"SWIMMING UPSTREAM TO ACHIEVE THE DREAM"

A DESCRIPTIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE POSTSECONDARY

EXPERIENCES OF FOSTER CARE ALUMNI

by

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Dedication

It is with a grateful heart that I dedicate this work to so many treasured individuals. I would like to acknowledge my husband, Mark. My dear, Mark, no one knows, but you the intimate details of my journey to Dr. Sharron Walters Crear. I could not have done it without your unwavering dedication and steadfast support. Your love, patience, and prayers got me through, babe. I am eternally grateful to you. When I began this journey, I had no earthly idea of the sacrifices that would be required to finish. During this extensive, tedious journey, life continued to happen, but we made it through and landed on sure footing. Through the tears, consecutive days and nights of preparing for exams, reading, researching, and writing, you unselfishly gave me the space and time that I needed to complete this journey. On this road less traveled, I have experienced delays, detours, and disappointment; however, with the Lord and you as my champions, I made it! During the last stretch of the journey, you were there, cheering me on and undergirding me with your strength. Although our battle with the Coronavirus temporarily delayed my work on this paper, I am most grateful that we made it through the illness together. You are my rock, the love of my life, my heartbeat, and the wind beneath my wings.

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Education is for improving the lives of others and for leaving your community and world better than you found it."

Marian Wright Edelman

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"For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope" (Jeremiah 29: 11). "Now unto him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works with us." (Ephesians 3:20). To my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, the author and finisher of my faith be glory and honor, dominion, and power forever! Thank you, Lord, for carrying me during and through this journey. I witnessed your "footprints in the sand" every step of the way.

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Abstract

Swimming Upstream to Achieve the Dream:

A Descriptive Phenomenological Study of the Postsecondary Experiences of Foster Care Alumni

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Education has been deemed the "great equalizer" for the condition of man ((Horace Mann, 1848). Studies have found that years of education and income are highly correlated—the higher the educational level, the higher the income (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Numerous studies highlight the benefits of attaining a college degree; however, college enrollment and graduation rates among young adults with foster care experience lag significantly behind those of their non-foster care peers. Despite increased policies and efforts at the federal, state, and local levels to improve the educational outcomes of this vulnerable population, poor educational outcomes are still prevalent. Although numerous studies have addressed the educational plight and outcomes of children and youth in foster care, limited studies have explored the postsecondary educational experiences of persons with foster care experience. Findings from this study addressed this gap and contributed to existing research regarding the postsecondary educational experiences of this vulnerable population. The purpose of this qualitative, descriptive phenomenological study was to explore the postsecondary experiences of 16 foster care alumni who attended an accredited, public, state-funded, postsecondary institution. The study explored factors that influenced their decision to enroll in college, obstacles that have

hindered their college success, what has helped them to be successful in college, and what they deem necessary to complete a postsecondary degree.

Keywords: aging out, academic preparation, college readiness, college success, emancipated, ETV state tuition and fee waiver, financial aid, first-generation, foster care, foster care alumni, foster care liaison, graduation, institutions of higher education, low-income, postsecondary education, retention.

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List of Key Terms

1. **Age out:** This occurs when youth are discharged from the foster care system at the age of 18 (The Texas Department of Family Protective Services (DFPS, 2020).

2. **College Success:**

   a. Grade point average: Cumulative grade point average above 2.0. The minimum standard for satisfactory work at most institutions is a 2.0 on a 4.0 scale. Students whose grades fall below this mark are considered at risk for going on probation or suspension from the university. For the purpose of this study, a grade point average of at least 2.0 and retention will be utilized to define college success. "The minimum cumulative grade point average required for undergraduate students to remain in good academic standing is 1.8 for students with 0-29 credit hours and 2.0 or higher for students with 30 or more credit hours. Post-baccalaureate students must have a minimum of a 2.0 GPA regardless of the number of completed credit hours" (Texas Woman's University, n.d.).

   b. Retention: College enrollment from one fall semester to the next fall semester.

3. **Education and Training Voucher (ETV) Program**: The Federal ETV program provides up to $5,000 an academic year to eligible students (23 years and under) for college-related expenses, including rent, books, utilities, childcare, computers, personal expenses, transportation, and tuition, if applicable. Funds are awarded based on the college's estimated cost of attendance (DFPS, 2020).

4. **First-generation:** A student neither of whose natural or adoptive parents received a baccalaureate degree; a student who, before "the age of 18, regularly resided with and received support from only one parent and whose supporting parent did not receive a

baccalaureate degree; or an individual who, before the age of 18, did not regularly reside with or receive support from a natural or an adoptive parent" (U.S. Department of Education, Title 34—Education, 646.7, Chapter VI).

5. **Foster Care**: 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 (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017).

6. **Foster Care Liaison**: Higher education foster care liaisons serve as a point of contact both on and outside the college or university. This individual may be referred to as the "foster care champion" or "transition coaches" (The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB): Texas Higher Education Foster Care Liaisons Information & Reference Guide, 2017).

7. **Institutions of higher education**: "Any public technical institute, public junior college, public senior college or university, medical or dental unit, public state college, or other agency of higher education as defined in the law" (THECB), Texas Education Code §61.003(8)).

8. **Low-income**: An individual whose family's taxable income did not exceed 150 percent of the poverty level. The poverty level amount is determined by using criteria of poverty established by the Bureau of Census of the U. S. Department of Commerce (U. S. Department of Education, Title 34—Education, 646.7, Chapter VI).

9. **State College and Tuition & Fee Waiver (T&F)**: This waiver provides an exemption of tuition and fees at Texas institutions of higher education for youth formerly in the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services conservatorship, adopted youth, and

certain other youth. Students must enroll in a state-supported school or a dual credit course by their 25th birthday (DFPS, 2020).

10. **Preparation for Adult Living (PAL**): The PAL Program seeks to prepare older foster youth for adult life when they leave foster care. The preparation must begin by age 16 or as soon as possible if the youth enters paid substitute care after turning 16. The PAL Program provides life skills assessment, life skills training, vocational and educational services, supportive services, and financial benefits such as aftercare room and board assistance (DFPS, 2020).

11. **Ward of the Court:** A person for whom a guardian has been appointed by the court (DFPS, 2020).

Chapter 1

Introduction

"Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the

conditions of men, the balance wheel of the social machinery." (Horace Mann, 1848).

Education is deemed a significant path to prosperity in America. In the United States,

postsecondary education has historically been the foundation for individual social mobility and

collective economic growth. Earning a college degree is recognized as one of the most

significant investments that an individual can make, and is a path to the middle class in the

United States. Those with a college degree will more than likely secure good-paying jobs and

experience greater job security. Furthermore, individuals with college degrees are more like to

live healthier lives and be more civically engaged in their communities. America's families'

economic strength depends on a higher education system that helps everyone succeed (U. S.

Department of Education, 2016). Research consistently supports the premise that the more

education one has, the more one can expect to earn over a lifetime (Carnevale, Rose, & Cheah,

2011). Persons with a four-year degree will earn about $2.1 million over their lifetime; this is

approximatively one-third more than someone who does not complete a degree and twice as

much as someone who has completed a high school diploma (Day, Riebschleger, Dworsky,

Damashek, & Fogarty, 2012).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2017), for young adults ages

25–34, postsecondary degree completion was associated with higher median earnings; this

pattern remained consistent from 2000–2017. In 2017, the average earnings of young adults with

a four-year degree were 62% higher than those of young adult high school graduates, $32,000;

and the average earnings of young adult high school graduates were 23% higher than those of young adults who did not graduate from high school, $26,000. Despite the benefits associated with a college degree, persons from foster care are significantly underrepresented in higher education and attain college degrees at considerably lower rates than their non-foster care peers. Salazar, Jones, Emerson, and Mucha (2016, p. 263) refer to this group as a "unique, hidden population."

Problem Statement

As of September 20, 2017, there were 442,995 children and youth in foster care in the United States. Of these 247, 631 exited the system. Eight percent (19,945) of the 247,631 were emancipated youth. Approximately 13,091 were between the ages of 18 and 20. Each year, approximately 23,000 youth age out of the foster care system. (Children's Bureau, 2019). Research regarding the educational outcomes of youth with foster care experience indicates that the possibility of college enrollment is bleak (Pecora, Williams, Kessler, Hiripi, O'Brien, & Emerson, 2006). Seventy to 80% of these youth aspire to attend college (Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004; McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White, & Thompson, 2003). However, approximately 50% graduate from high school by age 18 (National Foster Youth Institute, 2019); 20% enroll in college compared to 60% of their non-foster care peers (Wolanin, 2005), and a mere 3–10% attain a bachelor's degree compared to the national college completion rate of 32.5% (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2018). Often, those who do enroll in college experience challenges and obstacles that derail their college success,[1] subsequently resulting in

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[1] For the purpose of this study, a grade point average of 2.0 or above and retention is defined as college success.

leaving college without a degree. These youth may suffer from irreparable mental, social, and academic deficits, which have been shown to increase based on time spent in foster care and the number of placements experienced (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Kirk, Lewis, Nilsen, & Colvin, 2011). Vulnerability to mental health and substance abuse issues, homelessness, unemployment, incarceration, teen pregnancy, and other unfavorable conditions may trump their aspirations and disrupt their pursuit of higher education (Kirk et al., 2011; Nixon & Jones, 2007; Pecora, Kessler, Williams, O'Brien, Downs, & English, 2005). According to the National Foster Youth Institute (2019), more than 20% will become homeless, 50% are unemployed by the age of 21, 71% of females will be pregnant by age 21, and 25% may become involved in the criminal justice system within two years of leaving care. Approximately 60% of young adult males who age out of foster care have been convicted of a crime. Conversely, Leone and Weinberg (2012) found that young adults with foster care experience and higher levels of education are much more likely to have stable, meaningful employment and less likely to experience incarceration and homelessness.

Kirk et al. (2011) concluded that one of the most significant disparities in educational attainment exists among youth exiting the foster care system. The educational outcomes—high school graduation, college enrollment rates, and the likelihood of earning a college degree among this population and the general population are staggering. The residual adverse impact of foster care placement throughout the foster care experience can adversely affect academic achievement at all levels of education (Day, Fogarty, & Damashek, 2011). Persons with foster care experience encounter a complex constellation of obstacles that cross and intersect with multiple domains, i.e., maltreatment, placement in restrictive settings, numerous home placements, school instability, academic issues, inconsistent social support, and low educational

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expectations from caregivers; thereby decreasing their chances of graduating from high school and attending and succeeding in college (Merdinger et al., 2005).

If education is indeed the "great equalizer," why are so few persons with foster care experience taking advantage of this "great equalizer" by completing high school and enrolling in college? If enrolled in college, why are these students dropping out at such alarming rates before graduation?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative, descriptive phenomenological study was to explore the lived postsecondary experiences of foster care alumni. The following overarching research question and four sub-questions guided this study: (1) What are the postsecondary experiences of foster care alumni? (a) What influenced the decision to enroll in college among foster care alumni? (b) What obstacles have hindered college success among foster care alumni? (c) What has helped foster care alumni to be successful in college? (d) What do foster care alumni deem necessary to complete a postsecondary degree?

Significance of the Study

Left behind: The residual adverse effects of foster care on education

There is a proliferation of research that reveals the value of earning a college degree. Historically, children and youth with foster care experience have been underserved at all levels in education. Unfortunately, due to low high school graduation, college enrollment, and college graduation rates among persons with foster care experience, few of them will experience the benefits that are associated with having a college degree. Educational achievement and outcomes for this population lag behind those of the general population for a myriad of reasons. Youth

emerging from the foster care system experience challenges that can adversely affect their response to education.

Despite increased policies and efforts at the Federal, state, and local levels to improve the educational outcomes of this vulnerable population, poor educational outcomes are still prevalent. (Rios & Rocco, 2014). Why is this the case? Disruptive family, school, and neighborhood experiences have been cited as factors that undermine academic achievement and college readiness (Clemens, Lalonde, & Sheesley, 2016; Okpych, Courtney, & Dennis, 2017; Trout et al., 2008; Unrau, Font, & Rawls, 2012; Watt, Faulkner, Bustillos, & Madden, 2018). Watt, Norton, and Jones (2013) noted that youth with foster care experience typically do not perceive themselves as being capable of succeeding in college, which may contribute to feelings of self-doubt and lack of confidence. These youth tend to struggle with social, emotional, and behavioral health issues and often receive no or poor-quality behavioral health services (Keller, Salazar, & Courtney, 2010; Longhofer, Floersch, & Okpych 2011; McMillen, Zima, Scott, Auslander, Munson, Ollie, & Spitznagel, 2005; Romanelli, Landsverk, Levitt, Leslie, Hurley, Bellonci, & Jensen, 2009; Salazar, 2013; Watt et al., 2018). Additionally, many of them lack financial and emotional supports, which are critical for young adults pursuing a college degree (Davis, 2006; Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Hass & Amoah, 2014; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010; Rosenberg & Youngmi, 2014; Wolanin, 2005).

Persons with foster care experience possess unique experiences. Thus, they encounter obstacles that place them at a disadvantage in the education system. This disadvantage gravely affects their chances of attaining economic stability as adults and gaining access to many of the benefits that a formal education affords. According to Geiger et al. (2017), research related to education for those with foster care experience has focused heavily on education at the

elementary and secondary educational levels. The researchers further acknowledged that although there has been an increase in studies published related to the postsecondary education experiences of foster care alumni in the past five years, research is still limited.

To obtain an in-depth understanding of the postsecondary educational experiences of college students who have experienced foster care, an understanding of their experiences at the elementary and secondary education levels is critical. Research paints a disturbing portrait of academic challenges and educational outcomes at the elementary and secondary levels. Due to disruptions in the family system, maltreatment, emotional and mental problems, and multiple home and school placements, youth in foster care do not always receive the same quality and level of education as non-foster care children and youth. A study conducted by Courtney et al. (2001) revealed that 50% of foster children had to change schools at least four times. Housing instability may lead to multiple school changes, delays in enrollment, inconsistent attendance, high rates of infractions due to disciplinary issues, and a higher likelihood of dropping out (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2018). Pecora (2012) found that nearly 44% of youth in foster care experience three or more housing placements while in care. Disruption in the educational process, due to multiple home placements, can result in delayed learning, academic difficulties, grade retention, and a lack of college readiness.

Special education. An enormous gap exists in the percentage of foster care youth (30-50%) who qualify for special education and their non-foster care peers (11.5%). Due to a learning disability or an emotional disturbance, youth in foster care experience higher rates of eligibility for special education services compared to their non-foster care peers. Furthermore, when comparing special education eligibility for children in foster care between the ages of six and 11 years, 30% were determined to be eligible for special education compared to 9.16% for

all children (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2012). In addition to high rates of special education placement, foster youth experience more absenteeism and tardiness, are often below grade level in reading and math, and have lower grade point averages than their non-foster care peers (Cox, 2012; Leone & Weinberg, 2010; Sheppard, 2012; Zeltlin et al., 2012). The adverse residual impact of foster care on the educational experience can present challenges that disrupt the pursuit of quality education; consequently, resulting in serious academic issues and poor educational outcomes.

Rationale for the Study

A plethora of research exists that highlights the educational barriers and challenges of children and youth with foster care experience focus on elementary and secondary levels before the aging-out process (Gieger & Beltran, 2017). However, there is limited research regarding postsecondary educational experiences and obstacles that hinder college success, resources that support college success, and resources that are necessary to complete a bachelor's degree among this population. Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, and Wyatt (2005) challenged researchers to explore reasons why a significant number of persons with foster care experience who enroll in college fail to graduate. Unfortunately, since 2005, few studies have been conducted focusing on postsecondary experience and obstacles to degree attainment among foster care alumni (Morton, 2018). Furthermore, a national poll revealed that approximately 83% of adults possess little to no knowledge regarding the experiences of youth in foster care, let alone their postsecondary education experiences or outcomes (Johnson, 2019; National CASA, 2009). "Included among those are likely faculty and staff who work in higher education, as well as federal and state leaders who inform education and social policies affecting youth in foster care" (Johnson, 2019, p. 1). Limited research regarding the educational experience of foster care alumni may present

challenges for practitioners and higher education staff who work to increase college success and graduation rates among this vulnerable population. This study contributes to a gap in the literature and offers implications for future research.

Relevance to Social Work

The National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (2017) states, "The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty." The NASW Code of Ethics was created to establish a foundation in the core values of the social work profession. Social work professionals are required to use the Code of Ethics as a guide in making informed decisions regarding ethical issues with clients and colleagues. Additionally, the Social Work Code of Conduct establishes guidelines for professional conduct. The role of social work spans the gamut of arenas that serve vulnerable populations. Foster care experience and its impact on educational outcomes are not exceptions. Social workers not only play vital roles in community organizations and medical settings but in education, as well. Trained social workers address the social ills of society. They possess the knowledge, expertise, and skills necessary to address the needs of underserved populations. K-12 School systems employ social workers at the elementary and secondary levels. The need for social workers does not cease when students graduate from high school and enroll in college; rather, the need for support intensifies.

Current research speaks volumes about the plight of young adults emerging from the foster care system. The literature referenced in this study reveals that there is a vast disparity between the educational outcomes of persons with foster care experience compared to non-foster care persons. Furthermore, research illustrates the dire need for interventions designed to

increase high school graduation, college enrollment rates, college success, and graduation rates among those with foster care experience.

If foster care alumni are fortunate enough to overcome their unique challenges and enroll in college, adjusting to the college environment and facing obstacles in college often result in them leaving without a degree. This study explored significant unaddressed challenges related to poor educational outcomes that deter college enrollment and derail degree attainment among persons with foster care experience.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Existing research illustrates that there is a substantial educational disparity between those who have experienced foster care and those who have not. Unfortunately, due to challenges that are often experienced by youth with foster care experience, few successfully graduate from high school, enroll in college, and attain a college degree. Trauma associated with the breakdown of the family unit, maltreatment, home placement instability, school disruption, and the entire foster care experience can result in multiple seemingly insurmountable obstacles that result in poor educational outcomes. Low high school graduation, college enrollment, and degree attainment rates among this group derail their chances of securing jobs that, at a minimum, require a postsecondary credential. As a result, the accumulation of economic stability, social capital, well-being, upward mobility, and competitiveness in the job market may never come to fruition.

If the educational outcomes of persons with foster care experience are not improved, the cycle of high unemployment and teen pregnancy rates, homelessness, and incarceration will continue to escalate for this vulnerable population. If education is a pathway to opportunity and success, persons with foster care experience who leave college without a degree may never experience the multiple benefits associated with possessing a college degree.

A thorough review of the literature, which includes previous research and findings on the postsecondary educational experiences and outcomes of persons who have experienced foster care, was conducted. Chapter 2 begins with a discussion on the benefits of education and provides a comprehensive understanding of the postsecondary experiences of the foster care alumni student population. Factors that influenced and hindered their decision to enroll in college, obstacles that impeded their college success, resources that supported their college

success, and resources they deem necessary to attain a bachelor's degree, are discussed as well. Furthermore, policies and programs that provide resources to increase the postsecondary enrollment and graduation rates of these persons were examined and detailed in this study. The study sought to answer the following an overarching research question and four sub-questions: What are the postsecondary experiences of foster care alumni, what influenced the decision to enroll in college among foster care alumni, what obstacles have hindered college success among foster care alumni, what has helped foster care alumni to be successful in college, and what do foster care alumni deem necessary to complete a postsecondary degree?

Multiple electronic databases (EBSCO Host, Google Scholar ProQuest Dissertations Social Services Abstracts, Social Work Abstracts) were searched for published peer-reviewed articles and dissertations that contain studies regarding the problem. The content outlined in the literature review situates this study within the context of the existing body of research.

Education Pays

According to the U. S. Department of Education (2016), higher education is the best investment that Americans can make in their future. A college degree is now more valuable than ever and has proven to be beneficial to degree recipients, as well as society. The economic and social value of completing a college degree has been well established and documented in research. Today's workforce requires, at minimum, a bachelor's degree. An individual with at least a bachelor's degree earns significantly more than those with less education (Dworsky et al., 2010). The research highlighted in this study indicates that higher education, more specifically, the completion of a college degree, pays. Unfortunately, the research also suggests that those who have experienced foster care rarely reap the benefits associated with higher education or the completion of a degree. Foster care alumni are grossly underrepresented (20% compared to 60%

of non-foster care peers) in higher education (Wolanin, 2005), and of those who do enroll, less than 10% attain a degree. (Berliner et al., 2010)

Who is More or Less Likely to Enroll in College?

"Access to education is a social justice issue that requires a new courageous commitment to identifying and eliminating obstacles to college success" (Gray, 2013, p. 1245). In identifying and eliminating these obstacles, it is critical to recognize who attends college and what factors influenced their decision to attend. Socioeconomic status is a strong predictor of who enrolls in college. According to the U. S. News World Report (2014), students from high-income schools were more likely to enroll and stay in college than students from low-income schools. Sixty percent of the wealthiest students enroll in and graduate from college compared to 6% of low-income students. Using a sample of 60 four-year universities, a 2013 study conducted by the ACT found that the typical six-year bachelor's degree completion rate reflected a 14% gap between higher-income students and lower-income students (47% compared to 33%) (ACT Research & Policy, 2013).

The National Center for Education Statistics' 2004 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) revealed that a minuscule 0.4% of the 19.2 million undergraduates enrolled in college during the 2003-2004 academic year were persons with foster care experience. These students identified themselves as a "ward/dependent of the court" on the Free Application for Student Financial Aid (FASFA) (Davis, 2006). Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini (2004) found that enrolling, serving, retaining, and graduating low-income students is a challenge for postsecondary institutions. Low-income students may lack general knowledge regarding college expectations, including degree requirements, tuition and fees, financial aid, and career preparation, which may influence their decision not to enroll in college. If enrolled, this

lack of knowledge may place them at risk of low adjustment and acclimation to college, which may result in dropping out before graduation. According to Smithgall, Gladden, Howard, George, and Courtney (2004), young people in foster care tend to be enrolled at high-poverty, under-funded, low-performing high schools where they are not adequately prepared for college-level work.

Factors That Influence the Decision to Enroll in College among the General Population

For more than 50 years, the University of California at Los Angeles Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey has provided data on incoming college students' background characteristics, high school experiences, attitudes, behaviors, expectations for college, and decision to enroll in college. Dr. Alexander Astin created the survey in 1966. Since then, more than 15 million incoming freshmen students at more than 1,900 institutions have participated in the survey. According to the survey published in 2016 by the CIRP, approximately 85% of freshmen stated that securing a better job was a major reason for going to college. (See Figure 1: Percentage of College Freshmen Saying "Very Important"). Two hundred four-year colleges and universities and 141,000 freshmen participated in the study (CIRP, 2016).

Figure 1: Percentage of College Freshmen Saying "Very Important"
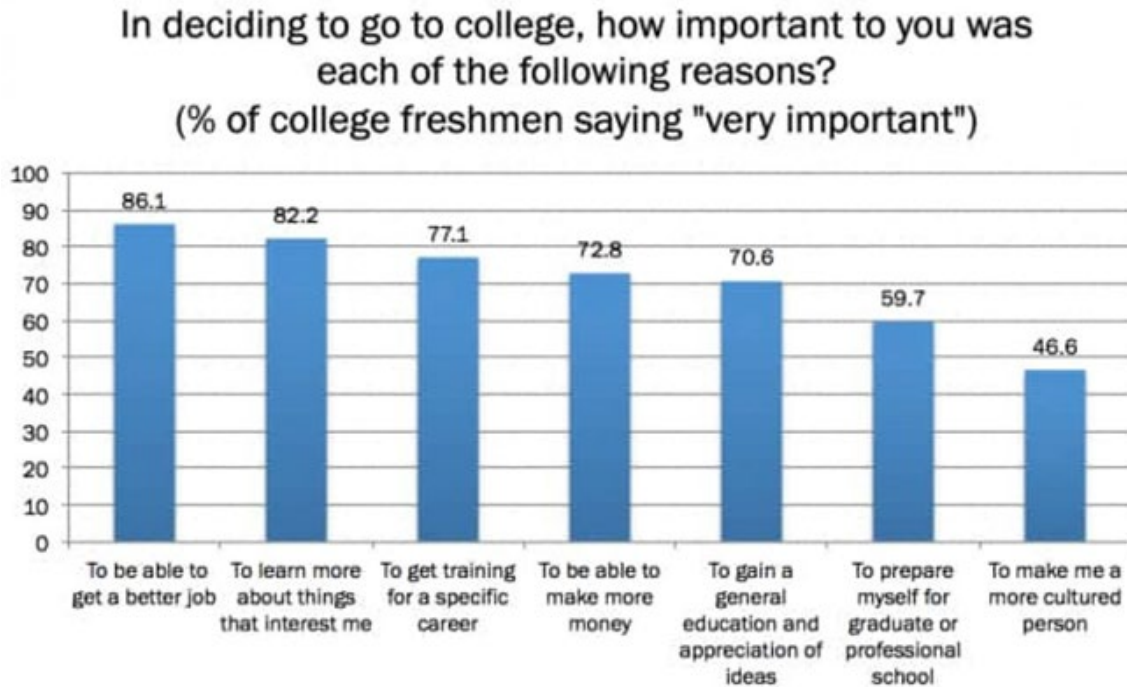
In deciding to go to college, how important to you was each of the following reasons?
(% of college freshmen saying "very important")

(The Cooperative Institutional Research Program at the Higher Education Research Institute at

U.C.L.A., 2014; Rampell, 2015)

Factors that Influence the Decision to Enroll in College Among Persons with Foster Care Experience

According to the Children's Bureau (2019), each year, between 20,000 and 23,000 youth age out of the foster care system. The aging-out process is a pivotal point in the lives of these youth. "Aging out without a permanent family and adequate preparation for adulthood is a crisis" (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2005, p. 1). Young adulthood is a significant milestone. Clark and Crosland (2009) revealed that regardless of family background, the transition from youth into adulthood is a complicated process. Osgood, Foster, and Courtney (2010) contend that the socio-economic status of young adults is a determinant of whether the transition to adulthood will be a smooth one.

According to research, youth who age out of foster care struggle with early independence, lack of finances, the possibility of being homeless, and lack of support. As a result of their early independence status, they are forced to make critical life decisions that any young person would find stressful and overwhelming without the support of family or significant others. The tremendous responsibility of housing, meals, transportation, and health care becomes a burden that they must shoulder alone (Batsche et al., 2012). As a consequence of their unique experiences, challenges, and circumstances, these youth require greater support than their non-foster care peers when attempting to access postsecondary education. In making the transition to adulthood, youth with foster care experience often lack the necessary encouragement, support (emotional, social, and financial), and resources that could influence their decision to enroll in college. Day et al. (2012) noted that due to the cost associated with higher education and resources necessary to attend, youth aging out of the system are often unsure whether college is an option. They assume they cannot afford college and do not apply.

The thought of navigating the complex postsecondary educational system without support can be daunting. The college enrollment and financial aid process can be stressful and overwhelming. These processes, combined with the cost of postsecondary education, may cause foster care alumni to think that college is beyond their grasp. Merdinger et al. (2005) revealed that the child welfare system has not been very effective in encouraging foster youth to pursue higher education or providing information to aid them in navigating the complicated college application and financial aid process (Dworsky et al., 2010; Hernandez et al., 2010). Dworsky et al. (2010) discovered that a significant number of youths with foster care experience are not provided opportunities to explore the college enrollment process or their postsecondary options. At age 16, youth in foster care may participate in Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) training,

which is offered by the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS, 2020). The purpose of this program is to prepare youth for a successful transition to adulthood. The program provides life skills assessment, life skills training, vocational and educational services, supportive services, and financial benefits such as aftercare room and board assistance (DFPS, 2020). The extent to which postsecondary education information is provided during this program and transition is unknown. If youth do not receive college information before exiting the foster care system, they are left to navigate the college selection, admissions, and enrollment process on their own, which is difficult, even for the average college-bound person. Sadly, due to lack of college information, far too many persons with foster care experience may never realize the dream of attending and graduating college.

A dominant mixed-method study conducted by Tobolowsky, Scannapieco, Aguiniga, and Madden (2019) sought to gain a better understanding of the postsecondary education needs and experiences of foster care alumni who had aged out of the system. The study included perspectives of foster care alumni, foster parents, CPS caseworkers, and community service providers who serve those who have aged out and those who are still in care. Three themes emerged from their study: 1) the perceived value of college, 2) foster alumnae's life challenges, and 3) the role and necessity of supportive relationships. "Participants held strong beliefs in the value of education and were confident that higher education is the best pathway to economic independence and a more stable future" (Tobolowsky et al., p. 9). Life challenges served as barriers to college success. The researchers found that policies aimed at ensuring the safety of youth in care contributed to a lack of social skills in these youth, which negatively impacted interpersonal relationships and college success. Furthermore, challenges such as unemployment, low salaries, and homelessness that these youth faced early in their lives continued to impact

their lives in college. Support networks, which included relationships with peers, a caseworker, a professor, and coach, were found to be instrumental in supporting participants' educational goals.

One of the factors that also may influence college enrollment among foster care alumni is having the assistance and support of family, a caseworker, a high school teacher, or a counselor. Studies conducted by Batsche et al. (2014) and Salazar, Jones, Emerson, and Mucha (2016) emphasized the significance of having a knowledgeable adult to assist foster youth with the college enrollment process. Research by Hines, Merdinger, and Wyatt (2005) found that the presence of a "crucial person" who served as a role model, advocate, and source of encouragement was instrumental to youths going to college.

In a study examining the association between social capital and college enrollment among foster care alumni, Okpych and Courtney (2017) found that the likelihood of enrolling in college increases when foster youth have supportive relationships with those who can provide assistance and support with the college enrollment process. Access to those who are willing to share college-relevant knowledge and resources is critical. Using a representative sample of youths ages 17–18 in California foster care in 2012 and college enrollment data obtained from the National Student Clearinghouse, researchers used logistic regression to predict college enrollment. Findings for this study were mediated by the amount of assistance that youth received in preparation for college and their participation in extended foster care. The following factors were positively associated with college enrollment: reading ability, educational aspirations, and high school grades. Factors such as grade repetition, placement in special education, and early parenthood decreased the likelihood of college enrollment.

A qualitative study conducted by Day et al. (2012) examined perceived barriers that impeded high school graduation and college enrollment. The sample for the study consisted of (N = 43) high school students who were currently in foster care—preparing to transition to college and college students who had been in foster care. Researchers collected data through testimonies given by students during two Kidspeak forums, which was sponsored by Michigan's Children in partnership with Western Michigan University and Michigan State University, during the summer of 2010. Data from the two forums were uploaded into NVIVO. Through using constant comparison methods, the content was analyzed to identify commonalities, differences, and main ideas (Day et al., 2012; Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg, & Coleman, 2000). Eight themes emerged from the analysis: (1) need for permanent relationships with caring adults outside of school and the educational advocacy that these adults can provide, (2) need for connections with teachers and other adults at school who understand the unique challenges that youth in foster care experience, (3) need for teachers to be sensitive to individual student learning needs, (4) lack of resources to address basic-school-related needs, (5) access to extracurricular activities, (5) unsafe schools, (6) untreated mental health issues, and (8) lack of preparation and support for independent living. All of these factors can be critical to academic success and can adversely impact academic performance in high school, high school graduation, and the decision to enroll in college. Researchers for this study noted that although the majority of the Kidspeak participants spoke about barriers to high school graduation, postsecondary education may present a more significant challenge for some. Housing, in particular, was noted as a significant concern.

Obstacles That Impede College Success Among Persons with Foster Care Experience

In examining obstacles that impede college success among college students with foster care experience, it is critical to place into proper perspective their entire foster care experience and the adverse effects that this experience may have had on them. Research sheds light on the tremendous challenges that children and youth often experience before foster care placement and during care. These challenges often negatively impact academic achievement and educational outcomes. Using a sample size of 248 college graduates who had foster care experience, Salazar et al. (2016) conducted an inductive qualitative content analysis of three open-ended survey questions to explore strengths, challenges, and supports they experienced in college that affected their success. Responses to three open-ended survey questions revealed seven global themes related to participants' college experiences and factors necessary for college success: (1) positive self—possessing a positive attitude and outlook, (2) overcoming—the desire and strength to overcome adversity, (3) interpersonal relationships—healthy relationships were identified as strengths, and unhealthy ones were identified as challenges, (4) finances and logistics, financial resources and the knowledge of managing finances, (5) academic orientation—possessing strong academic skills, (6) physical and mental health—good mental and physical health, which included the purchase of healthy foods and, (7) independent livings skills—budgeting, critical thinking skills, leadership skills, organization, problem-solving skills, time management skills, and professionalism.

The Significance of (biological, foster, or adopted) Parents' Educational Level and Students' Socioeconomic Status on College Success and Degree Attainment

In addition to the multitude of obstacles that foster care alumni experience in postsecondary education, it is critical to recognize how their parents' educational level and their

socioeconomic status may impact their college-going experience. Being first-generation and low-income can result in failure to enroll in college and can adversely impact the college-going experience and educational outcomes. Emerson (2006) reported that most students with foster care experience are first-generation students and are financially independent at a young age. Davis (2006) revealed that foster care alumni generally come from low-income backgrounds. Under federal financial aid law, all "wards/dependents of the court" are considered to be financially independent, regardless of their age. Therefore, the income earned by the student's parents or legal guardians is not used to determine the student's eligibility for financial aid. These students encounter unique challenges associated with being in the foster care system, and they experience education as a ward of the court.

Murray et al. (2007) suggested that college students with foster care experience are often an overlooked subgroup within the first-generation student population. Youth with foster care experience often exhibit characteristics similar to youth classified as at-risk, which includes being low-income, ethnically diverse, and requiring special education and support services (Hill, 2006; Wulczyn, Smithgall, & Chen, 2009; Zetlin, 2012). When examining the postsecondary experiences of foster care alumni, it is crucial to understand their unique experiences as former foster youth, as well as their status as first-generation college and low-income students. The intersection of their status as former foster care youth, first-generation college and low-income, may have an impact on their college experience. Careful examination of their postsecondary experiences and taking into consideration the intersection of first-generation college and low-income may result in a greater understanding of the totality of their college experience. This study drew on research regarding first-generation college students to help illuminate the postsecondary experiences of foster care alumni who are first-generation college students.

Batsche et al. (2012) conducted a qualitative study to investigate whether KnowHow2Go (KH2Go), a national college access campaign developed for first-generation students in the United States, would be of interest to youth who had aged out of foster care. Data derived from interviews with 27 youth who were enrolled in college after aging out of foster care suggested that they have similar college-knowledge needs as first-generation students. However, when designing services for youth with foster care experience, those who serve them must realize that these youth possess a unique set of experiences that contributes to the complexity of their status as foster care alumni and potential first-generation students.

Research conducted by the Casey Family Programs in 2010 revealed that, due to their background and their early independent status, college students with foster care experience require more attention than most other first-generation students. Furthermore, students with foster care experience arrive on campus in survival mode. Much of their attention is focused on basic human needs, such as safe and stable housing, food, transportation, healthcare, and adequate financial aid. Housing is especially crucial during school breaks and summers. This research indicated that the needs of those college students who are foster care alumni are greater than those students who are first-generation only. The study did not include information that discloses whether those college students with foster care experience were first-generation or non-first-generation students.

Characteristics of first-generation students and low-income students. The characteristics of college enrollment, persistence, and graduation patterns of first-generation college students are quite different from those of their non-foster care peers, and it is these unique characteristics and patterns that place them at risk in the college environment. The research examined for this study consistently indicated that first-generation students enter

college at a disadvantage, are retained in college at a lower rate than non-first-generation students, and are less likely to attain a bachelor's degree.

First-generation students are more than likely to possess the following characteristics: low-income background, ethnic and racial minority backgrounds, have earned a GED, are financially independent of their parents, are more likely to have multiple obligations outside of college that limit their full participation in the college environment, and lack the necessary knowledge to understand and navigate the college system (Aronson, 2008; Chen & Carroll, 2005; Choy, 2001; Duke, 2015; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Ishitani, 2016; Merritt, 2008; Nomi, 2005; Thayer, 2000; Warburton & Bugarin, 2001). Pascarella et al. (2004) and Aronson (2008) revealed that these students are more likely to delay college enrollment after high school graduation, lack academic readiness, attend college part-time and work full time while enrolled. Furthermore, these students are more likely to live off-campus, which prevents them from becoming involved in clubs and organizations on campus.

The college enrollment and financial process can be intimidating for any student. Enrolling in college for the first time can be a stressful process that involves social, emotional, and academic adjustments. The experience can be especially challenging for students from low-income backgrounds and first-generation students. Numerous studies focusing on first-generation students have suggested that these students are at greater risk than non-first-generation college students of leaving school before attaining a degree. Youth who have foster care experience encounter significant challenges that impede academic progress and increases their chances of leaving college without a degree. Engle (2007) revealed that first-generation students need assistance at every step of the college process—from admissions to graduation. Similar to findings from studies on students with foster care experience, factors such as experiencing

academic difficulty and social, financial, and family issues made the transition to college more difficult among first-generation college students. Research has consistently found that the more unaddressed obstacles that first-generation students experience, the more likely they are to leave postsecondary education without a degree (Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2008).

A review of the literature revealed that several studies about persons with foster care experience corroborated findings from Thayer (2000) regarding factors that adversely affect college retention (college success) among first-generation, low-income students. These factors include (1) limited information about the college experience and academic expectations, (2) lack of academic preparedness, (3) lack of family and social support, 4) and lack of academic and social integration. Of these factors, the lack of academic preparedness was identified as one of the most challenging obstacles faced by first-generation students. Due to these factors, first-generation students are less likely to persist in college until degree attainment.

Limited information about the college experience and academic expectations. Non-first-generation college students are at an advantage when it comes to knowledge regarding college admissions and enrollment, financial aid, degree completion, and college expectations. They have the support of parents and family who possess college experience. In contrast, due to a lack of guidance and support, first-generation students tend to possess limited knowledge regarding college costs and other college-related information (Choy, 2001). Comparably, research suggests that many foster care youths feel unprepared for college due to a lack of knowledge about postsecondary education options and the college experience (Cochrane & Szabo-Kubitz, 2009; Day et al., 2012; Geiger, 2018; Merdinger et al., 2005; Rios et al., 2014.).

Lack of academic preparedness. First-generation college students enter college less academically prepared than non-first-generation college students and are at a higher risk for

academic failure (Choy, 2001; Pascarella et al., 2004). Multiple factors impact their ability to perform well within the educational system. Warburton et al. (2001) revealed that first-generation students were less academically prepared and were less likely than non-first-generation students to complete AP credits. Likewise, research has found that persons with foster care experience lack the academic readiness to tackle college-level courses and experience less support and guidance than their non-foster care peers, which results in poorer outcomes (Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004; Geiger, Piel, Day, & Schelbe, 2018; McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White, & Thompson, 2003; Merdinger et al., 2005). Another study revealed that college students with foster care experience were less academically prepared and had lower high school and college grade point averages than their non-foster care college peers (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Unrau, Font, & Rawls, 2012).

College readiness is often defined as being prepared to succeed in college and eventually graduate. A guide from the National Forum on Education Statistics proposed the following definition for readiness: A student is college-ready when he or she has attained the knowledge, skills, and disposition needed to succeed in college-level coursework (non-remedial) to earn the credentials that will lead to a meaningful career aligned with their goals and offering a competitive salary (NCES, 2015). Similar to youth with foster care experience, Sheehy, Oldham, Zanghi, Ansell, Correia, and Copeland (2001) revealed that only 15% of youth with foster care experience were likely to enroll in college-preparatory courses during high school compared to 32% of their non-foster care peers.

First-generation students tend to require remediation in reading and mathematics, and standardized test scores, such as the ACT and SAT, are often lower than non-first-generation students. A study by Balemian and Feng (2013) revealed that first-generation SAT takers in 2012

had less (70% compared to 80%) core academic preparation (four or more years of English, three or more years of mathematics, three or more years of natural sciences, and three or more years of social sciences and history) than non-first-generation SAT test-takers (College Board, 2013). In 2014, 341,236 potential first-generation college students took the ACT. Results for all first-generation high school graduates who took the ACT in 2014 indicated that only 9% met all four of the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks, which indicated academic readiness for college-level coursework, including first-year college courses in English Composition, College Algebra, Biology, and social sciences. A low 18% of all 2014 ACT-tested first-generation high school graduates met only one Benchmark, and, sadly, 52% met none (ACT, 2014).

Lack of family and social support. Consistent with research on first-generation students, persons with foster care experience often lack support from family or significant others than non-foster care peers receive (Geiger, Piel, Day, & Schelbe, 2018). Davis (2006) revealed that students whose parents have graduated from college could seek guidance and support from their parents; however, youth with foster care experience do not have these advantages. The researcher further determined that persons growing up in foster care do not receive the necessary level of support and affirmation from teachers, social workers, and other adults regarding their ability to pursue a college degree. A meta-analysis study by Robbins et al. (2004) found that social support was a major predictor of college retention among foster care alumni. Perry (2006) asserted that, due to the initial placement and subsequent disruptions, youth with foster care experience are likely to possess lower levels of social support and a ruptured social network.

A qualitative, descriptive analysis study conducted by Geiger et al. (2018) explored challenges perceived by foster care alumni college students participating in a campus-based support program designed to serve foster care alumni. Results from the study found that the most

significant challenge perceived by study participants was family and personal issues. The researchers noted that this finding is consistent with literature that those with foster care experience may encounter challenges managing interpersonal relationships (Geiger et al., 2018; Goodkind, Schelbe, & Shook, 2011; Hernandez et al., 2010). The next three most challenging issues reported by participants were student housing, informal social support, such as support from family and friends, and inadequate financial support. Equally important, participants also reported other challenges, such as the lack of available mental health services, the ability to plan for the future, transportation, parking costs, food insecurity, locating employment, meeting academic expectations, and transition to college.

A study conducted by Merdinger et al. (2005) of emancipated foster youth enrolled in a four-year university revealed that approximately 87% of the participants in their study reported that the strength of their social support played a significant role in their educational success. This support came from a friend or a family member. Furthermore, approximately 60% stated that their current friends consist of people they knew in foster care, most of which, maintained contact with foster, group home, or kin-care parents.

Insufficient financial aid. Geiger et al. (2018) revealed that the majority of participants in their study had received various sources of financial aid, such as Pell Grants (98%), work-study (92%), institutional grants or scholarships (89%), Education and Training Voucher (ETV) (70%), and tuition and fee waivers (50%). However, the rising cost of higher education and insufficient financial aid continued to serve as an obstacle. According to College for All Texans (2020), the cost per year for attending a public four-year university in the state of Texas ranged from $18,790 at Sul Ross State University Rio Grande College and $32,189 at Texas A&M University at Galveston. This includes enrollment in 15 credit hours in both fall and spring,

books and supplies, and room and board (dependent students living off-campus). The average cost for attending community college in the state of Texas ranged from $13,984 at Brazosport College to $25,670 in the Lone Star College System District.

In 2018-19, when the maximum Pell Grant was $6,095, the average grant awarded was $4,160. In 2019-20, the maximum Pell Grant covered 59% of average published tuition and fees and 28% of average tuition, fees, room, and board at public four-year colleges and universities (College Board, 2020). The maximum Federal Pell Grant award is $6,345 for the 2020-21 award year (July 1, 2020, to June 30, 2021) (Federal Student Aid, n.d.). The Texas state tuition and fee waiver only covers tuition and fees. The ETV may provide up to $5,000 an academic year to eligible foster care alumni students for college-related expenses, including rent, books, utilities, childcare, computers, personal expenses, transportation, and tuition, if applicable. Funds are awarded based on the college's estimated cost of attendance. During the 2020-21 academic year, an eligible student may receive up to $5,039 per semester in Texas Grant funds (College for Texans, 2020). In reviewing the average cost of higher education and the amount of financial aid available to foster care alumni, the combined sources of financial aid may not be sufficient to pay for college-related and basic living expenses at some postsecondary institutions in Texas.

The Casey Family Programs (2010) found that youth who have aged out of foster care are typically independent and living at or below the poverty level. Therefore, when enrolling in higher education, they require a financial aid package that covers all college-related costs. Foster care alumni enrolled in college must live on grants, scholarships, loans, work-study, tuition and fee waivers, and employment. Multiple studies have cited a lack of financial resources as a deterrent to college enrollment and graduation. Although different sources of financial aid (ETV, state tuition and fee waiver, Pell, work-study, scholarships) are available to improve

postsecondary outcomes for those who have experienced foster care, graduation rates for this population remain low. Davis (2006) suggested that on-campus work-study positions are excellent opportunities for foster care alumni to earn money while working in areas that encourage study and learning. Moreover, opportunities to work on campus help foster care alumni to obtain funds to help with college expenses while allowing the students to get connected with campus resources and institutional personnel.

Mental health problems. Numerous studies have cited mental health problems as an obstacle to college success. The Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study (2005) found that 54.4% of alumni had significant mental health problems that included depression, social problems, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and anxiety (Pecora et al., 2005). Merdinger et al. (2005) indicated that 35% of the youth in their study disclosed that they had received mental health services since exiting foster care and that 7% had received intensive in-patient services. Posttraumatic stress has been identified as one of the most common mental health diagnoses among foster care alumni transitioning out of the foster care system (Salazar, 2012). Pecora et al. (2005) found that 25% of youth who age out of the foster care system suffer from the direct effects of PTSD. Day et al. (2012) found that several participants in their study had been diagnosed with emotional disturbances and had been prescribed anti-psychotic or other psychotropic medications due to trauma. Participants in their study shared the adverse impact of mental health problems on school performance.

Federal and Local Policies and Resources that Support College Success for Foster Care Alumni

Federal programs. Policies at the federal and state levels have been implemented to encourage and increase college enrollment and degree attainment among persons with foster care

experience. Wolanin (2005) asserted that special programs of state student financial aid convey to persons with foster care experience that higher education is for them and that states hold high expectations for their educational attainment. The following federal and state legislation and programs were established to increase access to college and to provide support for youth in foster care who desire to attend college: The John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP), 1999; the Education and Training Voucher Program, which was created in 2001 as an amendment to the CFCIP of 1999; the College Cost and Reduction Act of 2007; the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008; the Higher Education Act, reauthorized in 2008; the Higher Education Access and Success for Homeless and Foster Youth Act; Federal TRIO Programs (Day et al., 2012; Watt et al., 2018); and the Federal Pell Grant Program.

The CFCIP helps persons with foster care experience up to age 21 to achieve self-sufficiency. The Act provides funding ($140 million) to state governments to improve and expand their independent living programs for foster youth aging out of care (Unrau, Font, & Rawls, 2012). Grants are offered to states to provide services, including education, training, employment, and financial support. States may also utilize up to 30% of funds on room and board for youth between the ages of 18 and 21 (John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, 2012).

In 2001, Congress authorized the Education and Training Vouchers (ETV) Program through the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program. The ETV provides resources specifically to meet the education and training needs of youth aging out of foster care. Through this program, states can provide current and former foster youth with up to $5,000 per year for postsecondary education and training (Children's Bureau, 2012; DFPS,2020).

The College Reduction Act of 2007 contains provisions designed to remove obstacles to accessing federal financial aid for college. The act makes it possible for foster youth who were in care at 13 years old or older to claim their independent status while applying for financial aid (PUBLIC LAW 110–84—SEPT. 27, 2007).

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 contains numerous provisions and requires state child welfare agencies to collaborate with their state and local agencies to promote educational stability and to expand eligibility for the ETV program to youth who exit foster care through adoption or kinship guardianship when they are at least 16 years old (Child Welfare, 2012; Day et al., 2011; Texas Education Agency, 2016). This Act allows states to claim reimbursement for foster-care maintenance payments made on behalf of foster youth to age 21 (Unrau et al., 2012).

Reauthorized in 2008, the Higher Education Opportunity Act expanded the definition of an independent student to include youth in foster care or youth who were wards of the court at age 13 or older. It also requires federal TRIO Programs to reach out and support foster care students (U. S. Department of Education, Higher Education Opportunity Act, 2019). The Higher Education Access and Success for Homeless and Foster Youth Act, amended in 2013, makes the cost of college more affordable for homeless and foster youth. Youth under the age of 24 who are determined homeless would be independent students. Also, this act provides homeless and foster youth in-state tuition for college, as well as a plan to assist them in accessing housing during their academic years (School House Connection, 2019).

According to Perna and Jones (2013), improving college access and success for students from low-income families and first-generation students to attend college requires a multi-faceted, comprehensive approach and commitment from multiple players. Among the major players are

the federally sponsored TRIO programs. As part of the Higher Education Act of 1965, TRIO programs were created at the federal level to motivate and support students from disadvantaged backgrounds (first-generation, low-income, students with disabilities, homeless students, and foster care students) in their pursuit of a college degree. The programs emerged as part of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 in response to President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty. There are eight programs under the auspice of TRIO—Upward Bound, Talent Search, Student Support Services, Educational Opportunity Centers, Ronald E. McNair Post Baccalaureate Achievement Program, Upward Bound Math and Science, and Veterans Upward Bound and the Training Program for Federal TRIO programs. Although there are eight TRIO programs, for this study, only two programs (Upward Bound and Student Support Services) will be discussed. Financial aid programs help students overcome financial barriers to higher education. TRIO programs support students in overcoming class, social, and cultural obstacles to higher education (Council for Opportunity in Education, 2020).

TRIO programs are available to youth in middle and high school, as well as adults at the postsecondary education level. TRIO programs are strategically and uniquely designed to address the academic needs of disadvantaged students, more specifically, first-generation, low-income, homeless, and youth with foster care experience. Approximately 790,000 students are served each year by more than 2,800 TRIO programs (Council for Opportunity in Education, 2019). As outreach and student services programs, the programs are designed to provide services for persons from disadvantaged backgrounds to aid in successful progress through the academic pipeline from middle school to post-baccalaureate programs (U. S. Department of Education, 2020). Maynard et al. (2014) revealed that, on average, studied TRIO and other college access programs increased college enrollment by 12%.

Upward Bound was the first program created in 1965 to assist disadvantaged youth. It is a federally funded TRIO program that connects students with opportunities to explore postsecondary education and assists them in facilitating successful transitions from high school to college. Pre-college programs such as UB are instrumental in making college a reality for foster care youth. UB programs are located throughout the United States and are available to serve students who desire to attend college. Through the delivery of targeted services, the program assists participants in succeeding in secondary education and, ultimately, in college. UB seeks to increase the rate at which participants complete high school and enroll in and graduate from college. The program provides academic tutoring, academic advising, stipends, assistance with SAT and ACT prep, cultural enrichment and college tours, assistance with applying for financial aid and scholarships, a summer enrichment program, summer work-study jobs, mentoring, assistance with completing college admissions paperwork and essays, student and parent workshops, and much more (U. S. Department of Education, TRIO, Upward Bound, 2020).

Upon college enrollment, TRIO, Student Support Services (SSS) Programs are available on various college campuses throughout the United States to provide resources and services to support college success and graduation. The purpose of the program is to increase college retention and graduation and to increase the transfer rates of students from two-year to four-year institutions. Programs such as SSS work to foster an institutional climate supportive of the success of individuals that are traditionally underrepresented in higher education, such as persons with disabilities and homeless and foster care youth. (U. S. Department of Education, TRIO, Student Support Services Program, 2020).

SSS programs seek to establish supportive academic environments that focus on student success. Staff members assist students in increasing college readiness, encourage social and academic integration on campus, as well as provide information regarding navigating the college process and environment. Services consist of academic advising, tutoring, mentoring, assistance with completing financial aid paperwork and searching and applying for scholarships, financial literacy training, grant aid, assistance in seeking employment on and off-campus, cultural enrichment activities, student success workshops (study skills, time management, test-taking skills), and career exploration (Tarrant County College, 2016). Methodologically rigorous research studies conducted in 1997 by Westat and Mathematica Policy Research revealed that SSS promotes persistence in college, college credit accrual, and better college grades (Pell Institute, 2009).

The Federal Pell Grant Program, a need-based program, provides grants to low-income undergraduate and certain post-baccalaureate students to promote access to college. Recipients qualify for up to $6,195 per year, based on need (Federal Student Aid, n.d.).

According to Texas Education Code (TEC) Section 51.9356, postsecondary institutions must appoint at least one employee to serve as a foster care liaison for students formerly in the conservatorship of the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS). These liaisons serve as a point of contact both in and outside the college or university (The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2017). Duties include providing information to foster care alumni regarding support services, informing these students about other resources available at the institution, and providing any other pertinent information to assist the students (Texas Education Code §51.9356).

Postsecondary Institutional Foster Care Alumni Programs and Non-Profit Organizations

Kinarsky (2017) noted that since 2006, there had been an increase in college-based programs that serve students with foster care experience. Several postsecondary institutions provide foster care alumni programs designed to increase the graduation rates of foster care alumni. These programs offer an array of services, including academic, counseling and career services, mentoring, funding for textbooks, as well as the distribution of computers to students (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). Likewise, other studies have revealed that some institutions across the nation have developed and implemented specialized campus-based programs tailored specifically to ensure the college success of students with foster care experience (Dworsky et al., 2010; Hernandez et al., 2010; Salazar, 2012).

According to Geiger et al. (2018), there is a greater awareness of the postsecondary experiences of foster care alumni, which has led to the implementation of campus-based support programs throughout the United States. The purpose of these programs is to recruit, prepare, and support foster care alumni in higher education. However, these programs are not well represented in higher education literature. Dworsky and Perez (2010) noted that more than a decade after the first program began in 1998, little is known about their impact on the postsecondary outcomes for those students who have participated in a campus support program for foster care alumni.

Education Reach for Texans (Reach), a non-profit organization, was established to eliminate barriers to college success and improve the success of foster care alumni in postsecondary education. The organization works to create support programs at public colleges and universities in the state of Texas (Watt et al., 2018).

Theoretical Framework

Human behavior is complex; therefore, the integration of theory to inform research is essential (Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 2012). The educational experiences of foster care alumni are multi-dimensional and complex; therefore, no one theory can provide a thorough explanation or understanding of the postsecondary educational experiences of foster care alumni. This section will focus on the concepts of cultural and social capital theories. Both theories will be utilized to illuminate the postsecondary experiences of foster care alumni.

Cultural Capital

Cultural capital is a sociological term developed by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in 1973 (Naseri, 2018). Since its inception, the concept of cultural capital has been highly influential and has generated extensive research about class inequalities in educational attainment (Sullivan, 2002). According to Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital consists of familiarity with the dominant culture in society, as well as the ability to comprehend and use of "educated" language. Cultural capital consists of forms of knowledge, skills, education, and advantages that a person is qualified for, which allows them to attain a higher social status (Naseri, 2018; Rohani, 2009).

The concept of cultural capital was developed in the context of Bourdieu's educational research, and it has had its most sustained effect in the sociology of education (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). Bourdieu believed that cultural capital included language ability, social communication ability, professional skills, personal demeanor, and the ability to grasp the opportunity to succeed. He theorized that cultural capital is gained mainly through a person's initial learning and is unconsciously influenced by settings (Bourdieu, 1986). Family plays a

significant role in an individual's acquisition of cultural capital, and an individual's values are determined mainly by the family background (Huang, 2019).

Cole (2019) stated that cultural capital is the accumulation of behaviors, knowledge, and skills that an individual can tap into to demonstrate cultural competence and social status. Cole further argued that historically and very much still today, depending on race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, religion, and even age, various groups of people have access to different sources and forms of knowledge. Bourdieu (1986) described three types of cultural capital: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized. Embodied cultural capital comprises elements such as skills, the habitus, styles of conversation, and posture. It is acquired, and the passively "inherited" properties of one's self, and is not transmissible in the form of a gift or bequest. Embodied cultural capital is acquired over time and reveals itself through an individual's character and way of thinking. Objectified cultural capital consists of goods and material objects such as pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, paintings that are owned by an individual. These goods can be transmitted both for financial profit and symbolically convey the cultural capital whose acquisition they facilitate. Institutionalized cultural capital is exhibited as academic credentials or qualifications held by an individual. A wealthy family can provide financial support to their children to pay for college in order for them to accumulate knowledge, qualifications, and credentials. This form of cultural capital is comparable and exchangeable (Emirbayer & Williams, 2005).

Habitus, which is central to Bourdieu's thought, is the learned set of preferences or dispositions by which a person orients to the social world (Edgerton & Roberts 2014). The concept of habitus relates to the resource of knowledge and is transmitted within the home. An individual's values are determined mainly by the family background (Bourdieu, 1986). Edgerton

and Roberts (2014) suggested that "habitus is rooted in family upbringing (socialization within the family) and conditioned by one's position in the social structure." For instance, due to similar backgrounds (values, life experiences, and education), a middle-class person might be more comfortable conversing with a professional, such as a lawyer or professor, than a working-class person. (Huang, 2019). Furthermore, the level of interaction between professors in college is also based on one's family background and personal values. Every professor will have a similar or same level of educational background, which is the criterion and standard on the requirement for the position.

Sullivan (2002) asserted whereas cultural capital consists of the possession of legitimate knowledge, habitus is a set of attitudes and values, and the dominant habitus is a set of attitudes and values held by the dominant class. A significant component of the dominant habitus is a positive attitude toward education. Lareau and Weininger (2003) suggested that schools play a crucial and growing role in the transmission of advantage across generations. Higher-class families and schools provide a different kind of education to the next generation than lower-class families (Huang, 2019). According to Sullivan (2002), the degree of cultural capital varies with social class; however, the education system assumes that students have some degree of cultural capital, which makes it extremely difficult for lower-class students to succeed in the education system. The researcher further suggested that "success in the education system is facilitated by the possession of cultural capital and higher-class habitus. Lower-class students do not, in general, possess these traits, so the failure of the majority of these students is inevitable" (Sullivan, 2002, p. 144).

Figure 2: Three Forms of Cultural Capital
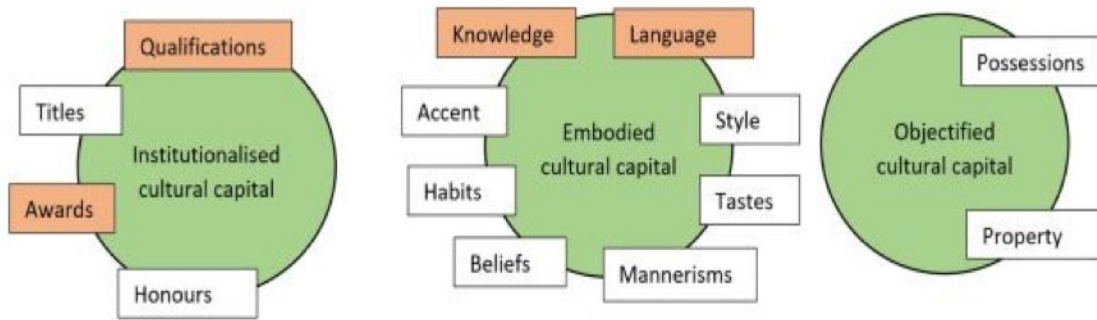
(Budden, 2019)

Social capital

Social capital, which has been defined in multiple ways, can be conceptualized as a single resource that includes connections to others that provide material or social benefits (Bourdieu, 1986). Social capital encompasses social networks and social relationships. Sources of social support may include family, school, peers, and neighborhood or community. (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2012). Coleman (1988) described social capital as the value that is created by investing in relationships with others through processes of trust and reciprocity. The researcher noted that social capital facilitates the achievement of goals that would not be possible in its absence or achieved at a higher cost. According to Metzger (2008), social capital can present in the form of emotional, psychological, physical, informational, instrumental, and material assistance, and has been found to mediate a person's ability to cope with stress. Social capital is comprised of three components: the quantity of an individual's social relationships, the quality of those relationships, and the value of the resources that individuals in social relationships can potentially make available to one another (Astone, Constance, Schoen, & Kim, 1999).

Putnam (2000) referred to social capital as *connections among individuals—social networks* and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. Lin (2001) operationally defined social capital as resources embedded in social networks and accessed and utilized by actors for actions. According to Lin, there are four explanations for how social capital can affect the likelihood that actions will lead to the accomplishment of goals: information, influence, social credentials, and reinforcement (Lin 2001; Okpych & Courtney, 2017). Huang (2019) noted that social capital could be understood as the contacts, social networking, and relationships that an individual possesses. For instance, an individual who has some valuable social networks, such as knowing important or influential people, is considered someone who has social capital.

Social capital conceptualizes social relationships as nonmaterial resources that can be utilized to benefit one in accomplishing goals. At the individual level, social capital refers to a system of interpersonal networks that enhances cooperation, collaboration, and resources (Dinda, 2008). It is accumulated when people interact purposefully with each other in formal and informal meeting places. Forms of capital, such as networks, norms, and trust that are built through obligations, expectations, and trustworthiness are considered to be essential sources of social capital (Robbins et al., 2012). As a resource, social capital is connected with group membership and social networks. Social capital recognizes the role of resources within a person's network of relationships and creates a means by which they can use networks to secure benefits (Coleman, 1988; Lin, 2001). Siisiainen (2000) posited that the concept of social capital has two critical components. The first component represents resources embedded in social relations, and the second represents access and the use of such resources resides with individuals.

Fukuyama (1995) asserted that the area where the government has the greatest ability to generate social capital is through education. Proponents of social capital believe that education increases social capital. Dinda (2008) noted that education is often cited as a critical determinant of social capital among numerous researchers. Schools serve as institutional environments that favor informal associations amongst peers and fellow members.

Figure 3: Social Capital
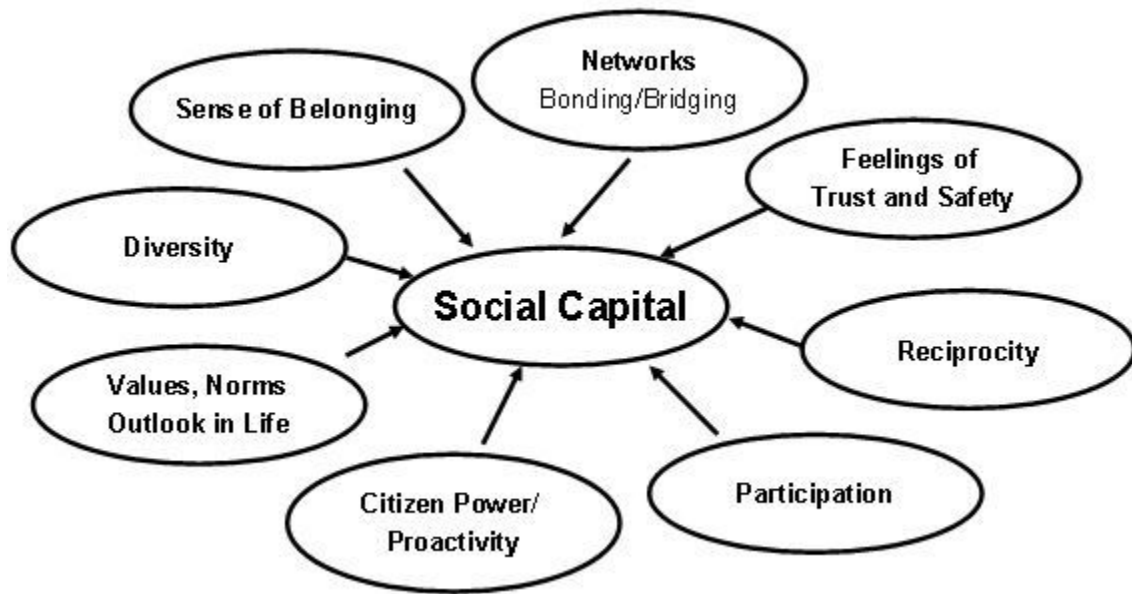
(Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 2006).

Summary of the Literature Review

A comprehensive review of the literature was conducted and presented in Chapter 3. The literature outlined in this study indicates that those who have experienced foster care possess unique characteristics and experience challenges that differentiate them from their non-foster care peers and place them at a disadvantage in the educational system at every level. Legislation that provides resources to increase the educational outcomes of persons with foster care experience has been clearly outlined and guidelines for the administration of resources at both

the federal and state level have been established. However, the educational outcomes of those with foster care experience remain low. Limited research is available regarding the postsecondary experiences of foster care alumni, as well as the support and resources that are critical to their college success. Findings from this study will address this gap in research, contribute to scholarly knowledge in this area, and provide implications for practice and future research. Cultural capital and social capital theories were utilized in this study to inform the study. A discussion of these theories and their relationship to the postsecondary experiences of foster care alumni is outlined in Chapter 5.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This chapter details the research design, rationale for the research approach, human subject ethical considerations, procedures for conducting the study, strategies for enhancing methodological rigor, data management and storage, and data analysis.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the postsecondary experiences of foster care alumni. A descriptive phenomenological (DP) approach was utilized to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences. Descriptive phenomenology is best suited for this study because little is known about the postsecondary experiences of foster care alumni, and this study's primary aim was to describe those postsecondary experiences. The study sought to answer the following overarching research question and four sub-questions: (1) What are the postsecondary experiences of foster care alumni, (a) What influenced the decision to enroll in college among foster care alumni, (b) What obstacles have hindered college success among foster care alumni, (c) What has helped foster care alumni to be successful in college, and (d) What do foster care alumni deem necessary to complete a postsecondary degree?

Qualitative Approach

A qualitative approach allows for data collection and analysis through the systematic examination of in-depth descriptions and meanings of the postsecondary experiences of foster care alumni (Teherani et al., 2015). Foster care alumni, in this qualitative study, were asked to describe their postsecondary experiences through the use of a rigorous qualitative approach. The researcher captured the subjective views, attitudes, descriptions, and perceptions of foster care alumni; thus, this approach was appropriate for this study.

According to Padgett (2008), rigor helps to build trustworthiness in qualitative research. The trustworthiness of this study was established by utilizing credibility strategies to enhance methodological rigor. Credibility addresses the congruent findings of participants' views and the researcher's description and interpretations (Padgett, 2008). Shenton (2004) noted that ensuring credibility is one of the most critical elements in establishing trustworthiness. Credibility not only strengthens the validity of the study, but it also ensures that the phenomenon was accurately described and identified. The rigor of this study was maximized using four techniques: member checking, peer debriefing, reflective journaling, and a summary of my background and qualifications (Shenton, 2004).

Member checking was utilized throughout the data collection phase to maximize rigor. Each participant was forwarded a transcript of their transcribed data to ensure that their experiences were accurately presented and understood. I engaged in peer debriefing sessions with my dissertation chair and with a committee member who is experienced in descriptive phenomenological research. These debriefing sessions provided opportunities for me to ask questions and receive feedback regarding the study. I engaged in reflective journaling to document my thoughts, ideas, and biases. Furthermore, a summary of my background, qualifications, and experience was included in this paper.

Background of the Researcher

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the instrument for data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994; Padgett, 2008). The success of a study depends heavily on the researcher's qualifications, experiences, and intellectual capacity (Padgett, 2008). My academic credentials consist of a bachelor's and a master's degree in social work. I am a doctoral student at the University of Texas at Arlington (UTA) School of Social Work.

Professionally, my career encompasses 40 years of experience in postsecondary education. During my tenure as a community college administrator, I worked with underserved, special populations, i.e., first-generation, low-income students, homeless students, and foster care alumni. Furthermore, serving as a member of the non-profit organization Education Reach for Texans has increased my knowledge regarding the educational plight of youth in foster care and foster care alumni.

During my postsecondary experience as a student, I encountered challenges and obstacles that interfered with my chances of completing a degree. This experience instilled in me a great appreciation for higher education and the benefits that are associated with possessing a college degree. I am the eighth child of 10 children, the first of the 10 to graduate from high school and enroll in college; a first-generation college student; and one who met the federal definition of low-income upon entering college as a freshman. As a first-generation, low-income college student, I was at high risk of dropping out of college before completing a degree. When I landed on the community college campus, as many underserved students, I had no clue what to do or how to do it. I was lost! My history as a once-struggling college student has proven instrumental in my ability to build rapport and trust with underserved students.

During the study, I remained cognizant of how my own social and cultural background, beliefs, assumptions, values, and postsecondary experiences could potentially influence and shape the findings, conclusions, and interpretations of the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Creswell, 2013; Tufford & Newman, 2010). Furthermore, to thoroughly understand and elucidate participants' postsecondary educational experiences and avoid imposing my personal biases, assumptions, and experiences in the study, every effort was made to "bracket" my experiences. Bracketing is viewed as one of the features that characterize Husserlian

phenomenological research. This technique is used to mitigate the researcher's assumptions, ideas, and personal biases (Tufford & Newman, 2010). I set aside my own experiences, as much as possible, to gain a fresh perspective from participants' descriptions of their postsecondary experiences. Bracketing was also achieved through the use of reflective journaling to document my feelings, thoughts, and ideas.

Paradigm

In conducting research, the researcher is guided by a worldview or set of beliefs known as a paradigm. A paradigm or worldview guides action about the desired goals of research and how it should be conducted (Yin, 2016). Multiple worldviews inform qualitative research—post-positivism, social constructivism, postmodernism, and pragmatism. This study utilized a social constructivism worldview to gain a deeper understanding of the postsecondary experiences of foster care alumni. According to constructivist researchers, there is no single reality; there are multiple realities, which are constructed in the human mind and actively give meaning and order to that reality (Teherani et al., 2015). Social constructivism embraces the premise that knowledge is constructed through interaction with others, captured through the eyes of others, and reported based on individual accounts of an experience (Creswell, 2013). A deeper understanding of the postsecondary experiences of foster care alumni was gained through the socially constructed, subjective realities of each participant's experience. Positioning this study within the context of a social constructivism paradigm allowed maximum opportunity for foster care alumni to describe their unique subjective experiences in their own words. As a result, the study captured multiple realities (meanings) that foster care alumni ascribe to postsecondary education.

In recognizing that all qualitative researchers bring biases to a study and acknowledging the potentiality for value-laden information from participants, this study employed rigorous

methodological strategies to decrease the impact of values on the interpretations and findings of this study (Creswell, 2013). The methodology for this study was driven by the ontological and epistemological beliefs that guide the research. A qualitative methodological approach to understanding the postsecondary experiences of foster care alumni is appropriate.

Descriptive Phenomenological (DP) Approach

Descriptive phenomenology (DP) is widely utilized in social sciences as a means to explore and describe the lived experiences of persons who share a particular life phenomenon for which little is known, or research is scarce (Giorgi, 2009). Multiple studies have focused on the dire educational plight and outcomes of children and youth in foster care at the primary and secondary school levels; however, there is limited research, particularly, in the state of Texas, on the postsecondary experiences of foster care alumni. A descriptive phenomenological approach best supported the purpose of this study. Descriptive phenomenology draws heavily on the works of Husserl and others, such as Clark Moustakas and Amedeo Giorgi. Giorgi was instrumental in expanding phenomenological thinking into the field of psychology (Giorgi, 2009). The DP approach allows the researcher to "enter the world" of participants to gain concrete descriptions of an experienced phenomenon. Foster care alumni in this study shared their unique, subjective postsecondary experiences, which provided the basis for a conglomerate of descriptions. Participants' descriptions of their postsecondary experiences resulted in emergent themes that offered an in-depth understanding of their shared experiences.

Human Subjects - Ethical Considerations. Protecting the privacy of human subjects involved in the study was paramount. Respecting the rights, desires, dignity, and autonomy of the participants is the responsibility of the researcher. The researcher used the following precautions to ensure that each participant's identity and human rights were protected: Approval

to conduct the study was requested from (UTA) Institutional Review Board (IRB) on December 13, 2020, and approval was received on February 21, 2020. The recruitment process began immediately after approval. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, each participant was assigned a pseudonym and numeric identifier that was used throughout the research project in place of their name. The names of the study sites were not referenced in the study, and all collected data, including audio recordings, transcripts, and questionnaires, did not include any identifying information. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

In mid-March 2020, due to the Coronavirus pandemic, an executive "shelter in place" order was issued by local jurisdictions; therefore, I was unable to conduct the study as initially proposed. The original proposal stated that: (1) the sample would be recruited from one research setting, (2) the study included participants who were currently enrolled in college, (3) before beginning the interview, participants would review and sign their informed consent in person, (4) and face-to-face interviews would be conducted.

The following modifications were made: (1) the sample was recruited from five research settings, (2) participants included those who were currently enrolled, had graduated, or dropped out of college, (3) the informed consent was reviewed, and verbal consent was given before beginning the interview (4) interviews were conducted via telephone or Skype. The original protocol was modified and submitted for IRB approval. Approval of modifications was received on April 2, 2020. The protocol approved by IRB was followed precisely.

Procedures

Research Setting. The setting for this research study included four accredited, public, state-funded postsecondary institutions and a non-profit organization that serves foster care

alumni in Texas and one community college in California. The postsecondary institutions are referenced as Institution A-E. Institution A has a student population of 10,568; Institution B has a student population of 6,671; Institution C has a student population of 34,187; Institution D has a student population of 15,846; and Institution E has a student population of 18,649.

Sample. Purposive and snowball sampling were employed to strategically identify and recruit a homogenous sample of 16 foster care alumni. A sample size of 16 participants allowed me to gather rich, in-depth data; focus on understanding the depth of each participant's postsecondary experience; and generate sufficient data to develop critical points of similarity and difference between participants. Study participants were required to meet the following criteria: (a) identified as a foster care alumnus (formerly in foster care), (b) at least 18 years of age or older, (c) fluent in English, and (d) able to provide consent.

Recruitment. To recruit participants for the study, I made initial contact via email with foster student liaisons at 12 postsecondary institutions and staff persons at the non-profit organization that serves foster care alumni in Texas. Under Texas Education Code (TEC) Section 51.9356, each postsecondary institution is required to designate one employee to serve as the liaison for students who were previously in the conservatorship of the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS). This law requires liaisons to provide support services, resources, and relevant information to assist foster care alumni students who are enrolled at their institutions. In my email to liaisons/staff persons, I discussed the details of the study and solicited their assistance in emailing a recruitment flyer, approved by the UTA ethics review board, to known foster care alumni, inviting them to participate in the study. The recruitment flyer, which was attached to the email, outlined details of the study and provided contact information for the principal investigator. Four liaisons responded to my request and agreed to

email the flyer to known foster care alumni at their respective institution. I waited to be contacted by potential participants. Potential participants were given seven business days to respond to the invitation to participate in the study. If at least 16 foster care alumni did not respond within seven days, I emailed the liaison/staff person a second time to provide an update and to solicit his/her assistance in following up with a second email to foster care alumni. Nine foster care alumni responded to my recruitment email from their foster care liaison. Once contacted by a potential participant, I provided information regarding the study, confirmed the foster care alumnus' willingness to participate in the study, responded to questions and concerns regarding the study, and discussed ethical issues and informed consent. If a potential participant agreed to participate in the study, I emailed the informed consent form and participant questionnaire and scheduled a mutually agreed upon time to interview via Skype or telephone.

To avoid being labeled or stigmatized for their histories in foster care, some foster care alumni fail to self-disclose their alumnus status. In addition to the foster student liaison/staff person emailing the recruitment flyer to known foster care alumni, I utilized snowball sampling to further identify and recruit participants for the study. After each interview, I asked the participants if they were aware of other foster care alumni who might be interested in participating in the research study. If so, he/she was asked to provide that foster care alumnus information regarding the study and my contact information. Seven participants were recruited via snowball sampling.

Data Collection

Interviews & Participant Questionnaire. Due to the Coronavirus pandemic, state guidelines were implemented to minimize public interaction. As a result, interviews for this study were conducted via Skype or telephone at a mutually agreed upon time. At least three days

before their interview, potential participants were emailed the informed consent form and the participant questionnaire. At the start of each interview, I reviewed the purpose of the study, responded to questions and concerns regarding the study, discussed informed consent, and gained verbal consent from the participant. After verbal informed consent was given, I asked the participant to email their completed participant questionnaire to me and to maintain their emailed copy of the informed consent for their records. In qualitative research, there is the potential for a participant to experience emotional distress. Therefore, before each interview began, I emailed the participant a flyer that included information for the National Alliance on Mental Health Hotline (NAMHI) and the Mental Health America Hotline (MHAH). Participants who were currently enrolled in college were informed that they could contact their campus counseling center. In recognition of the fact that a participant could experience emotional distress during an interview, I was prepared to immediately stop the interview and refer the participant to the NSPH, MHA Hotline, or his/her campus counseling center for assistance. Upon completion of these activities, the interview began.

In conducting interviews for qualitative research, building rapport is not only required but critical (Giorgi, 2009). When communicating with participants, every effort was made to establish rapport and create an atmosphere of trust. Moustakas's (1994) phenomenological method recommends one semi-structured, one-hour interview with each participant. Interviews for this study ranged from 35 to 60 minutes. One interview took place via Skype, and the remaining 15 interviews were conducted via telephone. Participants were encouraged to describe their postsecondary experience from their perspectives. Interview questions consisted of 15 guided, open-ended conversational style questions. These questions were carefully crafted to solicit broad descriptions of participants' postsecondary experiences. All relevant questions and

topics were addressed with each participant. To clarify all responses to interview questions and to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' postsecondary educational experiences, probing questions followed interviewees' responses to guiding questions. These probes included questions or statements such as, "Can you give me examples? You stated…, can you tell me more about that? Can you provide more details about it…? Please explain what you mean when you say…, In what ways? How so?" Interviews occurred in April 2020. Participants were mailed a $25.00 Walmart gift card for their full participation in the study.

After interviews were conducted, audio recordings of the interviews were submitted to a professional transcription service and transcribed verbatim. Once transcripts were returned, they were reviewed for accuracy and clear statements and de-identified. After this, transcripts were forwarded to participants via email from my password-protected UTA email account for member checking. Participants were given five days to review their transcripts and provide feedback. Several participants responded that their transcripts reflected accurate statements. Transcripts were uploaded to ATLAS.ti (version 8) to manage and code.

Data Management and Storage. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, all collected data, including audio recordings, transcripts, and questionnaires, did not include any identifying information. The interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder to capture the data for this study. After interviews were completed, recordings were uploaded via an encrypted, password-protected computer to a professional transcription service. Audio recordings were destroyed immediately after they were transcribed, and transcripts were returned from the transcription service. My UTA email account was utilized to correspond with participants, and all information received via email from participants was stored on a UTA password-protected laptop.

Due to the Coronavirus pandemic, the UTA School of Social Work was officially closed to students; therefore, during the research process, original hard copies of questionnaires and transcripts were stored and maintained in a locked file in my home office. After this research, all original paper documents will be stored and maintained at UTA in the School of Social Work for three years after the end of this research. The Institutional Review Board and those connected with this research will have access to the data.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using a modified version of Colaizzi's (1978) descriptive phenomenological seven-step analytical method outlined in **Table 1: Steps in Colaizzi's Descriptive Phenomenological Data Analysis Method** on the next page. Colaizzi's method provides a rigorous analysis and allows the researcher to stay close to the data.

Table 1: Steps in Colaizzi's Descriptive Phenomenological Data Analysis Method

Step	Description
1. Familiarization	The researcher familiarizes with the data by reading through all participants' transcripts several times.
2. Identify Significant Statements	The researcher identifies all statements that are of direct relevance to the phenomenon under investigation.
3. Formulate Codes	The researcher identifies meanings relevant to the phenomenon that arise from consideration of significant statements. The researcher must "bracket" pre-suppositions to stick closely to the phenomenon as experienced by participants.
4. Cluster Themes	The researcher clusters identified codes into themes that are common across all accounts.
5. Develop an Exhaustive Description	The researcher writes a full and inclusive description of the phenomenon, incorporating all the themes produced in step 4.
6. Produce the Fundamental Structure	The researcher condenses the exhaustive description down to a short, dense statement that captures just those aspects deemed to be essential to the structure of the phenomenon.
7. Seek Verification of the Fundamental Structure	The researcher returns the fundamental structure statement to all participants to ask whether it captures their experiences.

(Morrow, Rodriguez, & King, 2015)

Steps in Colaizzi's Descriptive Phenomenological Data Analysis Method

1) **Acquiring a sense of each transcript**. All interviews were personally conducted by me, which allowed me to stay close to the data as I sought to gain a deeper understanding of each foster care alumnus' lived postsecondary experience. By reading the transcripts several times and listening to recorded interviews twice, I was able to acquire a sense of participants' stories (Colaizzi, 1978). Furthermore, listening to recorded interviews twice allowed me to capture a sense of the emotions that were attached to participants' experiences.

2) **Identification of significant statements**. In step two of the data analysis process, I identified and highlighted significant statements regarding postsecondary experiences on each participant's transcript (Colaizzi, 1978). After this, the significant statements were cut out and grouped based on similarity. I read through each statement and ensured that each was placed in the appropriate group. Using this technique, I was able to immerse myself in the data and begin the process of identifying themes that began emerging in the early stages of the analysis process. A total of 548 significant statements were extracted from 16 transcripts.

3) **Formulation of codes (meanings).** In step three, codes were formulated from significant statements and grouped based on their relationship or frequency (Colaizzi, 1978). Underlying meanings from each statement were studied carefully and grouped into categories. During this stage, I engaged in "bracketing" to set aside personal bias, thoughts, and feelings that emerged due to my past work history with underserved students in higher education. Furthermore, I engaged in reflective journaling to capture my thoughts and ideas.

4) **Cluster codes into themes.** In step four, codes were entered into ATLAS.ti 8 and assigned to the significant statements identified in step 2. After this, codes were exported from ATLAS.ti into Excel, where they were clustered into themes (Colaizzi, 1978). The reduction of codes into themes created a more manageable data set. This process resulted in data interpretation through the use of meticulous efforts and ensured connectivity with the original data. A total of four themes were formulated from 548 significant statements.

5) **Development of an exhaustive description.** In step five, using the four emergent themes, I constructed an exhaustive description of the postsecondary educational experiences of FCA as articulated by participants (Colaizzi, 1978).

6) **Production of the fundamental structure.** In this step, Colazzi (1978) recommended that the exhaustive description be reduced to an abridged statement that captures those ideas that are deemed vital to the postsecondary educational experiences of FCA. During this step, through further data analysis and data reduction, a greater understanding of the postsecondary educational experiences of FCA was acquired.

7) **Validation of fundamental structure.** Due to time-related constraints, this study deviated from Colaizzi's seven-step method by excluding step 7. The fundamental structure was not forwarded to participants for validation.

Chapter 4

Results

A descriptive phenomenological approach was utilized to gain a deeper understanding of the postsecondary experiences of 16 foster care alumni. Adhering to Giorgi's (2009) descriptive phenomenological method and a modified version of Colazzi's (1978) seven-step data analysis method, four themes emerged from the data. The following overarching research question and four sub-questions were answered: (1) What are the postsecondary experiences of foster care alumni? (a) What influenced the decision to enroll in college among foster care alumni? (b) What obstacles have hindered college success among foster care alumni? (c) What has helped foster care alumni to be successful in college? (d) What do foster care alumni deem necessary to complete a postsecondary degree?

Characteristics of Sample

The final sample consisted of 16 participants. Fifteen participants resided in Texas, and one participant resided in California. Ten were currently enrolled in college, three had completed a bachelor's degree, two had completed a master's degree, and one had withdrawn from college. Participants' ages ranged from 18–30 or above. Eleven participants were female, and five were males. Eight participants identified as African American, five as Caucasian/White, two as Hispanic/Latino, and one as Bi-racial/Mixed. Table 2: Summary of Participant Demographics provides a summary of participant demographics.

Table 2: Summary of Participant Demographics

Characteristics	n (%)
Age in Years	
18-21	5 (31)
22-25	3 (19)
26-29	3 (19)
30 or above	5 (31)
Gender	
Female	11(69)
Male	5 (31)
Ethnicity	
African American/Black	8 (50)
Caucasian/White	5 (31)
Hispanic/Latino	2 (13)
Bi-racial/Mixed	1 (6)

Participant Questionnaire Information

      Participants completed a questionnaire that collected demographics, foster care background, education and housing, financial aid received, employment status, and campus involvement. To ensure anonymity, each participant is referenced by a pseudonym. Table 3: Participant Demographics provides details for participant demographics, while Table 4: Foster Care Background describes participants' foster care background.

Table 3: Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age Range	Gender	Race
Bella	18–21	F	White
Ericka	18–21	F	Hispanic
Robert	26–29	M	Latino
Jonathan	26–29	M	White
Tia	30 or +	F	Mixed
Courtney	18–21	F	White
Melissa	30 or +	F	African American
Skylar	18–21	F	White
Casey	22–25	F	White
Phillip	30 or +	M	African American
Justin	18–21	M	African American
Kelly	30 or +	F	African American
Austin	30 or +	M	African American
Lindsey	26–29	F	African American
Ashley	22–25	F	African American
Lauren	22–25	F	African American

Table 4: Foster Care Background

Status	n	%
Adopted	6	38
Aged out	9	56
Placed with relatives	1	6
Mean age at entry into foster care	9	
Mean years in foster care	6	
Mean foster home placements	7	
Mean school placements	5	
Mean high school placements	2	
Participation in the PAL Program	9	56
Diagnosed with mental illness	9	56

Foster Care Background. When analyzing foster care background data, it was found that nine participants aged out of foster care, six were adopted, and one was placed with relatives. Age at entry into foster care ranged from birth to 17 with a mean of 9 years. Time in foster care ranged from six months to 18 years with a mean of 6 years, foster care home placements ranged from one to 31 with a mean of 7, and total school placements ranged from one to 22 with a mean of 5, and high school placements ranged from one to six with a mean of 2. Nine participants participated in preparation for adult living program, and nine were diagnosed with a mental illness. Table 5: Education and Housing provides details for participant education and housing arrangements.

Table 5: Education and Housing

Characteristics		n	%
First-generation		11	69
Repeated Grade		1	6
High School Graduate		15	94
Mean High School GPA		3.2	
Felt Academically Prepared		6	38
Mean College GPA		3.0	
Dropped Out and Returned to College		6	38
Developmental Education Enrollment		7	44
College Graduate		6	38
Living Location		3	19
	On-Campus	1	6
	On Campus/1ˢᵗ Year	11	69
	Off-Campus	1	6
	Not Answered		

Education and housing. Eleven participants disclosed that they were first-generation college students, six percent repeated a grade, and, impressively, 15 were high school graduates. The mean high school grade point average for participants was 3.2, and the mean college grade point average was 3.0. When enrolling in college for the first time, six participants stated that they felt academically prepared for college-level courses; the majority of participants (10) stated that they did not feel academically prepared. Six participants dropped out and returned to college, seven were required to enroll in developmental education, six were college graduates, and 11 participants lived off-campus.

Financial Aid. All 16 participants received some form of financial aid. Interestingly, only one participant received a student loan. Table 6: Financial Aid Received provides details for financial aid received.

Table 6: Financial Aid Received

Financial Assistance	n	%
Received Financial Aid	16	100
Type of Financial Aid		
Pell, T&F Waiver	5	31
Pell, T&F Waiver, Scholarships	6	38
Pell, T&F Waiver, Other	1	6
Pell, T&F Waiver, Scholarship, Loan	1	6
Pell, TX Grant, T&F Waiver	1	6
Tuition & Fee Waiver	1	6
T&F Waiver, Scholarship	1	6

Employment status while enrolled in college. In addition to receiving financial aid, the majority of participants in the study stated that they had to work full time or several part-time jobs to have enough funds for college-related expenses and living expenses. Ten participants work/worked full time, three work/worked part-time, and three are not or did not work while in college. Casey stated that she had maintained two to four jobs or the equivalent of a full-time job during her entire college career.

Involvement in a campus-based foster care alumni program or a student organization. Campus involvement played a vital role in connecting to social networks. Of the 10 participants who were currently enrolled in college, two were involved in a campus-based foster care alumni support program, and one was involved in a campus-based Christian student organization. Four participants were not involved on campus; however, two of the four stated that they plan to join the foster care alumni program. One participant explained that they are a commuter student, has children, and works full time; therefore, time does not allow for participation in campus activities. Interestingly, all five participants who had graduated from college had participated in a campus-based foster care alumni support program while enrolled in college.

Thematic Findings

Four themes emerged from the data: (1) College is a stepping stone to a better life, (2) College provides opportunities for self-discovery and growth, (3) There are myriad obstacles to college success, and (4) Support is critical to college success.

Theme 1: College is a Stepping Stone to a Better Life

The theme of college is a stepping stone to a better life emerged as participants described their reasons for enrolling in college. Eight participants stated that they decided to enroll in

college because college provides opportunities for a better life. A better life was described as improved socioeconomic status, increased economic and family stability, and increased job satisfaction and opportunities. Robert stated,

> I enrolled in college because it's a stepping stone to a better life. I knew it wasn't a question of if I want to go, it's I need to go. It wasn't a yes or no decision, it was, I'm going to go to college, and that's final. The drive for a better life than what I had growing up and then now more than ever is I have a son now. I have an eight-month-old son. Everything I do in school is going to affect his livelihood and I need to try for the very tip of the point that I can achieve in college for my son.

Robert disclosed that he and his siblings were removed from their biological mother's custody due to abuse and their mother's subsequent imprisonment. They were adopted by their grandmother when he was ten years old. He stated, "I really didn't think about college until probably my junior year in high school, and I was well aware that it was free." Robert further stated that no one influenced his decision to enroll in college. Nevertheless, the trauma that he experienced as a child guided many of his decisions, including his decision to enroll in college. Robert will graduate with a bachelor's degree in May 2020, and he has been accepted into law school.

Bella explained that she was the first in her family to graduate from high school and enroll in college. She stated, "My parents didn't graduate high school, and I would like a better life for myself because I saw the route that they went down. I wanted to do something better with my life." Bella shared that although a friend encouraged her to check out a particular university, no one actually influenced her decision to enroll in college.

Lauren expressed that she believes that a college degree is a path to a better life. She stated that her decision to enroll in college developed out of the awareness of her mother's inability to care for her children and a desire for a better life for herself. Lauren indicated,

> I just wanted a better life for myself, to be honest with you. And pretty much that's what led me wanting to go to college. Eventually, it was just wanting something better for myself. I already knew about my mother's story in regards to why she wasn't able to really just watch us. Me knowing her story was a part of me wanting something better and also just being in the care that I was in, some of the things that they might've done or even some of the things they could not have done. I didn't want to be able to bring a child into the world, knowing that I'd have to rely on something like that.

Lauren indicated that no one influenced her decision to enroll. She revealed that her adopted parents were not supportive of her decision to enroll in college. Tia shared that she was informed as a child that education was the only way to break the cycle of poverty. She asserted, "It was just important to me to make sure that the cycle was broken so that I didn't have to struggle the rest of my life the way my parents did." Tia stated that no one influenced her decision to enroll in college. She disclosed that she lived in a group home, and no one there, except for a therapist, had a college degree.

Justin informed me that he enrolled in college because he wanted to have the best life for himself and his siblings. He stated,

> I want the best for them, and I want to have the best life for myself also. I want to have more stability. That's what I mean by the best life I can have. Stability. I don't want to have to struggle in my lifetime. That's what I grew up in. I don't want to have to go through that ever again. Financially, yes, just really more financially than anything.

Justin stated that his biological relatives encouraged him to enroll in college. He shared,

> They encouraged me to go but they said like I don't have to because college isn't for everybody. That's what they told me all the time. But then I told them I wanted to because that's always been one of my dreams is to that.

Jonathan shared that his decision to enroll in college was driven by his belief that getting a good marketable degree or marketable education was going to allow him to get a job that he really enjoyed and would provide sufficient income to support himself and build a better future. In describing what influenced his decision to enroll in college, Austin shared,

> I felt like college was an escape, because it was either going to college, or return back to before I grew up and go back to the gang. In the gangs, and sell dope, and eventually end up in prison, or definitely homeless. It was just a golden ticket, to a new life, new experiences, new ... A whole new journey. And that's why I really enrolled in college because I wanted a new life. I wanted a new outlook. I wanted to see the world.

Austin stated that his foster mother at the group home inspired and encouraged him to attend college. He explained that once he graduated from high school, his foster mother took him to speak with a counselor regarding college enrollment. The counselor encouraged him to try college and see how he would do.

Theme 2: College is an Opportunity for Self-discovery and Growth

The theme of college is an opportunity for self-discovery and growth emerged as participants described their postsecondary experiences. Lindsey described her initial postsecondary experience as a "maze," and Phillip described his experience as "a combination of

confusion and uncertainty." Although some participants such as Lindsay and Philip initially struggled with transitioning to college, the majority of participants described their postsecondary experiences as positive and beneficial. Several participants described how college has contributed to self-discovery and personal growth. Participants attributed intellectual and personal development to academic engagement through class discussions and interaction, seeking assistance from professors, and tutoring; and social engagement through involvement in campus organizations and clubs, and peer relationships. All of these factors provided exposure to diversity and new ideas.

When describing her postsecondary experience, Melissa stated,

It really opens up your eyes and your mind a lot. It just opened up your mind to things that are going on. You look at things with different perspectives. It increases your outlook on things. You're not as close-minded. You're more understanding. You know how to facilitate a lot more.

Justin cheerfully shared how exposure to new experiences in college have contributed to his personal growth as a young adult.

My college experience has been one of the best things I've ever experienced in my life from meeting people and just experiencing a lot of things. Like from the parties…not even the parties, just everything, the classes, and just being more open-minded to a lot more stuff, if that makes sense. My experience, also I would say experiencing a lot more stuff up close. What I mean by that is because I'd never been to a college basketball game ever in my life and me experiencing that, I got to see that and I love basketball. So, then my experience also is meeting other people, being more diverse.

In describing his postsecondary experience, Phillip stated,

I think it was an opportunity to self-discover, in growth, and to add, I guess to your values that you already had or to change some of those values that you thought were important. So, I think it was socially. But I guess I grew in different areas of my life. One in the social aspect and the second would be in leadership. And then also I was trying to develop self-confidence. So, I think college contributed to those three growth areas in my life.

According to Lauren, her postsecondary experience was overall amazing. She described her experience by sharing,

Being in foster care, sometimes you deal with foster parents that don't want to take you out, either out of embarrassment or sometimes they just don't have the money to take you out. And so, going to college actually helped open and broaden my horizons, not just to my environment, but to a plethora of people, races, and environment. So that's where college was an eye-opener for me. Not only that, I learned how to be a business savvy person. I learned how to get out of my shell and without college, I know for sure some of the things I do know now would not be in my brain.

As detailed in their stories, participants perceived that college provides opportunities for exposure to new ideas and diversity. Through campus connections and participation in various on-campus activities, some participants reported that they experienced personal growth and increased self-esteem.

Theme 3: There Are Myriad Obstacles to College Success

The theme of there are myriad obstacles to college success emerged as participants described what obstacles have hindered their college success, which were inadequate preparation for college, insufficient financial resources, and mental health problems.

Subtheme 3A: Inadequate Academic Preparation for College. Eleven participants disclosed that they did not feel academically prepared for college. Inadequate academic preparation included a lack of academic skills to engage in college-level course work and lack of study, test-taking, and time management skills. Some participants reported that they lacked guidance and life skills that are necessary to live independently. Austin revealed that he experienced multiple home and school placements while in foster care. He attributed a lack of college readiness to his "failed education background," which caused him to question his ability to be successful in college. He shared,

> I was like, "Man, am I going to be successful the first year?" I was afraid to even go to class sometime. Like, "Man, I don't want to go to class and, right now I feel like an idiot." So, like I'm not even worthy to even step into the classrooms, at the college, so, it was just a fear factor, like wow. The second thing is, I felt like I was not educationally equipped. I felt like I wasn't equipped with math skills and reading. And math, all the educational tools you need to transition into college. And I felt like I didn't have that, I didn't have that. And so, my first years of college was scary because I felt like I always about to have a collision with more failure.

In regards to his academic foundation, Phillip stated, "I think on the academic level I was very behind, so I wasn't prepared for the college curriculum. I was behind in English and math, those subjects like that. I didn't excel very well then and I struggled in those." Jonathan shared, "My first year was really tough because the academics were way more strenuous than I got in high school. I felt that my high school just didn't do a good job of preparing me for college and the rigorous academics."

Casey revealed that due to 22 high school placements, she ended up completing high school through an independent study program that required her to spend one hour per week completing course packets, which did not adequately prepare her for college. She further disclosed that upon college enrollment, she was placed into remedial classes due to her rocky high school foundation. According to Robert, the high school he graduated from, which was located in a "low-income" area, failed to adequately prepare him for college-level work. He shared, "I wasn't really prepared for the writing courses or the math courses. I completely bombed my first semester in college. My GPA was like a 1.25."

Justin described his first semester of college as the most challenging semester because transitioning from high school to college is one of the hardest things "because you don't know what to expect so you don't know how to prepare for certain things like tests, how to study." Tia described herself as a social person who had "lots of friends" and loved meeting new people. According to Tia, invitations to join organizations and clubs created opportunities for campus involvement. She stated that she struggled with,

> Knowing how to say yes to some things and say no to other things and set boundaries. I struggled with figuring out how to study and how to just balance all of the demands that I had on me. I didn't have any study skills. I didn't know how to get organized. I didn't know anything about financial aid, or budgeting, or how to pay bills, or how to get a checking account. I didn't honestly know anything.

Phillip stated that he was not ready for college because he didn't know how to properly study. Jonathan shared, "not really being taught how to study and how to

prepare for tests and how to do well at a college level academic-wise was a struggle."

Ericka described her inadequate preparation for college by explaining,

I was one of those kids in high school it was easier to just go off memorization. And now it's like, oh, I have to study. I can't just wing it. But how do I do that? I did have to kind of like figure out how to study right. I know that sounds crazy. When I got into college, I thought that I could skim stuff and cram like I could for stuff in high school, and I cannot do that.

According to Lindsey, she was academically prepared for college but lacked guidance and life skills. She shared,

I was not prepared life-wise. You know, there were a lot of distractions, you know? It's kind of like, how do I put it? Let's imagine you've been kind of sheltered your whole life, and then finally, you've been set free, and you absolutely have nowhere to go and like no idea of where you want to go.

Courtney stated that a lack of life skills made college difficult for her. She shared, "I don't even know how to grocery shop or pump gas. I know that sounds stupid, but it's like when I first saw my vehicle, I'm like, what do I do? How do I pump gas? She stated that she had to rely on friends to teach her how to grocery shop and save money while grocery shopping.

Subtheme 3B: Insufficient Financial Aid. All 16 participants reported that they received some sort of financial aid. However, insufficient financial aid to pay for college-related and living expenses such as housing, meals, transportation, utilities, and personal items were listed as a significant obstacle to college success. Thirteen of the participants did not receive sufficient financial aid. Participants shared that due to insufficient

financial aid, the need to work excessive hours while juggling a full-time course load

served as a significant obstacle to college success. Ten of the participants reported the

need to work full time to cover college-related and living expenses, and three

work/worked part-time. When asked what obstacles she has encountered in college,

Casey stated,

> Insane workload would probably be the best description. I've maintained anywhere from
>
> two to four jobs or the equivalent of full-time altogether, or a full-time job throughout my
>
> entire college career. It was really rocky for the first year and a half I was probably okay.
>
> I was struggling, but I wasn't dying.

> Similarly, Ericka described the need to work excessive hours to support herself as

an obstacle. She asserted,

> I worked two jobs my first semester, just to pay a regular portion of my bills and then still
>
> be able to save. Then that was tiring because I would get out of my classes, and I would
>
> literally work from the time that I got out to nighttime. Then I would work till like 2:00
>
> or 3:00 in the morning.

Jonathan disclosed that one of the biggest obstacles that he faced in college was trying to

make sure that he had enough money to cover basic needs such as rent, food, and utilities, while

still doing well in school. He shared, "Working enough to have all that while also studying

enough for 12 to 15 hours of college credit was tough." Ashley stated that lack of financial

support and not having "a village basically to go to" as significant obstacles for her. Tia

described insufficient financial aid and a lack of financial resources as obstacles. She expressed,

> My freshman year, I was 17, and the director of the group home I was in just kind of
>
> dropped me off. I had $50 in my pocket. I remember there was one year I couldn't even

afford to buy a winter coat. So, it was like I was struggling to get to school because if it was super cold. There was one year we had an ice storm and things like that, and that's like, I didn't even have a coat, because I couldn't afford it. So, the little things like that, that are outside of just tuition and fees, that people don't think about in regards to, whether it's emotional support or financial support, that a lot of foster kids just don't have.

Casey disclosed that due to insufficient financial aid, securing affordable, safe housing was a significant obstacle for her. She shared,

I was basically house hopping between toxic relationships and living with friends who had extra rooms, none of which ended well. Before this place that I'm at now, the environment I was in was not conducive to live in, let along study in. My mental health deteriorated real quick.

Kelly shared that affordable housing was an issue for her, as well. She explained, "not knowing where to go, where to live, different things like that. Apartment saying, "Hey, you need three times the rent," or not having a cosigner." According to Ericka, transportation was an obstacle for her because she could not afford to purchase a car. She indicated,

So, there wasn't always days where I had rides or for sure rides, so I would have to get rides or call someone the night before and make sure I had like three options set up the next morning if the first person and the second person don't come through.

Lauren indicated that the state tuition and fee waiver is beneficial; however, she emphasized that the waiver only covers tuition and fees. College expenses include much more than tuition and fees. Therefore, other forms of financial resources are necessary to cover college-related and basic living expenses. Lauren explained,

The tuition waiver is pretty cool. It helps cover your tuition. Given that it's so much that people don't tell you going into college. You have to pay more than just your books, or more than just this, or they don't express why they stress scholarships so much. What would be an ideal, pretty cool deal is support with books to where the kid can actually focus on the dorm and the food part of college.

Skylar stated, "I had to pay for my housing and food plan and all of that stuff, but I've got plenty of other scholarships to be able to cover the rest of it." Although all 16 participants were able to receive various sorts of financial aid, most lacked sufficient aid to pay for necessary living expenses.

Three participants stated that they were currently receiving sufficient financial aid to pay for college-related expenses and living expenses. Of the three, the first participant stated that his financial package included: Pell, the state tuition, and fee waiver, Texas grant, and a housing voucher; therefore, he does not have to work. The second participant's financial aid package consisted of Pell, the state tuition and fee waiver, scholarships, and part-time work-study on campus. The third participant's financial aid package included Pell, the state tuition and fee waiver, a housing voucher, and part-time work-study on campus.

Subtheme 3C: Mental Illness Due to Trauma: "It's affected my life. I can tell you that." Nine participants in the study disclosed that, due to trauma, they had been diagnosed with a mental illness. Participants were asked to describe how having a diagnosed mental illness has affected their postsecondary experiences. Bella disclosed that during her first year of college, she struggled with substance abuse. She stated,

I think it was because I was having all these disorders at one time. And I was so

overwhelmed. I mean, yeah, I adapt quickly to college, like, but I mean, it's still stressful.

And it still puts a toll on my mind, especially if you already come from past traumatic

experiences. And so, I mean, I dealt with substance abuse, but then I quit.

Robert described how a traumatic childhood experience resulted in a diagnosis of PTSD

for him. He stated that the illness has profoundly affected his life. He explained,

I was very temperamental in the beginning of my college experience. I was very

secluded. I guess I wasn't very social. I would not talk to anybody. It was like I would

keep to myself, I wouldn't befriend anybody, if anybody befriended me it was like, I

don't trust you, what do you want?

Tia stated that, due to childhood trauma, she battled depression and anxiety. She

described the effects of mental illness on her college experience by stating,

Depression is an interesting illness. It tells you that you're not worthy. And when you've

been in foster care and that message has already been reinforced to you, that message has

already been drilled into your head, having something like depression tell you that you're

different than everybody else, that something is inherently wrong with you, I think it

really hits people that have endured trauma like that. To survive, I just stuffed all of that

stuff down. All of the trauma that put me in foster care, all of the trauma that I

experienced while I was in foster care. Just to be able to get through it, to be able to get

out, I stuffed it all down, and I refused to deal with it. And at some point, that stuff has to

come back out. And it did in a really scary way, and I wasn't prepared to deal with it, and

I wasn't equipped with the tools, the coping skills, to understand what was going on, and

to function while those things were going on. And so, I just shut down.

Courtney disclosed that she had been diagnosed with multiple mental health illnesses. She described how a recent traumatic incident exacerbated her illness and adversely disrupted her college experience. She explained,

> I was so depressed that I wouldn't even get out of bed. And finally, my friend walked in one day, literally drug me out of bed and was like, you need to get up, or I'm finding a way to get you in that shower, showering you, and dragging you out to class.

Lauren described the ups and downs of battling mental illness while in college. She explained the difficulty of dealing with the mental aspect of being adopted or not knowing your identity or dealing with the trauma inflicted by a parent and "just being in the foster care system as a whole." She painted a vivid picture of her struggle with mental illness and how it has affected her college experience.

> Bipolar, you could be that person where you're high one minute and low the next, or with PTSD, you can really freeze in that time and it's kind of weird to explain, but you can freeze within that time and everything else goes blank. I would get into a low manic depressed state to where I did not feel like doing anything, or even if I studied, it was that second guess, it's not right.

In describing how mental illness affected her grades on assignments and tests, she further shared,

> Being able to study clearly and effectively played a part. You look at the scores, and you're like, oh man, what I was second-guessing myself or overthinking or causing myself to go through a whole bunch of unnecessary depressed states. It caused me to pick the wrong answer to where I knew the answer was right, but it ended up being different.

When asked to discuss how mental illness has affected her college experience, Casey indicated,

> Anxiety's the biggest one that affects my college. The other ones, they're fairly manageable now, but anxiety's a big one. My stress levels being so high, I have anxiety so bad that I will bite my nails until they bleed. I would say that a lot of issues with my grades that I had in the past were anxiety-related.

Lindsey shared her battle with depression and its effects on her college experience. She explained,

> I did have a lot of times where I did not get up for anything. I just went through, and it was mostly during holiday times, where I didn't get to leave campus like everyone else. So, I did poorly. I did not pass classes. I didn't get up to do anything. It was a very depressing time for a couple of years.

Austin described how feelings of loneliness and reminiscing on past tragedies and difficulties fed the depression that he experienced during his first year of college.

Theme 4: Support is Critical to College Success.

The theme of support is critical to college success emerged as participants described what has helped them to be successful in college. Several participants stressed the importance of having a social network to support them with the enrollment process and throughout college. A support system was perceived as one of the essential contributors to college success. Participants explained that having someone to turn to for social, emotional, and financial support minimalized stress and contributed to a positive college experience.

Subtheme: 4A: Personal Support: "Building a support system, for me, was the biggest way that alleviated all of those obstacles." The college admissions, enrollment, and

financial aid process can be intimidating and frustrating. Having assistance from someone who is knowledgeable of the process can minimize the frustration that foster care alumni may encounter when enrolling in college. Participants were asked, "Did someone help you with the enrollment process?" Ten participants responded, yes. Those who responded yes stated that they received assistance from persons such as a caseworker, school counselors, disability support services staff on the college campus, college and career center staff, high school coach, biological relatives, and pre-college program staff. Although some participants experienced assistance with the enrollment process, some reported frustration and lack of support with the process.

Robert revealed that he received assistance with the entire enrollment and financial aid process, which he described as tedious and frustrating, from his girlfriend. He stated, "I actually wasn't going to continue on to go to school that fall semester, and she helped me with my financial aid, with the enrolling process, and so she helped me actually with the whole processing situation." Due to college staff's lack of familiarity with policies and resources available to foster care alumni, the enrollment and financial aid process may be complicated for these youth. When describing her experience with the admissions and enrollment process, Tia said, "I didn't have anybody to guide me. I didn't know about schools, so I only applied to one."

Phillip sought assistance with the enrollment process from the staff at the postsecondary institution, where he decided to enroll. He provided an in-depth description of his frustrating experience:

> So, it was kind of exhausting and I ended up frustrated because they kept turning me back to the counselors. Then they were taking back to the Financial Aid and Financial Aid sent me back to Registrar, and then especially because of the tuition appeal, the waiver, they kept doing that. But I ended up asking the counselor that, "Look here, somebody doesn't

help me; I'm just leaving and not come back." And so, one of the counselors sat down with me and really went over everything that I needed to do and then asked me to come back to look at that information and then I was able to submit it to the Registrar's office.

Phillip also shared his frustrating experience with transferring from a community college to a university. Due to the college staff's lack of familiarity with the state foster care tuition and fee waiver, he experienced financial challenges.

Nine participants stated that having a support system has contributed to college retention. When participants were asked whom they turn to when faced with an obstacle, the following responses were provided: friends, biological relatives, caseworkers, foster parents, mentors, professors, roommates, spouses, foster care alumni program staff and peers, and fraternity brothers. Some participants described feelings of frustration, discouragement, and fear due to a lack of social support. Several participants indicated that due to the lack of family support, opportunities to connect with peers, particularly those from a similar background, as well as professors and staff, created a sense of belonging and community.

Connection with peers with similar experiences was a source of tremendous support. Participants reported that having the support of foster care alumni peers created a sense of belonging, mattering, family, and community. Courtney exclaimed that having a "damn good support system" has been extremely helpful for her. She stated, "I wouldn't be anywhere without my friends because we're going through the same thing. So, we rely on each other so much. They're basically my family away from family at this point." Bella shared her experience with arriving on campus for the first time and feeling alone; however, securing a safe housing environment and having the support of peers helped her develop a sense of belonging. She explained,

So, when I first moved into college, I was living with one of my teachers. I had got

kicked out of a house that I lived in. I lived with my friend, and she kicked me out. And

so, I was living in my car and then I eventually moved in with one of my old English

teachers. And then she drove me to school and so basically, I was alone at school, and I

lived on a floor. I'm in a scholarship program, and so I live on the floor with them. And

so, it was really nice to have some community, and me and my roommate, we got along

really well.

Jonathan reported that social involvement in a fraternity and the support of peers

contributed to his college success. Due to this support, he made it through college and graduated

with a bachelor's degree in business. Lindsey revealed that she receives support from a previous

caregiver. She stated,

After all these years, she's still there. And I still visit her for every holiday. And she's

really the reason that I'm able to continue. She calls me all the time, sends me her

support. Sends me money sometimes. Sends me care packages. Just knowing that

someone out there who cares about me and supports me wholeheartedly is what's helping

me thrive.

Skylar explained that she turns to her adopted parents for support when needed. Justin

stated that he turns to his roommates and biological relatives for support. Robert indicated that

after meeting his wife in college, she became his source of support. He stated,

I met my wife that I currently have. I met her my spring semester of my freshman year.

And she was my rock at an early time period in our relationship. She would push me and

anything that I needed or whatever I was going through, she was always there for me.

A few participants stated that upon initial arrival on the college campus, they experienced feelings of loneliness due to lack of family and peer support. However, as they began to acclimate to the college environment, these feelings began to dissipate through social engagement, exposure and forming new relationships. Some participants explained that due to lack of support and guidance from family, they were forced to do things on their own, which was discouraging and sometimes created feelings of loneliness. When arriving on campus for his first semester, Austin shared that he was looking around and observing first-year students being accompanied and supported by parents. He stated:

> It was kind of discouraging because I was looking around as I was filling out paperwork. I was looking at other freshmen's mothers and their parents there to help them. And their friends, their friends going into college, they're freshmen, and I'm like wow. They have mom and dad in there, standing in line to help to be there for their kids, and to make sure their kids get financial aid. If their books are all there. I kind of felt discouraged. I felt kind of sad. And I was like, wow, you know. Kind of like wish mom and dad was there for me. The fear of really not having a support system. Like it was scary for me. It was like you ain't got no support system, you ain't got no mom and dad. You really here by yourself. I mean you grow up on your own, you got to figure things out on your own.

> After a while, Austin began meeting new people and soon discovered that a few of his friends from "the hood" were enrolled at the same university. He shared, "I had a ball with those people. So, it made it a little more comfortable. You know, because of the people, you know because of the bond I had with the people that came to the university." Lauren expressed that "not having the support of a village" made college extremely difficult. She indicated,

Sometimes just being honest, on holidays, I have a family with foster care. I mean well with my adoptive parents, but given the site and situations, I did not want to be in. I didn't have a family to go home to, and that affected my college experience only because I didn't have somebody to support me throughout the whole experience of being in college like that to say, "Hey, congratulations," or "Hey, you need some money here and there?"

Kelly described a lack of support and how the creation of a support system contributed to helping her complete college. She shared,

I knew that I didn't have a traditional support system. I can't ask my bio parents; they barely finished high school. Also, with where they are in their life path, it was a good for you type of thing, but it doesn't benefit me—and so being able to immerse myself with other people who have similar backgrounds, also being able to get into the things I like. Such as putting myself into a different environment even though I didn't have that physical support system with familiarity and people that I knew. I was able to create the support system that I needed. I think that was beneficial for helping me graduate and complete my degree.

Robert shared his initial experience with college by describing thoughts about being the first in his family to graduate from high school and enroll in college without the support of his family.

I was on my own; you know what I mean, I didn't have my mom or my dad or anybody that they like, "Oh yeah, this is what you're supposed to do." "This is how it's done." I learned on my own and I made my own decisions regarding my college path that I chose.

When Ericka was asked what has been most difficult for her in college. She shared,

I guess not really having anyone. I would like to go out and... I don't know, I wish I had

people that I could be like, "Hey, let's go study," or like, "Hey mom, let's go get some

coffee and help me with my homework," or something like that. But the people that I do

have, they're always busy. They're always on their own stuff or have whatever excuse as

to why they can't.

Bella shared that she was adopted as a teenager. Due to the adversarial relationship with

her adopted parents, she "unadopted" herself at age 18. She stated, "it was a bad situation and

home life, so I left." Therefore, she didn't have the support of the family.

Subtheme 4B: Institutional Culture: Professors, Staff, Resources, and Services. The

theme of institutional culture emerged when participants were asked to describe what the college

has done to help them stay in school. Access to support for obtaining resources was crucial to

participants. According to participants, campus culture (supportive professors and staff) and

campus resources and services have played a pivotal role in their college success. In discussing

the importance of campus culture, Austin painted a vivid picture of the critical role that faculty

and staff, who were genuinely interested in the development and success of their foster care

alumni student population, played in his college success. With a tone of appreciation and

gratitude Austin stated,

Austin stated,

The professors that were so professional helped me with time management, helped me

with how to have social and personal relationships. How to manage my student loans and

how to manage the money that I earn. Definitely, it was the college professors that really

helped me to make my journey, as a university, as a whole. Professors interact more with

students than anybody on the campus. It's those professors that they definitely make a

difference.

On the contrary, Phillip shared that when he initially enrolled in college, the expectations that professors had were very intimidating, stating,

> I guess maybe perhaps it was the notion that it just felt like, look, we're not here to babysit you. You get your work done, you turn it in, and if you fail, that's on you. So, it was just the messaging around it.

He further explained that he struggled tremendously due to a lack of support from staff and professors. After a few years, Phillip transferred to a different college. He described the campus culture as welcoming and professors and staff as genuinely invested in student success, stating that,

> I think the culture of the university had a lot to do, just the culture of the university makes you really feel like you're just not a student, but we're a family here. I think that sense of taking on a new identity really helped keep me there.

College culture played a significant role in the postsecondary experiences of other participants, such as Lauren. She explained that it was the culture of the college that helped her to feel connected and retained in school.

Participants identified campus-based programs, resources, and services that contributed to their college success. Eight participants stated that they received support through campus resources and services such as advising, career services, counseling, computer and tutoring labs, leadership programs, student clubs, and organizations. Furthermore, eight participants stated that their universities provided support through a campus-based foster care alumni program. Participants stressed the benefits and importance of their respective foster care alumni programs. These programs provide a case management approach to serving college students who have experienced foster care. Participants asserted that their foster care alumni programs have been

instrumental in supporting foster care alumni from entry into college until degree completion. Services provided by some programs include book vouchers, care packages, academic advising, food pantry, clothing closet, and a study lounge, along with assistance with locating employment, housing, and a primary care physician.

Ericka stated that the director of the foster care alumni program at her university has a background in social work and experience working with foster care. She credits the director for being extremely resourceful in locating services and resources for foster care alumni students. Ericka disclosed that when she first started college, she was staying all over the place and just working. She described the support that she has received from the foster care alumni program by stating,

> Right now, I'm somewhere a little bit more stable where I can actually make sure that I've got it taken care of and I'm not here and there, I'm just here. They make it easier because I don't have to go out and work as much as I did in my first semesters, and stuff like that, which is nice. I mean, don't get it twisted. I know that I need to work, but if I can knock out as much school as I can while not having to stress about stuff, that's what I would like to do. They definitely help a lot with the Supervised Independent Living (SIL) program. If I didn't have somewhere where they were helping me pay for my rent, I definitely wouldn't take as many classes as I do. I actually stay in the dorms. I think it's great. It's literally, perfectly right on class. I don't have to drive anywhere. I work and go to school on campus. I don't have to use any gas. I walk out of my dorm, and I walk across the university.

Ashley revealed that being a foster care alumnus negatively affected her college experience; however, the support network that she found through participation in the foster care

alumni program changed the trajectory of her life, "because they created an area of community."

She further stated an organization such as the foster care alumni program,

> breaks the stigma of former foster youth because, as a freshman, it's very discouraging
> when you come, and you have no support networks, no emotional support network. The
> program helps with that financially, emotionally, and provide peers who are just like you
> helped her to stay in college and feel connected in college.

Ashley reported that the foster care alumni program helped her to stay in college and feel connected. Phillip described how he, in collaboration with a social work professor at the university he attended and graduated from, designed, and implemented an on-campus foster student-alumni program. Phillip stated that being able to help his foster care alumni peers gave him a sense of belonging and purpose, which proved to be instrumental to his college success. He further stated that some campus professors and staff became "campus champions" for foster care alumni students on campus. The role of these individuals was to help alleviate issues that foster care alumni students encountered on campus. Through establishing relationships with various campus directors such as financial aid and counseling, Phillip served as an on-campus advocate for foster care alumni students until he graduated. Phillip explained the importance of having an emotional support network through the foster care alumni program. He explained,

> Building a support system, for me, was the biggest way that alleviated all of those
> obstacles. I think that to help me complete my college degree more than I think, the
> support system has to be in place. That was very crucial because, with that support
> network, I can navigate the university a lot better, especially when issues arise. I think
> that was probably the most crucial component to me to graduate. I think also going back
> to having a sense of belonging in the community and the messaging of that you can

graduate despite the challenges that you face. I felt like having this organization gave me

a sense of belonging, and it also gave me something I feel like I could be passionate

about and work towards to improve. And so, I think that those things kept me in college.

This program really helped me to stay in college and feel connected in college

When describing what the university has done to help her stay in college, Kelly explained

the support that the foster care alumni program located on her college campus provided to foster

care students:

One of the things that I liked about that program is the way that it was structured. It was

probably a little bit bad for me, but they gave you what you needed based on what you

needed. They allowed us to, one, use our independent thinking and judgment, and reach

out, communicate what our needs were. But if they felt like we were struggling at

something, then they would offer that support for whatever that need was. So, giving you

the ability to have some control over your life.

Jonathan shared that the foster care alumni program was instrumental in supporting him

through college. He said,

The foster care alumni program helped out because just being around foster care peers

who had the same goals and could relate to some of the struggles that I was going

through. Then also, having some liaisons to the school to help out with different

resources was helpful as well for getting through.

Kelly noted that the foster care alumni program staff was incredibly supportive while

allowing students to maintain a sense of autonomy and control over their lives. In describing the

assistance and support that she received from the program staff, Kelly stated,

One of the things that I liked about that program is the way that it was structured. If they felt like we were struggling at something, then they would offer that support for whatever that need was. "Hey, I'm not your caseworker, but I am here to support you. So how would you like for me to support you?"

Casey revealed that the foster care alumni program assisted her with receiving food stamps and with her unemployment application. She asserted, "They walked me through everything I needed to do. Although helping students to locate employment was not a service provided by the program, staff assisted Casey in her search for a job.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore the postsecondary experiences of foster care alumni. Chapter Four outlines four themes that emerged from the descriptions provided by 16 foster care alumni regarding their postsecondary experiences. The themes are: College is a stepping stone to a better life, college is an opportunity for self-discovery and growth, there are myriad obstacles to college success, and support is critical to college success. All four themes were supported by rich subjective accounts of participants' experiences.

Chapter 5

Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the postsecondary experiences of foster care alumni. A descriptive phenomenology approach was utilized to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences. The study sample consisted of sixteen foster care alumni who described their postsecondary experiences. The following overarching research question and four sub-questions guided this study: What are the postsecondary experiences of foster care alumni, what influenced the decision to enroll in college among foster care alumni, what obstacles have hindered college success among foster care alumni, what has helped foster care alumni to be successful in college, and what do foster care alumni deem necessary to complete a postsecondary degree?

Findings from this study revealed valuable information regarding the lived postsecondary experiences of foster care alumni. The following four themes emerged from the data: 1) College is a stepping stone to a better life, 2) College is an opportunity for self-discovery and growth, 3) There are myriad obstacles to college success, and 4) Support is critical to college success. The four themes frame the discussion of the findings within the context of the research questions. The results of this study illuminated the postsecondary experiences of foster care alumni and contributed to current research in this area. Participants shared rich, descriptive accounts of their postsecondary experience, which included factors that influenced their decision to enroll in college, obstacles that hindered their college success, what resources, services, and support helped them to stay in college, and what they deemed necessary to complete a postsecondary degree.

Due to the disruption of the biological family and subsequent placement in foster care, participants revealed that they had experienced a life of uncertainly and instability. Eleven of the 16 participants in this study reported being first-generation college students. Two participants stated that they were first-generation high school graduates as well. Participants disclosed that they did not want to follow in their biological parents' footsteps—they wanted "something better." Participants voiced a desire to graduate from college, secure employment, and become financially stable. Carnevale et al. (2011) posited that a college degree supports economic stability and competitiveness in the workplace. Furthermore, an individual with more education can expect increased earnings over a lifetime. Participants in this study viewed college as a means of breaking the cycle of poverty and positively changing the trajectory of their lives.

The theme of college is a stepping stone to a better life suggests that participants in this study believe that higher education leads to a better life, which includes the attainment of a credential that leads to better job opportunities, improved socioeconomic status, and increased financial and family stability. Participants stated that attaining a college degree would result in an income that would allow them to afford to do things that they were not able to do while in foster care. Several participants expressed the belief that their pursuit and attainment of a college degree would positively impact the lives and futures of their children. Findings in this study are consistent with research conducted by Tobolowsky et al. (2019), which found that youth with foster care experience hold strong beliefs in the value of education and are confident that a college education is the "best pathway to economic independence and a more stable future." Five participants in the current study have graduated from college with a bachelor's degree. Two participants have received their master's degrees. All five graduates are gainfully employed. Congruent with Leone & Weinberg (2010), young adults with foster care experience and higher

levels of education are much more likely to have stable, meaningful employment and less likely to experience incarceration and homeless.

The theme of college provides an opportunity for self-discovery and growth emerged as participants described their postsecondary experiences and what they had gained from college. Published literature regarding the postsecondary experiences of foster care alumni focuses heavily on barriers, challenges, and obstacles. Studies regarding the individual personal development that is acquired as a result of college attendance that may contribute to a healthy self-image among foster care alumni were not located in the literature.

The theme of there are myriad obstacles to college success emerged as participants described the challenges that interfered with their college success. The most frequently cited obstacles were lack of academic preparation for college-level coursework, insufficient financial aid, and mental health problems.

Lack of academic preparation. Ten participants stated that they did not feel academically prepared to engage in college-level work. Congruent with Dworsky and Perez (2010), Unrau et al. (2012), and Emerson (2006), some participants in the current study reported a lack of academic preparation for college-level work and 44% required enrollment in developmental education courses despite having a high school diploma. Some participants reported lacking basic writing and math skills, as well as study and test-taking skills, which served as obstacles to college success. Seven participants reported that they were required to enroll in developmental education. One participant reported graduating from high school in the top quarter of his class; however, he was required to take developmental education courses. He also reported that he earned a 1.25 GPA at the end of his first fall term. Another participant described coming from a failed educational system, where he did not learn anything but was able

to graduate from high school. Consistent with Smithgall et al. (2004), some participants revealed that they had attended high-poverty, under-funded, low-performing high schools where they were inadequately prepared for college-level work. Several participants reported that college academics were much more strenuous than high school, which made acclimating to college difficult. Congruent with Courtney et al. (2004), Geiger et al. (2018), McMillen et al. (2002), and Merdinger et al. (2005), persons with foster care experience lack the academic readiness to tackle college-level courses and experience less support and guidance than their non-foster care peers, which results in poorer outcomes.

Insufficient financial aid. Aligned with Geiger et al. (2018), due to the rising cost of college, insufficient financial aid served as an obstacle to college success among participants in this study. All 16 participants reported receiving the Pell grant and the state tuition and fee waiver. In addition to the Pell and the state tuition and fee waiver, three participants received scholarships, two received a housing voucher, one student received the Texas grant, and one received a loan. Thirteen participants stated that they did not receive sufficient financial aid to pay for college-related and living expenses, which required them to work excessive hours while juggling a full-time (12-15 credit hours) course load. Ten participants reported the need to work full time, and three worked part-time. Only one participant reported receiving sufficient financial aid to cover all college-related and basic living expenses; therefore, he did not have to work. Aligned with research by Davis (2006), findings from this study revealed that the financial support received is often not adequate to meet the needs of college students from foster care (see also Unrau, Dawson, Hamilton, & Bennett, 2017).

Mental health problems. Nine of the participants were diagnosed with mental health problems, which reportedly interfered with their college success. This finding is consistent with

multiple previous studies that found that mental health problems may interfere with the college success of some students who have been diagnosed with a mental illness. Research conducted by Pecora et al. (2006) found that 50% of former foster youth in their analysis had been diagnosed with a mental illness. Comparably, the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study (2005) revealed that 54.4% of alumni had significant mental health problems that included depression, social problems, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and anxiety (Pecora et al., 2005). Moreover, Day et al. (2012) found that several participants in their study had been diagnosed with emotional disturbances and had been prescribed anti-psychotic or other psychotropic medications due to trauma. Participants in their study shared the adverse impact of mental health problems on school performance.

Perry (2006) suggested that due to the initial placement and subsequent disruptions, youth with foster care experience are likely to possess lower levels of social support and a ruptured social network. The theme of support as critical to college success emerged as participants described factors that were important to enrollment and college success. According to Davis (2006), students whose parents have graduated from college could seek guidance and support from their parents. Thus, they are at an advantage when it comes to knowledge regarding college admissions, enrollment, financial aid, college expectations, and degree completion. Cochrane and Szabo-Kubitz (2009), Day et al. (2012), Geiger (2018), Merdinger et al. (2005), and Rios et al. (2014) suggested that youth with foster care experience feel unprepared for college due to a lack of knowledge about college options and the college experience. Consistent with their findings, 34% of participants in the current study revealed that they felt unprepared for college due to a lack of knowledge about higher education options and the college experience.

Okpych and Courtney (2017) revealed that access to those who are willing to share college-relevant knowledge and resources is critical. Furthermore, the likelihood of enrolling in college increases when foster youth have supportive relationships with those who can provide assistance and support with the college enrollment process. Congruent with their study, 63% of participants cited that someone assisted them with college information and the admissions and enrollment process, which lead to successful college enrollment. All 16 participants expressed the importance of having a reliable support system in order to navigate through college to degree completion. Consistent with Robbins et al. (2004), social support was a significant predictor of college retention among participants in the current study.

Some participants reported that upon arrival at college, they lacked the emotional and social support of family, which resulted in feelings of loneliness. However, after being on campus for a while, they were able to make connections that became sources of support. Fifty-six percent of the participants stated that having a support system contributed to college success (retention). Findings from the current study are consistent with Merdinger et al. (2005), which revealed that the majority of participants in their study reported that the strength of their social support played a significant role in their educational success. Participants in the current study stated that social and emotional support came from friends, biological relatives, caseworkers, mentors, peers with similar backgrounds, adopted parents, college professors, and staff, fraternity brothers, and foster care alumni program staff. Notably, connections with peers with a similar background served as a source of tremendous support. Seventy-five percent of participants reported that they were involved in a campus foster care alumni program, student organization, or club.

Interestingly, all five participants who had completed degrees participated in a campus-based foster care alumni program while enrolled in college. Of the ten participants who were enrolled in college, three reported that they were participating in the foster care alumni program. Participants stated that through participation in a campus-based foster program or student organization, they were able to develop social connections, which resulted in feelings of a sense of belonging, mattering, community, and family.

Explication of Theory

Cultural capital theory. For participants in this study, growing up in foster care resulted in a lack of cultural capital, which placed them at a disadvantage, educationally, socially, and economically. According to Bourdieu (2016), the family plays a significant role in acquiring cultural capital. Due to the disruption of the family, home removals, and multiple home placements, foster care alumni are often at a deficiency when it comes to the possession of cultural capital. Many parents provide financial support (objectified) for their children to pay for college and attain a credential (institutionalized); however, typically, those with foster care experience are responsible for acquiring this type of capital without the assistance and support of a family.

For youth in foster care, the value of higher education may not be conveyed as essential by their biological, foster care parent(s) or guardian. Consequently, many of these youth may fail to graduate from high school and enroll in college. Although a college degree can increase cultural capital, youth with foster care experience may not understand the value of education and its contribution to cultural capital, which leads to an increase in other forms of capital. Five participants in this study have increased their objectified and institutionalized cultural capital by

attaining a college degree. Ten participants were currently enrolled in college during this study and are well on their way of increasing their cultural capital.

Social capital theory. Social capital theory offers a way to understand the obstacles that foster care alumni encounter as they attempt to access higher education and interact in the college environment. Putnam (2000) referred to social capital as connections among individuals—social networks. The power of social capital lays in connections, opportunities, and information. Consistent with social capital theory, participants in this study described how connections with various campus networks and individuals played a significant role in college enrollment and college success. Although some participants lacked the support of family to assist them with the admissions and enrollment process, they received support from high school coaches, counselors, college and career staff, friends, and caseworkers. Upon enrollment in college, these participants were able to connect with friends, fraternity brothers, roommates, foster care alumni program staff, and professors, which contributed to their college success.

Participants stressed the benefits of having a supportive campus culture and access to various campus support networks. Consistent with Putnam (2000), social capital in the form of campus support programs and student organizations created a means by which participants could access and secure resources and services that are necessary for college success. Through campus support networks, participants are and were able to connect to campus resources and services that provided various means of emotional, psychological, social, and financial support, such as book vouchers, food, clothing, mentoring, and assistance with employment and housing. Moreover, through participation in foster care alumni programs, fraternities, leadership programs, and mentoring, participants were able to develop intellectually, personally, and

socially. Some participants stated that campus connections provided access to community resources and services.

Through campus social connections, participants revealed that they were able to develop lasting relationships with peers from similar backgrounds, staff, and professors, which provided a sense of belonging, community, and family. One participant emphasized the positive experience of having professors who were great at connecting with students through in-class discussions, which, to him, validated that he mattered. Congruent with Metzger (2008), some participants reported that foster care alumni program staff, professors, and peers provided social support by serving as mentors, campus champions (advocates) for foster care alumni students, which minimized the stress associated with being a college student.

Study Limitations

As in any study, this study was not void of limitations. First, the sample was limited to two demographic areas—Texas and California. Fifteen participants were from Texas, and one participant was from California. A study conducted in a different geographical area would possibly yield different findings. Secondly, face-to-face interviews were initially proposed as a means of data collection. However, due to the constraints associated with the Coronavirus pandemic, interviews were conducted via telephone and Skype. Thus, I was unable to observe the facial expressions or body language of the participants. Moreover, building rapport with participants may have been negatively impacted by the use of technology. Finally, but equally important, although strategies were employed to reduce the researcher's bias, in qualitative research, the researcher's biases may influence the results of the study.

Implications

      Social work practice. Social workers serve as advocates and service providers to address the ills of society. The role of social work spans the gamut of arenas that serve marginalized, vulnerable populations. Social workers not only play vital roles in community organizations and medical settings, but in education as well. They are employed by independent school districts at the primary and secondary levels. Social workers who serve youth in foster care are responsible for ensuring that they are educated with as few school disruptions as possible. The need for social workers does not cease when students graduate from high school and age out of the system. To successfully transition to young adulthood, youth with foster care experience need continued support in arranging housing, locating employment, maintaining benefits, and, for those who are interested, enrolling in college. Due to a plethora of academic and social issues experienced by college students, several institutions of higher education employ social workers to work in various capacities to address the various needs of students. Social workers in higher education may address the psychosocial functioning of individual students, academic-related challenges, behavioral issues, and mental health concerns, and serve as directors of counseling and coordinators or directors for support programs that serve underrepresented student populations (Crear, 2016).

      A fractured educational foundation may result in foster care youth dropping out of high school and failure to enroll in college. This study underscores the need for collaboration between high school social workers, local college preparatory programs, and higher education personnel. Collaboration among these entities could result in foster care youth receiving the necessary support to graduate from high school and gain access to college information, resources, and services. At the age of 16, youth in foster care are provided with preparation for adult living

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training. Social workers who are involved in this training or work with youth who are preparing to age out of care could partner with local higher education institutions to provide college information for these youth. Some higher education institutions are willing to assign staff to provide college informational workshops and serve as on-campus contacts for high school youth who are interested in enrolling in college. These types of collaborative efforts increase the likelihood that foster care youth will receive accurate information that will, hopefully, result in college enrollment.

Furthermore, college preparatory programs such as Upward Bound are available to youth with foster care experience. Social workers who serve foster care youth and those working in high schools can contact local Upward Bound (UB) programs for information regarding program participation for these youth. Information regarding the program could be acquired and disseminated to youth from 9-12 grade. UB was designed "to generate in program participants the skills and motivation necessary to complete a program of secondary education and to enter and succeed in a program of postsecondary education" (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). The program provides an array of services and resources to assist students in graduating from high school and enrolling in college. Multiple higher education institutions and non-profit organizations located throughout the United States receive funding from the U. S. Department of Education to host UB programs. Research by the U.S. Department of Education revealed that 86% of UB students in the 2013–14 high school graduation cohort enrolled immediately in college following high school graduation (Council for Opportunity in Education, 2020).

Postsecondary institutions. According to Dennis and Osterholt (2011), "postsecondary educators today are in a position to make a real shift that meets the needs of current students. By fully utilizing resources with a collaborative system, the possibility of academic success that ***all***

students strive for can be reached." The phrase, "Student success in higher education is everybody's business" (Wilson, Fuller, & Mykhaylichenko, 2011, p. 3) speaks volumes regarding where the responsibility for student success lies on college campuses. Student success is not the responsibility of the student alone. The responsibility lies with each member of the higher education environment, which includes, but is not limited to frontline admissions, records, and enrollment staff; financial aid, advising and counseling, career services, health services, student organizations and clubs, academic affairs—faculty, computer and tutoring labs. Student success initiatives, resources, programs, and services are most effective when all members of the campus community are laser-focused on student success.

Some have stated that higher education institutions are not social services agencies—they are institutions of learning. However, higher education institutions serve students whose lives are adversely impacted by multiple and complex problems and social ills. When a student walks onto a college campus, they do not leave their emotional, mental or physical health, socioeconomic status, class, race, gender, ethnicity, academic deficiencies, disabilities, experiences of abuse, trauma, and maltreatment on the parking lot and pick them up when they leave the campus. In order to successfully serve all students, higher education institutions must have adequate resources and services in place to meet the complex needs of a diverse student population. It is difficult, if not impossible, for a student to be academically successful if they lack a supportive network and sufficient financial aid, are struggling with mental health or physical problems, lack a safe, clean environment to live, lack reliable transportation, or is experiencing food insecurity.

Due to a lack of knowledge regarding the college admissions, registration, and financial aid processes, some participants in this study reported experiencing frustration when attempting

to enroll in college. One participant mentioned that he experienced financial problems in paying for his classes because college staff at the university were not familiar with the state tuition and fee waiver that is available to foster care alumni for payment of tuition and fees. Once enrolled in college, this participant was instrumental, with the assistance of a social work professor, in implementing a support program for foster care alumni students and becoming an advocate for those students. College administrators are encouraged to raise awareness among campus staff and faculty regarding the unique characteristics, experiences, and needs that students bring to the college environment. Awareness could be accomplished through the engagement of faculty and staff in professional development opportunities and dissemination of information regarding resources available to specific student populations. Participants in this study expressed the need for on-campus resources to meet their emotional and mental health needs. If higher education institutions cannot provide these services, a referral system to connect students with community resources should be in place to ensure timely support.

Emerson (2006) stressed the importance of campus programs to provide student academic and social supports (see also Family Programs, 2010 and Unrau et al., 2017). In serving students, higher education personnel, staff, and faculty are encouraged to embrace a holistic approach to serving and educating students. Foster care alumni support programs and TRIO programs typically embrace a holistic case management approach to serving students. TRIO programs are located on college campuses throughout the United States. Staff members serve as advocates for program participants, provide resources and services to increase college success, foster useful campus connections, and work to foster an institutional climate that is supportive of underserved students.

Implications for Future Research

Several participants in this study reported that college is an opportunity for growth and development. A review of the literature revealed that there is a significant gap in research about the personal development that foster care alumni gain from attending college. More research is needed in this area.

Student success is the goal of higher education institutions, and they are responsible for educating and issuing credentials; however, interestingly, research regarding the postsecondary experiences of foster care alumni is scarce in higher education journals. A review of the literature revealed that research regarding the postsecondary experiences of foster care alumni is published mostly in social work and child welfare-related journals. Higher education executives and administrators subscribe to higher education journals. Thus, in order to raise awareness and increase knowledge regarding the postsecondary experiences of foster care alumni, researchers and practitioners should submit their articles to higher education journals as well as social work and child welfare-related journals.

Findings in this study revealed that the foster care alumni programs utilized by participants in this study are and have been extremely instrumental in alleviating some of the obstacles that foster care alumni encounter in college. However, data regarding the outcomes of these programs are lacking in the literature. Research to evaluate the effectiveness of foster care alumni programs is needed. Although foster care alumni programs have been implemented at some higher education institutions throughout the states, there is a need to implement more programs. Research that demonstrates positive program outcomes may provide data that will encourage the implementation of more campus-based support programs to serve foster care alumni students on more college campuses.

In examining the postsecondary experiences of foster care alumni, it is recommended that researchers consider the intersections of foster care, first-generation, and low-income college students, and how these factors combined may negatively affect foster care alumnae's college experience. Sixty-nine percent of the foster care alumni participants in this study reported being first-generation college students, which means that neither parent nor legal guardian has a college degree (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Congruent with literature by Engle (2007), most students with foster care experience are first-generation college students; however, they are often an overlooked subgroup within the first-generation student population. Furthermore, due to their independent status as foster care youth, 100% of participants in this study were low-income individuals. Finally, in conducting a review of the literature for this study, it was revealed that theoretical frameworks were used sparingly. Human behavior and each individual's lived experience with a particular phenomenon are incredibly complex. The use of theory in qualitative research serves to illuminate the phenomenon and findings of the study.

Conclusions

A college degree opens doors to opportunities that otherwise would not be afforded to those without a degree. Research in this study demonstrated that youth with foster care experience are less likely to graduate from high school and attain a college degree than their non-foster care peers. The findings of this study suggest that there is a need for continued support and expanded policies that provide financial support for persons with foster care experience. There is a great need for increased financial aid to ensure sufficient funds to cover college-related and basic living expenses for those alumni who are enrolled in college. Sufficient financial aid will minimize the need for these students to work full time while tackling 12-15

semester hours of college coursework. Moreover, the need for social support and support networks, as well as access to mental health services, are paramount.

Despite the seemingly insurmountable obstacles that participants in this study experienced, it is apparent that they possess a level of determination, hope, motivation, persistence, and resilience that is necessary to accomplish their goal of degree attainment and a better life. It was apparent that each participant recognized that swimming upstream to achieve their dream is and will not be easy; however, by maintaining the strength and fortitude that have brought them through difficult times, they can make the journey.

Appendix A:

Participant Questionnaire

SECTION I. DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Pseudonym: _____ Numeric Identifier _____

Age: (Circle response)

a. 18 – 21

b. 22 – 25

c. 26 – 29

d. 30 or above

Gender: _____ Ethnicity: _____

SECTION II. FOSTER CARE HISTORY

1) What age did you enter foster care? _____

2) How did you exit foster care? (Circle response).

     a. Aged out

     b. Adopted

     c. Reunified with birth or step-parent

     d. Placed in non-relative guardianship

     e. Placed with relatives

     f. Not exited. In extended foster care

     f. Other _____

3) Did your biological, adopted, or foster care parent(s) whom which you last lived with have a college degree? (Circle response). Yes or No.

4) How many years were you in foster care? _____

5) Number of foster care home placements _____

6) Number of school placements while in foster care _____

7) Number of school placements while in foster care in high school _____

8) Have you ever received special education accommodations? (Circle response). Yes or No.

9) Did you participate in Preparation for Adult Living Training? (Circle response). Yes or No.

10) Have you ever been diagnosed with a mental illness, i.e., depression, PTSD, anxiety? (Circle response). Yes or No. If yes, please list diagnosis _____.

SECTION III: EDUCATION

1) Have you ever repeated a grade? (Circle response). Yes or No. If so, what grade _____

2) Are you a high school graduate? (Circle response). Yes or No. If yes, what year did you

graduate _____

If no, did you complete a high school equivalency diploma, i.e., GED? (Circle response).

Yes or No. If yes, what year did you complete the diploma? _____

3) What was your high school grade point average? _____

4) What semester and year did you first enroll in college? _____ _____

5) When you decided to enroll in college, did you feel that you were prepared academically

for college? (Circle response). Yes or No.

6) How many credit hours have you completed in college? _____

7) What is your college major? _____

8) What is your current college grade point average? _____

9) Have you dropped out of college and returned? (Circle response). Yes or No. If yes, what

semester and year did you drop? _____ _____

10) What semester and year did you return to college? _____ _____

11) When you first enrolled in college, were you required to take a developmental (remedial)

education class. (Circle response). Yes or No.

12) If you are currently enrolled in college, what is your current living arrangements: (Circle

response). On-campus or Off-campus

SECTION IV: FINANCIAL AID AND EMPLOYMENT:

1) Are you receiving or did you receive financial aid while enrolled in college, Yes or No. If

yes, please circle all that apply.

PELL   Tuition and Fee Waiver   Scholarship   Other

2) Are you currently employed? (Circle response). Yes or No. If employed, are you full-time

or part-time? (Circle response)

SECTION V: STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS:

1) Do you or did you participate in any on-campus student organizations, programs, or clubs? If

so, please list.

_____
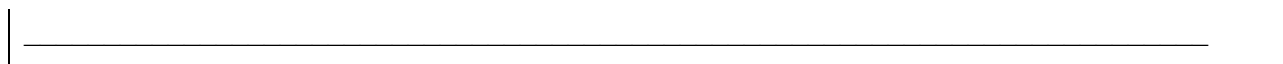
Appendix B:

Interview Guide

1) Can you talk with me about why you decided to enroll in college?

2) Did your foster family play a role in your decision to go to college? If so, describe how.

3) Did someone help you with the college enrollment process? If so, describe how this person or these persons helped you.

4) I noticed on your participant questionnaire that you stated that you were not (or were) prepared for college. In what ways do you think that you were prepared or were not prepared for college?

5) In as much detail as possible, please describe your college experience?

6) Describe how being a foster care alumnus has affected your college experience/describe how being a foster care alumnus affected your college experience?

7) Describe obstacles that have made college difficult for you/describe obstacles that made college difficult for you.

8) What have you done to overcome these obstacles/what did you do to overcome these obstacles?

9) Can you share with me what has been the one <u>most</u> difficult obstacle that you have faced since you enrolled in college/can you share with me what was the one most difficult obstacle that you faced while you were in college?

10) I noticed that on your participant questionnaire, you stated that you have a diagnosed mental illness. Describe in what ways, if any, this illness has affected your college experience.

11) What has been easy for you in college/what was easy for you in college?

12) Describe what has helped you to stay in college/describe what helped you stay in college?

13) Who do you turn to for support when you face obstacles/who did you turn to when you faced obstacles in college?

14) Describe what the university has done/did to help you stay in college.

15) What do you think is necessary to help you complete your college degree/what was necessary to help you complete your college degree?

Probing Questions. To clarify all responses to interview questions and to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' postsecondary educational experiences, probing questions will follow interviewees' responses to guiding questions. These probes may include questions or statements such as, *"Can you give me examples? You stated…, can you tell me more about that? Can you provide more details about it…? Please explain what you mean when you say…, In what ways? How so?"*

Appendix C:

Recruitment Flyer

Participants are needed for a research study exploring the postsecondary educational experiences of Foster Care Alumni

Introduction

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Sharron Crear, a doctoral student at the University of Texas at Arlington in the School of Social Work.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the postsecondary educational experiences of foster care alumni (persons who were formerly in foster care).

Eligibility Criteria

To be eligible, you must be 18 years of age or older, fluent in English, were formerly in foster care, are able to provide consent.

Potential Benefits of Your Participation

A potential benefit of your participation is your contribution to a deeper understanding of the postsecondary experiences of foster care alumni. Further, your contribution, through the sharing of your experience, may potentially provide critical information for higher education administrators, faculty and staff, and organizations that work to improve the postsecondary educational outcomes of foster care alumni.

Time Commitment

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be involved in one semi-structured, one-hour interview via Skype or telephone.

Additional Information

       Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, all collected data, including audiotapes, transcripts, and questionnaires, will not include any identifying information on them. The results of the study will be published, but your name or university of enrollment will not be used. Your data will only be reported in combination with the data from other participants and will not be singled out.

Compensation

       You will receive a $25.00 Wal-Mart gift card via U. S. Mail for your full participation in this study.

If you are interested in participating in this research study, please email Sharron Crear, School of Social Work, The University of Texas at Arlington at sharron.crear@mavs.uta.edu.

Appendix D:

Informed Consent

<div align="center">**Consent Form**</div>

TITLE OF RESEARCH PROJECT

An Exploration of the Postsecondary Educational Experiences of Foster Care Alumni: A Descriptive Phenomenological Study.

RESEARCH TEAM

Sharron Crear, Principal Investigator, School of Social Work
sharron.crear@mavs.uta.edu

Debra Woody, Ph.D., Committee Chair/Faculty Advisor, School of Social Work
debwoody@mavs.uta.edu

IMPORTANT INFORMATION ABOUT THIS RESEARCH PROJECT

The research team above is conducting a research study about the postsecondary educational experiences of foster care alumni (FCA). You can choose to participate in this research study if you are 18 years of age or older, were formerly in foster care, fluent in English, are able to provide consent.

You might want to participate in this study if you want to contribute your perspective to a study on the postsecondary educational experiences of foster care alumni. However, you might <u>not</u> want to participate in this study if you are uncomfortable sharing your personal educational postsecondary experience, and if you do not have time to participate in one semi-structured, one-hour interview via Skype or telephone at a mutually agreed upon time.

This study has been reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board (IRB). An IRB is an ethics committee that reviews research with the goal of protecting the rights and welfare of human research subjects. Your most important right as a human subject is informed consent. You should take your time to consider the information provided by this form and the research team, and ask questions about anything you do not fully understand before making your decision about participating.

TIME COMMITMENT

This research study will involve one semi-structured, one-hour interview.

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

Your participation involves being interviewed about your postsecondary educational experience. The interview will be recorded using a digital audio recorder. If you decide to participate in this research study, this is the list of activities that you will ask to perform as part of the research:

1. Read through the Informed Consent and talk with the principal investigator to make sure that any questions you may have are answered; then make your choice about whether to participate.
2. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to:
    a. Give verbal Informed Consent;

      b. Complete the participant questionnaire; and
      c. Complete one semi-structured, one-hour interview about your postsecondary educational experience.

The data from the participant questionnaire will only be used for research purposes and will not contain any of your identifying information.

After the interview, the audio recording from your interview will be transcribed, which means the recording will be typed exactly as recorded, word-for-word by a professional transcription service. Once your transcript is returned from the transcription service, it will be forwarded to you via email from my password protected UTA email account. You will be asked to review your transcript and provide feedback within five days. Your audio recording will be destroyed after transcription.

POSSIBLE BENEFITS
A potential benefit of your participation is your contribution to a deeper understanding of the postsecondary educational experiences of foster care alumni. Further, your contribution, through the sharing of your experience, will provide critical information for the field of social work, higher education administrators, and staff and faculty.

POSSIBLE RISKS/DISCOMFORTS
This research study is not expected to pose any additional risks beyond what you would normally experience in your regular everyday life. However, you might experience emotional distress during the interview. If such discomfort occurs, the interviewer will immediately stop the interview and refer you to the Counseling Center at your college/university of enrollment or to the National Suicide Prevention Hotline for assistance.

COMPENSATION
Upon completion of all study procedures, you will be mailed a $25.00 Wal-Mart gift card via U. S. Mail for your participation in the study. If you choose not to complete all study procedures, you will not receive a gift card.

The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) considers all payments made to research subjects to be taxable income. Your personal information, including your name, address, and social security number, may be acquired from you and provided to UTA's accounting office for the purpose of payment. If your total payments for the year exceed $600.00, UTA will report this information to the IRS as income and you will receive a Form 1099 at the end of the year. If you receive less than $600.00 total for payments in a year, you are personally responsible for reporting the payments to the IRS."

ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS
There are no alternative options offered for this study.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The research team is committed to protecting your rights and privacy as a research subject. All paper and electronic data collected from this study will be stored in a secure location on the UTA campus in the School of Social Work for at least three (3) years after the end of this research. Audio recordings will be immediately destroyed after transcription.

The results of this study may be published and/or presented without naming you as a participant. The data collected about you for this study may be used for future research studies that are not described in this consent form. If that occurs, an IRB would first evaluate the use of any information that is identifiable to you, and confidentiality protection would be maintained. While absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, the research team will make every effort to protect the confidentiality of your records as described here and to the extent permitted by law. In addition to the research team, the following entities may have access to your records, but only on a need-to-know basis: the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the FDA (federal regulating agencies), the reviewing IRB, and sponsors of the study.

CONTACT FOR QUESTIONS

Questions about this research study or reports regarding an injury or other problem may be directed to Dr. Debra Woody, School of Social Work at deb.woody@mavs.uta.edu. Any questions you may have about your rights as a research subject or complaints about the research may be directed to the Office of Research Administration; Regulatory Services at 817-272-3723 or regulatoryservices@uta.edu.

CONSENT

By giving verbal consent, you are confirming that you understand the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and your rights as a research subject. By agreeing to participate, you are not waiving any of your legal rights. You can refuse to participate or discontinue participation at any time, with no penalty or loss of benefits that you would ordinarily have. You are indicating your voluntary agreement to participate in this study by beginning this interview.

Appendix E:

Counseling/Crisis Resources

Experiencing a crisis?

You May Contact

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Helpline. Monday through Friday, 10 am–6 pm, ET. 1-800-950-NAMI (6264) or info@nami.org.

Mental Health America (MHA). 1-800-273-TALK (8255) to reach a 24-hour crisis center or text MHA to 741741 at the Crisis Text Line. https://www.mhanational.org/get-involved/contact-us.

If you are currently enrolled in college, you may contact your campus counseling center for assistance!

Appendix F:

IRB Approval Letter

4/2/2020

IRB Approval of Minimal Risk (MR) Protocol

PI: Sharron Ann Crear
Department: Social Work
IRB Protocol #: 2020-0149.1
Study Title: *An Exploration of the Post-secondary Educational Experiences of Foster Care Alumni: A Descriptive Phenomenological Study*

Effective Approval: 4/2/2020

Face-to-face or in-person interactions with human subjects approved within this protocol may only proceed once restrictions are lifted related to COVID-19:
https://resources.uta.edu/research/coronavirus/index.php

The IRB has approved the above referenced submission in accordance with applicable regulations and/or UTA's IRB Standard Operating Procedures. The approved modifications are limited to:

- Updated title to An Exploration of the Post-secondary Educational Experiences of Foster Care Alumni: A Descriptive Phenomenological Study
- Expand sample to any foster care alumni who have attended college, is currently enrolled, or graduated
- Expanding recruitment to post-secondary institutions, non-profit organizations, foster care alumni associations
- Obtain verbal consent in place of written
- Conduct interviews via Skype or telephone
- Mail participant's Walmart gift card through U. S. Mail.
- Additional flyer for mental health resources for those not currently in college
- Participant questionnaire, interview questions, recruitment flyer, and informed consent all revised to reflect changes

Principal Investigator and Faculty Advisor Responsibilities

All personnel conducting human subject research must comply with UTA's IRB Standard Operating Procedures and RA-PO4, Statement of Principles and Policies Regarding Human Subjects in Research. Important items for PIs and Faculty Advisors are as follows:

- **Notify Regulatory Services of proposed, new, or changing funding source**
- Fulfill research oversight responsibilities, IV.F and IV.G.

- Obtain approval prior to initiating changes in research or personnel, IX.B.
- Report Serious Adverse Events (SAEs) and Unanticipated Problems (UPs), IX.C.
- Fulfill Continuing Review requirements, if applicable, IX.A.
- Protect human subject data (XV.) and maintain records (XXI.C.).
- Maintain HSP (3 years), GCP (3 years), and RCR (4 years) training as applicable.

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