BOURDIEUEAN CAPITAL IN FORMER

FOSTER YOUTH COLLEGE STUDENTS:

A MULTICASE QUALITATIVE STUDY


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Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate College of the
Oklahoma State University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
December 2019

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are so many people to whom I owe thanks for making this journey possible. First and foremost, I want to thank my family. Kendall, you have always been my rock and I could never have done this without you. Thanks for sticking with me through all these years. I love you so much. Tatum, you knew what "homework" was long before you ever started school—I started this journey before you were born and now you're in Kindergarten! Thanks for being such a great daughter and motivating me to be better. Merritt, you're new to all of this, but know that Dad has been at this for a while and I hope it makes you proud someday. To my parents and grandparents, thank you for always pushing me to be my best and supporting me through many, many years of school.

I've been extremely fortunate throughout my doctoral journey to have supportive bosses and coworkers. Thanks to all of you who have been flexible with my schedule, listened to my whining, and told me I could do it. It has meant so much to me.

To my committee members, thank you for your constant, gracious support through this process and for welcoming me into the community of scholars. I couldn't have asked for a more distinguished group of academics to serve as role models and mentors. Dr. Kearney, thank you for your patience, your kindness, and for not giving up on me. You've been all I could have ever hoped for in and advisor.

I can't express my gratitude to all the participants of this study in words. This dissertation has been a journey for me in the truest sense of the word—I wound up far from where I started. You taught me more about grace, perseverance, and determination than anyone I've ever met. Thank you for letting me be part of your lives.

Finally, I thank God for all of these people who have supported me and everything else. I'm so much more blessed than I deserve.

Name: KYLE FOSTER

Date of Degree: DECEMBER 2019

Title of Study: BOURDIEUEAN CAPITAL IN FORMER FOSTER YOUTH COLLEGE STUDENTS: A MULTICASE QUALITATIVE STUDY

Major Field: EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP & POLICY STUDIES

Abstract: The purpose of this study was to explore successful foster alumni college students' experiences where they used, while in college and before matriculating, cultural and social capital resources as defined by Pierre Bourdieu (1984 & 1986). These resources are sometimes referred to as "symbolic capital." Since cultural and social capital are traditionally associated in the educational environment with students from privileged backgrounds, this study sought to gain a deeper understanding of how successful college students who were previously in foster care perceived these resources; Bourdieu's theories suggest these students would be unlikely to have the significant advantage of similar cultural and social resources. Five participants who were current college students who were in foster care during adolescence were interviewed. Participants shared experiences wherein cultural and social capital would have been relevant factors to their success. Participants' experiences were also examined through postings on their social media pages.

This study utilized the *a priori* theoretical framework of Bourdieu's theories of cultural and social capital. Four findings emerged from this analysis. First, Participants were aware of cultural capital differences from peers. Second, cultural capital was not necessarily linked to participants' college success. Third, participants possessed often unexamined sources of symbolic capital. Finally, the data showed that cultural and social capital often overlapped. These findings have implications for higher education institutions wishing to better serve former foster youth college students. In addition, this study provides a valuable example of how Bourdieu's theories can be applied in research with college students from underserved populations.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

World-renowned journalist Dan Rather said of getting a college education, "A college degree is the key to realizing the American dream, well worth the financial sacrifice because it is supposed to open the door to a world of opportunity" (2012). In an era that seems to be growing in cynicism, there has been a great deal of debate about the American dream and whether, indeed, it is even still attainable. Although considered debatable by some, Americans certainly seem to believe that college is worthwhile; between 1992 and 2002, enrollment at degree-granting institutions grew by 15% and rose by 24% between 2002 and 2012. In 2012, 41% of 18-to 24-year-olds in the United States were enrolled in college (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). This speaks to the value that American society puts on higher education. As Rather (2012) indicated, judging from these statistics, Americans seem to believe that higher education is the door to opportunity, or at least the ground floor to opportunity. According to an article in the *New York Times,* the college degree is now the minimum requirement for many low-level jobs in the United States—in other words, the new high school diploma (Rampell, 2013).

The importance of a college degree is also evident in the earnings of degree completers versus non-completers.  In 2014, young adults aged 25-34 with a bachelor's degree had median earnings of $49,900 per year, compared with $30,000 for high school completers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016).  In sum, evidence abounds that attaining a college degree is more important than ever to personal and financial success in America.

If a college degree is important to attaining success, it is easy to imagine that there are groups where it is even more important, groups so utterly lacking in the privileges enjoyed by the white middle and upper classes that higher education is one of the very few paths to upward mobility.  There are many groups throughout America's history: African Americans, Native Americans, and women, just to name a few.  However, there is one group that is often overlooked when it comes to the importance of higher education as social equity: children in foster care.

There are many reasons that foster alumni may not succeed in college.  Each instance of college success is attached to a real person with an individual story.  The prevailing trend in higher education is to view student retention through the lens of student engagement theory.  However, as will be discussed later, these theories may fail to address some key factors in students' personal backgrounds that may help to account for college success, or lack thereof.  This dissertation is focused on research that views college success among alumni of foster care through less-utilized theoretical lens in the area of college student retention: Bourdieu's theory of social and cultural capital.

**Background of the Study**

The prospects of success in higher education for students who have been in foster care are grim. At the K-12 level, children in foster care are twice as likely to be absent from school, 17- and 18-year-olds are twice as likely to be suspended and 3 times more likely to be expelled than other students, and the average 17-18-year-old in foster care reads at a seventh grade level (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). About 20% of those who were in foster care will not finish high school or a G.E.D.

Like many of their peers, youth in foster care want to go to college; in fact, more than 70% of children in foster care desire a college experience (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010). Despite this, former foster youth are unlikely to finish a degree, especially compared with their peers. Fewer than 5% will finish a 2-year college degree and only 2.5% will finish a 4-year degree by age 26 (Courtney, et al., 2011). Considering that, among all adults in the U.S., 30.4% had earned a bachelor's degree in 2011, people who were not in foster care are more than ten times as likely to earn a bachelor's degree than those who were (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). The reasons for this lack of college success include that children in foster care are often on their own at a young age, are disappointed in the systems designed to help them, and are hesitant to ask for help after aging out. Few college programs are aware of the particular needs of former foster youth. They also often lack role models, mentors, and advocates. Health-related needs often go unmet and there is often a lack of a good fit with the college or program (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

The difficulties of alumni of foster care are reflected in economic and social data. In one study, more than 45% of former foster youth reported at least one

economic hardship at age 26 and nearly 30% reported not having enough money to pay rent.  More than 80% of women and about 40% of men had received a means-tested government benefit in the previous year, commonly known as welfare benefits.  Teen pregnancy among females who had been in foster care was also prevalent, with 32.1% reporting having been pregnant before age 18.  Perhaps most alarming, though, is the fact that 59% of female participants and 81.8% of male participants reported that they had been arrested at some point in their life (Courtney, et al., 2011).  On average, the arrest rate for Americans before age 23 is between 30.2% and 41.4% (Memmott, 2011).  With per inmate cost averaging $31,286 in 40 American states (Henrichson & Delaney, 2012), taxpayers have a vested interest in keeping foster alumni out of the prison pipeline.  Providing foster alumni with genuine opportunities for higher education is an excellent way to do this.  These striking figures give a clear indication into why states should make college success for former foster youth a public policy priority.

## Problem Statement

Adults who were in foster care are much more likely to have negative social and economic outcomes, from increased rates of reliance on government assistance programs, to high teen pregnancy rates, to higher-than-average arrest rates (Courtney, et. al., 2011).  Although obtaining a college degree can help to negate some of these outcomes, only about 4.4% of foster alumni finish a 2-year degree and only about 2.5% finish a 4-year degree by age 26 (Courtney, et. al., 2011).  Alumni of foster care are on their own at a young age and often lack role models, mentors, and advocates (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

With pressure mounting on colleges and universities to increase retention of students and related graduation rates, these institutions have not found an effective way to support increased retention and graduation among foster alumni, thus continuing the cycle of negative outcomes. By considering the social and cultural capital this unique population of students has built before entering college and devising strategies to use and build this capital, institutions of higher education may gain unique and useful insights into how to best support foster alumni on their campuses.

## Professional Significance

Student retention and graduation efforts are critical issues in higher education. Especially in traditionally marginalized groups such as racial and ethnic minorities, academics and administrators in colleges and universities across America are sparing no effort to get students across the stage on commencement day (for example, see Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003). However, the college success of foster alumni, also a marginalized group, has not been given this attention. Given that there were more than 400,000 children in foster care and nearly a quarter-of-a-million exiting care in fiscal year 2014 (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016), combined with reports of strong rates of college aspirations among this group, higher education stakeholders can likely benefit from the information presented here. As pressure from the public and policymakers mounts for institutions of higher education to graduate more students in a shorter amount of time with less debt, all scholarship that assists in this aim is helpful.

This research also makes a unique contribution to the higher education body of scholarship.  Although there is a plentiful amount of scholarship dealing with Bourdieu's theories and a smaller number of pieces of research dealing with former foster youth, the current approach has not been utilized to study the problem at hand. The lessons learned from this research can be applied to other projects dealing with college student retention in traditionally underserved groups, as well as highlight areas of Bourdieu's work that are of significance in these areas.

**Overview of Methodology**

This research used a constructivist guiding epistemology and relies on Interpretivism as its theoretical perspective.  Both of these concepts will be fully explored in Chapter 3.  Bourdieu's theory of social and cultural capital served as the theoretical lens for this study. A detailed discussion of Bourdieu's theories is provided in Chapter 2.

This study used a qualitative multiple case study methodology as described in the seminal book by Stake (2006).  Each participant constituted a case in the multicase study and each case consisted of in-depth interviews and document analysis.  Participants were college students at colleges and universities in a southwestern state in the United States.  Participants were all foster alumni (see Definition of Key Terms) and were at various stages in their college careers.  Data analysis used open coding, as well as coding using Bourdieu's theories as a lens.  A full description of this study's methods appears in Chapter 3.

**Definition of Key Terms**

For the purposes of this study, the following terms are defined.

- Associate's Colleges: "Institutions at which the highest level degree awarded is an associate's degree" (Center for Postsecondary Research, 2017).

- Baccalaureate Colleges: "Includes institutions where baccalaureate or higher degrees represent at least 50 percent of all degrees but where fewer than 50 master's degrees or 20 doctoral degrees were awarded during the [academic] year" (Center for Postsecondary Research, 2017).

- Doctoral Universities: "Includes institutions that awarded at least 20 research/scholarship doctoral degrees during the [academic] year (this does not include professional practice doctoral-level degrees, such as the JD, MD, PharmD, DPT, etc.)" (Center for Postsecondary Research, 2017).

- Foster Alumni: A person who was removed from the home of their biological or adoptive parents and placed in another home. This includes kinship placement or a non-kinship placement, as well a group homes and similar out-of-home placements.

- Master's Colleges and Universities: "Generally includes institutions that awarded at least 50 master's degrees and fewer than 20 doctoral degrees during the [academic] year" (Center for Postsecondary Research, 2017).

- Private College or University: An institution of higher education that offers degrees at various levels, is not funded through legislative

appropriations, and is under the direct control of a private entity, such as a privately appointed governing board or corporation.

- Public College or University: An institution of higher education that receives publicly appropriated funds from a state legislature or other government body and is under the direct control of a governing or coordinating board appointed by the state government.

## Summary

There are many compelling reasons for colleges and universities to help former foster youth reach their goal of a college degree. Some of these are public policy reasons; attaining a college degree will aid in helping alumni of foster care avoid many of the negative outcomes that they all-too-typically experience as adults. Colleges and universities are also under increasing pressure to assist traditionally underserved groups, a designation which fits foster alumni well. Although the most popular focus of studies on college student retention tends to use theories of student engagement, using the theoretical lens of cultural and social capital could yield useful results. This qualitative multicase study sought to explore questions of cultural and social capital usage in foster are alumni.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF EXISTING LITERATURE

Perhaps the issues of college student retention, outcomes of foster alumni, and Bourdieuean theory would not seem to have much commonality at first glance. Much has been written about the three subjects separately and some has even been written about combinations of two. However, an examination of the literature in this chapter demonstrates that these three concepts, when considered together, may produce valuable new knowledge about ways to ensure that foster alumni have a better chance at success in life. As noted in Chapter 1, for some foster alumni, this may be assistance with their journeys to college degrees.

After describing the search process, I will begin this review of literature with an overview of Bourdieu's social and cultural capital theories. I will then consider studies in education that have employed Bourdieu's concepts as their theoretical framework. An examination of the literature surrounding adult outcomes of foster alumni will follow. Next I present a review of the traditional theories used in research on college student retention and compare and contrast those to the Bourdieuean framework. An examination of the literature surrounding adult outcomes of former foster youth will follow. Next I

present a review of the traditional theories used in research on college student retention and compare and contrast those to the Bourdieuean framework. The chapter closes with a summary of how these concepts integrate with one another and an explanation of how this study is situated with the concepts.

## The Search Process

Oklahoma State University's Edmon Low Library proved to be an invaluable resource in the search for scholarly work in these areas. Using the library website's BOSS (Big Orange Search System), I was able to use Boolean search terms such as "cultural capital," "social capital," "foster alumni," "college student retention," and "college student persistence." To some of the broader terms, I added descriptors such as "+ higher education," "+ special populations," and the like. The library website's BOSS functionality allowed me to sort results by type, such as peer reviewed journal, newspaper article, book, report, and so on. I was able to build the amount of relevant literature I reviewed incrementally by utilizing reference lists of relevant articles that I discovered through BOSS. Although most of the resources that proved relevant to my study were available electronically, I did utilize Oklahoma State University's collection and its inter-library loan service in order to obtain those resources only available in print.

## Bourdieu's Theories of Cultural and Social Capital

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu was a prolific producer of theory related to class, social reproduction, and education. Some of his most well-known theories are those dealing with cultural and social capital. To better understand how these concepts have been applied in educational research, it is prudent to begin with a primer on the theories themselves.

**Cultural Capital**

Bourdieu (1984) introduced the concept of cultural capital as a way to explain differences in educational outcomes among French children during the 1960s. Dissatisfied with economic theory's implicit definition that non-economic forms of capital were disinterested, he sought to define the forms of capital and how they could be converted from one form to the other. Bourdieu (1986) identified two forms of non-economic capital: cultural capital and social capital.

Cultural capital is a concept that has been operationalized in many different ways and across disciplines. Scholars do not completely agree about how to best sync Bourdieu's original concept, which applied to the French educational system several decades ago, to modern American society. The differences in the roles of class, context, and culture make it difficult to apply the concept of cultural capital exactly as it was originally envisioned. However, Winkle-Wagner (2010) developed a definition that is helpful in reconciling our society with the concept of cultural capital. Figure 2.1 illustrates the features of cultural capital included in this definition, an explanation of those features, and examples.

| **Figure 2.1.** Features of Cultural Capital | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Feature of Cultural Capital** | Culturally based resources | Skills, abilities, or mannerisms (Also known as Taste) |
| **Description of feature** | • Cultural awareness<br>• Knowledge about educational institutions<br>• Educational credentials<br>• Aesthetic Preferences | • Primarily habituated<br>• May not be consciously noticed |
| **Examples** | • Proper table etiquette<br>• A college degree<br>• Knowledge of fine art or classical music | • Style of speaking<br>• Manner of dress<br>• Self-confidence |

*Figure 2.1.* Cultural capital is divided into 2 main features: culturally based resources and skills, abilities, or mannerisms. Adapted from R. Winkle-Wagner, "Cultural Capital: The Promises and Pitfalls in Educational Research," copyright 2010, Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Like all forms of capital, the purpose of cultural capital is to exchange or expend it. Cultural capital can be exchanged for social rewards, including social mobility, acceptance, recognition, and inclusion (Winkle-Wagner, 2010 p. 5). Cultural capital is acquired through transmission within the family and through education. According to a prevalent interpretation of Bourdieu's theory, it is more difficult to acquire cultural capital through education alone (Winkle-Wagner, 2010).

Cultural capital is integrally linked to two related concepts from Bourdieu's theory: field and habitus. Field is where cultural competence is produced and assigned value. Bourdieu (1984) summarized the limits of where the field exists by saying it has "well-nigh inexhaustible possibilities for the pursuit of distinction" (p. 226). Many fields exist; Bourdieu (1984) described everything from holiday resorts to political programs as unique fields where cultural capital can be expressed. Any given social setting can be a

field where cultural capital is valued, is effective, or even existent (Winkle-Wagner, 2010). Thus, cultural capital that is valuable in one field may hold no value in a different field.

The other concept that is vitally linked to cultural capital is habitus. Habitus can be viewed as how cultural capital operates below the level of consciousness and language. One's habitus is the "cumulative collection of dispositions, norms, and tastes" (Winkle-Wagner, 2010, p. 9) and is constantly functioning as a way to perceive, appreciate, and act in the world. Habitus is a major way in which class distinctions are displayed, usually below the level of consciousness. Habitus is an embodied state linked to material conditions, such as economic conditions, so division of labor, work, and domination are all expressed through it (Winkle-Wagner, 2010). Habitus functions as a form of currency in the social world, where disposition can either be viewed favorably or unfavorably. For instance, certain gestures, such as raising one's hand, would be considered appropriate in a classroom and rewarded, whereas others could be considered rude and penalized (Winkle-Wagner, 2010). Though cultural capital, field, and habitus are very complex notions that require drawn out explanations, they can be summarized by Bourdieu's (1984) own formula: [(habitus) x (capital)] + field = practice (p. 101).

**Social Capital**

Social capital is a term that has entered the lexicon of American buzzwords. The basic understanding of social capital in the population at-large seems to be "using relationships with others for personal gain." Although this may be partly correct, social capital is a much more complex concept. Social capital, as it relates to educational research, has been mainly viewed in two ways. Coleman (1988) explains social capital as

a vehicle for the delivery of understanding of norms, social control, trust, and authority

an individual must understand and adopt in order to be successful.  Coleman (1988)

stresses the role parents play in building their child's social capital, especially as it relates

to educational settings.  Bourdieu (1986) defines social capital as,

> the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of
>
> a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual
>
> acquaintances and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group—
>
> which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned
>
> capital, a "credential" which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the
>
> word (pp. 248-249).

Bourdieu (1986) indicates that these group memberships may exist only because of

material and/or symbolic exchanges or in a more permanent state, such as membership in

a family, school, or tribe.  This emphasis on group membership sets Bourdieu's (1986)

explanation of social capital somewhat apart from that of Coleman (1988).  Because

group membership is such a vital component of social capital under Bourdieu's model,

the amount of social capital an individual possesses is dependent upon the size of their

social network and the amount of economic, cultural, and symbolic capital possessed by

each member of that network (Bourdieu, 1986). To be theoretically consistent, this study

used Bourdieu's (1986) theory of social capital instead of Coleman's (1988) theory.

Even though Coleman's (1988) work on social capital is undoubtedly seminal and has

been used broadly, the present research used only the Bourdieuean framework.

Additionally, the emphasis on durable networks and group membership is particularly

interesting when investigating alumni of foster care, a group who often does not form the durable relationships that their peers may have before entering college.

Possessing an understanding of the underlying theoretical model is important to understanding research that utilizes the Bourdieuean framework. Researchers frequently operationalize the concepts in many different ways, sometimes in contradiction to one another. The overview of the theoretical model in this section will provide at least some context to the research presented in the following section.

## Educational Research Employing Bourdieu's Theories

Bourdieu's theories have been used extensively in educational research as a tool to determine how students and parents are equipped to succeed in the educational environment. The majority of research has been at the K-12 level, though some work has been done with higher education and in special populations of students and parents. Some of this research will be explored in this section. This exploration will be followed with a discussion of how the literature portrays cultural and social capital as being transmitted.

To understand how cultural capital has been used as a theoretical framework, it is necessary to first understand how it has been operationalized in research. Winkle-Wagner (2010, p. 29) identifies four ways in which cultural capital is typically categorized in educational research: highbrow cultural capital, contextually-valued cultural capital, otherized cultural capital, and Bourdieuean framework cultural capital.

### Highbrow Cultural Capital

Beginning in the early 1980s, when Bourdieu's theories were really in their infancy, research started to emerge that used these theories as theoretical frameworks.

During this time, it was common for researchers to define cultural capital as something that was gained through participation in highbrow activities such as music, art, and theatre.  A typical example of how cultural capital has often been operationalized is DiMaggio's (1982) study that sought to determine if cultural capital affects high school student success.  DiMaggio (1982) used data from 1960s high school students to determine if participation in highbrow cultural activities affected high school success. The results of the study concluded that participation in highbrow activities among the all-white sample did, in fact, significantly impact grades, especially among girls.  DiMaggio (1982) also concluded that a father's educational status had a larger effect on the cultural status of girls than that of boys.  DiMaggio's (1982) study appears to be the first linking cultural capital to student success in the United States.  Along with Mohr, DiMaggio (1985) used the same data to find that cultural capital had a significant impact on educational attainment, college attendance and completion, graduate school attendance, and marital selection for men and women.  This operationalization of cultural capital as participation in highbrow cultural activity has continued throughout the literature; in 2000, De Graaf, De Graaf, and Kraaykamp did a study measuring the effects of parents' participation in beaux-arts and their reading activity had on their children's development of cultural capital.  The results indicated that the reading activity of parents had a greater impact on cultural capital development of children than parents' beaux-arts participation. Parents' understanding of democratic culture and the resulting ability to use this understanding in negotiations regarding their children's schooling has also been an operationalization of this highbrow approach to cultural capital (Gvion & Luzzatto, 2008).  The literature contains many more examples of K-12 cultural capital research

being operationalized through this highbrow approach. The highbrow approach has also been utilized in cultural capital research in the higher education context. Noble and Davies (2009) used participation in cultural activities, such as attendance of classical concerts and utilization of art galleries and museums, as a proxy for cultural capital. They also utilized such proxies as public library membership and students' ability to name the author of a book they had recently read. Their research found that cultural capital has a larger effect on higher education participation than many traditional quantitative methods of social class, such as parents' educational background.

**Contextually-Valued Cultural Capital**

The second of the four common approaches to operationalizing cultural capital identified by Winkle-Wagner (2010) is defining cultural capital as contextually-valued. These studies treat cultural capital as a resource that is valued based on the setting; although everyone may possess cultural capital, the social situation determines its value. Winkle-Wagner (2010) points out that this approach is more connected with Bourdieu's concept of field than some of the other approaches.

A recent example of research where the contextually-valued model of cultural capital is utilized comes from Zarycki (2009). The author demonstrates in this instance that cultural capital is valued differently in two post-Cold War former Soviet countries; in Moscow, cultural capital is valued in its objectified state (embodied through state support of higher education), whereas in Warsaw, membership in the elite group of *intelligencia* predominantly contains the value of cultural capital. In this study, the concept of field can be viewed as the different geographical and cultural locations as they developed after

the fall of the Soviet Union; these differences caused cultural capital to be regarded differently based on the context.

At the K-12 level, contextually-valued cultural capital is often expressed as a function of parental involvement. For example, Cheadle (2008) found that parental involvement before a child enters school can put the child at an advantage initially, but between-child differences in academic ability often grow less significant once the child enters school regardless of parental cultivation. Here, the context where cultural capital is highly valued has more to do with time than geographic space.

The contextually-valued approach to cultural capital has been used widely, in research ranging from students' college choice decision-making process (Astin and Oseguera, 2004; Freeman, 1997), to their perceptions of college financial aid (St. John, 2006), to the relationship between college students' socioeconomic backgrounds and their development of identity (Aries and Seider, 2005). However, as Winkle-Wagner (2010) points out, there are some problems with this method. Although it does allow for a richer view of cultural capital than the "you either have it or you don't" approach the some other methods take, it is often unclear how cultural capital is used in data analysis in qualitative studies when using the contextually-valued approach. Conversely, the contextually-valued approach does lend itself to more critical forms of inquiry owing to its recognition and appreciation of non-dominant forms of cultural capital.

**Otherized Cultural Capital**

The third common operationalization of cultural capital is its application to marginalized or "otherized" populations. This view of cultural capital shifts it to a

resource that is part of a group identity, as opposed to the more traditional view of cultural capital as a personalized, individual characteristic (Winkle-Wagner, 2010).

Examples of otherized cultural capital often concern racial or ethnic minority groups.  Nasir and Saxe (2003), in their research on minority youth academic and ethnic identities during formal education, suggested that cultural capital was a shifting and evolving concept that changes as the people of a certain community experience different things and gain opportunities.  Carter (2003) suggests that cultural capital may exist in dominant and non-dominant forms, such as the non-dominant "Black" cultural capital, which may include language and clothing styles.  Although this cultural capital may not be valuable in schools, Carter (203) asserts it is valuable in a community setting, particularly among Black peers.  Yosso (2005) suggested that this type of cultural capital, often unrecognized in schools, can be used as a tool to reform education to reward cultural forms of capital other than the dominant highbrow form.

Many more examples of research exist wherein cultural capital has been utilized in this manner.  This more critical approach does, indeed, present an interesting perspective on cultural capital by focusing on non-dominant groups.  This is in contrast to the final operationalization of cultural capital, that of the Bourdieuean framework.

**Cultural Capital in the Bourdieuean Framework**

The concept of cultural capital was originally developed as part of Bourdieu's larger theory of social reproduction.  Rather than treating cultural capital as a discrete concept, some scholars have connected cultural capital to Bourdieu's larger framework in their research.  This has been employed in educational research on topics from family involvement in K-12 education to enrollment in college (Winkle-Wagner, 2010).

Researchers using this approach typically attempt to connect cultural capital to other important components of Bourdieu's framework, such as social capital, habitus, and field (Winkle-Wagner, 2010).

**Cultural and social capital in the Bourdieuean framework.** One of the most important aspects of Bourdieu's overall theory of social reproduction is that it asserts that forms of symbolic capital are primarily used to perpetuate class inequality. This means that, when using the full Bourdieuean framework, it is important to consider both cultural and social capital (Musoba & Baez, 2009).

In some studies using Bourdieu's concepts of both cultural and social capital, the two forms of capital are entangled and difficult to distinguish. For example, Zweigenhaft (1993) studied data on Harvard and Radcliffe graduates who had previously attended elite preparatory schools or public schools. The study found that, although experiences at elite higher education institutions do bestow cultural and social capital, those who enter the setting with valued forms of capital are highly rewarded. Studies like this one are key to the current research because they demonstrate that cultural and social capital can be gained before entering higher education and then exchanged in that setting. Perna (2000), too, has combined cultural and social capital as indistinguishable variables in her work. Though her study of college enrollment decisions among African American and Hispanic students clearly defined cultural and social capital differently in the discussion of theoretical background, the quantitative study combined them for the statistical analysis portion. Perna (2000) used proxies such as high school quality, desegregation, high school region and location, educational expectations, and parental involvement, education, and encouragement to measure cultural and social capital. Her use of school-

and family-based resources helped validate her finding that cultural capital was as important as ability in college enrollment decisions with these groups.

One of the most important features of cultural and social capital in the Bourdieuean framework, as it relates to this study, is the consistent finding that parents play an important role in the accrual of these forms of capital (Perna & Titus, 2005; Wells, 2008; Martin & Spenner, 2009). Lareau, in particular, has been a consistent voice in the Bourdieuean framework for the importance of parents in the accumulation of cultural and social capital. In an early study in this vein, Lareau (1987) sought to determine, through observations and interviews, how social class affects schooling in a working class neighborhood and a middle class neighborhood. She found that middle class parents, who generally possess more education, job flexibility, and a better understanding of their children's schools than lower class parents, are more likely to impact their children's education in a positive way. Lower class parents generally felt that their children's education was the sole responsibility of the school and that it resided in a different sphere than their responsibilities at home. This is in contrast to the middle class parents, who saw themselves as "partners" with teachers in the education of their children. Because of this, Lareau asserted that social class is a form of cultural capital in and of itself. Like in the research mentioned above, Lareau's (1987) conceptions of cultural and social capital are entangled, though both are present in the research.

Even though intertwining cultural and social capital to the degree that they are indistinguishable does present a problem (Winkle-Wagner, 2010), it is appropriate to utilize both concepts if the researcher's goal is to use the full Bourdieuean framework. The other pieces that make up this framework, field and habitus, are also important

components empirical research using the Bourdieuean framework; the following section details some examples of this work.

**Habitus and field in the Bourdieuean framework.** As previously noted, field is the social setting where cultural capital is exchanged and rewarded (or not rewarded, as the case may be) and habitus is "cumulative collection of dispositions, norms, and tastes" (Winkle-Wagner, 2010, p. 9) and is constantly functioning as a way to perceive, appreciate, and act in the world. These two features of Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction must necessarily be employed if a researcher's aim is to be as true as possible to Bourdieu's ideas. There are several examples of researchers using these concepts in work related to cultural capital.

Like Bourdieu's other concepts in the theory of social reproduction, habitus and field have been operationalized in a variety of ways. Lareau and Horvat (1999) operationalized field as a third-grade classroom and found that, in this setting, cultural capital connects to habitus. Students were rewarded by educators based on the ways in which their parents interacted with school officials. Dumais (2002) operationalized habitus as occupational expectations using the NELS dataset. In her work, McDonough (1997) suggested the idea of "organizational habitus," which she used as a proxy for whether or not students were college-bound. Combined with background cultural capital, operationalized as knowledge and understanding of the college admissions process, greatly affected the college choice decision making of students.

Habitus can play an important role in college student retention. Nora (2004) found that both cultural capital and habitus influenced students' perceptions of comfort on campus, fit, and acceptance. Habitus and cultural capital are also linked to social

class, which has an effect on college choice and graduation. Reay (1998) used in-depth interviews to begin to untangle the complicated factors that go into college choice. The study was conducted in Britain, which has a different system of higher education than the United States, as well as a different history of class relations. Although Reay (1998) does not have any findings that could be broadly applied, she does indicate that traditional measures of college choice, such as gender, social class, ethnicity, etc., may not fully explain the messy process of college choice, which is fragmented even within social class, suggesting familial habitus plays a role in college choice.

Though empirical work in the field of education using Bourdieu's framework is readily available to researchers, this framework has not been used to study college choice in foster alumni. As the next section will demonstrate, this is a group where cultural and social capital may be even more important than many other groups.

## Foster Alumni and Higher Education

Although it is fair to say that most Americans probably have some fleeting awareness of the foster care system, it is less likely that knowledge about aging out of foster care is widespread. The average person, too, is unlikely to know a great deal about the negative adult outcomes that many former foster youth face. This section presents information about foster care in general and problems faced by those who age out of foster care.

### Foster Care Basics

According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, foster care is:

a temporary living situation for children whose parents cannot take care of them

and whose need for care has come to the attention of child welfare agency staff.

While in foster care, children may live with relatives, with foster families or

in group facilities (2014).

Children of all ages—from newborns to teenagers—may wind up in foster care because

their families are in crisis.  Foster care is designed to be a temporary state for the child

while parents work to reach a state where the child can be returned to their custody

(Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014).  Out-of-home care, which includes foster care, is

divided into three types of care, as displayed in Figure 2.2.

| Figure 2.2. Types of Out-of-Home Care | |
|---|---|
| Foster Care | <ul><li>Temporary service.</li><li>Provided by states.</li><li>May live with relatives or with unrelated foster parents.</li><li>Can also refer to placement settings such as group homes, residential care facilities, emergency shelters, and supervised independent living.</li></ul> |
| Group and<br><br>residential care | <ul><li>Work with children whose specific needs are best addressed in a structured environment.</li><li>Examples include<ul><li>Community-based group homes for adolescents who are involved in the juvenile justice system</li><li>Residential campus facilities for children and youth with mental health or behavioral problems.</li></ul></li><li>May be operated by public or private agencies.</li><li>Often provide an array of services, including<ul><li>Therapeutic services for children and families and</li><li>Educational and medical services for children or youth.</li></ul></li></ul> |
| Kinship care | <ul><li>The care of children by relatives or, in some jurisdictions, close family friends (often referred to as fictive kin).</li><li>Preferred resource for children who must be removed from their birth parents because it maintains the children's connections with their families.</li><li>Often considered a type of family preservation service.</li><li>May be formal and involve<ul><li>Training and licensure process for the caregivers,</li><li>Monthly payments to help defray the costs of caring for the child, and</li><li>Support services.</li></ul></li><li>May be informal and involve<ul><li>Only an assessment process to ensure the safety and suitability of the home, along with</li><li>Supportive services for the child and caregivers.</li></ul></li><li>Approximately one-fourth of the children in out-of-home care are living with relatives.</li></ul> |

*Figure 2.2.* Explanation of different types of out-of-home care. Adapted from webpage "Out-of-Home Care," by Child Welfare Information Gateway, https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/outofhome/

Despite the fact that Figure 2.2 places foster care as a subsection of the larger term out-of-home care, there are no definitive rules or shared agreements about which type of care is meant by the term "foster care." Sometimes children are placed in kinship care through official foster care programs; sometimes children may be temporarily placed in a group home while awaiting placement with a family. For the purposes of this research, the term "foster care" applied to any situation where children are placed outside the home, either formally or informally. This information only scratches the surface of information about foster care and there are many works and sources that provide a more comprehensive review of foster care in the United States (e.g. McDonald, 1996; Ehrle & Geen, 2002; Beam, 2013).

Like many of their peers, youth in foster care want to go to college. Research shows that more than 70% of children in foster care desire a college experience (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010). However, they are much less likely to actually finish a college degree than their peers. About 20% of those who were in foster care will not finish high school or a G.E.D. Only 4.4% will finish a two-year college degree and 2.5% will finish a four-year degree by age 26 (Courtney et al., 2011); among all adults in the U.S., 30.4% had earned a bachelor's degree in 2011 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). This astounding achievement gap between former foster youth and their counterparts is reason enough for leaders in higher education to act. However, perhaps an even more compelling reason for graduating foster alumni from institutions of higher education is that it helps to them to avoid outcomes that are negative for the individuals as well as society.

**Negative Social Outcomes for Foster Alumni**

The negative outcomes experienced by foster alumni are reflected in economic and social data.  In one study, more than 45% of former foster youth reported at least one economic hardship at age 26 and nearly 30% reported not having enough money to pay rent.  More than 80% of women and about 40% of men had received a means-tested government benefit in the previous year, commonly referred to as welfare benefits.  Teen pregnancy among females who had been in foster care was also prevalent, with 32.1% reporting having been pregnant before age 18.  Perhaps most alarming, though is the fact that 59% of female participants and 81.8% of male participants reported that they had been arrested at some point in their life (Courtney et al., 2011).  On average, the arrest rate for Americans before age 23 is between 30.2% and 41.4% (Memmott, 2011).  With per inmate cost averaging $31,286 in 40 American states (Henrichson & Delaney, 2012), taxpayers have a vested interest in keeping former foster youth out of the prison pipeline, as well as the negative behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse and violence that may lead there.  Providing them with a higher education is an excellent way to do this.  Not only has participation in education been shown to reduce participation in crime (Lochner & Moretti, 2001), but Brand and Xie (2010) propose that those who are least likely to attend college are the most likely to benefit from a college education.  Thus, helping qualified, capable, motivated foster alumni attend and finish college is a win-win situation for both the foster care alumnus and for broader society.

**Foster Alumni and College**

The experiences of foster alumni in college are, by and large, not thoroughly addressed in the higher education literature. The largest portion of issues surrounding this topic have been examined within the field of social work. This section presents some of the findings of the small number of studies pertinent to this research.

As would be expected from a group of young people who have been through such unique, often traumatizing experiences, the transition to college often looks different for former foster youth. For instance, without the support normally given by parents, foster alumni in one study indicated they needed to rely on teachers, high school counselors, independent living specialists, and other adult mentors to obtain information about college. Asking for help was not easy for these students and they reported needing to "work up courage" to ask (Batsche, Hart, Armstrong, Strozier, & Hummer, 2012). This is important to note because it contrasts starkly with the normal parent-to-child transmission of cultural and social capital in the Bourdieuean framework. In a series of focus groups with foster youth, case workers, and foster parents, Geenen and Powers (2007) found that a stable, loving relationship with an adult was a key component of successful transition of foster youth into adulthood. One study finding that pertains quite directly to Bourdieu's theories on cultural and social capital was that European foster youth who engaged in the type of "informal learning" that occurs outside the classroom, such as volunteering, were often able to strengthen their social networks by connecting with adults in their communities who act as mentors. Those who participated in the broadest number and variety of leisure

and cultural activities were most successful in formal education (Jackson & Cameron, 2012).

Other evidence suggests that, in the absence of guidance from parents regarding college life, paying for school, and college admissions, summer bridge programs for foster alumni facilitated by higher education faculty and staff, as well as students—including foster alumni—served to increase perceptions of enhanced life skills, self-concept, and self-efficacy, thereby increasing the resiliency of participants (Kirk & Day, 2011). Even with on-campus support services tailored to foster alumni, however, these students often had unmet needs that services did not help them overcome. Often, however, this stemmed from a belief from the students themselves that they needed to deal with the unmet need on their own (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010). This, of course, may have a negative effect on foster alumni student retention.

In the field of educational research, much has been done in the study of college student retention. Although this study uses a less traditional Bourdieuean framework to study why foster alumni students attend and then leave or graduate college, it is important to understand how college student retention has traditionally been studied and why the approach used in this study was chosen.

### Traditional Approaches to Studying College Student Retention

Perhaps the most prevalent school of thought when discussing how colleges and universities should retain their students is student engagement theory. The basic premise of student engagement theory is that colleges and universities must engage students both inside and out of the classroom in order to develop and retain them.

Student engagement theory offers several reasons why students leave college. Among these are such factors as academic major change, financial and family issues, poor psycho-social fit, and others (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008). Spady (1970) pioneered student engagement theory by beginning to expand on how interaction between the student and the college environment can help explain the phenomenon of college dropout. Tinto's (1975) original model posited that students drop out of college due to a variety of factors, such as goal commitment, institutional commitment, and peer-group and faculty interaction. However, the student's integration into the college's academic and social systems are most directly related to persistence in this model. Figure 2.3 illustrates Tinto's original model, widely known as the interactionalist model.

**Figure 2.3.** Tinto's Interactionalist Model of Dropout Decision
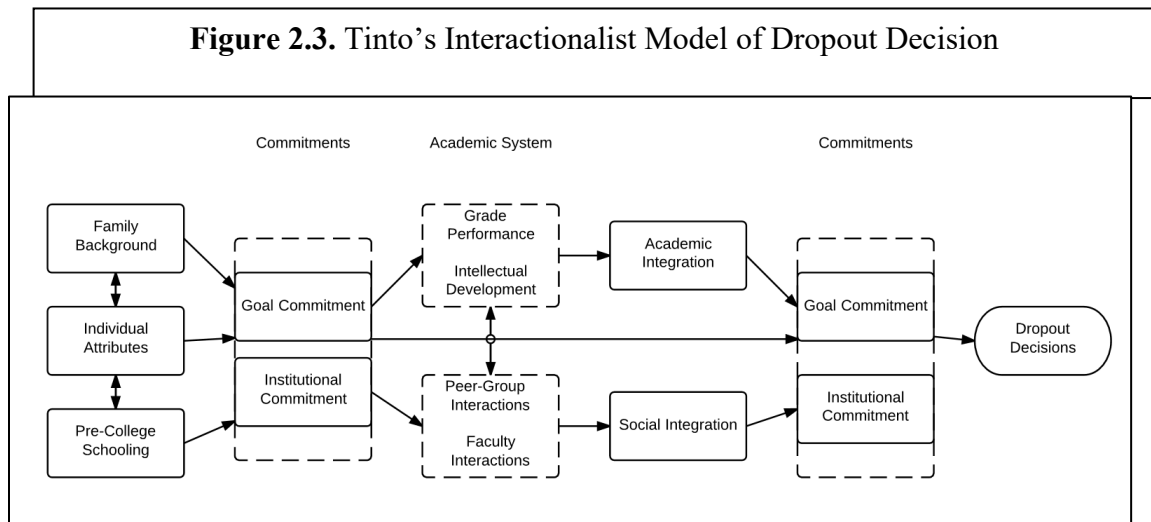


*Figure 2.3.* Tinto's interactionalist model of dropout decisions demonstrates the importance of academic and social integration to college student retention. Adapted from "Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Current Research," by V. Tinto, 1975, *Review of Educational Research, 45*(1), p. 95.

After Tinto's seminal work, interactionalist theory was followed by works about student involvement. Student involvement theory traces its theoretical roots to Astin's (1984/1999) theory of student involvement. Astin (1984/1999) defined involvement as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the

academic experience" (p. 518) and postulated that student learning and development were strongly linked to the amount of time students spent engaged in educational programs and that "the effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement" (p. 519). Whereas traditionally, most time and resources were spent on well-prepared, assertive students, Astin (1984/1999) suggested that greater attention should go to "passive, reticent, or unprepared" (p. 526) students. Astin (1984/1999) listed several areas where students could participate in valuable engagement, such as honors programs, athletics, and at their places of residence, but he notes that student-faculty interaction is more strongly tied to satisfaction with college than any other type of involvement or institutional characteristic. This emphasis on faculty-student interaction would become a hallmark of student engagement theory. Astin (1985) firmly linked his involvement theory to college completion by asserting that, if involvement is a continuum, dropping out of college is the ultimate form of non-involvement.

Student engagement theory was further developed through the late 1980s by scholars such as George Kuh (e.g., Kuh, Whitt, & Strange, 1989; and Kuh et al., 1991). Kuh and others contributed to student engagement theory by further advancing the idea that institutional productivity is tied to how students are engaged outside the classroom (Kuh, Branch Douglas, Lund, & Ramin-Gyurnek, 1994).

At its heart, student engagement theory is really about institutional action. Essential to engagement is the institution makes it a priority as a means to student success and "focus[es on] its own behavior and establishing conditions within its walls that promote [retention and graduation]" (Tinto, 2012, p. 6). This can be seen in the

enrollment management models that emerged in the 1980s, which can still be seen today. Colleges and universities sought to exert more influence over student enrollments through revised institutional practices in the areas of financial aid, recruitment, student support services, curriculum development, and other academic areas. The goal was, and continues to be, to influence areas of student enrollment and persistence (Berger & Lyon, 2005). Student engagement continues to be the cornerstone of retention efforts at a large number of institutions.

## A New View of College Student Retention

Both the traditional student engagement models of retention and the cultural and social capital models offer valuable tools for the study of college student retention. However, in the specific case of studying student success among college students who were in foster care, using the lens of cultural and social capital is a more promising avenue.

Although widely utilized, there are problems with the use of student engagement theories. An examination of the literature demonstrates that student engagement theory tends to offer a one-size-fits-all model for retaining and graduating students. Tinto's (1975) internationalist theory was developed using data at private, residential colleges during the 1970s, hardly representative of today's average student (Longden, 2004). Additionally, these theories tend to pay less attention to students' life experiences before they arrived on college campuses. For "traditional" college students, student engagement theory continues to be a valuable toolbox for issues related to college student retention. However, cultural and social capital theory provides an alternative to studying college student success that is particularly apt for alumni of foster care. By taking into account

family background, pre-college experiences, and the unique nature of the relationships the student may have formed, cultural and social capital theory could be an excellent way to explain why some foster alumni succeed in the college environment and some do not. Bourdieu's theories could help explain why many college students falter, despite the apparent increase in opportunity (Longden, 2004). Former foster youth share many of the same challenges related to class that Bourdieu described, further making cultural and social capital an appropriate theoretical lens for this work.

## Summary

Although foster alumni college success and Bourdieu's forms of capital would seem to be a natural fit for one another, there is a marked absence of research that includes both of these concepts. This chapter began with an explanation of how Bourdieu's theories have commonly been operationalized in the literature, as explained by Winkle-Wagner (2010). The next section dealt with research on typical outcomes for alumni of foster care. Next, the traditional models for studying college student retention were explained. Finally, literatures explaining how Bourdieu's theories could be fruitful in study college student retention were expanded on. With this foundation, the next chapter consists of an explanation of how Bourdieu's theories can be utilized in a multicase study of foster alumni in college.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides an explanation of the full study design. First, definitions

relevant to understanding the design of the study are presented.  The purpose of the study

is examined, along with the research questions.  This is followed by a discussion of the

study's guiding epistemology, theoretical perspective, and theoretical framework.  A

detailed description of the research context follows the discussion of epistemology,

theoretical perspective, and theoretical framework, which precedes a discussion of

research participants.  The chapter concludes with a discussion of data collection methods

and analysis.

### Statement of Purpose

According to Patton (2002), "purpose is the controlling force in research.

Decisions about design, measurement, analysis, and reporting all flow from purpose" (p.

213). This, Patton (2002) explains, is why the researcher must first be clear about

purpose.  The purpose of this research is to explore successful foster alumni college

students' experiences where they used, while in college and before matriculating, cultural

and social capital resources as defined by Bourdieu.

**Research Questions**

1. In what ways, if any, do foster alumni college students report sources of social and cultural capital as a part of their college experiences?

2. What uses of cultural tools, if any, do foster alumni students report as a part of their college experiences?

**Study Design**

This is a qualitative study that is based on a constructionist epistemology. The study utilized a multicase study methodology, guided by respected theorists and qualitative methodologists Guba and Lincoln (1981), Crotty (2012), Stake (1995 & 2006), and Yin (2014).

**Qualitative Research**

Qualitative methods allow the researcher to study a problem in depth and detail because of the ability to approach fieldwork without the constraints of predetermined categories of analysis (Patton, 2002). Qualitative research functions as a tool for understanding participants' meaning; its purpose is not to determine what may be causing what the researcher believes to be happening (i.e. cause and effect). The subjective meanings made by foster alumni are central to exploring how cultural and social capital may play into experiences that help determine a course of college success, thus making this study's purpose uniquely suited to qualitative research. This seeking out of the subjective point of view assists the researcher in understanding deep, rich insights into how participants make meaning of, and perceive, their worlds--in this case during college. Rather than generalizing to a broader population, qualitative inquiry assists researchers in gaining a deeper understanding of a phenomenon at a smaller, more

contextualized scale. In this research, the goal was not to garner broadly generalizable results, but to gain a deeper understanding of the roles, based upon foster alumni reports and perceptions, of cultural and social capital in their navigation of the college environment.

**Researcher as Instrument & Reflexivity**

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Merriam, 2002). This meant that, as the researcher, it was important that I was aware of my own subjectivity and how it may have affected the research and/or the research participants. Although constructionist epistemology holds that true and total objectivity is not possible, and its pursuit is not the purpose of most qualitative research, being aware (and making readers aware) of how my own beliefs and prior experiences may influence the research helped to make it more trustworthy.

I have assisted with analysis of previous research with former foster youth that may have colored how I viewed the data in these cases. For five years, I also worked in a one-on-one environment with students, including foster alumni, as an academic advisor at a four-year metropolitan university. These experiences may have influenced how I viewed the experiences of the participants in this research. On the other hand, working with college students and being at a college campus for so many years was also helpful for this research. I have a firm understanding of the culture of higher education, meaning that I could enter the field of research with useful experiences and insights. Though each student is unique, understanding the general patterns and trends of the academic year was useful in contextualizing the research.

Although an initial understanding of the lives of participants in qualitative research was helpful with gaining access and promoting openness during data collection, it was important for me to balance these strengths of my positionality with my own preconceived understandings. Throughout the research process, it was important for me to practice reflexivity.

As someone whose primary professional focus has been on student success, my instincts constantly tell me to intervene with students who are experiencing difficulty. During my five years as an academic advisor, my worldview became that almost any student who is having difficulty can be helped with individual assistance and attention from those at the institution. This model of intrusive advising is prevalent throughout the contemporary academic advising world (see Earl, 1988; Glennen & Baxley, 1985; and Varney, 2007). During the course of this research, I had to keep in mind my role as a researcher, resisting my desire to step in and tell students "here's what you're doing wrong, let me help," and instead listen to their stories, observe their experiences, and truly focus on the emic perspective that is so vital to the success of qualitative research. The task of a qualitative researcher is rarely a simple one and that held true here. Although I did take my experiences and worldview with me into the research, and they are proved to be of great worth, I constantly reminded myself to take a step back, be reflexive, and look at my participants and their world with an open mind and heart.

**Guiding Epistemology and Theoretical Perspective**

The qualitative research design of this study was based upon the social constructionist worldview. The constructionist perspective, this study's epistemology,

assumes that individuals create meaning to better understand the world in which they live; these multiple, varied, and complex subjective meanings are the lens through which individuals view their world (Creswell, 2009). This epistemology asserts that "truth, or meaning, comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world" (Crotty, 2012, p. 8). Crotty (2012) further defines constructionism as "the view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context" (p. 42). The constructionist epistemological stance is reflected in the research questions of this study. Instead of predetermining the existence, or the forms, of cultural and social capital for participants, this research sought to understand student experiences and consider how their reports may fit cultural and social capital as defined for this study. Further, the importance of society and culture in Bourdieu's theories of social and cultural capital virtually demand a guiding epistemology in the constructionist vein. In his discussion of social constructionism, the aspect of this worldview that posits that social origin of meaning and the social character of this meaning play a vital role in constructionist epistemology, Crotty (2012) asserts that "without culture, we could not function" (p. 53). Bourdieu's theories are constructed entirely against a backdrop of the social world and the culture contained therein, thus making constructionism the natural fit for the guiding epistemology of this study. Moreover, the unique culture of American higher education, the socialization of foster alumni, and the networks they form are key components of this research; the meanings made by participants will heavily framed how these elements

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affected the research's findings.  Flowing from the epistemology is the theoretical

perspective: in this case, interpretivism.

        **Theoretical perspective.** Crotty (2012) explains the theoretical perspective as

"the philosophical stance lying behind the methodology…[which] provides a context for

the process involved and a basis for its logic and its criteria" (p. 66).  Developed in

response to the positivist outlook that seeks to make value-free observations about

humanity, society, and history and with the aim of explaining and predicting,

interpretivism instead seeks interpretations of the world in the social context; these

interpretations are derived by culture and historically situated (Crotty, 2012).  Bourdieu's

reliance on the significance of culture and social relationships means that a study guided

by his theories will benefit from the theoretical perspective of interpretivism.  In this

case, rather than looking for universal norms or truth, this study focused on the

interpretations of each participant and his or her unique story. Students are likely to view

the possession, use, and sources of social and cultural capital differently; further, their

experiences occurred entirely within the context of society and culture, specifically the

culture of American higher education and the society in which it sits.

**Theoretical Framework**

        Anfara and Mertz (2015) define theoretical framework as "any empirical or quasi-

empirical theory of social and/or psychological process, at a variety of levels, that can be

applied to the understanding of phenomena" (p. 15).  The theoretical framework for this

study was Bourdieu's cultural and social capital theories.  As described in Chapter 2,

Bourdieu's theories view meaning making by participants through the lens of culture and

the social world.  The unique culture of American higher education, the socialization of

foster alumni, the networks foster alumni form, and the meanings foster alumni make of their experiences served as powerful factors in how these students view their experiences in the higher education environment.

Other, more traditional engagement theories, such as those proffered by Astin (1985), Kuh *et. al.* (1991), and Tinto (2012), could have been used for this study. However, while these theories help in explain why students generally leave college, they do not take into account the unique circumstances of many students in special populations, especially foster alumni. Likewise, the design of this study posits that valuable understanding may be found from exploring the experiences of *successful* students. As the college experiences of foster alumni are an understudied area in the realm of higher education scholarship, Bourdieu's theories were useful in gaining a deeper understanding how culture, social networks, and background interact to influence the meanings that participating foster alumni students make about their experiences in college. Largely dependent on the interpretations and meaning making of social actors, cultural and social capital theories were better suited for the exploratory, qualitative design of this study.

**Methodology**

This research used a multicase study methodology. Case studies are "holistic and context sensitive" (Patton, 2002, p. 446). The term "case study" itself can possess a dual meaning, referring either to the process of "collecting, organizing, and analyzing data" or the resulting product, which is produced after analyzing "comprehensive, systematic, in-depth information about each case of interest" (Patton, 2002, p. 447).

The most important hallmark of case study research is that there is an identifiable case (or, for a multicase design, cases).  Many things can be the case in a case study.  Stake (1995) asserts that the case could be a child, a classroom of children, or even professionals mobilizing to study a childhood condition.  However, not everything is a case; cases must deal in specifics.  For example, relationships among entities, reasons behind decisions, and policies are not cases.  These things are too broad and general to be suitable as cases (Stake, 1995).  Cases are uniquely identifiable, systematic, complex, and functioning.  The system may not work well or be irrational but, if it is a bounded object, it is likely a suitable case  (Stake, 1995).  In this study, each participant and his or her experiences while in college will be an individual case.

Data for a case study may be gathered by a variety of means.  Stake (1995) categorizes data collection into three areas: interview, document analysis, and observation. Each is pertinent to the design and data collection in this study and will be further considered in the Data Collection section.

At this point, a working definition for case study methodology has been established.  This foundational information is important to understand how researchers deal with a single case; however, it also provides the building blocks for the multicase study design wherein multiple cases are dealt with simultaneously; such was the case in this research. Using as a guide the previous information, the following sections further detail the design for this multicase study.

**Study Quintain and Case Boundaries**

In designing multicase research, Stake refers to the "quintain" as the "object or phenomenon or condition to be studied—a target, not a bull's eye" (2006, p. 6); the quintain is the overarching condition or phenomenon through which the multiple cases are connected. For this study, the quintain is defined as the lived experiences of foster alumni in college as they relate to the use of cultural and social tools during the navigation of individual experiences. One of the central aims in a multicase study is to better describe the quintain, demonstrating how the phenomenon under study appears under different contexts. In a qualitative study, more emphasis is placed on how the phenomenon of interest is experienced by the people involved (Stake, 2006).

After identifying the quintain, a multicase researcher must decide how many cases to select for study. Choosing fewer than 4 or more than 10 cases will diminish the benefits of the multicase study (Stake, 2006). If there are too few cases, there will likely be an insufficient amount of data to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomena; if there are too many cases, the amount of data may become unmanageable and similarities across cases may become difficult to establish. In addition, a researcher must determine which cases to choose. In situations where researchers do have the freedom to choose their cases, there are three main criteria that, in general, they may use to help select them:

- "Is the case relevant to the quintain?

- Do the cases provide diversity across contexts?

- Do the cases provide good opportunities to learn about complexity and

  contexts" (Stake, 2006, p. 23)?

Considering these questions requires that the researcher assess what may be reasonable boundaries within which the cases should exist. These may be geographical, time-related, based upon characteristics, or other factors; always the choice of case boundaries is guided by what may best explain the quintain.

This research took place within the context of the United States higher education system in a single south central state. Participants came from public colleges and universities, including associate's colleges, a Master's university that is a Historically Black university, and a doctoral university. A mix of geographically diverse institutions provided a diverse set of participants for the multicase study.

To properly understand the context of the cases presented here, it is useful to have some background knowledge of the state in which they took place. It is a state in the south central United States with a population of approximately 3.9 million. The state's median income in 2019 was $26,472. Approximately 34% of the population was college educated. According to *U.S. News & World Report* (2019), the state ranks 47th in healthcare, 39th in education, and 41st in crime and corrections. In 2017, there were 9,315 children in foster care in the state; this number had seen limited fluctuation over the preceding 10 years, with a high of 11,463 in 2014 and a low of 7,857 in 2010 (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2019). Like many other states, the state has also been negatively affected by the national opioid crisis; the National Institute on Drug Abuse (2019) reported that 388 deaths in the state in 2017 were the result of opioid overdoses. This translated to 10.2 deaths per 100,000 persons. The state has also had a particularly high imprisonment rate, with 704 residents per 100,000 being

incarcerated, the second highest rate in the nation. This compares nationally with an average of 440 per 100,000 residents incarcerated (The Sentencing Project, 2019).

Notwithstanding its penchant for imprisoning a relatively large portion of its population, religion plays an important role in its culture, both on and off college campuses. A Pew Research study ranked the state as the eighth most religious state in the U.S., with 64% of survey respondents saying religion was a very important part of their lives and 71% saying they believed in God with absolute certainty (Lipka & Wormald, 2016). Christians make up 79% of the adult population, with Evangelical Protestants making up 47% of the adult population; the next largest denomination, Mainline Protestants, make up 18% (Pew Research Center, 2019).

One final note on the context of the cases presented here is that it is important to remember that state services to youth in foster care may have impacted the data. Some states provide more services to foster youth when they age out of care; some provide fewer services. Participants discussed services they received such as help paying for college, but these services vary by state, so foster youth outside of this state may report different experiences from these participants.

This research began during the fall as defined by the traditional academic calendar. Since an important part of qualitative research is the ability to spend longer amounts of time in the research setting to gain the emic perspective and due to scheduling issues, the collection of data occurred across several semesters.

**Research Participants**

Before recruitment of participants began, approval was obtained from Oklahoma State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Based on the

guidance offered by the Department of Health and Human Service's Office of Human Research Protections (2016), this research qualified for expedited review. Oklahoma State University has federal-wide assurance status, meaning that the IRB application approved there made the process of gaining approval on campuses where other participants were enrolled much easier. After IRB approval at the appropriate institutions of higher education was received, recruitment of participants began at each site.

Each participant constituted a case (and the unit of analysis). There are key traits that participants must have possessed and which provided additional bounding of the cases. The most important characteristic participants must have possessed was being foster alumni as defined for this study. As explained in Chapter 2, the term foster care alumnus sometimes defies easy categorization; therefore, determining whether a potential research participant met the definition of "foster care alumnus" was done on a case-by-case basis. For the purposes of this research, foster alumni were in out-of-home care for a minimum of one year after their thirteenth birthdays. Research has shown that the teenage years are a time of high decision-making activity regarding college (Galotti & Mark, 1994), so being in care during this time period was more likely to have an effect on their college attendance as a young adult. Out-of-home care may have included formal foster care placements, kinship placements, time spent in group homes or shelters, or other similar arrangements. Participants self-identified as foster alumni. Every effort was made to assure that participants came from various institutional types and locations, and every effort was made to also represent a broad range of student types in classifications and majors. For this

research, participants were successful students.  Like defining foster care alumnus, a determining who is a "successful" student is largely subjective.  For the purposes of this study, students must have been making satisfactory academic progress at their institution (i.e., not being on academic probation, suspension, or similar status) if in their second year of college or beyond; for first year students, participants must have participated in college preparation programs for high-achieving students such as concurrent enrollment or AP® coursework during high school.  Furthermore, using a set GPA or other universal indicator of success may have limited participants because different institutions of higher education may have different requirements for continued enrollment.  Therefore, a successful student in this study was one who is meeting the academic expectations of their own institution.

Five participants were recruited for this study.  Using my professional connections in Oklahoma higher education, both through my job and as part of a statewide professional organization for academic advisors, I leveraged my contacts in student services across the state for initial assistance in recruiting former foster college youth.  I also contacted campus offices such as TRIO programs, Student Support Services, and Financial Aid in order to recruit students.  I also utilized other public agencies, such as the Department of Human Services who work with foster youth. I also used the publicly posted campus contacts who are a part of the R is for Thursday Network of Oklahoma (a network of higher education professionals who work in support of former foster youth on campus).

I asked my contacts on campuses (or at other organizations identified above) to distribute information to students who fit my study participant criteria and who

may be interested in participating in the study. These fliers and emails explained the

basics of the research and provided my contact information. If a student expressed an

interest in participating and consented for the campus contact to give me the student's

contact information (or contacts me directly to initiate the process), I talked with the

student via email and telephone to discuss the commitment involved in participating,

the purpose of the research, as well as all subject matter specified in the IRB

application. If the student (or potential student) agreed to participate, we then

discussed logistical concerns related to data collection and cover the IRB-approved

consent form in detail.

      Once participants were selected, data collection using the methods described

below began.

<div align="center">**Data Collection**</div>

      The core methods of case study methodology were interviews, document

analysis, and observation.

**Interviews**

      The first method of data collection employed in the case study was

interviewing. When researchers cannot observe directly, as was the case here, they

must gather data in other ways. One of the most utilized data gathering techniques is

interviewing. Obtaining the descriptions and interpretations of others are two of the

core uses of case study (Stake, 1995, p. 64). Understanding the multiple views of the

case is one of the most important parts of a qualitative researcher's use of case study

methodology. In qualitative research, an interview can best be understood as a

conversation with a purpose (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Questions should be more

issue-oriented, rather than a set list of specific question that is asked of each participant. Qualitative interviewing is more focused on seeking out unique stories and perspectives that are possessed by each participant (Stake, 1995). Interviews were semi-structured so that, while all the major themes of social and cultural capital were addressed, the participants had the opportunity to add information that they thought was important to the study.

Each participant was interviewed face-to-face once, with follow-up information being gathered by phone calls, emails, and text messages as needed. Interviews took place in a location mutually agreed upon by both the researcher and the participant; in each case, this was on the participant's college campus. Interviews ranged in time from approximately thirty minutes to an hour-and-a-half.

A limited amount of demographic information was collected during the interview, while the more relevant aspects of this were ascertained during the recruitment process during the initial introduction period to the student. Additionally, demographic information was not central to the research questions of this study and, therefore, did not carry a great deal of importance. Questions pertained to participants' meanings made from experiences where use of cultural and social capital resources were evidenced (see Appendix A). Participants were then asked to reflect on how these experiences and the subsequent meanings made have impacted their college experience and academic success. As more information emerged during the process of the interviews, probing and follow-up questions were then asked to gain a deeper understanding of participants' meanings.

With the permission of the participants, interviews were recorded for later transcription and analysis. Interview notes recorded participants' responses and descriptors of their actions or the environment.

**Document Analysis**

Document analysis was the other major source of data collection. Nearly every case study will utilize this technique for data gathering (Stake, 1995). Documents can reveal things to the researcher that cannot be directly observed, things that happened before the research began, or other information about the case (Patton, 2002). Documentation can come in many forms, including letters, memoranda, e-mails, and other personal documents, such as diaries, calendars, and notes (Yin, 2014).

Document analysis in the cases presented here occurred exclusively through content created by participants using social media, specifically Facebook and Instagram. These platforms, through text, pictures, video, and interaction with peers, help to convey how users make sense of the social world, often in their own words. After participants agreed to grant access to their social media profiles, this proved to be a useful way to unobtrusively gain a more thorough perspective on participants' everyday lives.

**Observations**

The third source of data for this study came from observation. In many instances, observation is the method of data gathering that puts the researcher closest to the case. The ultimate goal of observation is to increase understanding of the case. Observation helped me gain a firmer understanding of what was occurring in the cases presented in Chapter 4, as opposed to exclusively taking at face value the words

of others. However, it is important to remember that my interpretation were present in these observations. Like most qualitative research observations should not be viewed as "what really happened" but as my perspective on the events that took place. Another important function of observation is that it provides context to researcher and reader (Stake, 1995).

Although it proved to be too much of a logistical hurdle to observe participants in addition to interviews at their campuses, the data collected from participants' social media provided an inside perspective into their daily lives, making it a form of observation. Further, I observed the campus environment of each participant before, during, and after our interviews. Additionally, part of my job required me to work closely with administrators, faculty, and staff from each of their campuses on a regular basis, and I had spent a considerable amount of time on the campuses outside of the context of this study. This prior experience provided familiarity with the physical and cultural environment of each of the campuses, an important consideration in this study.

### Data Analysis

At its most basic level, data analysis begins in qualitative research from the first moment data is collected, as the researcher begins turning things over in her or his mind and making notes, with new ideas coming forth and connections being made between ideas as data collection evolves. On the formal level, analyses for this study occurred through coding of interviews and categorizing documents.

In a multicase study like this one, both individual cases analysis and cross-case analysis are used. To help accomplish this, Stake (2005) recommends the researcher

establish a "case-quintain dialectic," which he defines as "a rhetorical, adversarial procedure, wherein attention to the local situations and attention to the program or phenomenon as a whole contend with each other for emphasis" (p. 46). He argues that issues from individual cases should not emerge too quickly in addressing the overall research questions of the multicase study, but that they should "be heard a while, then put aside a while, then brought out again, and back and forth" (p. 46).

Each case was first analyzed individually and separately in search of themes. After interviews were conducted, I transcribed and uploaded them into MAXQDA®, a qualitative research data analysis software package, for analysis. This software allows users to quickly and easily sort data into themes, create memos, and analyze content. A minimum of two rounds of coding for all data sources occurred: the first was open coding wherein I looked for emergent themes from the data without the influence of the study's theoretical framework. The second round of coding used Bourdieu's theories as a lens. In this round, I looked for themes in the data that matched Bourdieu's assertions about social and cultural capital in the educational context. Each interview, set of field notes, and document related to each particular case underwent many rounds of analysis as themes emerged. A case report for each participant was then written.

The study's two research questions guided the cross-case analysis of the data; answering these questions controlled how analysis progressed. The analysis was an investigation, in the most basic terms, of how participants made meaning from their experiences, where use of cultural or social capital was in evidence, and how they reported cultural tools as being a part of their college experience. Once overall

themes across cases began to emerge, I began to make assertions regarding the quintain. These assertions included notions about the ways in which participants appear to possess cultural and social capital--the sources, applications, and associated experiences. According to the literature detailed in Chapter 2, the Bourdieuean theory of cultural and social capital suggests that these forms of capital would be expected to be found in cultural and social elites and is less likely to be found in those from less socially privileged backgrounds such as the participants in this study. The literature also suggests that possession of these forms of capital, for the most part, is understood below the level of conscious thought for those who have it. A third important suggestion by the literature is that, by and large, cultural and social capital are transmitted generationally, from parent to child, which logic might suggest is very unlikely in this population. As data analysis continued, I looked for evidence that supported or undermined these claims and assumptions that are currently embedded in the literature. Assertions, as a result of coding, that are made about individual case studies were be the basis of the study's cross-case findings, conclusions, and recommendations (Stake, 2005).

### Establishing Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is an important consideration in qualitative research. In general, qualitative research is trustworthy when it is credible, dependable, and clear about the extent of useful transferability (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). In order to be useful, research must be credible. This means it was important to approach the phenomenon under study with a commitment to co-constructing meaning with participants, including all the nuances, complexity, and diversity of viewpoints that

occur therein. As a qualitative researcher, it was particularly important for me to be self-reflective about potential sources of bias and error, and to deal with and report these sources (Patton, 2002). Several measures, discussed in the following paragraphs, were employed here to increase trustworthiness.

The use of multiple sources of data in this study contributed to this case's trustworthiness; case studies that use multiple sources of data are rated more highly, in terms of quality, than their counterparts that only use one data source (Yin, 2014). The use of multiple data sources helps to ensure that one source of data does not lead to a misunderstanding of the phenomena; multiple sources can help to contextualize one another. Member checking to ensure that participants are being properly represented was also utilized, as recommended by Stake (1995). After each interview was transcribed, it was emailed to the participant for review to ensure their intended meaning is clear. As the study proceeded, I frequently took the opportunity to self-reflect on subjectivity, including potential biases, that I brought to the study and included this in the write-up (Creswell, 2009). My reflections took the form of a research journal that included field notes from observations and after interviews. Finally, Creswell's (2009) recommendation that an external auditor unfamiliar with the research or project assess the project throughout was followed to increase trustworthiness. This auditor was a professional colleague with a doctoral degree in higher education who has completed a dissertation utilizing qualitative methodology. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe four criteria for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research: confirmability, credibility, transferability and dependability.

Figure 3.1 summarizes how these trustworthiness measures were employed in this research.

| Figure 3.1. Means of Establishing Trustworthiness | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Practice** | Reflexivity | Triangulation | Member Checking | Thick Description | External Auditing |
| **Criteria** | Confirmability | Confirmability and Credibility | Credibility | Transferability | Dependability |
| **Description** | • Frequent self-questioning<br>• Keep meticulous notes on my own feelings on experiences after each interview, observation and how my own awareness affected it | • Multiple sources of data | • Participants review interview transcripts for accuracy<br>• Frequent contact with participants by social media, texting, and phone calls<br>• Follow-up interviews | • Describe case in great enough detail that the reader can evaluate transferability to other scenarios | • Frequent contact with advisor<br>• Peer review of work |

*Figure 3.1.* Criteria of trustworthiness and how they will be employed. Adapted from *Naturalistic Inquiry*, by Y.S. Lincoln and E.G. Guba, 1985, Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

## Summary

To conclude, this research used multicase study methodology, guided by the research questions, to explore the experiences of foster alumni college students with particular concern for how social and cultural capital may be at work. Use of interviews and document analysis as data from five participants formed a multicase study. Data analysis included multiple rounds of coding at the single case level followed by cross-case analysis. As previously outlined, multiple steps were taken to assure the trustworthiness of study outcomes.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

INDIVIDUAL CASE ANALYSES

The purpose of this research was to explore successful foster alumni college students'

experiences where they used, while in college and before matriculating, cultural and

social capital resources as defined by Bourdieu.  The study was guided by two central

research questions:

1.  In what ways, if any, do foster alumni college students report sources of social

    and cultural capital as a part of their college experiences?

2.  What uses of cultural tools, if any, do foster alumni students report as a part of

    their college experiences?

This study used a qualitative multi-case study methodology.  Using the methods

described by Stake (2006), the multi-case study uses individual cases to examine the

quintain—that is, the central phenomenon or condition under study—in varying contexts.

In this multi-case study, five foster care alumni made up the cases under study.  These

participants were all in the foster care system as adolescents before beginning college,

and all meet the criteria described in Chapter 3.  Individual case reports are presented in

this chapter, followed by cross-case analysis in Chapter 5.  All data for individual cases

were obtained through in-person interviews and social media document analysis.

Figures representing social media content are based on actual posts but anonymized to protect the confidentiality of participants.

**Taylor**

Taylor's interview was the first I conducted for this research. After corresponding via email and on the telephone we met for an interview on her campus on a warm spring day. At approximately 20 minutes after the time we were supposed to meet, I called her but no one answered. After about 10 more minutes, I called her again; she answered this time and told me she had been napping and forgot to set an alarm. She felt very badly and, about 10 minutes later, she met me at the library in what I would consider to be typical clothing for a college student in her early 20s—sweat pants, a t-shirt, and a baseball cap. We sat down at a table in a study area on the second floor of the library. It was the weekend and the campus was fairly deserted, so we had plenty of privacy.

During our discussion, I learned that Taylor, and African-American female, was not originally from the state where she was attending college. She grew up in a medium-sized city in the western U.S., as well as spending time in a large city in California. At the time of our interview, she was studying at a Historically Black University that would be categorized as a Master's university according to the definition in Chapter 1 and anticipated graduating in about a year-and-a-half. The campus was in a rural area of the state without much in the way of entertainment or shopping within a half-hour drive. My impression of the university was that the faculty and staff care a great deal for the success of their students, though they are under resourced. The university has a branch campus in an urban area of the state, though most students attend the rural campus. Although not

known as a powerhouse, there is a definite sense of pride among university employees and alumni, largely related to Fisher being the state's only HBCU.

During the interview, Taylor was very open and sometimes emotionally vulnerable. From the course of our discussion, several findings regarding her perceptions of her time in college and her high school years emerged.

**Finding 1: Self-Sufficiency Before and During College**

Growing up, it was not Taylor's intention to attend the institution where she was. She matriculated at Fisher University because her high school boyfriend decided to attend there. However, the relationship did not last. According to Taylor, "He only went here for one year. He failed miserably, so I left him. I was stuck here by myself. Me and him don't date no more, thank God. But I'm here by myself now." Taylor found herself on a college campus in a new state without the only person she knew. To make matters worse, she suffered a miscarriage and was physically assaulted by those she considered friends during that first tumultuous year of college. She expressed to me that she came very close to not returning after her first year at Fisher; however, she did not feel like she had anywhere else to go, so in her words, she had to "suck it up and come back."

**Self-sufficiency within her family.** College was not the first time Taylor felt on her own. Although Taylor considered herself an alumnus of foster care, she was never officially removed from her home by a government agency. She left home on her own as a teenager.

> And my mom, she is so messed up in the head from her childhood, she didn't
> know how to be a mother to us. She gave us tough love instead of nurturing
> love. So I had to learn everything on my own.

Taylor felt that her mother also did not provide in material ways, "I couldn't depend on her for anything." Before she left home, Taylor was working a lot of long hours and was home infrequently. Her mother had a boyfriend Taylor despised. Finally, things reached a breaking point and her father came to get her when Taylor was in high school. While staying with her sister for a time, her sister's husband molested Taylor. Based on our interview and the social media posting below, my impression was that Taylor feels that relying on others does not pay.

**Figure 4.1.** Representation of Taylor's Social Media Post About "Getting Through It"



> **t** **Taylor**
> ... · 🌐
>
> [shared photo]
>
> QUEEN OF GETTING THRU IT!!!!
> EVEN IF I GOTTA CRY MY EYES OUT ALONG THE WAY.....BITCH
> IMMA GET THROUGH IT!!!!
>
> Like · Comment · Share
>
> ↪ 546 shares
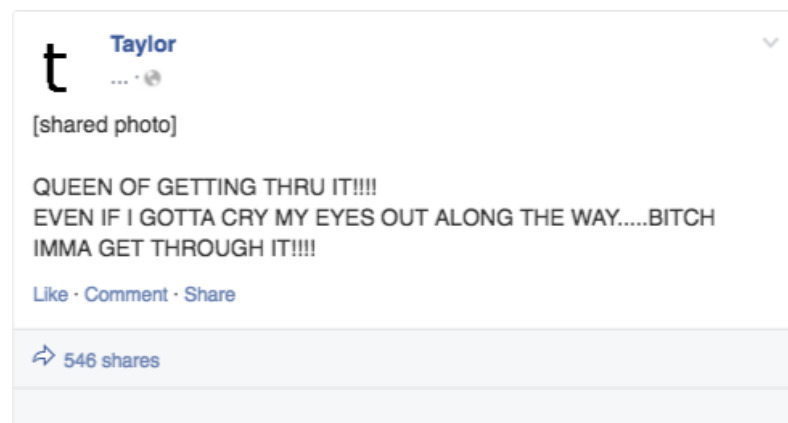
**Learning about getting ready for college.** Taylor also expressed to me that she was on her own when it came to preparing for college. Often students rely on parents, teachers, or others with experience to help them navigate the college admissions system. However, Taylor said, "I mean, as far as SAT scores and SAT and ACT grades, I did that all on my own. My mom didn't graduate [high school] and I witnessed her working hard and depending on everybody else and I hate that feeling." She did get a fee waiver for the SAT from her high school counselor, but that she did all the research about admissions test and colleges on her own using the Internet.

**Finding 2: The Importance of Help from Non-Family Support**

Although Taylor stressed the importance of being self-reliant, she also made it clear that her success in college was largely due to help from others. During the course of the interview and analysis of her social media postings, three sources of support emerged as important: Miss Franco, campus- and work-based support, and Taylor's spirituality.

**The role of Miss Franco.** Miss Franco was a life-changing figure in Taylor's life, and Taylor had a great deal to say about her. Miss Franco was the mother of the boy Taylor was dating when she started at Fisher University and was also a youth advocate who worked at Taylor's high school. Taylor met Miss Franco during Taylor's senior year of high school. Taylor described Miss Franco as being very connected to the community, "She's a big deal. Like, every person who's somebody knew this lady."

When Taylor left her sister's home, and disconnected from her biological family, she began living with Miss Franco, making her a *de facto* foster parent to Taylor. Miss Franco took a very active role in Taylor's life, especially as it related to college. Taylor said Miss Franco "gave me the extra push I wasn't getting at home." Taylor also described how Miss Franco encouraged her when she felt like giving up.

> So she was there when I was slowly giving up. She was literally the angel to say, "No, you're going to finish, you're going to graduate and we're going to send you off to college. End of story."

As Taylor's senior year of high school drew to a close, she had not passed a test her state required seniors to pass to graduate. She retook the test over the summer and passed, but she did not learn the result until August. This meant she did not know she would be able

to attend college until days before classes started.  Taylor described how Miss Franco
helped her this way:

> And she called up everybody up here [at Fisher] to say 'What can I do? She just
> graduated.'  And she just drove us down here.  She said, 'Come on, get your
> stuff.' I said, 'I don't have anything.' She said, 'We don't worry about that.  We'll
> worry about that when we get out there.  Just grab all your stuff and let's go.'

At the time of our interview, Taylor was still in frequent contact with Miss Franco, even
though her romantic relationship with Miss Franco's son had long ended.  In fact, Taylor
pointed out on the day of our interview that it was Miss Franco's birthday.  This
suggested that Taylor still felt a close connection to this person who had been
instrumental in getting her to college.

**Campus- and work-based support.**  Taylor relied heavily on the support she
received from her campus involvement and her on-campus job.

*Dance team*.  After dancing in high school, Taylor joined the dance team at
Fisher.  At the time of our interview, Taylor was planning to leave the team because she
was pregnant (she was about 16 weeks along) but she did describe the team members as
"very supportive."

**Figure 4.2.** Representation of Taylor's Social Media Post of her with her Dance Friends
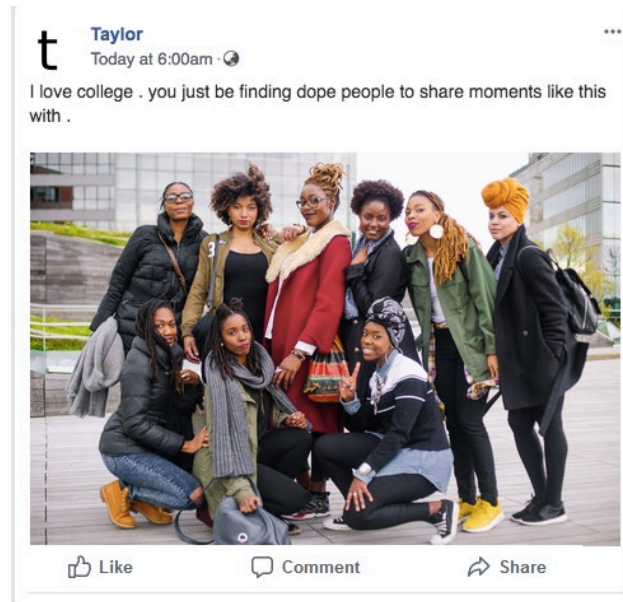


Although Taylor did tell me they were supportive and shared the post on social media represented here that supports that assertion, Taylor's feelings about the group appear to be more complicated. When I asked specifically if she would consider her teammates to be a support network, Taylor told me,

> We're not going to say support network. Because, like I said, people are catty, people are not as genuine as you would hope they'd be. But they do know the situation and I do know that if I was asking for something they would be there. But would they be somebody who I would definitely depend on? No.

This seemed to continue the theme of self-reliance; while Taylor believed they would be there if she asked, she would not put all her faith in her teammates.

*Woman of Purpose.* One organization that Taylor expressed had been helpful is Woman of Purpose. She described the organization as "womanhood come together" and told me that they help with problems such as abuse, children's issues, and homelessness. Taylor explained to me how the organization helped her:

I didn't really have a mother figure to really teach me all the things I wish she

would have taught me. And my sister—me and her grew up in the same

household, we're both trying to figure out everything on our own. So it's just nice

to have different women of different backgrounds who did come from a two-

parent household or who do have a mother who is already highly educated or,

hell, who already have walked the walls of Fisher and they know the ends and

outs and how to help you.  So that organization does help quite a lot.

Based on Taylor's description, Woman of Purpose appeared to be a group of women who

served as a valuable social network during her college years.

*Support at work.*  Taylor worked in the Enrollment Management office at Fisher

University.  She shared how her co-workers supported her during college.  When she

initially discovered she was pregnant, Taylor worried about how having a baby would

affect her ability to continue college.

I told [my co-workers] that I was pregnant—the moment that I told them that I

was pregnant they said, "Okay, great.  So what's the next step?  You're not going

home.  But what's the next step?  Because you're going to stay and finish."  Like,

okay.  CJ made it to the point where I got in-state [tuition] so my tuition goes

away.  And I can move straight into Commons when school is over with.  When

the baby gets here, they said they're going to help.  They said this baby is going to

have to be an office baby, it's going to have to be over there by the fax

machine.  We'll have to look at it look at us and we're going to keep working.

Aside from helping with this situation, Taylor's co-workers in Enrollment Management

helped her with housing, scholarships, and tuition issues.  Taylor said she has no doubt

she would have been kicked out of the university had it not been for her co-workers, "They're the reason I'm still here, even facing you right now."

*Spirituality.* The third area that emerged as a support for Taylor was spirituality. Interestingly, this aspect of support did not come up during our interview. While she did mention in passing being thankful to God for things that had happened or people that she met, she did not mention her religious beliefs or spirituality as a source of support. On her social media, however, Taylor posted many times over the months about God and how she relied on her relationship with Him and how it kept her going. Figure 4.3 is a representation of a typical example of a post she shared.

**Figure 4.3.** Representation of Taylor's Social Media Post about God



Another example of the importance Taylor put on God came from a social media post that is even more specific to college. She shared the photo in Figure 4.4 post right before the fall semester was about to begin.

**Figure 4.4.** Representation of Taylor's Social Media Post Asking for God's Help



Based on the amount of similar content Taylor shared, it seemed clear that she relied on her spirituality and relationship with God.

## Ana

Ana was a student at one of the state's largest, urban community colleges. At the time of our interview, she was in her second semester of college. Ana's college serves a large population of students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. They are viewed mainly as a feeder school for two large universities in the same metropolitan area. The campus is situated in a part of the city that has been largely bypassed by the economic development that has occurred in other parts of the metro area. The institution serves a large number of Hispanic students, largely based on its location in a part of the city where a large Hispanic population resides. The college has instituted many innovative programs over the years aimed at increasing retention among minority populations and expanding concurrent enrollment to more high school students. Ana

heard about the study through her Education Specialist (a person from the state assigned to her case as a college student). We corresponded through email, text, and phone before she agreed to participate in the study. We met for our interview on Ana's campus. The campus is made up of several connected buildings, so we had a bit of trouble finding one another. After we finally connected, we found an out-of-the-way spot in an administrative part of the campus to talk. Aside from being a full-time student, Ana worked many hours as a restaurant server. I saw the fatigue in her brown eyes, but she was very engaging and a great story teller. Of all the participants in this study, Ana seemed most hesitant to share.

Ana was removed from her biological parents' home, along with her twin sister, during Ana's freshman year of high school. Ana and her sister suffered many years of physical, emotional, mental, and sexual abuse at the hands of her parents. Her mother also battled opioid addiction and mental illness. After she was removed from her home, Ana spent the remainder of her high school years bouncing between kinship placements, group homes, and foster homes. I did not probe too much into areas that seemed especially traumatic for her. Beginning with our interview and through analysis of Ana's social media, several findings emerged. The most pronounced of these were "going it alone and chasing dreams," the "impact of her interaction with the foster care and education systems," and the "role of her support network".

**Finding 1: Going it Alone and Chasing Dreams**

Discussion during our interview and Ana's social media painted a picture of someone living on a knife's edge. Ana had big dreams and a bright vision for her future. However, it seemed that those dreams were in constant danger of slipping away. Ana

was on her own for a long time and the pressure of going it alone weighed on her.  In the

face of a tremendous amount of adversity, her drive to make a better life for herself and

others like her kept her pushing forward.

**The stress of being on your own.**  As is the case with many children in foster

care, Ana's traumatic experiences did not end when she was removed from her home.

She went through many placements during her time in the system, including grandparents

who had not been part of her life previously and whom Ana did not get along with. She

was placed in a group home for a period of time and in several other traditional foster

care placements.  Ana described the behavioral issues she had during her time in foster

care, which resulted in her being shuffled around from home to home to group home.

Ana felt like she had been on her own a long time.  The final time was the day she turned

18:

> I ended up getting kicked out [of my foster home] after I aged out, which was
>
> literally at my birthday, [date]. That was after the first semester [of my senior year
>
> of high school], so I was like, I guess I'll move to Urban City then. I had a car,
>
> because I had bought a car with the money I had been saving up. I had been
>
> working, working ever since I was old enough to. So, I bought a car that day [my
>
> grandmother] kicked me out. Called one of my friends, and they came and picked
>
> me up, and we went and bought a car. I slept behind a gas station in my car for
>
> two weeks until I made enough to get an apartment. I got a gym membership
>
> because it was only $20 a month, and used their shower. I thought it was pretty
>
> smart. Then I got an apartment after I saved up enough, which was luckily, praise
>
> the Lord, only two weeks. And so, I got my apartment and drove back and forth

from Urban City to school, which was about a 45- or 40-minute drive, but I didn't

want to transfer last semester of my senior year [of high school]. I drove back and

forth, and then ended up graduating [high school], and then I'm here.

Ana spoke many times about how she could not rely on family or people in the foster

care system (including foster parents), and that she had to "go it alone" many times in her

life. The thing that she spoke about most, however, were the stresses of supporting

herself financially. Ana worked as a restaurant server. Even though she received

education and training voucher benefits that were available to former foster youth to

offset the cost of college, she still frequently struggled. The social media post in Figure

4.5 was typical of something Ana frequently posted.

**Figure 4.5.** Social Media Post Showing Ana's Financial Anxiety



Even at her own campus of Urban Community College, an associate's college where

socioeconomic status was often a barrier, Ana felt different from her peers. She

sometimes got frustrated with her sister, Maggie, when Maggie said how stressed she was

with school, even though Maggie's boyfriend supported her financially. Ana thought

most students on her campus had an easier time financially, but she did not think it was fair for her to be frustrated with them. She told me,

> [They] don't mean to, they don't know any better. . .That's what it's been like their whole life. They don't know, people don't know they're privileged. . .They probably just don't know, and I shouldn't act like that, but sometimes I'll catch myself getting so mad, I'm like, "Stop! I can't be mad about that cause I'm going to have a comeback story." Yeah, know what I'm saying? I try to tell myself that.

This sentiment also applied to Ana's thoughts about other issues. For those unfamiliar with college students who were in foster care, questions about where those students will spend their holiday breaks are not normally top of mind. Ana's social media post, represented in Figure 4.6 shows, how she felt different from other students in this regard. She posted it a few days before Thanksgiving.

**Figure 4.6.** Ana Expressed the Difficulty of being a Former Foster Kid on Holidays

**Chasing Big Dreams.** One thing I learned about Ana through our interview and being connected through social media was that she had big plans for herself, and quitting or failing were not among them. What kept Ana going was the pursuit of her dreams.

At our interview, Ana already had very specific plans for where she wanted her life to go. She had a law school across the country and a law specialty picked out. She knew what she wanted to do after she got her law degree—start a non-profit organization to help people like her, who were in foster care, have a chance at a better life. About a rough semester she said, "I've got too high of hopes to be flunking out." Even when times were exceptionally tough—which they often were for Ana—her dreams kept her motivated. She told me, "It's been really hard dealing with everything, all together, and I'm still alone. I'm taking on all this stuff, and I've contemplated dropping out so many times, but I'm like 'No, my dreams!'" Spending so much time going through our interview transcript and poring through Ana's social media, I many times found myself wondering how she did it. Her attitude was evident when she said,

> You're not a product of your circumstances, you're a product of your choice. I
> believe that your actual drive and 'want to' is a huge factor in college and success
> in general. Because if you don't have 'want to,' especially, I mean, foster kids not
> really having anybody, you're not going to do well. You're just going to be a
> statistic.

Ana was making sure she was not on the path to being a statistic.

**Finding 2: Impact of Interaction with the Foster Care and Education Systems**

Ana had plenty of interaction with "the system." This yielded both positive and negative experiences for her.

**Interactions Pre-College.**  Ana was removed from her parents' custody her freshman year of high school but returned to her mother the same day with the promise that the father would leave the home.  However, he was back the same night.  Ana reported this at school the following day and the girls were placed in an emergency shelter.  After a few days, Maggie was placed with their grandparents, and Ana was placed in a foster home before ending up with her grandparents. Over time, she had several additional placements due to her strained relationship with her grandmother.

Ana yearned for a modicum of stability in her young life.  The social media post represented in Figure 4.7 gave a glimpse into Ana's life during her time in foster care.

**Figure 4.7.** Representation of Ana's Social Media Post About Adoption



Ana

I remember the third to last foster home I was in, I though that was a wrap for me. We spent most of our time together, laughed together, stayed up watching movies, she had just became a foster parent and seemed to be really enjoying it. I thought this must be it this is the woman who's going to sign the papers and I'll get to stay here. One morning i woke up and there was a trash bag on the kitchen counter and my case worker was said to be picking me up in a few hours. She said she couldn't handle it anymore. So I left. I was so worried and spend the remaining time I had in foster care so worried about who was going to finally accept me despite everything I had done and everything I had been through. Who was going to talk me down the isle in the future? Would I have someone to go home to one the holidays? The pressure older foster youth face upon aging out is ridiculous and overwhelming. I was never going to be adopted, but on September 10th of last year I gave my life to Christ and in doing so realized I had been adopted all along. By my father in heaven. So this #NationalAdoptionMonth I give love and prayer and tribute to the foster youth that may not make it to being adopted but who are already so loved and adopted but their Heavenly Father💙 I believe in the power of testimony, what's your #adoption story this month? #futureChildAdvocateLawyer #NotAStatistic

👍 Like          💬 Comment          ➦ Share

Multiple foster care placements and the stress of life in foster care affected Ana's high school coursework. However, overall she was academically high-performing. Ana participated in concurrent (also sometimes called "dual") enrollment in high school, a program where high school students took college courses during their junior or senior years of high school. In Oklahoma, where Ana went to high school, only highly-performing students (as determined by their ACT scores) could participate. Ana said,

> Our counselor came and talked, well like she had a meeting where it was the ones who wanted to sign up for concurrent or whatever. We went to. . .the cafeteria or something, and she talked to a bunch of us, what we needed to do, or if we needed to schedule an appointment with her or whatever. She did prep us for that, but I hadn't [taken] anything, so I just had my basics, and I was like, "Okay, let's get 'em done." They only offered a limited amount anyways, so I did talk to her about which ones I was going to take. She was like, "Well, we only are offering these." She was like, "So just pick from those." And so, I just kind of looked at them and picked on my own.

Ana's experience with her case worker was similar. Approximately two months before she and Maggie would age out of foster care, their case worker had a meeting with the two of them where they were bombarded with information about college. Ana appreciated the information, but she told me both she and Maggie felt totally overwhelmed. She wished that her case worker would have started preparing them for college long before that point. Ana told me that foster kids had such unstable lives that getting them prepared for college long before they aged out would be a much better approach.

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**Interactions During College.** Aging out of foster care did not mean Ana's interactions with the system, and by extension the impact of those interactions on her life, suddenly ceased. Like many former foster youths attending college, Ana benefited from the use of Education Training Vouchers (ETV) to help pay for college. With the stress of trying to make it on her own (as discussed in Finding 1), ETV was a major benefit. Ana also had a state-assigned support person, Lilly. Lilly got her signed up for Medicaid, which took a huge burden off Ana. Ana also found a champion on Urban Community College's campus, Pam. Pam was a college employee who serves as a liaison to students receiving ETV funds. Ana told me multiple times during out interview how much she likes Pam and how Pam was very helpful to her in finding out college-related things she needed to know.

## Finding 3: The Role of Ana's Support Network

The support of others was a critical part of Ana's college success. While Ana talked a great deal about the importance of doing things for herself and her lack of trust in other people, it became apparent that Ana does have a small group supporting her and their support is crucial. In addition to Pam and Lilly, previously mentioned, Ana relied on her friend Kristen and the support she received from church.

Kristen was a teacher at the high school where Ana graduated. At the time of our interview, Kristen and Ana lived a block from one another and Ana described Kristen as her best friend. Figure 4.8 represents a social media post made about Kristen and another friend.

**Figure 4.8.** Representation of Ana's Social Media Post About Kristen and Jen



Kristen also went to Ana's church, which Ana said was a huge support to her as a college

student.

> I know you wouldn't think they would connect with school and whatever, they
>
> helped me a lot, with school stuff. I also work at another church, and my boss at
>
> that church has helped me a lot at school because I'm taking a child and family
>
> and society class. She's helped me connect with other people throughout the
>
> church to help with my project because I've got to do a family project. They've
>
> just been really helpful to my education, they really have. I'm blessed to have that.

As we talked more about her church, Pam, and Kristen, Ana told me, "I feel like I have

more of the support system than I realize, honestly."

### Nicholas

Nicholas was a freshman at a flagship state doctoral university. His perspective

as a first-semester student proved to be valuable—at the time of our interview, it was the

first week of classes. Nicholas and I met for out interview in a group study room in his

campus's library, and his head seemed to be spinning from the buzz of his first week as a

college student. Although it was, by far, the shortest interview I conducted for this

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research, his perspective was unique and important. In contrast to other participants, Nicholas was a very infrequent social media user. However, I was able to glean a great deal of rich data from his social media page from posts by friends and family.

At the time of our interview, Nicholas had declared his major as piano at Tech University. Tech is a large, land-grant doctoral university that is known as one of the state's two flagship institutions. As such, admission requirements are more selective than most other universities in the state. The campus is located in a medium sized city that I view as a typical college town—small enough to drive anywhere in 20 minutes but large enough to keep college students occupied on weekends. As a large doctoral institution, Tech's culture is what one may think of as more a more stereotypically "higher education culture." Classes, especially for first- and second-year students, are often larger and taught by graduate students. Research plays a prominent role in the mission of the institution and teaching is not as heavily emphasized as it is at the state's community colleges and regional universities. Football is king on fall weekends at Tech.

Nicholas was originally from a medium-sized city, in the central U.S., but graduated from high school in a nearby small town after he was adopted. Nicholas was removed from his parents' custody when he was around 11 years old and was in foster care for approximately 6 years. He had four biological siblings, all younger than him. His biological parents faced issues with substance abuse and neglected their children. Nicholas told me that he and his younger sister took care of their three youngest siblings. He had to walk 10 miles to the grocery store to purchase food for the family. He thought his mother had some sort of government unemployment benefit because his parents did not work, but there was money coming in, most of which was spent on drugs. Nicholas

and his siblings were abused, and their home lacked basic utilities like electricity and running water.  All the children were removed from the home and spent most of the next two years separately going from foster care placement to placement throughout the state.  Ultimately they were reunited in the home of the woman who adopted Nicholas.  Two main findings emerged from our interview and Nicholas's social media: "having a support network", including a relationship with his biological family, and "the importance (and lack) of financial resources in his life."

**Finding 1: The Importance of Nicholas's Support Network**

Unlike some of the participants in this study, Nicholas had regular contact and even relationships with several of his biological family members, including his parents.  As an adoptee, Nicholas also had another mother in his support network, as well as adoptive siblings.  Like many college students, Nicholas had friends and other supporters who helped him along the way.  Our interview and social media posts suggested that this network was important in Nicholas's college experience thus far, as well as in his college preparation.

**Support of Biological Family.**  While the importance of money was a separate finding, for Nicholas it intersected with support from biological family.  His grandfather, in particular, seemed to have played a major role in Nicholas's life as it relates to his college experience.  Nicholas said his grandfather considers himself to be a mentor to him.  When I asked Nicholas about the role his biological family played in getting him ready for college, he said,

> [My grandfather] helped me. He's the one who's paying for my car payment this
> month, so he's just helping me and he's one who's helped me a lot. My mom and

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dad will give me advice, but I don't really take their advice. I kind of take it with a

grain of salt because you know, they've never been to college.

Nicholas's social media showed that his grandfather continued to offer him love and

encouragement.  Figure 4.9 represents a social media post Nicholas's grandfather left on

his page just before his first semester of college was about to begin.

**Figure 4.9.** Representation of Grandfather's Social Media Post to Nicholas



Nicholas also said that his biological parents are very proud of him for being one of the

first in the family to attend college.  As previously mentioned, though they do offer

advice, Nicholas does not rely on them because their lack of experience in matters related

to college.  Though Nicholas may not find value in their advice, his biological parents'

social media posts on his page seem to demonstrate pride in him and his

accomplishments.  Figure 4.10 includes some typical examples of his biological parents'

posts.

**Figure 4.10.** Representation of Nicholas's Biological Parents' Social Media Posts



**Nicholas's Bio Dad**

Just want to say congratulations to this very handsome and intelligent young man right here. He graduated with national honor's society and will be attending Tech U next year. This is a true confirmation to his resiliency, strength, and determination. I love you so very much. #greatthingstocome

Like · Comment · Share

**Nicholas's Bio Dad**

This is Nicholas playing Christmas recital. He is a very talented young man who only been playing for 3 years or so. VERY proud of him.

Like · Comment · Share

**Nicholas's Bio Mom**

We celebrate our son Nicholas as a high school Senior graduate...in his 18 years, we've been throuhg a lot and we are thankful for his other [adoptive] Momma in his life for pushing him and as we see waht we've rcreated...Now we parpare to send him off as a Tech U Farmer, but first he has a few months off for some tame shenanigans and relaxation before adulthood sets in and then its time to get serious..So Congrats to our oldest Baby-Son Nicholas for his life beginning ♥ 2018 Farmington High School Sr ♥♥

Like · Comment · Share

**Support of Adoptive Family.** The support of Nicholas's adoptive family, especially his adoptive mother, was also important. Nicholas described his adoptive mother multiple times as someone who was "always there" for him, providing him emotional support and advice about college,

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Then my mom really just helped me with all the little stuff. I had to find all the

little stuff by myself, but she kind of just told me that if you ever need someone

just come home. Stuff like that.

Aside from his mother, Nicholas also appeared to have support from other members of

his family by adoption. A typical example of this was a social media post from his sister,

a video of Nicholas playing the piano with his sister captioning it, "Shoutout to the little

bro for having some serious talent on the keys! Proud of your hard work!!"

**Finding 2: The Significance of Financial Resources**

One of the most persistent themes for Nicholas was the important role of financial

resources. In fact, it was one of the first things he told me about himself, "I just recently

bought a new car, still paying that off, so that's not fun. I'm also broke, so I can't pay my

car right now, so that's not fun either." Worries about money seemed to be causing

Nicholas a great deal of anxiety. When we talked about his situation prior to being

placed in foster care, he talked about how his biological parents spent all their money on

drugs. Earning money before going to college occupied a great deal of his time the

previous summer previous,

I was living in the house I was adopted with, and so I had two jobs two to three

months ago, and so I was working at both jobs, working two summer jobs to try to

earn as much money as I can, and so I was good financial wise, kind of like

making $600 a month. I thought it was really good.

Nicholas expressed that Education and Training Voucher (ETV) funding was a very

important element of his being ready for college. When I asked him about the single

most important resource he needed to be successful in college, he told me it was money. When I probed deeper, he told me:

> Because I have a car payment and I can't pay it. It really kind of sucks, but at the same time ... I say I need money, but I really don't. I just like having a little bit of extra money, but in terms of actual resources there's not really anything ETV mostly has it all covered and if not then my family is always there to pick it up.

I found this to be an interesting dichotomy. Financial concerns seemed to cause Nicholas a great deal of stress and anxiety. However, he also seemed to believe that he is ultimately financially secure, thanks to his ETV funding and assistance from his family.

## Michel

After multiple hits and misses by phone and email, Michel and I scheduled an interview at Michel's campus, Tech University, the same large public doctoral university that Nicholas attended. However, Michel never showed up for our interview. After later reaching him by email, he apologized and we rescheduled. To my delight, Michel met me at our agreed-upon place outside the library. We went inside and had our interview in the group study room I reserved.

My first impression of Michel was of a free spirit. He had long, blonde hair, dressed very casually, and seemed he would have been very at home in the 1960s. From the beginning, I could tell that Michel was anxious, however. He was extremely well-spoken and articulate, but he fidgeted a lot during the interview and small talk did not seem to come easily to him. However, our interview was the longest, by far, of all of my interviews.

Michel overcame a great deal of adversity to become an honors student in Philosophy at a major research university who was about to graduate. Michel grew up with a single mother who battled addiction and heavily relied on Michel for support, even as a young child. Michel also developed a substance abuse problem as a teenager, coped with mental health issues and seemed to be on a trajectory toward incarceration. Although he still experienced many difficulties at the time of our interview, including food insecurity, he defied the odds. After stints at a group home, he was placed into a program intended to assist foster youth aging out of care. Part of this program included housing. During this time, he met the woman who would become his wife, with whom he credits much of his turnaround, even as she faced her own challenges. Michel's wife was also a student at Tech University and they had a young daughter together. Since the time of our interview, Michel graduated from Tech University and was accepted into a graduate Philosophy program at a very well-respected, private university.

Sifting through the data from Michel's interview, my field notes, and his social media profile was the most difficult of any of the five cases but also the most rewarding. Michel was articulate in expressing himself and incredibly introspective. Indeed, this theme of self-image was one of the major findings in Michel's data. Other major findings included "the large role of external factors such as mental health and substance abuse," and" how social and group dynamics affected his perceptions of college."

**Finding 1: The Important Role of Self-Image and Purpose**

Michel required little prompting to discuss and reflect on how life events shaped him or the lens through which he viewed his experiences.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Michel's time in foster care and immediately before had a profound impact on his self-image and how he perceived his college experiences.

I spent a lot of the time in my later teen years struggling with substance abuse and homelessness. My mother and I were living here or there, couch surfing for a while. And then we were living in her SUV for a while after that. I've really struggled with over the years [with] mental illness. I've been an inpatient about five or six times. These are sort of just the things that really shaped the way I viewed the world, though, and have been very impactful in my life. So, they're sort of the things that I mention the most.

Throughout the interview, this proved to be true. The constant strand of Michel's experiences being filtered through the lens of his background was quite evident.

Based on our interview, I concluded that Michel has a driving need to excel in his chosen academic discipline. He has a true love of philosophy that goes back to his teen years. During his time as a student at Tech, he was president of the Philosophy academic honor society and started a student publication on Philosophy. This ability to push himself further and to excel has been a hallmark of Michel's time as a college student. Michel said,

I would describe my college experience as mainly enlightening. I've learned so much about so many different topics. I've learned more than anything, I think the main thing I've gained from college is the ability to direct myself. To know what I'm capable of, to see what's out there, and to utilize the resources that I've been taught about in college and utilize the ability to explore further resources.

This need to excel, however, also had consequences, which Michel understood. Combined with his attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder and anxiety, Michel's desire to excel took a toll. He told me during our interview that he does not know how to relax because he felt constant pressure to be doing something, such as writing to get an academic publication, getting into graduate school, and the like.

   **The Importance of Purpose.** Along with (and related to) self-image, the theme of "purpose" was recurrent in Michel's data. This theme is perhaps best understood by the contrast of Michel's life before college and during college. During his time with his mother and after he was placed in foster care, Michel seemed to lead a life adrift. When he was with his mother, he lived a transient lifestyle, often living in his mother's car and mostly not attending school. After he was placed in foster care, he still seemed to lack purpose, battling addiction and seeing no hope in his circumstances. Even after he was accepted into an independent living program and was given his own apartment, he worked a low-wage job at a fast food restaurant, which he found to be deeply unfulfilling. He told me that during this period of his life, his primary concern was often where he would get money to purchase marijuana. For Michel, it was a very dark period of his life. It seemed that it was not even so much the circumstances themselves, but the sense of living a life without purpose, that was so distressing to Michel. Two things were pivotal in bringing a vital sense of purpose to his life: family and college. Michel relied heavily on his girlfriend-turned-wife for motivation. They met when she and Michel were in the same independent living program, and they attended the same community college. He credited her with getting him out of his addiction to methamphetamine. Largely due to her academic major and options for transfer, she and Michel both transferred to Tech,

which was a huge turning point in Michel's life.  Michel also gained a sense of purpose from his daughter, who was a toddler at the time of our interview.  Figure 4.11 represents a particularly poignant social media post Michel made about the sense of purpose his daughter lent to his life.

**Figure 4.11.** Representation of Michel's Social Media Post About His Daughter



Along with his wife and daughter, the other purposeful force in Michel's life was college.

> It's as if once I got involved in school, even if I wasn't directed then, at least I
> knew where I was going, what I was doing. Because once I just started applying
> for school, it's like everything seemed more hopeful. I was thinking more into the
> future, I wasn't thinking when can I get the next paycheck so I can get some weed,
> so I can relax, things like that. It was, this is where I'm at now, and it's going to be
> difficult, but now I have the trajectory, now I know where I'm going. I think

college really sort of tied up everything together, and made me realize what I was

doing with myself, where my life was going, and how I could move it forward.

Michel described the study of philosophy as "more than just a job, as more than just a

way of getting along." He said philosophy and the pursuit of knowledge gave meaning to

his life, a different sort of meaning than his family; philosophy gave him satisfaction.

Perhaps because of the deep meaning he gained from his academic pursuits, Michel

expressed frustration with his fellow students who did not seem to put in the same work

and apply the same importance to the academic dimension of college.

**Finding 2: The Role of Mental Health and Substance Abuse**

Throughout our interview and through social media postings, Michel expressed

that mental health, substance abuse, and his life in the foster care system seemed to be

inexorably bound together, linked by a common thread of traumatic experiences. Michel

entered the foster care system in his teen years after a falling out with his mother, his

grandmother fetched him to live with her. His grandmother then found a notebook—

Michel did not want to discuss the contents but told me his grandmother found them

"very disturbing." His grandmother kicked him out of her home. His uncle told him he

could go to a local convenience store chain to utilize the Safe Place program (a national

program for teens who are in crisis and need someplace to stay).

> So the first step that I did was I went to [the convenience store], I utilized Safe
>
> Place, told them I needed a Safe Place. They took me to the [Youth Services]
>
> shelter. This is where I got involved with [the state human services agency],
>
> because when I went to the shelter, I had injected for the first time, the first and
>
> only time that I ever injected meth because I was in a very dark place.

Michel told me that he had been in inpatient care for mental health issues 5 or 6 times during his life. Although his struggles with addiction had considerably lessened, Michel still struggled immensely with mental health issues as a college student. In fact, Michel saw this as one of his most defining features.

> More than anything, I think something that really determines who I am and how people see me is the fact that I struggle a lot with ADHD. So I don't really have as much of a filter as others might have. I tell people my substance abuse issues in the past without thinking that it might change the way they see me, or change the way my life goes. I'm a very open person, and I'm also excitable. I move my hands all the time, I'm messing with my face. I have a hard time sitting in one particular way.

Michel's ADHD impacted his life as a college student almost constantly. He told me that he often felt very overwhelmed and unfocused. Our discussion left me with the impression that he was nearly constantly in a state of being close to the edge, as if any moment he felt that he could fall. Michel has been very successful academically in college, so it seemed he developed coping strategies for his mental health issues. However, the issues still played a significant role in his life. They also intersected with the final finding in Michel's case: his perception of how social and group dynamics shaped his college experience.

**Finding 3: Social and Group Dynamics and Michel's Perception of College**

Although he was very academically very successful in college, Michel struggled socially. During our interview, Michel told me about trouble connecting with his fellow students:

But when you don't have friends, and you feel alone, even though I have my wife and I felt a very close relationship. You feel alone in a swarm of people. You feel like you don't belong. And that can lead to cynicism sometimes. Sometimes it leads to happiness for me. Sometimes I'm glad that everybody doesn't like me, and that I can just sort of do what I want to do. And other times, it hurts me. Sometimes it's the same emotion at the one time. I'm happy that I can be who I want, read what I want, do what I want. But I still feel alone and saddened. Sometimes I just want to give up, because I don't feel like I'll connect with people the way that they connect with one another. It's as if everybody was given a manual on how to engage with one another. And they all read the manual, and then they promptly memorized it. And now I'm going into this situation trying to figure it out, and I get the negative looks or reactions, or ostracization. That's my main issue, is that.

Michel pointed to several things that set him apart from his peers. His struggles with mental health marked him as different. He said, for example, he might become overwhelmed and start pulling out his hair in public, which he said would solicit the reaction from others "like it's the worst possible thing." More than any other factor, however, Michel felt that his childhood experiences set him apart from his peers in college. The consequences of Michel's chaotic childhood continued to have consequences for him as an adult. He described this through the lens of his relationship with his mother:

She treated me like a friend or a caretaker. So I sort of just had to rely on myself. And more than that, she never taught me to regiment myself. Hygiene wasn't an

issue, making sure to go to bed on time was never a problem, because I could just

stay up whenever I wanted. I would fall asleep eventually. Regulating myself was

something I almost never was taught. And other kids at the time said, oh, you

have all this freedom. And sure, at the time I was like, yeah, I have all this

freedom. But now, where has it gotten me?

Michel's difficulty fitting in had real consequences for him as a college student.

He said being ostracized was hurtful to him and to his self-image (which, as described in

Finding 1, is an important part of this case). More than this, though, Michel realized that

being ostracized by others in college was harmful to his chances at success. He described

this realization, telling me,

> . . . I realized early on that to be ostracized from the other students is to not have
>
> access to the same knowledge that they have. Because if you're not engaging
>
> them, you don't know what's going on. If you're not engaging with your
>
> professors in a more in-depth level, you don't know what's going on in the
>
> academic realm. It's like if you don't engage with the students, you don't know
>
> what resources are there as much, because that's where people are talking about
>
> them is when they engage with one another.

This is not to say that Michel was totally without a social network on his campus.

Indeed, he described having very positive relationships with his professors. Additionally,

Michel was part of his university's student government association, as well as president

of the campus chapter of his discipline's academic honor society and of the off-campus

student organization. Michel became involved with the off-campus student organization

because he assumed no one else would address the issues faced by off-campus students

with his same passion.  Being part of these organizations yielded benefits to Michel, which he described this way:

> I feel like they've helped me to learn how to engage with individuals in a better light, especially since you're sort of forced to be with these other people if you want to be a part of the organization. So I think it's helped me to deal with people that I like and people I dislike in a better way. I think that it's helped me to understand how to access and aggregate resources, not only from the college, but from other students, from other organizations, and from this community around us.

His engagement with others also taught Michel lessons about how to manage his appearance to position himself in a positive light with others.

## Cassandra

Cassandra was the last participant I interviewed.  She initially contacted me through email and we spoke on the phone.  Cassandra was a student at Green County Community College, an associate's college where she was completing general education. GCCC is a multi-campus community college in an urban area of the state.  Through years of political maneuvering, GCCC has remained the only game in town, so to speak.  By state statute, only GCCC is allowed to offer lower-division college coursework in the county where it is located.  This means that it is in a class of its own among the state's community colleges.  In the state's other metropolitan area, three community colleges compete for students; in GCCC's service area, its four campuses have no competition for students, making it somewhat of a behemoth.  GCCC places a high premium on innovative practices and student success, giving it a culture that is truly student-centered.

After attending GCCC, Cassandra planned to transfer to Tech University-Urban Campus, a doctoral university, to study human services. We met on GCCC's downtown campus in a large, empty mezzanine area that had been set up with many round tables like a ballroom. Cassandra had no classes on that day, so I appreciated her making a special trip. At the time of our interview, Cassandra was 20 years of age. She had a bubbly, outgoing personality and answered my questions without hesitation.

Cassandra's mother and older brother struggled with addiction and they moved around frequently. Her mother and brother were both arrested within a day of one another, and Cassandra was placed into a foster home when she was 15 years old. She had trouble adjusting to life with her foster family and was placed into a youth shelter, where she spent the next 7 months. She was then placed with another foster family; after 9 months with that family, her foster parents adopted her at the age of 17.

Cassandra was wonderful to talk to. She was very open and her optimistic personality was contagious. During our interview (which was relatively short) and through data collected from her social media, three major findings emerged: the support of her family and friends, the importance of her relationship with God, and her desire to be of service to others.

**Finding 1: Support from Family and Friends**

As a college student, Cassandra relied heavily on family and friends for support. Many of these people were in Cassandra's life because she was in foster care: namely, her adoptive family and state-assigned worker, Rachel.

Cassandra told me that Rachel went "way above and beyond" in helping her with college-related matters. Rachel also connected Cassandra with an organization for foster

youth; Cassandra now sits on the board of that organization.  Cassandra told me that

Rachel "really invested" in her.  Cassandra and Rachel's relationship seemed to transcend

that of a state employee and a client; Cassandra described what seemed to be a friendship.

> Because even if it's not talking about college, it's also talking about what I'm
>
> going through and she's very emotionally supportive. She says if you ever need
>
> anything you can call me and when I did, she just poured out so much advice that
>
> I needed and it was great.

Cassandra indicated that this type of emotional support was important to her as a college

student.  She also received this type of support from her adoptive family.

Aside from her adoptive parents, Cassandra had several adoptive siblings.  This

included two sisters and three brothers, as well as a 1-year-old girl whom her family was

fostering at the time of our interview.  When we talked about the stress and pressure of

being a college student, Cassandra told me about how being with her sisters helped her.

She gave examples such as holding her foster sister because she loves holding babies,

taking her 5-year-old sister out for ice cream, and watching movies late at night with her

15-year-old sister.  When I asked Cassandra how these relationships with her sisters

helped her as a college student, she told me,

> It helps me to relax and not worry about what I need to work on next or helps me
>
> really enjoy having a family who really loves me and doesn't want to hurt me and
>
> just reminds me that I'm not alone and I didn't by the grace of God I didn't age out
>
> of the foster care system because who knows where I could have been.

Cassandra has also relied on her adoptive mother, specifically for advice about

transferring between colleges.  Although she did not specifically mention support from

her adoptive father during our interview, she did tag him in a social media post

expressing her gratitude to her adoptive family, as represented in Figure 4.12.

**Figure 4.12.** Representation of Cassandra's Social Media Post About Her Adoptive

Family
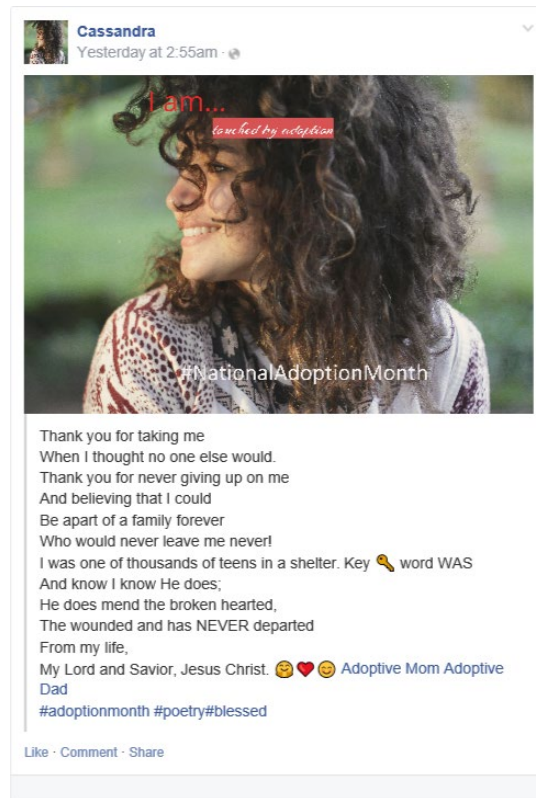


As evidenced in Figure 4.12, Cassandra also placed great importance on her religious

beliefs, which is expanded upon in Finding 2.

**Finding 2: The Importance of Cassandra's Relationship with God**

During our interview, Cassandra spoke about the direction her life took and the

major influences that shaped her.  From interview and social media data, it became

apparent that Cassandra's religious beliefs, specifically the personal relationship she felt

with God, had a major impact on her life and the way she viewed the world, as was

evident in Figure 4.12.

Cassandra experienced a life-changing religious conversion during her freshman year of high school, before she was removed from her biological mother's custody. Before this, she told me she was using drugs for approximately four years. The reason she changed is that she asked God for help and He is the only reason she is here today. Her description made her faith sound almost like a refuge. She described life after her conversion in this way:

> [My mother and brother] did their drugs in front of me but I would isolate myself in my room, turn on my radio, put Air One on, one of my favorite [Christian] radio stations and I would just be like I'm going to live in my own world and do this until I'm 18 until I can get a job and move out. That was my thought.

Cassandra's faith was tested when her biological mother and brother were arrested. She felt that it was a way for God to test her faith in Him, to see if she would still believe during such a difficult period in her life. She credited her aunt with helping keep her faith alive during that time by taking her to church and just "acknowledging [her] existence."

Cassandra's relationship with God was also been vital to her success as a college student; in fact, she described it as the most helpful.

> It's helped me because He has always been there and when I'm going through something I just start to sing and I sing and I sing and lyrics just come. I can't explain it. They just come and I sing to Him how I feel and He reminds me I'm never alone and I don't see it as a do or don't type thing, I see it more as a how can I get to know Him better and He's better to help other people. Not by telling them

about the Bible but by loving them the way He loves me every day. That's how I

see it.

Not only does Cassandra rely on her relationship with God for emotional strength, she

also credits Him for smaller things, like doing well in a class.  Figure 4.13, a

representation of one of Cassandra's social media posts about finishing all her final

exams, illustrates this.

**Figure 4.13.** Representation of Cassandra's Social Media Post Thanking Jesus



**Cassandra**

Praise you, Jesus! I am FINALLY finished with all my finals! I just finished
my online fast-track class. Thank you, thank you, thank you! 😩🥹🙏👊

Like · Comment · Share
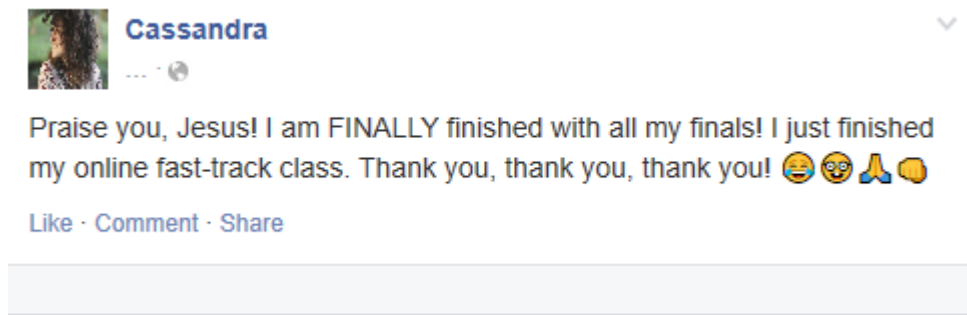
**Finding 3: The Desire to Be of Service to Others**

The third prominent theme that emerged from Cassandra's data was a desire to be

of service to others.  Cassandra was a very busy person; aside from being a college

student, she also managed two non-profit organizations, Helping Hands and House of

Hope.  Helping Hands helped families in need of necessities such as clothing, shoes,

diapers, wipes, and the like.  The organization also provides clothing, toiletries, diapers,

and wipes to emergency foster care placements.   House of Hope provided transitional

living for girls aging out of foster care, in addition to non-housing support to young

women who needed it during their transition out of care.  Running these organizations

kept Cassandra quite busy; during our interview, she told me she was not sure how she

did it.  Throughout the interview, however, she brought up the non-profits multiple times

and her involvement with them seemed to lend her a strong sense of identity and motivation.

Cassandra chose her college major out of her desire to serve others.  She was studying Human Development and Family Science.  The specific reason she chose this field of study was to help other children in foster care.

Cassandra's desire to emotionally invest in others mirrored the emotional investment she perceived that other made in her.  As busy as it kept her, Cassandra seemed to find real purpose in service to others.  Throughout our wide-ranging interview, she was noticeably more excited about her work with non-profits, Helping Hands and House of Hope, than anything else.  It was apparent from our interview that her work and her studies point toward one goal: being of service to others, especially those from backgrounds similar to hers.

## Summary of Case Study Reports

Five cases were presented in this chapter.  Each case consisted of one college student who was previously in foster care.  Three of these students were attending public universities, two were enrolled in community colleges.  Each case contained a unique set of circumstances related to the student's college attendance and personal motivations and challenges.  Through analysis of data collected from interviews and social media document analysis, each case report presented its major themes. The next chapter will present an examination of how common themes are present across cases.

CHAPTER V

FINDINGS

CROSS-CASE FINDINGS

In this chapter cross-case themes will be presented and discussed.  Cross-case themes

resulted from analysis undertaken in the manner described by Stake (2006), beginning

with the in-depth reading and re-reading of each case that led to the five individual case

study reports presented in Chapter 4.  Cross-case assertions look across the case -specific

findings. Although the particular character of each case is largely lost as each assertion is

made, the process requires an intimate knowledge of each case in order to recognize the

prominence of themes across multiple cases.  Following the advice of Stake (2006), the

themes presented here maintain as much of the situational character as possible without

getting too bogged down in the unique characteristics of each case.  Themes derived

using this method and then filtered through the lens of my research questions were:

1.  In what ways, if any, do foster alumni college students report sources of social

    and cultural capital as a part of their college experiences?

    a.  Theme 1: Cultural Capital Can Be Acquired by Those Willing to Search

    b.  Theme 2: The Importance of Social Networks

    c.  Theme 3: Cultural Capital Differences from Peers

2. What uses of cultural tools, if any, do foster alumni students report as a part of their college experiences?

    a. Theme 4: Using What You Have

**Theme 1: Cultural Capital Can Be Acquired by Those Willing to Search**

For any college-bound student in America, there are questions that must be asked and things that must be learned. Some knowledge of the college admissions process, and indeed the larger system of higher education, is necessary in order to even begin college. As a first-generation college student, myself, I can relate to how overwhelming this can be. I, at least, knew that I could depend on my parents to help me locate my immunization records, hand over tax returns, and plan out a budget as I went out on my own for the first time. In no case examined here, though, did a participant rely on a biological parent for assistance in the college admission process, although Nicholas and Cassandra were able to rely on their adoptive parents. Taylor told me she could not rely on her mother for anything. Ana had ceased all contact with her biological parents and was in foster care at the time when her college preparation activities were happening. While Nicholas's biological parents were supportive of him attending college, he did not ask or receive any assistance from them as he did his college preparation. Michel was on his own and his mother was largely dependent on him for much of his life, offering no assistance as he prepared for college. Cassandra also had no contact with her biological mother and was with her adoptive parents as she prepared for college.

In Taylor's case, she was able to rely on a trusted adult, Miss Franco, with getting into college. She leaned on coworkers for assistance with scholarships and other college-related issues. Ana was able to get assistance when she needed it from a college

employee who works with former foster youth. She also built cultural capital through her relationship with an older friend who had gone to college, as well as through her church. Michel had help from someone who worked with young people in his independent living program. While these people were of assistance, to various degrees, to participants in building cultural capital, these participants also all stressed that they had taken it upon themselves to learn things about going to college. Whether independently researching college admission exams like Taylor, showing up on her own to apply and enroll like Ana, or perusing the university's website to find the answers he needed like Michel, the participants felt that it was on them to find the knowledge they needed to be successful in college. This suggests that, perhaps, cultural capital is not always transmitted from person-to-person but can sometimes be generated through hard work on the part of the student.

On the subject of biological parents to cultural capital, there is an interesting point that merits noting here. Although the evidence does not support an assertion that biological parents helped these participants build cultural capital in the traditional sense, it could be argued that their influence did have some effect on preparing their children for college by influencing the trajectories of their lives. Across cases, participants were clear in their interviews that they did not want to wind up like their biological parents. This is understandable since each participant experienced trauma as a result of their parents' decisions; in many cases, this trauma was compounded by the fact that the participants had suffered abuse or neglect, sometimes for an extended period.

Three of the five participants, Taylor, Ana, and Cassandra, relied on their religious beliefs to varying degrees, often as a form of cultural and/or social capital

building.  Interestingly, this was expressed in varying ways.  Taylor did not emphasize her faith during our interview, but she did post on social media somewhat frequently about God getting her through.  For Ana, the capital she derived from her faith seemed to come from the relationships she built through her religious community.  In the case of Cassandra, she was explicit that her faith helped her persist through difficult times.  This sentiment seemed to be shared by her family, perhaps strengthening the durable social network she was able to draw upon.

**Theme 2: The Importance of Social Networks**

Across several cases, participants claimed that they learned early that they could rely only on themselves and that they were responsible for their own success or failure. This was particularly true in the cases of Taylor and Ana, who spent a great deal of time discussing the experience of being on their own with no one to rely on.  As data analysis continued, however, it became apparent that all participants did, in fact, rely on a social network to some degree.  Without exception, participants had a network of friends, family, or social services workers who contributed to their success as college students.

In the cases of Taylor and Ana, both participants described a strong connection to one to two people to whom they were not related (either biologically or through adoption or marriage) who had been of great benefit to them in their collegiate careers.  For Taylor, her relationship with Miss Franco was instrumental in her college attendance, starting in high school and continuing at least to the point of our interview, and presumably beyond.  For Ana, her relationships with Lilly and Kristen, her former high school teacher turned friend, were beneficial for her as a college student, though these social networks did not seem to benefit her pre-college.

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Nicholas, Michel, and Cassandra all described durable social networks with family as being beneficial to their college success. Nicholas seemed to perceive the support of his adoptive family, especially his adoptive mother, as most helpful for navigating college. Unique among all participants, he had strong, visible support from his biological family for his college attendance, though he seemed to perceive his grandfather's financial assistance as the most helpful aspect of this support. For Michel, his wife was a key figure in his success as a college student. More than any other participant, Michel also engaged with institutional structures at his university to build social capital. His engagement with student government, an academic honors society, and faculty seemed to benefit him as a college student. While all the other participants seemed to regard college as a means to an end (not winding up like their parents, helping others, or fulfilling their dreams), Michel was unique in that he seemed to relish the opportunities afforded to him as a college student. Michel expressed a love of learning for its own sake and a keen appreciation for his own academic discipline of Philosophy. From the data presented here, it can be asserted that there were at least two reasons: (1) Michel had a deep love of philosophy that went back to his childhood, and (2) Michel recognized that engaging with his university through organizations, academic research and writing, and his faculty would assist him in achieving his personal and professional goals.

Another prominent relationship that emerged across nearly all cases was the one between the participants and someone assigned to them by a government social services agency. The only exception to this was Taylor, who was not formally placed in foster care by the state, but instead voluntarily left her home as a minor and, for all intents and

purposes, found her own de facto foster mother.  For Ana, Nicholas, Michel, and Cassandra, there were varying degrees of benefit from this social connection.  In Ana's and Cassandra's cases, they actually became quite close to their assigned workers, with Cassandra describing hers in terms of a friend.  Nicholas discussed his worker in positive terms, though both he and Ana seemed to perceive the greatest positive in their relationships to be their workers' facilitation of ETV funding.  This aspect of the relationships may be all the more crucial because, as the data demonstrate, these students often lacked other financial resources to pay for school.  Michel had help from a counselor in his transitional living program, though he did not seem to view him so much as an institutional aid as a kindred spirit.

**Theme 3: Cultural Capital Differences from Peers**

Across data from multiple participants, the theme of noticing cultural capital differences from peers emerged.  One example came from Ana, who became frustrated with peers who did not face the same struggles.  However, she did indicate that she knows she should not feel this way because it is unlikely that her peers are even aware of their privilege

Perhaps the most pronounced example in the data of a participant perceiving cultural capital differences from peers came from my interview with Michel.  Not only did Michel describe feeling frequently sad and lonely, but he felt like his peers had been given a manual of how to behave (in the college context, presumably) that he did not receive, and he frequently felt set apart.  Michel perceived these differences to be both from his background—not being parented as a child led to consequences like not developing a proper hygiene routine—as well as class differences.  Michel seemed to

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perceive that he was doubly disadvantaged as someone who came from an unstable home and a lower socioeconomic status than many of his peers.

While the other three participants did have a feeling of being different than their peers in some respects, this perception did not occur as a major theme in their cases. Each case is unique and the intent of this study is not to explain but to gain a deeper understanding, however, it is worth noting that the three participants who did not present cultural capital differences as a major theme did not age out of foster care; Nicholas and Cassandra were both adopted before aging out and Taylor was not in the state's custody. All three of these participants also had stable adult figures in their lives consistently from a time preceding their entrance into college and through the collection of data for this study. For Nicholas and Cassandra, it was one or more adoptive parents on whom they could rely; for Taylor, Miss Franco could be described as having played the role of a surrogate mother, even though she had no legal relationship to Taylor. While causation is by no means implied here, it is worth noting how the manifestation of this theme aligns with each participant's situation vis-à-vis their aging out of foster care and having a stable adult presence in their lives prior to college.

**Theme 4: Using What You Have**

Across cases, the data showed a drive for participants to do what they could with what they had, to create their own successes. It was a resiliency and determination that was, frankly, remarkable.

Though they came from a variety of backgrounds and different genders, races, and geographical areas, each participant had an extraordinary ability to do the most with what they had. It may be too much to say they each turned their failures into successes;

life seldom seemed to work that way for these participants. Each of them, however, possessed a clear-eyed determination that helped them to see through their present circumstances to the future that could be—a future that was markedly different from their past and present. For Taylor, going to college was not part of the plan; neither was breaking up with her boyfriend in her first year, being physically assaulted by people she considered friends, or becoming pregnant before her senior year. However, she persevered. Ana, without the benefit of a parent or even a place to live, enrolled in college on her own while living in her car and showering at the gym. When she thought about dropping out, she reminded herself of her big dreams and it kept her going. Michel, who battled addiction, mental illness, and neglect, and was much more likely, statistically, to be in prison than college. However, he completed a bachelor's degree in Philosophy and was accepted into a doctoral program in the same field at one of the most prestigious universities in the American southwest.

It would be folly to say that each of these students reached a level of college success due only to their own efforts; the themes previously discussed belie that notion. However, based on the data and my own experience of working with college students for many years, I would say that each of them possesses an extraordinary level of tenacity and drive, almost an admirable stubbornness

**Chapter Summary**

Using the guidance of Stake (2006), and the lens of the research questions, four cross-case themes emerged: Cultural Capital Can Be Acquired by Those Willing to Search, the Importance of Social Networks, Cultural Capital Differences from Peers, Using What You Have. This chapter gave an overview of each of these themes. Chapter

6, the concluding chapter of this study, discusses conclusions and implications of these

findings.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter presents the findings, discussion, and implications for the current study. Prior to discussing these important elements, however, it is useful to call to mind the context of this research and why it was undertaken.

College student development researchers throughout the years have found theory to be a useful tool in developing practice to help students graduate. While theories from well-respected higher education scholars such as Tinto (see *Leaving College (1993)* and *Completing College* (2012)) have come to prominence in the last several years, the works of scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu have also guided higher education scholars and practitioners in their work to increase college student retention and graduation. This study sought to use Bourdieu's theories of cultural and social capital, as described in *Distinction* (1984) and *The Forms of Capital* (1986), respectively, to gain a deeper understanding of how some students perceive the uses and sources of cultural capital in their college experiences. The participants in this study were chosen specifically because of their background as former foster youth. As explained in Chapter 2, former foster youth are historically a group of students for whom finishing a college degree and living

the "American dream" is not the typical outcome.  Indeed, Chapter 2 demonstrates that former foster youth are much more likely to end up in the criminal justice system than the higher education system.  Therefore, the need to gain a deeper understanding of how these students succeed becomes all the more urgent.  It is my firm belief that education researchers should strive to make a positive difference in the lives of students; I hope that, in some small way, this research will contribute to that goal.

The present study used a qualitative multicase study design to explore two research questions:

1. In what ways, if any, do foster alumni college students report sources of social and cultural capital as a part of their college experiences?

2. What uses of cultural tools, if any, do foster alumni students report as a part of their college experiences?

As with any qualitative research, the goal was not to seek definitive answers, but to gain a deeper understanding of participants' perceptions and the meanings they made from their experiences.  Through interviews and analysis of social media content of five participants, five case reports were written and presented in Chapter 4.  Subsequently, Chapter 5 presented cross-case themes that were outcomes of data analysis.  After briefly considering the limitations of this study in the next section, I will return to the literature to discuss the findings of this multicase study.

## Limitations

Prior to delving into the findings and discussions in this multicase study, it is important to pause and consider the study's limitations.  As with all qualitative research, the present study was not intended to be generalized to the entire population of former

foster youth college students. Rather, the purpose of this research was to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of these particular students. This is not to say that the findings have no utility outside these particular cases; indeed, the findings presented here can play a part in informing further research and practice.

This study was conducted within a limited geographical area of a single state. Although the participants represent a blend of two-year and four-year institutions, none of the participants attended a private institution; this limits consideration of the campus dynamics and culture prevalent at private universities, especially if the institution is religiously affiliated.

Finally, qualitative studies are invariably impacted by the perspectives of the researcher(s). Although I have strived to prioritize the participants' own voices in this research, it would be erroneous to assert that my own perspectives and preconceived notions did not color the research to some degree. This is particularly true as someone who was never in foster care. Having not experienced firsthand the struggles and triumphs of these participants, it may have been difficult for me to see their perspectives as clearly as I might have otherwise. Alternatively, I also may not have been blinded my own experiences in the foster care system. Despite these limitations, I am very grateful to the participants of this study for giving me the privilege of entering their lives, even if for a short time, and for the contributions. I believe this study will contribute to research, theory, and practice that will improve the lives of college students like these participants; these contributions are discussed in detail below.

**Findings and Discussion**

Based on the analysis of the data, several assertions can be made in this study. Assertions are based on the case data and the *a priori* theoretical framework that guided this study, Bourdieu's theories of cultural and social capital. These assertions are:

1. Participants were aware of cultural capital differences from peers,

2. Cultural capital is not necessarily linked to participants' college success,

3. Participants possessed often unexamined sources of symbolic capital, and

4. Cultural and social capital often overlap.

Each of these assertions are explained here, along with a discussion of how each assertion is situated within the extant literature on cultural and social capital.

**Assertion 1: Participants were Aware of Cultural Capital Differences from Peers**

One of the major components underlying Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital is that of habitus. As described in Chapter 2, habitus can be viewed as how cultural capital operates below the level of consciousness and language. One's habitus is the "cumulative collection of dispositions, norms, and tastes" (Winkle-Wagner, 2010, p. 9) and is constantly functioning as a way to perceive, appreciate, and act in the world. This subconscious functioning of habitus is a key concept; cultural capital theory assumes that these collective dispositions, norms, and tastes are so ingrained that there is no awareness of them in the functions of daily life. Habitus is how cultural capital is operationalized in the world. If this is the case, then it can reasonably be expected that students would not spend a great deal of time considering their own cultural capital and tools. However, it was apparent in this multicase study that participants are quite aware of cultural capital differences from peers, even if they did not express it in that way.

Particularly in two participants, this awareness can be seen in how they contrast themselves with their peers. Ana, who attended a community college in an urban area that was typified by lower-income students, felt that her fellow students did not understand their own privilege compared to someone like her who was in foster care. This quote from Ana demonstrates that she had spent time examining her own cultural capital and tools and comparing them to her peers at her own college:

> [They] don't mean to, they don't know any better. . .That's what it's been like their whole life. They don't know, people don't know they're privileged. . .They probably just don't know, and I shouldn't act like that, but sometimes I'll catch myself getting so mad, I'm like, "Stop! I can't be mad about that cause I'm going to have a comeback story." Yeah, know what I'm saying? I try to tell myself that.

The distinction here is particularly sharp because Ana implies that not only do her peers possess cultural capital and tools she does not, but that they leave their own possession of these resources unexamined.

Michel also spoke directly to cultural capital differences from his peers. As described in Chapter 2, theoretically cultural capital and tools are expected to be transmitted from parent to child. When speaking about what differentiated him from his peers, Michel discussed how, when he was younger, other children would marvel at the amount of freedom he possessed (because his mother did provide structure for his life). He lamented, however, that this lack of structure has been detrimental to him as he now suffers from a lack of self-regulation that others learned from their parents.

While these are the most illustrative examples of this assertion, the entire data set possessed an undercurrent of cultural capital differences from peers. In each interview,

there were hints that participants were different than their peers; rather than something the participants may have said directly, it was a sense in every question they answered that they knew their experience was different from what would be considered a "normal" college experience. While this certainly may be true for any former foster youth in many areas, it held particularly true in these cases for experiences surrounding perceived use of cultural and social capital. Examples of this included forming strong relationships with others in the absence of parents, such as an outside mentor, a faculty member, or even a former high school teacher. This often resulted in a blending of cultural and social capital that is discussed in Assertion 4.

**Assertion 2: Cultural Capital is Not Necessarily Linked to Participants' College Success**

Bourdieu's (1984 & 1986) goal in developing theories of cultural and social capital was to explain differences in educational outcomes: those with capital have better outcomes, while those with worse outcomes lack it. This means that for students succeeding in college, theoretically cultural and social capital should have played an important role. While the role of social capital will be expanded upon later, let us examine cultural capital in isolation. For Bourdieu, the possession and, by extension, expenditure of cultural capital accounted for much of the explanation behind why the classes of people with cultural capital displayed disproportionally greater educational outcomes. However, for the specific population in this study—former foster youth who were *succeeding* in college—possession of cultural capital seemed to be less vital for positive educational outcomes than the theory would suggest.

Two of the participants—Ana and Michel—had accumulated virtually no cultural capital during their teen years. Ana was placed in a series of shelters and foster homes while Michel spent much of his teen years living a transient life with his mother or in state custody at a youth shelter or independent living program. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the most important source of cultural capital development, according to Bourdieu (1984), is through parents and, clearly, the parents of these participants were not developing cultural capital in their children. Theoretically the other source of cultural capital accumulation is through education. This also does not bear out in the cases of Ana and Michel; Ana described going to a series of high schools throughout her foster care placements and never feeling like her teachers were helping her, while Michel frequently did not even attend school. The other three participants did have at least some sort of parental figure during a portion of their teen years: Taylor had Miss Franco, Nicholas had his adoptive mother, and Cassandra had her adoptive parents. However, it seems unlikely that, coming into the participants' lives relatively late, these people could have had a profound impact on the development of cultural capital, especially as much of the participants' habitus would have been developed by then. The literature does not speak to how long it may take to develop cultural capital, but it certainly seems dubious that having a parental figure for one to three years could replace the lifetime of parent-to-child capital transmission that Bourdieu had in mind. Nicholas, it should be noted, did have ties with his biological family; however, he expressed skepticism at the utility of their advice and almost all the contrasting data regarding his biological parents' support of his educational goals came from his social media page. Based upon findings by Kearney, Naifeh, Hammer & Cain (2019), biological family evidence solely on his

Facebook page suggests that Nicholas may have been using social media as a boundary management tool to buffer his family's influence rather than embrace it.

While it is impossible to say definitively what accounts for these participants' college success in the face of a lack of cultural capital, it could be that they developed a sense of independence early on, something that could be viewed as "otherized" cultural capital. A reasonable argument could be made that these students did, indeed, possess some cultural capital, just not the kind that would traditionally be associated with attaining good educational outcomes. If this were the case, then these students may have been well-served by this cultural capital by collateral; in other words, learning by necessity to persevere and do things for themselves due to their background in foster care is a form of cultural capital that had some benefit to them as college students. Each participant possessed an attitude of perseverance out of necessity. Since they often had to figure things out for themselves in foster care, this practice transferred over into their college experiences.

Throughout the cases, participants described doing things for themselves that parents would normally play a part in, such as applying for admission, taking college admission tests, and enrolling in courses for the first time. While cultural capital would have certainly made life easier for the participants, they appeared to be succeeding despite their lack thereof. It also seemed that the theory's assertion that education can be a source of cultural capital holds true. Participants who had been in college longer seemed more at ease with the processes than those who were newer students. Although this may seem obvious for any student, it is important to account for how students entering the higher education environment, or "field" as classified by Bourdieu (1984),

gain this capital outside of familial relationships in order to gain a broader understanding of how students build the capital that the theory postulates is necessary for college success.

**Assertion 3: Participants Possessed Often Unexamined Sources of Symbolic Capital**

Although they certainly did not possess a great deal of cultural capital, participants were not without symbolic capital that they were expending to their advantage. This was particularly true of social capital. Though the participants did possess social capital, it often went unexamined until specifically discussed in interviews. There exists a distinction here between "unexamined" and "unaware." Although participants were aware of the sources of capital in their lives, they had not considered them as such; though they may have been aware that someone was a force for the positive in their lives, they had not thought of that person (or people) as helping them succeed in higher education.

Perhaps because of the learned behavior of having to do everything for themselves, participants had often not examined the sources of symbolic capital in their lives, especially social capital. For example, Taylor discussed at length that she had to figure everything out on her own and that she could not rely on others to help her. However, the role of Miss Franco and her coworkers seemed to be quite important to her college success. Ana, likewise, indicated that there was not anyone she felt she could turn to in the earlier stages of the interview. As the interview progressed and we discussed her support network, however, she commented that she had more support than she realized.

Across cases, it was evident that durable social networks were crucial to the college success of participants. This holds with Bourdieu's theory that durable social networks are the key to social capital. Are these durable social networks as Bourdieu imagined them? This is doubtful. Family (or at least biological family) did not constitute a durable social network for most participants. One possible exception would be Nicholas but, as described above, he was careful to set boundaries in these relationships that made this unlikely. For Taylor, her coworkers also provided an invaluable support network, and Taylor perceived them as a durable network. Other social networks were more difficult to define using Bourdieu's (1986) framework; while Bourdieu (1986) had organizations, family, political party, and the like in mind, many of these participants drew upon a network made up of friends and others whose connections were difficult to align with the theory. Though they came in various forms and were probably not the sort of durable networks Bourdieu envisioned, their effect was undeniable as they were vital to participants' college success.

**Assertion 4: Cultural and Social Capital Often Overlap**

In the extant literature, cultural capital and social capital, especially in the Bourdieuean framework, are most often demonstrated as two separate concepts, although there are limited exceptions to this (see Perna (2000) and Zweigenhaft (1993)). As the examination of literature in Chapter 2 demonstrates, cultural capital is the most often utilized portion of Bourdieu's work on symbolic capital. Cultural capital is presented as tastes, habits, and the like, while social capital is portrayed as gained from durable social networks. While the two are interrelated, there is a clear distinction in the literature between the two concepts.

In the cases presented here, the line between cultural and social capital is blurred. Each participant derived benefits from durable social relationships that contributed to their success in college. However, some of the benefits of these relationships could be described as social capital. For example, Miss Franco's relationship with Taylor was undoubtedly a contributing factor to her success. While this durable relationship was a source of social capital for Taylor, she also derived cultural capital benefits when Miss Franco helped her with the college admission process. An even more salient example is Taylor's relationship with her co-workers. They provided her with a source of social capital, especially when she learned she was pregnant. They also provided cultural capital benefits in helping her look for and apply for scholarships. In Ana's case, her church community provided her with a strong social network, but she also indicated that they helped her because some of them had attended college, a sure example of cultural capital building. Other examples of the blurring of the distinction between cultural and social capital also exist in the data. This suggests that, rather than two discreet theoretical components, social and cultural capital must sometimes, if not most of the time, be seen as one force working toward the building of symbolic capital. Separating the two concepts may even lead to further limitations on research as attempting to parse out which form of capital is at work can lead to missing the larger effects of the overall symbolic capital building at work.

## Implications

Upon the completion of a study such as this, I, as the researcher, must consider the implications for research, theory, and practice. These implications are discussed in this section.

**Research**

Compared to research on other groups of college students, the body of literature concerning college students who were in foster care is scant. While this area has received more attention in recent years, it is incumbent upon scholars of higher education, like me, to consider this often hidden population of students. At the time this research was conducted, there existed no examination of how former foster youth perceive experiences related to cultural and social capital, thus, this study contributes to gaps in knowledge in both the literature on foster alumni in college and to the body of literature regarding cultural capital in the higher education environment. As explained in Chapter 2, most of the research which has employed this theory has been in the K-12 context. Often, this research has also been conducted in the context of parents adding to cultural capital by their direct involvement with a child. If cultural capital theory is to be a valuable tool in the arsenal of higher education researchers, more research in which students, specifically college students, who do not come from traditional families must be conducted.

**Theory**

Bourdieu's theories of cultural and social capital proved to be a good fit for the current research. Many of Bourdieu's assertions concerning cultural and social capital applied across the cases presented here. However, there were many things that did not fit the theory as posited by Bourdieu. One glaring example of this is the assertion that cultural capital is transmitted from parent to child and that, while it is possible to acquire this capital through education alone, it is quite difficult. This study suggests that students can acquire cultural capital through sources other than parents or education. Bourdieu's theories do not take into account the possibility of gaining cultural capital from friends,

mentors, teachers, or even from the students taking it upon themselves to work hard at learning the culture of higher education.

As the field of higher education research, specifically on college student retention, has grown, so has the amount of attention paid to how theory can inform this work. Chapter 2 discussed how the study of college student retention has traditionally been viewed, specifically through the lens of preeminent scholars such as Tinto and Astin. These theoretical frameworks still have great value. However, I suggest that Bourdieu's theories of cultural and social capital are underutilized in research examining college student retention, especially in underserved or hidden populations. Bourdieu's theories were particularly useful in this instance in examining how these participants' experiences both before and during college connected to their motivation to succeed and their adaptation to the higher education environment. I believe this principle could easily transfer to other student groups.

It may be that Bourdieu's theories of cultural and social capital are due for a renaissance. As higher education scholars, it is important for us to recognize that college student success does not begin when the student arrives on campus. In the past, the prevailing thought has been that college students have usually been on a trajectory to complete college long before they attend their first course. To some extent, Bourdieu's theory affirms this view. As this research demonstrates, however, researchers utilizing these theories must take into account the differences in culture between contemporary American culture and the culture mid-twentieth century France that Bourdieu had in mind when he proposed these theories. Research such as this can aid in adjusting the theories to make them more useful in the present-day context. The theories used here also assume

that students come from a traditional family structure.  As access to higher education is opened to a larger and more diverse group of students, theories such as Bourdieu's must also recognize that many of these students will not come from a "traditional" home and account for this fact.

**Practice**

Perhaps the most important consideration for research with college students is how it can improve practice.  For me, this study having a positive impact on students' lives was a paramount consideration.  Based on the findings, I make the following recommendations for practice.

The participants in this study all relied on a social support network which was often formed before the student entered college.  State entities responsible for the wellbeing of foster youth should take this into account.  In most cases, the support network was not one that was formed through an artificial intervention by case workers or someone else from the system.  Rather than trying to force foster youth to be part of official support structures, states would do well to consider giving these children the tools to build strong, healthy relationships.  Support networks formed organically, such as the ones seen in the cases presented here, are more likely to endure and serve the student into their college years and beyond.  This could mean better training for foster parents and case workers about how to talk to foster youth about college and exposing them to concepts that will assist in their future success.  Although this may be difficult as foster parents and case workers are normally in a child's life for a limited amount of time, providing an environment where going to college is seen as the norm could have tremendous benefits for foster youth later on.  States could also provide tools and

experiences for foster youth that normalize college attendance and expose them to the culture of higher education. Examples of this could include organizing campus visits, a dedicated time to discuss paying for college and filling out the FAFSA (for high school seniors), and identifying high school students who could take college courses and working with high school counselors to determine if this is a good fit for these students. Since foster youth often move from home to home, a best practice could be to utilize online coursework.

Some students, such as Michel, Taylor, and (to a lesser extent) Ana found sources of cultural and social capital on their own campuses. Once again, though, these were not networks that were formed specifically for former foster youth or mentors assigned to the students. They were organically formed. It is important to note that for many of the on-campus personnel supporting these students, it would have been impossible to tell that they were former foster youth unless they self-disclosed this fact – a step for which there is very little incentive and even possible risk. Therefore, college and university personnel should recognize the value of building interpersonal relationships with students. Colleges and universities, especially those serving underrepresented students, should place particular emphasis on the fact that a strong interpersonal relationship with members of the faculty and staff can be quite important to student success, especially for students without a reliable source of cultural or social capital. As a former academic advisor, I recommend institutions of higher education place a great emphasis on coaching and mentoring and focus less on the transactional aspects which can confound students who are not familiar with the culture of higher education. The temptation for colleges and universities is often to form student clubs and offices within student affairs divisions to

engage "special populations" such as former foster youth. None of the participants in these studies listed these types of structures as being important to their success. Rather, colleges and universities must begin shifting to a mindset where engagement is less about joining a club and more about faculty members reaching out to struggling students. Instead of a dedicated office in student affairs, colleges and universities must foster a culture where student success is everyone's job; this is particularly true because students like the ones in this study are unlikely to ever set foot in a Student Life office. Finally, since these students are often hidden in plain sight, colleges and universities must employ the principles of universal design when deciding how to provide services to students. Since most personnel on a college campus will never know that the student they are dealing with was in foster care, the best scenario is to treat each student as if they have endured traumatic experiences, do not have extensive experience with the higher education environment, and may not have an extensive support network.

### Recommendations for Future Research

The research presented here represents a start toward understanding how theories of cultural and social capital can help account for success in former foster youth college students. However, this line of research is far from complete and much more can be done to further this line of inquiry.

In the present study, all participants were current college students. Although they were all on the path to graduation, it would be useful to conduct similar research with participants who were college graduates. This could help to explain experiences college graduates may have had throughout their college careers that may have shaped their

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perceptions of cultural and social capital, especially given that graduates will have had more time to reflect on these experiences.

It may also be useful to examine the question of social and cultural capital in former foster youth college students from a quantitative perspective. Having a larger number of participants and determining what types of experiences were particularly meaningful across this larger group may help to narrow the focus of future research to hone in on best practices.

Investigating the perception of cultural and social capital professionals or other supportive adults connected to foster youth may also be useful. Determining what role foster parents, case workers, teachers, school counselors, and others see themselves playing in these young peoples' lives could provide useful insight into how these forms of symbolic capital may be transmitted to foster youth during times of high decision making activity regarding college.

Finally, the use of Bourdieu's theories may hold great utility for other groups of less traditional students. For example, first generation college students, students from areas with few college graduates, and international students will most likely all have interesting perspectives on symbolic capital that could further the line of research in this area.

**Conclusions**

Statistically, former foster youth are much less likely to graduate college than their peers who were not in foster care; in fact, they are much more likely to wind up in the criminal justice system than the higher education system. This is hardly surprising given the amount of trauma they endure by being removed from their homes, in addition

to events that often led to the removal.  However, we in higher education would be making a grave error to write these students off.  During the course of this study, I observed more courage, determination, and hope than in any other students I have worked with in my career.  Although Bourdieu's theories of cultural and social capital suggest that these students cannot succeed in higher education, the five students represented here are persisting and, in some cases, even flourishing.  It is my sincere wish that, as a community of scholars and practitioners, we remind ourselves daily that we can make a difference in the lives of these students.  I can attest to the fact that they are absolutely worth it.

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APPENDICES

# APPENDIX A
## INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Let's start by you telling me a little bit about yourself.

2. How did you come to be in foster care and how long you were in care?

3. What was your situation in the 2-3 months before college as it relates to where you were living and who was supporting you?

    a. Financially? Emotionally? Both? Something else?

4. How do you feel your experiences before college either prepared you or didn't prepare you for this time in your life?  One of the things I'm interested in is determining if certain types of experiences you had before college helped you get prepared for attending college, such as activities you were involved in in high school.  Tell me about what kinds of activities you were involved in during high school.

5. Who did you talk to about getting ready for college?

6. Why did you talk to that person or persons?

7. What role did your biological family play in preparing you for college?

8. How would you describe your college experience thus far?

9. Are you involved in any clubs or groups on or off campus?  What drew you to these groups? How do you feel like they're helping you get through college, if at all?

10. Tell me about a time when you felt really prepared or unprepared for something you had to do that was specific to college?

11. Next, I'd like to talk about things that have helped you to navigate college. By this, I mean any resource, knowledge, skill, or relationship you've drawn upon to help you figure things out as they relate to your college attendance.

12. What has helped you navigate college? *Follow up as needed with: By this, I mean any resource, knowledge, skill, or relationship you've drawn upon to help you figure things out as they relate to your college attendance.*

13. In what areas did you not feel prepared for college? *Follow up as needed: By this, I mean any resource, knowledge, skill, or relationship you've drawn upon to help you figure things out as they relate to your college attendance.*

14. What else could you share with me about your experiences while in college?

15. What else could you tell me about needed resources while in college?

16. What else could you tell me about needed knowledge while in college?

17. What else could you tell me about needed or beneficial relationships while in college?

18. Of your identified resources, experiences, knowledge, and relationships, which do you feel has been most critical to your success in college?

ADULT CONSENT FORM

OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY

**PROJECT TITLE:** Bourdieuean Capital in Former Foster Youth College Students: A Multicase Qualitative   Study

**INVESTIGATORS:**   Kyle Foster, M.S., Doctoral Candidate, Oklahoma State University

Kerri S. Kearney, Ed.D., Associate Professor of Higher Education and Student Affairs,  Oklahoma State University

**PURPOSE:**  The purpose of this research is to explore successful foster alumni college students' perceptions of experiences where they used, while in college and before matriculating, cultural and social capital resources as defined by Bourdieu. The study seeks to understand how college students see their use of certain cultural and social resources during college.  This study will use research to explore these issues.  All study participants are college students who were once in foster care.

**PROCEDURES:** This research will consist of three types of data collection: observations, interviews, and document analysis.  During the course of the research, you will be asked to be observed by the researcher on your campus and/or doing things related to your college attendance.  This may include sitting in on your classes, a meeting with a faculty member or college/university staff member, a club or group meeting, or other activities. You will not be asked to deviate from your normal routine for these observations.  Each observation should last no longer than two (2) hours and there should be no more than five (5) observations during the entire course of the research.  For the interview portion, you will be interviewed one (1) to three (3) times at a location that is convenient for you. Each interview is expected to last forty-five (45) minutes to one (1) hour.  It is anticipated that all interviews will be one-on-one, though a larger group interview with other research participants may also occur.  The researcher will ask to review several items for document analysis.  This may include your posts on social media, admissions essays you wrote before college, and/or your personal calendar.  It is not anticipated that you should have to deviate from your normal routine in order for these documents to be analyzed.

**RISKS OF PARTICIPATION:**  Risks associated with participation in this research study include psychological or emotional discomfort as a result of discussing past traumatic events and/or dysfunctional relationships. In order to assist with the offset of these risks, you will have the ability to stop any interview or other research-related activity that is

causing trauma, stress, or other emotional or psychological harm. If you experience emotional or psychological distress that could result in harm, please contact your campus mental health wellness office.

**BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION:** It is expected that this research may help to improve college experiences of future college students who have been in foster care.  Your contribution to this research may help you to improve the lives of people with similar experiences.  If you are interested, we will send you a copy of the results of the study when it is finished.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored on a password protected flash drive in a locked filing cabinet and only researchers and individuals responsible for research oversight will have access to the records. Data will be destroyed within three (3) years after the study has been completed. Video or audio tapes will be transcribed and destroyed within fourteen (14) days of the interview. Your identity will be kept private.  Any information that could used to personally identify you will be changed.  The name of your college/university will not be used.  You will be referred to by a pseudonym for the research—if you would like, you may choose this name.

Confidentiality will be maintained except under specified conditions required by law. For example, current Oklahoma law requires that any ongoing child abuse (including sexual abuse, physical abuse, and neglect) of a minor must be reported to state officials. In addition, if an individual reports that he/she intends to harm him/herself or others, legal and professional standards require that the individual must be kept from harm, even if confidentiality must be broken. Finally, confidentiality could be broken if materials from this study were subpoenaed by a court of law.

**COMPENSATION:**  No compensation will be offered to participants of this study.

**CONTACTS** : You  may contact any of the researchers at the following addresses and phone numbers, should you desire to discuss your participation in the study and/or request information about the results of the study:

Kyle Foster, M.S., Doctoral Candidate in Educational Leadership & Policy Studies, School of Educational Studies, Oklahoma State University, (580) 916-1931.

Kerri S. Kearney, Ed.D., 315 Willard Hall, School of Educational Studies, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078, (405) 513-2043.

If you have questions about your rights as a research volunteer, you may contact the IRB Office at 223 Scott Hall, Stillwater, OK 74078, 405-744-3377 or 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


I certify that I have personally explained this document before requesting that the participant sign it.


_____

Signature of Researcher                                          Date

# APPENDIX C
## FLYER FOR DISTRIBUTION TO POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS

Hello!

You've received this flyer because someone on your campus thinks you might be a good person to participate in research I'm conducting for my dissertation.  My name is Kyle Foster and I'm working on a PhD in Higher Education & Student Affairs at Oklahoma State University.  Several years ago, I became interested in how college students who were in foster care make it work from admission to graduation.  Basically, I'm looking at how certain relationships and knowledge affect your life as a college student.  I know that students are normally very busy people—I worked as an academic advisor for a long time, so I feel your pain.  However, there are some very good reasons that you may want to participate in this research:

1. The big hope here is that it can help other former foster youth in college who come after you.
2. Your identity will be kept anonymous.
3. The time commitment is not major.

If this looks like a project that may interest you, please shoot me an email at kyle.foster11@okstate.edu or call/text me at (580) 916-1931.  Even if you don't want to participate but want to know more about my research, I'm really happy to talk!  I hope we get the chance to work together on this project!

--Kyle Foster

# APPENDIX D
## EMAIL TO CONTACTS SEEKING PARTICIPANTS

Hello,

My name is Kyle Foster and I am a doctoral student in Higher Education and Student Affairs at Oklahoma State University.  I am currently in the dissertation stage of my degree and I am reaching out to you because I think you may be able to connect me with someone who would be interested in being part of my research.  Throughout my journey as a doctoral student, it has been really important to me that what I'm doing will make a difference in the lives of college students.  As I've progressed, I've found that there is one particular group of students that I'm really anxious to help: those who were in foster care.  For a variety of reasons, I've found that I need to help these kids.  My research deals with how kids who were in foster care build and use cultural and social capital.  Basically, the theory states that these types of capital are very important in educational settings and I want to know what role these forms of capital play in college for former foster youth.  My hope is that my research will lead to a better understanding of how we can help former foster youth get through college and complete a degree that can transform their lives.

At this point, I'm asking if you would be willing to pass the attached flyer along to someone who may be a good participant for this research.  The basic requirements are that they are a college student who was in foster care at some point during their teens.  Please rest assured that the identities of all participants will remain confidential and that their privacy is of the utmost importance to me.  All research will be conducted in compliance with institutional research board regulations at Oklahoma State University and those on your campus.

If you are able to pass this along to someone who may want to participate, would you please respond and let me know?  Thanks so much for your time and please don't hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

Best,

Kyle

Kyle Foster

Doctoral Candidate-Educational Leadership & Policy Studies

Oklahoma State University

kyle.foster11@okstate.edu | (580) 916-1931

My doctoral advisor is Dr. Kerri Kearney.  She may be reached at kerri.kearney@okstate.edu.

The Oklahoma State University Institutional Review board may be reached at irb@okstate.edu.

# APPENDIX E
## OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY IRB APPROVAL

**Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board**

| | |
|---|---|
| Date: | Thursday, October 19, 2017 |
| IRB Application No | ED17121 |
| Proposal Title: | BOURDIEUEAN CAPITAL IN FORMER FOSTER YOUTH COLLEGE STUDENTS: A MULTICASE QUALITATIVE STUDY |

Reviewed and    Exempt
Processed as:

**Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved    Protocol Expires:    10/18/2020**

Principal
Investigator(s):

Kyle Stephen Foster                Kerri Shutz Kearney
                                   315 Willard
Stillwater, OK 74078               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 Dawnett Watkins 219 Scott Hall (phone: 405-744-5700, dawnett.watkins@okstate.edu).

Sincerely,

Hugh Crethar, Chair
Institutional Review Board

VITA

Kyle Foster

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Thesis:  BOURDIEUEAN CAPITAL IN FORMER FOSTER YOUTH COLLEGE
STUDENTS: A MULTICASE QUALITATIVE STUDY


Major Field:  Educational Leadership & Policy Studies

Biographical:

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy in Educational
Leadership & Policy Studies at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater,
Oklahoma in December, 2019.

Completed the requirements for the Master of Science in Higher Education at
Drexel University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in March, 2012.

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts in Political Science at East
Central University, Ada, Oklahoma in May, 2009.

Experience:

Assistant Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, Oklahoma State Regents for
Higher Education, 2015-present

Student Success Advisor, University of Central Oklahoma, 2011-2015

Admissions Counselor, St. Gregory's University, 2010-2011