

FOSTER CARE ALUMNI AFTER COLLEGE:  
A RETROSPECTIVE LENS

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A RETROSPECTIVE LENS

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to:

Laura Lucille Hancock-Jameson

Hear that lonesome whippoorwill  
He sounds too blue to fly  
The midnight train is whining low  
I'm so lonesome I could cry  
I've never seen a night so long  
When time goes crawling by  
The moon just went behind the clouds  
To hide its face and cry  
Did you ever see a robin weep  
When leaves begin to die  
That means he's lost the will to live  
I'm so lonesome I could cry  
The silence of a falling star  
Lights up a purple sky  
And as I wonder where you are  
I'm so lonesome I could cry ~ Hank Williams

I think you loved this song because being lonesome was a familiar feeling for you. I believe this is why your heart never turned anyone away. You took your pain and loneliness and used it to alleviate pain and loneliness for others. You dedicated your life to your kids, grandkids, great grandkids and anyone else's kids in need. That is exactly what the participants of my study have decided to dedicate their lives to....being there for others when it feels like no one else is. One of my life goals was for you to watch me finish this degree and you left too soon for that. In your defense, it did take me almost 10 years to finish and you were almost 100. Ironically enough, I had to reserve a room for my defense and my advisor gave me 2 options to request, room 231 or 333. They

assigned me room 231. Although I have never shared your faith or really any faith for that matter....I questioned it when I got that room assignment and I know deep in my heart that was you. Supporting me. Making me feel not so alone. Your time, love and support mattered and you made my world a lot less lonesome.

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Abstract:

Completing a college degree is major accomplishment under the best of circumstances. The economic and societal value of a college degree has the potential to produce residual benefits for one of the most vulnerable populations, foster care alumni. A specific group of foster care alumni, those who “age out” of foster care share the same aspirations to complete college as their non-foster care peers; however, there is an obvious discrepancy in actual outcomes between the two groups in terms of completing their degrees. (Davis, 2007). Consequently, the focus of this research was to gain insight and knowledge about what circumstances and/or conditions were present for the small percent of foster care alumni that persisted and completed a bachelor’s degree in Oklahoma.

This multi-study consisted of 9 participants with unique individual experiences and shared commonalities in terms of what helped them to persist and complete college and also how they sought and accepted support in times of need. The participants represented 5 different public colleges in Oklahoma. Collectively, four findings emerged from the data. Participants credited support from others as significant in their abilities to persist in college, their rationale for seeking a college degree was a significant source of motivation as they wanted to experience a better life in adulthood than they experienced in childhood. The majority of participants chose degrees that would allow them to work in a helping profession and contribute to improving the lives of others in situations similar to what they experienced in childhood. Interestingly, their goal of helping and supporting others somewhat contradicted the way they accessed support from others. Participants exercised caution and were often times reluctant to seek/accept support from others. The findings from this research indicates that foster care alumni, although considered one of the most academically vulnerable groups (Zetlin & Weinberg, 2010), were able to persist and complete a bachelor’s degree as a result of genuine, authentic, support networks and an innate desire to have a better quality life and help others in a professional capacity.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Over the past fifty years, several societal trends in the United States have significantly impacted postsecondary education institutions. The expansion of access to higher education for women, minorities, and members of lower socioeconomic groups is an example of the evolution of higher education from a traditionally exclusive privilege to an increasingly inclusive opportunity. However, mere entry into higher education is does not sufficiently address the needs of particular groups in terms of completing their college degrees. Tinto (2007) acknowledges access has increased; however, “greater equality in attainment of four-year college degrees has not followed suit” (p.12). The opening of doors for a more diverse student representation on college campuses brings new and different needs for institutions to keep pace and support the layers of its changing student body. A report from the Education Policy Institute (2003) acknowledges the significant increase in accessibility of higher education and cautions institutions to be more responsive to the changing needs of students (Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003). Delayed institutional adjustment to the new challenges presented by increased accessibility has significant implications on the institution, the student, the economy, and society as a whole.

One unique population increasingly recognized on college campuses is foster care alumni. A college degree has the potential to redirect a trend of poor outcomes for those who were in the foster care system. The social benefits of improving outcomes for foster care alumni are significant on an individual, community, and national level. In response to addressing unique needs of foster youth in transition from dependence to independence, the federal government enacted the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 with the overarching goal of improving long-term outcomes for alumni of the foster care system. This policy mandates that states receiving federal funding provide financial, emotional, and educational support to youth who “are likely to remain in foster care until age 18, youth who, after attaining 16 years of age, have left foster care for kinship guardianship or adoption, and young adults ages 18-21 who have ‘aged out’ of the foster care system” (Children’s Bureau, 2012, para. 1). The programs and services resulting from the policy provide an option that allows qualified foster care alumni to extend their status and remain in state custody until up to age 26 to receive educational and medical support (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). While the efforts and support are a step in the right direction for promoting positive educational outcomes for foster care alumni, some of the responsibilities of the state outlined in this policy are not well defined for states. Financial support, counseling, and housing services are measurable and easily defined; however, the ambiguity of what constitutes personal/emotional support and interactions with dedicated adults merits further investigation. Intangible support is of great significance and often difficult to objectively measure. In a study of campus support programs for foster care alumni in college, Dworsky and Perez (2010) found that relationships, a sense of belonging, and support held more value to foster alumni in college than the tangible support offered by campus programs.

A growing number of higher education institutions across the nation recognize and are responding to the needs of these foster alumni college students. At this point, there are fourteen states with child welfare and higher education collaborations focusing on this population. In Oklahoma, 255 youth “aged out” of foster care in 2017 (Oklahoma Policy Institute, 2018). Recent research on outcomes for Oklahoma’s foster youth who “aged out” also coincides with national outcomes. For example, 26% experienced homelessness, 69% completed high school or a GED, 28% exited care from a youth shelter and 62% accessed public services upon exit from foster care (Cahill, Crawford, Dorsett, Kee, and McDaniel, 2014). In response to the significant numbers of youth aging out of foster care combined with poor outcomes, specifically in terms of retention on college campuses nationwide, Oklahoma State University responded with the goals of promoting success and retention of foster care alumni on college campuses throughout the state. This initiative consists of a statewide collaboration of higher education institutions and defines “any person who spent time in an out-of-home placement in any state or country from ages 13-18 and who is currently enrolled in or has graduated from college, or is college-bound” (R is for Thursday Network, 2018). This statewide initiative currently conducts research and provides online education to Oklahoma campuses in efforts to better understand needs and promote success for foster care alumni students. Foster alumni on college campuses appear very similar to other at-risk students in terms of minority status, financial needs, academic challenges, and mental health issues; however, they present many unique challenges and needs associated with being a former foster youth that often go unnoticed or are misunderstood (Pecora et al., 2003).



## **Problem Statement**

Despite implementation of programs and funding to support foster care alumni in pursuit of higher education, national statistics indicate foster care alumni continue to complete college at significantly lower rates than their non-foster peers. A study by Day, Dworsky, Fogarty, and Damashek (2011) compared retention and persistence of foster care alumni at a four-year university to that of first generation non-foster alumni college students. The findings showed that students who were first generation, low income foster care alumni had dropout rates of 21% for the freshman year and 34% prior to degree completion in comparison to their non-foster, first generation, low income counterparts with dropout rates of 13% for the freshman year and 18% upon degree completion. Lack of academic preparation for postsecondary education, perceived lack of support from student personnel services in terms of foster care alumni specific needs, and a lack of ability to manage the demands of college life were found to be barriers to persistence in college for foster care alumni. Advances in the R is for Thursday initiative in Oklahoma and future research on this topic may illustrate the potential benefits of investing in foster care alumni in college, not only imminently but also the long term residual effects associated with a college degree.

The United States Department of Education (2018) estimates that only 3-11% of foster care alumni have completed a bachelor's degree in comparison to 36% of the general population. In addition to the significant gap this suggests for outcomes between foster care alumni and their non-foster peers, it is imperative to note that while the non-foster completion rate is specific, the completion rate for foster care alumni with a bachelor's degree is uncertain and, thus, presented as a range. Pecora et al. (2003) established the higher number of this range (11%) when considering nontraditional, or older, foster alumni

who have returned to college; more commonly stated numbers (3-4%) represent graduation rates for traditionally aged students. Although a variance in graduation rates for foster care alumni exists, there is evidence that a small percent do persist and graduate from college. This lack of a clear understanding about graduation rates for foster alumni represents a lack of attention to foster care alumni in the scholarly literature. What literature that is available tends to highlight poor outcomes. Little attention has been given to the small percent of foster care alumni who persist and complete college.

Research from the literature in social work and education have produced a wealth of problem-saturated products, yet the scholarly literature does not adequately address the ingredients for persistence among the small percent of foster alumni who complete college despite the odds. An understanding of the contributors to former foster youth who persist and attain college degrees from their insider perspectives may create an understanding of how to maximize potential and best utilize existing state resources for this population. Oklahoma, in particular, is one of fourteen states in the United States with existing initiatives to support foster care alumni on college campuses.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this multi-case study (Stake, 2006) was to explore the foster care alumni's perceptions of contributors to their ability to persist through college and obtain a bachelor's degree. According to Tinto (2012), persistence "refers to the rate at which students who begin higher education at a given point in time continue in higher education and eventually complete their degree" (p. 127). Specifically, the focal point of this study was foster care alumni who graduated from a public institution in the state of Oklahoma within the past ten years.

## **Summary of Relevant Literature**

Previous scholarly literature addresses several issues relating to foster care alumni and college. The catalyst for much of the quantitative research derives from the foundational report by Courtney et al. (2007) that highlights long term outcomes for alumni of the foster care system since the implementation of the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999. In contrast to the quantitative works, Hernandez and Naccarato (2010) conducted an exploratory, qualitative study examining the effectiveness of foster care alumni campus support programs on twelve college campuses through a series of interviews with campus advocates across the nation. The findings echo the need for support; however, the interviews did not include the perceptions of foster care alumni in college. A dissertation by Watts (2012) examined foster care alumni in college and explored challenges utilizing a qualitative, case study methodology that included ten foster care alumni attending college. This study is significant because it reflects students' experiences from an insider perspective; however, this continues to exclude the experiences of foster care alumni who actually persist and complete college. In a recent quantitative study, Salazar (2012) addressed retention of foster care alumni in college and found "in addition to insufficient empirical evidence of support program effectiveness, there is also very little empirical information regarding what factors differentiate foster care alumni who do and do not drop out of college" (p.140), concluding with the need for collaboration between child welfare agencies and higher education as a finding from this study. This study reiterates the need for examination of what foster care alumni perceive as contributors to their ability to persist through college. Specifically, the focal point of this study was foster care alumni who graduated from a public institution in the state of Oklahoma within the past ten years.

The uncertainty behind the percent of foster care alumni who attend, persist, and complete college is being addressed through two recent initiatives of significance to the higher education community to help identify and track foster care alumni. The federal government recently expanded its efforts to address accountability for foster care alumni with the implementation of the National Youth in Transition Database. According to the Children’s Bureau (2012), this mandate “establishes the National Youth in Transition Database and requires that states engage in two data collection activities” (para. 2). The first set of data collection relates to outcomes of youth involved in independent living programs to determine effectiveness and efficiency of Independent Living programs. The second set of data collection involves demographic information. This accountability initiative is relatively new; however, it seems promising as a useful tool in establishing solid information for foster care alumni who complete a college degree. Another change in federal guidelines allows for college campuses to have access to information about foster care alumni on their campuses via the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FASFA). Students who declare dependency status by checking the box stating “at any time since you turned age 13, were both your parents deceased, were you in foster care, or were you a dependent or ward of the court” (U.S. Department of Education, 2018) provide an opportunity to be tracked while in college. This additional tool will change the landscape for campuses with existing foster care alumni initiatives in the difficult process of identifying foster care alumni on campus.

The existing scholarly literature on foster care alumni in college does not address the perceptions of those who persist and complete college in terms of what they contribute as beneficial in their journey through college. In addition to existing literature, identifying

foster care alumni on college campuses and implementing research findings to promote success for this population is promising.

### **Research Questions**

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

### **Significance of the Study**

This study was designed to contribute significant findings for the three areas of research, theory, and practice.

### **Research**

This study addressed, from a student perspective, the existing gap in the scholarly literature on the journey of foster care alumni in successfully navigating college (Patton, 2002). Engaging participants in dialogue and reflection provided insight into how this marginalized population interpreted their realities and how those realities influenced behaviors (Freire, 2000; Stake, 2006).

### **Theory**

This study expanded on the foundation of Ryan and Deci's (1985) self-determination theory and Ainsworth and Bowlby's (1991) attachment theory. Foster care alumni are a unique sub-group who, along with other minority groups, are "missing from extensive

inclusion in the literature” (p. 202) as it relates to persistence in higher education. (Metz, 2004).

## **Practice**

This study informs higher education institutions of contributors to foster care alumni persistence to completion of college from an insider’s retrospective lens and contributes to improving services and increasing retention in higher education institutions for current and future foster youth pursuing a college degree.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Foster care:* Supervised care for orphaned, neglected, or abused children in a substitute home or an institution on either a full-time or day-care basis (“Foster care,” n.d.).

*Foster care alumni, also former foster youth:* Adults who, as minors, were removed from their home and placed in a foster home due to abuse and/or neglect

*Aging out:* According to Barker (1999), aging out is an “informal term used for status changes among young people who outgrow their qualification as dependents while in the responsibility of the health care and welfare system, such as foster care” (p. 14).

*Academic success:* According to Kuh et al., 2006, “student success is defined as academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational outcomes, and post-college performance” (p. 7).

*Persistence:* The desire and action of a student to stay within the system of higher education from beginning year through degree completion (Berger & Brooks-Gunn, 2005, p.12).

*Education Training Voucher Specialist (ETV):* The education specialists assist youth eligible for the program in their transition from custody through a post-secondary setting. The education specialist's work with the students to develop educational and transitional plans once the students gain admission to a postsecondary institution (Oklahoma Department of Human Services, 2014).

*Independent Living Specialist (IL):* The Independent Living Program (ILP) is a federally funded program designed to assist eligible youth in making successful transitions from foster care to independent living. Independent Living Coordinators in the States are responsible for assisting youth in foster care with accessing services geared toward achieving self-sufficiency prior to exiting foster care (Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.-b).

### **Research Design**

The following section provides an overview of the study's design and methodology. Expanded descriptions are presented in chapter three.

### **Philosophical Worldview**

The philosophical worldview premise for gaining insight into the lived realities of foster care alumni is the co-construction of knowledge and understanding. Constructivism provides a foundation for the development of this research study. According to Creswell (2009), social constructivists operate under the assumption that individuals "develop subjective meanings of their experiences" (p. 8). This research gives voice to foster care

alumni and their assignments of personal and multiple meanings to what was beneficial to them in completing college. According to constructivism, engagement and interaction between the subject and the researcher are essential to gaining a situated knowledge of participants' experiences (Creswell, 2009). The collaborative nature of a multi case study methodology is inherently well positioned upon the constructivist philosophical worldview.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

According to Crotty (2009), the theoretical perspective is the “philosophical stance that lies behind our chosen methodology” (p.2). This serves to further expound upon the underlying philosophical worldview assumptions brought to the design of the research study. For the purpose of this study, symbolic interactionism served as the theoretical perspective. George Herbert Mead (1934), a social psychologist and the founding theorist of symbolic interactionism asserted that people construct meaning through interactions and reactions within a broader community. As an extension of Mead’s theoretical foundation, Blumer (1969) described the basic ideas as root images that “refer to and depict the following matters; human groups or societies, social interaction, objects, the human being as an actor, human action and the interconnection of the lines of action” (p.6). The emphasis of symbolic interactionism is the “elimination of the subject-object dichotomy and integration of self and society” (Lecompte & Priessle, 2003, p.128). The assumptions of this theoretical perspective are that construction of meaning occurs as individuals engage with others, actions are a response of the individuals’ interpretations of those meanings, and reality is not fixed but is fluid and subject to modification based on individual interpretations (Crotty, 2009). This perspective further explains how subjects assign meaning to their experiences and their



engagement with the world and served as an extension of the constructivist foundation for this research.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This original intent of this qualitative research design was to utilize Tinto's interactionist theory as the theoretical framework. The main premise of Tinto's theory involves examination of specific components of college life, which have evidence to support various factors that greatly influence the students' decisions to depart or persist based on their levels of integration within those specific components. Upon collecting and analyzing my data, however, I decided that Ryan and Deci's (1985) self-determination theory and Ainsworth and Bowlby's (1991) attachment theory provided a better framework for the purposes of my research. Both theories are further detailed in Chapter 2 of this study.

### **Methodology**

This qualitative research study employed a multiple case study methodology to generate knowledge as it related to foster care alumni experiences in college. According to Gay, Mills and Airiasan (2009), "case study research is a qualitative research approach to conducting research on a unit of study or bounded system" (p. 426). Further, in a multiple case study, Creswell (2007) states "the one issue or concern is selected, but the inquirer selects multiple case studies to illustrate the issue" (p.74). For the purposes of this research, a case was defined as the experiences of each individual foster alumni student; I purposefully selected multiple cases in multiple locations in the state of Oklahoma to add depth and breadth to the data. Each individual case was also bound by time: foster alumni students graduated from Oklahoma institutions in a span of 10 years (2005-2015). Generating

knowledge through the use of multiple cases when each of the cases has common characteristics or conditions, in this study status as a foster alumni college student in a specific place and time, aided me, the researcher, in developing a collective understanding (Stake, 2006). More specifically, Stake (2006) states, “a quintain is an object or phenomenon or condition to be studied—a target, but not a bull’s eye. In multi case study, it is the target collection” (p. 6). In order to illustrate the meanings assigned to college completion of foster care alumni, this study targeted multiple cases to highlight individual uniqueness as well as common experiences to capture the quintain of foster care alumni who persist and complete college to gain insight and contribute to the growing body of knowledge.

## **Methods**

I utilized criterion sampling to ensure participants met the specific criteria of having been in foster care between the ages of 13-18 and had completed a minimum of a bachelor’s degree at a public institution in the state of Oklahoma between 2005-2015. (Creswell, 2009). All participants in this study had aged out of the foster care system (turned 18 without achieving permanency in a family). As is appropriate for qualitative study, multiple sources of data were collected; these sources include one-on-one semi-structured interviews, artifacts, and a timeline activity.

Participants who met the criteria were asked to participate in two semi-structured individual interviews that lasted approximately 45-60 minutes each to discuss experiences while in college; an optional follow-up interview lasting approximately 15 minutes was proposed in the event for additional data or need for clarification; however, no follow-up interviews were conducted. Participants were asked to bring an artifact significant to their college experiences to the interview as well as participate in an illustrative activity that

established a timeline for examining specific events as it related to their engagement with the higher education institution they attended. Interviews were audio recorded and I transcribed all interviews verbatim with the exception of removing identifying information. Once the interview was transcribed, participants had an opportunity to participate in a member check to ensure the data was an accurate portrayal of their experiences (Gay et al. 2009).

### **Data Analysis**

MAXQDA Software for Qualitative research was used to organize and code the data for analysis. The coding and analysis processes resulted in qualitative themes related to the research questions. Data analysis processes are further detailed in Chapter 3.

### **Researcher Statement**

In considering my role as a researcher, I reflected on ways I could position myself in terms of this research. Professionally, I have Bachelor and Master of Social Work degrees, and I am a Licensed Clinical Social Worker. My interest in social work stems from a range of life experiences combined with the kindness of those who raised me, particularly my grandmother who always did what she could to help others in need. I spent almost ten years working with at-risk youth in residential and home-based settings prior to becoming a faculty member in the Social Work department at Northeastern State University. I have studied, practiced and now teach social work, a profession with a strong relationship to foster youth. From a more intimate perspective, my younger sister's children were removed from her care due to a shocking and heinous act of child abuse toward the youngest of her children. The perpetrator, the biological father, was sentenced to 29 years in prison and my sister was charged with a failure to protect her children. My mother was granted temporary custody but soon became critically ill. I had just completed my master's degree, had three young

children of my own, and did not feel I could possibly care for six children; however, I knew my sister deeply loved her children and feared how it would affect her, her children and my mother if they did not know who was caring for the children. For the next year, in addition to raising my own children, I was a foster parent for my three nephews, ages 2, 3 and 4. My husband and I went through the formal process of becoming a certified foster home and cared for them until my mother was able to complete her chemotherapy and make a full recovery. I have seen both sides of the foster care system and my interest in this population is a direct result of those experiences, both personally and professionally. These perspectives are both a blessing and a curse. As a researcher, I believe education is essential in making the shift from dependency to independence and increasing overall quality of life, and I hold firm the belief that these children are some of the most vulnerable, yet at the same time the strongest people I have known. My positionality as a researcher in this study, with all of my own experiences and perspectives, contributed to this work; however, it was also continuously considered and managed through qualitative research-related steps further explained in Chapter 3.

### **Delimitations**

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2008), delimitations “clarify the boundaries of your study” (p.78). As previously noted, I examined factors that contributed to foster care alumni’s ability to complete a bachelor’s degree. This study focused only on the state of Oklahoma in an effort to create understanding in the context of a state without a lengthy history of foster alumni support systems on college campuses. This study focused on foster youth who have “aged out” of foster care. The purpose of examining this group was to gain a better understanding of how they persisted without an established formal support system

throughout their tenure in college. This study relied on information from a small group of participants, and their reports were subjective and specifically related to their personal experiences. Due to these delimitations, this study is not generalizable to all foster care alumni and all geographic regions of the nation.

### **Summary**

Foster care alumni in college are a relatively small group in comparison to the general college population and a population not well understood in the research literature or in practice. While the adversities foster care alumni must contend with are well documented in the research literature, contributors to persistence for those who complete college are not. This multi-case study, based in Oklahoma, highlighted the positive outcomes and explored significant contributors to success for the foster care alumni with a college degree; the outcomes may have a beneficial influence on present and future foster care alumni in college.

Chapter 2 presents a review of related literature including the similarities of foster care alumni and their non-foster alumni peers in terms of abilities and desires to attend college. In addition, insight into the discrepancies in outcomes between the two groups is explored. Chapter 3 will provides extended detail of this study's design and methodology.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The prospect of achieving the American dream is introduced to children, as pupils of the public school system, early in their educational endeavors. Defined, this dream is the notion that “the American social, economic, and political system makes success possible for every individual” (“American dream,” n.d.). The possibility of becoming a teacher, doctor, lawyer, or president is becoming more of a reality across gender, race and socioeconomic status. Children in the foster care system are very similar to non-foster peers in terms of hopes, dreams, and goals for their future. Courtney, Terao, and Bost (2004) provide a quantitative portrait representative of former foster youths desire to attend college, reporting 75-80% of foster youth in a mid-western study held this aspiration. In addition to a desire to attend college, successful pursuit of a college degree requires support.

The review of literature will start by considering the American foster care system- the place where foster children often first realize they are distinctly different from their peers. It will then consider data on children who age out of foster care and the shared benefits of supporting the educational aspirations of foster alumni. A section on the

current research on foster care alumni in college is provided and includes considerations of financial, emotional, and relational concerns. This review will conclude by discussing the effectiveness and efficiency of programs available to assist foster care alumni in college and consider the theoretical application of Ainsworth and Bowlby's (1991) attachment and Ryan and Deci's (1985) self-determination theory for future considerations.

### **The Search Process**

The search for literature consisted of a three-part process. The first part of this process involved a review of Oklahoma State University online library databases: *Academic Search Premiere*, *Dissertation and Theses*, and *ERIC* using the following combination of descriptors: former foster youth, foster care alumni, foster care and higher education, independent living for foster youth, and outcomes for foster care alumni. The second phase of this process consisted of an online search for journal articles and government documents utilizing Oklahoma State University's *One Search* database. The final phase of the search process consisted of evaluating existing collection of literature and bibliographic references related to the topic of former foster youth.

### **The American Foster Care System**

Historical, philosophical, and political forces are major contributors to societal involvement in protecting children from abuse and neglect. According to Mather, Lager, and Harris (2007), the earliest approaches in the United States originate from England's

17<sup>th</sup> century Elizabethan Poor Laws and the *parens patriae* concept. The approaches established responsibility of the towns and states to assist vulnerable families; however, in terms of protecting children, the concept of *parens patriae* is the foundation of our existing system. *Parens patriae* is “based on the premise that the state is responsible for its citizens and is therefore the ultimate parent” (p. 2). The complexities of society overseeing “parenting” responsibilities of vulnerable children coupled with the harsh conditions of illness, poverty, and lack of resources to adequately care for children often resulted in placing children in deplorable conditions and severing connections with their family of origin.

Historically, substitute care for abused and neglected children began as an informal system by the community and evolved in response to societal conditions. During the 1850s, the need for placements grew due to extreme economic conditions and subsequent social problems. During the period between 1854 and 1929, the Children’s Aid Society developed “orphan trains” as a system of placing approximately 250,000 children who were abandoned or orphans. This approach to establishing permanency, safety, and wellbeing for children of neglect was an effort to address the significant numbers of children struggling to survive on the streets of New York to other regions of the nation (McCullough et al., 2006). The concept of relocating children to a permanent home selected to meet the basic needs of the child seems to be well intended; however, the system was controversial and eventually eliminated. At the turn of the century, the



first White House Conference on Children convened in 1909. The focus shifted from removing children to restoring families. As a result, foster care services eventually evolved from a substitute service to a supplemental service for families in need. However, since that time, the formal presence of the state and federal government in child welfare systems remains. During the latter part of the century, the evolution of foster care was strongly influenced by two major studies.

Maas and Engler's 1959 study titled *Children in Need of Parents* illustrated significant issues arising from long-term placement in foster care. As a result of these findings, there was an increase in public interest on achieving permanency for children in the foster care system. In addition to the heightened awareness of negative outcomes associated with long-term placement in foster care, the system also saw a rise in reports of abuse and neglect.

The increase in reports was not due to a rise in the actual number of children exposed to abuse and neglect; rather, it was the discovery of "The Battered Child Syndrome" in the 1960s that legitimized the consequences of physical abuse (Kempe, Silverman, Steele, Droegmueller & Silver, 1962). This particular piece of research drastically changed the way society viewed and responded to child abuse. The scientific evidence of how abuse affects children paved the way for the establishment of state mandatory reporting laws and investigation of allegations, creating an influx of referrals to an unsteady child welfare system. After the discovery of the physical effects of abuse

and the sudden increase of reporting in the decade to follow, the federal government responded with funding to support the plethora of children in need of foster care services. This funding allowed for a more formal foster care system for children of abuse and neglect (Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2013).

The current foster care system strives to provide a safe, nurturing, and supportive environment for abused and/or neglected children until they are able to reunify with their biological family (Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.-a). In placing children in the foster care system, the state has determined the parents are not able to provide adequate care to the child and therefore assumes all parental rights and responsibilities for the child. The original intention of foster care placement was a temporary intervention to protect children and support parents in efforts to ultimately reunify families. The underlying concepts of the foster care system were that children were placed in an alternative environment while their family remedies identified areas of deficiency in order to have the child return home. In cases where this does not happen, permanent solutions for foster children occur through kinship placements, and adoption. Unfortunately, permanent solutions are not always feasible through these three primary options - reunification with the biological family, kinship placement or adoption. In those instances, the state continues to fulfill the role of parent and has a responsibility of ensuring the education, health, and safety needs of the children are met.

In sum, the notion of child abuse, and the large influx of children into the long-term care of the state is relatively new; therefore, research on how to provide the best possible care to children within the foster care system is continuously developing. Without additional research on preventative measures and addressing deficiencies earlier as well as interventions to address the gaps in services and service delivery, foster youth are likely to continue to struggle to achieve the ultimate goal of adulthood: independence.

### **Alumni of Foster Care**

Children who do not receive a permanent placement and reach the age of eighteen in foster care “age out” of foster care. This means that they have reached adulthood without achieving permanency through reunification, kinship placement, or adoption, and their wellbeing is technically no longer the responsibility of the state. In contemporary times, and in this study, these young men and women are referred to as foster alumni (although some definitions also include as “foster alumni” those who found permanency after being in care).

Approximately 25,000 foster youth age out of the system annually and the majority has little to no fiscal or familial support upon exit (Downs, Moore & McFadden, 2009). For many of these youth, they are literally on their own. Often, these youth face transition from being a dependent of the state to independence with an inadequate foundation and minimal preparation and support for independent living; they are often particularly ill-equipped when it comes to the intricacies of pursuing higher education.

The assumed parental role of the state seemingly addresses all of the concrete areas of the foster youth's life to afford them the same long-term opportunities for success as their non-foster peers; however, they continue to have poor outcomes in adulthood. In terms of outcomes, Wertheimer (2002) reported that among foster alumni participants, only 50% held regular employment, a little over 50% of the women had a child and were reliant on governmental subsidies, almost 50% had been arrested, and 25% experienced homelessness. These tragic life events would be a time to turn to family for support, and it is typical for a family not touched by foster care to continue to have ties with children after they reach the age of eighteen; however, not having family or emotional support is common for many foster youth aging out of the system. The poor outcomes for former foster youth may be, in part, a result the very system in place to promote their safety, permanency, and wellbeing (Sullivan, Jones, & Mathieson, 2010). However, current long-term outcomes bring this population full circle as the high rates of inadequate education, homelessness, incarceration, and welfare dependency require re-engagement with the social service system (Allen & Vacca, 2010). The discrepancies in long-term outcomes and what can be done to maximize existing programs and assist this population in realizing their own life aspirations require further investigation.

### **Independent Living Programs**

Federal recognition of the dismal outcomes for foster care alumni in terms of disproportionate levels of mental health issues, employment, incarceration and reliance

on public assistance in adulthood shed light on the need for additional supports to promote independence and improve long-term outcomes (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 1999). As a result of the persistent negative outcomes, President Bill Clinton signed into law The Foster Care Independence Act (PL- 106-169) on December 14, 1999, replacing the former Title IV-E Independent Living Initiative (1986). The passage of this legislation paved the way for increasing funding, establishing oversight, and enhancing programs to assist alumni of the foster care system in transition from the status of a ward of the state to adulthood. The Children's Bureau (2012) outlines specific components of the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP) funding available in the form of grants to states and tribes to assist this population in achieving self-sufficiency:

Activities and programs include, but are not limited to, help with education, employment, financial management, housing, emotional support and assured connections to caring adults for older youth in foster care. The program is intended to serve youth who are likely to remain in foster care until age 18, youth who, after attaining 16 years of age, have left foster care for kinship guardianship or adoption, and young adults ages 18-21 who have "aged out" of the foster care system. (para. 2).

As it relates to this study, the program provides support in terms of funding to foster care alumni (who meet the aforementioned criteria) to pursue postsecondary education in the

form of Education Training Vouchers (ETV). Specific elements of funding and support for independent living are provided in greater detail later in the chapter.

### **Education as a Social Tool**

As with other marginalized groups, the most promising approach to alleviating many social problems foster care alumni endure in adulthood is education. For foster alumni, gaining a degree may have compounding benefits for both students and society. Evidence demonstrates high rates of mental health issues, reliance on public assistance, incarceration, and homelessness for alumni of the foster care system. Research also establishes a significant relationship between education and a reduction in these social problems. A 2013 study shows “on average, for every young person who ages out of foster care, taxpayers and communities pay \$300,000 in social costs like public assistance, incarceration, and lost wages to a community over that person’s lifetime” (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2013, para.4). Given the evidence, it would behoove the many factions involved to understand how to better assist the foster care alumni to achieve independence and contribute both fiscally and socially as adults.

### **Economic Considerations for Foster Alumni with a College Degree**

Enhancing postsecondary opportunities for youth aging out of foster care is a sound investment considering the fiscal impacts of dependency on welfare, incarceration, lack of education and subsidized health care for former foster youth as adults (Dworsky,

2005). The concept of additional support to reduce negative outcomes has been studied to determine if extending support and guardianship from the age of 21 to the age of 23 would benefit foster care alumni and improve long-term outcomes. Utilizing a cost-benefit methodology, Packard, Delgado, Fellmeth, and McCready (2008) project that, over the 40-year career spans of participating foster care alumni, the financial, educational, and emotional support from these services would increase tax revenues and yield a benefit-cost of 2-0 with a 75% success rate over the course of their careers. Their study considered the disproportionate representation of foster youth who are incarcerated, homeless, and dependent on assistance as adults in the state of California and examined how expansion of existing programs and extending the age of care from 21 to 23 would improve successes and fiscally reduce reliance on state and government assistance. A 2010 study by Trostel echoed the substantial fiscal impact college education has on governments. Although this study was not specific to a college degree for foster care alumni, the findings estimate the “extra tax revenues from college graduates are more than six times the gross government cost per college degree” (p.220). This reiterates the significant fiscal impact of investing in college education. When considering the rate of return for a population with an already disproportionate weight on government reliance, it solidifies the need to increase attention to this population and support for their pursuit of higher education.

Higher education institutions have the ability to work in collaboration with

outside agencies as well as utilize existing supports to promote initiatives for improving educational outcomes for foster youth aging out of foster care. Batson (1994) offers a conceptual analysis of motives for acting in for the good of the public. One of the motives, egoism, posits that all human action is in self-interest. In the case of higher education institutions as it applies to the initiatives for the foster alumni population, partnering with projects to retain foster care alumni in college would serve many purposes. First, it would be an opportunity to provide a valuable service and recognition at a statewide level. Secondly, former foster youth success would benefit the institution if the initiatives accomplish what they intend to through increased retention. Lastly, the more members of society who are employed and contributing to tax revenues, the more funding will be generated for higher education institutions. Support programs in higher education for foster youth aging out of foster care are costly and would require collaboration and creativity; however, the long term fiscal and societal benefits appear outweigh the initial cost.

### **Support and Success of Foster Alumni in College**

In terms of educational outcomes, foster youth are considered to be one of the most educationally vulnerable groups (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2010). Given the poor long-term outcomes foster care alumni experience, it is important to consider the most effective and efficient ways to reduce the likelihood of their occurrence. Along this vein, Jones (2010) reiterates, “postsecondary education is of interest because it is a powerful



predicator of future life successes and an indicator of successful emancipation from foster care” (p. 9). A postsecondary education appears to be a feasible response to alleviating the plethora of social problems that haunt this population in adulthood.

Additional support for the significance of a college degree is found in an article by Nancy (2008), which examined the shift in employment opportunities. The emphasis is on the importance of higher education due to the shift in the job market as of late. In the past, blue-collar jobs were sufficient for workers to support themselves and their families; however, recent changes in the work industry require a college degree to increase the likelihood of independence. This broad statement applies to all entering the workforce and reinforces the importance of a college degree to achieve sufficiency in adulthood.

Due largely to the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (further detailed in a later section), foster care alumni are now afforded very similar opportunities to their non-foster peers in regard to financial support to pursue higher education. This policy replaced the Independent Living Initiative of 1986 and expanded services for foster youth in transition from care to independence (Downs, Moore & McFadden, 2009). In addition to the expansion of programming with the Foster Care Independence Act, the Fostering Connections Act of 2008 emphasizes the importance of oversight and evaluation for youth in extended care (DiNitto and Johnson, 2016).

Despite development of and subsequent improvements in programs and increased accountability, alumni of the foster care system continue to lag behind their non-foster peers in terms of retention and completion of a college degree. For example, a study by Wolanin (2005) found that among college-qualified cohorts, 60% of non-foster youth attend college in comparison to 20% of foster care alumni. In addition to the imbalance in pursuit of higher education between foster and non-foster youth, foster care alumni also do not complete college at the same rate as their non-foster peers. The Center for the Study of Social Policy (2009) found at the age of 19, only 18% of foster youth are pursuing a four-year degree, compared to 62% of their peers. In addition to the pursuit of a postsecondary education, major disparities in completion rates exist. Snyder and Tan (2006) found that only 26 % of foster alumni who enter college finish their degrees in six years compared to 56% of non-foster alumni students. Because many foster alumni share characteristics with first-generation students, it may appear logical to group them with first-generation students. However, statistical outcomes found students who were first generation low income foster care alumni had dropout rates of 21% for the freshman year and 34% prior to degree completion in comparison to their non-foster, first-generation, low income counterparts with rates of 13% for the freshman year and 18% upon degree completion (Day et al., 2011).

Literature comparing foster and non-foster completion outcomes shows that graduation rates for foster alumni range from 1% to 11% (Pecora, et al., 2003) in

comparison to a 30% graduation rate among their non-foster peers (Wolanin, 2005). More recently, Davis (2007) reported that of the foster children who attempt to obtain a college degree, only 3% achieve this goal. Over a decade after the passage of the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 and implementation of programs, that allow for financial, medical, and educational support to this population, foster youth continue to be disproportionately represented in higher education.

Whereas the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 provides targeted support for former foster youth in obtaining a post-secondary education, including a college degree, the effectiveness of programs for former foster youth in college found in the literature is not promising. A recent study by Nicoletti and Tonelli (2007) found independent living programs are not effective when it comes to improving long-term outcomes of foster care alumni. This data is echoed and narrowed down to a specific area of concern in a more recent study by Hernandez and Naccarato (2010), which found that the foster care system not only fails to give the youth who are aging out of the system the tools that they need to transition into everyday living, they also fail to provide information and preparation for higher education. Despite the availability of monetary support and independent living programs to prepare foster care alumni for transition into adulthood, they continue to experience poor outcomes in higher education.

## **Issues of Foster Youth in Education**

Although children and youth in the foster care system have had experiences that differ from their non-foster care peers, they are similar in their life goals of permanency, happiness, and safety. Despite the significant variances in long term outcomes between foster care alumni and their non-foster peers, their hopes and desires for a happy, healthy life are similar. Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor and Nesmith (2001) found that many children in foster care (comparable to their non-foster peers) have a strong desire to obtain higher education, yet their goals are less likely to come to fruition. Mech (2003) reiterates the significant role that education plays in the ability to be independent and do well in life. In general, it is common knowledge that a primary predictor for poverty is lack of education, and despite available funding for higher education and support for foster care children, they are significantly less likely to obtain a college degree.

Attention to the trends associated with aging out of the foster care system, including the desire to attend higher education and the low success rates for achieving degrees has researchers focusing on various aspects of this complex topic. An article by Choice, et al. (2001) highlights many legislative recommendations; of interest was the recommendation to commit resources to examine the contributions of the courts in the educational experiences of children in foster care. In addition to educational experiences, Massinga (1999) also suggests that states should be responsible for ensuring that they adequately prepare the children they take into custody for adulthood by providing the

skills and information needed to maintain employment or pursue higher education. Given that students entering higher education are those who have exited from the K-12 system, a consideration of the educational experiences of foster children prior to college is critical to the discussion.

### **Foster Youth in K-12 Educational Systems**

The research literature on foster children in American educational systems suggests that education for foster youth is a secondary issue in light of the multitude of pressing issues. Berger and Brooks-Gunn (2005) addressed the deficiencies in educational literature in regard to foster care children, and their findings reinforced the ideas that foster children are not a primary concern when it comes to the educational arena. In addition, an overloaded child welfare system designed to provide safety, permanency and well-being for children has primarily focused on protecting children; that is insufficient for preparing foster students for college. If foster children are not a priority in the educational arena and education is not a priority in the foster care arena, it seems logical that transitioning from dependence to independence is severely lacking and in need of transformation. Three unique, and additional, concerns of college bound foster youth in K-12 education are imposed mobility, relationships, and caregivers.

## **Imposed Mobility and Foster Youth**

Within the foster care system, children are typically mobile. A report by the Casey Foundation (2011) stated that the average number of foster homes per stay in foster care is 3.2 and an average 65% of former foster children experienced seven or more school changes during the K-12 years. This disruption impacts the foster child's academic achievement as well as the ability to develop and maintain personal and social relationships. Calvin (2001) estimated that the adjustment period for each transition from one school to the next is between four to six months. Emerson and Lovitt (2003) also recognize the how the lack of knowledge among educators, when it comes to foster children, affects educational experiences. Foster children have substantially different experiences that interrupt development and interfere with their academic and social abilities. Unless educators are cognizant of the impact of some of the experiences that contribute to and result in foster placement, it may appear as if the children are difficult, non-compliant, or indifferent.

## **Relationships**

An article by Davis (2007) emphasizes the importance that developing relationships has on foster children and points out the opportunity for personal development that is enhanced by experiencing positive relationships in the school setting. However, given the mobility imposed on foster children, developing personal

connections may be difficult. Likewise, relationships for many foster youth have not been pleasant or fulfilling.

Experiences such as trauma, abuse, and neglect that require youth to develop resilience may be essential to survival in the system and considered beneficial at the time, however, this very independence poses potential barriers to developing trust and connections with others (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Zetlin and Weinberg (2004) found that the experiences of this population within the foster care system and within the school system fail to establish a nurturing and supportive environment. This may be the result of a combination of the youth's reluctance to develop trust with others due to past experiences as well as a shortage of resources on the part of social service workers and educators.

### **Caregivers**

Another factor for K-12 foster youth is the care provided by the foster parents and how it compares to the care provided by a permanent caregiver. Foster parents are less likely to be as engaged with foster children's academic experiences in the form of parent teacher conferences and involvement in extra-curricular activities. Due to the many placements, foster children are often not involved in activities outside of the classroom that teach valuable social skills such as developing social relationships (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003). In addition to the lack of engagement, a connection between the level of education of the caregivers and children's success in school has been established

(National Center for Children in Poverty, 1990). Jacobson (2008) found that foster parents are more likely than non-foster parents to not have a high school education. The multiple disruptions, decrease in caregiver school involvement and the lack of exposure to parental figures that have experienced higher education are significant detractors from establishing the necessary socialization and academic preparation for college.

### **Foster Alumni in College**

Similar types of concerns for foster alumni exist once on the college campus that includes emotional support, relationships, and efforts by the college campus community.

#### **Emotional Support**

As outlined in the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, one of the responsibilities of states for youth transitioning out of care, including those who are college bound, is to provide emotional support. Clearly, emotional support is subjective and may require input from the recipient of services. For the purposes of creating a working definition for this goal, I will refer to Cohen (2004) who analyzed the concept and determined

The construct of social support as a protective factor in regard to stress and its consequences...emotional support, defined as the availability of at least one empathic, caring, reassuring, and trustful individual who provides support and opportunities for venting, is its principal operative aspect. (p. 670)



By definition, emotional support is the result of establishing healthy, consistent relationships to provide support and encouragement.

Evidence to reinforce the significance of relationships and support was present in a study by Dworsky and Perez (2010), who found that relationships, a sense of belonging, and support held more value than tangible support for the foster alumni student population.

In their examination of retention and persistence of foster care alumni at a four-year university, Day et al., (2011) discovered additional evidence to support the significance of support on college campuses. Emotional support helps to address other barriers to persistence in college for foster care alumni that include: lack of academic preparation for postsecondary education, perceived lack of support from student personnel services, and lack of ability to manage the demands of college life.

The lack of emotional support combined with a lack of expectations is overwhelming in an endeavor such as higher education. According to a recent publication by the Casey Foundation (2011), foster youth reported others expectations of them in terms of pursuing and completing college was minimal and unlike many of their non-foster peers, they did not have a support network. Massinga and Pecora (2004) noted that researchers have only recently begun examining the importance that support systems and relationships have on reducing the negative outcomes for former foster youth.

## **Relationships**

As previously discussed, foster children have unique barriers to developing the skills for, and having the experience of, strong and healthy relationships. However, the criticality of relationships for success in college remains. A study by Lemon, Hines, and Merdinger (2005) found that while former foster youth transitioning to college benefit from concrete information (day-to-day life skills and information), the incorporation of a strong connection with a source of support that extends beyond teaching basic living skills is critical. Essentially, the relationship is more important than the information. Currently, independent living services fail to address a crucial component of what seems to be a key to success. Propp, Ortega, and Newheart (2003) observed that while the services being provided focus on the more objective, basic information necessary for independent living, the subjective components such as relationships were lacking and more difficult to incorporate into the program. While relationships are a key component in successful transitions for youth, both foster and non-foster, specific challenges are present for the foster youth.

## **The College Campus**

It is imperative to consider ways in which higher education may have the capacity to meet this need for foster care alumni on their campuses. Emerson (2006) found student services personnel at most postsecondary institutions are not familiar with or prepared to address the unique needs of this population. Given the range of support services available

to a multitude of at-risk student groups in higher education institutions, it would benefit institutions to consider the identified gaps in the Foster Care Independence policy that are more subjective. As stated earlier, one component outlined in this policy includes the provision of support via mentors and engagement with dedicated adults. Emotional support for students is a rather common feature of postsecondary institutions. Student organizations, counseling services, and mentoring are just a few ways in which institutions have the potential to address this critical component.

A newer trend on college campuses is the implementation of formal support programs for former foster youth. Michigan State University recently discovered a promising practice utilizing peer support from foster care alumni serving as mentors and educational workshops to enhance foster youth basic awareness about higher education admissions and expectations. While the results of this study are optimistic, Kirk and Day (2010) acknowledge that this type of an intervention would require an array of services at the community level as well as within the educational institutions that serve the former foster youth. Day et al. (2011) suggest that “another way to increase graduation and retention rates among this population would be for the federal government or the states to fund the implementation and evaluation of campus support initiatives for alumni of foster care” (p. 2339). This innovative approach on campuses in response to the goal of the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 is a golden opportunity for postsecondary

institutions to develop built-in support and mentoring to promote retention and academic success for foster care alumni on their campuses.

### **Theoretical Models of Student Retention**

Developing support programs for at risk students is just one step toward the goal of increased retention in higher education institutions. The greatest challenge for institutions is no longer access to college but rather retention once the student arrives. This section will provide a brief overview of current research of knowledge on student retention.

Retention of students is a widely researched topic in higher education. Tierney (2000) states, “college student departure is one of the most studied areas in higher education literature” (p. 213). The issue of retention is important to understand as the effects are felt at the personal, institutional, and societal levels.

In their review of retention theories, Demetriou and Schmitz-Sciborski (2011) report the earliest study of retention was “a 1938 study led by John McNeely and published by the U.S. Department of Interior and the Office of Education collecting data from 60 institutions and examined characteristics, social engagement, and reasons for departure” (p. 2). As federal policies and programs, such as the GI Bill and The Higher Education Act of 1965 contributed to significant growth in access and pursuit of a college degree, research into retention expanded accordingly.

Alexander Astin (1984) theorizes that students will get out of the institution what they put into the institution. His model, Input-Environment-Output, is the primary feature of his Involvement Theory. Wolf-Wendel, Ward and Kinzie (2009) acknowledge, while the institution is considered important, “the unit of analysis and focus is on the individual student, as he/she controls the extent of his/her own involvement” (p. 411).

In response to the changing landscape of the student body in higher education, Bean and Metzner’s 1985 research considered the non-traditional student experience and found, for that population, the external environment was a more prominent factor in retention than social integration into the institution. Of the many theorists who study and write about student retention in higher education, none is as prominent or well-known as Vincent Tinto, whose theory was initially considered (changed *a posteriori*) for the theoretical framework for this study.

### **Tinto’s Model of Student Retention**

Tinto’s 1993 interactionalist theory stems from Spady’s 1970 social integration process theory on student dropouts. The grounding for both theories was derived from Durkheim’s theory of suicide (1897), which posits people who are not connected to society opt to remove themselves from society through suicide. Tinto (1993) extended this notion to student retention, theorizing when students do not see themselves as a part of the institution, or when membership is constrained; departure is the more feasible option.

A second dimension of influence for Tinto's model was Arnold van Gennep's (1960/1908) theory on rites of passage, which conceptualizes a process of transformation of individuals who are leaving one community to become a part of another community. Van Gennep's rite of passages was presented in three stages referred to as "the stages of separation, transition and incorporation" (p. 92). In his model, Tinto (1993) applied this process to student integration into college life. Successful navigation of all three phases establishes integration into the institution and increased likelihood the student will persist.

The theoretical lens of Tinto (1993) provides a framework for examination of student retention and promotes a deeper understanding of academic and social factors that contribute to students' decision to persist or depart higher education institutions.

The first area of concern in Tinto's model is student characteristics prior to entry into the institution. Foundational components such as socioeconomic status, academic preparedness, self-efficacy, and emotional support are factors that contribute to student persistence (DeWitz, Woolsey, & Walsh, 2009). The level of commitment to educational goals the student possesses is another pre-disposing factor for consideration in understanding a student's decision to depart or persist.

As the existing data demonstrates, foster care alumni are often ill equipped when it comes to socioeconomic status, academic preparedness, self-efficacy, and emotional support. This lens is useful in understanding the significance of collaboration among

social service agencies, pipeline initiatives, and first year experience programs as they relate to preparing foster care alumni and addressing needs prior to and upon entry into higher education institutions.

Student departure is complex and cannot be solely attributed to the pre-entry characteristics but rather a complex equation also involving the students' level of commitment and ability to integrate socially and academically (Tinto, 1993) The components of Tinto's 1993 interactionist theory that substantially influence the students' decision to depart or persist are adjustment, difficulty, incongruence, and isolation.

### **Adjustment**

According to Tinto (1993), "the first stage of the college career, separation, requires individuals to disassociate themselves, in varying degrees, from membership in the communities of the past, most typically those associated with the family, the local high school, and local areas of residence" (p. 95). In regard to the adjustment phase for foster care alumni, aligning with a new community that fosters autonomy and stability may serve as a tool for empowerment. A recent study by Okumu (2014) explored many factors of foster alumni in transition to college and found while the participants "expressed feelings of isolation and estrangement in the transition to college, these perceptions were balanced by increased self-esteem, feelings of self-sufficiency, and

optimism in the face of a new beginning” (p. 14). Aging out of foster care typically means youths have experienced past trauma and unstable relationships with significant others in their lives while also being subjected to having little control over personal choices such as where they will live, who they will be able to have connections with and where they attend school. A consideration of the histories of alumni of foster care suggests the adjustment phase may be a smoother process for foster alumni than for their non-foster peers.

### **Difficulty**

However, as with any significant life changes, the adjustment period may be difficult. In addition to the academic demands of college life, students must balance obligations and establish relationships with their peers. The ability to establish relationships heightens emotional support for students and increases their commitment to the institution. This is one way in which institutional retention efforts may translate into developing or enhancing foster care alumni specific networks to increase a sense of belonging and commitment to the institution. Emotional support during this period is likely to promote positive outcomes; however, foster care alumni may exercise a higher degree of caution when it comes to developing close relationships and sharing their personal backgrounds (Okumu, 2014). This apprehension could create a barrier to persistence if the foster care alumnus is not comfortable seeking help during times of difficulty whether it is academically or socially. An existing foster alumni network may



alleviate some of the initial concerns related to the student being uncomfortable with their background, and they may benefit from reaching out to others who can truly empathize with their unique circumstances.

### **Incongruence**

The lack of the institution's ability to meet the needs of the students is another determining factor in the students' decision to depart (Tinto, 1993). The incongruence may be academic, social, or a combination. This is another significant point for consideration in assisting foster care alumni with college planning prior to entry and instituting a built-in support system upon arrival. In applying the concepts of persistence, it appears a formal campus support system for foster care alumni has the potential to create goodness of fit between the student and the institution. For example, an institution may not be familiar with the Educational Training Voucher program. This lack of institutional knowledge and preparation requires foster care alumni to explain their personal situation to financial aid offices and make contact with the ETV specialist, who works outside of the institution, to assist in clarifying application and disbursement of funds. This particular situation, and others like it, could be addressed through efforts to educate those in support services at higher education institutions.

### **Social Isolation**

The fourth component influencing student departure is social isolation. Tinto

(1993) posits the inability to make meaningful connections within the community may cause the student to depart even if they are not struggling academically. Academic and social integration occurs when the attitudes and values between the institution and the student align. Academically, the student is performing well and able to keep up with the academic rigor (Tinto, 1993); socially, the student has established connections with peers and faculty, engages in extracurricular activities, and has a sense of belonging and membership within the institution, which increases the student's level of commitment to and improvement in retention.

### **Attachment Theory**

The works of John Bowlby (1969, 1972, 1973, 1980), a renowned child psychiatrist and founding father of attachment theory, posits that attachment to caregivers is vital to survival, has an influence from “cradle to grave,” and impacts the way individuals organize their beliefs in relation to the world. The foundation of John Bowlby's theory of attachment is a reflection of his own childhood experiences coupled with his early professional experiences of working with maladapted children. Bowlby was born into privilege and spent his early, formative years being cared for primarily by a nanny. This relationship was interrupted when Bowlby was about 5-years-old and partially attributes the development of his theory as having roots in this early life

experience of attachment disruption. (Bowlby, 1958). As a researcher, Bowlby's attachment theory was heavily influenced by the integrating theoretical elements of ethology (the study of animal behavior), psychoanalysis (the study of the unconscious), and cognitive psychology (the study of mental processes) with his own research and real-life experiences. Bowlby theorized emotional disturbances in children had a strong link to experiences with family and had the potential for cross-generational affects. Bowlby's (1947) first empirical study of 44 cases revealed a connection between symptoms of maladapted children and parent-child relationships.

Prior to her collaboration with John Bowlby on attachment theory, Mary Ainsworth's research extended upon her work with William Blatz's (1940) security theory, emphasizing the significance of development of security and dependence on parents and theorized the lack of security, termed a "secure base" interfered with a child's ability to cope with unfamiliar situations. According to van Rosmalen, van der Horst, and van der Veer (2016), during the "1950s and 1960s further important aspects were added to what was to become attachment theory, notably among them the earlier mentioned methodological and theoretical contributions of Ainsworth" (p. 24). Most notably, Ainsworth and Wittig (1969) developed the Strange Situation Classification as an assessment tool to understand differences in attachment between children. As a result of her research, Ainsworth classified attachment styles as; secure, resistant and avoidant and concluded that the attachment style of the child was determined by the behavior and level

of sensitivity the mother demonstrated to the child (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978).

The foundation of attachment and classification of attachment styles in children has paved the way for understanding how early attachments affect adult functioning. According to Rholes and Simpson (2004), “many contemporary adult attachment studies focus on the two attachment style dimensions rather than the four categories” (p. 4). The attachment style dimensions are fearful, which consists of “high scores on both dimensions” and dismissive style that “reflect high avoidance and low anxiety” (p.4).

Levine and Heller (2011) describe the four attachment styles in adulthood as secure, anxious, avoidant, and anxious avoidant. Secure attachment styles are characterized by low anxiety and low avoidance, whereas, anxious styles are characterized by high anxiety and low avoidance. Anxious attachment styles desire attention from attachment role models while maintaining doubt regarding the ability or willingness for others to respond to them. Avoidant attachment styles tend to be uncomfortable with emotional intimacy and have a desire to sustain their emotional independence. Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) devised both interview and self-report measures of the four styles and the two dimensions that provide a visual representation of the theoretical concepts:

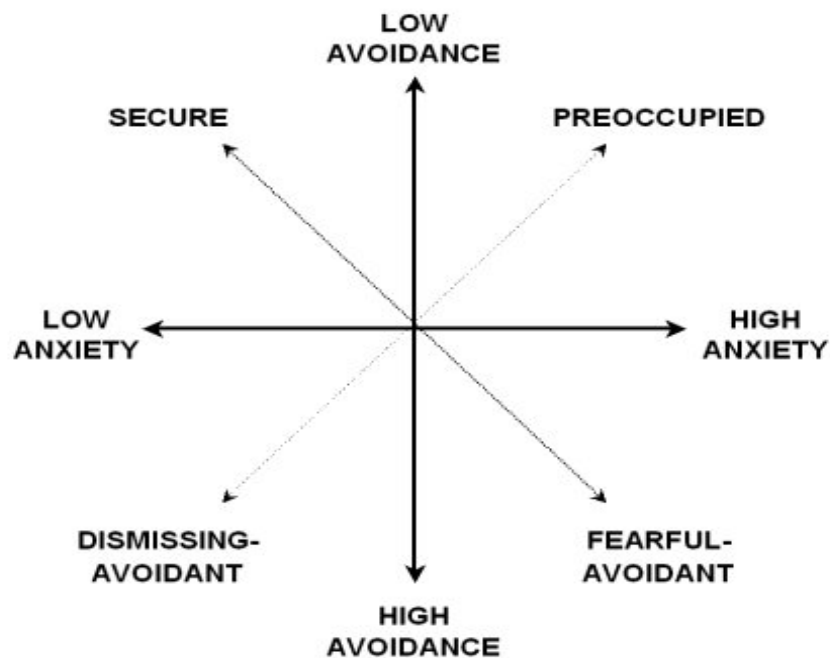


Table 1: *The two-dimensional model of individual differences in adult attachment*  
 (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1999, used with permission of the authors).

Attachment theory establishes the significance of developing secure attachments to help navigate behaviors in times of distress. Often times, children involved in the foster care system experience chronic distress coupled with the likelihood of attachment disruption with primary caregivers and lack the emotional resources needed. Although attachment styles are “stable once they are formed, change is possible throughout the life span” (Davidson, 2007). This may be accomplished through establishing a secure base, examination of current internal working models, examination of internal working models of past relationships, examining the influence of the past upon the present, and revising

and updating the individuals internal working model to reflect their sense of worthiness and love (Davidson, 2007).

### **Self-Determination Theory**

Self-determination theory provides a theoretical framework for understanding human motivation in pursuing goals and has been influenced by previous theories related to needs and motivation. Deci and Ryan (2000) compare and contrast the works of Hull (1943) and Murray (1938) in relation to their theory of self-determination. In regard to needs and the Hullian tradition, “we define needs as innate, organismic necessities rather than acquired motives, and as in the Murray tradition, we define needs at the psychological rather than the physiological level” (p. 229). Rooted in an organismic theory of motivation, self-determination theory operate under the following assumption:

People are active organisms with evolved tendencies toward growing, mastering ambient challenges, and integrating new experiences into a coherent sense of self. The natural developmental tendencies, do not, however, operate automatically, but instead require ongoing social nutriments and support (“Self-determination thoery”, para. 4).

Further, the social environment can serve to help or hinder an organism’s innate desire to be engaged and strive for both physical and psychological development. This interaction is the foundation for the premise of self-determination theory.

According to Deci (1980), understanding the behavior of self-determination is explained as a “psychological construct referring to people’s flexibility and capacity to choose among the behavioral options and to accommodate to the situations in which only one option is available” (p. 6). Essentially, self-determining individuals are flexible and able to adapt even in situations where the availability of options are limited versus the non-self-determining behavior of inflexibility and inability to adapt given minimal or sole options. Ryan and Deci (2000) posit types of motivation, intrinsic and extrinsic, are distinguished “based on the different reasons or goals that give rise to an action” (p. 55). Stone, Deci and Ryan (2009) explained “humans are inherently motivated to grow and achieve and will fully commit to and even engage in uninteresting tasks when their meaning and value is understood” (p. 77). The levels and orientation of underlying motivations are significant in understanding goal-directed behavior.

Understanding the concept of motivation is significant in many aspects; however, in terms of higher education, it seems beneficial to understand underlying factors of motivation and consider ways to facilitate growth and development as a potential means of improving student engagement, increasing retention, and improving overall outcomes. Ryan and Deci (2000) describe the differences between the two types of motivation, stating, “intrinsic motivation refers to doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable and extrinsic motivation refers to doing something because it leads to a separable outcome” (p.55). Intrinsic motivation has materialized as a critical

phenomenon in the educational arena as a source in which achievement may be facilitated or destabilized (Ryan & Stiller, 1991).

In their dialogue regarding motivation and self-determination theory, the authors address cognitive evaluation theory, a sub-theory that examines ways intrinsic motivation is facilitated (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The theorists elaborate, “research into intrinsic motivation has thus placed much emphasis on those conditions that elicit, sustain, and enhance this special type of motivation versus those that subdue or diminish it” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p.58). This is facilitated through promoting the inherent psychological need for satisfying feelings of competence, relatedness, and autonomy. Deci and Ryan (2000) explain the concepts. In reference to autonomy, this is the notion that people make decisions independently and are in control of their behavior as they pursue their goals. Competence refers to one’s ability to master tasks, or perceive themselves as having the ability to develop mastery. The final concept, relatedness, is the idea that a sense of connection and belonging to other people serves to elevate levels of motivation.

Ryan and Deci (2000) explain that extrinsic motivation “contrasts with intrinsic motivation, which refers to doing an activity simply for the enjoyment of the activity itself, rather than its instrumental value” (p. 60). Organismic integration theory is a sub-theory contending that extrinsic motivation is contingent on the extent to which autonomy exists. Ryan and Deci (2000) define the extrinsically motivated behaviors identified regulation, external regulation, introjected regulation and integrated regulation



as:

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

Intrinsically or extrinsically motivated behaviors are both useful in helping to understand persistence. Self-determination theory is a useful lens in considering the “how” and “why” people are motivated to achieve goals. For the population of foster care alumni, it is important to not only understand the sources of motivation but also to understand what circumstances help to facilitate and regulate behaviors geared toward persistence.

### **Existing Supports for Foster Care Alumni College Students**

There are several possible layers of support for foster care alumni in college, and a brief presentation and discussion of those efforts will conclude this review of literature. From a macro perspective, federal policy has developed financial support and shaped practice for foster youth in transition from care to college. From a mezzo perspective, many communities and universities are working diligently to meet the needs of foster care alumni on college campuses. Last, support for foster care alumni in college may be

found among individuals who reach out to help fill in the gap in services regarding financial, emotional, or educational assistance.

### **Resources through Federal Policy**

The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 was passed to address the range of poor outcomes such as high rates of homelessness, mental health issues, substance abuse, out of wedlock births, and lack of stable employment this population faces in transition (Courtney, Dworksy, Lee & Raap, 2009). The following statement from President Clinton at the signing of the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 summarizes the foundational component of this legislation:

The bill gives States more resources and flexibility to help former foster children finish high school and go on to college, to help young people get jobs and vocational training, to provide counseling for young people learning to live on their own—you've already heard how important that is—and above all, to make sure young adults leaving foster care know they are not out there alone. (para. 4)

The provision of financial, medical, and educational support was enacted to ensure that youth transitioning out of the foster care system be afforded the same opportunities as their non-foster peers to develop skills and pursue an education; underlying this effort was the recognition that, for many children in the foster care system, provision of support services may be the sole responsibility of the foster care

system (Collins, 2004). The broad goals of implementing additional supports are to decrease negative outcomes for former foster youth and provide equitable opportunity to foster youth through a holistic approach designed to meet the social, economic, and educational needs of the transitioning youth.

As a result of this federal policy, the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program became available to states in the form of grants to administer programming to assist foster care youth during the transition from foster care to adulthood to improve long-term outcomes. As stated earlier, the main components addressed in this transitional period are education, employment, finances, and emotional support for youth who have no imminent plans for permanency and are approaching 18 years of age. In terms of federal support, all states are eligible to receive funding to assist foster care alumni in postsecondary educational endeavors; however, the amount and order in which monies are allocated vary from state to state. In order to facilitate appropriate distribution of funds and oversight, the state assigns an ETV specialist to specific regions in the state to assist foster care alumni in securing funds for college and to serve as an advocate for students (“Oklahoma Successful Adulthood Program”, 2017).

In regard to specific financial support from the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, the Educational and Training Vouchers Program (ETV) in the state of Oklahoma provides \$4,998 yearly for foster care alumni to pursue postsecondary education full time and \$2,499 annually for part time students. This funding is available

to cover education-related expenses such as tuition, fees, textbooks, housing, transportation, and medical expenses not covered by other sources. ETV funding serves as a supplemental resource and is applied after all other resources are exhausted (“Educational and training vouchers for current and former foster care youth”, 2015).

### **Additional Financial Support**

In addition to financial support that is provided through federal funding, primary financial supports for foster care alumni in pursuit of a college degree are available through federal Pell grants, state tuition waivers, and scholarships based on financial need, residence, and academic performance. In the state of Oklahoma, foster youth who have graduated from high school in Oklahoma are eligible to participate in Oklahoma’s Promise, a state tuition waiver program. In addition to financial support, another valuable resource available to Oklahoma foster care alumni in college is state medical insurance, Sooner Care, which is available until they reach 26 years of age.

The financial resources in this section are responses by the federal and state governments to promote independence for foster care alumni in pursuit of higher educational opportunities. The benefits associated with a college education have a substantially fiscal impact on governments (Trostel, 2010), and investment in such an endeavor will require time before a return is noticeable. However, financial support is just a portion of what is needed to promote independence and success in college.

## **Community and Campus Initiatives**

On a smaller scale, grassroots efforts are surfacing in communities and on campuses across the nation targeting support and success of foster care alumni in college. Many of the initiatives are led by colleges and universities with support from non-profit organizations to promote success for foster youth on their campuses and in their communities. When I first began work on this dissertation, there were ten states recognized as having higher education systems working in collaboration with child welfare agencies to assist foster care alumni on college campuses (Emerson & Batson, 2010). Today there are an estimated fourteen. The existing programs, initiatives and missions of the original ten are outlined below. Additional new states include: Idaho Fostering Success Network, Kansas Kids @ Gear Up, Missouri REACH, and Foster Youth College Success Initiative (New York).

*California College Pathways* “Through strategic philanthropic investments, dedication and support from California’s three public post-secondary education systems, and the determination and perseverance of youth themselves, California College Pathways has helped thousands of foster youth succeed in college and career and is poised to assist thousands more.” (<http://www.cacollegepathways.org/about/why-this-work-matters/>)

*Florida REACH* “Florida Reach connects K-12 administrators, higher education affairs professionals and youth advocates representing 21 Florida organizations, schools and government agencies, spread from Tallahassee to Miami, who work with youth in foster care. The big collective goal of the group is for every Florida college and university campus to have a “campus coach” to guide foster youth students and connect them to

services they need to successfully access and complete higher education”  
(<http://floridacollegeaccess.org/news/florida-reach-network-helps-foster-youth-achieve-higher-education/>)

*Embark Georgia Statewide Network* “is a statewide leadership initiative increasing college access for young people who have experienced foster care or homelessness. These students face significant challenges when pursuing a post-secondary education including diminished access to financial resources, instability while in high school, and significantly reduced social capital. When they enroll in a post-secondary educational institution they have earned these credentials against great odds and represent the future leaders of Georgia. (<https://www.fanning.uga.edu/programs/embark/>).

*Fostering Success Michigan* “is a statewide initiative that aims to increase awareness, access and success in higher education and post-college careers for youth and alumni of foster care” (<http://fosteringsuccessmichigan.com/>).

*North Carolina REACH* “is a state-funded scholarship offered to qualified applicants for up to 4 years of undergraduate study at NC public colleges and universities. Available funding is awarded after other public funds and scholarships have been applied. NC Reach provides comprehensive student support, including mentors, care packages and internships.” (<https://www.fc2sprograms.org/nc-reach/>)

*Ohio REACH* “improves post-secondary outcomes for foster care youth and alumni through leadership, empowerment, advocacy, research and networking (L.E.A.R.N.). Establishing foster care friendly campuses within the state of Ohio creates awareness and reduces barriers for former foster youth in post-secondary education”  
(<http://fosteringsuccessmichigan.com/network/ohio-reach>).

*REACH for Texans* “seeks to eliminate barriers to success and build support programs for alumni of care attending public colleges and universities in the state of Texas. We are one

of a growing group of organizations across the nation seeking to improve the success of former foster youth in postsecondary education”  
(<http://www.educationreachfortexans.org/about.html>).

*Great Expectations of Virginia* “Every student deserves a bright future. In Virginia, thousands of students who have experienced foster care find success through a Great Expectations program at one of Virginia’s Community Colleges”  
(<http://greatexpectations.vccs.edu/>).

*Washington State’s Passport to College Promise Program* “is designed to strengthen the post-secondary pipeline for students who have experienced foster care”  
(<https://www.washingtonpassportnetwork.org/blog/event/2018-passport-to-college-state-conference/>).

*R is for Thursday Network of Oklahoma* is a “research-led initiative that equips individuals to support college-bound foster youth/alumni and foster alumni attending college. R is for Thursday currently defines an R is for Thursday (R4T) student as any person who spent time in an out-of-home placement in any state or country from ages 13-18 and who is currently enrolled in or has graduated from college, or is college-bound”  
(<https://education.okstate.edu/risforthursday/index.html>).

Although each of the higher education programs differ in terms of funding, support, and collaboration, the fourteen states share the common theme of offering specific support and resources to foster alumni on their campuses to assist them in persistence and completion of college. In efforts to maintain emphasis on foster care alumni in Oklahoma, it is important to delve deeper into the unique features of R is for Thursday.

R is for Thursday began as a research project by a faculty member at Oklahoma State University, a land grant institution, and evolved into a statewide network of service in response to the needs emerging from the data collected from Oklahoma foster care alumni. Ongoing research continues to lead the direction of R is for Thursday, and practice, in turn, informs the research; this makes the program a research-driven project that coincides with the “mantra of the young people who guide the work of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative (2013)—nothing about us without us...which must be a driving force in the design and implementation of review and oversight processes for young adults in foster care” (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2013, p.4).

R is for Thursday, to date, is solely a volunteer-driven collaboration of participating college and university campuses and their communities. In spring 2018, it became an officially recognized program of the Higher Education and Student Affairs program in OSU’s College of Education, Health and Aviation. While primarily focused on the retention of foster alumni on college campuses, the effort also recognizes the need to expand efforts to help with the recruitment and transition of foster alumni to college and to support the transition of graduating foster alumni into the workforce. In addition to ongoing research and service, the collaborative also serves as an information resource for state policy affecting foster alumni college students in Oklahoma.

Federal, state, and community efforts illustrate the layers of involvement and dynamics of both top-down and grassroots approaches to supporting foster alumni in



college.

### **Conclusion**

Historical accounts of how communities, states, and governments respond to the care of children in foster care reveals one common theme: there is always a need for improvement. Despite the less than desirable outcomes, services continue to evolve in response to the emerging needs of this population and changing societal demands and conditions. Given the shift in educational demands by the workforce and greater access to college, it is only logical to assume that a concern for better understanding and supporting foster alumni in college will continue to increase.

It is well established that there are many benefits associated with earning a college degree, both fiscally and socially. Many of the issues that tend to present chronic problems for alumni of the foster care system may be alleviated with completion of a college degree.

Evidence presented in the literature disputes the argument that former foster children simply cannot afford higher education or do not have ample opportunities. In actuality, former foster children do have the financial and educational support necessary to live independently while in pursuit of higher education. However, despite the monetary support provided by the federal and state governments, foster alumni continue to lag in pursuing and completing degrees in higher education. According to Walters (2005), the

financial support alone simply is not enough for former foster children to successfully navigate the uncharted territory of higher education.

Stone (2007) evaluated the impact of maltreatment and foster care and concludes “because educational attainment is such a pervasive protective factor for youth, a renewed and rigorous commitment to research sensitive to these issues cannot be overemphasized” (p.151). Of those who do attempt to complete higher education, only a small fraction will achieve this goal (Barth, 1990). While higher education plays a significant role in life success, the possibility of achieving a degree is minimal without the basic needs of support and nurture from a significant and caring support system. Empowering foster care alumni, implementing campus support programs, and targeting areas of vulnerability common among students are just a few ways in which higher education can respond to and promote positive outcomes for foster alumni students on their campuses.

While there is limited scholarly literature on foster alumni college students, as reviewed and discussed in this chapter, it pays little attention to the factors that lead to success among the small percent of foster alumni who complete college despite the odds against them. An understanding of the lived experiences of former foster youth who attain college degrees, from their insider perspectives, may create an understanding of how to maximize potential and best utilize existing resources for this population.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

Former foster youth have significantly lower college completion rates in comparison to their non-foster youth peers (Wolanin, 2005). In addition, findings from existing scholarship for former foster youth emphasize poor outcomes for this population as they transition into adulthood (Andom, 2007). Disparities in adulthood outcomes between foster care alumni and their non-foster peers are significant. The presence of positive educational outcomes and knowledge of the experiences of former foster youth from an inside perspective are lacking in existing scholarly literature. This study gives voice to this largely unnoticed population to better understand how to facilitate positive educational outcomes of former foster youth. This chapter provides an overview of the overall purpose of this study, philosophical worldview foundation, theoretical perspective, and framework. In addition, a description of the research design and sample of participants are presented as well as methods of data collection and analysis. Finally, trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and anticipated limitations of the study are discussed.

## **Problem Statement**

Despite implementation of programs and funding to support foster care alumni in pursuit of higher education, national statistics indicate foster care alumni continue to complete college at significantly lower rates than their non-foster peers. A study by Day et al. (2011) compared retention and persistence of foster care alumni at a four- year university to that of first generation non-foster alumni college students. Lack of academic preparation for postsecondary education, perceived lack of support from student personnel services, and a lack of ability to manage the demands of college life were found to be barriers to persistence in college for foster care alumni. The findings showed that students who were first generation low-income foster care alumni had dropout rates of 21% for the freshman year and 34% prior to degree completion in comparison to their non-foster, first generation, low-income counterparts with dropout rates of 13% for the freshman year and 18% upon degree completion.

The Casey Foundation (2010) estimates “about 2 percent obtain bachelor’s or advanced degrees, in contrast to 24 percent of adults in the general population” (para 2). In addition to the significant gap this suggests for outcomes between foster care alumni and their non-foster peers, it is imperative to note that whereas the non-foster completion rate is specific, the completion rate for foster care alumni with a bachelor’s degree is uncertain. For instance, Pecora et al. (2003) found that the higher number of this range (11%) seems to represent nontraditional, or older, foster alumni who have returned to

college; graduation rates for traditionally aged students are represented by the low end of the range (3-4%). This lack of a clear understanding about graduation rates for foster alumni represents a lack of attention to foster care alumni in the scholarly literature; what literature is available tends to highlight poor outcomes. Scholarly literature leaves unaddressed the ingredients for success among the small percent of foster alumni who complete college despite the odds. An understanding of the lived experiences of former foster youth who attain college degrees from their insider perspectives may create an understanding of how to maximize potential and best utilize existing resources for this population.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this qualitative, multi-case study (Stake, 2006) was to explore foster care alumni's perceptions of contributors to their ability to persist through college and obtain a bachelor's degree.

### **Research Questions**

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

## **Pilot Study**

Prior to the design of this study, pilot work was conducted to explore and refine “best” ways of approaching data elicitation with foster alumni. My pilot study explored experiences of foster care alumni college graduates utilizing an oral history methodology. The purpose of the pilot study was to gain insight into the participants’ experiences in foster care during college and beyond college to determine which factors significantly influenced their educational and professional success while also acknowledging the challenges they endured prior to entry into and during their time in the foster care system. This work influenced the design of the current study in helping me to understand the complex and intricate details associated with the journey from foster care to college; however, it appeared to be too broad in terms of understanding the specific contributors to persistence of foster care alumni success while in college. After completing this pilot work and revisiting the overall purpose of my research, to gain insight into the small percent of foster care alumni with a bachelor’s degree, I decided to modify my methodology to add depth and breadth.

## **Research Design Overview**

The following section discusses the research study design, including philosophical worldview, theoretical perspective, methodology and theoretical framework.

## **Philosophical Worldview**

This study was based upon a philosophical worldview of constructivism, with a focus on gaining understanding through multiple realities of participants. The underlying assumptions of creating knowledge through multiple meanings as it relates to the experiences of this population are characteristic of a constructivist worldview (Creswell, 2009). According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2008), qualitative research “is grounded in an essentially constructivist philosophical position, in the sense that it is concerned with how the complexities of the sociocultural world are experienced, interpreted, and understood in a particular context at a particular point in time” (p. 80). A qualitative approach provided a more in-depth account of experiences of this population to gain knowledge into meanings assigned to college experiences from an emic perspective (Patton, 2002). The unique life experiences coupled with the broad social issues of this population lend itself well to a constructivist lens.

## **Theoretical Perspective**

The theoretical perspective for research has a broad influence in terms of how a researcher understands the knowledge they seek. For the purposes of this research, I utilized the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism to understand how foster care alumni successfully navigated their way through college and explored the meaning

they assign to particular experiences or relationships considered to be significant proponents of their success in college. Gay et al. (2009) detail the connection between the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism and a constructivist philosophical worldview, stating that a common feature of symbolic interactionism is to inquire and understand how “people construct meanings and shared experiences by interacting with others” (p. 12). This approach to understanding is characteristic of the philosophical worldview foundation of constructivism; which is concerned with the co-creation of knowledge between the participant and researcher in assigning meanings to particular experiences (Creswell, 2009). More specific to this project, the foster care alumni served in the role as informants, and I identified emergent themes and patterns from the data to gain knowledge and insight into contributors to persistence, as well as efforts to seek support, during their college endeavors (Creswell, 2009).

## **Methodology**

This qualitative research study utilized a multiple case study methodology to gain insight, via individual interviews, participant timelines, and the use of artifacts (Creswell, 2009; Patton, 2002; Stake, 2006), into the lived experiences of former foster youth who have completed a bachelor’s degree. Stake (2006) lists several criteria for selecting cases for the multiple case study, such as ensuring the case is “relevant to the quintain; providing diversity across contexts; and providing good opportunities to learn about complexity and contexts” (p. 23). For this study, the quintain is alumni of the foster care



system as college students. In efforts to meet the criteria of diversity and to attain rich data, I relied on cases from multiple sites across the state of Oklahoma as well gender and ethnic diversity among cases. In terms of complexity, I utilized artifacts and participant timelines to supplement the data gathered from individual interviews and provide a more holistic perspective of college experiences for foster care alumni in college. According to Stake (2006), the multi-case study “may focus on the binding concept or idea that holds the cases together” (p.9). This research emphasized completion of a college degree, in the state of Oklahoma, within a ten-year span (2005-2015) for alumni of the foster care system as the deliberate boundaries for each case in this study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

As stated in Chapter 2, my original intent was to utilize Vincent Tinto’s interactionist theory as the framework for this study. I anticipated that Tinto’s (1975) foundational work on students’ decision to persist in or depart higher education institutions would be well aligned with understanding how social and academic support would be beneficial to foster care alumni in completion of their college degrees. As a result of the emergent themes from the data, I deemed the use of Ryan and Deci’s self-determination theory and Bowlby and Ainsworth’s attachment theory as a more appropriate fit for my data. For participants of my study, the consequences of departing college was influenced by a lack of familial support or “back up plan” and an inherent awareness of the poor outcomes they may face. This awareness influenced their

decisions to persist and although the institution had positive attributes, the participants emphasized the significance of motivation for improving their future and the opportunity to help others as critical in their college endeavors. For this reasoning, Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory was deemed a more appropriate fit to understand the participants' persistence in college. Another important aspect that emerged from my data was the significance of the participants' willingness to seek/accept support from others and the manner in which they approached support. The vulnerabilities and disruptions previously experienced during their formative years strengthened a sense of independence in adulthood. Although resiliency is a positive attribute, in times of need, it may work against achieving goals. The recognition of this barrier of absolute independence and the ability to develop trust and relationships with sources of support in college was significant. For this reasoning, Bowlby and Ainsworth's attachment theory seemed to be a natural lens to use for my data.

### **Participants**

This study included nine participants who were alumni of the foster care system and completed a college degree, in the state of Oklahoma, in the years 2005-2015. Criterion sampling was used to ensure participants met specific criteria (Creswell, 2009) and included the following:

- Placement in foster care between the ages of 13-18

- Completion of a bachelor's degree from a public institution in the state of Oklahoma within a designated 10 year period
- "Aged out" of foster care (specifically defined as turning 18 without achieving permanency in a family)

I made a conscious effort to include both male and female participants as well as participants from diverse ethnic backgrounds. The trend of disproportionality of minority children in the child welfare system has been well documented. In an article related solely to the topic of minority overrepresentation in child welfare systems, Cross (2008) states "children and youth of color continue to be removed from their families and communities at disproportionate rates and existing services ranging from child welfare and juvenile justice to mental health have not had positive outcomes" (p.14). According to foster care statistics (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017), the most recent (2003-2012) report on the racial composition of youth exiting foster care reveals a decrease in "the percentages of White children, Black children, and children of unknown or unable to be determined race ... while the percentage of Hispanic children and children of other races or multiracial children increased" (p. 11). The evidence related to race and foster care pointed out a strong need to seek out racial/ethnic diversity among participants when studying foster care-related issues.

## **Recruitment**

Participants were located and recruited through the Oklahoma R is for Thursday email database and announcements to the organization's social network sites (see Appendix A for email script and social network announcements).

### **Ethical Considerations**

In efforts to maintain confidentiality, I assigned pseudonyms, and no identifying information about participants was reported in the research or reports. Additionally, demographic and descriptive information about the participants is generic and de-identified. Participants were provided a copy of the consent form via email as well as in person for review prior to the in-person interview. The consent form explained that participation was voluntary and their information would be de-identified. All data was stored in a locked cabinet in a secure location. I obtained approval from the Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to conducting any research.

### **Methods**

I gathered "comprehensive, systematic and in-depth information about each case of interest" (Patton, 2002, p. 447) through the use of one-on-one semi-structured interviews, utilizing a timeline activity and an artifact to layer data and facilitate discussion.

### **Interviews**

Participants who met the study criteria participated in two semi-structured

individual interviews lasting approximately 45-60 minutes each to discuss what they perceived as contributors to their abilities to persist and complete a bachelor's degree. The option for a follow up interview lasting approximately 15 minutes was approved for the collection of additional data or clarification but no follow up interviews were needed. An interview guide is provided in Appendix D. Interviews were audio recorded via digital voice recorder, and I transcribed the data verbatim to an electronic data file. Upon completion of the transcription process, participants were sent electronic versions of their interviews and participate in a member check to ensure accuracy prior to representing the data in its final product (Gay et al., 2009).

### **Artifacts**

Participants were asked to bring an artifact to their second scheduled interview that represented their journey through college. Gay et al. (2009) define an artifact as a “written or visual source of data that contribute to our understanding” (p. 374). During the interview, the participants were asked to describe the artifact and assign meaning to how it contributed to their success in college. Artifacts were photographed and are included following each individual case study.

### **Timeline Exercise**

In addition to the artifact and individual interviews, participants were asked to illustrate a timeline of their college journey. A timeline is a visual illustration of significant events that occur over time. Sheridan, Chamberlain and Dupuis (2011),

elaborate on the usefulness of this activity, stating, “as for narrative, time is necessarily embedded in graphic elicitation processes of drawing and visually exploring life experience” (p.554).

This activity facilitated discussion related to what the participants perceived as contributors to their persistence during specific points of significance for them. For the timeline activity, the participants were given a timeline template provided in Appendix E and markers to illustrate significant life events during their journey through college. This timeline exercise, in addition to the discussion of their artifact, during the interview process provided direction for the interview while preserving the opportunity for participants to reflect and expand on their unique experiences.

### **Data Analysis**

In my analysis of the data, I used “questions that were generated during the conceptual and design phases of the study, prior to fieldwork, and the analytic insights and interpretations that emerged during data collection” (Patton, 2002, p. 437) to guide my analysis. In organizing data for analysis in this multi case study approach, the individual participants were the primary unit of analysis and the focal point of the study.

While data analysis began almost simultaneously with the start of data collection, the process of focused data analysis began upon completion of individual interviews, including the discussion of their artifacts and timeline activity. I used the resulting transcripts and field notes to conduct my analysis. The computer software program

MAXQDA was utilized for organizing the processes of both open and closed coding of the data.

For the purposes of this research, both inductive and deductive analysis was conducted. In order to expand on the data corpus, I incorporated analytic and reflective memos, which included “questions, musings, and speculations about the data and emerging theory” (Creswell, 2007, p. 290). Patton (2002) describes deductive analysis as using data in accordance with an existing theoretical framework. This section of the analysis relied on the theoretical framework of Ryan and Deci’s self-determination theory and John Bowlby’s attachment theory. In terms of closed coding, Creswell (2009) explains that “meaningful data chunks can be identified, retrieved, isolated, grouped, and regrouped for analysis” (p. 199). A second component of analysis consisted of “open coding” or inductive analysis. According to Patton (2002), “inductive analysis involves discovering patterns, themes, and categories” in the data, “through the analyst’s interaction with the data” (p.453) and without the framing of a specific theory.

The memos produced during data analysis as well as the results of two rounds of coding were used for “cross referencing codes and emerging categories” (Creswell 2007, p. 290). According to Patton (2002), “content analysis is used to refer to any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings” (p. 453). This layer of analysis

revealed patterns and themes across the data corpus to translate into my findings from this research study.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness for the study results were pursued through addressing issues of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper & Allen, 1993). The table below details the techniques, application, and criterion I used to achieve trustworthiness:

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

Table 2: Trustworthiness Table



I collected data and used thick, rich description from multiple sources (participants) to increase transferability (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008), established credibility through conducting member checks, and maintained a researcher log to ensure dependability. Member checks served to reduce researcher bias as well as self-reflection. According to Creswell (2007), reflexivity is awareness by the author of “biases, values and experiences they bring to a qualitative research study” (p. 243). Triangulated reflexive inquiry consists of self-reflexivity, reflexivity of those studied, and reflexivity about audience. This provided a framework for awareness as I engaged with the data to promote self-awareness of my influence on the interpretation and representation of data (Luttrell, 2010; Patton, 2002).

### **Limitations**

Limitations of this study included a strong reliance on semi-structured interviewing to gather data, sample size and generalizability, subjectivity, and potential bias regarding my personal and professional roles in working with foster youth (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Whereas a limitation to this study is the ability to generalize, the intention of this study to illustrate through in-depth study of specific foster alumni the resiliency of members of a marginalized group who are more often in the spotlight for the poor outcomes remained.

### **Summary**

The focus of this qualitative, multi-case study was to gain insight and illuminate what foster care alumni perceive as contributors to persistence in college. This chapter outlined the rationale for a constructivist philosophical worldview foundation of this study and explained the components of the research design. The sample participants, ethical considerations, collection and analysis of data, trustworthiness procedures, and anticipated limitations are also detailed.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS, PART 1: CASE-LEVEL ANALYSIS

The purpose of this multi-case study was to explore foster care alumni's perceptions of contributors to their ability to persist through college and obtain a bachelor's degree.

The central questions that guided this research study were the following:

- 1) What did foster care alumni with a bachelors' degree, completed from a public four-year college in the state of Oklahoma, perceive as contributors to their ability to persist and complete college?
- 2) How do foster care alumni seek and utilize formal and informal support while in college?

The multiple-case study methodology consists of individual and cross case analysis to reveal the uniqueness of the individual case and expose the quintain of the collective

cases (Stake, 2006). For this study, nine alumni of the foster care system, who had obtained a bachelor’s degree in the state of Oklahoma, participated in two individual interviews and shared their lived experiences of their journey through college. Each of the participant’s personal experiences navigating college is presented as individual cases for the first portion of this chapter along with the timeline activity used to facilitate discussion. In cases where the artifact provided by the participant might identify the person, edits were made by me (e.g. blurring a visible face).

The table below consists of the participants in the following section respectively. Demographic information (age, gender, and ethnicity) and college majors are included.

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Major/Degree</b>
Maria	39	F	Hispanic	Social Work
Faith	27	F	Caucasian	Accounting
Brittany	22	F	Caucasian	Animal Sciences
Brandon	23	M	Caucasian	Accounting
Anthony	24	M	Caucasian	Human Services
Malcolm	23	M	African American	Psychology & Sociology
Isabella	24	F	Hispanic	Criminology & Economics
Jennifer	25	F	Caucasian	Sociology & Human Services
Heather	24	F	Caucasian	Human Development &

				Family Sciences
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Table 3: Participant Demographics & Major

**Maria**

Maria was a 39-year-old mother, wife, step-grandmother, and social worker for the state Department of Human Services. She was assigned to the permanency unit. Maria was in the early stages of her career and spent her days pursuing permanent connections for children in foster care. Maria’s work was very personal and intentional. By the time Maria reached her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, she experienced a total of 15 placements in foster care, including an adoption that was later terminated due to abuse, shelters, and traditional foster homes. While Maria’s journey through foster care and “aging out” may not be an anomaly, her educational outcomes merited further investigation.

Maria arrived to our first of two interviews early on a Saturday morning in a long black maxi skirt, a white cotton shirt, a mid-sleeved cardigan and flats. She wrapped her knitted cardigan tightly around her as she took a seat across from me, an action she repeated throughout our time together, almost as if she was cocooning herself. It was her dazzling, warm smile and perfectly manicured fingernails that stood out as perhaps representing the self she wants to share with the world...keeping the rest of herself securely under her wrap. This was an erroneous assumption on my part, as her demeanor

proved contradictory to her candor as we delved into her past. The taupe walls, faux wood desk, office phone, and one desktop computer for use by adjunct faculty on a satellite college campus seemed too sterile and undeserving of the story that unfolded inside its walls.

For each participant in this study, a timeline exercise was utilized to illustrate significant events during their journey through college.

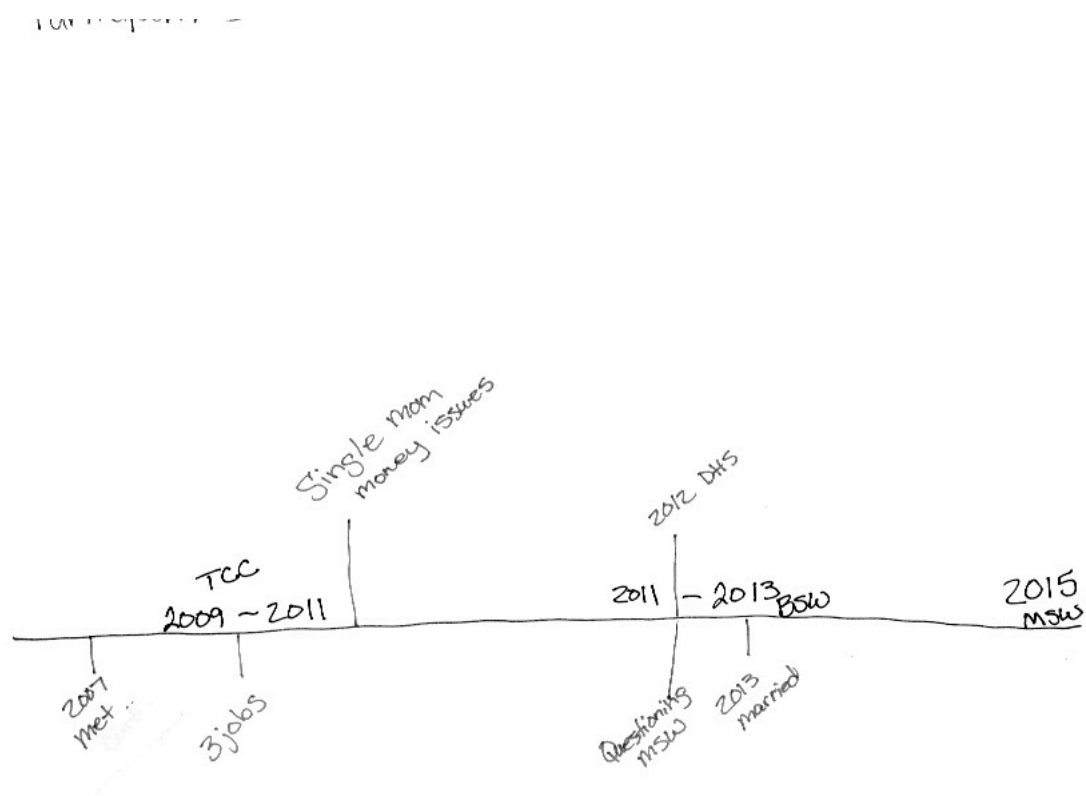


Figure 1: Maria's timeline

As illustrated above, Maria's timeline highlights the struggles of being a single mother, working multiple jobs, completing a practicum, then employment at a social services agency as well as the establishment of an early relationship that developed into a significant source of support for her.

**Finding 1: The significance of support.** The levels and types of support were critical to Maria's journey. The types of needed support she identified were both tangible (food, shelter, transportation, financial) and intangible (emotional, relational, supportive). Maria sought out and accepted support; however, this was incredibly difficult for her. Acknowledging the need for support was also perceived as a threat to her independence. Interestingly enough, giving support and helping others was a driving force in her pursuit of higher education and her choice of profession.

### *Lack of support*

Growing up in foster care, support was minimal according to Maria. She explained that her transition from foster care to adulthood left her with a harsh realization.... "I didn't have like a strong connection to really anybody, so I was just kind of out there." In addition to not having relational support during this critical phase, she also developed an awareness that tangible support for her basic needs was no longer provided for her. She recalled, "I was given a \$200 voucher to Wal-Mart and my case was closed and that was it, there was no follow up. [I was] just kind of handed a voucher and kind of given to the world." Maria explained that she "didn't even finish high

school” and “nobody really encouraged me to finish school or to get my GED so I just kind of floundered around” and gravitated toward someone to provide the support she desperately needed. Maria explains, “I met a man who promised to take care of me [providing emotional support and basic needs] and he ultimately left. I didn’t get any help. I had food stamps and that kind of stuff but that was it.” By the age of 21, Maria was divorced and a single mother living in public housing she described as the “worst public housing that’s out there.” True to the statistical forecast for someone on the “aging out of foster care” journey.... she had arrived.

### *Receiving Support*

Maria was struggling to meet basic needs for her and her son: “I spent a lot of those years being a single mom working three jobs if I had to” when she reconnected with someone she describes as:

a person in my life who, she was with me when I was in foster care, she was never my worker but she knew me, so she came back into my life and really pushed me to make some positive movements in my life and kind of explained that it didn’t always have to be so tough. It didn’t always have to be so hard. If I could just get my education then things could be a little easier.



Maria reflected on how this person, Deborah, has evolved into a “mother figure” for her, and her encouragement and support convinced Maria to enroll in junior college even though “it was really scary because I didn’t even finish high school.” In addition to providing a familial type relationship for Maria, Deborah also provided tangible incentives for her efforts. “The one I call mom now [Deborah] she gave me \$200 for graduation [from community college] and I literally was like...if I go on and get my bachelors’ degree, how much will I get?” The support and incentive she described was a strong motivator for her to take the next step and pursue a bachelors’ degree.

During Maria’s time working on her bachelors’ degree, she described still feeling “like I was just out in the world with nothing with nobody” until she met her future husband, John. Maria reported being in a healthy relationship, and receiving support from John “really stabilized” [her].... “I just stayed focused.” It was during this time that she was able to fully understand and embrace the notion that “things aren’t that hard, they don’t have to be that tough.” She “finally had a support and wasn’t doing everything on my own,” and as a result of her relationship with John, Maria was no longer the sole provider for her and her son. She told me that she was able to “not work for a portion of the time so I could just focus on studying,” which was a huge factor in her ability to complete a master’s degree. She acknowledged, “You can’t be alone the rest of your life and expect to [not have anyone helping you]; in reality, you need

people.” Although it went against what she believed about the world, accepting support and developing relationships were essential for her success in college.

### *Giving Support*

In addition to doing the best she always could for her son, Maria chose to pursue her education because “this was going to make me into the person I needed to be for somebody.” The end goal for Maria was to provide a better life for her family but also to give back to a system she was produced by. She stated that her “desire to make change in the system that is broken” was something that was a significant motivation for her to keep moving forward in college. Maria reflected momentarily and explained that it was not necessarily an interest, but an obligation stating, “It was important for me to work at DHS because I felt like I needed to basically.” In retrospect, she described her education as critical “so that I know what I am doing and I have something behind me that says I know what I am doing.” Maria said it is “the best feeling knowing that I helped rebuild at least one family.” Her educational endeavors and sacrifices are not necessarily for personal gain but rather her contribution to a collective effort for children in the foster care system.

**Finding 2: Something to prove.** The messages of what others expected for Maria were interpreted by her as...not much. She had already met the expectations of being dependent on public assistance, living in poverty, becoming a single parent and a high school dropout. Interestingly enough, it was sheer defiance of those expectations that

fueled Maria's drive to persist through college. Maria said she imagined telling everyone that did not take care of her [biological parents, caseworkers and foster parents] as a child:

I am going to show you that I can do it. It was all those people who did not take the time to fulfill their duties. I wanted to show every last one of them that you may have knocked me down but I got up and I may have struggled but I did it and in your face.

It was important to Maria that she proved that she could be successful not only to those who didn't expect her to do well in life but to also prove to others in similar situations that "this is doable." More importantly, she told me "I needed to prove to my own son that yes I had a really crappy life, but that doesn't define me as a person." Despite all the self-doubt and low expectations she felt others had of her, she said, "It was just knowing that I was going to get it done. It didn't matter how long it took."

Although Maria was adamant she would surpass the low expectations she felt others had of her, she struggled to meet the very high expectations she had for herself. The greatest challenge for her was being present for her son. Due to the demands of school and work, she told me she "wasn't at a lot of his sports and he was good. I was hearing from other people, 'Your son is doing so great' and you know all I could do was cheer him on and not see it and that was tough." She also described feeling guilty when her son was going through some "behavioral ups and downs" and feeling as if she

“wasn’t being the mom” she should be. Maria was working to provide a better life for her son and that came at a cost of feeling like she was not always there for her son. I asked her how she moved forward, managed the internal conflict and realities of choosing one thing over the other, ultimately deciding to stay the course with college. Maria replied “I just have to chalk it up to tenacity. I knew that, by god, I wasn’t given a proper, in my view, chance at life and my son was going to have something to be proud of and somebody to look up to.”

**Finding 3: Tension:** Maria discussed not feeling very well prepared for college when she started. However, she felt life was drowning her, and she was at a point where she felt her only option was to move forward. Her initial apprehension in terms of being prepared was just part of her struggle. She felt as if she had “just had somebody [from her childhood] invested enough to care about my future, that may have been enough” to instill confidence and develop skills needed for adulthood early on in her life. Despite her lack of preparation and guidance, Maria moved forward out of desperation but internally she struggled because she “just didn’t feel like I could do it.”

In addition to her lack of confidence, Maria said “I feel like I jumped into junior college because I had to but had I been just a little more prepared”.... a thought that lingers as she paused, seemingly imagining how different her life would be. Maria then recalled she was “very naïve in how to get that stuff taken care of” and “didn’t have good study skills,” and her roles of mother, student and employee were “just so hard to

balance.” She was moving forward but struggling to stay afloat when she accepted that she could not do this alone. Although she felt a great deal of tension when making the decision to pursue higher education, the tension she felt in having to accept help and need help and support from others was a little more of a challenge because it might call her abilities into question and uncover a weakness. Something she never wanted to be again was weak and vulnerable.

Accepting that she could not do everything on her own was tough for Maria. She recalled “putting yourself out there is the toughest part..... it’s just breaking down the pride, you know I really do need somebody and you’re not a bad person because you need somebody.” She reflected on the times when Deborah and John (her fiancé) reached out to her and stated she was “very resistant” and “wasted a lot of time just being ornery.” In retrospect, Maria said “Had I just been a little less nasty to her Deborah sometimes, I probably would’ve had a lot more support a whole lot earlier” and “I probably could have become degreed a lot sooner.....had I been just a little more open to somebody helping me.”

**Finding 4: A clean slate.** As part of our second interview, I asked Maria to bring something representative of her ability to persist and complete college. Maria shared a picture of herself as a young girl and tearfully described her artifact:

This is the only young picture I have of me. I don’t know, I was just so innocent here, you know? There had been some trauma but you can’t

really tell. I look at that and it's kind of...kind of a clean slate. Then so much happened after this picture that anybody could have given up and people would have been okay with it but I just always pushed myself to not be a victim. I see this and it's just a clean slate. I don't know how else to say it, but that's kind of...I don't know, like a new beginning for me.



Figure 2: Maria's artifact

### **Faith**

Faith was a 27 -year-old wife, mother to a newborn son, homeowner and a college

graduate with a bachelor's degree in accounting. Faith worked directly for and alongside the Department of Human Services (DHS) for almost 10 years. At the time of our first interview, her current position as an accountant with a state university was a continuation of her professional relationship with DHS. While Faith's position and degree were typically not associated with a helping profession, her work continued to focus on the population she was familiar with and passionate about helping: youth in foster care. Through a collaborative effort between the state university and the state DHS, she had an opportunity to use her accounting degree, which is not typically associated with a helping profession, while engaging in work that was meaningful to her. Faith entered the foster care system at the age of 12 and "aged out" of foster care at 18 years of age. She attended 21 different schools during her time in the K-12 system and was very well-versed on the challenges of completing college for youth aging out of foster care. As with all participants in this study, a timeline exercise was utilized to illustrate significant events during their journey through college, below is Faith's timeline.



Figure 3: Faith's timeline

Faith's timeline highlights several critical points in her journey through college. Failing coursework, moving out of foster care, eliminating negative relationships, changing her major, creating a life with a significant source of support for her and buying a home.

Faith arrived to our first meeting while in the second trimester of her pregnancy with her son. She wore a maternity dress that revealed a "baby bump" and had her medium length brown hair pulled away from her face. After we exchanged brief pleasantries and reviewed the consent form, Faith was ready to get started. Her serious, "get down to business" personality was thematic throughout our two interviews together, and it appeared to coincide with what I imagined accountant's value: efficiency, balance, and being factual. However, during our second interview, Faith seemed to let her guard



slightly down as we were in her home and she was holding her newborn son. Motherhood suited her and she seemed to adapt to her new role quite well. Motherhood seemed to bring out a different side of Faith.

**Finding 1: Resourceful.** Throughout our time together, it was apparent that Faith's ability to complete a bachelors' degree was a direct result of seizing opportunities that came her way. She stated, "I knew I wanted to better myself. I wanted to be better than what my mom was, you know, like how she took care of her kids." More specifically, Faith "wanted to be financially stable so that [she] didn't have to rely on the government and state assistance to help and [she] wanted to live in the good part of the neighborhood." She recognized early in high school that she was going to have to take the initiative in order to achieve her life goals, including completing college as a way to help her dreams come to fruition.

### *Breaking down pride*

One key requirement to having her needs met was for Faith to step outside of her comfort zone. She acknowledged it was challenging to accept help from others because she "didn't want to put anyone out, wanted to be on [her] own, like independent, very independent and didn't want to ask for help from anyone." She also reported she has been "very, very proactive in my education since high school" and attributed this to "putting pride out there and asking, when you need something it doesn't hurt to ask." Faith saw asking for help as a positive. You're doing something to better your life so why not ask

someone for help? Why not ask for assistance if it's going to help you in the long run?"

*Knowing how to create what she needed*

Although Faith knew the direction she wanted to go in life and that she must reach out to others to get there, she also knew that she had to be practical and intentional about the decisions she made. At the age of 16 when one of her placements were contemplating adopting her, she recounted:

I went to an IL [Independent Living] event and they told me if I wasn't in care [foster] care for 9 months after my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, I wouldn't qualify for tuition waiver. I wasn't familiar with what tuition waiver was but I was like, I don't want to lose that.

Faith did not want to compromise her opportunity to go to college even if it meant achieving permanency with an adoptive family. She attributed the Independent Living program as "what got me into college" and helping her realize that she would have access to resources that would enable her to complete college. Prior to this realization, Faith knew she wanted to further her education, but she did not have the support or resources. The knowledge about and access to Independent Living support opened a door to her new life and she stepped across the threshold without looking back.

During her time in college, Faith explained how she sought help when she needed guidance. She stated "I would go into the counselor whenever I needed to." She utilized

the resources available to her to make sure she stayed on track with her degree plan. She emphasized the importance of self-advocacy, stating:

Stay one step ahead of the game. Plan what you're going to do and no one's going to do it for you. You're going to have to do it on your own. When you start to see a decline in your grades, go and talk to a counselor. Go talk to the professor.

Faith described starting the college track as “intense.” She added, “You’re 18 and you’re aging out and you don’t know where you are going to stay because the people you are with are going to tell you to boot it.” Faith felt overwhelmed about aging out of foster care and was not confident that she could realistically afford to live on campus. She hoped her foster mother “wouldn’t just kick me out and make me go rent an apartment.....then you’re on your own. You have all the bills and all that responsibility.” Using her inherent accounting skills, Faith offered to pay her foster mother “\$300 to rent the room [she was already living in]. IL [Independent Living] funds helped pay for it. She [foster mother] was very low income so she needed extra income.” Her foster mother agreed and Faith stayed there until she found a house where she “also only paid only \$300 a month there but there was also bars on the window, I couldn’t leave anything out front. I was hardly ever there, I went there to sleep because I was working and all that.”

Another reality for Faith was the time frame she would be qualified to receive financial support for college. She shared her deep awareness about needing to complete

college by the age of 23 (since the time Faith was in college, the age has been extended to 26). This was challenging, but Faith shared her strategy of “working two part time jobs and [she] always made sure that [she] was at full time status [attending] summer school as well.”

*Knowing how to avoid what she didn't need*

For many young people, college is a time of socializing and independence. While Faith was already familiar with being independent, she had an awareness that she could not sacrifice her education by socializing. Faith reported, “I didn't do anything extra with school. I didn't volunteer. I didn't have time. I didn't hang out with friends. I went to school.” At this point in her life, Faith was purely focused on meeting her goal of completing courses by the age of 23 and keeping a roof over her head. In terms of socialization during the early college years, Faith stated, “I don't have friends, I don't have a social life, I don't do anything outside of work and school. It's homework, work and school.” She focused primarily on her faith and attributed her strength throughout college to her beliefs. Faith stated, “It [faith] helped me stay away from the drugs, the parties, the drinking, and the alcohol. All that stuff. Being distracted with all that could be another reason why [someone has] given up college.”

**Finding 2: Not giving up.** Faith shared her experience of managing to graduate from the same high school where she started as a freshman despite the fact that she was very mobile during those years. Faith disclosed a promise she made to herself: “I told myself I

wanted to graduate from the school I started in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, and I managed to do that even though I had like 6 different placements.” It was not an easy task. Faith reflected on an especially challenging time for her during one semester because she “was pulled into a group home and had to do the coursework from the group home. That kind of put me behind so when I went back to school and started regular classes, I had to do a lot of makeup work.” This setback could have potentially put her further behind or contemplating whether it was worth all she would have to do. Failure was not an option and Faith worked hard to complete the requirements to catch back up with her high school coursework.

Moving forward to college, Faith accessed resources, secured housing, and chose a career path in nursing. During this time, she encountered some barriers in terms of taking care of basic adult tasks. Faith shared those experiences, stating,

There were several times I missed an electric bill or something because I wasn't used to it, I never had the responsibility of having to do it or have someone show me how to do that. I wish someone would have shown me.

These hiccups along the way were not enough for her to throw in the towel and give up; however, a bad academic semester in college left Faith feeling like “quitting everything.” Faith failed half of her nursing classes in her first semester. Faith stated she was

Failing out of the nursing program. There was another program that was also associated with the actual nursing class. I passed both of those but I didn't pass the nursing class. The tests were really hard. I didn't really apply myself.

She was taken aback by these failures and began to think, "I had 12 hours, failed 6 hours and I had to repeat, and I thought that time, maybe school is not for me."

It was at this point that she sought guidance from her ETV (Educational Training Voucher) specialist who encouraged her to pursue a career path that she enjoyed, not one where she could make more money. Faith stated, the prospect of "deciding and changing majors" had her thinking about "giving up." However, this advice from her worker was received well by Faith because she trusted that her worker had her best interest at heart. Faith followed through and changed her major. She stated,

I went back and started fresh the next semester and got all A's or A's and B's. It's hard the first semester. It gets boring because you want to be out with your friends on the weekends and stuff instead of doing homework. I can see how it gets boring but you've got to sacrifice something.

Faith had several setbacks and thought about quitting, yet she chose to regroup and move forward.

**Finding 3: Connections.** Faith credited a great deal of her success to the connections (or disconnections) she made throughout her time in high school and in college. She

discussed how her connections to others have helped her and how she hopes to be the connection for someone in that situation [another foster alumni] to help them navigate issues as they arise. Her first disconnection in college was “a boyfriend that it was really a bad situation for me and so I broke it off with him [during] summer and that’s when I feel like I really started doing better.” While Faith did not engage in a lot of groups and was reluctant to spend too much time socializing, she reported,

I had my close friends. They knew I was taking a big exam or I had just turned in a paper or something or I was working on something and be like, now, let's go out and have lunch or something.

She endorsed this type of support, stating “I do encourage that. Let people know what you're doing. Don't just shut everyone out. Then, they can root for you, they'll encourage you.” In addition to the informal connections Faith made, one of the most significant connections she had was with her ETV specialist. Faith reported her “ETV specialist she was very encouraging,” and this was evidenced in her first semester of failing courses and struggling. She recalled her ETV specialist telling her “That’s understandable. You are coming out of high school, you are going into a school where you decide whether you are going to classes or not, and you decide whether you do the homework. You’re deciding all that.” Faith explained that during her first year she benefitted greatly from her connection to her ETV specialist and stated, “They aren’t there to do that but she helped counsel me I guess.” About her ETV specialist, Faith said,

We are still friends, we still communicate. I would call her up, I would go talk to her go see her, spend hours a couple of hours up there. She would just let me vent and she would give me advice.

The connection remains. For example, “She came to my wedding. I told her that we were expecting. She’s really excited. She is a good friend.”

In addition to Faith’s connections with her close friends and her ETV specialist, she also shared how her connection to one of her foster grandmothers has been extremely beneficial to her:

My grandma was also encouraging, like all the way through [college]. Well, okay, I call her my grandma but she is the lady I aged out with. She’s a foster grandma, I guess. She is the closest thing to like a family grandma that I have. She helped me, you know, like if my car died or something she would come pick me up and take me to school or take me to work. She encouraged me. She told me how good I was doing because that really is what it is, you know, that I passed all my classes with A’s. She praised me for it. That’s good, you know because you need some encouragement.

Faith highlighted the importance of having a safety net of connections to reach out to “when you need someone telling you that you’re doing a good job and to keep moving forward and to not give up when it gets all stressful.”



It was during her time in college that Faith established a lifetime connection with her husband. She reported that he was also in “the system” and was able to understand what that is like. At the time of our interview, they had been married for several years, purchased a home together and became the proud parents of a newborn son. She credited his support and encouragement for helping her to succeed and have a good life.

The last, and most profound connection Faith described was her relationship with God. Faith said she was drawn to God from the time she was a young girl. She described the connection as:

I've never known my dad so I've always looked to him [God] as my father and the Word of God, it says, ‘God is the father to the fatherless’ and I kind of looked at God as my dad. It also says, ‘He'll never leave you, nor forsake you’ no matter what you're going through and to set your expectations higher and He'll bless you exceedingly and above all of it. I just leaned on Him, mostly. All throughout foster care and all that, I continued to go to church and all that. Be very faithful with Him.

**Finding 4: Hope.** For our second interview, I requested that Faith share something that represented her ability to persist and complete college. In a very touching moment, as Faith is holding her newborn son as he quietly nursed, Faith brought out her Bible and opened it to the book of Ephesians, verse 4:19 (as she quoted in the previous paragraph), and shared how much God has changed her life and given her glimmers of hope in her

darkest times. She reported that as a young child, her mother did not attend church and even discouraged Faith from attending. Faith always found a way to attend, through the church bus or with friends or neighbors. She described her dedication as:

He's made a way through everything. Our marriage, making sure the bills are paid on time. Finding loopholes and stuff. I don't know ... All I can say is it's been God. When we moved from our rent house to here, we barely had any money you know and that's stressful. It is very stressful and if you're going to school and all that stress on top of that, you would just want to drop school and focus on your finances because you need to pay for your house or whatever so you would just go and get a full time job. I didn't have to. I still was able to do all of that. I still stand on the 'set your expectations higher and He'll bless you exceedingly and above all that you could ever think or imagine' as the whole.

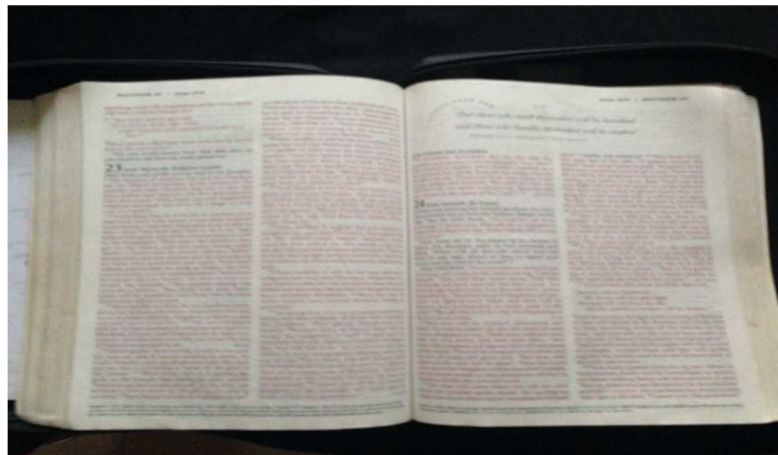


Figure 4: Faith's artifact

## **Brittany**

Brittany was 22 years old, engaged, and a college graduate. At the time of our first interview, Brittany had recently completed her bachelors' degree in animal science. She described her decision to major in animal science as a way to combine her love for animals and her passion for helping others. She saw her degree as the first step of many in being "able to actually begin" life. Brittany's tenure in the foster care system did not begin until she was 17 years old. While she was in placement for what might be considered a relatively short amount of time, she reported having to endure her abusive situation for 7 years before removal. Being placed in foster care was a turning point for Brittany as it ended years of abuse and shed light on a pathway to her future. By the time we met for our second interview, Brittany reported that she accepted a position with the state's Department of Human Services.

For each participant in this study, a timeline exercise was utilized to demonstrate significant events during their journey through college. Below is the illustration of Brittany's journey.

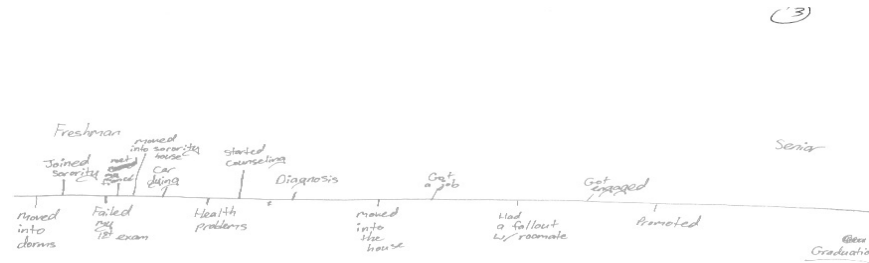


Figure 5: Brittany’s timeline

Brittany’s timeline highlighted moving into the dorms, joining a sorority, failing her first exam, encountering and dealing with health and transportation problems, conflicts in relationships as well as becoming engaged and promoted at her job prior to graduation.

Brittany arrived to our first interview in her work attire-- black pants and a royal blue polo shirt. She had just completed her workday and said she was worried she would be late for the interview. I reassured her that we had plenty of time as she settled into her chair. Our table was nestled in the corner of the mostly empty cafeteria on a satellite college campus. Once Brittany got situated, she decided to grab something to drink before we got started. A few moments later, she returned with her beverage in hand and appeared enthusiastic about sharing her story with me.

**Finding 1: A strategic approach to a new life.** For Brittany, being placed in foster care not only ended the years of abuse she endured; it also opened up new possibilities for her

life. Brittany reported she had not considered college and being placed in foster care “surprisingly pushed me towards wanting to go to college. Before all that happened, I actually didn’t even think about it.” She recounted having good grades despite the fact that she “hated” high school and she knew she did not “want to end up like my parents and wanted to have a good life. The only way to do that [was] to step up and go to college.” Brittany envisioned how different her life could be and decided to start a new life for herself. She finished high school and started her freshman year in college. She described her experience as:

a fresh start and going to college was like a new beginning for me. I moved really far away and I didn’t know hardly anybody in [town] and so it was a completely new start. It was just like me rewriting my story.

Brittany shared her strategic approach to starting this new life. She stated she had to be conscientious and “start setting my standards higher” and “make sure my priorities are in order.” She viewed college as a new opportunity for a fresh start in life. She stated she “knew graduating [college] would be the first, big step in doing that. I think just seeing the end was the whole motivation.” She envisioned the finish line and assumed that if she adhered to her strategy of discipline and prioritizing, she would achieve her educational goals.

**Finding 2: Roadblocks that challenged success and independence.** Even the best-laid plans are paved with obstacles along the way. Brittany’s plan for college was not an

exception. She shared how her first two years in college presented significant challenges. Academically speaking, Brittany stated she was very confident and entered her freshman year with the philosophy “I don’t have to study because I never had to in high school.” She “always had A’s and B’s and never even failed an exam.” In addition, she reported being ill-prepared for the basics of getting started at college. She had not anticipated going to college and was trying to figure it out as she went along.

They shoved us [incoming freshmen] all in a room and they had a handful of academic advisors just walking around. They weren’t helping you one-on-one. They were just like, “This is the way you do it.” I was like, “Okay, I’ll do this.” I just kept signing up [for courses] and then somebody walked by and they’re like, ‘you’re good, you’re done.’ They didn’t say ....you should probably get rid of some of those classes.”

It wasn’t until much later that Brittany realized attempting 17 hours her freshman year, not studying, and joining a sorority were not a sound approach. While she reported having positive experiences with joining a sorority, she acknowledged the toll it took on her coursework due to the additional combination of taking too many hours and inadequate study habits. She elaborated, “the work load is a lot different and they don’t baby you and so it was hard for me [to adjust],” resulting in her “grades slipping” and ultimately failing a final exam in one of her courses. Brittany also admitted that she was spending a great deal of time “having fun” and “was also on a freedom high, so I made

some pretty bad decisions.” She attributed failing a final exam her freshman year as her “wake up call” and vowed to work hard to bring her grades up and strike a balance between her social and academic life.

Brittany entered her sophomore year with new insight and modified strategies for being successful; however, she soon experienced significant health problems resulting in emergency room visits, pain medication, and ultimately surgery. Brittany expressed her frustration with not being able to obtain a diagnosis and proper treatment for several months. These experiences took a toll not only on her health but also her attendance and performance in her classes. Brittany described her sophomore year as “probably the hardest of all of them” and dealing with her health problems as “just bringing me down. I was just getting depressed and pissed off at the world.” In addition to the mental and physical strain, she reported having to deal with very basic day-to-day issues in the midst of all the chaos:

My car flooded and started having a lot of electrical problems and it just kept dying all the time. I had a class that was off-campus. I had to keep hitching rides and it was a hassle because I would try to find somebody that would be able to fit me in their schedule.

This experience was especially difficult for Brittany as she shared her disdain for asking others for help. Brittany stated:

I don't like asking for help because I don't want to be a burden [and] interrupt [them]. My schedule was always busy, so I'm assuming everybody else's is. I try not to interrupt people unless I really have to. I like to be really independent.

However, she was determined to stay the course and do what she had to do to achieve her goals.

**Finding 3: A good support system.** Brittany was very adamant that she was “independent” and “self-motivated,” yet she emphasized the role that her involvement with other people and groups had on her ability to move forward and be successful in college. She identified several factions as reliable sources of support for her. She recalled deciding to join a sorority and stated “I had a lot of support through my sorority sisters” and described her involvement in the sorority as:

a really good thing for me because I didn't know anybody when I joined. I got to meet a lot of people and it helped me socialize and it helped me feel comfortable with myself . . . . . because I'm really shy. [The sorority affects] social life which can be negative but they also show you how to act like an adult.

Brittany also relied on her foster mother and boyfriend (now fiancé) as a source of support through the rough times. She stated they “were the biggest support throughout everything.” She also credited her mental health counselor to being instrumental in guiding her through relationships and navigating her way through the very difficult times.



Her counselor helped her to work on “trust” issues and engage in a healthy relationship with her fiancé. Brittany reported being very “up front” and “open” about being an alumni of the foster care system despite perceived “judgment” from others about her past. She decided that she would shift her narrative from a source of “pity” and “stereotypes” to something to be “proud” of and open about. She appeared to be empowered by this shift.

**Finding 4: Getting through tough times.** Brittany was asked to bring an artifact to our second interview representative of her ability to persist and complete college. She stated she chose to bring a card she received from her younger brother when she came home from a week in a shelter after being removed from her home. She described her artifact as something that reminds her of a very dark time and a pivotal moment in her life.

Brittany shared that she always keeps it near and she:

Can always look at it. I always get butterflies in my heart. I always refer to it anytime I'm struggling and stuff like that. It just makes me really happy. I just look back at it and think of how difficult it was, and when I got this I was just so happy to see it.

She stated she was not even sure if her brother remembers giving it to her, but it is something that is reflective of her ability to survive difficult times and serves as a tangible reminder of “how tightly bonded we are, seeing that just makes me think how lucky I am to have them and just gives me motivation to keep trying.”



Figure 6: Brittany's artifact

## **Brandon**

Brandon was a 23-year-old young man with a master's degree in accounting. At the time of our first interview, he had recently begun his career as a tax accountant for a Fortune 500 company and reported his firm was recognized as one of the "top 10 best places to work." Brandon was in the midst of the "busy season" and working 60 hours a week.

Brandon reported that he was removed from his mother and father at the age of 13 during one of the many times their home was raided for drugs by law enforcement. He

stated that during the previous raids of his home, the officers would call his grandmother and she would pick up Brandon and his siblings and care for them until his parents were released from jail. This time was different. His grandmother arrived a few minutes late, resulting in Brandon being placed in the foster care system. He remained in foster care until he aged out at 18 years of age. During his time in the foster care system, Brandon experienced multiple placements but described feeling fortunate for kinship placements that kept him with various relatives as his caregivers. He credits his educational outcomes and decisions to the influences of not only those family members but also the exposure to educational opportunities available to children that age out of foster care to pursue a college degree. He summed up this fateful event as “five to ten minutes between me being in foster care and me not being in foster care.”

Brandon engaged in a timeline activity to signify events he felt were critical to his success in completing his college degree.

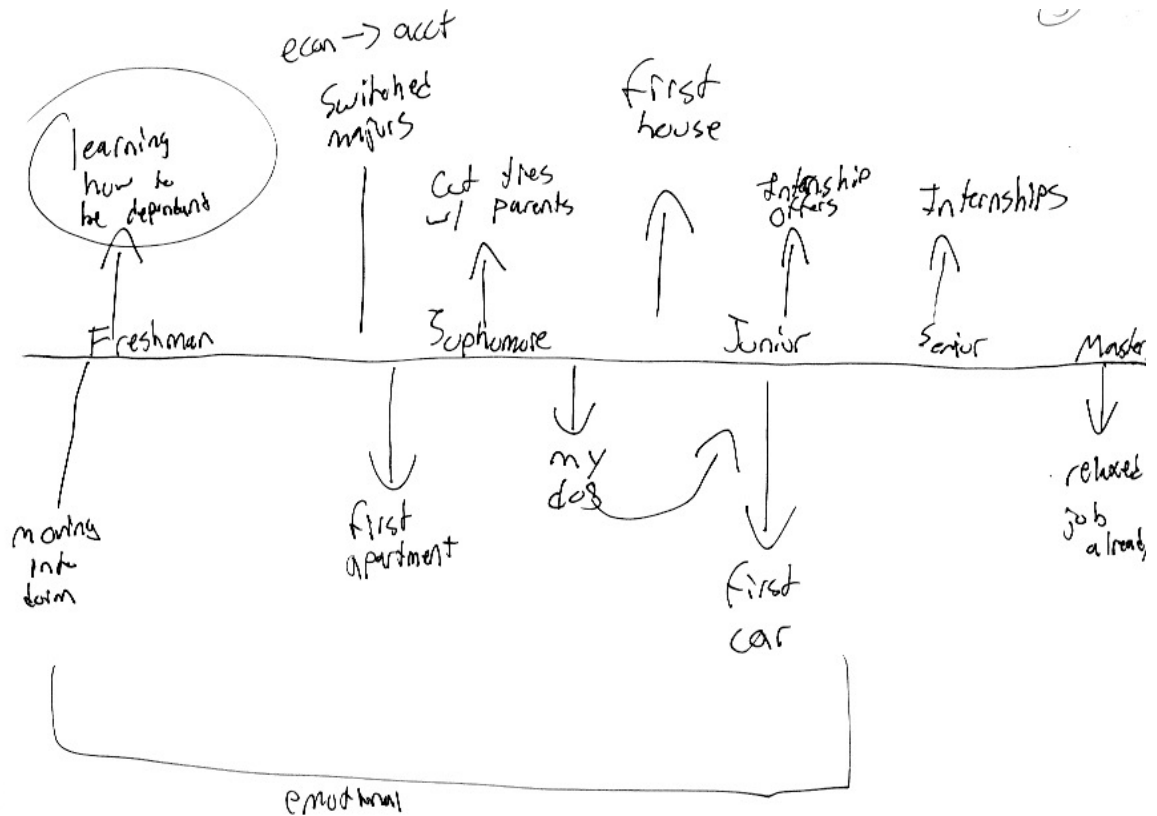


Figure 7: Brandon's timeline

Brandon's timeline highlights moving out of foster care into the dorms, then later an apartment with his friends, learning how to be dependent which he described as an emotional journey, changing his majors, disconnecting from his parents and the independence of getting a vehicle from an external stakeholder of the foster care community.

Brandon was a rather tall and husky young man with a seemingly serious demeanor. In scheduling our interview, I was slightly worried about the amount of information he would share based on the long hours he was working combined with the fact that it was later in the evening; however, we were able to have a lengthy and rich conversation about his journey through college.

**Finding 1: Embracing being dependent on others.** Brandon shared his experiences of being reliant on extended family members to care for him during the 5 years he was in foster care. He stated, “Even though I had trouble living with my aunt and uncle, I was able to depend on them for a lot.” Brandon reported also being able to depend on his cousin when he lived with her, so the idea of being dependent was not foreign to him when he went to college; however he felt it was more challenging for him to be dependent on someone who had no obligation to care for him. Brandon said:

I think it's harder to do with someone that isn't taking care of you, because my guardian, she's supposed to do that, but placing dependence on people that have no actual responsibility to help you was kind of difficult, and it's something that could very easily make you feel sorry for yourself.

Brandon explained that when he went to college he had to “learn how to live off of my friends” who were “not necessarily responsible” for him. He stated his roommates in college came from “more established families” and, therefore, were better equipped for college than he was. While he was largely dependent on his friends for transportation,

basic household items to furnish their living quarters, and contingency funds in emergency situations during the first couple of years of college, he utilized other resources whenever possible. He gave an example, stating, "I did depend on them taking me to the grocery store, but I took the bus to school." He also recalled a time when his financial aid was not disbursed as anticipated, leaving him without money to cover his portion of the rent. His roommate loaned him the money until he received his financial aid.

In addition to his roommates, Brandon depended on Independent Living (IL) workers. Brandon stated, "I relied on independent living a ton when I came out of foster care. I got really close with Independent Living." In addition to the financial support he received from IL, he also recalled reaching out to his IL worker and the IL director when he needed advice or guidance before making decisions. He shared his experience of receiving a phone call from the IL director informing him that someone wanted to donate a car to him. He credited the donation of the car and the relationship with the IL team as instrumental to his ability to gain more independence in college.

Brandon described how being dependent on others who were not obligated to help him was an emotional journey. He reported strong feelings that he might be "annoying [to others]" and experiencing "fits of depression" when he felt as if others were helping him out of "pity" during the early times in college. He concluded that he needed to be able to rely on others without "feeling sorry" for himself and to be mindful that "these

people want to help, because they love me and care about me.” Brandon credited learning to embrace dependence as foundational for his ability to “learn how to be independent.” He stated, “My favorite thing of learning how to be dependent is finding the value that people see in me, but that was not ... That was a learning process.”

**Finding 2: Focusing on things of value.** Throughout our time together, Brandon emphasized the importance of focusing on things he found valuable and beneficial to his educational goals. Brandon disclosed his perspective on the value of relationships in his life:

I don't put value on family. I put value on relationships. I don't think blood creates relationships. I think you create relationships. I don't believe in forced relationships. There's members of my family where I don't have a relationship with them, and I don't strive to do that, because I can see it being harmful or I don't see the value in it. I create relationships where I see value, and I don't necessarily see blood ties as value.

He reported that he has a strong connection with his friends and is able to see the value in those relationships as evidenced by not only the support they provided to him but also the positive influence they had on his education. He stated, “I was always around different individuals that had aspirations, so I developed the same aspirations, just by nature of proximity.”

Brandon described how his involvement with the Independent Living (IL) program was of great value to him. “I wanted to do something for myself. I wanted to make something of myself, which was unheard of for people in my family, so if these people, entrusting in them is going to help me accomplish that, that is important.” He stated his IL worker and IL director were not “in this field because it pays well, it's not lucrative, they do it because they want to see people succeed that are in the program.” He assigned a great deal of value to not only the tangible support he received but also to the potential they saw in him and how that instilled more confidence in his ability to do well in college.

In addition to the peer relationships and formal relationships with IL, Brandon also found a great deal of value in networking and developing relationships with his professors. He stated:

I was super close to a lot of my professors. I actually had one professor that I would go in and rant about stuff to. That's incredibly important. Especially when you get into kind of your major, not only are these people teaching you and they're going to be your source of knowledge, but they also know how to push you forward.

Brandon utilized the approach of focusing on things of value as a way to serve as a reminder that his peers, IL workers, and professors genuinely wanted to help him be successful in college. He reported having to remind himself because, if not, he would be



prone to pitying himself for being so reliant on others and he realized “there's no value in that. No positive consequences from that [self-pity].”

**Finding 3: Playing it safe.** Brandon described himself as “a safe thinker” and “very risk-averse.” He chose to bring his professional business card as the artifact that represented his ability to persist and complete college. He described his artifact:

My main motivation was for me to be successful, and to be able to be self-sustaining, I had a lot of help through college, I didn't want that to be wasted, people saw potential in me to give me things, and I don't want to waste that, so what drove me through college was knowing that I could be better off [in life].

He explored how this mentality was evident early on and guided him in deciding which college degree to pursue. He investigated the long-term stability of various degrees and chose to pursue accounting because the program [at his college] had a “95% job placement rate upon graduation” and “everyone needs accounting.” He stated “I do things that I know I can do, and then I do things that I know will work, and will be self-sufficient for a long time, and it's very safe.” Brandon began his educational journey with the idea that he would major in economics; however, he reported feeling uncertain about career stability so he changed his major to accounting because “there's a large variety, it's safe, I like it, and I think that was very significant for me, because I was so set on economics, but I was scared about what I was going to do with it. Switching [majors] was humongous for me.”

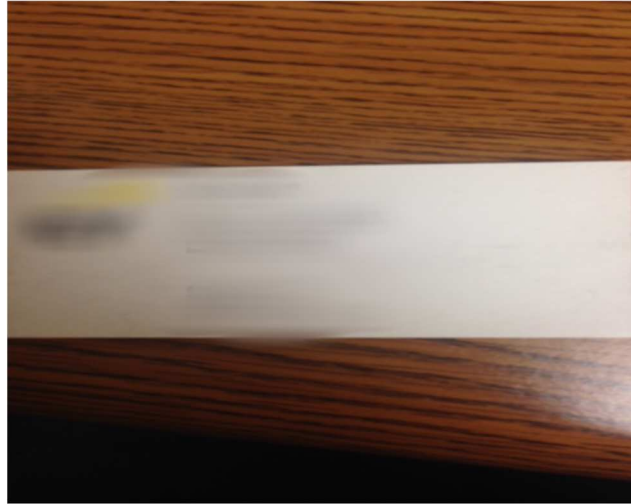


Figure 8: Brandon's artifact

### **Anthony**

Anthony was a 24-year-old young man who completed his bachelors' degree in human services counseling and is currently pursuing his master's degree in counseling. Upon completion of his graduate studies, he reported that he planned to begin working toward the requirements to become a Licensed Professional Counselor. At the time of our first interview, Anthony informed me that he was employed with the state Department of Human Services as a Child Welfare Specialist. By the time we met for our second interview, he reported that he recently accepted a new position that provided him an opportunity to work solely with youth in foster care. According to Anthony, he was intending to spend his career working to help alumni of the foster care system become successful and independent as they transition to adulthood. His career goals were

a way for him to integrate his passion for helping others and his personal expertise of the foster care system. Anthony reported his “foster career” began when he entered into the foster care system at 11 years old. He remained in care until he aged out at 18 years of age. He stated that he had one “full blood” brother, who was placed in foster care at the same time, yet they only lived together for 5 months during his tenure in the foster care system.

As with other participants in this study, Anthony completed a timeline of significant events that contributed to his ability to complete his college degree.

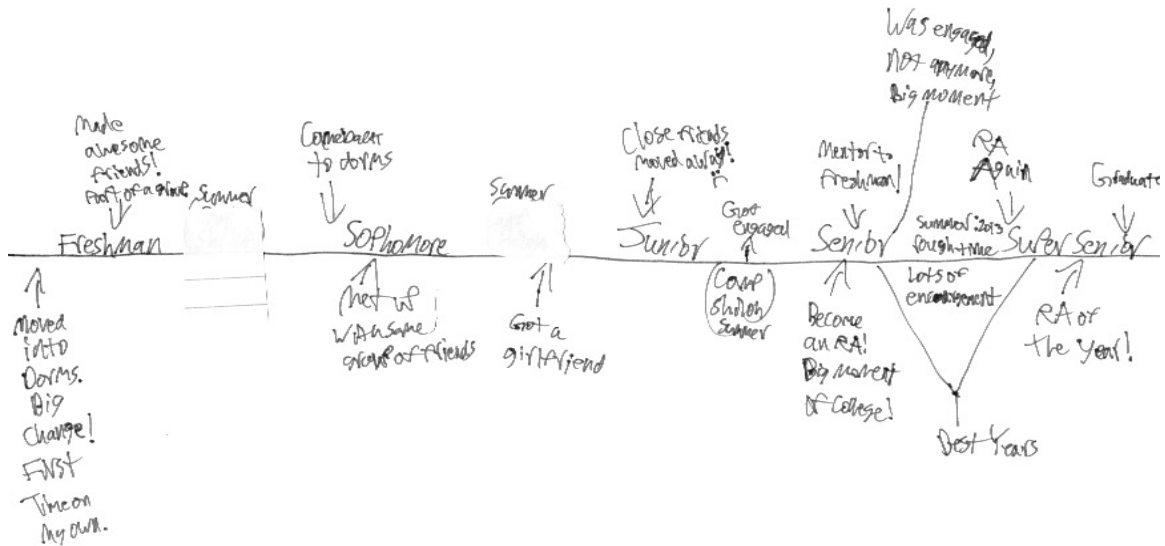


Figure 9: Anthony’s timeline

Anthony's illustration highlights being on his own for the first time in his life, making friends and being a part of a group, being involved in summer camps, developing and ending romantic relationships, becoming a resident advisor and being named resident advisor of the year during his super senior year in college.

Anthony and I met on a college campus for both of our interviews. On both occasions, we met during the weekend, and there was plenty of quiet space to sit outside and engage in our conversations. Anthony was approximately 5'7"-5'9" tall and had a slender build. He had dark curly hair, brown eyes, and a very warm smile. When I asked him to tell me about himself, he confirmed my suspicion that he was of Italian descent and added that he was working on a personal project to watch 52 movies in one year. He had a girlfriend, and a cat, and loved music, movies, and being outdoors.

**Finding 1: Adapting to change.** Anthony shared how he experienced his first day at college. He recalled his foster parents helping him get moved in and then leaving him in his dorm. He stated, "I just cried and hugged them" before they left. "I just felt alone. I knew no one. I was starting over. It was scary but it was adventurous, I liked it, it was just I had to get that [crying] out of my system." He credited his frequent moves as a foster child as a contributor to his ability to cope with fear and uncertainty. He further stated, "I always adjust quickly. I've learned to adapt well and adjust quickly from moving to places in foster care." He identified managing his internal dialogue as critical to adapting to change and stated "that is usually how I cope. That's kind of always how

I've done things --- internal [dialogue] when I had a big change.” In addition to adjusting to a new place to live, he also had to prepare himself to meet new people. He recalled thinking:

It's going to a new place to where you know nobody and you are like.... my life is different than theirs. They are probably not a foster child. They didn't live how I lived. I don't know exactly how I'm going to relate to other people.

Anthony did not allow doubt to linger for very long. He recalled reminding himself that he was “an open-minded person and open to change if it's going to benefit me” and “they [students in the dorms] are freshmen too so they're probably going through the same thing I am.” Anthony reiterated how he has learned to redirect the way he views a circumstance or a situation, and he feels as if everything he has learned in his life up until this point has provided a strong foundation for him to become independent. He said he has learned to approach unfamiliar situations by being positive and telling himself, “Everything's going to be just fine. I made it through all this stuff in my life. Why can't I do this one? This one's not any different, it's just a different situation is all.”

**Finding 2: Establishing a campus support network.** Anthony, a self-proclaimed “outgoing and positive” person, realized he would need to connect with others and work to integrate himself into college life; however, this would require “self-motivation” and being intentional in his interactions. He reported that as a result of his efforts, he “made a lot of friends and I just felt welcome. I felt like I was actually a part of something.”

While some of his friendships and relationships on campus were organic, Anthony acknowledged he had to deliberately seek out some of his support networks. He offered an example describing how he reached out to a friend from his hometown that knew someone at one of the churches near campus and “got plugged in right away to that church.” Anthony admitted being extremely proactive in finding ways to meet his social and spiritual support needs. He described the payoff from his efforts as:

You just experience so much, all these events, sports events, all these other activities that go along, you're just a part of it. It's just a different culture. It just really made it worthwhile, the whole experience. I love college. I miss it.

Anthony continued to develop his campus network to meet his educational needs as well. He recalled wanting to change his major from business but he was unable to decide on another major and needed additional guidance. Anthony stated, “I just went to look at all the different majors they offer and then I would go and talk to a certain professors of those majors and talk with them to see what they are about, what job you can get, see what fits.” This helped him to decide on his major and realize how he could incorporate his desire to work with foster youth with a counseling degree.

Anthony credited his involvement as a Resident Advisor (RA) as a significant network for him. Anthony spent his last 2 years in the dorms as an RA (Resident Advisor) and stated it was the “best time of my life” being in that role. In his last year, he was recognized as the Resident Advisor of the year award out of 45 candidates. He

acknowledged that without intentionally seeking a support network it would have been very difficult to have integrated into campus culture and develop those critical connections. Anthony credited seeking out and developing a support system as empowering. He stated, “there is nothing stopping you but you at this point. Maybe you never felt empowered but you can actually be empowered this time.” He shared that he extended his time at college and stayed for a fifth year, which he referred to as his “super senior” year. He reported that he was “uncertain” about where he would go or what he would do after he graduated. He decided to stay an additional year instead of “rushing to graduate” to allow himself time to figure out the direction he wanted to go after college.

Lastly, Anthony described how his Education Training Voucher (ETV) specialist was a source of support for him in terms of helping with the financial aspects. He stated his worker helped him with:

Certain things like my car broke down and she was able to help me get money for that, my contacts, just stuff to help. When I lived in this apartment for the summer she helped me with the first month's rent, and the funding she helped me get. She was a resource. She also provided knowledge about available resources in community to access for future reference.

**Finding 3: We need support. Not a crutch.** For our second interview, I requested that Anthony bring an artifact representative of his ability to persist and complete a Bachelors’ degree. As we were nearing the end of the interview, we were situated on an

outside bench and I asked him to produce the artifact so we could discuss it. Anthony looked toward the parking lot and responded “it’s that car right there.” He stated he had sold the car several months earlier so he “had to borrow it back for this.” I then asked him to describe how this car was representative of persisting through college. Anthony reported that in his last foster home before college, he was given the opportunity to save half of the money for a car and the house parents would pay for the other half. He stated:

I bought the vehicle and it felt like just mine and I kept it all through college. It is something that’s one the proudest things I had. Because I earned that money, I earned it. I felt good.

He described the support and saving money to purchase a car as a wonderful lesson in working for something that is important and will have a lasting impact on his life.

Anthony elaborated, “Yeah, we are foster kids. Yes we do need some support in a lot of areas but we don't need handouts. We can be fine in how we are just teach us how to earn stuff.” He recalled many times in foster care in which folks with seemingly good intentions would want to help them. He described the mentality of those wanting to help as seeming like “since you are a foster child it means that everything is taken away from you so let me give you all the stuff you don't have it.” He highlighted the importance of understanding how teaching and supporting foster alumni should be geared toward upward mobility and to promote independence and not simply offering a “crutch” for foster alumni to lean on.





Figure 10: Anthony's artifact

### **Malcolm**

Malcolm was a 23-year-old African American male who recently completed two bachelors' degrees, one in psychology and a second in sociology. He reported that he graduated with honors. At the time of our interview, he was seeking employment with the Department of Human Services in hopes of working with children in the foster care system. Malcolm was also in the process of applying to graduate school in hopes of completing his master's degree in social work.

Malcolm reported being in foster care "on and off for about basically my whole entire childhood life." He stated he was the fourth of seven siblings, all brothers. He

opted to sign himself back into foster care when he turned 18 years old so that he could utilize available funding for college. He credited early influences from his biological father and his desire to work in a field where he can help others as instrumental in his quest for a college degree. While he acknowledged the support from the state was a strong motivation for him to remain in foster care beyond his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, he stated that he would have attended college regardless of the available funding his tenure in foster care provided him.

Of all participants, Malcolm was the only one to run out of space and start a new line on the bottom to illustrate the events he felt were significant to him in college.

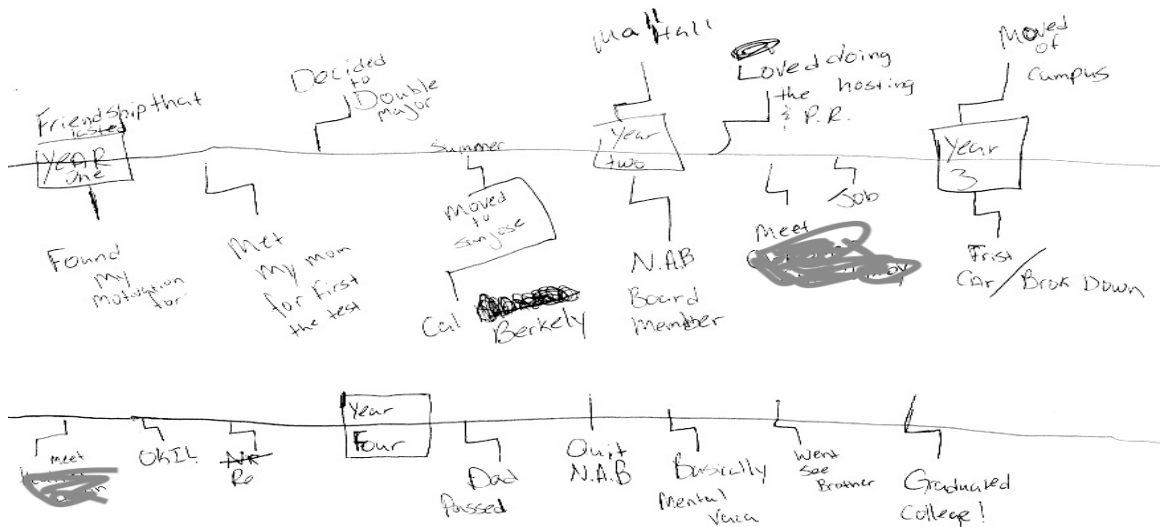


Figure 11: Malcolm's timeline

Malcolm's timeline highlighted meeting significant, lasting relationships with foster care alumni, stakeholders of the foster care community, becoming involved in foster alumni networks as well as becoming involved in many campus activities. He also cited forming relationships with his biological family and losing his biological family as significant events.

Malcolm was a self-proclaimed "hipster" and described himself as a "charismatic" individual. He was rather tall and slender young man with dark brown eyes shaped by his black-framed glasses. His clothing verified his claims that he was a "hipster." Each interview he was dressed in a vintage style shirt and skinny jeans. His hair color was different for each of our interviews, once bright red and the second time electric blue, so I would describe Malcolm as an eccentric hipster. Malcolm is not quiet, but he is certainly not loud. He appeared very comfortable during both of our interviews together and seemed eager to share his story with me.

**Finding 1: Healthy connections.** Malcolm reported that he had never lived with his biological mother, and his involvement with his biological father was never consistent during his time in foster care. Malcolm disclosed he felt a need to reconnect with his biological family when he turned 18 years old. This reunion just happened to coincide with the time frame in which he began planning to attend college. Malcolm described his concerns in reunifying:

There are a lot of foster kids who actually do this. They meet their biological family or go back to their biological family and do nothing with themselves. That was never an idea in my head at all. I imagined it, but I quickly un-imagined it within the same thought process.

He stated that during his brief reconnection with his biological family, he witnessed firsthand “how unhealthy my brothers are. Sometimes you have to see it to believe it yourself.” The need to reconnect with his original source of support in life was met with the harsh reality that his relationships with them might not be beneficial to his educational endeavors. Malcolm recalled, “Coming into college, I didn't really have a strategy. I just knew that I just wanted to graduate.” While his initial focus was on completing and graduating, he reported finding his “motivation” early on. He attributed his desire to become a helping professional as a motivator but also reported he made strong personal connections with peers on campus. Malcolm elaborated on the significance of those relationships, stating, “I never had like a family dynamic in a sense, but I started making friends that became my family. Our bonds got really closer.” He credited the friends he made at college as instrumental in his ability to successfully complete college. Malcolm stated:

They really do help you stay on track if you have the good ones. In college, you can run into all sorts of different characters who can be beneficial or completely irritating and I ran into a lot of beneficial people.

Malcolm recalled meeting one friend in particular to whom he instantly felt connected. Months later, he learned that she was also an alumnus of the foster care system. He described the need for a support system for foster alumni in college students as critical. He stated:

As foster alumni, we're not as prone to structure as somebody who grew up in a normal family would be. We always had more freedoms and pushbacks than other children would have growing up, so coming to college is an adjustment. It's really easy to fall off track.

Malcolm reported seeking out peers who were “interested in the same things” so he could “at least have friends and some stability as well.” He attributed the friendships as beneficial to him not only on a social level but also to help him push to maintain the academic rigor needed to complete college. In his intentional and deliberate approach, Malcolm was able to construct a support system to collaborate with his internal drive to graduate from college.

**Finding 2: You can sleep when you're dead.** In addition to Malcolm's need for healthy relationships in college, he decided to incorporate and emphasize some of his core strategies from high school to his college career. According to him, this meant that he needed to “study, make friends, and communicate with teachers” in order to be successful. Malcolm added that he was given early advice in college that resonated with him. He stated: “someone told me in college you get to choose two out of three things:

sleep, personal life, and grades. I chose grades and personal life because sleep, you can sleep when you're dead.” Malcolm was immersed in various groups and activities during his time in college that gave him an opportunity to recognize and highlight his leadership skills but also allowed him to work toward things he was passionate about.

During his first year in college, Malcolm was recruited very last minute to fill in for an event as an emcee for the university activities board. After the event, he was approached by a board member who stated: “Would you want to be on the board? I feel like you have great ideas.” He agreed and served on the board for the next three years and, according to Malcolm, that is when life “got really busy” in college; he said his involvement “ignited my fire.” His work involved public relations and entertainment coordination. He credited his success to his ability to make “really good friends and professional contacts. I still to this day have this old little black book of managers for musician's names that probably don't even remember who I am.” He detailed his experiences as getting to:

Set up and do my own show. It wasn't anything big, but I had got to manage it, find the location on campus that we're going to do, get volunteers, get the lights set up, everything. And that was really fun, and I thought ‘One day I'm going to figure out a way to mix my passion to help people and my love of entertainment together, but directed towards the foster youth.

It was not long afterward; Malcolm began networking with other foster care alumni on his campus and became involved in engagement, recruitment, promotion and facilitation of several events across the state targeting youth in foster care. He stated, “we [he and another foster alumni] started doing stuff with them [teen conference] and we basically met a lot of good contacts and a lot of former alumni who have this crazy yearning to help people and do things.” These experiences expanded on his foundational experience as an activities board member, alumni of the foster care system, and his innate desire to help others during his college years. His sense of obligation, connection to others, and personal drive were significant contributors to his success in and outside of the classroom.

**Finding 3: Inspiration to help others.** For the last part of our second interview, I asked Malcolm to bring an artifact that represented his ability to persist and complete college. He produced a photograph of himself along with his biological father and three of his siblings. Malcolm reported that his father passed away at the beginning of his senior year in college. He hesitated momentarily and informed me that this picture was the only photograph he has of him and his father. He cited the picture as “the main reason why I went to college. Even if I don't have children, I know that I can at least afford to pay for my brothers to have pictures if they wanted it, if they asked. To have them have family pictures and have someone keep them.” The second way the artifact was representative

of his persistence was in the way his father lived his life prior to Malcolm being removed from his custody. Malcolm stated:

It showed me that my dad actually did something with himself. I mean, a lot of people in America, in Oklahoma anyway, who know my dad only think of my dad as this guy with four kids who couldn't take care of them, who had a drug problem, who was an alcoholic.

Malcolm disclosed that prior to his father having “problems,” he was a generous and giving person who wanted to help others. He recollected:

My father would do stuff for charity and stuff. I'm a mixture between my parents. My mom is very harsh and my dad was always like really nice to people. I'd rather be ... I can be like my mom a lot and sometimes people forget because I feel like I'm a nice person underneath it all, but I want to be remembered like that.





Figure 12: Malcolm's artifact

## Isabella

Isabella is a 24-year-old Hispanic young woman who was raised on the West coast. She aged out of foster care at 18 years of age and decided to pursue a college degree during her senior year in high school. At the time of our first interview, she had recently completed two degrees, a Bachelor of Arts in Criminology and a Bachelor of Business Administration in Economics from a private college in Oklahoma. She reported that she was working at a restaurant and in the process of preparing to apply to law school.

Isabella illustrated important events she encountered during her college endeavors in the timeline activity.

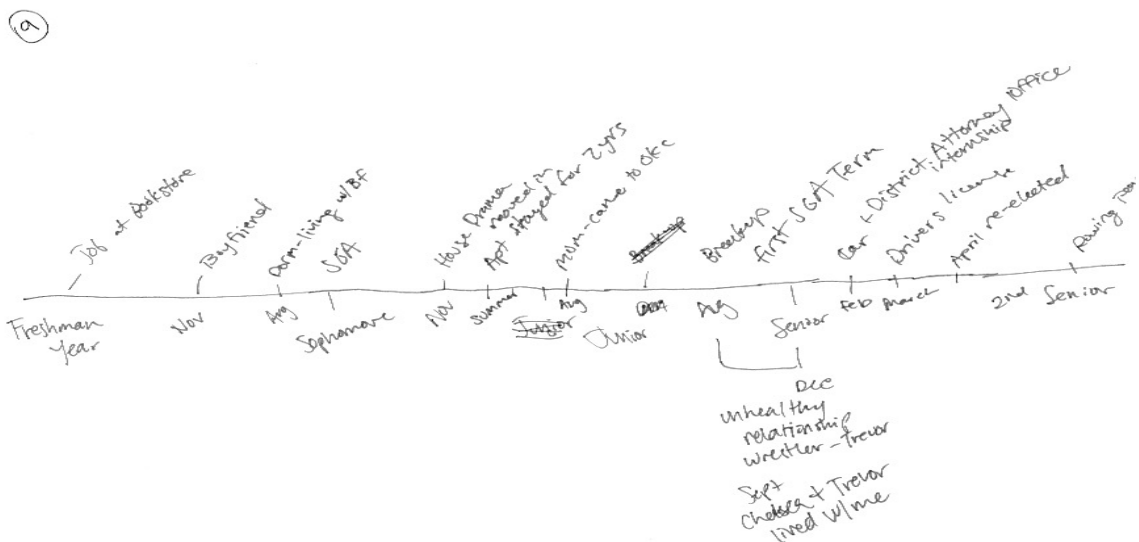


Figure 13: Isabella's timeline

During her time in college, Isabella identified employment, athletics, forming healthy and eliminating unhealthy relationships, including a brief time her mother moved to Oklahoma, being involved in Student Government Association and gaining a higher level of independence by learning to drive and obtaining her driver's license as critical in her journey.

As a high school athlete, Isabella sought out various colleges offering athletic scholarships. She credited a job she had during her senior year in high school as instrumental in her decision to pursue a smaller school because she “liked the family environment it created. Everyone knew each other. We all kind of worked together, we were a team,” and she wanted to find an institution that would offer a close-knit setting in the classroom. Isabella reported that she was not an “elite” athlete, but she wanted to pursue college athletics to provide an extra layer of insurance that she could be successful in college. She stated:

I knew if I did [athletics], I would automatically have people that I would know and kind of have a network, and I loved it so much in high school I was like...people who love [the sport] are normally cool people.

We met for both of our interviews in a small office on a college campus near her job. Isabella had her long, dark hair pulled to the top of her head. Her stature is small and she had an athletic build. She was the type of person that, at a glance, looks like a 24-year-old college athlete but her eyes seemingly reveal something older and wiser about her.

**Finding 1: Getting involved on campus.** Isabella reported that she intentionally immersed herself in campus life as a way to generate support systems and increase accountability for herself. As a student athlete, Isabella had built-in and immediate involvement on campus. Her participation in college athletics required her to attend practices and competitions. She had to become a part of a team. She stated it was important to be “involved in something that's not academic so you can have an extracurricular that you make friends and form a family and they basically will be your support group.” Isabella also sought involvement opportunities outside of athletics and decided to run for a position in the student government organization. She recalled being elected and stated that she placed a lot of emphasis on how others might perceive her. She stated, “I started gaining a level of respect not only from my teammates and people I'd worked with through NSGA and I started establishing myself.” In establishing herself, Isabella was seemingly re-creating herself as she wanted the world to see her: strong, hardworking, independent and intelligent.

Isabella was intentional in her efforts. She reported self-awareness about how a bad reputation might interfere with her ability to complete college. She stated, “I can find myself getting into trouble just by hanging out with people. If you do stuff on campus it's less likely that it will happen.” In addition to her athletics obligations, her involvement in the office of the student government organization, and her coursework, she also decided to secure employment and obtained a job at the campus bookstore. It

wasn't very long before she had a full plate. She described her busy days: "I just spent my time, and it was wrestling, SGA, and school. That's all I did." While her goals to be very involved on campus and stay on a positive track were planned with good intentions, she found herself in a personal relationship and experiencing difficulties managing all of her obligations. She recalled:

The first semester I had the worst GPA ever of life. I had a 2.9, but it wasn't for lack of trying. It was just I was spread so thin between that relationship, between SGA and people not picking up their work slack, and there would be times I'd be in the office, it's just like a little basement area, I'd break down and cry and just kind of deal with my feelings there.

While her efforts to become immersed in college life were meant to help her be successful, she found that along with all the benefits, there were also unanticipated consequences with which she had trouble coping as she moved through her junior year. She recalled:

They [others in the student government] started attacking me personally, saying that I was emotionally unstable. I knew I had so much work to do, so that's how I was so focused. I was like, 'If I go home [to the west coast], I'll get distracted. I won't be able to focus.'

Isabella wanted to go back home to regroup and rejuvenate away from all her obligations at school, but she knew it would not be a good place for her emotionally, so she kept moving forward doing the best she could to balance her life.

**Finding 2: Personal connections.** When Isabella arrived to college, she reported not having personal connections with anyone on campus. She was not only new to college life; she had relocated to a different part of the country away from her friends and biological family. Fortunately for Isabella, she made connections with various factions. Members of the wrestling team were among the first people on campus Isabella connected with. She recalled having a difficult time with her then-boyfriend, and members of the team responded:

They had me come on campus and they all invited me to hang out and I'm like, 'Wow, my friends want to hang out with me. This is new. Life is really good. They haven't wanted to do this for a while.' They ordered pizza and they tried so hard to try to make me feel comfortable.

Isabella stated that there were ups and downs with that cohort, but overall they were connections she could count on in the ups and downs of college life. She recalled during times of “ups and downs” among team members, the coach “who was typically a hard ass” would show compassion to her and her teammates. While she appreciated the connection, she reported his compassionate side was “unexpected” for her to witness.

Another significant connection for Isabella was with her professors. She reported having one, in particular, whom she would approach when she was struggling, and she was impressed and reassured with his response to her. He would say:

How are you doing in life? What are you doing now? I'd tell him and it was just something fun and exciting for me to say or whenever bad was happening he could tell, at least I went to a small school and he'd be like, hey you're not doing so well on this, is there something going on? Do you need extra help? You're human, give yourself a break. He literally said to me one time he's like, I care about you doing great in my class but I care more about you as a person. Him saying that made me feel so much better because I felt like I was a failure because I went from being an A student for him and now being a "C" student. Him saying like, hey you're okay you're still better than the other half of the class, you might have a competitive nature but he also recognized that this wasn't going to be an A student for me, for this next semester.

The personal connections with her teammates, coach, and professors had a profound influence on Isabella's college experience during good and bad times. She also reported a close connection and friendship with her supervisor in the campus bookstore she worked at. She stated:

Had I not made that friendship, I can't imagine my college scene. It was always like if I had to make a decision, she would be a person I would go and be like,

‘Hey, I’m thinking of doing this. How would this affect me working here and what is your opinion?’ I could always tell she cared.

Isabella’s comfort level for engagement with her personal connections on campus were not instantaneous and required personal reflection and opening up to the idea that she needed others to help her be successful. She elaborated, “Sometimes all it takes is someone to say, ‘hey you got this.’ That is all it takes because for the most part they have all the tools” and knowing that this connection is “going to have different access to resources whenever you're talking to them.” She reported learning about how her personal connections across campus would help her not only have her basic needs met but also serve as a source of emotional support as well.

**Finding 3: Finding the help she needed to be independent.** For the final part of our interviews, I asked Isabella to bring an artifact representative of her ability to persist and complete her college degree. She brought keys to a car. Her car. She attributed her ability to become independent and develop a higher level of self-confidence to being open to letting other people help her. She had developed personal connections that served her well in her time of need; however, she still reported feeling like her personal connections truly “didn’t understand” her situation as an alumni of the foster care system. She offered an example of overhearing her peers “talking about how their parents don't want to buy them another laptop and I'm like, oh, that's cool like at least you have health



insurance.” Isabella also recalled many low points in which she wanted to reach out to her biological family but was hesitant to do so. She stated:

I didn't feel like I could call home and say, 'Hey, this is what's going on' because it was like they needed to hear that I was doing okay in my mind. I felt like if I told them I was struggling, they would just worry and it wouldn't do any of us any good, so I never really, and they never really picked up the phone. They always had these things going on and I didn't feel like I needed to add to that, so I just tried to make sure everything looked like everything was going okay.

These glimpses into the reality of her experiences in college are just a couple of ways in which she felt like others were not able to fully understand her challenges. Isabella recalled letting her guard down for the first time and how that changed so much for her. She stated:

I know at least for the longest time up until I met Dr. Q, I felt like I had this huge chip on my shoulder about foster care. I felt like everyone would see me as a foster care kid and that I was like basically like some sort of damaged human that no one really wanted. The next step was to go to someone who would know how to handle it. Dr. Q was the person for us in this instance.

She found herself opening up and seeking support in situations because she felt she had an ally for college students from the foster care system. She reported encountering a

situation she was not sure how to approach and she decided to accept an offer from Dr. Q that would promote her level of independence beyond what she had known before. She recollected:

Dr. Q, she taught me how to drive and it was interesting because she wasn't my first person I had asked. I had asked my friends and everybody seemed to be like, yeah, we'll help you. I was like, I asked so many people. You have no idea how many people I've asked for help. No one understood what it's like to not have a car and not have a license and have to learn all that while ... they just didn't understand that little tidbit. It represents my ability to persist through college because as soon as that happened ... well it cost so much like financially, and even more so with my decisions. When it broke I had to fix it and everything, it was kind of like I still have so much more freedom now and it helped me think of like more ideas of how I could help others and like it just made me feel more independent. The second I had that I felt like there was less to stop me I didn't have to live in an apartment two streets down, I could live some ten minutes away if I wanted to now because I could drive.

Isabella reported that she found confidence and comfort in her new level of independence that having her license and a vehicle provided to her. She attributed having these tools, along with a source of support for foster care alumni, as being instrumental in her ability to complete college and consider graduate school.



Figure 14: Isabella's artifact

### **Jennifer**

Jennifer was of average build with shoulder length brown hair. She was dressed in professional attire with a personalized twist of bright colored flats and bright lipstick.

The first thing I noticed about Jennifer was her bright smile and warm eyes. For our first interview, Jennifer and I settled into her office and began our conversation about her journey through college as an alumnus of the foster care system. Our second interview also took place in her office.

Jennifer engaged in the timeline activity during our interviews together. Her organization and creativity were evident to me in her visual representation of her college journey.

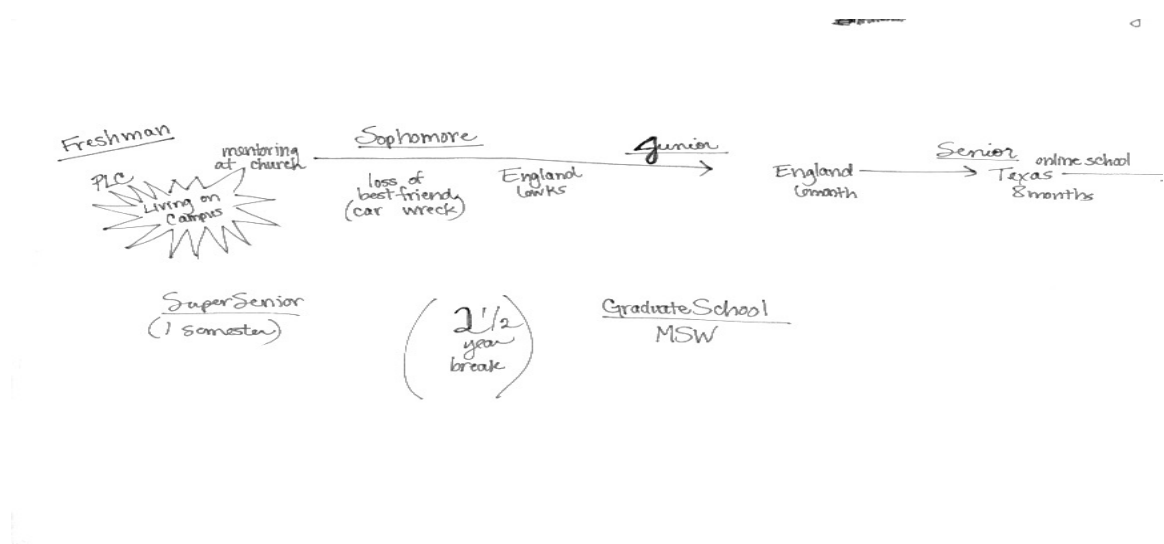


Figure 15: Jennifer's timeline

Jennifer was a 25-year-old newlywed with a bachelors' degree in sociology-human services. At the time of our interview, Jennifer was pursuing her master's of social work degree on a part-time basis. She was employed in a position she described as her "dream job" working at an agency helping "young women who have aged out of foster care navigate the higher education system" and "working with foster families." In

addition to her roles as wife, graduate student, human services professional, mentor, and advocate, Jennifer reported that she and her husband were in the process of becoming certified as foster care providers.

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

**Finding 1: Super Involved.** Jennifer described herself as “super involved on campus” during her first several years of college life. She reported that she had no intention of attending the state university of which she is a graduate because she assumed it was primarily a campus for “commuter and international students.” Jennifer said she was gravitating toward a private university known for having a campus “with student life.” As a result of encouragement from one of her high school counselors, however, Jennifer decided to apply for the Presidents Leadership Council (PLC) at the state university. She

reported that being selected for PLC was a “deal breaker” in terms committing to a state college.

In addition to being innately drawn toward a strong student life on campus, Jennifer’s involvement in PLC required her to be “involved in [a minimum of] 3 student organizations at any given time.” Jennifer described this as a “busy time” for her but she stated, “That’s the beauty [of PLC]. It created an environment where I was interacting with people of different degree programs.” This resulted in significant, lifelong connections. She elaborated, “All of my best friends have very different degrees than I have. Most of us, our degrees were even in different buildings on campus. The likelihood that we would have even met [without PLC] was really slim.” During her freshman year, Jennifer became fully immersed in student life and recalled, “I loved student life. That was the world that I lived in.”

As Jennifer progressed through her journey in college, she became involved in many other factions of student life. She reported being involved in Greek life, being a member of the Honors Society, and spending a semester during her junior year in Europe as part of an independent studies program. Jennifer fully embraced many opportunities presented to her through her involvement in student life and membership in PLC.

**Finding 2: Worth investing in.** Jennifer attributed her success in college not only to expectations from her family but also to the people who realized her potential and invested in her. She recounted, “Once I came into foster care there were people who

invested in me” and “undoubtedly the reason why I've been successful can be directly attributed to mentors in high school and in college.” Jennifer shared how an outsider’s perspective on foster care alumni might be influential:

The general society's tendency is to assume either deviance or pity. Neither of those things is helpful. That can come out in really subtle ways, when people say things like, ‘I can't believe you were in foster care.’ I'm not sure what to say back to that. It's always well meaning, but that could be an assumption of pity, or it could be, ‘I can't believe you're not in prison or I can't believe you're not on drugs’ depending on who you're talking to.

In contrast, she recalled observing a “really powerful” conversation between a mentor and foster alumni that was reflective of her experiences with others who invested in her. She reported the message was, “You are worth the effort. You are worth the effort that you are putting forth. It's worth it to us and it's worth it to you to work that hard.” She elaborated, "Our experiences and our shortfalls that are the result of our trauma are going to be across the board, but so are our strengths.” Jennifer acknowledged the many people who realized this along her educational journey.

Jennifer’s high school counselor was the first person she identified as not only directing her to PLC but also to instilling in her a sense of investing in others. She stated, “I really had a sense of purpose in that. I'd been taught in high school that that's what you do. You reach in the lives of younger people.” Jennifer recalled learning that a member

of her panel who was instrumental in her being selected for PLC was also an alumnus of the foster care system:

She's in a room of ten people interviewing me. Then a year later, two years out of college, someone says, 'She's a foster care alumni.' I'm like, 'I didn't know that.' I think she's a great example of that. That looks different for different people. She didn't have to shout from the rooftops, 'I was in foster care too!' She looked at me and said, 'I see these strengths and that's worth investing in.'

During her time on campus as a student, Jennifer reported that investing in others was embedded in the “culture” of the university. Jennifer stated, “That idea of the upperclassmen investing in the younger classmen was very strong. That was communicated to us as an expectation. When you become an upperclassman you invest in the younger classmen.” She shared how this notion translated into other areas of her life as she began investing in youth at her church during her junior year and she continues to invest in PLC students in her professional capacity as well.

Jennifer reported that the institutional investment was not isolated to the PLC she was affiliated with. She recalled, “If I needed something there was someone who could help me advocate for myself.” More specifically, she reported having “faculty who were allies for me as well.” This was something that took her by surprise. She stated, “Some of my professors have been huge supports in my life, and I didn't see that coming. I didn't expect that.” The institutional investment went all the way to the president of the



university. Jennifer stated, “Through PLC, if I see President B, he knows me by name. We've had conversations; I babysat their child, that sort of thing. That kind of connection for a freshman is really unique.” The continuum of people Jennifer identified as investing in her ranged from her high school counselor to the president of the university she graduated from. Their collective investment continues to have a positive influence in both her personal and professional life.

**Finding 3: Consistency.** For our final interview, I requested that Jennifer bring an artifact that she felt was representative of her ability to persist and complete college. Jennifer glanced around her office for a moment and stated “I only put things in my office that remind me why I do what I do.” She explained that she wanted to share a group of artifacts she has in her office that she intentionally placed together because of the significance they had for her. She started with an object that belonged to her foster father, who passed away shortly after she graduated from college. It was a desk ornament he found at an estate sale that resembled a light bulb. She described its significance as:

I consistently was surrounded by supportive people. In that group of people, I would say the most supportive person would have been my foster dad. He modeled what I said earlier about even with the crisis we always come back to education, and that's always still our priority. I would say that that is really symbolic to me of consistency and of that support.

Situated behind her late foster father's desk ornament was a brightly colored painting.

Jennifer stated:

This painting was given to me my first Christmas with my foster family. It was painted for me by my [foster] sister-in-law's best friend. It was for me. That was really special. Daisies are my favorite flower, and I love turquoise, which this was meant to be. I think that my [foster] brother and sister-in-law were the very first open arms welcome in my foster family, other than my parents. They've consistently been that way. No matter what country I was in, or no matter what state I lived in, they've always been the follow through.

Jennifer's final object was a vase with what appeared to be baby's breath flowers. She reported that her husband gave her the flowers, which were from her foster father's funeral. She paused briefly and closed by saying, "Those three things are together on purpose, and consequently right next to my college diploma."



Figure 16: Jennifer's artifact

### **Heather**

Heather was a 24-year-old wife and a permanency caseworker for the Department of Human Services (DHS) child welfare division. She had a Bachelor of Science in Human Development and Family Services and has been employed at DHS for “a little over a year.” Heather stated she recently accepted new position in her agency that will allow her to work more closely with youth in foster care as they transition out of care.

During both of our interviews, Heather participated in the timeline activity illustrating events she deemed significant to her ability to persist and complete her college degree.

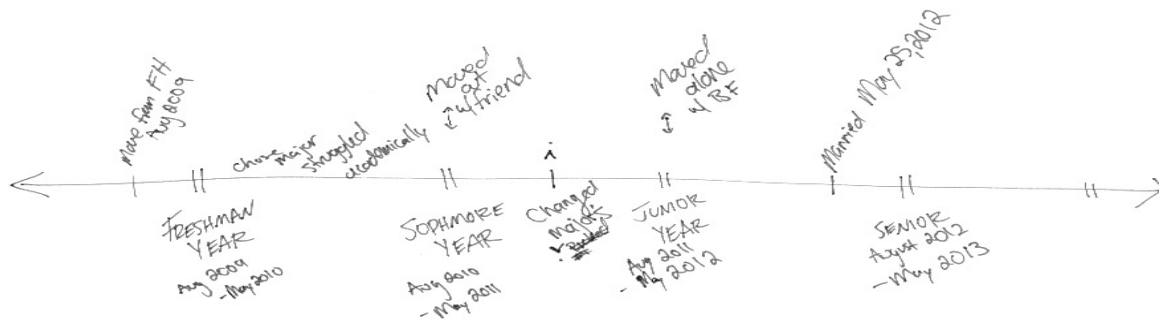


Figure 17: Heather's timeline

Heather's timeline illustrates several moves, academic struggles that ultimately resulted in her changing her major. She also moved in with her boyfriend and married him before she completed her college degree.

At the time of our interview Heather had been married for 3 years; however she had been in a relationship with her husband since she was a sophomore in high school. She described the time she met her husband as "the worst year" of her life because it was the year her mother passed away and she subsequently ended up in the foster care system. She was placed in the same foster home as her older sister where she remained until she turned 18 years old. Heather reported that she did not consider college an option prior to her placement in foster care. She was from a small rural town and she described her plans for after high school as "staying home with my biological family and taking care of

my mom.” Heather attributed her lack of job opportunities, her natural knack for making good grades, the hope for a more promising future, and “everyone hammering” her to go to college as instrumental in her decision to pursue higher education.

I met with Heather for both of our interviews during her lunch break in an empty office at the Department of Human Services. Heather had long blonde-brown hair, a partially completed full sleeve arm tattoo and a very detailed manicure consisting of pastel floral and chevron designs. We sat close in proximity to one another during the interviews; however, there seemed to be a distance between us. Heather later acknowledged her apprehension in sharing her past. She stated “telling someone your story is like giving them a piece of who you are, and so I really guard that and I only give it to certain people, because even really close people have used it and turned it. I don't like to do that.” I thanked her for entrusting me with her story.

**Finding 1: “The weirdo that had to stay on campus for Christmas.”** Heather reported feeling very apprehensive about pursuing a college degree due to her lack of planning combined with what she felt was a less than solid educational foundation from high school. Her concerns related to not being academically prepared for the demands of coursework minimized as she found herself learning to cope with feeling like an outsider on campus. Heather identified several ways she felt her otherness surface. The most obvious was her ability to relate to her peers. Heather reported that she was “the weirdo that had to stay on campus for Christmas” as well as during the summers while most

other students went home to their families. Heather stated the only reason she enrolled in coursework during the summer semester was to ensure “that I could stay on campus or continue to get VA [Veteran’s Administration] payments” for rent.

In addition to feeling “different” for living on campus at those times, she observed less obvious, yet vast differences between her peers in her architectural program and herself. She recalled her experiences:

There was no family coming to watch my presentation. You have to get bios [biographies] written about you. You have to apply and compete for a job listing and when they look at that stuff [they] are going to be like ‘she came from nothing.’ I never felt good enough. I felt like I was the wrong type of person to be in there because they were all rich and they all had big family supports. I just always felt out of place. It's okay being judged if you don't have anything to hide but when you're trying to keep your dark secrets about your family and your experiences in your closet, that's really hard to be put right in the spotlight and still keep it all hidden.

Overall, Heather summarized her early college experiences as “going through an abusive relationship all through my first 2 years in college.”

Interestingly, feeling out of place seemed to serve as a positive contributor for Heather as she stated she did not “focus on that [socializing] but threw myself into

homework.” She reported experiencing “a rough time in high school doing a lot of things I shouldn’t have been doing as a minor” and decided she “had so much to lose” if she got into trouble. She reported that her fear of losing her funding as a result of “partying in college” or performing poorly in her courses strongly contributed to her maintaining focus and completing college.

**Finding 2: “It’s not the same [as other students’ families or support systems] but it’s what got me through.”** While Heather reported that she did not have strong peer relationships and family support during her time in college she acknowledged that she did have a small, yet solid support system. She stated “I had a family in a way, it’s not what everyone else has. It’s not the same, but it’s what got me through.”

Heather identified her boyfriend, now husband, as her main source of support throughout college. She elaborated that he was a “consistent” person for her and “he took a lot of my baggage with him. He was able to hold a lot of it for me and he understood.” The need for a consistent presence coupled with having relationships with people who knew her from her life prior to college appeared to be the critical components she needed to from her support system. Heather stated:

I was blessed with a lot of really good mentors. My ETV specialist was a lifesaver. I kept a connection with my caseworker [from DHS]. She was like my mom. She came up once a semester, it’s really far for her, but she came up once a semester and made sure I was eating and made sure I had everything I needed.

She always gave me birthday and Christmas presents. Those two were the most influential, but there's also [a worker] who ran TRIO talent search and she met me because they come to the lower income schools and teach about college. I spent most of my freshman lunch times in her office because I had no one to eat with. She was in the student union, so I would go get my food and then go eat in her office. I was not sitting in that big cafeteria alone. I went up and ate in their offices. That's what saved me.

**Finding 3: “I realized I could be more than just a poor kid.”** For our last interview I asked Heather to bring an artifact representative of her ability to persist and complete college. Heather revealed the first structure she developed in an early architecture course. She described the structure as the result of an assignment where she was instructed to design “an example of a starting point to a transitional area to a gathering place.” Although Heather’s experiences in her architecture courses were extremely overwhelming for her, she stated that completing this structure was “a big turning point in college” and “the first time I realized that I could be more than just a poor kid.” The realization came at a very vulnerable time for her both academically and socially, and although she continued to struggle with the content, she moved forward and applied to the architecture program she had been preparing for. She was not admitted.

Heather described her resulting panic. “I started to freak out. I knew that my scholarships wouldn't cover me just to take random classes because I wanted to wait a



year to reapply.” As an alternative to giving up on the major altogether, Heather opted to focus on the courses she needed to fulfill requirements for a minor in human services and family development. She soon realized how naturally the content of the coursework came to her. She stated, “It really intrigued me. There was a lot about lower income, poverty, and how that affects people. I was able to really connect with that sort of thing.” Although Heather applied to the architecture program a second time, she “didn’t even wait for the results” before she “changed majors” to human services and family development. In addition to the content, Heather attributed not feeling “fear of the judgment” on her new path as instrumental in her educational journey but later acknowledged “self-confidence was the biggest hindrance” in her architectural journey.



Figure 18: Heather’s artifact

This chapter presented the individual and unique cases of nine foster care alumni who persisted in college and completed their bachelor's degrees. Each participant in this study engaged in two interviews, for approximately one hour per interview. In the first interview, a timeline activity was utilized as a tool to facilitate discussion related to significant events during their time in college and further explore how they navigated challenges. For the second interview, participants brought an artifact that was representative of their abilities to persist and complete college. My intention in presenting each of the cases individually in this chapter was to provide depth and understanding of individual perspective and experiences using thick, rich description to portray each case. According to Patton (2002), it is imperative that "each case study in a report stands alone, allowing the reader to understand the case as a unique, holistic entity" (p. 450). The multiple-case study methodology is two-fold in this dissertation. The next chapter will integrate the emergent themes from the process of cross-case analysis the individual cases presented in this chapter collectively to capture breadth and better understand the quintain of a relatively small group, foster care alumni with a bachelor's degree.

## CHAPTER V

### CROSS CASE THEMES

The following section will present the five themes, related to the research questions, that emerged from the cross case analysis of data collected from participants.

1. What did foster care alumni with a bachelors' degree, completed from a public four-year college in the state of Oklahoma, perceive as contributors to their ability to persist and complete college?
  - a. Theme 1: Support
  - b. Theme 2: Upward mobility
  - c. Theme 3: Intrinsic motivation
2. How did foster care alumni seek and utilize formal and informal support while in college?
  - a. Theme 4: Strategically
  - b. Theme 5: Cautiously

#### **Theme 1: Support**

**Foster care alumni perceive both tangible and intangible support as critical to their abilities to persist and complete college.**

The most prevalent theme across all cases was foster care alumni's perceptions of the significant roles that support from others had in their abilities to complete college. All nine participants (100%) identified various degrees of support as instrumental in helping them to achieve their educational goals. The notion of support manifested in several ways across the cases. The following excerpts from the data highlight the types and levels of tangible and intangible support participants attributed to their abilities to complete college.

### **Financial Support**

In terms of financial support, the majority of participants (77%) received scholarship assistance through the educational training voucher (ETV) program provided by the state of Oklahoma; this helped to offset tuition costs and other college-related expenses. However, participants identified support beyond basic entitlements as significant for meeting tangible needs and also because of the intangible message that others were willing to invest and believe in them. Both formal and informal stakeholders in the foster care community provided this extra level of support.

### **Transportation**

Over half (55%) of the participants identified transportation issues as significant and attributed their success in completing college to others assisting them with access to transportation. In having this need met, foster care alumni reported being able to develop

a critical independence. However, participants with transportation still reported vehicle malfunctions on a regular basis, which then made them reliant on friends, roommates, or public transportations to get to classes and work. For example, Brittany reported that during the times her vehicle was not working, she relied on friends and others in her sorority to help her get to school, work, and even to the hospital during her health crisis. The willingness of her friends and sorority sisters to help with basic needs during the chaotic times she was dealing health problems and transportation issues was a significant source of support for Brittany.

Participants without transportation stated they were consistently reliant on friends, roommates, and public transportation to get to and from classes, the grocery store, and work. Two participants were the recipients of tangible support from external stakeholders in the foster care community. Brandon spent his freshman and sophomore years in college relying on his friends and public transportation to get to classes and conduct personal errands. Brandon struggled with feeling “like a burden” in having to rely on his friends during that time. He shared his experience of being contacted by the Independent Living director and informed that someone in the community donated a car to give to a foster care alumni in college. She offered it to Brandon and he accepted the offer. He attributed this donation as instrumental in his ability to complete his undergraduate and graduate degrees. In a similar situation, Anthony worked and saved his money but he still lacked enough money to purchase a reliable vehicle. His former caregivers at a

group home matched what he saved with their own money and he was able to purchase a vehicle while in college. He recalled how people would “give” stuff to him while in foster care and felt “we do need support but we don’t need handouts.” Anthony said the lesson he learned about working and saving for a goal was as valuable as the car was to him.

Isabella was a unique case among these participants in that she had not learned to drive a vehicle; therefore, she was reliant on living and working close to campus. A stakeholder in the foster care community learned of this need and responded. She taught Isabella how to drive a vehicle, and as a result, Isabella was able to obtain a driver’s license and eventually purchase a vehicle. This gesture was significant as it provided Isabella choices of where she could live and work while in college. This level of autonomy also helped Isabella to not only consider, but to also pursue other educational opportunities beyond her undergraduate studies.

### **Intangible Support**

Maria was a good example of a participant that reported that a tangible gift also had intangible value. Maria was given a \$200 check from a former caseworker when she completed her associates degree. She said that the money was very helpful to her, but she also felt support in terms of being acknowledged for her accomplishment, and she felt inspired by this gesture to consider how much further she could go in her educational endeavors.

Intangible support, including encouragement and emotional support, was equally prevalent across the cases and participants also considered it significant to their successes. For example, Faith and Heather both described how former caseworkers continued their support beyond their obligatory period. Heather said her connections with a student support services worker she met while in high school, who had an office on her college campus, was critical to her success; she reported that she was not comfortable around her peers and would frequent the student support services office during lunch periods. Heather also stated that her former caseworker brought her gifts during her holidays and “checked in” on her while she was in college. Faith continued to have a relationship with her former caseworker and believed the emotional support Faith received from her was instrumental to her success in her educational endeavors.

The remaining participants described the intangible support they received via campus involvement as being a key factor in their ability to complete their undergraduate degrees. Both Jennifer and Malcolm reported being heavily engaged in student life on campus. Jennifer’s network included President’s Leadership Club (PLC), a sorority, her faith community, and her foster family, but she attributed her academic success to a campus culture that emphasized relationships and supporting one another. In Jennifer’s case, that included support from her peers, faculty, and the president of the university when she experienced the death of a close friend. Malcolm immersed himself in various activities both within and outside campus. When he inadvertently connected with

another foster alumni in college, he learned of and became heavily involved with many foster care alumni activities and initiatives. His involvement and the support of his network helped him to successfully complete college despite difficult times.

## **Theme 2: Upward Mobility**

### **Foster care alumni's belief that completing college would improve their quality of life was a main factor in their abilities to persist.**

In my cross-case analysis, the concept of upward mobility was a substantial presence. For the purpose of this research, the notion of upward mobility referred to the desire to have a better life than what the participants formerly lived and experienced. More specifically, this meant having basic needs met for themselves and their families, and having financial, emotional, and physical security and stability. Sixty-six percent of participants felt that completing a college degree would help them in their quest for a sense of calmness and stability in adulthood.

Maria's motivation was rooted in her desire to provide a "better life for her son," and she reported that this helped her maintain focus when she was continually struggling to manage her obligations as a student, employee, and a single mother. Her voice inflections seemed to suggest guilt about having "only ramen noodles" to eat at certain times, and she was proud to be able say, that through sacrifices made to complete college, she has achieved a sense of stability in being able to provide more for her family. This



sentiment was also shared by Faith, who became a new homeowner and a first time mother during the time of her research interviews. She reported her aspiration to “live in the good part of town” and to be a better mother to her child than her mother was to her as driving forces when she faced challenges in completing her college degree.

The desire for upward mobility was a contributor in Brandon’s decision-making during his college, particularly in terms of relationships, majors, and long-term outcomes. His analytical approach was also apparent in his perspective that completing college allowed him to independently take care of himself and be “better off in life” than his family of origin. During college, his decision to change his major to accounting was based on the stability of the profession in terms of locating and securing employment that would always be in demand and provide a more consistent future.

Participants reported that upward mobility through education was applicable not only to securing tangible needs and resources but also to eliminating forms of dysfunction that led to their placements in foster care in the first place. Jennifer and Brittany revealed specific goals of changing patterns of abuse and neglect they experienced with the belief that “dysfunction is generational (Jennifer).” Jennifer reported that her biological parents were upper middle class professionals and she never struggled with basic resources such as adequate food or shelter. Rather, she expressed the desire to create a healthier adult life than what she experienced during childhood. This desire to redirect generations of abuse and neglect was a driving source for her as

she transitioned from dependence to independence during her time in college. Brittany viewed completing her college degree as an opportunity to start a fresh life and believed that graduating from college would provide her the opportunity to “rewrite” her life story and break her family’s cycle of abuse. Rewriting her story was Brittany’s way of taking control of her life, and her educational journey allowed her to not only physically remove herself from her childhood of abuse and neglect but also create a pathway toward health and long-term stability.

Pursuing the opportunity to do better for self and others required the participants to step outside of their comfort zones and embrace significant changes. Anthony highlighted the importance of reminding himself that, while difficult, it was imperative that he set aside the fears and uncertainty he held because he knew the long-term outcomes and significance of completing college would be of great benefit to him as an adult. He recalled from his personal experiences ways in which foster children and alumni are “given” tangible things in lieu of intangible “lessons” that he felt would better serve them in their pursuit of upward mobility. In hindsight, he believed that his greatest gain from his journey was learning to make a better life for himself through others who taught him about upward mobility.

The participants in this study perceived a college degree as an opportunity to advance in life on many levels. While the notion of completing college to advance and “do better” in life is not restricted to this population, the rationale for significant changes

and decisions to redirect their paths in life via education provides a level of insight that may prove valuable for those foster alumni who will follow in these participants' footsteps.

### **Theme 3: Intrinsic Motivation**

#### **Foster care alumni attributed their innate desire to be a helping professional as a contributing factor in their abilities to persist in college.**

According to Ryan and Deci (2000), intrinsic motivation is defined "as the doing of an activity for its inherent satisfactions rather than for some separable consequence" (p. 56). The majority of participants in this study reported a strong desire to help others as not only guiding their choices in terms of the specific degree they chose to pursue but also as a major contributor to persisting and completing college. More specifically, 55% of participants in this study completed bachelors' degrees in social sciences; 22% pursued degrees outside of what might be considered traditional "helping professions," but their shared intentions were to use their degree(s) to be of service to others in need. A sense of obligation to utilize their personal life experiences coupled with their shared objective of improving services and long-term outcomes for future generations of children in the foster care system were strongly reported across the cases.

One example of a non-traditional approach to helping others was Brittany. She completed a degree in animal sciences and shared that her next step was to pursue a

master's degree in counseling with the ultimate goal of providing equine therapy services to survivors of childhood trauma. Her personal experiences of childhood trauma were a source of pain but also served as a source of motivation because of her desire to help others heal from traumatic experiences in a professional capacity. Another participant, Faith, initially began working toward completing the requirements for a degree in nursing; however, after struggling with the coursework and questioning her desire to be in the nursing profession, she switched her major to accounting. Faith explained that personal decisions leading up to and during her time in college were made based on fiscal logic. From her perspective, her primary struggles in college were rooted in basic financial aspects of being independent. This awareness was very important for her during the transitional period between aging out of foster care and completing college. Her firsthand experiences of learning to manage her finances coupled with her innate desire to serve others was significant in her decision to redirect her educational path and complete a degree despite "failing" at her first degree choice. At the time of our final interview, she was utilizing her accounting degree to support alumni of the foster care system in accessing funding for college.

Multiple other participants pursued traditional "helping profession" degrees, and the commonalities across the cases were remarkable. Maria, Anthony, Malcolm, Jennifer, and Heather had vastly different experiences in terms of number of placements, amount of time spent in placements, and personal connections throughout their time in foster

care; however, they all shared an innate desire to complete a degree that would allow them to work, in professional capacities, with vulnerable populations.

Maria's negative experiences in foster care propelled her to pursue a degree in social work and with an emphasis on child welfare. Maria reported that the path she chose in college was based on her inherent need to work in a system she had a passion to change. Her persistence in college was grounded in the logic that in order to be an effective social worker, she needed to have a solid educational foundation in working to restore children and families. This drove her to endure the challenges and focus on the bigger picture, not only for her family but for the many children and families she would work with in her career. Her ability to persist was rooted in her desire to make the system better than how she experienced it.

At the time of our interviews, Anthony and Heather were using their degrees in psychology and human and family services to work with children and families in county child welfare agencies. Anthony was pursuing a graduate degree that would allow him to focus on adolescent males involved in the child welfare system. His personal experiences coupled with the knowledge he acquired during the early stages of his educational journey prompted him to change his major from business to psychology. Heather also felt heavily influenced by her experiences in college to change majors and pursue a degree that would give her an opportunity to give back to the community of foster care. She began her studies with the goal of majoring in architecture but never felt comfortable or

as though this was a good fit for her. She reported that as soon as she changed her major to human and family services, she felt a strong connection to the content and believed she was on the right path to help others in similar situations she experienced during her childhood.

Although Malcolm had not secured his desired employment at the time of our interview, he reported that his desire to work in some capacity with children in the foster care system was a major contributor to his ability to overcome challenges in college. He attributed his strong desire to help others to his own personal experiences in foster care coupled with his biological father's giving spirit. Malcolm acknowledged his biological father struggled with personal issues that resulted in him spending most of his life in foster care; however, he used the positive aspects of his father's life as a template for his professional goals and a motivator for persisting and completing his degree.

Lastly, Jennifer was very strongly motivated in college by her desire to work with vulnerable children and the need to shift the narrative in terms of how workers communicate with, to, and about those in foster care. She expressed the significance to her of investing in others and she stated that a strengths-based approach was instrumental in developing her sense of purpose throughout her college journey.

The first three themes discussed were in response to my first research question that sought to understand what foster care alumni college graduates perceived as contributing to their abilities to persist and complete their college degrees. The following

two themes are related to my second research question in efforts to understand how foster care alumni sought and utilized both formal and informal types of support while in college.

#### **Theme 4: Strategically**

##### **Foster care alumni in college were strategic in seeking both formal and informal sources of support in college.**

One hundred percent of participants in this study identified various types of support as instrumental in their abilities to obtain bachelors' degrees. In addition, the data revealed that participants were deliberate and strategic about seeking support from both formal and informal networks. By definition, being strategic is "necessary to or important in the initiation, conduct, or completion of a strategic plan" ("Strategic," n.d.). The participants of this study reported approaching support from others on an as needed basis with the specific intent of helping them to persist and complete their college degrees. They maneuvered their way through college in a proactive approach to address barriers before they became problematic and a potentially compromised their educational endeavors. For most participants, seeking and/or accepting support from others came at a personal cost of sacrificing pride and independence; however, this was necessary for them to meet their long-term goals and continue moving forward in college.

Maria, a non-traditional college student, shared ways in which she sought formal sources of support to meet her basic needs, yet she reported an initial resistance to accepting informal support from others even when it was directly offered. After reflection, however, Maria chose to “accept help” to further pursue her education. Her decision was not made lightly, and she knew that she would have to sacrifice a certain level of her self-described “pride.” Maria, like many other participants in this study, reported feeling somewhat vulnerable but believed that accepting support from others would increase the likelihood of her academic success.

Faith shared a similar perspective in terms of seeking and utilizing formal support. She recalled proactively approaching professors when she needed clarity with assignments, seeking help from academic counselors for scheduling and assessment of her academic progress, and asking her ETV specialist for help with decision making. Faith also reported the importance of informal support; she identified friends and her last foster placement as sources of informal support for her. As a result of establishing relationships, Faith felt she had a “safety net” when times were difficult. Faith explained that she kept her informal supports apprised of what she was experiencing in terms of challenges and successes while she was in college. This meant that she had others cheering her on when she did well on an exam or cheering her up when she was struggling with an assignment. The variety of supports accessed by Faith helped her to successfully complete college.



In terms of being intentional in approaching and utilizing support, many elements of Isabella's journey echoed those of Maria and Faith. From a practical perspective, Isabella sought to be involved in athletics on a "smaller, close-knit" campus. She believed this choice would provide her with the opportunity to "form a family" while she was in college as well as provide her with support and accountability for completing college. With a holistic approach in mind, Isabelle sought involvement in the student government association and sought help from her professors, coaches, fellow athletes, and external allies known to support foster care alumni success in college. Although initially frustrated in her efforts to gain help with learning to drive a car, something Isabella attributed to a lack of empathy and understanding about the limitations of not driving, Isabella was eventually offered a chance to learn to drive by an external stakeholder in the foster care community. She set aside her personal apprehensions and accepted the offer, which resulted in her obtaining her driver's license and purchasing a vehicle. Perhaps most importantly, learning to drive and having a vehicle provided Isabella with the independence she craved.

Anthony did not wait for sources of support to come to him when he found himself alone on a college campus. Despite his fears of being truly alone, he reportedly reminded himself of previous situations that left him feeling overwhelmed and actively responded. He reached out to existing connections in his faith-based community to "get set up" with other like-minded individuals in his new area. He did not wait for the

organic development of relationships but rather sought to immerse himself within the campus community as a way to deliberately develop various sources of support. Like Isabella and Faith, Anthony was proactive in approaching his professors for advice, guidance, and support for navigating his coursework. He reported that the residual effects of being proactive and developing sources of support on campus was “empowering” to him, especially given the positive responses he received in doing so.

In contrast, Brandon arrived to campus his freshman year with an already established group of informal supports and deliberately lived with this group of friends throughout college. Brandon shared that his roommates were reliable, had the resources to meet their needs, were driven to be successful in college, and were available to help him with transportation and some basic needs. The success and drive of his friends fed his own internal flame to want to go to college and be successful by “nature of proximity.” In alignment with other participants, Brandon reiterated the importance of approaching professors and using their expertise to better understand the expectations and content of the coursework while also developing positive relationships that improved overall educational outcomes. Like some other participants in this study, Brandon revealed a strong and deliberate reliance on the state’s Independent Living program to ensure he would have adequate funding for his educational endeavors.

Jennifer was formally involved at her college campus from the start. She pursued and was accepted as a member of the PLC (Presidents Leadership Club), which required

active campus involvement. As a result, Jennifer received a great deal of formal, financial, educational, and social support. Being mentored and mentoring others were strong elements of her campus culture; a residual effect of this expectation was the development of lifelong friendships and informal sources of support. In addition, Jennifer was fortunate to also have maintained a very positive and nurturing relationship with her foster family during her time in college. She sought advice and guidance from her foster siblings and parents; however, it was during the loss of her close friend that she leaned back in to the community she had built in college to help her get through another difficult challenge. Jennifer reported that she continues to maintain many of the relationships she established during college.

Another participant, Brittany, immersed herself in sorority life at the recommendation of her mental health counselor and her foster mother. Although Brittany described herself as a normally “shy” person, she reported that her involvement with the sorority supported her opportunity in college to “rewrite” her life story. Furthermore, when she was faced with academic, health, and transportation challenges, connections with her sorority sisters provided a more intimate source of support for the physical, mental, and technical tolls she faced. In addition to joining a sorority, Brittany sought informal support from a relationship with her boyfriend. Brittany relied on her foster family, her counselor, her boyfriend, and some of her sorority sisters to help her balance

her academic and socialization obligations as she dealt with her chronic health issues and successfully completed her degree.

A social butterfly by nature, Malcolm did not report challenges in making connections and finding support on the college campus. He maximized several opportunities to work on campus that led to making personal connections, and he actively worked to construct sources of support for himself. A pivotal moment for Malcolm was meeting another foster care alumnus on campus; in retrospect, he believed this served as an opportunity to connect on a deeper, more personal level than he had with his previous sources of support on campus. His relationship with another foster care alumnus at his campus, someone who could empathize with his past and also the struggles of support of the present, was significant. She became a source of informal support that led to connections with various factions of formal foster care alumni support and engagement across the state.

Like Brandon, Heather's primary, informal source of support was pre-existing; she relied on her continuing relationship with her boyfriend from high school. During her earlier years in college, Heather was very intentional with who she did and did not seek support from. While she was reportedly very apprehensive, Heather did utilize opportunities from one of her classmates who asked a private tutor if Heather could "sit in" during their tutoring sessions in order to better understand the content of the coursework. Interestingly, Heather also sought social support from pre-existing formal

sources of support on campus including a TRIO worker, with whom she spent her lunch breaks. Heather maximized primarily pre-existing relationships for support, both formal and informal.

### **Theme 5: Cautiously**

#### **Foster care alumni in college felt cautious and applied boundaries to seeking support in college.**

Despite the deliberate and strategic pursuit of support discussed in the last theme, participants in this study exercised a great deal of caution in how they sought and utilized support during their college careers. Many participants in this study described the process of “breaking down pride” to seek or accept help from others, particularly when in face-to-face, more intimate situations. Several participants specifically stated feeling as if seeking support from their biological families or maintaining those connections would not be conducive to helping them navigate challenges and achieve their educational goals. Heather felt like an “outsider” on campus and that she had nowhere to go when she felt vulnerable. She acknowledged that she did not engage in what might be considered typical college socializing as she had “too much” at and feared “going out” might jeopardize her scholarships. Heather believed her best support was from people who knew her past and would not “judge” her for it; this small group of people consisted of her boyfriend and a TRIO worker, both of whom she met when she was in high school.

Early in college, Maria was resistant and somewhat hostile toward continuing a relationship with her former caseworker. Steady support despite Maria's defiant attitude, and "kicking and screaming" allowed Maria the time to understand the authenticity of her worker. Maria reported that "in reality, you need people," and in hindsight, she was happy with her decision to add another layer of support.

Like Maria, Faith was resistant to a relationship with the foster care system— in her case with her ETV specialist. Faith stated she was able to let her guard down only when she realized her worker "had her best interest at heart." Yet, she also reported that she did not over-impose herself on those she counted on for support, but rather she reached out to them only when she truly had a need. Faith was very cognizant of how others could help her and took great measure to "not put anyone out." For instance, she reported paying her foster parent rent to continue living at her house after she aged out of foster care and began college. Faith also exercised caution not only in whom she sought and accepted support from but also in relationships that were not conducive to her goals. She shared the experience of eliminating a personal relationship with a boyfriend that she believed was not healthy.

Isabella and Brandon both shared experiences of not approaching their biological family members in their times of need. Isabella had a point in college where she felt extremely vulnerable and in need of support. She reported that she contemplated reaching out to her family; however, she knew she could not afford to "let her guard

down”; she believed that involvement with them during her time of need “was not a good thing.” Instead she sought advice and guidance from a “trusted” person who was “invested” in her, which was a select few people that she felt could help meet her needs and achieve her goals in college. Her group involved formal groups on campus (coaches, professors, and her work study manager) as well as established allies of the foster care system. Brandon was familiar with his biological family’s “lack of investment” in his success while he was in college. He was careful to avoid re-engaging in relationships during his often “emotional journey” through college. Brandon “avoided” his family purposefully as he did not feel they would promote his upward mobility and did not assign value to the educational goals he held. In times of need for Brandon, he sought help from formal networks (Independent Living workers and professors) and informal networks (friends and roommates). He maintained that he only sought help when he felt he had to, as he did not want to “overuse” his support system.

The overuse or misuse of people in support positions was also a perspective Brittany shared. Although she knew she could reach out to her sorority sisters to help meet her health and transportation needs, she reported she “did not want to be a burden” thus, she asked for help only in extreme situations. One example of her cautious approach was to “ask for rides from others with similar schedules”; this provided minimal disruption to her sources of support. Malcolm also was cautious when seeking support from others. His approach involved vetting people who “had similar interests and

motivations” to assist him as he pursued his educational endeavors. Malcolm, like Isabella and Brandon, was careful to avoid his biological family as he reported that they were not a positive support system for him during this time in his life.

### **Summary**

This previous chapter illustrated the retrospective experiences of nine foster care alumni that completed a Bachelors’ degree in the state of Oklahoma. Stake (2006) emphasizes the importance of maintaining the uniqueness of each case while interpreting information that is particular to the context of the research agenda. The individual cases focus on the different paths leading up to the decision to pursue a college degree, the participants’ perception of levels and sources of support from both formal and informal networks, the significance of support, and the approach to utilizing sources of support. In this study, the unique aspects were length of time in foster care, connections with proponents of higher education, navigating challenges during their time in college, and distinctive sources of motivation for pursuing and completing a college degree.

This chapter integrated the individual cases to situate data and identify common threads among the nine participants in a context that is useful to practice and future research through the process of Stake’s (2006) cross-case analysis procedure. Stake (2006) summarizes this process as moving “from the particular to the general” (p. 10) in developing common themes across the data to develop multi-case assertions. The findings and cross-case analysis of participants’ experiences resulted in the five



assertions. The first assertion establishes the significance of support from others as critical to the participants' success in college. The concept of support varied from case to case; however, a strong foundation for the role of support in the matriculation of participants was established. Secondly, participants held a strong belief that completing college would contribute to their ability to be more secure financially, physically, and emotionally, not only for themselves but for their families as well, and this belief served as a motivator to pursue, persist and complete college. Along a similar vein, the third assertion across the cases was the participants' inherent desire to be of service to others in need. This transpired in various ways in terms of the types of degrees sought and rationale; however, it was a common motivator in completing college to achieve this innate desire among participants. The fourth assertion addressed the strategic nature of participants' decisions in terms of seeking and accepting support from others, situating themselves in ways that they felt would serve to promote their success and avoiding certain situations that did not align with their educational goals. Lastly, participants in this study exercised caution when reaching out to others or accepting help. This reiterated the need for independence and the level of trust participants placed in those they felt were a source of support. Many participants avoided offers of support and resisted help initially in their college careers; however, they reported that people need help and people want to help them succeed. This aspect of the research lends itself to the needs of each participant and how they decide to accept support. The decision to accept

support required trust, time, and decreasing resistance for participants in pursuing sources of support, a goal that is not always easily achieved.

It is my contention that the cross-case assertions related to contributors to persistence and completion of college, ways participants sought support, reasoning for pursuing and persisting in college, as well as the strategic nature of their approach to having their needs met has potential implications at various levels across various disciplines for helping to better understand foster care alumni in college and during their time in college. The contention of cross-case assertions has potential implications in the scholarly literature in terms of how to work with foster care alumni prior to entry into college, how to work to retain foster care alumni in college, and specific areas to hone in on when working with a foster care alumni at risk of not completing college. The next chapter will discuss future considerations in terms of practice, theory and future research opportunities to better understand how to improve educational outcomes for alumni of the foster care system in pursuit of a college degree.

## CHAPTER VI

### DISCUSSION

Interest in long-term educational outcomes for alumni of the foster care system is in the relatively early stages for researchers; however, the scholarly literature is increasing. The purpose of this study was to add to the knowledge base by exploring the perceptions of nine foster care alumni who completed bachelors' degrees. Findings will help researchers and practitioners better understand how to facilitate positive educational outcomes for this population. This study was guided by two central research questions that explored what participants perceived as contributors to their abilities to persist and complete college, and how they sought and utilized formal and informal sources of support.

Chapter IV provided individual case reports based upon data from the participants in this study. By first presenting the cases individually, I captured the uniqueness of each participant and the personal meaning they assigned to their experiences during college. Chapter V presented cross case findings. Cross case findings were a result of synthesizing the data from the individual cases, the "particular to the general" (Stake, 2006, p.10). As a result of cross-case analysis, five themes emerged. In this chapter of my

dissertation, I will first present the study's findings and then discuss these findings within the related literature. Next, I will provide implications of these findings for research on foster alumni in college, related theories, and practice on college campuses. In my final sections, I will discuss limitations of this study and provide suggestions for future research that resulted from my work.

### **Findings**

By using the themes that emerged in my cross-case analysis and considering my research questions, the following four findings emerged:

1. Students attributed their abilities to persist to other people supporting and helping them with tangible (e.g. money, transportation) and intangible (e.g. encouragement, advice).
2. Students reported an internal desire to have a better life for themselves than their past experiences. They desired the outcomes that are more typically related to the lives of those who have college degrees.
3. Students reported a strong need to make life better for others and to give back to others. Having a degree that allowed them to function in helping professions was important; they desired to be providers of help in contrast to recipients of help.
4. Students were cautious about accessing formal and informal support but, once deciding help was needed, they were strategic and proactive

about seeking out help. Students reported that a specific need or relationship they perceived as invested in them was typically a prerequisite for seeking assistance.

When I designed this study, it was my belief that the work of Vincent Tinto on college student retention would likely be a suitable theoretical lens for understanding my findings. However, with my findings in hand, I discovered that Tinto's work was ill-fitting for explaining how this particular population of students, former foster youth, described the contributors to their success and how they accessed support in college. Tinto's theory of student retention was useful in understanding diverse groups of populations on college campuses; however, this theory did not provide useful consideration of the pre-entry experiences of foster care alumni which seemed to have a significant impact on their abilities to persist and their approaches to seeking support or integrating themselves into college. Thus, I returned to the literature in search of theoretical guidance that would deepen my understanding of my findings and assist me in situating them within a larger set of knowledge.

In this search, I discovered two theories that provided a greater insight and was more useful in answering my research questions. The first theoretical lens, attachment theory, integrated many issues related to pre-entry for my participants that provided a lens beyond that of Tinto's. Attachment theory provided a foundation of established

research with considerations for practice in institutions working with foster care alumni in college. This provided understanding into the influence of past experiences on present behaviors that was unique for my participants and an appropriate fit for the purpose of this study and was useful to my findings as they related to how participants sought support from others.

The second theoretical lens, self-determination theory, was particularly relevant in understanding the findings of my data in terms of persistence. Self-determination theory presented a lens that helped me to hone in on the participants specific motivations for persistence versus the general tone of Tinto's theoretical position in connecting commitment to goals to a student's academic persistence. Ultimately, two theories, self-determination theory and attachment theory became my *a posteriori* lenses as I felt they were better suited to answer my research questions based on the data provided by the participants of this study. The following sections discuss each of my findings with related theory and literature.

**Finding 1: Students attributed their abilities to persist to other people supporting and helping them. (Research Question 1)**

Each participant in this study identified support from others as a critical factor in his or her ability to persist to college education. The meaning assigned to what constituted support surfaced in a variety of ways in this study. Participants provided concrete examples of how support from others, on a continuum from the difficult-to-

quantify emotional support to the more easily calculable tangible sources of support they received, had a direct influence on their persistence toward and completion of their college degrees.

It is perhaps the criticality of intangible source of support that needs the most explanation. As discussed in the Chapter II literature review for this research, the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 specifically addressed the need for emotional support as a critical objective, mandating the provision of emotional support for foster care alumni opting to remain in care and pursue postsecondary education. Over the past 20 years, the significance of emotional support continues to emerge in the scholarly literature (Day et al., 2011; Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Okumu, 2014; Sims et al., 2008), and the findings of this study echo the instrumental role emotional support plays in academic success for foster care alumni in college.

The participants in this study shared examples of how the emotional support they received from both formal and informal sources was beneficial in their abilities to navigate trials and celebrate accomplishments during their time in college. For several of the participants, sources of emotional support were not organic connections because they were caseworkers assigned to work with participants as a part of their professional duties. The consistency and intent of the emotional support provided by these individuals remained critical factors in successful outcomes for participants.

Research by Munson, Smalling, Spencer, Scott and Tracy (2010) found components of positive relationships between foster care alumni and non-kin natural mentors consisted of “trust, consistency, empathy, and authenticity” (p.533) and participants valued directness, accountability and respect from their mentors. Although it may be argued that these are important traits of any relationship, it is imperative to maintain consideration of the dynamics of the past and the potential of the future when considering how emotional support factors into educational outcomes for foster care alumni.

Children are placed in the foster care system as a result of some form of abuse and/or neglect. The duration and severity of each situation varies; however, the common thread for the participants in this study is that they were neither reunified with their biological families nor were they adopted by another family – either of which may have communicated and instilled a sense of permanency and stability to the child.

Relationship development with critical caregivers and caseworkers is disrupted by multiple placements but also by high turnover rates for caseworkers in child welfare. A recent Casey Foundation report (2017) stated, “the available data currently reflect an estimated national average turnover rate of approximately 30 percent” in the child welfare workforce (para 3). As a response, the ongoing changes in critical relationships may cause foster youth to become “guarded” as a protective factor and may hinder the development of future relationships (Crosson-Tower, (2001). This means of coping with



constant changes as children often translates into a sense of independence and maintaining guardedness with others as foster alumni transition into adulthood. As stated earlier, many participants in this study did not view relationships with their families of origin as a healthy source of support; however, a recent study indicates that despite being guarded in potential relationships and disconnected from previous relationships, youth transitioning into adulthood were amendable to relationships they were able to vet. Lee, Cole, and Munson (2016) explored how youth navigated their relationships during the transitional period from foster care to adulthood. They observed, “the idea of being able to craft one’s own family was appealing for these participants who had experienced separation from family during their time in the child welfare system” (p.445). This “crafting” process was a similar sentiment among many of the participants in my study in terms of how they formed relationships through the process of trust-building, persistence, and perceived authenticity of individuals attempting to lend support in times of need.

The abusive events that led to placement in foster care and the relational instability combined with the academic disruptions tend to serve as a negative influence in the long-term outcomes for youth who age out of foster care; however, there are always exceptions to the rule. The participants of my study are the outliers. Each had experienced maltreatment as children, were removed from their homes, and did not achieve permanency resulting in “aging out” of foster care yet, they are not assigned to

the categories of negative outcomes in adulthood. They represent the small percent that persist and complete their college degrees.

Findings from previous research echo the experiences of the participants in this study in terms of the significance of having emotional support during college. Dworsky and Perez (2010) examined the impact of college support programs for foster care alumni and found “having someone to turn to or someone who believed in them” (p. 262) held more value to participants than the tangible support they received. Further, Day et al. (2011) found emotional support for foster care alumni in college was significant in terms of their abilities to persist and emotional support appeared to compensate for areas of deficiency such as being academically unprepared. Like the participants in Day et al.’s study, participants in this study attributed the guidance and support they received during times of difficulty with coursework, scheduling, and balancing personal obligations to their ability to persist and complete college. This would entail preparing institutions to engage with foster care alumni early in their college endeavors, equipping financial aid offices to be educated in the specific scholarship programs for foster care alumni, and considering ways to enhance mentoring opportunities on college campuses.

Although participants also reported use of tangible supports, however, the critical ingredient to success appeared to be emotional assistance. To differentiate these two types of support, Sims et al. (2008) also examined how foster care alumni involved in postsecondary continuing education programs, both completers and non-completers,

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

As I previously stated, the majority of participants in my study were recipients of state-funded scholarships that were essential in their abilities to pursue and complete their college degrees. The tangible support was acknowledged but not emphasized as heavily as other types of support among participants of this study. The scholarship monies available to the participants appeared to be a less obvious form of support as it was based solely on certain criteria, and perhaps it was less highlighted because it was already in hand. Tangible and intangible support that extended beyond entitled financial support was highlighted by participants as critical to their success. It is important to reiterate the role of available funding in terms of participants considering college a viable option. For example, Brittany and Heather did not have specific intentions of pursuing a college degree until they learned of the opportunities their status as a foster care alumni would provide for financial support for college. The availability of funding for college planted the seed for their academic future decisions. It is also possible that entitled financial

support was viewed as more dependable or consistent (less likely to be taken away) than the intangible support needed from people; thus, participants focused specifically on support that could be of concern.

A critical component of the participants' success in college was a result of persistent efforts from supportive stakeholders that extended beyond the basic levels of support. The National College of State Legislators (2017) identified lack of support as a barrier to completing college for alumni of foster care stating they "lack the emotional and social support a family or other network can provide, and feel isolated and lonely on campus" (para. 4). This particular recommendation is a direct connection to one of the participants in this study, Heather. She reported feeling "like an outsider" and struggled to make connections in college. She sought company with a former caseworker housed on the same campus during lunch breaks when she felt overwhelmed by being around other students on campus. Heather's example establishes a connection between recommendations, practice, and outcomes. This also reinforces the significance of the findings from Dworksy and Perez (2010) that relationships and belonging are of more importance to foster alumni in college than concrete campus services.

**Finding 2: Students reported an internal desire to have a better life for themselves than their past experiences. They desired the outcomes that are more typically related to the lives of those who have college degrees. (Research Question 1)**

Many of the participants in this study reported upward mobility as a driver in their persistence in college. Upward mobility encompassed improvements to their quality of life including establishing healthy relationships, financial security, stability, safe housing, and better relationships in adulthood than they experienced as children. Although qualifying “life success” varied among participants, the belief that a college degree would significantly increase their odds of enjoying a better life was prominent across participants and perceived as greatly contributing to their persistence.

Along a similar vein, Jennifer expressed her insight that “dysfunction is generational,” and she was striving, through her college experiences, to establish a functional foundation as she transitioned into adulthood. Her sentiment echoes the findings of a study by Hines, Merdinger, and Wyatt (2005) that examined contributors to resilience among foster care alumni attending college and identified “the determination to be different from abusive adults” (p. 391) as a critical source of motivation and contributor to resilience. Previous research has established a connection between abuse and/or neglect and levels of education. Caregivers with lower levels of education are at a higher risk of abusing and/or neglecting their children (“Risk Factors of Child Abuse”, n.d.). Education serves as a tool for reducing child abuse and/or neglect in several ways. For example, knowledge of child development is a major factor in coping with challenges of parenting and anticipating age appropriate expectations of children. A second factor is the security in terms of being more likely to have access to adequate resources (housing,

health care, etc.), benefits that are often associated with higher levels of employment opportunities higher education can provides. Inadequate access to basic resources may increase parental stress and result in higher risk of abusive and/or neglectful situations (Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2013). In addition, Dworksy and Perez (2010) asserted improving postsecondary opportunities for foster care alumni would assist them in capitalizing on their future and alleviate many of the costly social problems they encounter in adulthood such as welfare dependency and lack of education. Jones (2010) also forecasted that concentrating on a college degree for foster care alumni was critical because of the positive residual effects a postsecondary education can bring to one's life. Like the participants in this study, participants in a study by Batsche, Hart, Ort, Armstrong, Strozier and Hummer (2014) also reported that they were motivated during challenging times in college because "they felt their lives would be better if they achieved their educational goals" (p. 180). In more recent research, Salazar (2013) compared the impact of a college degree for foster care alumni and non-foster care alumni in areas such as "income, housing, reliance on public assistance, mental health, happiness and other outcomes typically associated with educational attainment" (p. 141). The findings suggest that although the two groups are not equally prepared for college, as expected, a college degree led to improved outcomes for both groups. From a strictly fiscal perspective, Packard et al. (2008) projected investing in foster care alumni and postsecondary education would generate substantial results over the course of their careers when factoring in the increased contribution to paying taxes and decreasing

reliance on social programs to meet their basic needs. This serves to enhance not only the individual's quality of life for themselves and their families but also serves to reduce the impact dependent adults have on social service systems. The notion that higher education has substantial benefits extends beyond foster care alumni-specific issues.

According to a report by United States Treasury regarding the value of investing in a college degree, Eberly and Martin (2012) highlight the growth in opportunities for employment, increased abilities for America to be competitive in the workforce, and providing essential mobility in income that is critical for expansion of the economy. In addition to lower unemployment rates and meeting the demands of a globally competitive workforce, the report also found that children of college-educated parents were substantially more likely to complete a college degree, continuing upward mobility at multiple societal layers and projected long-term benefit to the American workforce. Increasing independence in adulthood, improving employment rates, the ability to engage in a competitive workforce and contributing to the tax system versus relying on programs funded by the tax systems for survival are components that deter generational involvement in foster care. The participants in this study are not only improving their own personal circumstances by completing their college degrees, they are also building protective factors known to reduce generational abuse and/or neglect for their children and future generations through their educational endeavors. These residual effects extend

the impacts and importance of the desires of participants and their sources of motivation in completing their college degrees.

**Finding 3: Students reported a strong need to make life better for others and to give back to others. Having a degree that allowed them to function in helping professions was important; they desired to be providers of help in contrast to recipients of help. (Research Question 1)**

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



community, which is, in a sense, a mirror of the social support that youth received from their environments” (p. 462).

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

**Autonomy.** The concept of autonomy was particularly relevant to the data. Autonomy refers to a conscious, voluntary decision made by the individual as it relates to their pursuit of goals. Ryan and Deci (2000), in understanding the “why” of goal pursuit, found a positive association between “value endorsement, behavioral persistence, conceptual understanding, personal adjustment, and positive coping” (p. 240) when educational goals are made independently of external factors and are in accordance with a personal desire. For instance, Brittany sought to integrate the trauma of her past and her love for animals as a way to move forward and as a means of healing herself and helping others to heal.

The participants in this study are among a small percentage of foster care alumni to complete a bachelor's degree and for most, they were making decisions about their lives in a very new context. Although foster care alumni are forced to make decisions and establish a certain level of independence at an early age in life as a means of survival, the decisions they were exercising at this juncture in their lives were geared more toward their future and personal goals versus the day-to-day independence they exercised as children. According to Svedin (2000), children of dysfunctional families are prone to becoming parentified which results in children growing up in "a more or less permanent role-reversal pattern sacrificing their childhood" (p.306). The decisions being made by participants of this study at the time of the interviews was in a different context, as it was age appropriate and occurring during times of challenge in college such as academic demands, learning to live independently and adjusting to new relationships. They embraced the opportunity to exercise their own decision making while maintaining a connection to their previous experiences as a motivator to persist toward and complete their degrees.

**Competence.** The second concept of competence serves to enhance autonomy. Competence is the "propensity to have an effect on the environment as well as to attain valued outcomes within it" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 231). Within felt competence, it is not necessarily reality that facilitates competence; rather, it is the perception of competence that elevates and promotes intrinsic motivation for goal attainment. For example, the

participants of this study were experts when it came to being a recipient, although at times a resistant recipient, of the work of helping professionals. Ryan and Deci (2000) postulate “people will tend to naturally to internalize the values and regulations of their social groups” (p. 238). Statistically, membership status as alumni of the foster care system would suggest a diminished likelihood of completing college; however, the participants of this study gravitated toward the other end of the spectrum and felt motivated by the way they perceived messages from others to move toward development as helpers. Examples of the perceived messages the participants received as facilitators of competence included Anthony’s example of his former caregivers paying for half of his vehicle while he was in college. Although the tangible gesture of assisting him with purchasing a car was helpful, it was the way Anthony perceived the message behind the gesture that was most significant. Anthony had a very specific goal of completing his graduate degree and working with teenage males in the area of prevention. This gesture from stakeholders of the foster care community was perceived, by Anthony, as a message of competence and accountability for moving forward and positively contributed to his perception that he was competent and possessed the abilities to be successful.

**Relatedness.** A third element of Ryan and Deci’s (2000) self-determination theory is relatedness. Relatedness refers to “the desire to feel connected to others, to love and care and to be loved and cared for” (p. 231). Many of the participants shared college experiences of relationships with previous caseworkers, other foster care alumni, and

others on their college campus such as professors, coaches, and peers. Prior to college, disrupted relationships were a common theme of their lives. However, in college they were able to seek and accept relationships with others who shared common goals. This autonomy seemed empowering for participants of this study who were able to shift the way they navigated their relationships and establish relationships with people they felt connected to in contrast to being involved in assigned relationships as a means of survival. At the time of our interview, Jennifer was working directly with young people in foster care, in the process of becoming certified to be a foster parent, and working toward a graduate degree in social work. During her time in college, Jennifer reported being actively involved with various factions on campus and said developing support and friendship with others was critical in her ability to complete college and overcome unforeseen obstacles along the way. Jennifer shared her personal experience of losing her best friend in an automobile accident while she was in college. The support and connections from others on campus during those difficult times reinforced her belief that she was where she needed to be with people who genuinely cared about her well-being.

In previous research with students in elementary school, Ryan and Grolnick (1986) established that intrinsic motivation to do well was higher among students who had teachers who were described as warm and caring. Although it is impossible to speculate how Jennifer might have responded had she not experienced this type of

response from her campus community, she did report how meaningful it was to her during a very difficult time in college.

In understanding goal directed behavior, Deci and Ryan (2000) posit “psychological development and well-being cannot be achieved without addressing the needs that give goals their psychological potency and that influence which regulatory processes direct people’s goal pursuits” (p.228). The majority of participants in this study wanted to become a part of the helping profession, and the power of this need to improve experiences for vulnerable children was a driving force in their abilities to persist and complete college. Participants felt as if completing degrees that allowed them to become part of a helping profession was an opportunity for them to confront injustice and advocate for others at the individual, family, and systematic levels. This knowledge may offer additional ways to influence an innate desire to help others while contributing to psychological development during goal pursuit. For example, participants in this study were reluctant in seeking help for themselves, yet their desire to help others motivated them to complete college despite the odds. Understanding how to facilitate and maximize opportunities to shift the focus from being recipients of support to being providers of support early in their educational endeavors may contribute to retention efforts.

**Finding 4: Students were cautious about accessing formal and informal support, but once deciding help was needed, they were strategic and proactive about seeking**

**help. Students reported that a specific need or relationship they perceived as invested in them was typically a prerequisite for seeking assistance. (Research Question 2)**

Categorization as a first generation college student seemingly acknowledges the challenges and poor foundational knowledge about how to navigate college but also illustrates the strength, pride, and commitment required by the student to complete their educational endeavors. For participants of this study, however, identification as an alumnus of the foster care system was not a source of strength and pride but rather a source of shame, particularly in the beginning of college. The related dialogue and reflection throughout data collection highlighted that they felt vulnerable academically and emotionally. Several participants gave examples of not revealing their status because the response from others was pity, and although it was well-intentioned, they reported not wanting others to feel sorry for them or to “give” them things. The way that they viewed themselves, as young adults wanting to learn how to be independent and do well in life, was the way they wanted to be treated by others.

Thematic in the data across all cases was a juxtaposition of participants reporting they did not need others and being heavily dependent on others to meet fundamental needs. For example, in the current study, participants reported that the basic need for transportation due to a lack of, malfunctioning of, or not learning the basic skills of how to operate a vehicle left few options for seeking out and/or accepting help from others.

Although participants in this study identified support from others as significant to their abilities to persist and complete college, they exercised caution in how they approached and utilized sources of both formal and informal support. The vulnerability associated with seeking out help felt threatening to participants who wanted to perceive themselves as largely independent. Foundational aspects of attachment theory are discussed in Chapter 2, and the following section will examine the relationship between this theory and findings from my data.

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

The Midwestern study (Pecora et al., 2005) examined outcomes of 659 foster care alumni in the first major study to investigate how children of the foster care system fared in adulthood. In a secondary analysis of the data, Okpych and Courtney (2018) examined attachment and persistence in college. Avoidant attachment is “characterized by emotional guardedness and reluctance to rely on others for support” (p. 106) and found that youth with higher levels of avoidant attachment “had significantly lower estimated odds of persisting than did youth with lower avoidant attachment scores” (p.112). More specifically, Kurland and Siegel (2013) note that students with avoidant attachment styles are more reluctant to engage with advisors, stating they “have developed schemas that indicate feelings of mistrust such that they only rely comfortably on themselves” (p.25). This hesitation mirrors the perspectives of the participants in my study in terms of approaching support from others. The key word, as it relates to my data, is *comfortably*. As I stated earlier, participants in this study cite support as critical to their success in college, yet this required them to function outside of their comfort zone, a process they described as “breaking down pride” to access various types of support.

Although it is not known how the participants of my study would score in terms of avoidant attachment, it is important to note that many participants described breaking down pride and seeking/accepting help from sources of support as intentional with the purpose of persisting in college. It is also important to note that support was sought not only after careful consideration but also from established, or what participants deemed as



legitimate, networks that offered or provided support on more than one occasion. For example, Brandon was cautious “not to overuse support” from others and described accepting help as “an emotional journey” for him. Several participants of this study specifically describe “breaking down pride” as a process that indicates they were responsive to support in times of need but the accepting of support was done cautiously and with the specific intent of helping them to achieve their educational goals. This may suggest that foster care alumni with lower level of avoidant attachment are amenable to accepting support in situations that present a potential threat to their ability to persist. The perspective of the participants in this study of “breaking down pride” seems to equate to letting their emotional guard down, and the perceived authenticity of support helped in diminishing their reluctance, both features of avoidant attachment. Participants recalled experiences of having support extended to them on multiple occasions from established sources. Isabella reported she would seek advice or guidance from a “trusted” or “invested” person but “not just anyone.” This vetting process coincides with Kurland and Siegel’s (2013) suggestion for advising students more prone to be avoidant attachment, stating, “advisors may need to undertake intrusive and persistent means when working with an insecurely avoidant student, who will not quickly reach out or share concerns” (p.25) and in doing so, sources of support are able to establish themselves as an ally. Essentially, existing research on avoidant attachment demonstrates that foster care alumni with lower avoidant attachment are more successful, and my data seem to reiterate that resistance to support, a risk factor to persistence, is not a fixed variable

given that the recipient is more apt to “breaking down pride” and accepting support particularly if the source of support is perceived as consistent and genuine.

### **Implications**

The outcomes of this study have implications for research, theory, and practice. Each is discussed in detail below.

#### **Research**

In terms of research, the issues related to foster care alumni and educational outcomes are gaining momentum among scholars. The Northwest study by Pecora et al. (2005) provided evidence of higher rates of social problems and obvious gaps between foster care alumni and their non-foster peers in terms of higher education. The attention created by this foundational study prompted researchers to investigate ways to address areas of deficiency and explore institutional changes to promote optimal outcomes for foster care alumni; however, this study is somewhat dated. The National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) was established in 2010 and requires states to track foster care alumni and monitor outcomes for youth aging out of care (youth.gov, n.d.). Although the primary goal of identifying barriers in college has a strong presence in the literature and the database, the focus of my research extends beyond the problems faced by foster care alumni in college and provides insight into factors that contribute to persistence and completion of college. This focus considers the participants’ experiences

from a strengths-based perspective versus a problem-saturated group of students on campus, and it highlights their desires to shift the emphasis from being viewed by others with sympathy to being treated with empathy that will help them to successfully navigate higher education.

The participants of my study valued authentic relationships with trusted people and networks they perceived as invested in them and their future. Participants reported desires to be viewed for their resilience versus being pitied for their status as alumni of the foster care system. They seemingly responded well to sources of support that acknowledged and supported their potential and that they perceived as highlighting their strengths. The findings from my research contribute to the notion that a strengths-based perspective may facilitate a more positive relationship between students and institutional representatives. The findings also provide the potential opportunity to explore a very specific group, foster care alumni, as they cited the need for positive relationships and a shift in perception by potential support networks as critical to their success. A strengths based approach early in the educational endeavors of foster care alumni in college with advisement would be an area worth further exploration in terms of research given the value assigned by foster care alumni and the significance of an advising relationship between the institution and the student.

Given the value assigned to strengths by participants and the significance of an advising relationship between the institution and the student, exploration of the impacts

of using a strengths-based advising approach early in the educational endeavors of foster care alumni in college would be useful. In a recent mixed-methods study, Soria, Laumer, Morrow and Marttinen (2017) examined the impact of a strengths-based advising model for the general population of first year undergraduate students and found a positive relationship between this approach and academic outcomes. They made the recommendation that “institutions place a special emphasis on integrating strengths based educational opportunities in academic advising contexts” (p. 63). Academic advisement is one of the first and perhaps most critical opportunities for engagement and building a foundation for success for students, particularly for students more likely to present a mountain of obstacles and uncertainty by assessing and highlighting and/or identifying the strengths they possess. Coupling the existing knowledge of the strengths-based lens for advising with the knowledge gleaned from this study provides an opportunity to further research ways to enhance experiences, develop critical relationships, and improve overall outcomes for foster care alumni in college.

The participants of this study all reported having supportive relationships as beneficial to their abilities to persist and complete college. As stated earlier, the way foster care alumni seek and accept support is unique and merits further investigation. Many of the participants gravitated toward sources of support as others who were familiar with their personal history or were existing stakeholders of the foster care community that did not require participants having to explain their situations as foster

care alumni or re-telling their personal stories, stories that many wanted to leave behind them and start anew. This insight would be useful in investigating the outcomes of higher educational institutions well-versed in the unique needs of the foster care alumni community via campus support programs in comparison to higher educational institutions with no formal networks for foster care alumni. This may require exploring the perceptions of support from foster care alumni that began college but did not persist to broaden the knowledge of what is beneficial and what practices may be detrimental to retention of this population.

Another area to further investigate is the underlying motivation to complete college. If a foster care alumni is pursuing a college degree to have a better life than they experienced as children, be financially stable, or become a part of a helping profession this information would be useful in understanding how to further facilitate ways to maintain motivation during challenging times and improve retention of foster care alumni in college. For example, several of the participants of this study reported changing majors after realizing their original choice was not a good fit for them. For some, they relied on guidance from support systems but for others they just happened to take a class that they felt connected to. As I reflect on the data, I consider how many foster care alumni were faced with similar situations in terms of goodness of fit between their goals and their chosen major. Perhaps they chose a major to make a comfortable income, as did Faith, and then realized it was not a good fit. What if they did not have someone to

guide them and decided to depart college because it was not something they were interested in after all? In sum, the outcomes of my research open the door to further examination of how a strengths-based approach in the early encounters with the higher education institutions lead to positive outcomes of foster care alumni, how a campus well-versed in the significance of support networks on campus might influence retention, and how honing in on underlying motivators might contribute to persistence and completion of college for foster care alumni.

### **Practice**

Many of the ways that participants felt support were through informal and intangible gestures from individuals with familiarity of their circumstances. Although financial support is essential to foster care alumni's abilities to persist and complete college, this was not a major area of concern among participants of this study. As stated earlier, perhaps the fiscal component is stable and predictable; therefore, it was not perceived by the participants of this study as a major contributor to persistence and completion of college. The findings from my study suggest that college campuses need to shift their primary focus from tangible support to emotional support for foster care alumni in college. This would provide the opportunity to make essential connections with others and broaden the level of trusted supports. Many of the participants in this research seemingly engaged in a vetting process of determining who and how they sought support from others. In considering the dismal outcomes of foster care alumni in college,

it is important to consider ways to reduce the necessity for vetting of potential supports. One approach that has been implemented in some programs is the use of seasoned foster care alumni on college campuses as mentors to incoming foster care alumni students. Insider knowledge is something that would be extremely difficult to replicate and is a characteristic that participants in this study valued when seeking out support from others. The concept mirrors that of the international student programs that promote integration versus isolation through familiarity. Several participants in this study felt out of place on campus; although they may present as a traditional, “normal” student, someone who has been in their footsteps would be extremely beneficial in assisting them with a consistent, stable presence to help in acclimating to campus life, norms, and expectations during this critical transition. This may be achieved through many avenues but would require collaboration between ETV specialists, Independent Living representatives, external stakeholders of the foster care community, and college campuses. Higher education institutions need to begin developing an early relationship with foster care youth while they are in high school to alleviate some of the initial confusion or hesitation about college life. This may be done via implementing formal campus support programs comprised of foster care alumni working in collaboration with Independent Living programs and ETV specialists. The transition for youth from Independent Living to working with ETV specialists once they arrive on campuses needs to have the constant presence of a formal campus support program to guide them as well as informing and

educating various factions of the higher education community (housing, financial aid, advising, student support services) about the unique needs of this population.

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

In addition to bridging connections between all invested agencies and institutions, it is important to reiterate that working with foster care alumni in college requires very specific knowledge for adequately addressing issues. The participants of this study identified how important their interactions with their professors, work-study supervisors, financial aid personnel, coaches, and peers were to their success; however, they also experienced issues that extended beyond the basic levels of support. They experienced challenges with how to meet their basic needs, for example, not understanding how meal plans work, running out of meal plans before the end of the semester, housing insecurity between semesters and during breaks because campus housing is not available and



signing financial documents for loans without understanding the difference between scholarships and loans. In sum, it would behoove higher education institutions to have a formal expert on campus to advocate for and assist foster care alumni to facilitate positive educational outcomes.

## **Theory**

The present study provides some insight into the underlying motivation to complete college among the participants through the theoretical framework of self-determination theory. Participants in this study emphasized their independence and, although they acknowledged how critical support was to their persistence and completion of college, they felt as though they were largely independent; however, a common theme was an intrinsic motivation to help others. The majority of participants in this study reported their desire to help others as a driving force in their persistence in college. My findings reinforce the concept of autonomy in the sense that participants emphasized the value in helping others as a driving force and a way to reconcile past injustices they experienced through addressing future injustices toward others. This insight into the participants' experiences and motivations to complete college was particularly evident with Heather. She began as an architect major but never felt as if she fit in and questioned her ability to persist and complete her degree. She changed her major to human and family services and felt a sense of familiarity and purpose, which she attributed to her ability to persist and complete college.

The second concept of self-determination theory, competence, was more complicated in the application to foster care alumni and the motivation to persist in college. In my theoretical application of this concept, the participants had expertise in the role of being a recipient of the helping profession. The participants of the study used their level of expertise and decided to go “against the grain” by internalizing the values instilled in them through their experiences in foster care. They were motivated to associate with the social group that perceived them as competent and able instead of the group that saw them vulnerable and unable. This concept warrants a much deeper understanding of the subtle nuances of competence in relation to motivation among foster alumni in college and would require additional research to reinforce my theoretical application of this component.

In terms of the findings from my study, the concept of relatedness was most evident and aligned the concept of self-determination theory and my data. Participants shared experiences of connecting prior to and during their college endeavors. The connections were critical in their abilities to persist. The findings from this study extend Ryan & Deci’s self-determination theory with a focus on foster care alumni who completed their college degrees. This theoretical lens has not been applied to this specific population in previous research and would be a good fit in expanding on the concept of extrinsic motivation as it applies to foster care alumni in college.

The second theoretical lens applied to my study was attachment theory. Although attachment theory encompasses a broad range of concepts, ideas, and applications, I utilized the specific component of avoidant attachment to examine my data. Avoidant attachment and anxious attachment for persistence of students in college had a presence in previous scholarly works. My study served to reinforce the findings on how levels of avoidant attachment influence specifically foster alumni students in terms of accepting/seeking support from others. Participants of my study, although their level of avoidant attachment is unknown to me, were closely aligned with the previous studies suggesting that lower levels of avoidant attachment are more likely to persist. In my application of this theoretical component of attachment theory, I postulated that the modification of levels of attachment was a process of “breaking down pride,” which had a strong presence in my data. This connection between modifying levels of attachment through “breaking down pride” and accepting support to help participants persist definitely merits further investigation. The findings from my study support and extend upon the previous findings from other researchers in understanding foster care alumni through the lens of attachment theory.

### **Limitations of the Study**

As is common with qualitative research, this case study has certain limitations. The goal of my study was to gain insight into the unique, individual experiences of a very

specific group of foster care alumni in the state of Oklahoma. Limitations of this study include a strong reliance on semi-structured interviews with participants. In my attempts to better understand how foster care alumni persist and utilize support services, I presented open-ended questions to facilitate discussion and gather data during my interviews with participants. Secondly, the data were generated from a small sample size of nine participants, the majority of whom attended college in the central and northeastern part of the state with the exception of one participant who attended college in the southeastern part of the state. As with all qualitative inquiry, the findings of this study are not intended to be generalizable; however, findings may be transferable to other locations and groups of foster alumni.

### **Future Research**

As stated earlier, the scholarly literature is evolving to include specific information and knowledge about foster care alumni in college. For future research, I believe it would be beneficial to further explore the experiences of those in a supportive role for this population to gain insight from a stakeholder perspective in terms of the challenges they experience in advocacy and support. Statewide initiatives in Oklahoma have relied primarily on individuals who function on a volunteer basis on college campuses. Establishing additional evidence in terms of the need for foster care alumni in a mentor/helping role might facilitate a necessary awareness among those in positions to implement change initiatives. This type of qualitative research may also unveil some of

the underlying perceptions those in supportive roles have of foster care alumni and thus may substantiate or dispute the beliefs of many participants that others feel pity toward them. In examining the attitudes and intent of those in supportive roles, it could bring an awareness to helpers about their own motivations or facilitate a change in insight among recipients of support who want to be considered fully capable yet acknowledge they need additional help in establishing independence. Research from the providers of support, both formal and informal, to foster care alumni in college would provide an insider's perspective and may serve to understand goodness of fit in terms of relationships between supports and foster care alumni. Understanding the motivation behind the "helper therapy principle" as it relates to foster care alumni may serve to challenge assumptions and reduce guardedness or reluctance to accept support during times of need.

A second area to consider for future research agendas is the foster care alumni who are not identifiable via scholarships or financial aid recipients. For example, Maria was past the age of receiving assistance for her foster care alumni status. She, like many of her foster care alumni peers, was a non-traditional student and a single mother when she began her educational endeavors. More specifically, additional research is needed to examine the resources that are available for those who fall outside of the Independent Living program radar and their specific needs.

## **Conclusions**

Establishing the foundation of this dissertation began almost a decade ago. In the time since collecting the data, I have witnessed the participants of this study continue to thrive and excel academically and professionally. As I conclude the work I began with the participants many years ago, I can report that Isabella is a third year law student. Anthony, Brittany and Heather work directly with foster care alumni in college in the state of Oklahoma. Malcolm and Jennifer are in graduate school working on masters' degrees in social work. In the lived experiences of these foster care alumni, people supporting their endeavors prior to and during college mattered. The work they are doing to give back to others matters. The content of this dissertation restores my belief that not all relationships are transactional.

During the data collection process, foster alumni shared very intimate pieces of themselves with me for the purposes of promoting better outcomes for others and in hope of transforming the system they came from. I am fortunate enough to be able to share this with others. In retrospect, the most challenging work for me has been ensuring that I am able to accurately represent their stories and experiences. It is my hope that the collaboration of foster care alumni and higher education is able to further develop as a result of our work.

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APPENDIX A  
RECRUITMENT COMMUNICATIONS

Note: The following will be distributed via email.

Foster Care Alumni After College: A Retrospective Lens

I am conducting research with adults who "aged out" of foster care (were not adopted or reunified with family at age 18) and who completed a Bachelor's degree at an Oklahoma private or public higher education institution between 2005 and 2015. This study is expected to help us understand what helps foster care alumni complete a Bachelor's degree.

Participants in this study will be confidentially interviewed, one-on-one, on two separate occasions for approximately one hour for each interview with possible follow up via email or telephone.

If you meet the criteria and are willing to consider participation in this study, I will email you a consent form that provides additional details about study procedures.

[signature block with contact information]

Note: The following text will be distributed via social media

### Foster Care Alumni After College: A Retrospective Lens 2015

I am an OSU PhD student conducting research with adults who "aged out" of foster care (were not adopted or reunified with family at age 18) and who completed a Bachelor's degree at an Oklahoma private or public higher education institution between 2005 and 2015. This study is expected to help us understand what helps foster care alumni complete a Bachelor's degree. If you meet the criteria and are willing to consider participation in this study, I will email you a consent form that provides additional details about study procedures. Questions or to sign up, contact: Toni Hail at (918) 207-7518 or via email at [toni.hail@okstate.edu](mailto:toni.hail@okstate.edu)

## APPENDIX B

### IRB APPROVAL LETTERS AND CONSENT FORM

#### Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board

Date: Wednesday, July 29, 2015  
IRB Application No ED15105  
Proposal Title: Foster Care alumni after college: A retrospective lens

Reviewed and  
Processed as: Exempt

**Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved Protocol Expires: 7/28/2018**

Principal  
Investigator(s):

Toni Hall Kerri Shutz Kearney  
PO Box 163 315 Willard  
Tahlequah, OK 74465 Stillwater, OK 74078

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The IRB application referenced above has been approved. It is the judgment of the reviewers that the rights and welfare of individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected, and that the research will be conducted in a manner consistent with the IRB requirements as outlined in section 45 CFR 46.

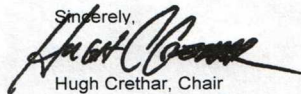
The final versions of any printed recruitment, consent and assent documents bearing the IRB approval stamp are attached to this letter. These are the versions that must be used during the study.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to do the following:

1. Conduct this study exactly as it has been approved. Any modifications to the research protocol must be submitted with the appropriate signatures for IRB approval. Protocol modifications requiring approval may include changes to the title, PI advisor, funding status or sponsor, subject population composition or size, recruitment, inclusion/exclusion criteria, research site, research procedures and consent/assent process or forms
2. Submit a request for continuation if the study extends beyond the approval period. This continuation must receive IRB review and approval before the research can continue.
3. Report any adverse events to the IRB Chair promptly. Adverse events are those which are unanticipated and impact the subjects during the course of the research; and
4. Notify the IRB office in writing when your research project is complete.

Please note that approved protocols are subject to monitoring by the IRB and that the IRB office has the authority to inspect research records associated with this protocol at any time. If you have questions about the IRB procedures or need any assistance from the Board, please contact Dawnnett Watkins 219 Scott Hall (phone: 405-744-5700, dawnnett.watkins@okstate.edu).

Sincerely,



Hugh Crethar, Chair  
Institutional Review Board

## ADULT CONSENT FORM

### OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY

**PROJECT TITLE:** Foster Care Alumni After College: A Retrospective Lens

**INVESTIGATORS:** Toni M. Hail, Doctoral Student, Oklahoma State University, Dr. Kerri S. Kearney, Adviser, Oklahoma State University

**PURPOSE:** The purpose of this study is to gather the perceptions of former foster youth who have completed a minimum of a Bachelor's degree in the state of Oklahoma, from private or public institution. The study focuses on what they believe contributed to their ability to persist and complete college.

**PROCEDURES:** By signing this consent form you agree to participate in the study. You will be given a copy of the consent, which includes contact information for the researcher, adviser, and university IRB. I will conduct a minimum of 2 interviews, which will last approximately 60 minutes each. You will be asked to participate in a timeline activity in the first interview and to bring an artifact to the second interview. The timeline activity and artifact will be digitally photographed and no identifying information will be shared. The digital photographs are data sources that will be utilized for data analysis and will be stored in the password-protected laptop of the researcher and will be destroyed after 5 years. I will record the interviews via digital voice recorder and then transcribe them to an electronic data file with no identifying information. Additionally, no identifying information about participants will be reported in the research or reports.

Once the interview is transcribed, you will have an opportunity to review the printed transcript. You may be asked via email or telephone or in person, if preferred to participate in a follow-up interview to clarify your earlier comments. Follow up interviews will last approximately 15-20 minutes.

**RISKS OF PARTICIPATION:** There are no known risks associated with this project, which are greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life.

**BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION:** Existing scholarship related to educational outcomes for former foster youth indicate that while the desire to attend and complete college is parallel to that of the non-foster youth peers, outcomes are significantly poorer for foster youth in college. Scholarship that highlights the successes of former foster youth after college is minimal. Findings from this study may help understand the contributors to persistence in college for this population. If interested, I will send you a copy of the results of the study when it is finished.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** All data will be stored electronically in an external data file on a password-protected computer; the laptop will be stored in the home or locked office of the principal investigator. The researcher will store the signed consent forms in a locked file cabinet drawer or (if electronic) the password-protected laptop of the researcher. Paper,



audio and electronic copies of any data will be stored in the principal investigator's office in a locked file for no more than five years, at which time they will be destroyed. It is possible that the consent process and data collection will be observed by research oversight staff responsible for safeguarding the rights and wellbeing of people who participate in research.

**CONTACTS:** If you have questions or concerns about participating in this research study, you may contact the researcher at (918) 207-7518 or by email at [toni.hail@okstate.edu](mailto:toni.hail@okstate.edu); you may also contact her adviser, Kerri Kearney, at (405) 513-2043 or by email at [kerri.kearney@okstate.edu](mailto:kerri.kearney@okstate.edu). For information on participants' rights, contact Dr. Heather Crethar, IRB Chair, 223 Scott Hall, Stillwater, OK 74078, 405.744.3377 or [irb@okstate.edu](mailto:irb@okstate.edu).

**PARTICIPANT RIGHTS:** I understand that my participation is voluntary; that there is no penalty for refusal to participate, and that I am free to withdraw my consent and participation in this project at any time, without penalty.

**CONSENT DOCUMENTATION:** I have been fully informed about the procedures listed here. I am aware of what I will be asked to do and of the benefits of my participation. I also understand the following statements: I affirm that I am 18 years of age or older. I have read and fully understand this consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A copy of this form will be given to me. I hereby give permission for my participation in this study.

Signature of Participant

Date

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Signature of Researcher

Date

---

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## APPENDIX C

### DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

1. Name: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Age: \_\_\_\_\_

3. Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

4. Degree/Major: \_\_\_\_\_

5. Institution: \_\_\_\_\_

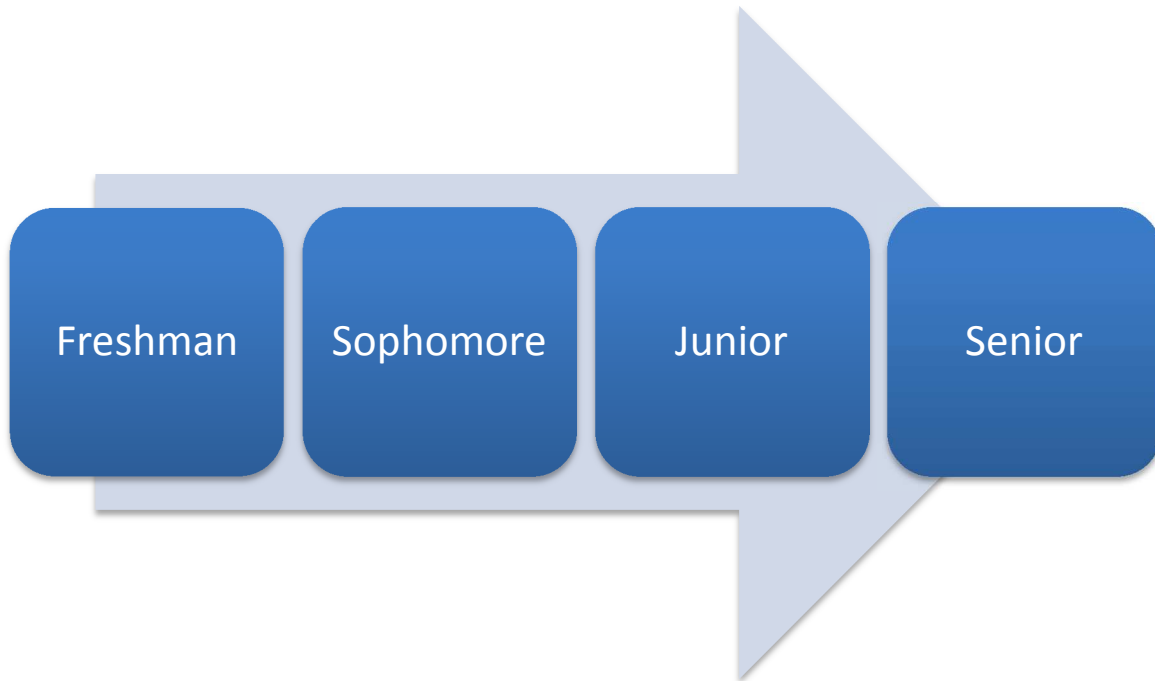
## APPENDIX D

### INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. What made you decide to go to college?
3. How would you describe your life during college?
4. Identify significant events in college (timeline activity)
5. Overall, what was most challenging to you while you were in college?
6. How did you overcome those challenges?
7. Overall, what kept you moving forward to complete college?
8. What strategies would you suggest for foster care alumni who have aged out and are planning to attend college?
9. How would you coach foster care alumni in college?
10. What would you do to help them persist and complete college?
11. Tell me about the (artifact) item you chose that represents your ability to persist and complete college.
12. What do others need to know about foster care alumni and persistence in college?

## APPENDIX E

### TIMELINE ACTIVITY GUIDELINE & INSTRUCTIONS



At the beginning of the interviews, participants were given an 11x14 blank white paper and instructed to highlight significant events over the course of their college journeys using the above illustration as a linear guide. This was used to illustrate events and elicit further discussion on those experiences. The timeline activity was used for both individual interviews.

APPENDIX F

CASE REPORT SUMMARY FOR CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS

Worksheet 3. Analyst's Notes while reading a case report

Case ID \_\_\_\_\_

Synopsis of case:	Case Findings: I.  II.  III.  IV.
Uniqueness of case situation for program/phenomenon:	Possible excerpts for cross-case report: Page Page Page
Relevance of case for cross-case Themes: Theme 1 _____ Theme 2 _____ Theme 3 _____ Theme 4 _____ Theme 5 _____ Theme 6 _____	General influences (optional):    Situational Factors (optional)    
Commentary:          	

<https://www.guilford.com/add/forms/stake.pdf>

APPENDIX G

Worksheet 4. Estimates of Ordinariness of the Situation of Each Case and Estimates of Manifestation of Multicase Themes in Each Case

W = highly unusual situation, u = somewhat unusual situation,  
 blank = ordinary situation  
 M = high manifestation, m = some manifestation, blank = almost no manifestation

	Case A	Case B	Case C	Case D	Case E
Ordinariness of this Case's situation:					
Original Multicase Themes					
Theme 1					
Theme 2					
Theme 3					
Theme 4					
Theme 5					
Theme 6					
Added Multicase Themes					
Theme 7					
Theme 8					

High manifestation means that the Theme is prominent in this particular case study. A highly unusual situation (far from ordinary) is one that is expected to challenge the generality of themes. As indicated, the original themes can be augmented by additional themes even as late as the beginning of the cross-case analysis. The paragraphs on each Theme should be attached to the matrix so that the basis for estimates can be readily examined.

<https://www.guilford.com/add/forms/stake.pdf>

## APPENDIX H

### ESTIMATES OF FINDINGS' RELEVANCE TO THEMES

Worksheet 5. A Map on which to make Assertions for the Final Report

	Themes							
Case A	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Finding I								
Finding II								
Finding III								
Finding IV								
Case B								
Finding I								
Finding II								
Finding III								
Case C								
Finding I								
Finding II								
Finding III								
Finding IV								
Finding V								
And so on for the remaining Cases								

A High mark means that the Theme is an important part of this particular case study and relevant to the theme.

<https://www.guilford.com/add/forms/stake.pdf>

VITA

Toni M. Hail

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Thesis: FOSTER CARE ALUMNI AFTER COLLEGE: A RETROSPECTIVE LENS

Major Field: Educational Leadership & Policy Studies

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy/Education in your major at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in May, 2019.

Completed the requirements for the Master of Social Work at University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma in 2003.

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Social Work at Northeastern State University, Tahlequah, Oklahoma in 2001.

Experience:

Northeastern State University, Tahlequah, OK

Instructor: August 2009-Present

Southwestern Oklahoma State University, Weatherford, OK

Clinical Service Provider III, August 2004-July 2009

Professional Memberships:

National Indian Child Welfare Association



