

8-2017

From Foster Care to College: Student Stories of Success

Tory Nicole England
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/etd>



Part of the [Child Psychology Commons](#), [Cognitive Psychology Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Secondary Education Commons](#)

Citation

England, T. N. (2017). From Foster Care to College: Student Stories of Success. *Graduate Theses and Dissertations* Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/etd/2436>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UARK. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UARK. For more information, please contact scholar@uark.edu.

From Foster Care to College: Student Stories of Success

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Higher Education

by

Tory England
Florida Atlantic University
Bachelor of Arts in Psychology, 2008
Florida Atlantic University
Master of Education in Educational Leadership, 2011

August 2017
University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

Dr. Michael Miller
Dissertation Director

Dr. G. David Gearhart
Committee Member

Dr. Kristin Higgins
Committee Member

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the different factors that empower young adults that were in foster care to be successful in a college environment. It has been documented that foster youth have significant challenges during secondary education (Conger & Rebeck, 2001; Geenen & Powers, 2006). Due to these challenges, foster youth attend and graduate higher education at a lower rate than their peers. The perspectives of foster youth currently enrolled in higher education is critical to determining which factors and programs have helped with their educational success. Five participants completed semi-structured interviews about their secondary education, transition to college, and adjustment during college. The findings from these interviews show the importance of having a mentor to assist foster youth with the process of transitioning to college and general life skills. This study also showed the benefits of exposing foster youth to workshops, conferences, and classes to help with expectations for college and that transition. Social concerns are one of the biggest challenges for foster youth and programs are needed to help with the adjustment to college and help foster youth create and maintain support systems.

©2017 by Tory England
All Rights Reserved

Acknowledgments

I would like to start by thanking my dissertation committee, Dr. Michael Miller, Dr. David Gearhart, and Dr. Kristin Higgins. I appreciate your support and guidance throughout the dissertation process. A special thank you to Dr. Michael Miller for serving as the chair and offering regular guidance and encouragement every step of the process. Your support helped me use my ideas and passions to accomplish this goal.

I would like to thank my family and friends that have supported me throughout my academic journey. My parents, Pamela Szczepinski and Herb Spokane, who have always encouraged me to pursue my dreams. My sister, Tayler, who has always been there for me. I would like to thank my college friends, Cait, Cyn, Dani, and Mila aka “the hand” for always challenging me to be better and great memories from the Honors College. To Jana for keeping me motivated with pink signs on my door when I did not think I could write any more papers in my master’s program, and Andrea who is the first friend I met in Arkansas and has been a helped with everything over the past six years from editing papers to helping with the foster kids.

Lastly, I would like to thank my husband, Aaron and son, Brandon. Aaron, you, have been a constant source of support since I started the doctoral program. I learned so much from you as we went through the journey of becoming foster parents. I appreciate your endless patience as we impacted the lives of four teenage girls. Brandon, you have already taught me so much in eight months. I hope you always have your happy-go-lucky demeanor and curiosity about the world.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to the participants that shared their stories and experiences with me and to all the foster youth I have worked with during my time as a case manager and foster parent. The impact each of you has had on my life and career is something I will always cherish. This process has allowed me to glimpse a small part of your struggle and celebrate your triumphs and for that, I am thankful. Your resilience amazes me and I hope you accomplish all your goals.

Table of Contents

I.	Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
	A. Context of the Problem.....	1
	B. Statement of the Purpose.....	3
	C. Statement of Research Questions.....	3
	D. Significance of Study.....	4
	E. Theoretical Framework of the Study.....	6
	F. Definitions.....	9
	G. Assumptions.....	10
	H. Delimitations and Limitations.....	11
II.	Chapter II: Literature Review.....	12
	A. Overview of Foster Care.....	12
	B. College Choice Theory.....	15
	C. Contemporary College Students.....	16
	D. Early Educational Challenges.....	18
	E. Transitional Challenges Exiting Foster Care.....	20
	a. Mental Health.....	22
	b. Homelessness.....	24
	c. Substance Use.....	25
	F. Foster Youth College Participation.....	26
	G. College Support.....	30
	H. Educational Aspirations.....	31
	I. Support and Mentoring.....	32
	J. International Studies on Foster Youth in Higher Education.....	34
	K. Chapter Summary.....	35
III.	Chapter III: Methodology.....	37
	A. Sample.....	38
	B. Design.....	39
	C. Role and Background as Researcher.....	40
	D. Data Collection.....	40
	E. Data Analysis.....	43
	F. Chapter Summary.....	44
IV.	Chapter IV: Results.....	45
	A. Summary of the Study.....	45
	a. Purpose of the Study.....	45
	b. Significance of the Study.....	46
	c. Design of the Study.....	46
	d. Data Collection.....	47
	B. Data Analysis.....	48
	C. Statement of Research Question Results.....	49
	D. Chapter Summary.....	55
V.	Chapter V: Conclusions and Recommendations.....	57
	A. Summary of the Study.....	57

B.	Conclusions.....	59
a.	Financial Assistance.....	59
b.	Perception of Education.....	60
c.	Mentors.....	61
d.	Programs and Workshops.....	61
e.	Social Engagement.....	62
C.	Recommendations.....	63
a.	Recommendations for Practice.....	63
b.	Recommendations for Research.....	64
D.	Limitations.....	65
E.	Discussion.....	66
F.	Chapter Summary.....	68
VI.	References.....	69
VII.	Appendices.....	75
a.	Appendix A: Phone Script.....	75
b.	Appendix B: Phone Screening	76
c.	Appendix C: Informed Consent.....	77
d.	Appendix D: Interview Script.....	80
e.	Appendix E: Interview Guide.....	81
f.	Appendix F: IRB Approval.....	88

Chapter 1: Introduction

Context of the Problem

Foster care is a system designed to remove children from homes where they are experiencing abuse, abandonment, neglect, or are at risk, and place them in another environment to provide safety (Lawrence, Carlson, & Egeland, 2006). Children who enter foster care face a number of challenges to be successful academically. Examples of these challenges include changing schools, long transitions between transfers, low attendance, behavioral issues, and they are less likely to graduate from high school (Conger & Rebeck, 2001; Geenen & Powers, 2006). Every year there are approximately 20,000 – 25,000 youth in the United States who turn 18 to 21 in the foster care system and must navigate the transition to adulthood and access higher education on their own (Nixon & Jones, 2007). Foster youth who meet specific requirements such as being in school, working a minimum number of hours, or hospitalized due to mental health can remain in foster care and receive services from age 18 to 21. Foster youth attend college and graduate at a significantly lower rate than their peers (Wolanin, 2005). There have been initiatives over the past 15 to 20 years to support foster youth enrolling in higher education and assisting in the transition from foster care to adulthood. Due to these programs being new and usually limited to foster youth under 21, there is little research on the success of these initiatives concerning college completion rates (Pecora, Williams, Kessler, Downs, O'Brien, Hiripi, & Morello, 2003).

The Independent Living Initiative was enacted by Congress in 1986 and created a framework for states to develop targeted services for teenage youth in the foster care system prior to turning 18 (Massinga & Pecora, 2004). This program was developed after research showed that a significant number of the homeless population were youth who had aged out of the foster care system by reaching the age of 18 to 21 (Wolanin, 2005). In 1999, the Foster Care

Independence Act (FCIA) amended the existing legislation to increase services from the age of 18 to the age of 21. Other major changes from FCIA include doubling funding for independent living services, permitted states to use federal funds to support housing, counseling, education, and other services, and gave states the option of extending Medicaid to youths transitioning out of foster care (Massinga & Pecora, 2004). The legislation also allowed for a broader range of services and assistance that youth aging out of foster care could access (Lemon, Hines, & Merdinger, 2004). Skills and training for these independent living programs focused on five core areas: education, employment, budgeting, credit, and consumerism (Lemon, Hines, & Merdinger, 2004). The goal was for foster youth to obtain the life skills that should have been obtained if they were being raised by caring adults who were invested in their success (Wolanin, 2005). All of these life skills are important to help foster youth be successful in a higher education setting.

A significant benefit of the Foster Care Independence Act (FCIA) is that it provides funding for youth exiting foster care that can help them access higher education (Massinga & Pecora, 2004). However, according to Massinga and Pecora, “public funds currently available to support post- secondary education for former foster youths are often ineffectively targeted or underutilized” (p. 162). This act also authorized the Education Training Voucher program that helps older youth exiting foster care continue on to higher education or vocational training. This voucher allows youth to access up to \$5,000 per year towards their educational expenses (Pecora et. al., 2003). In addition to the voucher, foster youth were eligible to receive up to \$4,000 a year for the Pell Grant and additional state need grants as well as work study (Massinga & Pecora, 2004). It is critical that foster youth and foster parents are aware of the financial resources available to help foster youth transitioning out of care achieve their educational goals.

The Foster Care Independence Act is relatively new and there is not consistency between state programs. There is a clear need for additional research to determine what interventions are the most effective with foster youth. There is also a lack of research with older foster care youth because there are not systems in place to track foster youth after they exit foster care (Pecora et. al., 2003). There is need for additional research for foster youth who attend post-secondary education and especially those who complete a degree. Foster youth face many obstacles and challenges that are unique from their peers. There is a need for research to make sure resources are being used to effectively support foster youth as they transition out of the foster care system and become independent adults.

Statement of the Purpose

The purpose for conducting the study was to identify the perceptions of foster youth about support systems and programs that have an impact on their decision to enroll in higher education and their success in the state of Arkansas. Information about the impact of independent living programs, financial assistance, Department of Children and Family Services assistance, foster family or group home impact, and specific programs at the institution were included in the study. The study included interviews with foster youth who are currently working on their degree in higher education.

Statement of Research Question

1. What factors were perceived to be most important to foster youth when deciding to enroll in higher education?
2. What was the perceived importance of each factor that a foster youth considers when enrolling in higher education?
3. What supports were perceived to be the most successful in helping foster youth transition and be successful in a post-secondary education setting?

4. What programs were perceived to be the most successful in helping foster youth transition and be successful in a post-secondary education setting?
5. What did foster youth consider the major obstacles to their enrolling in higher education?

Significance of the Study

Every year approximately 20,000 to 25,000 foster youth exit the foster care system between the ages of 18 and 21. Foster children deal with high rates of mental health issues, homelessness, and substance use after exiting the foster care system. Foster youth transitioning out of the foster care system attend college at a lower rate compared to their peers who are not in foster care even when controlling for other demographic information (McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White, & Thompson, 2003; Vacca, 2008). Foster youth face numerous challenges as they enter adulthood and there is a lack of support to assist in helping them continue their education. It is important to understand, from the foster youth's perspective, what are the most important factors that influenced their decision to attend an institution of higher education and help them to be successful in their transition out of foster care.

One foster youth, Terry, that aged out of foster care stated, "Aging out of foster care shouldn't mean being totally on your own. The end of foster care cannot mean the end of community caring" (Massinga & Pecora, 2004, p. 152). This quote is especially relevant to helping foster youth prepare and navigate the pursuit of a higher education. Foster youth have the bond with their parents, siblings, and family broken when they enter into the foster care system. They often grow up with a significant amount of uncertainty and instability in their lives so that they do not have the ability to focus on education or the support system to help them be successful in a post-secondary education setting. Success requires that social workers, foster parents, and college and university administration be invested in helping foster youth be successful in completing their education.

Higher education is critical because it can improve opportunities available and is a predictor of future success. Attending an institution of higher education is a sign the foster system helped successfully transition foster youth to adulthood (Jones, 2010). Although there are a limited number of studies about completion rates for foster youth in higher education, attendance rates of foster youth in postsecondary education are estimated at 2% to 20% (Nixon & Jones, 2007; Vacca, 2008). Of the foster youth who attend postsecondary education, only a small percentage of those finish their degrees (Vacca, 2008). There is a gap between the perceived needs of foster youth as they transition to college and the services offered by independent living services and college support services (Dworsky & Perez, 2010). Research focusing on the foster youth who successfully transition to higher education is critical to help understand the foster youth perspective on how to overcome barriers and which factors helped them achieve the goal of attending college.

States have the discretion on how funding is utilized and distributed to foster youth who choose to continue with vocational school, community college, or a four-year degree. In most states the funding and tuition programs are underutilized (Collins, 2004). States continue to allocate funds for tuition waivers and educational training vouchers to help students financially attend college, but there are still other logistical and emotional reasons that foster youth do not always take advantage of these programs. Research is needed to help understand the other barriers to attending college so that they can be addressed through programs and services. This is especially true for research on specific states as the services and programs vary greatly (Collins, 2004).

There has been limited research about foster youth and Independent Living Programs in Arkansas. Interviewing foster youth at different institutions of higher education in Arkansas

allowed for a broad perspective about how Arkansas State Services and Independent Living Programs prepare foster youth for the transition to higher education. By identifying the needs and perceptions of foster youth who are attending institutions of higher education, a better understanding was created of what services and interventions best support these youths.

This study affected foster families, higher education leaders, and policy makers. Higher education administrators can develop programs and initiatives that better serve foster youth. Policy can be based on research and data to inform better policies that directly target the needs of foster youth. This research can describe the complexities of the foster care system and education and help identify the impact policy has on foster youth. Specific training sessions can be given to foster parents, group homes, and others who interact with foster youth so that they are aware of the resources available in higher education. Foster parents and support systems are critical to the success of foster youth in their transition to higher education and providing specific training can help foster parents understand how to assist foster youth and make the transition to higher education successful.

Theoretical Framework of the Study

This study will utilize the theoretical framework of subpopulations. A subpopulation is an identifiable fraction or subdivision of a population (Gohn & Albin, 2006). This is any group that has common and distinguishing characteristics. Foster youth share common experiences that allows this study to look at the subpopulation of foster youth in higher education. Foster youth exit foster care between the ages of 18 and 21 and must transition to living on their own and navigating the educational process if they want to continue their education. Foster youth also have common educational experiences during their secondary education that make them a unique subpopulation.

Institutions of higher education are made up of diverse student populations. These students are often categorized based on factors such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, language, clothing, religion or any number of other factors (Gohn & Albin, 2006). Institutions often directly or indirectly designate students as part of specific subpopulations based on factors such as gender, race/ethnicity, level of enrollment, credit hours, financial dependency, high school grade point average, hours of employment, first generation, student athletes, involvement in Greek organizations, honors students, and others (Gohn & Albin, 2006). Students can be part of multiple subgroups and change groups during their time at college. Administrators at institutions of higher education can assess the progress and success of students in different groups or subpopulations and compare them to the entire student population. Data about the different groups can be utilized to determine appropriate strategies if specific populations need additional support. For example, minority students and lower socioeconomic groups that experience negative expectations about education can be helped by support and exploration about self-perceived abilities or academic inadequacies (Jordan, 2000).

Foster youth are not usually a subpopulation that is identified by colleges and universities and foster youth do not have to identify themselves as such on college applications. Foster youth share a unique set of characteristics different from other subpopulations. Research recommends that services would be beneficial if specifically targeted at former foster youth due to the unique challenges they face persisting in higher education (Salazar, 2012). Foster youth often have multiple identities and have been compared to other subpopulations including students with low socioeconomic status, first-generation college students, and minority students. Research studies have found that foster youth perform below their peers even when compared to subpopulations that often share similar characteristics (Wolanin, 2005).

Research has shown that individuals from a low socioeconomic status are less likely to attend college, are less likely to attend selective institutions of higher education, and are less likely to persist or attend graduate school (Walpole, 2003). These students often have to work while they are in college to pay bills and the cost of college and often work extensive hours (Gohn & Albin, 2006). Working while attending college requires that students balance multiple responsibilities including managing their work schedules, academic responsibilities, and other extracurricular involvement (Gohn & Albin, 2006). Similar to foster youth, there is a lack of research and policy attention given to this population (Walpole, 2003).

First generation college students have been the focus of research to better understand their demographics, transition to post-secondary education, and persistence and degree attainment in college (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak & Terenzini, 2004). Foster youth are often also first generation college students and share many characteristics with this population. First generation college students have a more difficult transition to college which often includes cultural, social, and academic transitional challenges (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella & Nora, 1996). Similar to foster youth that lack a support system, first generation college students often transition to higher education with minimal guidance (Gohn & Albin, 2006). First generation college students have to navigate resources available to them and find ways to succeed in the college environment (Gohn & Albin, 2006).

Minority students are overrepresented in the foster care system. African American youth make up 24% of the foster care population and 13% of the overall population. Hispanic foster youth make of 22% of the youth in foster care and 22% of the overall population (AFCARS, 2014). African-American students are one of the most researched populations on college campuses (Gohn & Albin, 2006). There are achievement gaps between races which starts at an

early age and increases as African American students advance in their education (Gohn & Albin, 2006).

Foster youth face many challenges in their transition to higher education including not knowing the services available, how to obtain services, and a lack of time due to other commitments such as work (Merdiner, Hines, Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005). While foster youth share characteristics with other populations, that often grow up with an uncertainty and instability throughout their childhood that creates a unique set of challenges in the educational environment. Studies show foster youth are at higher risk of dropping out compared to their peers that are low-income, first generation college students (Nixon & Jones, 2007). Foster youth are unique from other subpopulations and depending on the findings of my study should be considered a subpopulation.

Definitions

Age Out: Foster youth who remain in the foster care system until the age of majority because they are not returned home to biological parents, placed in guardianship, or adopted prior to the age of 18 (Samuels & Pryce, 2008)

Child Welfare Services: Agencies that are responsible after a child has been removed from their home to find them a safe placement until a permanent living environment can be arranged (Davis, 2006)

Foster Care: Social service system designed to take children out of homes where they are being abused, abandon, or neglected or at serious risk and alleviate those conditions through out of home care (Lawrence, Carlson, & Egeland, 2006).

Foster Youth: Children who were removed from their biological or legal home prior to the age of 18 and were in legal custody of the state (Arkansas Department of Human Services, 2008).

Independent Living Program (ILP): A federally funded government program developed in 1986 after a research study showed foster care youth were over-represented in the homeless population. The most updated version was amended in 1999 and is known as the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (Wolanin, 2005).

Higher Education: Operationally defined for the purpose of this study as two or four-year public institutions in the state of Arkansas.

Stressors: Challenges from being in foster care that impact foster youth such as experiencing trauma, separation from family, change of placements (Geenen et al, 2015).

Supports/Support Systems: Any person or program that offers resource and guidance to help foster youth.

Assumptions

1. Foster care affects the foster youth's outlook on higher education. Foster youth find it difficult to focus on education due to their circumstances.
2. Foster youth have a limited view of higher education options. There is a limited focus to inform foster youth of the possible options in higher education and services available to help them access higher education.
3. Foster youth understand the impact of foster care on their educational experience. Foster youth realize how foster care affects their education while in the foster care system.
4. Foster youth attend college at a lower rate than their peers that are not in foster care. Foster youth are more likely to choose to work or other alternatives than higher education.

Delimitations and Limitations

1. There are potential challenges to locate foster youth after age 18 that chose to sign themselves out of the system. I relied on institutions of higher education, Department of Human Services workers, and non-profit agencies to help recruit foster youth for the study.
2. There may be a positive bias from the foster youth that participate in the study because they have successfully navigated the system and are working towards completing a college degree. Therefore, it may not be a representative sample of all foster youth.
3. This is a single state study that is only looking at foster youth at Higher Education institutions in the state of Arkansas. Each state determines how to fund education and programs therefore this study cannot be generalized to other states.
4. The qualitative nature of the study and challenge of accessing this population will only allow for a small sample of participants therefore it may not generalize to the larger population.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The literature review will provide an overview of the current research in higher education. Literature was searched through the University of Arkansas Library databases including JSTOR, Ebsco Academic Search Complete, and ProQuest Central. Common search terms included “foster care and higher education,” “foster youth and education,” and “foster care system and education.” Additional materials were also obtained from professional contacts. The literature review will provide an overview of the foster care system, early educational challenges faced by foster youth and transitional challenges foster youth face exiting foster care including mental health challenges, homelessness, and substance use. The section on contemporary college students and issues, challenges, and support systems allows for a comparison between the general population and foster youth. The second part of the literature review will focus on foster youth that enter into higher education and look at the research on college participation, college supports for foster youth, educational aspirations of foster youth, support and mentoring, and international studies of foster youth in higher education. This literature is relevant to my research questions and provides context and understanding about the current situation of foster youth in higher education.

Overview of Foster Care

Foster care is a social service system that is designed to take children out of homes where they are being abused, abandoned, or neglected, or are at risk for serious maltreatment, and alleviate those conditions by placing them in out-of-home care (Lawrence, Carlson, & Egeland, 2006). Once a child is removed from a home by Child Protective Services, child welfare agencies are tasked with several goals for foster youth including safety, permanency, and well-being (Conger & Rebeck, 2001). Youth in foster care can experience a significant amount of

psychosocial concerns ranging from histories of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, family instability, health problems, multiple placements, substance use or abuse, criminal behaviors and increased risk for mental health problems (Elze, Auslander, Stiffman, & McMillen, 2005). Out of home care can be a short-term or long-term arrangement until the child can be safely reunified with the family, an alternative option such as adoption or permanent guardianship is found, and in some cases, the child remains in the foster care system until adulthood (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Foster youth have an option to remain in foster care after the age of 18 if they remain in high school or work on their GED, or the court orders continued placement (Nixon & Jones, 2007). Foster youth that age out of the foster care system by turning 21 or choosing to sign out of foster care after the age of 18 and face numerous difficulties and challenges including continuing their education.

The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (2014) provides statistics about the number of children in foster care, coming into care, and exiting foster care. In the fiscal year 2014, there were a total of 415,129 in the foster care system in the United States. There were 264,746 children who entered foster care in 2014. Approximately 20,000 to 25,000 foster youth age out of foster care each year without being reunified with their parents or adopted (Elze et al., 2005; Nixon & Jones, 2007). Removing a child from his or her home has been shown to have potentially negative consequences including behavioral, psychological, and academic problems (Lawrence et al., 2006). These negative consequences continue to impact foster youth after they exit foster care and can present barriers for them to achieve their educational goals. It is critical that child welfare agencies and institutions of higher education can effectively provide resources to help the over 20,000 foster youth transition out of foster care and achieve their goals

of completing post-secondary education. Services and funding vary between states so it is important to look at the specific circumstances and programs offered in Arkansas.

As of August 2016, there were 5,030 children in foster care in the state of Arkansas according to Mischa Martin, Director of Children and Family Services (Fanney, 2016). The Division of Children and Family services conducts between 3,000 and 3,200 investigations each month based on reports of child maltreatment or neglect. In March of 2015, Governor Hutchison commissioned a review of the Division of Children and Family Services operations and performance. This review was to show what was working in the state of Arkansas and also identify ways the system could be strengthened (Child Welfare Policy and Practice Group, 2015). The review of the Arkansas child welfare system included interviews with Division of Children and Family Services staff, external stakeholder and review of policies and procedures as well as a review of trend data. One of the findings from this review was the rate of maltreatment reporting in Arkansas is 72.9 report per 1000 children which is above the national average of 47.1 reports per 1000 children (Child Welfare Policy and Practice Group, 2015). This review showed a clear need for Arkansas to address some of the challenges with the current system.

Arkansas faces many challenges including a shortage of foster homes. Due to the shortage of foster homes, approximately 55% of the children in foster care in Arkansas are placed in a different county from their previous residence (Child Welfare Policy and Practice Group, 2015). There is a significant shortage of beds across the state and Arkansas has a low rate of placement with relatives. The shortage of placements has caused children to spend the night in DCFS offices when no placement is able to be found (Child Welfare Policy and Practice Group, 2015). There have been recruitment efforts to increase the number of foster homes in Arkansas

and from March 2015 to March 2016, the number of foster homes increased from 2,801 to 3,306 (Fanne, 2016). During this same times period, the number of children in foster care also increased from 4,178 to 4,791 (Fanne, 2016). The placement challenge is significant because 55% of children in foster care in Arkansas are placed outside of the county they reside (Child Welfare Policy and Practice Group, 2015). Children in Arkansas are also likely to be in multiple short-term placements or have a placement disrupted (Child Welfare Policy and Practice Group, 2015). The foster care system cannot currently support the number of foster children which has a direct impact on foster youth.

College Choice Theory

There are numerous studies and models that have been created to help understand the behaviors about college selection. Sociological models focus on the various social and individual factors that determine and individual's aspirations about education and occupation (Jackson, 1982). There have been multiple studies that support certain individual and family characteristics are positively correlated with college ambitions and enrollment in college. Some of these individual factors include high self-esteem, grade point average, and types of academic classes (Alfassi, 2003; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Another contributing factor during the application process, which is critical for at-risk students and adequate financial resources (Choy, 2003). Adequacy of financial resources is highly correlated with completing all of the necessary steps to enroll in higher education such as taking entrance exams and completing college applications (Choy, 2003). Prospective students with parents who have a college education, financial resources, and have completed academically rigorous coursework are significantly more likely to enroll in higher education.

Other models focus on the process that students go through when deciding to attend an institution of higher education instead of the individual characteristics. These models range in the

number of steps, but typically include three to seven steps that the student must complete to enrolling in higher education. Choy (2003) created a model where students must complete five steps in order to make it to a four-year institution. These steps include, aspire to attend college, be academically prepared, take the necessary entrance exams, apply to college, and enroll in college (Choy, 2003). Students leave the path to attend college during each of these five steps, but it is most often because they fail to aspire to attend higher education or they are not academically prepared (Choy, 2003). Hossler and Gallagher (1987) created a process where students move through three steps including predisposition, search, and choice. In these models, the early states such as aspirations and predisposition can be highly influenced by the individual's background and family characteristics. Foster youth face unique challenges based on their circumstances to successfully move through the early stages of the process to enroll in higher education.

Contemporary College Students

It is important to understand the contemporary college student to see the differences in the experiences of current college students and youth exiting foster care. Traditional college students are grouped in this category based on, "age, how recently they graduated high school, their living accommodations, membership in organizations, abilities, and race, ethnicity or heritage" (Gohn & Albin, 2006, p. 8). These students are typically between the ages of eighteen to twenty-five and are attending college full time opposed to having other commitments such as employment or a family (Levine & Dean, 2012). Traditional students tend to be consumer oriented and are looking for colleges and universities that offer a variety of activities, services, and opportunities to get involved (Levine & Dean, 2012). There are numerous theories and models about traditional students and the impact of college. College can be a developmental

testing ground for students to try new attitudes, beliefs, roles, and behaviors (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). College can also be a form of culture shock based on encounters with new ideas, differing values, new freedom, new opportunities, and social demands (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Traditional students often identify as part of one or more subpopulations based on their involvement and other college experiences. Some of these groups include Greek organization students that are part of a local or national fraternity or sorority, residence halls students that choose to live on-campus, honors students that participate in a college program designed for those with excellent test scores or high grade point averages, and student athletes that compete and various levels of inter-collegiate athletics (Gohn & Albin, 2006). National studies indicate that 56-58% of the students that enroll as first time, full-time freshmen will graduate within six years (Carey, 2005; McMillen et. al, 2003). The college graduation rates for foster youth are estimated to be significantly lower than traditional students that did not experience foster care (Vacca, 2008). There are numerous benefits to earning a college degree including higher earnings, higher standard of living, wider opportunities, cognitive skills and intellectual growth, and quality of life (Gohn & Albin, 2006).

Current college students are often referred to as millennials and are the most ethnically diverse of all generations (Brunner, Wallace, Reymann, Sellers, & McCabe, 2014). While this generation has the strongest relationships between races, there is limited interest in discussions of race and engaging in conversations across political and generational differences (Levine & Dean, 2012). Issues surrounding race and ethnicity have decreased while there has been more focus on issues regarding income and wealth. In addition, there are increasing women on college campuses and females are demonstrating greater academic progress than their male peers

(Brunner et. al., 2014). There are several psychosocial and identity development theories to help address the changes that are occurring in college students and help them define themselves and understand their interactions with others (Gohn & Albin, 2006).

Another trend with current college students is the notion of “trophy kids” which have been highly involved in competitive activities. Children that grew up in this generation were also highly supervised by their parents during their activities. Brunner et. al. wrote, “today’s traditional aged college students are products of a protected and supervised upbringing; they have been sheltered and lived structured lives” (p. 262). Students go to college wanting to be autonomous, but their parents are more involved and they are more dependent on their parents than any previous generation (Levine & Dean, 2012). Foster youth often do not have the same opportunities for participation in activities and involvement from parents or caring adults compared to their peers that are not in foster care.

Early Educational Challenges

Foster children experience many challenges and obstacles in regard to educational attainment compared to their peers who are not in foster care. Foster youth remain in the system for an average of 18 months and change placements an average of every six to 10 months (Wolanin, 2005). Due to the frequency of placement changes, foster children are more likely to transfer schools and experience longer delays between school transfers (Conger & Finkelstein, 2003). Transferring schools can create disruption because the foster youth must adjust to new teachers, classmates, and curriculum. Teachers and counselors can be a resource for foster children, but it is hard for foster youth to establish strong relationships in the school setting due to the frequency of placement changes (Wolanin, 2005). There is also evidence that when foster children’s placement is disrupted, children feel their situation is temporary and it can interfere

with their ability to concentrate and therefore successfully complete coursework (Conger & Rebeck, 2001).

Children in foster care are also likely to repeat a grade, be placed in special education programs, and have low attendance and behavioral issues in school (Elze et al, 2005; Geenen & Powers, 2006). Foster children often enter care already behind in their education and fail to catch up (Elze et al, 2005). In a study of 17,422 children over the course of four years, Conger and Rebeck (2001), found that foster children's reading and math mean scores were below the citywide average before foster care placement and scores remained below the mean after entering foster care. Another study of 424 foster parents in Oregon found that approximately 37% of children in foster care were performing below grade level compared to the national average of 20% (Burley & Halpern, 2001).

Foster youth often lack some of the basic support structures that children typically have in a family home. One study showed that the adults in the lives of foster care youth spent less time on homework than their peers, and the adults in the foster youth's lives were less likely to oversee their homework (Blome, 1997). As foster youth enter high school, the amount of time spent on homework is significantly less than their peers with 63% of sophomores in foster care reporting that they spent three hours or less on homework a week while 48% of the comparison group reported three hours or less spent on homework per week (Blome, 1997). Foster children are less likely to take college preparatory classes as part of their high school curriculum (Blome, 1997). Foster youth are frequently not provided college information and options about applying to higher education (Davis, 2006). There are often low expectations for foster youth so child welfare workers and foster parents do not receive training on how to guide older foster youth through the application and enrollment processes for higher education (Wolanin, 2005). All of

these factors increase the likelihood that children in the foster care system will not understand how to access post-secondary education or be ready to complete college level coursework.

Foster children face numerous educational challenges at the secondary level when they enter foster care. In addition to challenges with class attendance, changing schools, and lack of a supportive academic environment, one study demonstrated alarming academic and behavioral concerns of foster youth. In a study that included interviews with 262 foster youth between the ages of 15 and 19 years old found that foster youth were likely to fail at least one class, be suspended at least once, engage in physical fighting with other students, and engage in verbal altercations with teachers (McMillen et al, 2003). Foster youth also will run away for a variety of reasons including to see biological parents, siblings or visiting friends. These behavioral issues are related to the trauma and instability in the foster youth's life also interfere with the foster youth's academics and class attendance (Conger & Rebeck, 2001).

Schools are often not equipped to deal with the behavioral problems of foster youth, leading schools to respond punitively with consequences such as suspension, expulsion, or placing the foster youth in a restrictive educational setting (Geenen, Powers, & Phillips, 2015). All of these challenges and potential changes of placement and schools can make it challenging to track a foster child's academic progress from an early age. Understanding the different variables that impact foster children's education can help social work agencies provide the most appropriate and effective services to help the foster youth be successful.

Transitional Challenges Exiting Foster Care

Research is starting to focus on the population of foster children who age out of the foster care system without being adopted or reunited with their biological family. Foster youth at around the age of 18 are expected to find a job or multiple jobs, secure housing, and become

independent adults even though research indicates a person at this age is not fully prepared to live independently without a support system such as family (Greeson & Bowen, 2008). Foster youth that age out of foster care without reunification with their biological families or adoption have increased risk factors for homelessness, early pregnancy, incarceration, and living below the poverty line (Courtney & Dworsky, 2005). One study that included interviews with 55 foster youth who had left the foster care system found that foster youth were struggling with poor health, poor education, housing problems, substance use, and criminal behaviors (Barth, 1990).

Many of the youth who enter adulthood from the foster care system lack the resources and skills to live independently (Montgomery, Donkoh, & Underhill, 2006). In one study of foster youth attending college, 40.5% reported feeling somewhat prepared for college and 35% of the sample felt not well prepared for college (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor & Nesmith, 2001). Due to these risk factors and lack of resources, children in foster care have lower educational attainment than their peers. Common themes that were identified as challenges transitioning out of foster care were managing mental health concerns, finding stable housing and substance use or abuse.

Approximately 20,000 youth exit foster care each year at the age of 18 without permanence creating a very abrupt transition without the typical support that most youth experience. Foster youth often are not considering post-secondary education as part of their transition because they do not grow up with the expectation of attending college and it is not a possibility that has been discussed with them (Wolanin, 2005). Foster youth are focused on meeting their basic needs such as finding housing and employments as well as other challenges such as mental health, homelessness, and substance abuse and do not consider their options for higher education (Greeson & Bowen, 2008).

Mental Health

One of the major transitional challenges for foster care youth as they exit care is managing their mental health. McMillen and Raghavan (2009) completed interviews with 325 foster youth that were 19 years old and had been in the foster care system since at least 17 years of age. Their results showed that mental health services declined the month prior to leaving foster care and then dropped dramatically the month after leaving foster care. Foster youth aging out of the system have significantly higher levels of mental health problems in comparison to the general population (Sakai, Mackie, Shetgiri, Franzen, Partap, Flores, & Leslie, 2014). The transitional period is especially challenging for foster youth that need access to mental health services because once they turn eighteen their medical insurance changes. Sakai et al (2014) conducted focus groups with 28 foster youth and found some of the challenges with mental health services to be logistical issues of scheduling appointments and having transportation, prolonged wait times of appointments, and interruption of services with their previous provider at the time of transition. Challenges to receiving mental health services on a college campus include lack of time, privacy concerns, lack of emotional openness, and financial costs (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010).

The college environment is a critical setting to evaluate and address mental health because most mental health disorders appear during early adulthood (Ziven, Eisenberg, Gollust, & Golberstein, 2009). Counseling centers on college campuses have been seeing a shift to handling more severe psychological problems including suicide, substance abuse, history of psychiatric treatment or hospitalization as well as depression and anxiety (Kitzrow, 2003). College counseling centers are needing to adjust to the severity of problems and the increasing demand for counseling and psychiatric services (Kitzrow, 2003). Counseling centers are one

resource available to students on campus, but there are several studies that have indicated that the college student population does not seek out needed services or treatment (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010). One study indicated that over half of the students that screened positive for major depression or anxiety disorders had not received any treatment in the prior year (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010).

Mental health challenges are common among foster youth due to their exposure to trauma, separation from the biological family, often multiple placements and other stressors from being in the foster care system (Geenen et al, 2015). Some of the foster youth develop psychological problems as a result of the trauma they experience prior to entering foster care and some develop disorders due to the increasing amount of stress in their lives while they are in the foster care system (Pecora, 2010). It is also important to consider that foster children enter the system for a variety of reasons, but parents being mentally ill is one of the reasons that foster youth might enter care (Pilowsky & Wu, 2006). Studies show that foster youth are two to four times more likely to suffer from mental health disorders compared to their peers that are not in foster care (Havlick, Garcia, & Smith, 2013). These factors make it more likely that foster youth will experience mental health concerns as young adults and have higher rates of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder than their peers who were not in foster care. Foster youth in college would have access and could utilize the counseling services available to them through the campus.

There have been several studies about the mental health of foster youth that transition out of the foster care system. One study of 265 participants showed that youth between the ages of 19 to 23 who experienced instability during their time in foster care had twice as many mental health concerns compared to foster children who are stable during their time in foster care

(Fowler, Toro, & Miles, 2010). Another study found that youth who age out of the foster care system are at an elevated risk for suicide attempts compared to their peers that were not in foster care (Pilowsky & Wu, 2006). Common diagnoses among foster youth include major depressive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety symptoms and alcohol and substance abuse or dependence (Geenen, et al, 2015; Pilowsky & Wu, 2006).

Homelessness

Foster youth also have an increased likelihood of being homeless during their transition out of foster care. Negative childhood and family background experiences put foster youth at increased risk for becoming homeless as adults (Koegel, Melamid, & Burnam, 1995). For individuals not in the foster care system, transitioning to adulthood is a gradual process of being less dependent on one's parents to meet their needs (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009). Children in a low socioeconomic status are overrepresented in the foster care system because parents in this demographic have difficulty preventing children's exposure to harm and are often not able to promote positive health outcomes. Research has shown spending time in foster care is a risk factor for homelessness and approximately 12% of all homeless adults and 40% of homeless adults between the ages of 18 and 21 years old were previously in the foster care system (Kushel, Yen, Gee, & Courtney, 2007).

There are several studies that have indicated that foster youth have difficulty securing stable housing. Courtney et al (2001) interviewed 133 youth over the course of three years and found that approximately 20% of the youth transitioning out of foster care experienced homelessness. One of the youth interviewed in the study stated he had \$250 when he aged out of the system and was not prepared to live on his own. When interviewed 18 months after exiting foster care that youth said, "he had suffered a number of crises since leaving the system

including an episode of homelessness, being seriously beaten on at least one occasion, and being incarcerated for a short time” (Courney et al, 2001, p. 692). Pecora, Kessler, Williams, O’Brien, Downs, English, White, Hiripi, White, Wiggins, and Homes (2005) interviewed 479 former foster youth that had spent at least 12 months in foster care and found 22% had been homeless for at least one night within one year of exiting the foster care system. It is difficult for youth to focus on higher education when their basic needs such as stable housing are not being met when foster youth transition out of care.

In addition to unstable housing, foster youth report extreme financial hardship. In a study of 55 foster youth who aged out of foster care in California, 53% reported that they had serious financial trouble including an inability to buy food or pay bills (Barth, 1990). In addition to being homeless, those who are homeless and have a history of being in foster care are likely to be homeless longer, be dealing with mental health issues, and have children in foster care compared to other homeless adults (Kushel, et al, 2007). In one study by Fowler, Toro and Miles (2009), they surveyed 265 adolescents who left the foster care system and conducted interviews over a ten-month period. The results showed that 20% of the participants were chronically homeless during the follow-up period of two years. Although slightly over half of the participants did not experience homelessness during the follow-up period, many experienced patterns of precarious housing. The financial hardship experienced by foster youth who exit foster care makes pursuing higher education not seem like a realistic possibility, even for those that aspire to continue their education.

Substance Use

There are several studies that document the high rates of substance use among college students especially in regards to alcohol consumption. Foster children have histories of

maltreatment and instability which puts them at higher risk of developing a substance use disorder (Braciszewski, Moore, & Stout, 2014). Substance disorders are less common than experimentation, but about one in four older adolescents meets the criteria for substance abuse and approximately one in five adolescents meet the criteria for substance dependence (Young, Corley, Stallings, Rhee, Crowley, & Hewitt, 2002). College students have higher rates of past month alcohol consumption, binge drinking, and alcohol abuse compared to their peers of the same age (Cranford, Eisenberg, & Serra, 2009).

Studies have suggested that foster youth who age out of the foster care system are at higher risk of substance use disorders than their peers. One study conducted interviews with 406 youth in the foster care system over the course of two years about their use of alcohol and drugs (Vaughn, Ollie, McMillen, Scott, & Munson, 2007). Based on this sample, 45% of the foster youth reported using drugs within the last six months, 49% had tried drugs in their lifetime, and 35% met the criteria for having a substance disorder (Vaughn et al., 2007). Foster youth that have a diagnosis of Conduct Disorder, are living independently, or have a diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress disorder have an increased likelihood of developing a substance abuse disorder (Vaughn et al., 2007). Another study that used the Composite International Diagnostic Interview-Substance Abuse Module with 1,715 participants from various sectors of care found that 19.2% of foster youth met the criteria for substance abuse or dependence (Aarons, Brown, Hough, Garland & Wood, 2001). Based on this information, services about substance use should be prioritized for foster youth that are aging out of the system.

Foster Youth College Participation

Jones (2010) wrote, “post-secondary education is of interest because it is a powerful predictor of future life success and an indicator of successful emancipation from foster care” (p.

8). Unfortunately, from the limited research on foster youth in higher education, it is clear that foster youth do not attend post-secondary education at the same rate as their peers (Wolanin, 2005). Studies about educational outcomes for foster youth after high school are limited for several reasons. Studies that survey foster youth about their education are usually completed when the foster youth are 19 or 20 years of age while they are still receiving Independent Living services so that they are unlikely to have completed a college degree at that time (Pecora et. al, 2003). The studies that have been completed about foster children attending college range from 2% to 11% attendance compared to 60% attendance of their peers who are not in foster care (McMillen et. al, 2003; Vacca, 2008). A limited number of foster youth begin post-secondary education, and of that group, approximately 3 - 4% percent obtain a bachelor's degree (Nixon & Jones, 2007; Pecora et al., 2005).

Research shows clear inequalities between youth who have been in the foster care system compared to their peers. One study that examined outcomes of foster youth after leaving care found that 7% of foster youth attended a four-year institution, 16% attended a two-year institution, and 9% attended vocational training (Courtney & Dworsky, 2005). Those in foster care that are able to attend post-secondary education face numerous challenges, which is why their drop-out rate is estimated to be as high as 80% (Elze et. al, 2005). Current statistics about attendance and completion of higher education show an urgent need to address some of the challenges that are hindering foster youth from reaching their potential.

Part of the challenge for foster care youth is the completion of high school at a much lower rate. Blome (1997) completed a longitudinal study from 1980 until 1986 to compare high school and post high school experiences of youth who were in foster care and youth living with at least one parent. This study included 334 participants, 167 of those participants were foster

care youth. This study found that over the six years, foster youth dropped out of high school at a higher rate, received significantly less financial assistance from parents or guardians, and were more likely to choose to participate in training programs instead of higher education. In a survey of 216 foster youth, experiences that were most influential on the foster youth's decision to attend college included, information about financial aid, advisement about college, and college preparation classes (Merdiner, Hines, Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005).

Statistics about the youth who attend post-secondary education show a significant difference compared to their peers. In a study of foster youth in the mid-west, less than 6% earned a two or four-year degree (Courtney et. al, 2004). Foster youth are less likely to be prepared so they often enroll in remedial education and research suggests that students assigned to remedial education frequently drop out of classes or do not make progress towards their degree at the same pace of their peers (Brock, 2010). Foster youth who attend college often have to work while they are in school. One study that sent surveys to youth formally in foster care at community colleges in California, found that the majority were working over twenty hours per week while attending school full time (Rassen, Cooper, & Mer, 2010). Other challenges that foster youth face outside of the classroom are feeling isolation especially during campus family events or major holidays. Research shows that foster children who are able to attend college are significantly less likely than their peers to complete their degree (Courtney et. al, 2010).

Day, Dworsky, Fogarty and Damashek (2011) completed a study at a large public four-year institution to examine if foster youth graduate college at the same rate as low-income, first generation college students. The study included 444 participants that were formally in foster care and 378 participants that were low-income, first generation college students. Findings from the study showed foster youth were less likely to graduate from college compared to the first-

generation low-income students. The results showed that former foster youth are more likely to drop out during their first year of college and more likely to drop out prior to completing their college degree. This study demonstrated that even when foster children are compared to students with similar demographic characteristics, they are still at a greater disadvantage when it comes to completing post-secondary education.

The completion rates for foster youth that attend college are significantly lower than their peers. In one study that interviewed former foster youth up to ten years after leaving foster care found that of the 44% that went on to post-secondary education, 10% had bachelor's degrees, 8% had associates degrees, and 20% had completed vocational training (Pecora et. al, 2003). Higher education or vocational training has the ability to greatly improve the lives of foster children and allow them greater opportunities as adults.

Jones (2010) collected data from 106 foster youth who were all in the same residential placement that focused on education for three years after exiting the placement. This study found the majority, approximately 80% of foster youth in the program had a desire to attend college. Of the sample, 13% of the foster youth attended a four-year institution, but the study was not long enough to determine the percentage that completed their degree (Jones, 2010). Foster youth in this study did have success in two-year programs with 21% of the students attending community colleges. The research shows that the foster youth who start post-secondary education are less likely than their peers to earn a degree (Day et al, 2013). There is a need for additional research that focuses on the factors that allow foster youth to persist and complete their post-secondary education as well as assessment on foster youth that leave post-secondary education to gain a better understanding of what support structures are the most beneficial to foster youth.

College Support

One of the obstacles that foster children face once they have been accepted and started college is navigating the resources available to them. Former foster youth often do not have the support and knowledge about what resources are available on a college campus. The two most common forms of support received by foster youth are Independent Living Programs and campus support programs (Salazar, 2012). Independent Living Programs help foster youth prepare to attend college by helping them apply for financial aid, completing college applications, and taking students on college tours (Salazar, 2012). College programs offer a range of services such as scholarships, priority registration, housing, mentoring, and academic support (Dworsky & Perez, 2010). College support services often include a broad range of programs depending on the institution, however few are directly targeted at youth that age out of the foster care system (Dworsky & Perez, 2010).

Recommendations from the research offer many suggestions to help foster youth in post-secondary education and increase the likelihood that they will persist. One of the key factors was having access to faculty members, advisors, and staff that can serve as support for foster youth while they are adjusting to college (McMillen et al., 2003). Foster youth indicate that some of the challenges with accessing resources at the institution of higher education they attended were lack of time, not knowing how to obtain the services, and not knowing where to obtain the services (Merdiner et. al, 2005). The transition to college can be overwhelming for any student. Foster youth often feel unprepared and attend college without guidance so it is important for them to be made aware of services and resources early in their transition.

Foster youth who do well academically and are motivated to attend college frequently cite having a mentor or role model as being a critical component to their success so it is

important that they continue to have these supporting individuals on a college campus (Martin & Jackson, 2007). There are multiple studies that emphasize the importance of a foster parent, teacher, or other role model that influences foster children to continue their education. In one study, teachers were the most cited role model for foster youth's educational success (Merdiner, et. al, 2005). Not only were these role models significant, but they often intervened or advocated for the foster youth in place of a caregiver that kept the foster youth on the path towards college.

Social support is critical for foster youth to be successful in post-secondary education. This is due to a number of reasons including, "students who had been in foster care may also be less likely than their peers to have informal networks of social support to which they can turn to when problems arise or they are feeling stressed" (Day et. al, 2013, p. 7). In one study where foster youth were interviewed for several years after being discharged from the foster care system, 40% stated they spoke with previous foster parents once a week and 20% of the foster youths stated the foster family continued providing emotional support and guided their decision making (Courtney, et al. 2001). Support networks are critical in the transition to higher education and there should be an emphasis on helping foster youth establish these relationships prior to exiting foster care.

Educational Aspirations

Although foster youth are worse off than their peers in regards to educational attainment at the high school and post-secondary level, there are several studies that show foster youth have a strong desire to achieve educational goals. Courtney, Terao, and Bost (2004) completed a study of foster youth in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin and estimated that approximately 80% had the desire to attend higher education institutions or additional training after high school. McMillen et al (2003) surveyed a sample of 262 youth in the foster care system about their educational

aspirations. Researchers asked a range of questions including gathering information about placement history, maltreatment history, behavioral problems, alcohol and drug use, and future orientation. Seventy percent of the participants stated they planned to attend college and 19% wanted to continue their education beyond a bachelor's degree. Overall their data showed significant concerns for foster care youth at the high school level, but the students still had a strong desire to continue their academic careers after high school.

Blome (1997) found foster youth and their peers both hoped to complete a college degree, but the non-foster care youth were more likely to plan a four-year bachelor degree while the foster youth were more likely to consider other options immediately after high school such as working, vocational school, or homemaking. In one study, foster youth who desired a college education often had to choose a community college or vocational school because they reported working an average of 26 to 31 hours per week and it was a better financial option than a four year college (Barth, 2010). Foster youth have access to the Educational Training Voucher, federal grants, and additional state funds and scholarships. Foster youth should be informed of all financial support and receive guidance about their post-secondary education options.

Support and Mentoring

Greeson and Bowden (2008) define a mentor as "an important adult, other than a parent, someone at least 21 years old who has had significant influence and could be counted on in a time of need" (p. 1180). Mentors are especially critical to foster youth that often lack a relationship with their biological parents or other family members. Mentors for foster youth often include people that they had relationships with from being placed in foster care such as social services workers, foster parents, and other adults assigned to them through formal mentoring

programs. This mentor can be a critical source of support while foster youth are transitioning out of the foster care system and pursuing their educational goals.

One of the recurring themes in the literature about foster youth that are successful in continuing to post-secondary education is having a role model, mentor, or person that encouraged them about education. Mentoring has been shown to improve student's outcomes including overall performance, critical thinking skills, self-confidence, grade point average, persistence, expectations, and future aspirations (Crisp, 2010). In a study of high achieving foster youth, 32% said that emotional support and guidance was still needed while they attended higher education. One foster youth stated, "A social worker is still important because she used to see me, not that often, but she kept in touch... and whenever I had trouble say with studying I knew I could pick up the phone and she'd be there for me" (Martin & Jackson, 2002, p. 128). The qualitative research about foster youth in higher education continually shows the significance of a mentor in the decision to pursue and be successful in higher education.

The Better Futures model is a program focused on improving the preparation and participation for youth in foster care that also have mental health challenges. This program includes services such as a Summer Institute, peer coaching, and attending mentoring workshops. This program created a place where foster youth experiencing mental health challenges could be around peers that have similar experiences while building their self-determination skills and working towards identified goals (Geenen et. al, 2015). This model was evaluated through a randomized longitudinal study of 67 youth in foster care with mental health issues. The findings of the study showed that those who participated in the program were twice as likely to attend post-secondary education compared to the control group. Other positive effects included higher rates of high school completion, mental health recovery, and quality of life

(Geenen et. al, 2015). This study demonstrates that foster care youth with mental health challenges have the potential to participate and succeed in post-secondary education with a positive support system and mentoring.

Foster Youth Studies in the United Kingdom

There are international studies and research on foster youth and educational outcomes that provide good information and best practices even though their child welfare agencies and schools operate differently than in the United States. Jackson and Ajayi (2007) report findings from the first study in the United Kingdom of foster youth that attended institutions of higher education. The study included 129 participants that were interviewed over the course of three years. Participants were sent an initial survey to make sure they met the criteria for the study and then a semi-structured interview about their life including why they came into care, placement history, educational attainment, school experience, and what their experience was as a university student with a background in foster care. This study cited foster parents as being an important source of support to the foster youth as they transitioned out of foster care and started at the university. Some foster youth reported spending weekends and holidays with their foster parents during the first year of their post-secondary education. Even those with support, still struggled with their program due to reasons such as lacking basic study skills, difficulty organizing their course work, and being a slow reader. Foster youth face similar challenges managing college level course work and also emphasize the importance of a mentor and support system to helping the foster youth be successful.

In another study by Martin and Jackson (2002), data was collected from 38 high achieving foster youth in the United Kingdom that had spent a minimum of one year in foster care. Some of the reasons in this study that foster youth stated helped them do well in school

were stability of placement, remaining in the same school, attending school regularly, education of foster parents, and foster parents that supported and encouraged them. Of this sample of foster youth, 25 had finished their bachelor's degree, several had master's degrees, and one had a doctorate degree. As part of the interview, foster youth were asked about a piece of advice and the most common response was the importance of positive encouragement and having significant others show an active interest in their education. The United Kingdom has realized the many challenges faced by foster youth and their transition out of foster care and created the Children (Leaving Care) Act of 2000 which requires a needs assessment for every eligible child that leaves foster care. Based on the results of the needs assessment, a plan is created with the help of an advisor to assist that youth be successful as an independent adult (Montgomery et al., 2006). The United States does not currently have any requirements or assessment for foster youth that age out of the system.

Chapter Summary

The research indicates that foster youth face numerous challenges from early on that impact their chances of being successful in higher education. In order to gain a more complete understanding of the factors that improve a foster youth's chances of being successful in higher education, there need to be more studies of foster youth that complete a college degree. There is a clear disconnect between a foster youth's desire to attend college and the knowledge and resources that allow them to achieve that goal. Foster youth who have attended college recommended the following additional services to help them transition: mentoring, assistance finding housing, assistance with finding a job, clubs for former foster youth, and on-going case management (Rassen, Cooper, & Mery, 2010). Colleges and universities need to consider the research that has been done to improve current programs for foster youth on college campuses

and target those services specifically at foster youth that have aged out of the system. There is a clear need for more research so child welfare agencies and institutions of higher education can better understand how to support these students in the transition to college and help them matriculate.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This study will identify the perceptions of foster youth about higher education and the programs and supports that are the most beneficial in helping with their success. Foster youth were interviewed about various supports and systems including Independent Living Programs, financial assistance, Department of Children and Family Services, foster families or group home environments, and specific institutional programs. Foster youth identified and described important early educational experiences and which supports and programs were helpful in the transition from foster care to higher education. Foster youth were asked to identify the factors that they perceived to be most important when enrolling in higher education and the major obstacles to enrolling in higher education. Qualitative research was chosen to explore the experiences of foster youth and how foster youth make meaning of their experiences to be successful in education.

This chapter included six areas for developing the methodology of this qualitative study. The first section is the sample that included the characteristics of the participants and how they were identified. The design section described why qualitative research was the best option for this study. The instrumentation section discussed the interview protocol and how each question and sub-question helped to answer at least one of the research questions. Collection of data described all procedures used to collect the data through the interviews and how that data was checked. Data analysis described the methods used to analyze the data and why this methodology was chosen. The final section summarized the methods and purpose of the study. This study is designed to better understand the educational experiences of foster youth in higher education and which programs and supports are the most valuable to their educational success.

Sample

A total of 10 to 12 participants were to be recruited through snowball sampling from various institutions in Arkansas. Qualitative samples are typically smaller than quantitative and must be large enough to assure that most or all of the perceptions that are important are uncovered (Mason, 2010). Additional participants were identified as needed to reach data saturation when new data does not add any further insight to the research questions (Mason, 2010). The institutions included in the study were four year and two year institutions including University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, University of Arkansas, Fort Smith, University of Arkansas, Little Rock, Arkansas State University, and Northwest Arkansas Community College. All participants had placed in foster care for a period of at least six months between the ages of 14 and 18. Foster youth should receive independent living services beginning at the age of 14 until their 18th birthday or until they are no longer in foster care.

Foster youth can be hard to access after exiting foster care because the state does not track these students after the age of 21 or when they sign themselves out of foster care which can occur at 18 or older. The snowball method was utilized to reach this population. I contacted the Department of Children and Family Services for names of students meeting the criteria and have them request permission from students to share their contact information. I also posted information online at the selected institutions and ask Division of Student Affairs and Multicultural Affairs administrators for recommendations of students that meet the selection criteria. Screenings were completed by phone prior to the interviews to ensure that the students meet the criteria for the study. All interviews took place in-person in a public location. All participants were informed of the interview process and signed a consent to participate and be

recorded prior to beginning the interview. All consent forms and procedures will be approved by the University of Arkansas Institutional Review Board (Appendix A).

Design

This is a qualitative study using standardized open-ended interviews for data collection (Appendix B). This interview type was chosen so sequence and order of questions can be chosen in advance (Patton, 2015). Prior to the interview, all participants completed an initial phone screening to make sure they met the requirements of the study and to schedule the semi-structured interview. There were prompts after each question to allow the participant to elaborate on their answer if appropriate. Participants answering the same questions allowed for comparison of answers between participants and ensure that all topics are addressed. Qualitative research and use of the semi-structured interview allows the researcher to gather information about the participant's experiences in foster care and how those experiences influenced their decision to attend higher education.

I recorded each interview with permission from the participant and offered a transcript to the participant to review. I took field notes during each interview. These notes contained observations about the participant and anything worth noting during the interview. After each interview was completed, I kept a researcher's journal of any general observations about each of the interviews. Field notes included any information about the participant's non-verbal gestures, interpretations, and concerns about the validity of any statements (Patton, 2012). All field notes were recorded within two hours of completing the interview. Field notes were used as descriptive narrative and detailed and may include the researcher's feelings or reactions to the participant's statements or behaviors during the interview.

Role and Background as Researcher

As the researcher, I have a distinctive interest in the foster care system. I was a unit staff assistant and case manager in Florida for two years working with foster youth in Broward County. I worked with foster youth from ages 0-17 in a variety of placement types including, in-home protective services, foster homes, group home, children's shelters, and relative placements. I did not specialize so my cases could have various goals including reunification, adoption, permanent guardianship, or Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA). I was a foster parent in the state of Arkansas for four years specifically fostering teenage girls, ages 14 to 19. I had foster youth in my home for several months to 3.5 years. As a case manager and foster parent, I was able to observe the challenges of foster youth being successful and supported in an educational environment. The majority of foster youth that I worked with encountered barriers to be successful in education and education was not a priority for them.

These experiences have made me passionate about researching what are primary factors that help foster youth be successful in higher education. Although my history of working with foster youth has given me a background and understanding of this population, I recognize that it could also create bias as I conduct and interpret research. I remained analytical as I reviewed the data from my participants and put several safeguards in place such as triangulation of data to ensure credibility of the research. I believe my background working with foster youth in different capacities allowed me to better interpret and evaluate the data collected during the interviews.

Data Collection

There was a multi-step process to develop, collect, and analyze the data. The first step was designing the interview questions related to the themes of the research questions. Questions were open ended and designed to guide the conversation that allowed for follow-up based on the

response of the participant. There were three sections of the interview guide. The first section was about the participant's experience in foster care. This included questions about how foster care influenced their education, how they found out about educational opportunities while in foster care, their transition out of foster care, and factors that influenced their decisions about higher education. The second section of questions was about the programs and supports they have utilized while in higher education. This section included questions about their transition, any pre-college or programs they enrolled in during college, and support systems. The third section of the interview guide focused on challenges or obstacles the participant has overcome to achieve their goal of completing higher education. These questions included topics such as the process to be admitted to a university, fears or doubts about participating in higher education and anything they would change about their educational experience. The final question allowed the participant to offer any information that was not included in the interview guide or the prompts. These questions are grounded from the literature about foster youth and their educational experiences.

There were five research questions for the study, below is each research question with the interview questions that will answer it.

1. What factors were perceived to be most important to foster youth when deciding to enroll in higher education?
 - Q2. When did you learn about or first consider applying to college, and how did you find out about the educational opportunities available?
 - Q3. Tell me about your transition from foster care to higher education?
 - Q8. How did you learn about the necessary steps to apply and be admitted to higher education?

2. What was the perceived importance of each factor that a foster youth considers when enrolling in higher education?

Q4. What were the most influential factors when deciding on an institution of higher education?

3. What supports were perceived to be the most successful in helping foster youth transition and be successful in a post-secondary education setting?

Q5. What supports did you utilize during your transition and after starting higher education?

Q7. What supports or programs were the most helpful in preparing you for the college experience and workload and why?

4. What programs were perceived to be the most successful in helping foster youth transition and be successful in a post-secondary education setting?

Q6. What programs did you participate in prior to or after enrolling in college?

Q7. What supports or programs were the most helpful in preparing you for the college experience and workload and why?

5. What did foster youth consider to be the major obstacles to enrolling in higher education?

Q1. Can you tell me about when you entered foster care and any changes to your educational experience?

Q9. What were your biggest fears or obstacles to enrolling and transitioning to college?

Q10. Would you change anything about your educational experience?

The research included a phone screening and semi-structured interview. Prior to the interview, there was a phone screening conducted to ensure the participant meets the

qualifications for the study and to set up a time for full interview. The beginning of the interview included an introduction to the researcher and the study. The participant was then asked the interview questions and any supplemental questions to help gain a better understanding of the participant's perspective. The final question asked the participant if they would recommend anyone else for participation in the study. The interview was recorded, notes were taken during the interview, and the researcher kept a journal about the interview. All interviews where the participant gives permission for the interview to be recorded were transcribed. These steps allowed for triangulation of the data and help with accuracy. In addition to using transcription, notes, and journaling, the researcher also had a debriefing session with a peer. This session allowed a peer to review the data and provide an external check.

Data Analysis

The researcher collected data from the semi-structured interview responses provided by participants who provided their perspective about secondary education, transitioning to college, and their college experience. The researcher will record all interviews with the permission of the participant and then transcribed. A copy of the transcription will be sent to the participant for confirmation and an opportunity to make any changes to their statements during the interview. Data analysis began through examination of reading the raw data. The researcher will review each of these transcriptions to look for common phrases or themes. Each interview will then be coded into themes, commonalities, and patterns utilizing the constant comparative method. Open coding will identify these initial themes and patterns and then they will be grouped together to develop common themes among the interviews. This will allow the researcher to see similarities, differences, and any anomalies across the interviews (Kolb, 2012). Constant comparative methodology has four stages including: comparing incidents, integrating categories and their

properties, delimiting the theory, and writing the theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Using a constant comparative methodology allows the researcher to look at the raw data provided and continually sort and code the data to develop a theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data analysis will allow for themes that can create generalizations to the larger population of foster youth.

Chapter Summary

This study will help understand the experiences of foster youth and how those experiences led them to achieve their goal of attending college. This qualitative study will analyze the perspectives of foster youth who are enrolled or recently graduated from institutions of higher education in the state of Arkansas. Foster youth were asked to share their experience in secondary education, the transition to higher education, and the programs and services they participated in while in college. This chapter describes the sample, instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis for the study.

Chapter Four: Results

The purpose of this study was to better understand the perceptions of foster youth and the supports and programs that help them be successful in higher education and any major obstacles to enrolling and transitioning to higher education. This study explored the perceptions of foster youth and their educational experiences in secondary education, transitioning to higher education, and during college. Foster youth attend and graduate higher education at a lower rate than their peers that are not in foster care. This is true even when compared to other groups of students with similar demographics. Foster youth face a unique set of challenges and circumstances that can make it challenging to be successful and navigate the transition from high school to higher education. A better understanding of the perspective of foster youth that have successfully navigated the transition and adjustment to higher education will help determine the best methods and practices to helping future foster youth be successful.

This chapter presents key findings and themes that emerged from the research. Five participants completed semi-structured interviews in-person with the researcher. All participants were foster youth who are currently enrolled or recently graduated from an institution of higher education in the state of Arkansas. This chapter will include a summary of the study including the purpose of the study, significance of the study, the design of the study and data collection. Data analysis and statement of the research questions will go over the results of the study and the chapter will conclude with a summary.

Summary of the Study

Purpose of the Study

Foster youth face distinctive challenges to be academically successful compared to their peers. Foster youth are more likely to change schools, not be enrolled in school for a period of

time, have disciplinary issues, and have difficulty focusing. The Foster Care Independence Act provides funding for youth that are exiting the foster care system to access higher education or technical training. The purpose of the study is to understand what programs and supports foster youth identify as being the most beneficial in their transition to higher education. Possible supports and programs included independent living programs, financial assistance, Department of Children and Family Services assistance, foster family or group home impact, and specific programs at the institution the foster youth are enrolled.

Significance of the Study

There is limited research about foster youth in higher education. Every year 20,000 – 25,000 foster youth age out of the foster care system without permanence such as reunification or adoption (Elze et al., 2005; Nixon & Jones, 2007). The foster youth have to navigate the transition to adulthood without the typical supports of most other young adults. By understanding foster youth perceptions of the supports and programs that have helped them transition and succeed in higher education, improvements can be made to help more foster youth be successful in a higher education setting.

Design of the Study

This chapter will present the key findings from five interviews that were conducted with foster youth that are either currently enrolled in higher education or have recently graduated within the past year. All participants completed in-person semi-structured interviews which were recorded. All transcripts were then provided to the participants to review for accuracy and if the participant would like to make any edits or changes. Field notes were taken during each of the interviews and a research journal was kept following the interview. Peer debriefing was a technique used to make sure the information collected was valid.

The initial research design was to interview 10 – 12 participants through snowball sampling. I recruited participants through a variety of methods including reaching out to all four year institutions in the state of Arkansas requesting assistance, contacting several Department of Human Services offices, and messaging non-profit group homes and organizations that work with foster youth. My first participant was recruited through a message sent to on-campus students and the University of Arkansas- Fort Smith, but she was not able to identify anyone else that met the requirements. My second and third participants also did not know of any foster youth in the state of Arkansas that were enrolled in higher education. Participant 3 stated, “I don’t really know anyone else from foster care that’s in college. I know people that have been in foster care but they’re not in school.” My fourth participant was recruited through outreach to Methodist Family Home and was able to refer me to my fifth participant. Due to the difficulty of recruiting participants and finding former youth that were enrolled in higher education, only five participants were able to be identified for the study.

Data Collection

Participants were recruited through several different methods. I emailed the student affairs offices of all four-year institutions in the state of Arkansas. I reviewed the website for each institution and contacted offices that directly supported foster youth or traditionally serve underrepresented students such as multicultural centers. I reached out to several contacts at the Department of Human Services such as Transitional Youth Support coordinators that work directly with foster youth after the age of 18. I also emailed non-profit organizations in the state of Arkansas including Saving Grace, Methodist Family Health, and Project Zero. Phone screenings were completed with six foster youth identified through this recruitment process and five individuals qualified to participate in the study. Participants were enrolled in five different

institutions including, University of Arkansas-Fayetteville, University of Arkansas- Fort Smith, University of Arkansas- Little Rock, University of Central Arkansas, and Northwest Arkansas Community College. One participant transferred from the University of Central Arkansas and graduated from University of Arkansas- Little Rock. Data were collected by reviewing the interview transcripts, field notes, and journals to find common themes for each of the research questions. Data collection began with an individual review of each of the interview transcripts. The review created categories for each of the interviews. Once all of the interviews had been reviewed, a comparison of categories emphasized the similarities and differences between the interviews.

Data Analysis

Data analysis started with a comparison of each case. The transcript was reviewed in its entirety and then a second time highlighting specific responses to the research questions. After reviewing the transcript, field notes and the researcher's journal were reviewed for any additional perspectives. This process was completed for each of the five interviews. Once this process was complete, a list of themes was created for each of the research questions organized by the participant. For each question, I reviewed the themes from each of the interviews to categorize and find common themes. Each of the research questions had a minimum of one theme or category that was mentioned by a minimum of three participants. Any identifying information such as names of family members, mentors, job locations, and specific college programs have been changed in that transcripts. Transcripts were emailed to each of the participants for confirmation of accuracy. Two of the participants responded that they reviewed their transcript and their statements were accurate and the other three participants did not respond. A peer

reviewed all of the transcripts and themes and confirmed that same themes. Below are each of the research questions and the data from the interviews.

Statement of Research Question Results

I reviewed each of the interview transcripts, field notes, and research journals to look for themes and commonalities between the interviews. Below are the research questions and discussion of the findings for each question. The first research question was, “What factors were perceived to be most important to foster youth when deciding to enroll in higher education? There were several important factors that emerged throughout the interviews. These factors include cost, location, and motivation to be successful. Participants that received grants and scholarships to cover all their expenses, still considered cost a deciding factor. Participants considered the cost of each institution where they were accepted and other costs such as utilities, transportation, and other expenses. Participant 5 had a good relationship with the Transitional Youth Support coordinator for her region who helped her understand the specific monetary benefits provided by the Department of Human Services for higher education. Participant 5 stated,

[My Transitional Youth Support coordinator] let me know about a lot of scholarships that were out there and just the resources, like being able to get a laptop, get your text books paid for, and your rooming and stuff paid for. Because a lot of foster kids, they have this belief that just you being a foster kid allows you to go to college, but that’s not true... our Transitional Youth Coordinator let us know that you still have to apply for scholarships, DHS will cover things but they’re not going to cover the whole thing.

Participant 3 is working full time to pay her expenses and attending college part time, she stated that she selected her specific institution because, “it was cheaper and close by. I received FASFA and then the Methodist Home grant.” Several participants worked one or more jobs while attending school to cover all of their expenses. There were significant differences in how participants found out about resources. Participant 2 only received Pell and Participant 3 did not

know about financial resources until after she had already exited the foster care system.

Participant four and five actively participated in DHS services throughout high school, had a better understanding of resources, and utilized DHS assistance for the cost of tuition and other related expenses such as books. The data shows that cost is a key factor in deciding on an institution of higher education, but foster youth had different levels of knowledge and understanding about the resources available.

Location was another common theme among the interviews of how the participants decided on college. Participants 1, 3, and 5 choose colleges close to where they aged out foster care in locations they were familiar. Participant 1 stated,

Mainly it was just because I didn't want to go away. I don't like to be far away from my [foster] parents or [my son] And the cost, I don't want to pay tons of money if I don't decide that the right thing for me. So I decided to come here because it was seven minutes away from my home.

Participant 4 had applied to multiple colleges in the state of Arkansas, but circumstances of helping with her younger siblings made her choose a location close to home. Participant 4 stated, "Unfortunately for me, some family issues came up that really made my decision for me." Participant 2 chose a location that was farther from home because she had the most financial assistance, but stated the institution was less appealing due to how far away she would be from home.

Another common theme was the motivation to be successful and have more opportunities for themselves. Although there was not much emphasis on education in the childhoods of the participants, during high school there was a mentor or purpose that made college a priority.

Participant 1 said,

My [foster] parents were always like 'Do you want to work at Mc. Donald's? Do you want to do it?' So they kind of teased me about that. I also have a four-year old son, so that was really kind of my push... but ultimately if I didn't go to college I would feel

kind of like a failure, like I failed him. This way I could support him better if I get my degree and have a stable job. Just comfort for me and him.

Participant 2 started to seriously consider college when her sponsor from a group organization took that participant and several other girls on a series of college tours. The participant stated,

She took us to her alma mater, Texas A&M and I thought it was ugly and it was boring and it was in the middle of nowhere. And then she took us to Baylor which is in Waco, and she took us to Texas Tech and she took us to Arkansas and OSU. Each time we'd go for two days. All the girls were the same age as I, and so we all drove down together, stayed in a hotel, it was super fun. We did the campus tour, we got the t-shirts, and did all that. Through the group of friends and her, that how I was like, maybe college is a good thing. Maybe working at [local bakery] for the rest of my life is not going to work.

It was apparent during each of my interviews that attending college was an important part of feeling successful for the participants. Participants believed that a college education was needed to expand their opportunities for employment. Participant 1 is a Certified Nursing Assistant and Participant 3 has a full-time job in a catering kitchen, but they did not feel they could accomplish their goals without earning a college degree. My field notes included multiple comments to support cost and location as common themes and my researcher's journal had notations of the reoccurring fear of failure if the participant chose not to attend college.

Research question two is, "What was the perceived importance of each factor that a foster youth considers when enrolling in higher education?" Cost appeared the most important factor and was discussed by every participant during her interview. Participants that did not have significant funding from the Department of Human Services or other scholarships, cost was more important than other factors such as location. Participant 2 stated,

If anything, the University of Arkansas was less appealing because it was farther away from my sister, and farther away from what I had called home for so long... I'm by far the farthest away from home. And so when [my friends] are like, "hey we're getting together for a reunion." I can't just jump in my car and go home.

Location was also a top factor identified by the participants in selecting an institution of higher education. Three of the participants choose to stay close to where they considered home and remain near their support systems while transitioning to college. Participant 5 chose to live with family and take care of her younger brothers while commuting to college. Participant 2 traveled the farthest to college and it was specifically for financial reasons and where the participant received the highest amount of financial support. My field notes and researchers journal also support the importance of these two factors. It was clear that the participants expressed anxiety about the cost of higher education and understanding how to budget and manage their finances. The participants that received financial support and a stipend still sought advice and input from their foster parents and mentors about budgeting.

Research question 3 is, “What supports were perceived to be the most successful in helping foster youth transition and be successful in a post-secondary education setting? The key support that came up in every interview was a specific mentor or mentors. This mentor was often a teacher or someone that worked at the school, an individual from the Division of Human Resources, or assigned through a non-profit program that invested in these individuals and helped them through the process of applying and transitioning to higher education. Participant 4 received support from her AP coordinator at the school throughout the application process.

Participant 4 stated,

we went to college visits together. She proofed all of my essays. We went to scholarship banquets together, but she was kind of the driving force behind getting into college.

Participant 3 had several mentors that were assigned and a set of foster parents that continued to support her as she transitioned to college. Participant 3 said,

I have one set of foster parents I still talk to they still help out whenever I need help. They actually told me about a program because I was in a Methodist group home and they have

like a foundation that helps you pay for school as well. They still help me fill out that stuff too.

In addition to having a specific mentor that helped with college applications, financial aid, scholarships and other aspects of the college process, participants were also taught life skills by their mentors. These mentors taught things such as home repairs, budgeting, cooking, and a variety of other skills that helped these foster youths be successful as young adults. Participant 3 stated,

I have [Jessica], she another mentor, she helps me out with budgeting and stuff. If I ever need help with my bill and stuff, she'll come and help me figure out why I'm doing what I'm doing. Then [Tina], she's kinda like a second mom, I don't know what you'd call her. If I ever need anything I can call her.

These mentors remained in contact with the participants and helped them after they had transitioned to college. These mentors would provide that missing support from a family such as phone calls, packages, and a place to stay during breaks. Participant 2 stated,

The foster parent that I had when I was eight years old... sends me care packages and remembers my birthday. So she's always been that one person that... just about when you think that she's forgotten about you she send you a card or gives you a call or writes on your facebook.

There was genuine appreciation and affection when the participants spoke of the different ways they had been supported by their mentors. It was clear from the participant stories that these mentors invested a significant amount of time and energy to support these participants and had a major influence in their decision to pursue a college degree. I was surprised by the level of involvement and commitment from the mentors to continue supporting these foster youth as they transitioned to college.

Research question 4 was what programs were perceived to be the most successful in helping foster youth transition and be successful in a post-secondary education setting? There were three types of programs that participants mentioned finding helpful in the transition and

being successful in higher education. These include programs that helped them receive college credit in high school, Independent Living Classes through DHS or group homes that helped prepare them for college, and extended orientation or campus resources. Four of the five participants took AP Courses as well as the AP exam for college credit. Participant 1 was also part of a program that allowed her to attend high school for half a day and college for half a day. She stated,

I had about 32 credits, college credits, before I even graduated high school. Then my senior year I took the CNA classes so I also passed and became a CNA before I graduated high school. So that was a great opportunity.

Participants 4 and 5 both regularly participated in Independent Living Program (ILP) classes in addition to have the opportunity to attend various conferences and workshops about higher education. Participant four stated the classes were helpful in a variety of ways. Participant four stated,

Independent living should things like how to cook, how to clean, and then like each year they would go over a list of scholarships and a list of schools in Arkansas and everything. And then they talked about our monthly stipend that we would get if we stayed in and went to school.

The participants identified programs that allowed the participants to earn college credits or gain a better understanding of college as beneficial. My field notes and researcher's journal support this finding. One of the reoccurring themes in my journal was that participants attributed their knowledge of certain life skills and college processes specifically to these classes. All participants had been involved with life skills courses, but not all of them participated in the Department of Human Resources classes. One factor I noted in my researcher's journal is there does not appear to be accountability or tracking of foster youth participating in the Department of Human Services classes.

The final research question was, “What did foster youth consider the major obstacles to their enrolling in higher education?” The most common theme between the interviews was the challenge of the social adjustment to college. The participants shared stories of challenges in high school because of changing schools frequently or being ridiculed about not having a family and their concerns continuing as they transitioned to higher education. Participant one described her social fears carrying over from grade school. Participant 1 stated,

I was really scared of judgements because you don't know what's going on in people's lives, and then having that from where I was really little, all the way to pretty much junior high, having people say I don't have a real family, and not having real friends because they don't know who my family is, things like that. I did have to switch school a lot, so whenever I made friends I didn't really attach to them because I didn't know if I'd have to leave or not. So that was kind of difficult.

Participant 3 also expressed her concerns about social settings. She stated, “I could buy groceries, I could budget. But as far as interacting with peers, that was really difficult.” It is clear from these statements that social concerns were a major challenge as participants transitioned out of the foster care system. Most of the participants attributed that to changing schools frequently and judgement by their peers during elementary school. There were often programs that helped the foster youth connect once they were at college such as orientation, living on-campus, and clubs and organizations, but not all participants were involved and there was not any specific programs for foster youth. My field notes support there was high levels of anxiety and fear in regards to the social environment of college and the participant doubting their ability to make friends.

Chapter Summary

There were several common themes that emerged in the data after analysis of individual interviews and comparison of the interviews. The themes and findings support previous research that foster youth face challenges that are different from their peers and there is a need for on-

going financial and emotional support after foster youth age-out of the foster care system. These participants spoke of mentors that offered support and programs that helped them apply and prepare for the transition to college.

One clear piece that is missing for the foster youth in college based activities or programs that support foster youth. Institutions often include foster youth as a group that can access services at a Student Support or Multicultural Center. Foster youth have unique challenges and there should be specific programs with staff that understand these challenges. Foster youth attend college at a lower rate than their peers and three participants did not know of any other foster youth at their institution. Specific services would also allow foster youth to connect with each other and feel less isolated while they attend college.

Chapter Five: Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to better understand the perspective of foster youth that are in the process of pursuing their college degree. Five participants completed semi-structured in-person interviews about their educational experiences as children, transitioning to college, and adjusting to college. There were clear themes that emerged highlighting the importance of financial knowledge, mentoring, and programs about higher education to help with the college transition and on-going success. One of the noticeable missing services from that data was that none of the foster youth received any specific services from the institutions in which they were enrolled. Institutions represented in the study include University of Arkansas- Fayetteville, University of Arkansas- Fort Smith, University of Arkansas- Little Rock, University of Central Arkansas, and Northwest Arkansas Community College. This chapter will give a summary of the study, general conclusions, recommendations for practice and future research, discussion and a summary.

Summary of the Study

This study supports the literature that foster youth face unique educational challenges that can make it difficult to transition and complete higher education. Approximately 20,000 – 25,000 foster youth age out of the foster care system each year in the United States without a sense of permanency (Elze et al., 2005; Nixon & Jones, 2007). These foster youth experience a disruption that often negatively affects their education. The data from this study supports the challenges described in previous research such as foster youth often have to change schools, have difficulty focusing on their academics, and have a history of school discipline. The average foster youth changes placement an average of every six to 10 months (Wolanin, 2015). Several participants mentioned challenges associated with changing schools frequently and adjusting to different

curriculum and a new social setting. Participant 3 stated that she changed placement for various reasons about every six months and all participants discussed that challenge of changing schools. Most of the participants had more stability in their high school years and had teachers or staff that helped them keep up with the curriculum.

Foster youth lack the traditional support systems that can make it difficult to continue their education after high school. The college graduation rates for foster youth are estimated to be significantly lower compared to their peers (Vacca, 2008). It is critical to understand the unique factors that affect this population to better address their needs. The data from this study show the importance of making education a priority when foster youth are younger and ensuring they are academically prepared and motivated to pursue their education. Cost was the most common factor that influenced foster youth choices. Access to information about financial aid and state resources is critical for foster youth to understand the attending higher education is a possible goal. Mentors played a significant role in assisting the foster youth with transitioning to college and offering on-going support. Foster youth identified the classes, workshops, and conferences they attended as helpful to understand the application process and general expectations of college. The level of access to these services varied greatly among the participants. Lastly, participants identified social adjustment and concerns as one of the biggest obstacles in adjusting to a college environment.

This study supports the research that currently exists about the challenges that foster youth face and factors such as mentoring that help foster youth succeed in the college environment. Due to social fears and challenges, there is a clear need for institutions of higher education to find ways to better support these students. Participants in the study expressed that orientation programs and clubs and activities assisted with the transition to college, but there

were not specific services for foster youth. While foster youth often share characteristics with other subpopulations such as first generation college students, they also have a different set of characteristics that needs specialized services. Colleges need to make a targeted effort to offer support and guidance for these students and spaces where foster youth can interact and support each other.

Conclusions

The following conclusions were created from the themes that emerged to each of the research questions. Themes include financial assistance, perception of education, mentors, programs and workshops, and social engagement.

Financial Assistance

Financial assistance is available for foster youth that attend higher education in the state of Arkansas. There needs to be a targeted awareness and support for foster youth about the financial assistance that is available. It should be clear what is available and the processes to attain that assistance should be uncomplicated. The participants in the study all knew that they needed to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), but not all of them were aware of the financial assistance through the Department of Human Services or other potential scholarships. The amount of financial assistance received ranged from only receiving the Pell grant to a significant amount of scholarships to cover all college related expenses with additional funds remaining. The two participants that attended Independent Living Classes, workshops, and conferences received more financial assistance than the three participants that had minimal involvement with these programs. Participants often had mentor or teacher who volunteered their time, made participants aware of additional resources, and helped them with the applications.

Access to funds from the Department of Human Services should be as simple as possible and assistance should be provided if needed to complete appropriate applications and paperwork. One foster youth stated that she was aware of the Educational Training Voucher program by the Department of Human Services, but did not want to 'jump through hoops' for state funding and looked into other scholarship options. Foster youth should be aware of the funds and process to apply as well as any requirements when the funds are received. Staff such as caseworkers and Transitional Youth Support coordinators should be able to assist foster youth in applying for the funds if assistance is needed.

Perception of Education

Foster youth need individuals in their life who help them understand the importance of education. There was a common theme among the participants that education was not a priority while they were in the foster care system. One participant explained that she did not put the effort into school because during secondary education because it did not seem important and she received poor grades and was surprised to be admitted and receive a couple scholarships to attend a university. Several participants moved frequently and felt that they were consistently behind when they would change schools. Participant 3 explained that she struggled significantly with math and that is currently an issue at college to find tutors and complete four required math classes when she lacks some of the foundational skills. The Department of Human Services and staff interacting with foster youth need to be emphasizing the importance of education from the time children enter foster care. Foster youth need the resources such as tutoring and help with assignments so they are academically prepared to complete college level coursework.

Mentors

Previous research has shown the importance of having a mentor for foster youth to encourage them and that this support is still needed after foster youth transition to higher education (Crisp, 2010). Mentors were a significant support in assisting foster youth apply, transition, and be successful in a higher education setting. There should be increased programmatic efforts for all foster youth to have relationships with a variety of mentors that can help them with the college process and basic life skills when they have questions or concerns. Mentors provided help with the college application process, advice about budgets, editing of scholarship essays, as well as care packages, phone calls, and a place to stay during college breaks for the foster youth in this study. It can be stressful to make the transition from foster care to a college environment and many foster youths were not sure if they were academically or socially prepared for college.

Mentors played a significant role in support through the transition. Mentors often filled a gap by creating support that would typically be provided by family. Several of the participants live or lived in residence halls for part of their college experience. When the residence halls would close for breaks, the mentors provided a home for foster youth to stay during these periods. Mentors also would call, message, and send care packages to the foster youth at college and offer them encouragement during their adjustment to college. This support and assistance was critical to the success of these participants.

Programs and Workshops

Programs such as Independent Living Classes should have an on-going component about education starting at an early age. Programs and classes were a helpful supplement to the guidance provided by the mentors for the foster youth. Independent living programs sponsored

by the Division of Human Services, group homes, and non-profit organizations provided information about colleges, application process, and financial aid. This is a critical resource because these classes can be required of all youth in the foster care system. This ensures that they are receiving timely information about the application process and funding available. These classes provide a space for foster youth to ask questions and receive assistance. College conversations should begin early to help foster youth understand the importance of maintaining their grade point average, taking the ACT or SAT, and be prepared to deadlines when they start applying for college.

There should be additional opportunities for workshops and conferences specifically for foster youth to expose them to different universities and resources. Participants that had the opportunity to attend conferences and workshops had a positive view and believed that it helped them to understand processes such as completing applications and applying for funding and scholarships. One participant had a mentor that took her on several college visits that was a key turning point in her views about college and the benefits. Foster youth should have multiple opportunities to be exposed to information about college and visit colleges to help find a college where the foster youth feels comfortable and can excel.

Social Engagement

Social challenges were one of the biggest obstacles for foster youth during secondary education and during their transition to college. Foster youth are less likely than their peers to have informal networks of social support that they can rely on when facing a challenge or problem (Day et. al, 2013). Providing opportunities to come to extended orientation programs and meet other individuals is one opportunity to help them to adjust and transition before college courses start. Participant 2 describes her experience at an extended orientation program,

I felt very less alone. I felt like I had people to contact if anything ever went super bad and I had people, my [orientation group] we actually still have a groupme and it's been four years and we all still talk in the groupme... It was nice to come in knowing people.

While participants did get involved in different organizations and groups on campus, none of them participated in any specific college program for foster youth. Creating space on campus for foster youth to connect with each other would help them feel less isolated. One of the components that was lacking from all interviews were specific institutional resources for foster youth. Foster youth had support from mentors and were able to utilize campus resources such as writing centers, but there is a need for specific services. Foster youth often have minimal knowledge about college and would benefit from guidance about resources and opportunities on campus. Social connection is a significant concern and a resource focused on supporting foster youth would help them to connect and feel less isolated as they start and go through their college experience.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the findings from the study. These include recommendations for practice that the Department of Human Services or individuals that work directly with foster youth can implement and recommendations for future research.

Recommendations for Practice

1. Mentoring played a critical role in helping foster youth with the college application process and learn necessary life skills. The mentors of these foster youth were individuals from the school setting such as teachers and program coordinators or individuals from the Division of Human Services. There should be more programs to specifically find a variety of mentors to be involved with teenage foster youth. Mentoring programs would ensure that foster youth have several supports and people they can turn to that can help

fill some of the gap from not having a strong family support system. These mentors should receive specific training about the potential challenges of working with foster youth and college application and financial aid processes.

2. Caseworkers, group home staff, foster parents, and others that work with older foster youth should receive specific training on college application processes, deadlines, FASFA, and challenges of foster youth attending college. Training focused in these areas would allow staff and foster parents to better support foster youth that want to continue their education after exiting foster care.
3. Colleges and universities should have specific programs and resources targeted at assisting foster youth with the transition to higher education and being successful in higher education. Foster youth are a unique population that faces specific challenges different from their peers. There should be support staff that understand the distinct needs of this population and there should be spaces or program for foster youth to interact and have a support system. It would be beneficial for foster youth to engage with others facing similar challenges and feel less isolated when they transition to college.

Recommendations for Future Research

1. Due to the small sample size and possible researcher bias, it would be beneficial to replicate the study to see if there were similar results. Additional context information about relationship with biological family and their educational background would be beneficial.
2. There were significant challenges to locating foster youth in college because they are no longer in the foster care system. Each region of Arkansas has a Transitional Youth Services coordinator who works with foster youth between the ages of 18 and 21.

Research including the perspective of these individuals would be beneficial since they work with a large number of youth that have aged out of the foster care system.

Transitional Youth Coordinators assist with some of the services and funding to help these youth attend college and could provide feedback about those processes from their perspective.

3. Research should be undertaken to analyze the different independent living classes, workshops, and conferences that foster youth attend to learn about the opportunities in higher education. It was clear that participants in this study received different levels of services based on placement type and location. It is important that these resources are evaluated and consistent so all foster youth are receiving the same amount of information and support.

Limitations

1. Only having 5 participants was a limitation of the study. Snowball method of sampling was not successful because participants had limited activities or involvement with other foster youth or if they knew foster youth, they were not enrolled in higher education. The only system in place to identify foster youth is the financial aid application, which cannot be accessed for research purposes.
2. All participants that volunteered to be part of the study were female. While the study was not designed to be single gender, but there were not any males that participated. I completed a phone screening with one potential male participant, but he was in relative placement at age 10 so he did not meet the minimum qualifications for an interview. This limits the ability to generalize the findings to all foster youth.

3. The study is limited to Arkansas and each state has a different model of college funding for foster youth and independent living services. The challenges faced by participants in the study are specific to navigating the Department of Human Services resources in Arkansas therefore these results cannot generalize to other states.

Discussion

Current literature has established that foster youth have a number of risk factors that negatively affects their education. These common risk factors such as changing schools, breaks in enrollment, and inability to focus during school were all described by the participants in this study. Foster youth lack stability and support systems that help their peers successfully transition to college. The model created by Choy (2003) includes five steps that need to happen for an individual to attend college. These steps include, aspire to attend college, be academically prepared, take the necessary entrance exams, apply to college, and enroll in college. Foster youth often struggle to get past the first step of aspiring to attend college because they do not have a family support system. This study showed that foster youth benefitted from school personnel and mentors that encouraged the participants to continue pursuing their education after high school and offered emotional support and guidance.

Foster youth attend college at a lower rate than their peers and often have to overcome obstacles such as working and finding a place to live when they exit foster care. Foster youth have not always developed the skills to live independently and do not feel prepared to start college (Courtney et al., 2001; Montgomery, Donkoh, & Underhill, 2006). Foster parents and staff often lack training to adequately prepare foster youth for their transition to college. There is a lack of research about foster youth that complete college for a variety of reasons including a lack of tracking foster youth after they exit foster care and the limited number that attend higher

education (Pecora, et al, 2003). Due to these factors, it was difficult to find participants for the study. This study supports that foster youth face obstacles that they must overcome to pursue high education including working full time while in school and other obligations such as helping take care of younger siblings.

Gohn & Albin (2006) define a subpopulation as an identifiable fraction or subdivision of a population. Institutions of higher education are made up of diverse populations that often are categorized into subpopulation by characteristics such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, religion, and a variety of other factors. This allows administrators to evaluate the progress and success of students that belong to certain populations compared to the entire population. Strategies can be created to support specific populations when needed. Foster youth often fall into several existing subpopulations including, low socioeconomic status, first generation college student, and minority. Even though foster youth fit in to other subpopulations, they should be considered a separate subpopulation. Foster youth are at high risk of dropping out and have characteristics that are shared outside of these other subpopulations. Foster youth go through instability during childhood and lack of family support that creates a need for specific services. The foster youth in this study benefitted from orientation programs, college resources, and organizations, but there is a need for targeted services. Three of the participants did not know any other foster youth that attended college and struggled making social connections when they started college. The dropout rate for foster youth who attend college is estimated to be as high as 80% (Elze et. al, 2005). Foster youth would benefit from additional guidance about resources available, how to obtain services, and a space for students to socially interact and support each other throughout their college experience.

Chapter Summary

Higher education should be a realistic option for foster youth that desire to continue their education, but do not have the same family support systems and resources as their peers that are not in foster care. Every foster youth has a different set of circumstances and perspective, but there are similar challenges that all foster youth face. This study analyzed the perspective of foster youth enrolled in higher education that have successfully completed college level coursework to better understand the resources and supports that helped them achieve that success.

Foster youth face numerous challenges that can hinder their ability to be successful in a higher education setting. This study analyzed the perceptions of foster youth to determine the key factors, programs, and supports that assisted them during their transition to higher education and completion of college course work. There are key findings from this study that can be used to improve the resources offered to foster youth that age-out of the foster care system and help more foster youth be successful in higher education.

References

- Aarons, G. A., Brown, S. A., Hough, R. L., Garland A. F., & Wood P. A. (2001). Prevalence of substance use disorders across five sectors of care. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 40*, 419-426.
- AFCARS. (2014). The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, Report 22 Retrieved from: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/resource/afcars-report-22>
- Alfassi, M. (2003). Promoting the will and skill of students at academic risk: An evaluation of an instructional design geared to foster achievement, self-efficacy and motivation. *Journal of Instructional Psychology, 30*(1), 28-40.
- Arkansas Department of Human Services (2008). *Arkansas Foster Family Services*. Retrieved from <http://www.fosterarkansas.org/>
- Barth, R. (1990). On their own: The experiences of youth after foster care. *Child and Adolescent Social Work, 7*, 419-440.
- Blome, W. W. (1997). What happens to foster kids: educational experiences of a random sample of foster care youth and a matched group of non-foster care youth. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal, 14*(1), 41-53.
- Braciszewski, J. M., Moore, R. S., & Stout, R. L. (2014). Rationale for a new direction if foster youth substance use disorder prevention. *Journal of Substance Use, 19*(1), 108-111.
- Brock, T. (2010). Young adults and higher education: Barriers and breakthroughs to success. *The Future of Children, 20*(1), 109-132.
- Brunner, J. L., Wallace, D. L., Reymann, L. S., Sellers, J., & McCabe, A. G. (2014). College counseling today: Contemporary students and how counseling centers meet their needs. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy, 28*, 257-324.
- Burley, M., & Halpern, M. (2001, November). Educational attainment of foster youth: Achievement and graduation outcomes for children in state care. Retrieved from: <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED460220.pdf>
- Carey, K. (2005). One step from the finish line: Higher graduation rates are within our reach. Retrieved from: <https://edtrust.org/resource/one-step-from-the-finish-line-higher-college-graduation-rates-are-within-our-reach/>
- Child Welfare Policy and Practice Group. (2015, July 6). A review of the Arkansas Divisions of Child and Family Services. Montgomery, AL: Author

- Choy, S. P. (2003). Access & persistence: Findings from 10 years of longitudinal research on students. Retrieved from: http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mistudentaid/2002AccessAndPersistence_394481_7.pdf
- Collins, M. E. (2004). Enhancing services to youths leaving foster care: Analysis of recent legislation and potential impact. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 26, 1051 – 1065.
- Conger, D., & Finkelstein, M. J., (2003). Foster care and school mobility. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 72(1), 97-103.
- Conger, D., & Rebeck, A. (2001). How children's foster care experiences affect their education. New York, NY: Vera Institute of Justice.
- Courtney, M. E., & Dworsky, A. (2005). Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Outcome at age 19. Chicago IL: Chapin Hall Center for Children.
- Courtney, M. E., Piliavin, I., Grogan-Kaylor, A., & Nesmith, A. (2001) Foster youth transitions to adulthood: A longitudinal view of youth leaving care. *Child Welfare*, 80(6), 685-718.
- Courtney, M. E., Terao, S., & Bost, N. (2004). Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth wave 1: Three State Findings. Chicago, IL. Chapin Hall Center for Children, University of Chicago.
- Cranford, J. A., Eisenberg, D., & Serra, A. M. (2009). Substance use behaviors, mental health problems, and use of mental health services in a probability sample of college students. *Addictive Behaviors*, 34, 134-145.
- Crisp, G. (2010). The impact of mentoring on the success of community college students. *The Review of Higher Education*, 34(1), 39-60.
- Davis, R. (2006) *College access, financial aid, and college success for undergraduates from foster care*. Washington, DC: National Association of Student and Financial Aid Administrators.
- Day, A., Dworsky, A., & Feng, W. (2013). An analysis of foster care placement history and post secondary graduation rates. *Research in Higher Education Journal*, 19, 1-17.
- Day, A., Dworsky, A., Fogarty, K., & Damashek, A. (2011). An examination of post-secondary retention and graduation among foster care youth enrolled in a four-year university. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33(11), 2335-2341.
- Dworsky, A., & Courtney, M. E. (2009). Homelessness and the transition from foster care to adulthood. *Child Welfare*, 88(4), 23-56.

- Dworsky, A., & Perez, A. (2010). Helping former foster youth graduate from college through campus support programs. *Children and Youth Services Review, 32*(2), 255-263.
- Elze D. E., Auslander, W. F., Stiffman, A., & McMillen, C. (2005). Educational needs of youth in foster care. In G. Mallon and P. Hess (Eds.) *Child welfare for the 21st century: A handbook of practices, policies and programs* (185-205). New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Fanney, B. (2016). Children in foster care in arkansas reaches all-time high. Arkansas Online: Arkansas Democrat Gazette. Retrieved from: <http://m.arkansasonline.com/news/2016/aug/22/foster-families-up-need-is-too-20160822/>
- Fowler, P. J., Toro, P. A., & Miles, B. W. (2009). Pathways to and from homelessness and associated psychosocial outcomes among adolescents leaving the foster care system. *American Journal of Public Health, 99*(8), 1453-1458.
- Fowler, P. J., Toro, P. A., & Miles, B. W. (2010). Emerging adulthood and leaving foster care: Setting associated with mental health. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 47*(3), 335-348.
- Geenen S., & Powers, L. E., (2006). Are we ignoring youths with disabilities in foster care: An examination of their school performance. *Social Work, 51*(3), 233-241.
- Geenen, S., Powers, L. E., & Phillips, L. A., (2015). Better futures: A randomized field test of a model for supporting young people in foster care with mental health challenges to participate in higher education. *The Journal of Behavioral Health Services & Research, 42*(2), 150-171.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Hawthorne, NY: Aldine.
- Gohn, L. A., & Albin, G. R. (2006) *Understanding college student subpopulations: A guide for student affairs professionals*. National Association for Student Personnel Administrators.
- Greeson, J. K., & Bowen, N. K. (2008). She holds my hand: The experiences of foster youth with their natural mentors. *Children and Youth Services Review, 30*(1), 1178-1188.
- Havlicek, J. R., Garcia, A. R., & Smith, D. C. (2013). Mental health and substance use disorders among foster youth transitioning to adulthood: Past research and future directions. *Children & Youth Services Review, 35*(1), 194-203.
- Hossler, D., & Gallagher, K. S. (1987). Studying student college choice: A three-phase model and the implications for policymakers. *College and University, 62*(3), 207-221.
- Hunt, J., & Eisenberg, D. (2010). Mental health problems and help-seeking behavior among college students. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 46*(1), 3-10.

- Jackson, G. (1982). Public efficiency and private choice in higher education. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 4, 237-47.
- Jackson, S., & Ajayi, S. (2007). Foster care and higher education. *Adoption and Fostering*, 31(1), 62-72.
- Jones, L. P. (2010). The educational experiences of former foster youth three years after discharge. *Child Welfare*, 89(6), 7-22.
- Jordan, P. (2000). Academic advising in the 21st century. *NACADA Journal*, 20(2), 21-30.
- Kitzrow, M. A. (2003). The mental health needs of today's college students: Challenges and recommendations. *NASPA Journal*, 41(1), 165-179.
- Koegel, P., Melamid, E., & Burnam, M. A. (1995). Childhood risk factors for homelessness among homeless adults. *American Journal of Public Health*, 85(12), 1642-1649.
- Kolb, S. M. (2012). Grounded theory and the constant comparative method: Valid research strategies for educators. *Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies*, 3(1), 83-86.
- Kushel, M. B., Yen I. H. Gee, L., & Courtney, M. E. (2007) Homelessness and health care access after emancipation: Results from the midwest evaluation of adult functioning of former foster youth. *Arch Pediatric Adolescent Medicine*, 161(10), 986-993.
- Lawrence, C. R., Carlson, E. A., & Egeland, B. (2006) The impact of foster care on development. *Development and Psychopathology*, 18, 57-76.
- Lemon, K., Hines, A. M., & Merdinger, J. (2004). From foster care to young adulthood: The role of independent living programs in supporting successful transitions. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 27(3), 251-270.
- Levine, A., & Dean, D. (2012). *Generation on a tightrope: A portrait of today's college student*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.
- Martin, P. Y., & Jackson, S. (2002). Educational success for children in public care: Advice from a group of high achievers. *Child and Family Social Work*, 7, 121-130.
- Mason, M. (2010). Sample size and saturation in PhD studies using qualitative interviews. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 11(8), Retrieved from: <http://nbnresolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs100387>.
- Massinga, R., & Pecora, P. J. (2004). Providing better opportunities for older children in the child welfare system. *The Future of Children: Children, Families, and Foster Care*, 14(1), 151-173.

- McMillen, C., Auslander, W., Elze, D., White, T., & Thompson, R. (2003). Educational experiences and aspirations of older youth in foster care, *Child Welfare*, 82, 475-495.
- McMillen, J. C., & Raghavan, R. (2009). Pediatric to adult mental health service use of young people leaving the foster care system. *The Journal of Adolescent Health : Official Publication of the Society for Adolescent Medicine*, 44(1), 7 - 13.
- Merdiner, J. M., Hines, A. M., Osterling K. L., & Wyatt P. (2005). Pathways to college for former foster youth: Understanding factors that contribute to educational success. *Child Welfare*, 84(6), 867-896.
- Montgomery, P., Donkoh, C., & Underhill K. (2006). Independent living programs for young people leaving the care system: The state of the evidence. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 28(12), 1435-1448.
- Nixon, R., & Jones, M. G. (2007). The Chafee Education Training and Voucher (ETV) Program: Six states experiences. Retrieved from: <https://www.google.com/#q=the+chafee+education+and+training+vouchers+program>
- Pascarella, E., Pierson, C., Wolniak, G., & Terenzini, P. (2004). First-generation students. *Journal of Higher Education*, 75(3), 249-284.
- Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (2005). How college affects students: A third decade of research. Jossey-Bass. San Francisco CA.
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). Qualitative evaluation and research methods (4th ed). Los Angeles: Sage Publication.
- Pecora, P. J. (2010). Why current and former recipients of foster care need high quality mental health services. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, 37(1-2), 185-90.
- Pecora, P. J., Kessler, R., Williams, J., O'Brien, K., Downs, A. C., English, D., White, J., Hiripi, E., White, C., Wiggins, T., & Holmes, K. (2005). *Improving family foster care: Findings from the northwest foster care alumni study*. Seattle, WA: Casey Family Programs.
- Pecora, P. J., Williams, J. Kessler, R, Downs, C. A., O'Brien, K., Hiripi, E, & Morello, S. (2003). Assessing the effects of foster care: Early results from the Casey national alumni study. Retrieved from: http://www.casey.org/media/AlumniStudy_US_Report_Full.pdf
- Pilowsky, D.J., & Wu, L. T. (2006). Psychiatric symptoms and substance use disorders in a nationally representative sample of American adolescents involved in foster care. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 38, 351-358.

- Rassen, E., Cooper, D. M., & Mer, P. (2010). Serving special populations: A study of former foster youth at California community colleges. *Journal of Applied Research in the Community College*, 17, 24-34.
- Sakai, C., Mackie, T. I., Shetgiri, R., Franzen, S., Partap, A., Flores, G., & Leslie, L. K. (2014). Mental Health Beliefs and Barriers to Accessing Mental Health Services in Youth Aging out of Foster Care. *Academic Pediatrics*, 14(6), 565-573.
- Salazar, A. M., (2012). Supporting college success in foster care alumni: Salient factors related to postsecondary retention. *Child Welfare*, 91(5), 139-167.
- Samuels, G. M., & Pryce, J. M., (2008). What doesn't kill you makes you stronger: Survivalist self-reliance as resilience and risk among young adults aging out of foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30, 1198-1210.
- Terenzini, P., Springer, L., Yaeger, P., Pascarella, E., & Nora, A (1996). First-generation college student: Characteristics, experiences, and cognitive development. *Research in Higher Education*, 37, 1-22.
- Vacca, J. S., (2008). Foster children need more help after they reach the age of eighteen. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30, 485-492.
- Vaughn, M. G., Ollie, M. T., McMillen, J. C., Scott, L., & Munson, M. (2007). Substance use and abuse among older youth in foster care. *Addictive Behaviors*, 32(9), 1929-1935.
- Walpole, M. (2003). Socioeconomic status and college: How SES affects college experiences and outcomes. *The Review of Higher Education*, 27(1), 45-73.
- Wolanin, T. (2005). *Higher education opportunities for foster youth: A primer for policymakers*. Washington, DC: The Institute for Higher Education Policy.
- Young, S. E., Corley, R. P., Stallings, M. C., Rhee, S. H. Crowley T. J., & Hewitt, J. K. (2002). Substance use, abuse and dependence in adolescence: Prevalence, symptom profiles and correlates. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, 68(3), 309-322.
- Ziven, K. Eisenberg, D., Gollust, S. E., & Goberstein, E. (2009). Persistence of mental health problems and needs in a college student population. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 117, 180-185.

Appendix A. Phone Script

A Study of Foster Youth in Higher Education

Phone Screening Script

University of Arkansas

Hello (Participant Name),

I am Tory England and I am conducting a study about foster youth who are attending an institution of higher education. I received your contact information because you might be interested in participating and meet the requirements of the study. I would like to ask you a few questions to determine your eligibility.

1. At what age did you enter the foster care system?
2. How long did you spend in foster care after the age of 14?
3. In what state and county were you in foster care?
4. Are you currently enrolled in a four-year degree program?

If they meet the criteria- Thank you for taking the time to talk with me by phone. You meet at the minimum criteria to participate in the study. I would like to set up a date, time, and location to set up an in-person interview. The interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes. What is your availability and do you have any questions?

If they do not meet the criteria- Thank you for taking the time to talk with me by phone, but unfortunately you do not meet the criteria for the study.

Appendix B. Phone Screening

A Study of Foster Youth in Higher Education

Phone Screening

University of Arkansas

Time of phone screening: _____

Date: _____

Institution: _____

Interviewer: _____

5. At what age did you enter the foster care system?

6. How long did you spend in foster care after the age of 14?

7. In what state and county were you in foster care?

8. Are you currently enrolled in a four-year degree program?

Appendix C. Informed Consent

A Study of Foster Youth Currently in Higher Education

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Principal Researcher: Tory England, Graduate Student, University of Arkansas

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

You are invited to participate in a research study about foster youth that are currently enrolled at a four-year institution of higher education. You are being asked to participate in this study because you meet the requirements for the study.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE RESEARCH STUDY

Principal Researcher

Tory England
Graduate Student
University of Arkansas
University Housing
960 W. Douglas Street
Fayetteville, AR 72701
(479) 575-3427
tnspokan@uark.edu

Faculty Advisor

Michael Miller
Dean and Professor
University of Arkansas
College of Education and Health Professions
324 Graduate Education Building
Fayetteville, AR 72701
479-575-3208
mtmille@uark.edu

What is the purpose of this research study?

The purpose for conducting the study is to identify the perceptions of foster youth about supports and programs that have an impact on their decision to enroll in higher education in the state of Arkansas. This includes information about the impact of Independent Living Programs, financial assistance, Department of Children and Family Services, foster family or group home environment, and specific college programs.

Who will participate in this study?

Ten to fifteen participants will be identified through snowball sampling. These will be foster youth that are currently enrolled at an institution of higher education and spent at least six months in foster care after the age of fourteen.

What am I being asked to do?

Your participation will require participating in a 45-60 minute recorded interview, with field notes made of your responses to 11 scripted questions, with additional prompts. If you consent to the interview being recorded, a copy of the transcript will be emailed to you for review.

What are the possible risks or discomforts?

There are no anticipated risks or discomforts identified with your participation in this study.

What are the possible benefits of this study?

You will be helping us to add to the ability to understand and meet the needs of foster youth in higher education and the contribution of new knowledge. You will receive a \$30 gift card as compensation for your time.

How long will the study last?

The interview should take between 45 and 60 minutes of your time. You will also be asked to review a transcript of the interview.

Will I receive compensation for my time and inconvenience if I choose to participate in this study?

You will receive a \$30 Walmart gift card for your participation in this study.

Will I have to pay for anything?

There are no costs associated with your participation in this study.

What are the options if I do not want to be in the study?

If you do not want to be in this study, you may decline to participate. Also, you may decline to participate at any time during the study.

How will my confidentiality be protected?

All information will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by applicable State and Federal law. All recordings will be stored on a locked computer and the transcripts of the recordings will use a pseudonym. All documents and recordings will be kept in a locked, secure staff office at the University of Arkansas.

Will I know the results of the study?

At the conclusion of the study you will have the right to request feedback about the results. You may contact the Principal Researcher, Tory England (tjspokan@uark.edu) or at the mailing address listed above). You will receive a copy of this form for your files.

What do I do if I have questions about the research study?

You have the right to contact the Principal Researcher or Faculty Advisor as listed below for any concerns that you may have.

Tory England
Graduate Student
University of Arkansas
University Housing
960 W. Douglas Street
Fayetteville, AR 72701
(479) 575-3427
tnspokan@uark.edu

Faculty Advisor

Michael Miller
Dean and Professor
University of Arkansas
College of Education and Health Professions
324 Graduate Education Building
Fayetteville, AR 72701
479-575-3208
mtmille@uark.edu

You may also contact the University of Arkansas Research Compliance office listed below if you have questions about your rights as a participant, or to discuss any concerns about, or problems with the research.

Ro Windwalker, CIP
Institutional Review Board Coordinator
Research Compliance
University of Arkansas
109 MLKG Building
Fayetteville, AR 72701
479-575-2208
irb@uark.edu

I have read the above statement and have been able to ask questions and express concerns, which have been satisfactorily responded to by the investigator. I understand the purpose of the study as well as the potential benefits and risks that are involved. I understand that participation is voluntary. I understand that significant new findings developed during this research will be shared with the participant. I understand that no rights have been waived by signing the consent form. I have been given a copy of the consent form.

Signature

Date

Appendix D. Interview Script

A Study of Foster Youth in Higher Education

Interview Script

University of Arkansas

Hello (Participant Name),

My name is Tory England and I am conducting a study about foster youth who are attending an institution of higher education. I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Arkansas and need to complete a research study in order to fulfill the requirements of a degree in Higher Education.

My study is titled, "From Foster Care to College: Student Stories of Success." According to research, foster youth attend college at a lower rate than their peers and are less likely to complete a four-year degree. The purpose of my study is to better understand the perceptions of foster youth about the supports and programs that impacted their decision to attend higher education in the state of Arkansas.

Thank you for agreeing to be part of my study. Once we review and sign the informed consent we will begin the interview. The interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes. All information will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by Federal and State laws.

Do you have any questions, comments, or concerns before we get started?

Appendix E. Interview Guide

**A Study of Foster Youth in Higher Education
Interview Guide
University of Arkansas**

Time of interview: _____

Date: _____

Institution: _____

Interviewee Institution Code: _____

Credits Earned: _____

Major/Minor: _____

Interviewer: _____

THANK YOU FOR AGREEING TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY ABOUT FOSTER YOUTH IN HIGHER EDUCATION. THIS STUDY FOCUSES ON YOUR EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES AND THE PROGRAMS AND SUPPORTS THAT HELPED YOU TRANSITION TO HIGHER EDUCATION.

I AM PROVIDING YOU WITH AN INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR YOU TO REVIEW AND SIGN, IF YOU AGREE. AS NOTED, YOUR IDENTITY WILL BE HELD IN STRICTEST CONFIDENCE AND YOUR IDENTITY WILL NOT BE LINKED DIRECTLY OR INDIRECTLY WITH THE STUDY FINDINGS.

THIS INTERVIEW WILL BE RECORDED WITH YOUR PERMISSION. FIELD NOTES ON THIS INTERVIEW GUIDE WILL ALSO BE COLLECTED DURING THIS INTERVIEW.

YOUR PARTICIPATION IS ENTIRELY VOLUNTARY AND YOU MAINTAIN THE RIGHT TO WITHDRAW AT ANY TIME.

BEFORE WE BEGIN, DO YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS?

DO I HAVE YOUR PERMISSION TO BEGIN?

THE FIRST SERIES OF QUESTIONS RELATES TO YOUR EXPERIENCES IN FOSTER CARE AND HOW THAT IMPACTED YOUR EDUCATION AND THE TRANSITION TO HIGHER EDUCATION.

Should you have questions or concerns about this survey, please contact Tory England, University of Arkansas, (479) 595-9392, tnspokan@uark.edu

SECTION I: YOUR EXPERIENCE IN FOSTER CARE

1. Can you tell me about when you entered foster care and any changes to your educational experience?

Other elements to consider:

-changing schools

-period of time without being enrolled in school

-ability to focus on school after entering foster care

-other personal impacts that may have affected education

-school disciplinary history

2. When did you learn about or first consider applying to college, and how did you find out about the educational opportunities available?

Other elements to consider:

-was there any one person who helped or encouraged you to apply

-how did you become aware of the resources available to attend college

-were there any programs DHS offered about higher education

-were there any programs at your high school about higher education

3. Tell me about your transition from foster care to higher education?

Other elements to consider:

-Any change in services from DHS

-Support systems that continued

-Financial assistance

4. What were the most influential factors when deciding on an institution of higher education?

Other elements to consider:

-Location and cost

- Previous knowledge of institution

SECTION II: PROGRAMS AND SUPPORTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

5. What supports did you utilize during your transition and after starting higher education?

Other elements to consider:

-Foster parents, group home, DHS staff

-Family relationships

-Other mentors or role models

6. What programs did you participate in prior to or after enrolling in college?

Other elements to consider:

-College based programs such as visits, tours, TRIO, Upward Bound

-DHS Independent Living Programs

7. What supports or programs were the most helpful in preparing you for the college experience and workload and why?

Other elements to consider:

-High school prep courses/programs

-DHS classes and conferences

SECTION III: CHALLENGES OR OBSTACLES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

8. How did you learn about the necessary steps to apply and be admitted to higher education?

Other elements to consider:

-Applications and FAFSA

-Orientation

-Advising and selection of courses

9. What were your biggest fears or obstacles to enrolling and transitioning to college?

Other elements to consider:

-Other concerns outside of higher education

-Part time job or other responsibilities

-General expectations about college

10. Would you change anything about educational experience?

Other elements to consider:

-Anything you would do differently

11. Is there anything else you want to add that we haven't covered?

12. Is there anyone else you would recommend to participate in this study?

THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY!

Appendix F: IRB Approval



Office of Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board

April 27, 2017

MEMORANDUM

TO: Tory England
Michael Miller

FROM: Ro Windwalker
IRB Coordinator

RE: PROJECT MODIFICATION

IRB Protocol #: 16-10-144

Protocol Title: *From Foster Care to College: Stories of Student Success*

Review Type: EXEMPT EXPEDITED FULL IRB

Approved Project Period: Start Date: 04/27/2017 Expiration Date: 01/03/2018

Your request to modify the referenced protocol has been approved by the IRB. **This protocol is currently approved for 15 total participants.** If you wish to make any further modifications in the approved protocol, including enrolling more than this number, you must seek approval *prior to* implementing those changes. All modifications should be requested in writing (email is acceptable) and must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

Please note that this approval does not extend the Approved Project Period. Should you wish to extend your project beyond the current expiration date, you must submit a request for continuation using the UAF IRB form "Continuing Review for IRB Approved Projects." The request should be sent to the IRB Coordinator, 109 MLKG Building.

For protocols requiring FULL IRB review, please submit your request at least one month prior to the current expiration date. (High-risk protocols may require even more time for approval.) For protocols requiring an EXPEDITED or EXEMPT review, submit your request at least two weeks prior to the current expiration date. Failure to obtain approval for a continuation *on or prior to* the currently approved expiration date will result in termination of the protocol and you will be required to submit a new protocol to the IRB before continuing the project. Data collected past the protocol expiration date may need to be eliminated from the dataset should you wish to publish. Only data collected under a currently approved protocol can be certified by the IRB for any purpose.

If you have questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact me at 109 MLKG Building, 5-2208, or irb@uark.edu.