 632 foster youth in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin found that by the age of 23 or 24, about 75% of the foster youth alumni studied had received a high school diploma or completed a GED (Courtney et al., 2010). Courtney and colleagues (2010) found statistically significant discrepancies between graduation rates of the alumni sampled and their non-foster youth peers, such that alumni were 3 times less likely to complete high school. A study completed in California had more serious findings, with the approximately 100,000 foster youth sampled graduating at a rate of nearly half the general population (Frerer, Sosenko, & Henke, 2013). Those who spent most of their time in the child welfare system in group homes were even less likely to graduate from high school, graduating at a rate 21% less than foster youth in kinship or non-kinship foster family care (Sullivan et al., 2010). These statistics are alarming when compared to those of the general population, in which the average high school graduation rate falls between 86% and 90% and 34% of young adults ages 25–29 are college educated (Kena et al., 2014).

Despite educational challenges in early and secondary education, many foster youth do enroll in and graduate from higher educational institutions. Unfortunately, rates of college aspiration vary greatly from actual college attendance and completion among foster youth (Courtney et al., 2010; Cusick et al., 2012). Past research has produced varying approximations of graduation rates among foster youth. Pecora and colleagues (2005) measured higher educational attainment in a group of 479 foster care alumni participating in the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study. The study found that 1.8% of

the participants between 18 and 25 years of age had graduated with a bachelor's degree or higher at the time of the study, compared to approximately 24% of the general population. Pecora and colleagues also found that participants ages 25 years and over had graduated with a bachelor's degree or higher at a slightly higher rate (2.7%). Another study, conducted with a group of 602 foster care alumni found that 5.7% of the study participants, ages 23–24, had completed a 2- or 4-year degree, compared to their non-alumni peers, who graduate at a rate of nearly 30% (Courtney et al., 2010). Regardless of the variation in these statistics, foster care alumni tend to graduate from higher educational institutions at a much lower rate than their non-alumni peers. This discrepancy in graduation rates suggests a deficit in factors that improve college retention and completion for foster youth.

Policy Affecting Foster Youth

In 2004, California enacted California Assembly Bill 490, Ensuring the Educational Rights and Stability for Foster Youth. The bill addressed issues of educational instability for foster youth in primary and secondary institutions by requiring the youth's current school, upon placement change, to allow the child to remain enrolled until the end of the school year and immediately enroll in the new school upon transfer. It also created a school liaison position in each school district. The bill addressed some of the negative consequences of instability in school settings. Five years later, Assembly Bill 167 (2009) was passed, allowing foster youth transferring schools in either 11th or 12th grade to graduate after meeting the state educational requirements, rather than the district requirements, which may include additional coursework. Both bills address issues of mobility within the foster youth population

Another law passed in 2009, Assembly Bill 669, allowed higher educational institutions the ability to provide foster youth under the age of 19 with resident status when enrolling in the institution, regardless of the youth's state of origin. This act allows foster youth to pay the lower tuition rates of residents, regardless of their city of origin or placement. Assembly Bill 1393 (2009) provided foster youth with priority on-campus housing at community colleges and state-supported universities. It also allowed foster youth to stay in on-campus housing on a year-round basis, including during breaks. This law is significant for foster youth because often youth aging out have no available housing during school breaks. Having to pay for off-campus housing required a higher income or external supports. Many youth who do not have external support must work more hours, which is a leading cause of college attrition in foster youth (Courtney et al., 2010). In 2011, Assembly Bill 194 provided foster youth with priority registration at California State Universities and community colleges. Most recently, Governor Brown adjusted the Local Control Funding Formula (2013), which allotted funding for foster youth assistance in K–12 schools.

Extension of Care

In 2008, the federal government passed the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, which allows for foster youth to remain in care until age 21. Foster youth are allowed to live in a foster home, group home, or a supervised independent living setting with the stipulation that they are furthering their education or employment via a 2- or 4-year college program, training or vocation program, employment, or employment program. This federal act provides monetary incentives for the states that implement it. California was an early adopter of the act, passing

California's Fostering Connections Act, or Assembly Bill 12 (AB 12) in 2010 (Courtney et al., 2013). AB 12 allows foster youth to use less of their limited financial resources on housing and more on educational expenses or other necessities. This bill suggests a shift in the goals for the nation's foster youth, from becoming independent at age 18 to the acknowledgement of the need for continued support into adulthood. Due to the recent passage of this law, little research is available on outcomes of foster youth who have participated in extended care. However, Goodkind et al. (2011) interviewed foster care alumni in Pennsylvania who exited care at age 18 to determine reasons for early exit. The study noted that foster youth left care at age 18 despite the opportunity to stay until age 21 due to misinformation or misunderstanding and a desire to be autonomous or independent. By shifting the expectations of foster youth and educating those working with foster youth, these challenges could potentially be addressed.

Factors Affecting Foster Youth While in Care

Recent legislation has sought to alleviate many of the barriers to higher education affecting foster youth. Many of these issues, such as mobility, timeline of care, type of care, and support have an effect on foster youth's academic success. Understanding the barriers to education can provide insight on the factors that assist success. Are the foster youth who obtain their goals of higher education affected by these factors any differently than the foster youth who do not achieve their higher education goals?

Mobility

Once placed in foster care, children are at risk of instability in their living and educational environments. On average, youth in care live in six separate foster care placements during their time in the system (Cusick et al., 2012). These disruptions,

referred to as *mobility*, in placement can be major challenges in education, social functioning, and mental health (Fisher, Mannering, Van Scoyoc, & Graham, 2013; Isernhagen & Bulkin, 2011). Youth in care also attend an average of six different schools during their time in foster care (Sullivan et al., 2010). Approximately 40% of the youth who participated in the study conducted by Sullivan and colleagues (2010) reported changing school settings at least eight times. Disruptions in stability were associated with lower educational achievement scores, with a heightened effect for youth at later stages of development (Isernhagen & Bulkin, 2011). Moreover, according to these researchers, as children with a highly mobile status move forward in their education, they fall farther behind their peers in terms of achievement test scores. High mobility can lead to missed school work and changes in curriculum, whereby the children and teachers are caught in perpetual game of "catch-up" in the child's education (Isernhagen & Bulkin, 2011, p. 19).

High mobility and other risk factors set up the foster youth population for academic challenges. A recent report on foster youth in California found that foster youth do poorly on state standardized testing when compared to their peers, with approximately one quarter of foster youth scoring far below basic achievement for their grade level (Frerer et al., 2013). Half of the foster youth in the report scored below basic aptitude on English-Language Arts portions of the California Standards Test. These challenges put foster youth at risk for high school dropout and may result in the necessity of remedial classes in college (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010). Remedial classes, which, if required, must be completed before moving forward to college-level classes and do not count for college credit, therefore setting students back in the educational process.

Placement stability has been shown to have an effect on educational attainment, as measured by graduation from high school, such that a reduction by one placement per year tends to make graduation nearly twice as likely, and reduction by two placements per year makes graduation 3 times likely (Pecora, 2012). High school graduation is an important marker for continuing educational attainment, as it generally a stepping stone in moving on to higher education.

Timeline of Care

Foster youth enter care at an average age of 7.6 years of age (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). A recent article reanalyzed data from three studies related to foster youth outcomes (Pecora, 2012). Through the Casey National Alumni Study, researchers observed a relationship between high school graduation rates and age of entrance to care, such that delaying entrance to care by 5 years resulted in a 150% increase in the likelihood of graduation from high school (Pecora, 2012). Entrance into care is often a result of maltreatment and therefore a safety issue. Due to the nature of the issue, this is generally a factor that may not be controllable considering safety.

Although care has been extended to age 21 with the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, for many years, youth were forced to exit care at age 18. Despite extensions to the age of exit in some areas, many youth choose to leave care at age 18, (Goodkind et al., 2011). Leaving care at age 18 is linked to additional barriers, including increased rates of incarceration, homelessness, decreased rates of college graduation (Courtney et al., 2010; Pecora et al., 2005).

Support While in Care

Having supportive relationships during care can influence higher educational attainment. Maintaining positive relationships with former foster families makes high school graduation while in care twice as likely (Pecora et al., 2006). Formal supports, such as foster families, child protective services workers, teachers, or therapists, are significant in lives of foster youth, but are most often placed in the middle circle, which indicate close relationships (Singer et al., 2013). Biological kin are often placed in the inner circle of the foster youth's support system, with a particular emphasis on sibling connections. These connections are particularly important as youth transition from the foster care system to adulthood.

Educational Aspirations and Academic Self-Perception

Academic self-perception is defined as "what type of student the participants considered themselves to be" (Kirk, Lewis, Nilsen, & Colvin, 2012, p. 313). This factor has been found to be a significant predictor in academic aspirations. Expectations are defined as more concrete extensions of aspirations, suggesting a more accurate tie to actual college attendance and completion than aspirations.

Employment

Past research has suggested that foster youth who maintained stable employment during high school and limited their work hours to less than 20 hours per week tended to enter higher education at a higher rate than those who were not employed or worked hours that exceeded 20 per week (Mortimer & Johnson, 1998).

Factors Affecting Foster Youth in Higher Education

Institutional Commitment

Institutional commitment is defined as a student's satisfaction with his or her school (Salazar, 2011). Salazar (2011) measured institutional commitment as a factor of academic retention in foster care alumni. Institutional commitment was measured through the individual's college transfer history (e.g., transferring schools) and reported college satisfaction. The study found that a student's satisfaction with his or her college was indeed linked to retention rates, such that individuals who displayed institutional commitment, or reported high satisfaction with their college, were significantly less likely to disengage.

Social Involvement

Social involvement is a factor related to general academic retention, as well as to academic retention specifically for foster youth (Robbins et al., 2004; Salazar, 2011). Salazar (2011) defined social involvement for undergraduates as how much one feels connected to one's college, as measured through engagement in extracurricular activities, amount of non-required engagement with professors, and amount of participation in social activities. Salazar's findings indicated that students who demonstrated social involvement in the forms of connectedness with their college and participation in social events had a significantly lower rate of disengagement than their peers.

Extracurricular activities can be influential factors in a child or young adult's development of resilience (Drapeau et al., 2007). Engaging in activities that offer a sense of efficacy and support can forward the developmental process. According to Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, and Wyatt (2005), the majority (65%) of the former foster youth

enrolled in a university who were interviewed had participated in an extracurricular activity while in high school.

Support

In a population characterized by instability and complications in familial relationships, social supports may be limited. Indeed, the research suggests that although 80% of the foster youth sampled reported having access to one type of support, only 39.8% reported having access to emotional/informational, tangible, affectionate supports, and positive social interaction (Salazar, Keller, & Courtney, 2011). Findings of a study of predictors of academic success among foster youth supported the need for multiple types of support in college, particularly the need for tangible supports (Salazar, 2011). Salazar's (2011) findings show the importance of support as a success factor for foster youth during their college years, particularly tangible supports, such as academic support, academic guidance, mental health supports, and institutional financial support. These results align with Courtney and his colleagues' (2010) analysis of the Midwest Sample of Foster Youth, which found that the foster youth sampled depended highly on scholarships (47%), loans (42%), and employment (28%) for college financing. The study also showed a much smaller amount of financial support from relatives (2%), foster parents (1%), or partners (2%). The largest barrier found for continuing education was lack of financial support. Most of the barriers reported in the study were related to lack of tangible supports, including lack of financial support, needing to work full-time, lack of child care, and lack of transportation. With financial support, these barriers become less imposing. Some campuses offer supportive services specifically geared towards foster youth, which may offer financial support or referrals for financial support (Dworsky &

Pérez, 2010). Unfortunately, these programs are often at risk for budget cuts, which would limit their ability to offer financial support. According to Dworsky and Pérez (2010), the foster youth alumni reported financial aid, housing assistance, leadership development opportunities, and mentoring to be the most important services they received through campus support programs. These results support the need for tangible supports for foster youth.

Financial Aid

Adequate financial aid to cover the costs of tuition, housing, and additional expenses is extremely important for foster youth in college, who often lack outside financial support (Courtney et al., 2010; Salazar, 2011). Foster youth and alumni often rely on scholarships to meet their financial needs while in school (Courtney et al., 2010). Chafee Grants are state-awarded grants available to foster youth or alumni attending a college or vocational program (Cochrane & Szabo-Kubitz, 2009). The grant, established in 2001 offers up to $5,000 for individuals who were in foster care at some point between the ages of 16 and 18. Although this grant was designed specifically for foster youth, only 9% of a sample of 35,664 former foster youth in higher education received the grant during the 2009–2010 school year. More often, foster care alumni received a Pell Grant, a federal need-based grant available to low-income families or single adults making less than $15,000 per year.

Conclusion

This review of related literature provided a background for the present research by describing the resilience and social convoy theories. Moreover, the review presented a discussion of the barriers and policies that have been created to reduce them. A review of

factors from previous research that have been linked success for foster youth in higher education were also addressed. Prior studies of foster youth and their higher education formed the basis of the current study.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Sample Selection

A total of 13 participants were recruited through snowball sampling from areas around Los Angeles County and Orange County. All participants were at least 18 years of age, had previous experience in foster care for a period of at least 6 months, had completed a 2- or 4-year degree or higher or were within 1 year of graduating from a 4-year program, and spoke and understood English.

Former foster youth who have completed higher education can be challenging to access due to dispersal post-graduation. Snowball sampling was employed to address this challenge, as it is often utilized when studying difficult to access populations (Faugier & Sargeant, 1997). The key informant, who is a student in the Master of Social Work program at California State University, Long Beach, was provided with information about the study. The key informant was asked to contact peers who met the study criteria and provide them with the study flyer and relevant information. It was assumed that all participants would have connections to individuals meeting the study criteria through past living or educational settings. This, however, was not the case, as many participants did not know anyone who had been in foster care and completed a 2- or 4-year degree.

Once contacted by potential participants, the researcher provided them with information about participant criteria, confidentiality, the study incentive, and the interview process. A brief screening was conducted to ensure the individual met the study criteria and if so, an interview appointment was set up at a public location convenient to the participant. Participants were interviewed at various locations, including professional offices, coffee shops, food courts, and college campuses. The specific locations were selected to ensure the most privacy available at the type of location selected. All participants were informed beforehand about the nature of the interview process. Consent to participate and consent to be audiotaped were obtained before continuing with the data collection process.

Data Collection

The present research utilized a demographic questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide to gain perspectives of former foster youth as they experienced accessing and completing higher education. Participants were provided with a brief questionnaire consisting of 14 demographic questions. Included in the questionnaire were questions about age, ethnicity, history of care, and educational information. Participants completed the demographic questionnaires at the beginning of the face-to-face interviews. The researcher clarified questions as needed. After participants completed the demographic questionnaire, they were engaged in an interview lasting 60 to 90 minutes. After appropriate consent was received, the interviews were recorded using a digital recorder. All recordings were labeled with a pseudonym in order to protect participant privacy and stored on an encrypted flash drive. All consent forms were stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's home.

Interview questions were strengths-based and open-ended. The questions focused mainly on the time period in which the participant was enrolled in higher education and K–12, but considered the full lifespan of the individual in order to gain a better understanding of the factors positively affecting the participants' engagement in their education. The questions focused on support systems available to the individuals that assisted educational attainment. The questions also focused on factors of resilience, exploring ways in which the participants fostered resilience and how it was utilized for academic success. As the interviews proceeded, additional questions were included to explore certain topics or trends prompted by past interview content. Additional questions were also included in later interviews to prompt the discussion of certain topics of interest, which were glossed over or not fully explained in the narrative. Factors in academic success were recorded for each individual interview and reoccurring representations of academic success factors were noted.

Analysis

Data analysis was based on Glaser and Strauss' (1967) grounded theory, which analyzes and categorizes themes present in the data. Demographic information was input into SPSS and analyzed to observe significant misrepresentations compared to data from past research. After digitally recording the interviews and labeling with pseudonyms, all interviews were transcribed and input into NVivo-10 to categorize and analyze recurring themes in the data.

As transcriptions were analyzed, a broad array of information was coded. As the coding process progressed, the focus of certain categories was adjusted based on new information and other categories were condensed based on similarity of information. The

researcher utilized the study's theoretical basis to gain an understanding of the information and determine coding categories. Coding categories were also determined based on an extensive review of past research. Coding was also influenced by the professional experience of the researcher as a clinician at a group home.

Limitations

The expected sampling frame of the research was limited, due to constraints of time and resources, as well as the geographic dispersion of these individuals once they have graduated from college. The majority (46%) of individuals sampled were recipients of post-baccalaureate degrees and most (85%) had received degrees in the fields of social sciences or human services. No prior research was located to determine whether this was an effect of snowball sampling or a significant trait in the population. The sample, therefore, may not be entirely representative of the whole population. Although snowball sampling is often used when accessing hard to reach populations, it can affect the representativeness of the sample, as participants may make or keep connections with peers who are in similar fields of study or employment.

The nature of the research requires some interpretation of the data. This interpretation is based on the researcher's knowledge base, experience, and unconscious biases. These factors could affect how the data is presented. Also, due to the recent passage of the federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 and California's Fostering Connections Act (2010), the vast majority (92%) of participants did not have experience with extended care (i.e., past the age of 18).

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Sample Demographics

The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1. The 13 study participants consisted of 11 (85%) females and 2 (15%) males. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 64 years, with an average age of 34. The largest racial or ethnic group in the sample was Caucasian (46%), followed by Latino (23%), African American (15%), and mixed race (15%). No Asian, Pacific Islander, or Native American individuals participated in the study.

Foster Care Experiences

Information regarding foster care experiences is listed in Table 2. Participants reported entering care at ages ranging from birth to 17 years old, with an average age of 8.1 years old (*SD* = 5.2). The mean length of time in the system was 7.9 years (*SD* = 5.3). Participants reported experiencing an average of 6.38 placement changes (*SD* = 5.5) during their involvement in the system. Foster care alumni exited the system at an average age of 16.8 years old (*SD* = 2.7). Thirty-one percent of participants were in care at the time of entrance to college.

All participants reported living in at least one non-kinship care setting, with an average of 4.62 (*SD* = 4.5) non-kinship placements. The majority of participants (54%) reported living in 1–3 non-kinship placements, while 23% reported living in 4–6, and

23% in 10 or more. Four participants (31%) reported living in one or more kinship settings, 4 (31%) in one or more group home or residential treatment settings, 1 (8%) in a guardianship setting, and 5 (38%) in other settings, including mental hospitals, temporary shelters, or under circumstances of homelessness.

TABLE 1. Sample Demographics ($N = 13$)

Characteristic	*f*	%
Gender		
Female	11	85
Male	2	15
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	6	46
Hispanic/Latino	3	23
African American/Black	2	15
Mixed/More than one race	2	15
Age		
25–30	5	38
31–35	3	23
36–40	2	15
41–45	1	8
61–65	1	8
Missing/Unknown	1	8

College Experiences

The quantitative college experiences of the participants are listed in Table 3. All participants had completed a 2-year degree or higher or were within one year of completing a 4-year degree. At the time of the interview, 15% of participants held an

associate degree as their highest level of education, 8% were within 1 year of completing a bachelor's, 8% held a bachelor's as the highest level, and a large portion of the participants held master's degrees (46%) or were in the process of obtaining a master's degree (23%). Of those interviewed, 46% received their associate's or bachelor's degrees in social sciences, 38% in human services, and 15% in business-related fields. Of those who completed a bachelor's degree, the average time reported between entrance to college and graduation was 4.6 years (*SD* = 0.88).

TABLE 2. Foster Care Experiences (*N* = 13)

Aspect of Experience	*M*	*SD*
Age Entered Care	8.13	5.17
Age Exited Care for the Last Time	16.77	2.71
Time in Care (years)	7.93	5.36
Total Placement Changes	6.38	5.45
Placement Changes Occurring in High School	2.38	1.80
Aspect of Experience	***f***	**%**
Non-kinship care		
1-3 Placements	7	54
4-6 Placements	3	23
10+ Placements	3	23
Kinship Care (≥1 Placement)	4	31
Group Home/Residential Treatment (≥1 placement)	4	31
Guardianship (≤1 placement)	1	8
Other Settings (≤1 placement)	5	38
In Foster Care While Entering College		
Yes	4	31
No	9	69

TABLE 3. College Experiences ($N = 13$)

Aspect of Experience	*f*	%
Current Highest Education Level		
2-Year Degree	2	15
Within 1 Year of 4-Year Degree Completion	1	8
4-Year Degree	1	8
Some Post-Graduate Work	3	23
Post-Graduate Degree	6	46
First Generation College Student		
Yes	8	62
No	5	38

Answering the Research Questions

Along an individual's lifespan, many factors come into play in the formation of circumstances and goal accomplishment. According to Bandura (1978), searching for the root cause of an outcome is an "idle exercise," as any event could serve as a stimulus, response, or environmental reinforcer. Personal characteristics function much the same, as they have the power to illicit a response from the individual's environment or change in response to the environment. This presents a challenge in terms of answering the research questions: How can questions regarding the internal and external factors leading one to enter and complete higher education be segmented into categories? How can supportive factors (external) be teased from the interaction with internal factors and responses? The questions regarding factors that support a former foster youth's entrance to higher education, completion of higher education, and the support available for them in higher education are all highly interlinked. This section will present themes found in

the data. Differences between factors that support getting into college and completing college will be differentiated as needed.

Motivation for Obtaining Higher Education

A commonality between all interviewees was an aspect of sustained personal motivation for obtaining an education. Motivation is necessary for the achievement of goals. Individuals varied in their representations of personal motivation. However, their reported motivations can be categorized into several themes: goals, intrinsic characteristics, and support. Many (62%) reported goals with tangible outcomes, such as desiring a career in a field requiring a degree (54%) or having stability in their finances and protection from poverty (46%). Aspects of altruism were also apparent in respondents' goals (69%), such that many were motivated by a wish to be a positive role model for someone in their life (31%), wanting to help others with the tangible benefits higher education can offer through a career or stable finances (46%), and wanting a better life for their family members (38%). One participant shared that her motivation came from "Just looking at my children and knowing that I didn't want to be the parent that my mom was for me. So, I wanted to be a parent with an education" (Participant 4). Often, goals were framed in terms of fear: a fear of disappointing a significant supportive adult, a fear of the negative outcomes often associated with foster youth, including poverty and homelessness, or a fear of following in parents' footsteps. Participant 13 stated a motivating factor was an "absolute fear of destitute poverty." This idea of fear can be reframed when viewing it from a resilience standpoint. Although fear can be detrimental to development, here it serves as a mitigating factor for success and assisted in motivating some of the respondents toward success. Altruism also appears to be rooted

in the resilience of the respondents, as it was based on taking something positive from a negative situation and utilizing those experiences to ensure that others would not face them in the future.

Personal characteristics also served as motivators for the respondents. Forty-six percent of respondents named personality traits, including determination (15%) and competitiveness (15%) as motivating factors. Others described an intrinsic need to defy others' negative expectations (31%). These factors can be considered internal factors, when considering Bandura's (1978) model of reciprocal determinism. The origin of these factors is challenging to determine, as they are both effectors of and effected by the environment. There is a possibility that these personality factors were present naturally and were fostered through circumstances. These traits may have been perpetuated as ways to cope with the negative circumstances in these individuals' environments. These traits therefore make sense in terms of the respondents' histories and resilience theory. In order to get needs met while in the system and accommodate for barriers, some traits are likely necessary to develop. Regardless of their origin and development, these traits tie into a system of long-term motivation towards the goal of success in academics. Defying expectations seems to have a particular impact on the participants. Many youth face barriers and stigma while in the system. Stigma can serve as a negative expectation of an individual, as Participant 10 describes in her narrative:

> The minute the school found out I was a foster kid, they would think I was stupid and so they would put me in remedial math and remedial English and I remember I was helping other kids in the class going, "I'm not going to work. I'm not the smartest person, but I can do the work and I want credit for it." . . . The school didn't know how to deal with a foster kid who was college bound.

Participant 10 brings up a significant barrier in this statement: lack of appropriate support in school. In order to get certain needs met in care, particularly academic needs, self-advocacy and defying expectations seem to be qualities needed to develop resilience. These personality factors may have developed in response to external factors, such as Participant 10's situation, but served as long-term motivators in obtaining higher education.

Support networks also played a role in participants' motivation for higher education. Most respondents (69%) named factors related to support systems as impacting motivation, including making a supportive figure proud, avoiding disappointing the supportive figure, and receiving support from an individual or collective support system. These factors encompass two ends of a timeline - receiving support and providing a clear return of personal success. These individuals used this support as an investment, providing heightened returns to their supportive investors in return. This relates to circumstances of the "turning point" in Drapeau and colleagues' (2007, p. 978) research, particularly related to forming a relationship with a significant supportive adult. Drapeau's descriptions of outcomes for this include engagement in new opportunities and increase in self-efficacy. Respondents (46%) named the intention of making a caregiver or significant supportive adult proud or a worry of disappointing a caregiver or significant adult as motivating factors. Some respondents (23%) also specifically named individuals in their support systems as external motivating factors, with 15% stating supports were significant in motivating individuals to get into college and 8% stating supports were significant in finishing college.

Expectation is a major factor, specifically in motivation for getting into college. Expectation, for the purpose of this research, will be defined as a belief held by an adult in the individual's life that the individual will become successful. Generally, these beliefs are expressed by the significant adult through verbal affirmations. In terms of motivations, 54% of participants named a significant adult's expectations as a motivating factor for obtaining (both getting in and completing) education, with 8% naming an individual who provided an expectation that built motivation to complete.

Academic Self-Perception

Just as motivating factors were affecters of these individuals' drives to enter and complete higher education, their perceptions of their place in the school environment also had an effect. A positive affiliation with school pre-college seems to be a commonality between many of the respondents (69%). This is clear through each respondent's academic self-perception and attitude towards the school environment. Despite setbacks or challenges, the respondents reported having mostly either positive academic self-perceptions or personal expectations of success pre-college. Participant 2 provides an example of her academic self-perception, stating, "I remember understanding that school was something I was good at. One of the few things I was good at 'quote, unquote' in my mind." Participant 2's understanding of her personal strengths focused heavily on her role as a student. Although she was subjected to high mobility, changing schools and housing situations regularly, her identity as a good student remained stable. This maintenance of personal identity is likely related to resilience, which is defined as an initial threat overcome through positive adaptation (Luthar et al., 2000). In this case, the initial threat is entrance to care and high mobility, which, as explored earlier, precipitates

a host of educational setbacks. However, Participant 2 fostered a positive self-perception regarding her role as a student and possibly maintained this identity as a means of coping with her changing environment. As her surroundings changed, she was still enrolled in school, where she could exhibit her academic abilities and receive positive feedback for them, as Participant 8 noted by saying, "[school] was probably the first place that I got positive feedback." Positive academic self-perception was not only observed as the individual's perception of his or her own ability, but his or her general attitude towards the school environment. Some participants (23%) noted that they viewed school as an escape. Interestingly, the 3 respondents who had the most limited support systems pre-college tended towards viewing the academic environment as an escape from challenging circumstances in the home environment. One participant viewed school as a way to get away from an abusive caregiver. Another participant utilized school as a way to redirect attention away from negative situations occurring at home:

> School was an outlet for me. Some people turn to drugs or alcohol or whatever, I turn to school. So, it was more of getting away from the household that I was in. Even younger years, even middle school, high school, whatever the situation was at home, it was just to get away. (Participant 6)

Again, in terms of resilience theory, the initial threats are clear (i.e., an abusive caregiver, negative circumstances at home) and the positive adaptation is to turn towards something beneficial to the individual, rather than a maladaptive coping skill, such as drug or alcohol use.

Validating Environments

In turn, external factors complement and augment internal factors, such as self-perception (Bandura, 1978). A validating environment can support an individual's self-perception or augment it in a positive direction. Part of the external factors included

circumstances that provided a validating environment. A validating environment, in this case, is a set of external circumstances that affirm the individual's goals or self-perceptions. These self-perceptions were reinforced by validating environments, which were exemplified by positive relationships with teachers or school administrators (69%), engagement with academically advanced programs or courses (38%), and exposure to a college environment (38%). Several respondents reported instances of teachers or school administrators providing support above and beyond the normal limits of their duties. For example, 2 participants reported receiving tangible support from teachers pre-college, including clothing items and temporary housing for the individual and her family. Another respondent received support from several school administrators and teachers to prevent her from being expelled. The participant stated that two teachers, the track coach and a counselor, advocated for her because she is "an asset to this school and has high grades" (Participant 12). In this case, the formal academic supports for this individual not only secured her place in the school, but provided validation for her academic identity. Another individual received direct support and encouragement from a high school teacher to apply for and enter college. The presence of clear formal support for these individuals in school provided, in some cases, validation of a pre-existing positive affiliation with the school environment, or in others, a potential point of action in the development of resilience. Several individuals also noted they participated in programs geared towards advanced students, such as the Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) program, honors or Advanced Placement classes, or college-related programs. Participant 2 stated: "I was in the GATE program in elementary school, so I remember that. I remember understanding that school was something I was good at." Because of

the nature of these programs and courses, they tend to carry a connotation of prestige. This prestige, as is clear in Participant 2's statement, can affect one's self-perception.

Coping with exposure to an invalidating environment was also important to these individuals. When placed in remedial classes, Participant 10's self-assessment of herself—that she is "not the smartest person, but can do the work and [wanted] credit for it"—opposed the external influence. Participant 10's internal factor mitigated the impact of certain outside factors. In fact, this seems to be the case with many of those interviewed. When encountering invalidating individuals or situations, respondents often reported utilizing the negative pushback as motivation, with an attitude of "proving them wrong." Many respondents reported personality factors, such as determination, persistence, competitiveness, and positivity as means to do this.

Expectation of Excellence

Expectation served multiple roles for these individuals. In addition to acting as a motivating factor, expectation was a theme found among most foster youth as an external factor that influenced the individual's attitudes towards school.

A validating environment may also include a significant adult figure who presents the individual with an expectation of excellence. Participant 13 explains this term in an example of his supervisor while in the military:

> First Sergeant had this expectation of excellence that I could be the best that there was there and that was it and there was no "can't try." You got to at least try as hard as you possible can and if you fail, you fail because nobody's perfect, you're not going to get everything, but you at least have to try as hard as you possibly can.

The expectations generally come from verbal affirmations directed toward the individual from someone close to the individual and plant a seed of personal expectation for the

individual. Over half of respondents (54%) reported significant figures in their lives providing expectations of either being generally successful or being successful in terms of obtaining higher education. Slightly fewer (46%) reported expectations from a significant individual as influential to their decision to apply for college.

This idea of expectation is highly linked with mentors and support. Expectation is related specifically to appraisal support, which provides evaluative feedback or enhancement of self-worth. Verbal expression of an expectation of someone provides evaluative feedback indicating that they are capable of completing the targeted goal. The supportive figures who provided expectation included adoptive or foster parents, biological family members (i.e., a parent, sibling, or extended family), teachers, supervisors, college outreach workers, an army sergeant, and coaches.

Bandura's (1978) theory of reciprocal determinism makes sense in this case. The appraisal support provided through the provision of expectations is an external, environmental factor that impacts the individuals way of thinking about his or her world. "Going to college and graduating was expected. That was set early on as a kid. My mom just explained that all of us would be going to get our bachelor's degrees, and if possible, even our doctorate degree" (Participant 10). Although this individual was not consistently living or even interacting with the mother who set this expectation, the expectation was internalized and persisted as the individual continued to navigate her environment through academia.

Support in Applying to College

Applying to schools can be a confusing process, especially without supportive assistance. Nearly all (92%) of participants referred to specific individuals or programs

that offered support and information in applying. The remaining participant (8%) was unsure of where, specifically, he received information, but stated that he did. The majority of participants (54%) received some kind of support in applying to college through high school services. Three individuals (31%) stated that they received support from a mentor, 23% from the college admissions office, 15% from adoptive parents, 15% from the foster care system through Independent Living Program (ILP) services or social workers, and 8% from a non-related supportive adult. Generally, this type of support was considered informational, as it provided information such as where to apply, how to apply, and services or assistance specifically available to foster youth. This support was pivotal to some individuals, as it made the possibility of college more plausible. For example, Participant 8 stated:

> I knew I didn't have a college fund, so it wasn't until I think I was in high school and I learned about financial aid and I realized I can go anyway. So I think it wasn't until high school that I realized I had other options, that I could go to college.

This individual was aware of her circumstances and discounted the possibility of college until she gained information about resources available to her. Information is power for these individuals, as it can affect the plausibility of attending college. Having that information can completely change how accessible college is for an individual with limited resources.

Self-advocacy and taking initiative was very important for these individuals, as well. Thirty-one percent of respondents relied mainly on their own initiative to gain information on applying for college or for financial aid. Participant 3 stated that she directly contacted the college to seek help in applying, "because [she] didn't have

anybody on the outside to help at all." For those with limited supports, taking initiative was necessary to gain information and accomplish goals.

Financial Support in College

Clearly, the availability of financial support was instrumental in the availability of college, as noted above. All participants received financial assistance of some kind during college. The majority of participants received financial support exclusively from formal settings (92%). Most formal support was provided through grants, including Cal Grants, Chafee grants, or Pell Grants. Seventy-seven percent of the respondents indicated they received some form of grant, while 54% received scholarships, 54% received loans, and 8% utilized funding from the G.I. Bill. One individual, who did not receive any formal support, did not qualify for grants commonly awarded to foster youth due to the age she was adopted and her adoptive parents' income. This individual was supported by her adoptive parents and gained additional income through employment. She also received financial support from friends and family before entering college and was able to utilize it through the first year of school. Many respondents (69%) indicated that either work or work study were sources of income supplementing formal aid. This type of support is of particular importance to this demographic. As Participant 2 puts it, "there's absolutely no way I would have been able to do it had I not had all the financial help." The availability of financial assistance was an external factor that allowed for the follow through of personal goals. Without formal financial support, college likely would not have been an option for many respondents, no matter the internal factors present.

Other Tangible Support

Although the majority of financial support was provided through formal systems, other tangible supports were essential for individuals to secure food, shelter, and other resources. Most commonly identified needs met through tangible support were related to housing, food, educational needs, or transportation. Access to housing was significant for the participants, with 54% of participants naming a specific support who offered a place to stay at some point during college. Housing was not always guaranteed for many of the respondents, particularly during winter or summer breaks. Living in the dorms proved beneficial for some respondents, such as Participant 8: "[Living in the dorms] was extremely useful. It got me out of my home environment. I wasn't commuting to Fullerton and back. It really took me into this is your academic life." However, dorm life presented challenges, such as shutting down during breaks and some holidays. Participant 10 stated:

> My college is a Catholic college, so it shuts down for holidays. So those were huge barriers. I was homeless, I had to put my stuff in storage, I had to rent a room, all the things that come with college life and so much more because I didn't have a traditional mom and dad.

Although dorms could provide the benefits of closeness in proximity to the academic life, they also left some participants isolated and without housing during breaks. Some participants would seek informational support from formal supports to ensure the availability of housing. Participant 11 sought information from the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) office in order to secure housing with peers.

Some respondents reported having instrumental supports that could provide them amounts of money or loans in extreme cases. Based on respondents' reports, this was not often utilized and only utilized in extreme cases, such as when in need of necessities.

However, some (46%) reported difficulty in accepting financial support from informal systems and others (23%) reported lack of supports that could offer financial assistance, particularly on an immediate basis.

Validating Environments in College

Participants described different types of validating environments available as college students. The method of validation appeared to shift once in college from a means of identity and motivation development to environments that supported engagement with others, promotion of academics, and development of skills. These benefits were obtained through supportive services in college, engagement with the campus, and relationships with mentors. Once the identity as a student is established, the purpose of the validating environment shifts from validating the goal of continuing education to validating the student's place in higher education. Establishing a sense of belonging was significant for the participants, whether through supportive services or social connections.

Supportive Services During College

Supportive services on the college campus can offer a variety of resources for students. The majority (62%) of respondents reported receiving supportive services, such as EOP services, foster youth specific programs, or counseling services during college. Five participants (38%) reported utilizing EOP services while attending college. Of those 5 participants, most (80%) reported EOP services as helpful towards obtaining courses congruent with personal educational goals or making connections with other students. Three (23%) participants described experiences in foster youth related programs, including Guardian Scholars, Partners for Success, and Youth Empowerment Strategies

for Success program. Although only 3 respondents participated in such programs, all 3 described the programs as providing environments rich with support. Instrumental support was provided through funds for housing, academic services, groceries, or clothing. All respondents participating in those programs described emotional and informational support through counselors, available resources, or peers. Participant 4 also described appraisal support in her relationship with her counselors, stating:

> If I didn't come to school, they would find out and they would call me: "Where are you? What's going on?" . . . I had never had that before. Nobody really cared if I was in school or not and then they just really showed that they cared. So they were there. Progressively, we just built that relationship together. (Participant 4)

Services that provide not only resources (informational support) or tangible items (instrumental support), but appraisal support and emotional support assisted this individual in developing a full supportive environment, which is often not available to youth exiting the system. This environment held her accountable for her actions in terms of academics, using the rapport built in a relationship, rather than punitive measures to elicit a positive response. While validating her role as a student by holding her accountable for going to classes, showing care for the individual validates a sense of belonging. Guardian Scholars functioned in a similar fashion, offering a safe space for former foster youth to congregate. For youth who may feel very isolated or misunderstood when entering college, having a space to spend time with others coming from similar situations was beneficial.

> They had an office on campus, so we could go to the office always and that was great because we had a place, with computers and their offices and a couch and some would always be . . . sleeping or eating or we'd be sitting in there talking about inappropriate things that young people talk about. (Participant 8)

The office offered a closeness of proximity to the counselors and to resources valuable for students. Participant 8 also noted the value of Guardian Scholars in terms of making connections:

> I got enmeshed into the foster youth culture and realized . . . I had always felt so disconnected from my friends in so many ways because of these things, but these were all these people who had lived my same life even though I wasn't in care, this was what was going on.

This experience demonstrates the shift in purpose of the validating environment. Finding a space in which the individual can experience a sense of belonging serves as an external factor to validate the self-perception of the individual as a student.

On-campus counseling did not seem to be a popular service among the recipients, as 3 (23%) participants utilized this service, 2 (15%) of whom did not find any benefit in the services. However, 1 participant indicated the importance of counseling services in her experience as a means of coping with mental health issues.

Although not all respondents were apart of foster youth specific supportive programs, some had outside supports that offered similar benefits either through social environments. Some individuals also found the financial aid office useful in terms of informational support.

Engagement with the Campus

Engagement with the campus was present through exposure to social environments or engagement with non-foster youth specific programs or clubs. Just over half (54%) of the respondents reported engagement in at least one of these areas. Four (31%) of the participants indicated they lived in on-campus housing or were part of a sorority or fraternity. These associations provided a sense of belonging, as Participant 5 describes: "I got in a sorority. I was like, I need to be a part of something to help guide

me." Motivation for seeking out such programs is related to building a validating environment, in which the individual can gain a sense of belonging. In addition, these settings offered structure for participants through scheduled social activities and assistance in building appropriate academic skills. For example, Participant 2 explained the structure of dormitory life: "there was just a lot of floor activities that happened and because you had an RA (Resident Assistant), a lot of it was forced . . . . So it was more organic in a way because it just happened." The structure of these programs offered means for individuals to connect with others. In addition to social exposure, engagement offered other benefits. Participant 5 stated, "My sorority sisters for sure were a good role model. They modeled, they were consistent with education. We had education sessions where we would go to the library and it was study time." In this case, the sorority provided assistance in building academic skills, such as study and time management skills. Aside from engagement in social environments, some participants engaged in other activities, such as clubs, organizations, or work in a field of interest. Participant 3 indicated that she "worked for elderly people and disabled. I learned that that was really my niche in life." Participant 3 described having a positive connection with the population she worked with. This environment validated the participant through skill building and building a sense of belonging in her environment. However, involvement in programs like these was not the case for all participants.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the current study was to explore the factors that assisted a sample of foster care alumni in entering and completing higher education. The study focused on the role of supportive factors and resilience in obtaining education. Thirteen foster care alumni participated in completing a brief demographic questionnaire and a 60–90 minute semi-structured interview. Transcripts from the interviews were created and analyzed using NVivo software.

Summary of Key Findings

Five common themes were identified using grounded theory as an analysis method. Several areas were explored in terms of the impact on the participants' entrance and completion of higher education. Themes included both internal and external factors, which were mutually effective, as described in Bandura's (1978) reciprocal determinism model. Thematic domains included motivation for obtaining higher education, a positive academic self-perception, exposure to a validating environment, the presence of expectations of success by a supportive adult, and support in applying to college. Factors specific to completing college included the presence of instrumental supports and a validating environment. The significance of these factors lie largely in the interaction between them. Internal and external factors can modulate other factors, perpetuate factors they complement, or mitigate factors they do not complement. The factors

present can activate resilience through the presence of a supportive adult or reinforcement of personality factors. The current research is unique in that it examines the functioning of former foster youth from a strengths-based perspective, in order to gain insight into the function of resilience and support.

Results revealed some similarities and differences with past research. In terms of demographics, the 13 study participants consisted of 11 (85%) females and 2 (15%) males. This varied greatly from national statistics, which show that 52% of foster youth are male and 48% female (USDHHS, 2013). Racial demographics of the study varied slightly from national foster care statistics, as well as Salazar's (2011) study of former foster youth who completed college (USDHHS, 2013). The portion of Caucasian participants (46%) aligned both with national statistics (42%) and with college completers (47%). The number of African American participants, who comprised 15% of the study participants, was much lower than the 26% in care and 34% of college completers. The number of Hispanic or Latino participants (23%) was similar to the 21% of the foster care population, but significantly higher than the 9% of college completers. Mixed race participants (15%) were represented at a higher rate in the study, compared to 6% of the foster care population and 3% of the college completers.

The average age of entry was slightly lower than both Salazar's (2011) findings (11.3 years old) and the Casey National Alumni Study (13.2 years old). The mean length of time in the system (M = 7.9 years, SD = 5.34) was similar to Salazar's mean of 8.7 years and the Casey Study's mean of 7.2 years. Salazar's findings incorporated information from both participants who completed college and those who dropped out. Participants reported average of placement changes (M = 6.38, SD = 5.45) during foster

care aligned with both Salazar's finding of 5.3 placement changes and the Casey National Alumni Study's finding of 6.5 placement changes on average. The similarity between rates of placement change suggests that this was likely not a factor that affected college entrance or completion.

Many of the findings in this study parallel Salazar's (2011) study. Salazar's findings regarding the significance of institutional financial support are congruent with the reports of participants in the current research. In addition to the necessary instrumental support through college, informational and appraisal support are important to the process of gaining entrance to college. The majority of participants stated that they received these types of support, which assisted them in applying. The environments most of the participants were involved in contrasted with what other foster youth often face. Dworsky and Pèrez (2010) interviewed directors of supportive programs for former foster youth entering college. The program directors interviewed indicated that foster youth are often not provided with information about college, including financial aid availability, college admissions requirements, or campus support programs. The directors also stated that foster youth often lack supportive adults who provide encouragement to access higher education. This contrast indicates a rift between those who enter college and those who do not. Salazar found academic goals, equivalent to motivation to complete college, to be significant as well. This was a major factor for participants in the current research. Social involvement, which Salazar describes as "extent one feels connected to college," is related to the presence of a validating environment (p. 65). Part of the shift in validating environments once the individual entered college was a feeling of connection with others

or the campus. The social connection became more of a focus once the individual entered college.

Limitations

No research is without limitations. Due to the nature of the research, the interpretation of interview content is based on the researcher's relationship with the information. This is affected by the researcher's knowledge base, experience, and unconscious biases. Also, due to methods used to conduct the research, there is no control group for comparative purposes. This can limit the understanding of what differences exist between the participants and the general foster youth population.

The sampling method could potentially pose a challenge, as snowball sampling may lead to an incomplete picture of the whole population. In addition, the effects of recent policy change, such as the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (2008), could not be observed in the sample due to the time period in which it was enacted.

Implications for Social Work Practice

The information provided here is valuable for those working with foster youth pre-college and during college. An emphasis on building environments for foster youth early during their education, potentially through academic programs or mentorships, is significant for building an academic identity. Provision of informational and appraisal support during the transitional periods is also seemingly significant, as evidenced by the influence of this type of support in building motivation and applying to college. During college, opportunities for former foster youth to engage with peers and the campus

provide them with validating environments. Foster care alumni could likely benefit from additional supportive programs during college.

Recent legislation extended care to age 21 in California (AB 12, 2010). Due to the importance of instrumental support during college, there is a likelihood that this will affect rates of former foster youth who are able to complete college. Social workers can now have greater involvement with foster care alumni in college. The needs of foster youth could more adequately be accessed and met through extended care.

Implications for Future Research

Although extended care was implemented in 2010 in California, due to the time frame in which this legislation has been in place, no participants in the current research experienced the effects of California's Fostering Connections Act. Future research could benefit from observing the effects of the legislation on foster youth in college. Understanding how foster care alumni who graduate differ from their non-graduating peers and from the general population would be valuable for increasing rates of graduation for youth in care. Future research would benefit from comparing these individuals to a control group to further analyze the impact of validating environments and availability of supports pre-college and during.

Conclusion

Findings of the current research indicated the significance of several themes as factors positively affecting entrance and completion of higher education in the foster youth population. Despite limitations to the research, understanding of these factors could be beneficial, not only to foster youth, but also to those working with foster youth.

Suggestions for future research could increase understanding and insight into the barriers and successes of the foster youth population.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

FOSTER YOUTH IN COLLEGE:

SUCCESS FACTORS SUPPORTING COLLEGE COMPLETION

(PRE-INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE)

Foster Youth in College: Success Factors Supporting College Completion

Pre-Interview Questionnaire

1) What is your gender?

- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male
- ☐ Other _____

2) How old are you (in years)? _____

3) What is your ethnicity? (Please check one):

- ☐ African-American/Black
- ☐ Caucasian/White
- ☐ Hispanic/Latino
- ☐ Asian/Pacific Islander
- ☐ Native American/American Indian
- ☐ Mixed Race
- ☐ Other (Please Specify) _____

4) What is your highest level of education? (Please check one)

- ☐ Some College
- ☐ 2-year College Graduate
- ☐ 4-year College Graduate
- ☐ Trade/Technical/Vocational Training
- ☐ Some Post-Graduate Work
- ☐ Post-Graduate Degree

5) When did you attend college? (yyyy-yyyy) _____

6) Are you a first generation college student?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure

7) Degree Completed (i.e., AA, BA, BS, etc.): _____
Field (i.e. Psychology, Computer Science, etc.): _____

8) What was your college GPA?

- ☐ 3.50–4.00
- ☐ 3.00–3.49
- ☐ 2.50–2.99
- ☐ 2.00–2.49
- ☐ 1.50–1.99
- ☐ Below 1.50

9) How old were you when you first entered foster care? _____

10) About how much time did you spend in foster care? ___ years & ___months

11) Approximately how many changes in placement did you experience while in care...
Ever?: _____
While in High School? _____

12) Approximately how many of these placement types did you experience in care?
Kinship care: ____
Non-kinship care: ____
Group Home/Residential Treatment: ____
Guardianship: ____
Other (Please specify) _____: ____

13) How old were you when you exited care for the last time? _____

14) Were you in the foster care system when you entered college?
☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Unsure/Do not want to respond

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Guide

1) What did you feel like on the day you graduated from college?

2) Who was the most proud of you when you graduated from college?

3) Tell me about the timeline of your education.
    How often did you change school settings in primary, middle, and secondary schooling?
    When did you attend college in relation to graduating from high school?
    What was the path like from entering college to graduating?

4) What were your favorite parts of school? (i.e., subjects, activities, etc.)
    What were you good at/not good at?
    What parts do you look back on as the most valuable to you?

5) Tell me about entering care.
    What grade?
    Who was there for you to talk to during this experience?
    Were any of those individuals continued support throughout your educational experience?
    Looking back, what were the most challenging parts of being in care in terms of your education?
    What were the most valuable parts?

6) Tell me about entering college.
    Who or what was influential to your decision to apply for college?
    Did you receive support in the college application process? If so, from whom or what agency?
    How did you get involved in the school environment? To what extent and how?
    How did you reach out to make connections? To what extent and how?

7) How did you finance your education?
    Were there any challenges?
    How was it managed?

8) What made it important to finish college?

9) How did you determine your major?
    How did you find your "fit?"

10) What were the challenges you faced during your educational experience and how did you overcome or face them?

11) Who did you talk to when you faced these issues?

Was there anyone you could ask for money (instrumental)?
Was there anyone you could talk to for emotional support (emotional)?
Was there anyone you could talk to for guidance or advice (informational)?
Was there anyone you could talk to act as your mirror and give you feedback on how you were doing (appraisal)? (Malecki & Demaray, 2003)

12) What would you say were your biggest successes in your educational experience?

13) How did you learn how to navigate through the education system?

14) If there were a song/movie/book that told your story, what would it be?

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