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Defying the Odds, Stories of Success:

A case study of Foster Care Alumni in the Community College Environment

by

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A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

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Under the Supervision of Professor Brent Cejda

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Defying the Odds, Stories of Success:

A case study of Foster Care Alumni in the Community College Environment

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University of Nebraska, 2020

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The purpose of this dissertation was to explore the lived experiences of foster care alumni and how these experiences influenced the individual's decision to enroll in a community college, persist, and complete a degree. The dissertation drew from two conceptual frameworks, Bandwidth (Verschelden, 2017) and Capitals – cultural, social, and academic (Bourdieu, 1986; St. John, Hu, & Fisher, 2010). Foster care alumni were selected as the population due to their underrepresentation in college enrollment and poor completion rates. Moving beyond a deficit model that focuses on identifying obstacles, this dissertation focused on success stories of the foster care alumni in an attempt to highlight experiences that contribute to success. Each student who participated in this study is on target to complete a college degree this year.

The dissertation tells the stories of six community college students using a case study methodology for data collection and analysis and narrative inquiry for data reporting. During the Fall of 2019, six students shared their stories. The stories were captured through semi-structured interviews that focused on the student's experience in the foster care system and their entire college lifecycle (from choice to completion). The stories were analyzed, using deductive analysis, for themes related to the primary research question and sub-questions. An additional theme emerged through inductive

analysis. The themes identified from the stories are Historical Hardships, Human Connections, Healthy Outlets, and Hopeful Futures.

The findings highlight common themes in the student stories that point to the need for and influence of human connections, the benefit of engaging in healthy outlets, and the power of having a mindset that focuses on a hopeful future. The findings also showed, though, that despite achieving a level of success that the overwhelming majority of their foster care alumni peers do not experience, the students still struggle with historical hardships that impact their current lives. However, the students have defied the odds by persisting and moving forward to degree completion.

Dedication

Mom, Dad, Jas, T, and Jax – I have felt loved and supported every day of my life because of you. You are my core.

N – Thank you for choosing me. With you, I get to be my authentic self.

You are my person.

Nicholas, Josephine, and Anthony – you have given me my greatest title, Mom. My love for you has no limit and no end. You are my heart, my soul, my purpose.

Acknowledgments

In her book, *Wolfpack*, Abby Wambach talked about how she pointed to her teammates (those on and off the field) after every goal she scored. She pointed because she knew she did not achieve the goal on her own, she received help from all of her teammates, at one time or another. This is my attempt to point at all of those who have helped me achieve this goal.

My family. I truly have no idea where I would be without you. A doctoral program is not easy. It requires a lot of time - a lot of time. Over the past eight years, there have been many moments that only received my partial attention due to my mind being lost in an article, a book, a module, a discussion board, or a paper. There were numerous nights that I needed to write instead of snuggling with my littles on the couch. There have been missed trips to the park, the pool, the beach, the mall. My laptop served as my carry-on item for all our family trips. Many sacrifices were made. I am forever grateful for the long talks, the belly laughs, the moments of silence, and the never-ending support. I hope you know how much I love you. I hope I have made you proud.

My friends. Although we do not see each other as often as I would like, I hope you know you inspire me to be the best version of myself. You have seen me at my lowest and hardest moments, and you held my hand. You have seen me at my craziest moments, and you calmed me down. You have seen me doubt my ability to go on, and you reminded me of my strength. Thank you for believing in me even when I could not do so myself.

My colleagues. I have been with many of you for over a decade. I have spent more time with you than my own family. You have grown to be like family to me. The

work we do makes a difference; I truly believe that to be true. We have so much more work to do, though. It is going to take courage and perseverance. But, you know what – we can learn a lot from our students. We must listen to their stories. We owe it to them to be more focused, to be more collaborative, to be braver. Thank you for giving me the space to learn, grow, and challenge myself to move beyond any self-imposed boundaries. You know I am not good about staying in my own swim lane anyway!

My faculty. My experience at UNL has been amazing. I live in Florida, yet I never felt like I was out of the loop or alone. I learned so much from my faculty and my fellow classmates. The greatest strength of the program was hearing perspectives and insights from students, practitioners, and researchers throughout the country. We are all working in this space of higher education, in very diverse settings, yet we are still experiencing many of the same situations. Two faculty members, Dr. Leist and Dr. Cejda, had the greatest impact on my success, and I am beyond grateful for their expertise, guidance, and patience. Special thanks to my chair, Dr. Cejda, and my dissertation committee – Dr. Wesley, Dr. Rumann, and Dr. Steckelberg. Your feedback and comments made this a more holistic, complete dissertation. Thank you, thank you, thank you!

My students. Thank you for trusting me with your stories. You are all incredible individuals who have overcome far too many obstacles for one lifetime. What I will remember most is how gracious each of you was with your time and how open you were with your story. Each of you owns your story in such a beautiful way. I learned so much from you. I wish you happiness, health, and continued success.

On average, over 400,000 children are in the care of the foster care system each year. These children are sometimes placed into amazing homes like my sisters in law (Angie and Suzie) or my friends (Russ and Ashley). Other times, they are not so lucky. We have some great community organizations, like the FLITE Center and HANDY, who are dedicated to helping foster youth transition successfully into adulthood. But, we must figure out a better way to support these children earlier on in their lives. We all deserve to feel loved, wanted, and supported. We all deserve to grow up in a safe environment without worrying about our next meal, shower, or bed. We all deserve to go to school to learn, play, and explore. We all deserve to be healthy and happy. We all deserve to grow old and strong. We must do better for these children.

To the children currently in the foster care system, you matter. Your voice matters. Your story matters.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

“Telling a story ‘makes the moment live beyond the moment’ . . . stories can indeed accomplish change.” (Riessman, 2008, p. 63)

Successfully navigating the complex processes of postsecondary education – application, testing, admissions, financial aid, registration, program selection, graduation, and placement – requires not only knowledge, opportunity, and perseverance but also human connection. “Without signposts, without a guide, without a visible shoreline to follow, many students make false starts, take wrong turns, and hit unexpected obstacles” (Scott-Clayton, 2011, p.1). This journey of college enrollment, persistence, and completion for individuals in minority and at-risk population groups is particularly complicated due to a deficiency of adequate systematic and external supports, referred to as social capital, and a lack of experienced guides referred to as cultural and academic capital.

Research shows that enrollment in, persistence through, and completion of postsecondary education influences an individual’s ability to secure financial independence and advance their social mobility (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011). Therefore, understanding the factors that impact participation in postsecondary education and degree completion/attainment is paramount for higher education practitioners.

Foster care alumni are underrepresented, in higher education, in terms of their enrollment, persistence, and completion (Casey Family Programs, 2010). Foster care alumni were selected as the study group due to their underrepresentation in higher education. Therefore, this study focused on enrollment and success (credential/degree attainment) of foster care alumni in community colleges. This topic was chosen to

understand better the lived experiences that influence a foster care alumni's decision to enroll in a higher education institution (specifically a community college), persist through and complete a credential/degree.

This study's primary focus was to understand the lived experiences of foster care alumni that influenced/influence their ability to be successful in higher education. A qualitative methodology was selected because qualitative research moves beyond the numbers and searches "for meaning and understanding" (Merriam, 2009, p. 39). The study was focused on learning from the foster care alumni who have "made it" by overcoming the odds and succeeding in post-secondary education. The study did not follow a typical deficit model approach but instead highlighted the strength factors that supported the success of the foster care alumni. The study followed a Problem of Practice approach because it "comes from a need to make improvements in a specific educational context" (Belzer & Ryan, 2013, p. 197). The specific educational context for this study is a community college and the factors that influence a foster care alumni's likelihood for post-secondary success.

Additionally, a Problem of Practice is "a persistent, contextualized, and specific issue embedded in the work of a professional practitioner, the addressing of which has the potential to result in improved understanding, experience, and outcomes" (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate Framework, 2019, para. 12). This study was a Problem of Practice because it was conducted at the specific post-secondary institution where the researcher works. The focus of the Problem of Practice was to better understand the lived experiences of the foster care alumni in relation to their post-secondary educational outcomes and success.

Massification of Higher Education – Understanding Enrollment Trends

The United States has experienced unprecedented growth in higher education in both the volume of institutions and the increase in student enrollment. “The massive expansion of higher education across all continents has been one of the defining features of the late 20th and early 21st centuries” (Guri-Rosenblit, Sebkova, & Teichler, 2007, p. 1). The focus of higher education, in post-World War II America, moved beyond the education of the elite and expanded to include economic growth for the country and employment opportunities and social mobility for individuals (Guri-Rosenblit, Sebkova, & Teichler, 2007; Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009). This expansion, or massification, brought challenges, including funding, support, capacity, access, and equity.

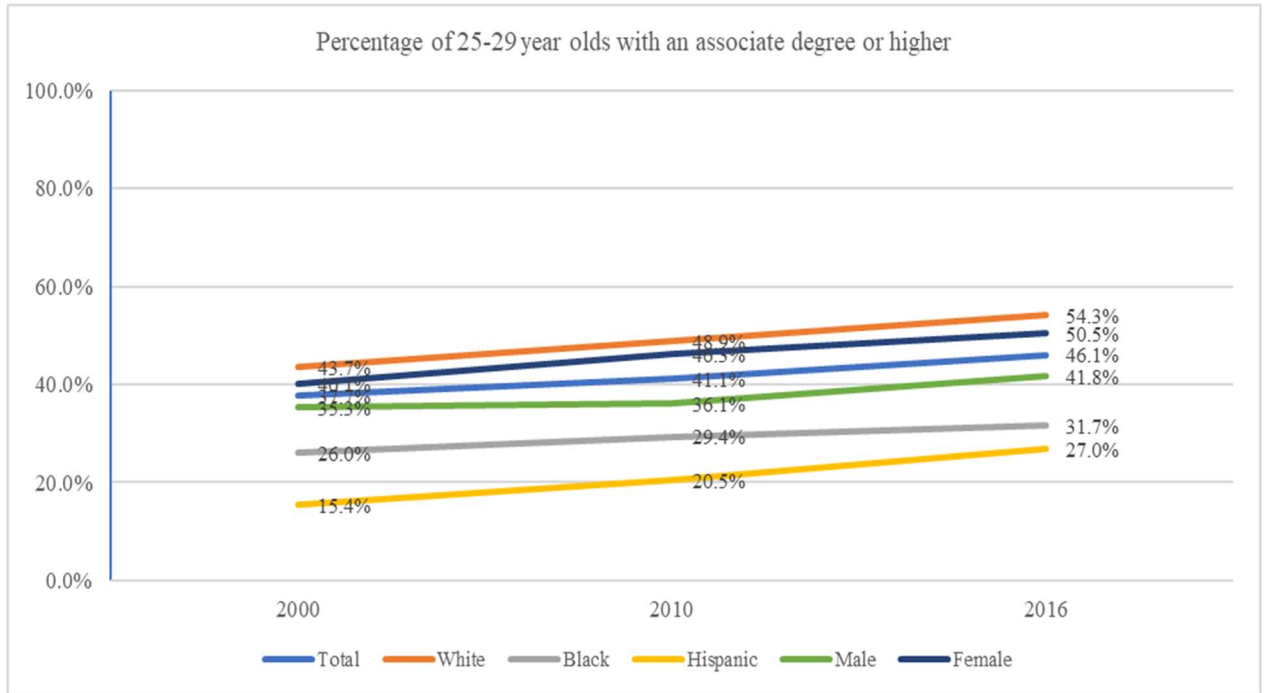
The number of higher education institutions grew from approximately 570 in 1900 to 7,150 in 2015 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). A 2017 report, published by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), specifically looked at institutional growth between 2000 and 2014. The publication reported the data based on the various types of institutions - public vs. private, sub-baccalaureate (e.g., associate degree or certificate) vs. baccalaureate and not-for-profit vs. for-profit. Between 2000 and 2014, the number of institutions offering sub-baccalaureate programs grew 20% (4,675 to 5,590) and the number of for-profit institutions increased 37% (2,445 to 3,360) while the number of public and private (not-for-profit) institutions decreased 6% (2,084 to 1,964 and 1,950 to 1,827, respectively).

In a subsequent 2018 report, the NCES examined the overall college enrollment rates for all institution types during a similar period, 2000 to 2016. College enrollment

“increased from 35 percent in 2000 to 41 percent in 2016.” (NCES, p. 1, 2018). Despite a six-percentage point increase to the overall enrollment, specific subgroups did not increase equally. NCES (2018) identified that “during this period, the enrollment rate increased by three percentage points for White young adults, six percentage points for Black young adults, and 17 percentage points for Hispanic young adults.” Variations also existed between genders, with male enrollment increasing from 33% to 39% and female enrollment increasing from 38% to 44% between 2000 and 2016 (NCES, p.1, 2018).

Researchers have examined the access, educational readiness, and achievement gaps for post-secondary populations. This research has influenced local, state-level, and federal policy changes and programming. Despite the research and system changes, there are still unanswered gaps in educational outcomes for minority populations.

The National Center for Education Statistics (2018) publication, *The Condition of Education*, identified various data points related to postsecondary enrollment and completion between 2000 and 2016. The publication highlighted that while enrollment within and between racial and ethnic groups has fluctuated over the past 20 years, the educational attainment for these same groups has not significantly changed. Different types of individuals are attending college, but more is not necessarily completing. The issue of access may be improving, but the gaps in educational attainment remain an issue among the different racial and ethnic groups. The chart below documents the associate degree attainment of different racial and ethnic groups as well as information related to gender attainment.



Graph 1: National Center for Education Statistics, Educational Attainment of Young Adults (2018)

Looking beyond race, ethnicity, and gender, the enrollment and completion rates for “at-risk” populations are even worse due to the compounding factors working against success. Individuals are deemed to be “at-risk” when they have one or more risk factors that decrease the likelihood of successful completion. Horton (2015) identified these risk factors to include (but not limited to) homelessness, poverty, transiency, history of violence or abuse, and academic under-preparedness. Foster care alumni, the targeted population for this study, are an at-risk population. The specific enrollment and completion metrics for this at-risk population are outlined next.

The Casey Family Programs (2010), a national organization committed to promoting the wellbeing of children in the foster care system, identified that only 7-13% of foster care alumni enroll in postsecondary education and of those less than 5% earn a bachelor’s degree. The educational attainment rates for associate degrees are not any

better with one source identifying that only 2% of foster care alumni who enroll in college earn an associate's degree (Watt, Faulkner, Bustillos, & Madden, 2018).

Compared to the racial, ethnic, and gender metrics identified previously, these statistics make the foster care alumni the most underrepresented and least successful population in higher education.

Community Colleges

Community colleges, because of their tradition of open access, affordability, remedial coursework, focus on workforce education, and wrap-around support services, are often the first-choice institution for foster care alumni. Community colleges “offer an open door to an opportunity to all who would come, are innovative and agile in meeting economic and workplace needs and provide value and service to individuals and communities” (Boggs, 2010, p. 1). Because of these value statements and practices, community colleges are often referred to as “democracy’s college.” The commitment of a community college to be resourceful, nimble, and responsive to the local community’s needs also positions the institution to better support the success of foster youth.

“Community colleges, with strong ties to local communities and shared linkages to local government services, are ideally situated to provide a structured support system for foster care youth to have college success” (Cutler White, 2018, p. 59)

Open access is a critical component of the community college mission, which allows traditional and non-traditional students to enroll in post-secondary education. One example of a non-traditional entry into a community college is through the attainment of a GED and not a standard high school diploma. This path is significant for foster care alumni since many do not graduate from high school with a standard diploma.

“Compared to their non-foster care peers, youth in foster care are less likely to graduate from high school” (Dworsky, 2018, p. 12). Without a non-traditional path, access to post-secondary education would not be possible for many foster care alumni.

The cost of tuition at a community college is typically significantly lower than traditional 4-year institutions. This commitment to affordability, positions community colleges to be the school of choice for foster care alumni since most are from low-income families and low socio-economic situations. “Community colleges are consistently a more affordable option for foster youth” (Hayes Piel, 2018, p. 25). Because of the various insecurities foster care alumni may be experiencing (e.g., housing, food, transportation) combined with targeted financial aid programs, the lower costs of tuition at community colleges support the enrollment of foster care alumni into post-secondary education. It ideally situates community colleges as the schools of choice for foster care alumni.

Community colleges also offer preparation (remedial) courses and programs to support academically underprepared students. Remedial coursework is another key factor in supporting post-secondary attainment for foster care alumni since many arrive at college unprepared. Youth in foster care “are often concentrated in the lowest-performing schools and continued to lag behind peers academically” (Dworsky, 2018, p. 12). For the overwhelming majority of foster care alumni, college is not seen as a viable possibility due to their experiences and lack of success in the primary and secondary (K-12) system. Community colleges often work with local social service agencies to increase foster care alumni understanding of remedial coursework and its ability to bridge the academically underprepared individual with college readiness skills.

In addition to the traditional general education curriculum intended for transfer to a 4-year university, community colleges have a strong emphasis and commitment to workforce education. “Support for transitioning foster youth in the pursuit of a higher education credential is a positive investment in the future workforce” (Day, Riebschleger, & Wen, 2018, p. 46). Programs that include short-term credentials, career counseling, apprenticeships, and internships are all ways community colleges engage foster care alumni. Community colleges also recognize the need for the student to be able to manage a job (with career potential) successfully and the rigors and expectations of college.

The role of the community college staff is another important factor in the successful transition of foster care alumni into college. “Effectively serving these students means providing them with the academic supports necessary to promote their educational attainment and addressing their financial and other non-academic needs” (Dworsky, 2018, p. 16). Many community colleges have offices and staff that are dedicated to providing wrap-around student services. “Campus-based support programs exist and are continuing to develop across the United States to provide wraparound support and case management services to foster youth” (Hayes Piel, 2018, p. 25). An example of the case management approach at community colleges is the concept of a one-stop office (Cutler White, 2018, refers to this as a “Single Stop”). A one-stop office supports students by identifying a single point of contact (the case manager) who is responsible for helping the student to successfully navigate complex higher education processes (including enrollment, financial aid, major exploration, course selection.).

While some research shows success for foster care alumni in traditional 4-year university settings, “community colleges clearly have a key role to play in reducing the

disparity in postsecondary educational attainment between youth who are or were in foster care” (Dworsky, 2018, p. 17). A community college’s commitment to access, affordability, college readiness, workforce education, and wrap-around services provides the necessary foundation to support postsecondary success for foster care alumni.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of foster care alumni and how these experiences influenced the individual’s decision to enroll in a community college, persist, and complete a credential/degree. The significance of the study was a personal, social, and economic one. The choice to pursue a college education and complete a credential/degree can have a long-term impact on an individual’s ability to add human and social capital and directly influence the individual’s economic earnings and opportunity for social mobility. Understanding the lived experiences that impacted an individual’s decision to enroll in postsecondary education and complete a credential/degree may provide guidance to secondary and postsecondary practitioners. This guidance can assist in properly supporting this population and increase the postsecondary participation and success of foster care alumni.

Above all of this, however, was the opportunity to provide a voice to this population to these specific individuals and to tell their personal, individual, and collective stories. This study sought to understand the lived experiences of specific individuals on a personal level and within the context of society, understanding that the environment and time influence the experiences. Since this research used the case study methodology for data collection, the analysis also sought to find specific themes within,

between, and among study participants that highlight similarities between the experiences of the population.

Research Questions

This study was based on the following primary research question: What are the lived experiences of foster care alumni that have contributed to their success at a community college? Two sub-questions were:

1. What experiences influenced their decision to enroll in a community college?
2. What experiences influenced their persistence and completion of a postsecondary credential/degree?

Conceptual Framework

This study's framework drew from two conceptual areas, Bandwidth (Verschelden, 2017) and Capitals – cultural, social, and academic (Bourdieu, 1986; St. John, Hu, & Fisher, 2010).

Bandwidth

While still fairly new, the notion of *Bandwidth* directly relates to an individual's limited capacity of cognitive resources available to successfully navigate everyday life. Verschelden (2017) suggested that “persistent worry about money, including lack of regular access to adequate food, shelter, health care, safety, and so on, takes up parts of the brain that are then not available for thinking, learning, and making good choices” (p. 5). Foster care alumni experience many of these basic insecurities (e.g., food, shelter, safety), which may contribute to the insufficient “bandwidth” to even consider enrolling in post-secondary education, let alone persisting and completing a credential/degree.

Cognitive resources are also under attack due to the constant negative lived experiences of non-majority populations, like foster care alumni. Verschelden (2017) referred to these negative experiences as all the “isms,” micro-aggressions, stereotype threats, and belonging uncertainty - as socio-psychological *underminers* that directly inhibit an individual’s cognitive ability and therefore reducing their bandwidth (p. 6). Verschelden (2017) asserted that marginalized groups, like foster care alumni, who continue to experience socio-psychological underminers are working with less available bandwidth (compared to majority groups that are not threatened by socio-psychological underminers). Therefore, the marginalized groups struggle to navigate everyday life, let alone success in academic endeavors.

These socio-psychological underminers are compounded with the fact that foster care alumni are most often also associated with a minority race, a low socioeconomic status, and other marginalized identities (e.g., sexual orientation, mental illness, homelessness, history of abuse) that further reduces the individual’s cognitive ability to focus on academics. Foster care alumni are “disproportionately youth of color from low-income families, and most came to the attention of the child welfare system after being neglected or abused” (Dworsky, 2018, p. 11). Verschelden (2017) stated,

Nonmajority students who belong to groups about which there are negative stereotypes not only are more likely to be kept out of opportunities for furthering their education, because of low ACT or SAT scores, for instance, but also may quit trying once they get to college as the pressure of poor performance exacerbates their stress and causes them to give up entirely. The negative effects of stereotype threat leave members of these groups consistently underperforming,

resulting in students who never enter college or drop out once they have started (p. 41).

Higher education practitioners need to recognize and understand the bandwidth limitations of students to support enrollment, persistence, and completion properly. Verschelden (2017) did not imply that standards or expectations need to be lowered for students with limited bandwidth. However, instead, the author challenged practitioners to create structures, policies, and practices that support the recovery of bandwidth for marginalized groups. Recommendations shared in the text included academic initiatives aligned to the research and work of Carol Dweck's (2006) *Growth Mindset* and Cohen, Garcia, Sherman, and others (2009, 2013, 2014) *Values Affirmation*. These concepts, Growth Mindset and Values Affirmation, directly oppose the traditional deficit model of social science research and instead are psychological interventions that focus on strengths, values, and the ability to learn/grow over time.

The concept of *Bandwidth* can be directly associated with an individual's ability or inability to acquire the necessary cultural, social, and academic capital to successfully navigate systems and processes and achieve financial independence and social mobility. Therefore, this study also utilized the concepts of Capital to inform the research.

Forms of Capital

Bourdieu's forms of capital are concepts used to explain the human experience and dispel the notion that life is a series of chances and possibilities (Bourdieu, 1986). Instead, according to Bourdieu, capital "takes time to accumulate and which, as a potential capacity to produce profits and to reproduce itself in identical or expanded form,

contains a tendency to persist in its being, is a force inscribed in the objectivity of things so that everything is not equally possible or impossible” (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 241-242).

Cultural Capital. Bourdieu links cultural capital with the educational achievements of the individual and takes the traditional concept, grounded in the purely economic benefit of education to the overall growth of the society, a step further by identifying the connection between the familial investment in education and the academic potential of the individual. He states, “the scholastic yield from educational action depends on the cultural capital previously invested by the family” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 244). Cultural capital is not something that can be gifted or given away, it must be acquired over time, and it requires an innate, personal commitment. However, cultural capital “cannot be accumulated beyond the appropriating capacities of the individual agent” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 245). Meaning, cultural capital has its limitations based on the individual and the connections acquired by the individual throughout their lived experiences.

Bourdieu describes the “institutional state” of cultural capital in the context of educational attainment as a way to draw some level of comparison between individuals regardless of their biological or familial connection. “By conferring institutional recognition on the cultural capital possessed by any given agent, the academic qualification also makes it possible to compare qualification holders and even to exchange them” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248). Educational attainment, therefore, could help to equalize or stabilize the previously uneven or limited capacities of certain individuals.

Social Capital. Unlike cultural capital that is linked, primarily, to the self and the familial unit, social capital is related to actual or potential resources beyond the self and

within the social network. Social capital, however, is also something that is only guaranteed to select individuals based on their given name, class, affiliation. For those who are not automatically guaranteed, this capital, connections, and relationships acquired overtime are key components to moving beyond an individual's current state/status/class. Opportunities for interaction and connections beyond the current social network is critical for advancement. "The volume of the social capital possessed by a given agent thus depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize and on the volume of the capital possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 249). Social capital is limiting by nature and purpose. It is not something that is equally given or available to everyone. In its very structure and core, social capital is intended to keep the connections controlled to serve the whole and not the individual. "The members of the group must regulate the conditions of access to the right to declare oneself a member of the group and, above all, to set oneself up as a representative of the whole group, thereby committing the social capital of the whole group" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 251). Therefore, even the opportunity for connection is not enough to gain social capital. An individual must be welcomed into the group, and the group must benefit, in some way, from the connection. At the time in which the group determines the connection is no longer beneficial to the whole, the individual may lose that connection and, in turn, lose social capital.

Academic Capital. The concept of academic capital, defined by St. John, Hu, and Fisher (2010), is "social processes that build family knowledge of educational and career options and support navigation through educational systems and professional organizations" (p. 1). Academic capital combines Bourdieu's cultural and social capital

and applies them to educational and career environments. For foster care youth, the ability to “build” academic capital is challenging, if not an impossible feat due to the circumstances and situations these youth experience in their primary and secondary years. When foster care children age out of the foster care system and become eligible for postsecondary enrollment, “they may have not developed the skills needed to successfully navigate complex bureaucracies both inside and outside of academia” (Whitman, 2018, p. 80).

Since post-secondary education participation and success support an individual’s opportunity to move beyond their current social class, the ability to successfully navigate the postsecondary environment is a critical piece of the puzzle. St. John, Hu, and Fisher (2010) outlined the relationship between academic capital (with postsecondary success) and an individual’s ability to experience cross-generational uplift (upward social mobility). The authors stated, “first-generation college students are making a first-time transition in family education, which can lead to social and economic class transformation” (St. John, Hu, & Fisher, 2010, p. 17). The flip side to this, though, is social reproduction and the inability to move out of one’s current social class. Foster care youth are often products of a cyclical system that prevents upward mobility and success. “Educational failure, like educational success, can reinforce replication patterns” (St. John, Hu, & Fisher, 2010, p. 15).

How, then, do these social theory concepts relate to postsecondary enrollment and completion? It can be assumed that a relationship exists between an individual’s cultural, social, and academic capital and the individual’s fundamental belief that a college credential/degree is a form of social mobility and a way to achieve personal advancement

and financial independence. To what extent does the individual's family value a college education? Does the individual belong to a social network that not only values a college degree but also has the means and resources to inform and support the individual through the enrollment and completion processes? An individual's choice to attend college and persist to a degree is influenced by that individual's cultural, social, and academic capital.

Due to potential inconsistencies, instabilities, lack of familial connections, and limited social networks, individuals raised in the foster care system may not have the ability nor the opportunity to acquire the necessary cultural, social, and academic capital to support educational attainment in the postsecondary environment. Researching the success stories of foster care alumni who have defied the odds by enrolling and succeeding in a community college may identify common experiences that influenced the enrollment and completion processes. Additionally, these stories may highlight the elements of cultural, social, and academic capital needed for this path.

Methodology

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research goes beyond the numbers to understand experiences. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research is not necessarily interested in cause and effect or specific scientific experimentation. Instead, "qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam, 2009, p. 5). There are various methods and approaches to conducting qualitative research, including case study, ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory, and narrative (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). Because this particular study was not only interested in understanding the

experience of foster care alumni but also intends to tell the story of the study participants, the qualitative research methods selected were case study (for data collection and analysis) and narrative inquiry (for reporting). The case study is a unique qualitative research method since it is focused on the “unit of analysis,” what Merriam refers to as the “bounded system” (Merriam, 2009). “Since it is the unit of analysis – a bounded system – that defines the case, other types of studies can be combined with the case study.....[one could] present a person’s ‘story,’ hence combining narrative with case study” (Merriam, 2009, p. 42).

Case Study

Merriam (2009) defined the case study as “an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (p. 40). Creswell (2013) took it a step further and defined case study as “a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information.....and reports a case description and case themes” (p. 97).

This idea of a “bounded system” is a critical characteristic of case study research. A bounded system is the unit of analysis in the case study. It is clearly defined in the research and inherently limits who/what is included in the study. Merriam (2009) compared the bounded system to “fencing in” what is being studied. For this study, the bounded system was not only foster care alumni enrolled in a community college, but it was even further fenced in by the specific characteristic of completion. Participants included in this study are foster care alumni, currently enrolled in a community college, who have completed 50% or more of their required credits toward their degree. The

bounded system is clearly articulated for this study, and therefore a case study methodology was applied. In addition to the inherent “bounded system,” case study was selected because “the researcher aims to uncover the interaction of significant factors characteristic of the phenomenon. The case study focuses on holistic description and explanation” (Merriam, 2009, p. 43).

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is about telling and knowing people’s stories. However, there is nothing simple about this method of qualitative research reporting. The narrative inquiry approach requires that the researcher observe, interview, and eventually understand the experiences, past and present, of a specific population of people. “Narrative stories tell of individual experiences, and they may shed light on the identities of individuals and how they see themselves” (Creswell, 2013, p. 71). The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of foster care alumni in the college enrollment, persistence, and completion lifecycle. This study population is the most underrepresented in higher education that also has dismal persistence and completion rates (Casey Family Programs, 2010; Watt, Faulkner, Bustillos, & Madden, 2018).

. This study did not focus on the deficits that exist with this population but instead attempted to understand the factors that led to the participant’s success and retell the story to highlight the triumph of overcoming adversity and beating the odds.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) stated that all narratives (experiences) have a triangular relationship (what the authors call three dimensions) between time, person/society, and place. The narratives/stories must be interpreted and retold, understanding the connection between the three dimensions. Clandinin and Connelly

(2000) elaborate on these dimensions by adding another level with the notions of “inward and outward, backward and forward” (p. 50). The authors stated,

By inward, we mean toward the internal conditions, such as feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, and more dispositions. By outward, we mean toward the existential conditions, that is, the environment. By backward and forward, we refer to temporality – past, present, and future. (p. 50)

The narratives collected and interpreted, and stories that are retold and presented, as part of this case study, considered the influences of time, person/society and place. It is only within these contexts that the case study was analyzed, and the stories reported and understood.

Assumptions

This study included two basic assumptions that are believed to be true and influence the study. These assumptions were the following:

1. Due to their underrepresentation in postsecondary education, foster care alumni will continue to be a population of interest for research and understanding;
2. Participants of this study will be honest and truthful when telling their stories.

Definitions of Terms

A variety of terms were used throughout the study, and it is critical for the reader to have a clear understanding of the terms so that there is no confusion regarding their meaning and impact on the results. Unless otherwise noted, the following definitions were obtained from the National Center for Education Statistics publication, *Postsecondary Student Terminology: A Handbook of Terms and Definitions for Describing Students in Postsecondary Education* (1981)-

Academic Capital - social processes that build family knowledge of educational and career options and support navigation through educational systems and professional organizations (St. John, Hu, & Fisher, 2010, p. 1)

Bandwidth – an individual’s limited amount of cognitive resources available (Verschelden, 2017).

Case Study - a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual materials, and documents and reports), and reports a case description and case-based themes (Creswell, 2007, p. 73).

College Choice - the concept of college choice involves a student’s ability to attend the college or university most suited to his or her desires and academic abilities. (Institute of Higher Education Policy, 2002).

Community college - Public 2-year postsecondary institutions that primarily award associate’s degrees and certificates and offer a wide range of services in their local communities (Provasnik & Planty, 2008).

Completion - successful attainment of a postsecondary credential/degree.

Cultural Capital - cultural capital is the accumulation of knowledge, behaviors, and skills that one can tap into to demonstrate one's cultural competence. Thus, one's social status or standing in society (Cole, 2018).

Educational Attainment - while not specifically defined in the NCES publication, for this study, educational attainment will be equivalent and synonymous to completion.

Enrollment - an indication of whether or not a person is registered in the postsecondary institution and is enrolled to participate in the instructional activities of the institution on the institution's census date.

Foster Care Alumni – adults, 18 years and older, who have spent time in foster care, kinship care, or other out-of-home placement. (Foster Care Alumni of America, 2018).

Growth Mindset – a belief that an individual’s “basic qualities can be cultivated through effort [and that] everyone can change and grow through application and experience” (Dweck, 2006, p. 7)

Milestones – “measurable educational achievements that include both conventional terminal completions, such as earning a credential or transferring to a baccalaureate program, and intermediate outcomes” (Leinbach & Jenkins, 2008, p 2). For example, a milestone can be the completion of developmental education coursework or completion of 50% of a degree.

Narrative Inquiry – a form of qualitative research that is focused on the experience of the individual(s) being studied. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) define this methodology as “a way of understanding experience...stories lived and told” (p. 20).

Persistence - while not specifically defined in the NCES publication, for this study, persistence will be defined as continued enrollment in postsecondary education that leads to completion.

Postsecondary education - an academic, vocational, technical, home study, business, professional, or other school, college or university or other organization

or person-offering educational credentials or offering instruction or educational services (primarily to persons who have completed or terminated their secondary education or who are beyond the age of compulsory school attendance) for attainment of educational, professional, or vocational objectives.

Qualitative Research – an umbrella concept covering several forms of inquiry that help us understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible. (Merriam, 1998, p. 5)

Social Capital - the collection of social relations one has at one's disposal (with peers, friends, family, teachers, fellow alumni, employers, colleagues, community members) (Cole, 2018).

Student – a person for whom instruction is provided in postsecondary education under the auspices of a postsecondary education institution.

Underrepresented population – students that are not part of the majority group and who are not proportionally attending postsecondary education based on the overall census data. “Underrepresented refers to racial and ethnic populations that are disproportionately represented in higher education” (Sierra College, n.d.).

Value Affirmation – a psychological intervention that provides students with the opportunity to “reflect on the values they hold as important, even those that have nothing to do with school” (Cohen & Garcia, 2014, p. 17).

Delimitations

This study examined the factors that influence an individual’s choice to enroll in a community college and persist in the completion of a credential/degree. The researcher chose to study foster care alumni who have enrolled in a community college. This

specific population was chosen because of its underrepresentation in postsecondary education. A community college setting was selected due to the nature of the environment and the foundational beliefs of the institutional type, specifically open access, affordability, and connection to workforce development. The specific credential/degree that the student is pursuing was not of particular significance to the study, and therefore all degree programs were included. The study participants are all close to finishing their credential/degree (in their last semester or their last academic year). The 50% milestone was selected, as a requirement for participation, because the study is focused on telling and understanding the stories of the foster care alumni who have defied the odds by succeeding in higher education.

The study followed a qualitative research methodology that included semi-structured interviews, field texts, and administrative data. The case study and narrative inquiry methodologies were selected because of the intent of the study.

Limitations

This study focused on the community college enrollment, persistence, and completion experiences of a specific student population in the Southeastern United States. While the initial analysis discussed earlier highlighted the postsecondary enrollment and completion from a national perspective, this specific study was conducted at one community college in Florida. The study results, therefore, do not apply to other community colleges within Florida or other regions in the country. Additionally, the study focused on factors that influenced matriculation and success in 2-year public community colleges, which immediately limited the applicability to 4-year public universities as well as private, not-for-profit, and for-profit institutions. Finally, the

influencing factors of college enrollment and completion identified cannot be generalized due to the study's sample size and therefore are not relevant to all foster care alumni enrolled in a community college.

Significance of the Study

This study was important on a variety of levels and in diverse sectors. Arguably, the most practical and immediate implication was for the specific individuals in the underrepresented population studied (foster care alumni) and the postsecondary institution and practitioners/administrators that serve them. Research documents the long-term financial gains of individuals with a college degree versus those who only have a high school diploma. "Increasing postsecondary educational attainment among youth in foster care would increase their average work-life earnings" (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2018, p. 8). Access to and the ability to secure high wage employment continues to widen the gap between the social classes within the United States. Studies like this can help individuals understand the importance of postsecondary education and assist foster care alumni in understanding the long-term implications of their college decisions.

On a very personal level, the study provided a voice to the foster care alumni enrolled and succeeding in college. Often studies focus on the factors that limit an individual's success in college. On the contrary, this study attempted to highlight what is working and what it takes to be successful (completing a credential/degree). The study provided the opportunity for the foster care alumni to tell their stories and to receive validation that their stories matter.

The study results may also enable the educational institution that serves as the study site, to create new or modify existing programs to support the enrollment and completion of foster care alumni within the institution. The study results may also prompt the college to further research underrepresented populations, overall, to support student outreach and enrollment. This continued commitment to research would allow the institution to develop a complete understanding and holistic plan to support the lifecycle of a student beyond choice and enrollment to include retention, persistence, completion, and placement. “Greater understanding of how foster alumni succeed in college will enable us [practitioners] to focus our efforts on supports leading to matriculation or higher education achievement” (Westland & Totten, 2018, pp. 91-92).

Still within the local community but external to the community college environment, businesses and non-profit organizations may find the results applicable to their settings to support both the workforce needs and employee recruitment (for businesses) and targeted outreach and programming (for non-profit organizations). “Working collaboratively campus partners, child welfare agencies, and other community-based organizations can assist community colleges practitioners identify and implement culturally responsive supports necessary to address the barriers that impede former foster youth academic achievements and build former foster youths’ resiliency both in and out of academic settings” (Fox & Zamani-Gallagher, 2018, pp. 34-35). State policymakers and legislatures may use the results to understand better programmatic and funding needs to support at-risk populations, specifically foster care alumni, as well as opportunities to support sustained economic growth. The ability to understand why certain groups enroll

and succeed in postsecondary education will help the state to meet its educational attainment goals by focusing efforts on targeted populations and programs.

Summary

Chapter 1 provided a brief insight into the national trends related to postsecondary enrollment and completion, overall, and a review of the enrollment and completion rates for foster care alumni, the study population. The purpose of the study and the research questions guiding the study were identified. The study's two conceptual frameworks, Bandwidth and Capitals, and two methodological approaches, case study and narrative inquiry, were introduced and explained. Finally, the chapter explored the delimitations, limitations, and significance of the study. Chapter 2 will now review the literature related to the study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

As outlined in Chapter 1, this study sought to understand the lived experiences of foster care alumni who have chosen to enroll in a community college and who have overcome their “at-risk” characteristics to beat the odds and persist to completion (through the attainment of a credential/degree). The study used qualitative research methods for collection and modes of analysis to tell the stories of these foster care alumni. Therefore, a broad review of relevant literature was necessary. The literature topics included foster care alumni (the at-risk population), enrollment, persistence, and completion within community colleges, federal financial assistance programs, bandwidth, capitals, and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis.

The literature review not only documented the context of the study, but it also served as a guideline for the semi-structured interview questions/prompts (during data collection) as well as the gauge for which the study is measured against. Did this study support the current, relevant literature, or did the study findings highlight something new that is worth considering for additional research? Before that could be answered, the literature must first be presented and reviewed.

Postsecondary Education Trend Data

Various national organizations (e.g., College Board, National Student Clearinghouse) and researchers monitor and evaluate post-secondary participation trends, including standardized admission testing, application metrics, enrollment, retention, completion, transfer, and job placement. In a 2013 presentation, representatives from the College Board and the National Clearinghouse, in consultation with the researchers at

Knocking at the College Door, provided an overview of data related to postsecondary education. The data clearly showed the diversification of the high school graduates (the immediate postsecondary participation pool) in not only race and ethnicity but also parental educational attainment with a steady increase in the number of “first-generation” students. The presentation also showed continued academic preparation and achievement gaps in students based on race and gender. Moving beyond academics, the presentation provided relational data between postsecondary education enrollment and socioeconomic status, with most students coming from middle-income homes and more higher-income students enrolling than lower-income students (Edwards et al., 2013).

During the same 2013 presentation, the persistence (retention) and completion data presented by representatives from the National Student Clearinghouse identified the tale of two students – one student who is retained and completes at the same institution and another student who persists by collecting credits at various institutions and eventually graduating (Edwards et al., 2013). The data identified 2.8 million unique students participating in postsecondary education, with over 45% of those students enrolled at a two-year public institution (a community college). Retention and completion data were also provided for various types of institutions. For two-year public institutions (community colleges), the six-year outcome data showed that almost 44% of students enrolled had either withdrawn or stopped out; 20% were still enrolled but have not yet completed a degree; and 36% completed a credential/degree (Edwards et al., 2013).

The final data shared in this presentation spoke to the “return on investment” (ROI) for postsecondary participation. This section was presented by a representative

from the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems and is relevant to this research study due to the proposed social and economic mobility benefit of enrolling in and completing a postsecondary educational credential/degree. In all 50 states, an individual with a minimum of an associate's degree earns more than an individual with just a high school diploma (Edwards et al., 2013). The ROI is not limited to the individual student but extends to the local and state community with increased state revenue and decreased state costs (e.g., corrections costs) (Edwards et al., 2013). Taking ROI to another level, the presentation addressed the concept of "gainful employment," which specifically looked at the value of a postsecondary credential/degree – particularly those earned at a community college (technical certificates and associate degrees). The programs targeted in the gainful employment data included Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), Health Science, Business, and others. This data documented that individuals who enroll in, persist through, and complete a credential/degree have the opportunity to experience economic mobility (Edwards et al., 2013). Understanding how foster care alumni fit into the landscape of higher education was critical for this research study.

Foster Care Alumni

As outlined in Chapter One, there is no question that foster care youth are an extremely at-risk population with a mountain of deficiencies to overcome to transition into adulthood successfully. "These young people [foster care youth] are disproportionately youth of color from low-income families, and most came to the attention of the child welfare system after being neglected or abused" (Dworsky, 2018, p. 11). Specifically looking at post-secondary participation and achievement, foster care

youth are one of, if not the, most underrepresented and underprepared populations in higher education. Only “about 17% of former foster youth enroll in postsecondary education by the age of 26” (Fox & Zamani-Gallagher, 2018, p. 30). Part of the reason for this severe underrepresentation could be the failures of the social service system. “The child welfare system has traditionally done a poor job of encouraging youth in foster care to pursue postsecondary education” (Dworsky, 2018, p. 12).

Additionally, the primary and secondary (K12) educational experiences and achievements of foster care youth are much lower than their non-foster care peers, which makes them even more vulnerable. “Frequent changes in placement often means changes in neighborhoods and schools, which contribute to difficulty in maintaining relationships and educational achievement” (Hayes Piel, 2018, p. 21). However, the outlook for those who do graduate from high school is not much better since most are not college-ready. “Many youth in foster care are not academically prepared for college because they experience frequent school changes, are tracked into basic education, attend low-performing schools, and are in need of remedial coursework” (Dworsky, 2018, p. 13).

Some early interventions and programs have shown success in supporting the transition of foster care youth into college. While still in the K12 system, consistency in home placement is influential. “When participants experienced stability in foster care placement, a more constructive and supportive environment to prepare for college seemed to emerge” (Franco & Durdella, 2018, p. 72). Beyond the home placement, exposure to college while in high school also supports college choice. “Foster youth cited high school experiences as important in their pre-college preparation and transition” (Franco & Durdella, 2018, p. 74). Mentoring programs for foster care youth, while in

high school, is also highlighted as support. “Knowing college-bound peers in high school seemed to help the participants with their transition to college” (Franco & Durdella, 2018, p. 74). To actively combat and improve the underrepresentation of foster care alumni in college, the K12 system must reevaluate the support programs in place. “Enhancing college-going support services and academic interventions at the K-12 level – in elementary and secondary educational settings – may be in the best long-term interest of foster youth” (Franco & Durdella, 2018, p. 78).

Beyond the K12 system, early college programs (e.g., summer-bridge) have also started to show positive outcomes. “One way to address the disparities in college access for foster care youth is exposure to pre-college programs” (Day, Riebschleger, & Wen, 2018, p. 39). These programs not only provide a structured and often intensive curriculum but also often support ongoing re-engagement. “Considering the lower college-going rate of foster youth, early and ongoing college preparation and transition support is vital to their future success as college students” (Franco & Durdella, 2018, p. 75).

The role of social services systems and their influence on a foster care youth’s exposure, or lack thereof, to college opportunities and options early in the youth’s educational journey cannot be ignored. “Longer placement in the foster care system, more frequent placements in foster homes, more frequent changes in foster parents and more frequent changes in social workers seemed to influence how participants accessed college resources, prepared for life as a college student, and felt supported during transitions to college” (Franco & Durdella, 2018, p. 72). The disruption caused by

multiple placements and schools and the instability from caseworker changes can negatively impact a foster care youth's college choice process.

However, a stable, consistent, social worker can assist the foster care youth in recognizing the long-term benefit of a college credential. "Participants [foster care alumni] felt a constant tension between pursuing education in order to achieve long-term goals and struggling to negotiate obstacles to meeting short-term needs" (Hallett, Westland, & Mo, 2018, p. 50). The social worker and the social services system should be making connections with the local workforce to help the foster care youth understand the need to invest in the education to support future growth (personal and finance) opportunities. "Support for transitioning foster youth in the pursuit of a higher education credential is a positive investment in the future workforce, and savings against potentially poor outcomes are most assuredly to be gained through such a priority" (Day, Riebschleger, & Wen, 2018, p. 46).

The best approach to supporting the successful transition of foster care youth into college is an integrated relationship between the K12 system, the social services system, and the college system. This holistic support system will increase the exposure and understanding of college materials, choices, long term benefits, and other important information. "Successful outcomes are achieved through informed decision-making, access to resources, social networks, and supportive services" (Westland & Totten, 2018, p. 91). The need for this integration also supports the notion that foster care youth must build and acquire social, cultural, and academic capital.

Enrollment, Persistence, and Completion within Community Colleges

Community colleges are often referred to as “democracy’s college,” meaning that the mission of the institution is to support the advancement of society by including all individuals who wish to engage in postsecondary education while also then positively impacting the local community and the nation overall. This core value of social growth and mobility directly positions community colleges to lead an intentional effort to improve postsecondary participation and educational attainment of foster care alumni. “Community colleges clearly have a key role to play in reducing the disparity in postsecondary educational attainment between youth who are or were in foster care and their non-foster care peers” (Dworsky, 2018, p. 17).

Because of their history and commitment to open access and affordability, community colleges are often the institution of choice for foster care alumni who bravely decide to pursue post-secondary education. “Community colleges are primed to serve this population due to open admissions policies, free or reduced tuition for many foster youth, and an array of support services designed specifically for foster youth” (Whitman, 2018, p. 83). Financial restraints are a key factor in the decision of whether or not to pursue post-secondary education. Community colleges serve as an affordable option for foster care alumni. “College affordability is also a major consideration for these young people who must often pay for their housing, transportation, books, food, and basic needs in addition to their tuition, and tuition costs are much lower at community colleges than those at four-year schools” (Dworsky, 2018, p. 16). Access, in terms of actual physical location, is also often a determining factor. “It is not surprising that foster youth often attend community colleges because these are often the most accessible post-secondary

institution in terms of location and cost” (Whitman, 2018, p. 82). Despite being affordable and geographically convenient, community colleges still have costs and other obstacles that are challenges for the foster care alumni.

Even when access and enrollment obstacles are overcome, persistence toward completion remains a hurdle for many community college students, including foster care alumni. A study completed by Day, Dworksy, Fogarty, and Damashek (2011) examined the attrition rates of foster care alumni compared to a peer group who did not experience foster care. The results were staggering, with 21% of foster care youth dropping out of postsecondary education, within the first year, compared to 13% of the peer group (Day et al., 2011). The gap widens even more beyond the first year, with 34% of the foster care alumni leaving before completion compared to 18% of the peer group. What about their experiences or circumstances influence their failure to persist to completion? What can institutions do to combat the attrition?

Geiger et al. (2016) examined different programs implemented on college campuses to support the retention and persistence of foster care alumni. One of the main themes of the case study completed by the authors was the initial building of and continued cultivation of a community of “scholars” that would network on a personal and academic level (Geiger et al., 2016). The community of foster care alumni enrolled at the institution met numerous times throughout the term to support success in current courses and re-enrollment in the next term. Also, institutional staff actively provided outreach to the students during finals week and planned celebrations to mark milestone achievements (Geiger et al., 2016). These targeted retention and persistence strategies align with the

concept of social, cultural, and academic capital and the influence/impact on individual success.

Also supporting retention and directly aligning to completion, community colleges have strong connections to the local business and workforce networks. These networks can assist foster care alumni in securing a job (leading to a career).

“Community colleges, with strong ties to local communities and (in most contexts), shared linkages to local government services, are ideally situated to provide a structured support system for foster youth to have college success” (Cutler White, 2018, p. 59). Additionally, these institutional partnerships assist in helping to inform the foster care alumni of the long-term gains of obtaining a postsecondary credential/degree. “Former foster youth attending community college often perceive education as an essential aspect of their transition to stability as an adult” (Hallett, Westland, & Mo, 2018, p. 57).

Higher education processes are complex, especially for first-generation students and students with limited exposure to college while in high school. Many first-generation students attend community colleges, including first-generation foster care alumni.

“Community colleges play an integral role in the lives of foster youth by helping them learn to navigate systems that are often complicated for many young people” (Whitman, 2018, p. 85).

“When students age out of or emancipate from foster care, they may have not developed the skills needed to successfully navigate complex bureaucracies both inside and outside of academia” (Whitman, 2018, p. 89). Community colleges help foster care alumni to build and acquire the necessary capitals (social, cultural, and academic) to successfully transition to college.

Federal Financial Assistance Programs

In *The Condition of Education* report (2018), the National Center for Education Statistics examined the cost of education, the percentage of financial aid awarded, and the average cost of unmet need in first-time, full-time students between 2000 and 2016. In these 16 years, the average cost of tuition and fees at a 2-year public institution only rose \$500 from \$3,000 to \$3,500. During that same period, however, the average percentage of students receiving financial aid (e.g., grants, loans) at 2-year public institutions rose from 57% to 75%. More individuals are qualifying for and taking advantage of federal financial aid to support postsecondary participation. The available financial resources support enrollment and participation in postsecondary education but do not guarantee completion. Other factors must be influencing completion.

Foster care alumni have access to financial aid programs, beyond those available to the majority group, that provide opportunities for postsecondary enrollment and persistence. An example of this specialized funding is the Chafee Educational and Training Vouchers. These financial aid programs and scholarships often include funding for needs beyond the cost of attendance (e.g., tuition, books, supplies) to support the overall cost of education (e.g., transportation, housing, childcare). However, not all financial aid programs are designed with the unique situations of the foster care alumni in mind. “Although federal and state programs make college a more economically viable option for young people making the transition from foster care to college, they were designed with a more traditional pathway from high school to college in mind” (Dworsky, 2018, p. 15). Unfortunately, foster care alumni hardly ever meet the definition of “traditional.” “The lives of these young people did not fit neatly into a four-year

degree plan. They experienced significant personal challenges in high school that impeded their academic engagement” (Hallett, Westland, & Mo, 2018, p. 54). It is these challenges that often delay enrollment into college and typically finds the foster care alumni meeting the “non-traditional” student characteristics, including (but not limited to) being older when first enrolling, needing remedial coursework, and taking longer to complete a degree. Regrettably, these “non-traditional” characteristics may directly impact the foster care alumni’s ability to take advantage of the financial aid programs that are available. “Young people making the transition from foster care to college may become ineligible for the very programs that were designed to promote their attainment of postsecondary education” (Dworsky, 2018, p. 15).

Despite having access to these financial resources, foster care alumni remain underrepresented in higher education. Why? What about their lived experiences prevent or deter foster care alumni from choosing to enroll in college? For those that do choose to enroll in college, what about their lived experiences prevent or delay them from completing a degree? Could the answer be found in exploring the concepts of social and cultural capital and how this population navigates the world? What influence does the concept of bandwidth have on the postsecondary experiences of foster care alumni?

Bandwidth

Verschelden (2017) introduced the concept of *bandwidth* to define an individual’s limited amount of cognitive resources available. Bandwidth is not specific to educational endeavors. Instead, bandwidth is related to an individual’s ability to successfully navigate life with a limited amount of cognitive resources. Since the concept is still fairly new, active research is not readily available. However, Verschelden’s work draws

closely on Carol Dweck's research on growth mindset, Steel and Aronson's (1995) research on Stereotype Threat, and Cohen and Garcia's (2014) work on Values-affirmation.

Growth Mindset

Yeager and Dweck (2012) outlined the impact of implicit theories on academic achievement and attainment. Individuals who are taught that intelligence is developed overtime (growth mindset) and not predetermined (fixed mindset) experience higher academic achievement over time. "The key is the belief that we can grow our brain by hard work and persistence" (Verschelden, 2017, p. 61). Also highlighted in the Yeager and Dweck (2012) article are the works of Aronson, Fried, and Good (2002), Good, Aronson, and Inzlicht (2003), and Blackwell, Trzesniewski, and Dweck (2007) which all addressed the concept of stereotype threat and how a growth mindset and growth mindset strategies (like values affirmation) can counteract this threat and support academic achievement in minority and underserved populations (like foster care alumni).

Dweck and her contemporaries are not without their critics, and Dweck has directly addressed some of the backlashes. In 2016, Dweck spoke with Christine Gross-Loh, of *The Atlantic*, about the concept of a "false growth mindset." Dweck stated that some educational practitioners did not take the necessary time to fully research the concept of mindsets to understand that all individuals have a mixed combination of growth and fixed mindsets and that a growth mindset is not the answer to all situations, all the time.

Since the 2012 release of Dweck's Growth Mindset text, educational researchers have explored the concept in action. Hochanadel and Finamore (2015) examined how

fixed and growth mindsets support students in times of adversity. The authors specifically addressed how the concepts of mindset and grit may influence a student's persistence in online college courses. "The low rates of retention, may, in part, be due to having a fixed mindset" (Hochanadel & Finamore, 2015, p. 48). The authors provided training recommendations for college faculty to understand the concepts of mindset and grit, and ways in which faculty can support students to develop these success strategies stating, "teaching a growth mindset and grit facilitates long-term goals and how to achieve them" (Hochanadel & Finamore, 2015, p. 49).

Claro, Paunesku, and Dweck (2016) explored how growth mindsets influence the academic achievements of students experiencing (or who have experienced) poverty. The authors studied 10th graders in Chile and specifically looked at the individual student's socioeconomic status (particularly the income of the student's parent/s) and academic achievement. Similar to prior research, a student's socioeconomic status strongly correlates to their academic achievements. Students from high income earning families have higher academic achievements than those from lower socioeconomic families.

However, moving beyond the already established relationships, the Claro, Paunesku, and Dweck (2016) study found a significant relationship between a student's mindset and their academic achievement. Moreover, this relationship (between mindset and achievement) was consistent throughout the study population – regardless of socioeconomic status – "these results show for the first time.....that this relationship is comparably strong with that between family income and achievement and that it holds true systematically" (Claro, Paunesku, & Dweck, 2016, 8666). This newly recognized

relationship was not only significant to the 2016 study participants but also, possibly, to the participants in the current study.

Stereotype Threat

Drawing on the work of Steele and Aronson (1995), Robertson and Chaney (2015) explored the impact of stereotype threat on black male students at a predominately white college. The researchers chose to study this topic due to the continued achievement gaps/low completion rates of black males among college graduates. While their enrollment in postsecondary education has increased, black males remain one of the least successful, with only approximately 1/3 of participants completing a degree (Robertson & Chaney, 2015). The study focused on four major areas (faculty involvement, classroom environment, student support services, and dealing with racism) and how these areas either support or inhibit success. “Using stereotype threat as a lens, the objective was to examine how African American males’ knowledge of negative stereotypes about themselves may have impacted their social adjustment, and by extension, their prospects for matriculation/academic success” (Robertson & Chaney, 2015, p. 33).

The researchers interviewed black students to understand the factors that influenced their college experience, and then the researchers analyzed the data to identify themes among and between the participants. Three overarching themes were identified and supported the notion that stereotype threats – or at least the perception of stereotype threats - existed both within and outside the classroom walls on a college campus. The study extended the idea of stereotype threat beyond the traditional research associated with standardized testing and researched the impact on the college experience of minority

students. Based on the findings of the study, the researchers made recommendations on ways secondary and postsecondary institutions can support the success of black males in college, including participation in college preparatory programs and inclusion of African American examples/writings in the curriculum (Robertson & Chaney, 2015).

Similar to the work of Robertson and Chaney (2015), Boyd and Mitchell (2018) examined the persistence of black males in college despite facing stereotype threats. “The threatening environments created by stereotypes can affect Black males’ academic success while they are enrolled at a college or university” (Boyd and Mitchell, 2018, p. 893). This study took a different approach, however, and focused on the black males who have succeeded despite facing predetermined stereotypes and, at times threatening environments. Boyd and Mitchell (2018) provided a review of the literature and former studies that supported the notion that stereotype threats inhibit a student’s ability to successfully navigate and persist through college (Verschelden would say that these situations reduce a student’s bandwidth).

Using Critical Race Theory, Stereotype Threat, and the Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework as their framework, Boyd and Mitchell (2018) conducted a qualitative study to determine the factors that influenced participants’ success. The authors used semi-structured interviews and “naturalistic” observations for data collection and then coded the data for themes and analysis. The findings of the study found that the participants often internalized their feelings when faced with actual or perceived stereotype threats and microaggressions (Boyd & Mitchell, 2018).

However, the participants also discussed ways in which they confronted and dispelled stereotypes and how these approaches helped to alleviate pressures during their

college experience. “Although instances of internalization occurred more often than not, as participants in this study continued their efforts to combat and dispel stereotypes in their later years of college, they began to directly address these instances, realizing that silence can indicate acceptance and tolerance of stereotypes” (Boyd & Mitchell, 2018, p. 906).

Interestingly, one of the themes identified by Boyd and Mitchell (2018) was “advice.” During their interviews, the participants provided advice/guidance to other, younger, black males who were enrolling in college. This theme could be attributed to the fact that the researchers specifically focused on black males who have persisted and succeeded despite the odds against them. Similar to Robertson and Chaney (2015), Boyd and Mitchell (2018) provided recommendations to improve the experiences of black males, including on-campus counseling services and a more inclusive curriculum.

Values Affirmation

In addition to having a growth mindset, strategies like Values Affirmation can help individuals to counteract situations (like stereotype threat) that reduce cognitive bandwidth and impede success. Jordt et al. (2017) examined the influence of an in-class values affirmation exercise on the academic successes of underrepresented minority students in an introductory science college course. The authors highlighted the adaptability and usability of this particular intervention since it is easy to administer, takes very little class time to complete, and does not have to be reviewed/graded by the faculty member making it ideal for small and large classrooms (Jordt et al., 2017).

Using quantitative methods for data collection and analysis, the authors found the “use of values affirmation intervention led to a reduction, but not elimination, of the

achievement gap between underrepresented minorities and white students with equivalent college GPAs” (Jordt et al., 2017, p.7). The authors partially attributed the increased academic achievement of the underrepresented minorities to the ability for the values affirmation to counteract psychological stressors (like stereotype threat).

Like Jordt et al. (2017), Brady et al. (2016) studied how values affirmation exercises impact a student’s academic achievement. Unlike Jordt et al. (2017), however, Brady et al. (2016) examined the impact of values affirmation over time. Specifically, the authors were interested in examining strategies that could help to decrease the long-standing achievement gaps for minority students in college. “Closing the gap even partially would improve the lives of many students and their families” (Brady et al., 2016, p. 354).

The authors decided to focus on values affirmation as the intervention strategy for the study population (Latino students and white students). Stating, “here we explore the idea that values affirmation can have long-term effects on students’ motivation and performance when it changes the way they later construe stressors and adversities” (Brady et al., 2016, p. 354). The study identified how this strategy has an immediate impact and then can compound over time to support a long-lasting, positive impact on self-efficacy, mindset, and achievement.

The Brady et al. (2016) study took place over two years and utilized experimental manipulations, quantitative methods (standardized testing), and the qualitative methods of surveys and administrative data review (academic transcripts). The analysis of the data showed that the values affirmation exercise had long-term, substantial impacts for the Latino students but interestingly, not the white students (in fact, the GPA for the

group decreased over time). “For Latino students, [value] affirmation led to a 90% reduction in the ethnic achievement gap” (Brady et al., 2016, p. 364). As part of their discussion and recommendations, the authors stated that Latinos continue to increase their participation in post-secondary education, and practitioners need to identify interventions/strategies to support the success of this growing population. “The affirmed learner’s psychology is transformed, such that later events are more likely to be seen through the prism of a positive view of the self and its assets” (Brady et al., 2016, p. 369).

As Brady et al. (2016) stated, there is not a magic, one-size-fits-all approach to counteracting academic threats and supporting student success and achievement. However, concepts like Bandwidth, Growth Mindset and Values Affirmation can help practitioners and students better understand situations and strategies that may help increase the likelihood of success.

Social, Cultural, and Academic Capital

For foster care alumni, college is most certainly not a guarantee, and the choice to attend may not even be a viable option. “Decisions to pursue postsecondary education are logically influenced by the information, and support foster youth receive from current placements and caseworkers” (Hayes Piel, 2018, p. 22). When family or other adult support is inconsistent or non-existent, the decision to pursue college may not have been viewed as a viable option for the foster care alumni. “This shortage of supportive adult relationships translates to a lack of social capital to help the youth succeed in a variety of areas including postsecondary education” (Hayes Piel, 2018, p. 25).

Foster care youth who decide to pursue postsecondary education are often ill-prepared, academically, and emotionally. “Foster care youth are often not included in

college preparatory courses in high school and generally receive little to no information about college entrance, making their educational goals that much more difficult to achieve” (Franco & Durdella, 2018, p. 69). The failure to participate in pre-college programs directly impact the individual’s college readiness. Beyond academics, many foster care alumni do not have a social network to lean on when they are struggling with their classes or other obstacles. “Participants [foster care alumni] rarely had a supportive familial network to lean on when facing difficult decisions or challenges” (Hallett, Westland, & Mo, 2018, p. 52). Unlike their non-foster care peers who can reach out to parents for support, “foster youth feel isolated and ill-equipped when a problem arises” (Hallett, Westland, & Mo, 2018, p. 57).

If foster care alumni can successfully develop and acquire social, cultural, and academic capital, their opportunities for success may improve. “These familial and social support systems facilitated ways for the foster youth to realize their needs and served to assist them in achieving their educational goal and aspirations” (Franco & Durdella, 2018, p. 73). These capital networks can be developed and acquired from a variety of places. “Individuals – peers, family members, teachers, and guidance counselors, and social workers – can significantly shape college transition experiences of foster youth” (Franco & Durdella, 2018, p. 79). It is critical to understand and build upon the success of those who have “made it.” “Those [foster care alumni] who have succeeded in college can provide a window into the characteristics that help foster youth succeed in college” (Franco & Durdella, 2018, p. 70). There is evidence that capital acquisition helps success. “When foster youth are given the necessary support and various forms of academic capital, they have the potential to successfully navigate barriers” (Whitman,

2018, p. 83). However, more research must be conducted to understand the lived experiences of foster care alumni fully. “The lack of comprehensive research on how the social and family experiences of foster youth shape their transition to higher education has broad implications for practice, including the early events in their matriculation to college” (Franco & Durdella, 2018, p. 70). With additional knowledge and context, postsecondary institutions and higher education practitioners can support foster care alumni in building strong capital networks.

Capitals, as a conceptual framework for educational research, has grown in interest since the early 1990s (Andriani, 2013). Researchers in social science fields, including education, and health science fields, including nursing, are employing the framework to design research studies (Nezhad, Zadeh, & Godarzi, 2007; Andriani, 2013). Social capital, and its networks of bridging and bonding, has been used as a conceptual framework in both qualitative and quantitative research in a variety of areas, including anthropology, political science, economics, and sociology (Patulny & Svendsen, 2007). In a 2007 article, Patulny and Svendsen outlined some of the seminal authors that used social capital as the framework for the qualitative research, including:

- Political Science: Putnam (1993); Fukuyama (1995); Norris (2001); Offe (1999)
- Economics: Loury (1977); Granovetter (1985); Grootaert and Bastelaer (2002); Herreros (2004)
- Sociology: Jacobs (1960); Portes (1998); Giddens (1994); Woolcock (1998)
- Anthropology: Svendsen (2006) and Rotberg (2001)

Moving beyond these social science disciplines, research using capitals as the framework also exists in the higher education sector. Hassani and Ghasemi (2016) researched the relationship between cultural, social, and economic capital and stratification in higher education. “Factors such as enjoyment of affluent families from qualitative school training, shadow educations, cultural capital, economic capital, and social capital of students have created a stratified structure in higher education and has strengthened the class structure of society” (Hassani & Ghasemi, 2016, p. 682). The results of the study found that strong social classification structures continue to be supported and perpetuated by the types of institutions attended and the majors selected by students participating in postsecondary education (Hassani & Ghasemi, 2016).

As the Hassani and Ghasemi (2016) study showed, the concept of capitals is related to postsecondary education throughout the lifecycle of choice, enrollment, persistence, and completion. Choosing to go to college is not a standard, guaranteed path for all individuals in all class structures. For some populations, college is not often a choice but an expectation. Individuals with parents or other family members who are college graduates may view college as a logical next step after high school. These individuals have been exposed to the benefits of the college and have some experience with the process. For other populations, college is not often a choice because other life situations are either in the way or because those individuals do not have parents or family members who are college-educated and therefore do not have experience with the process.

Bryan, Farmer-Hinton, Rawls, and Woods (2018) examined the role of social capital on college choice and enrollment of high school students. This study researched

the impact of “college talk” on 10th and 12th graders and their decision (or not) to enroll in a postsecondary institution. The researchers defined “college talk” as a mechanism to build social capital (through high school counselors, teachers, administrators, fellow students) regarding postsecondary education and expectations. The study found that “college talk” with both 10th and 12th graders had a positive influence on the individual’s choice to enroll in college with greater significance found with the 12th graders. The study suggested that social capital influences college enrollment.

Academic capital and its influence on the career orientation of high school students was the focus of a 2018 study by Zaichenko and Vinokurov. The researchers defined academic capital as “the knowledge component of the student’s human capital” (Zaichenko & Vinokurov, 2018, p. 189) and related it to Bourdieu’s idea of institutionalized capitals that are forms of resources for the individual. Academic capital, therefore, is a form of cultural capital that is acquired by the individual through their experience with and exposure to educational systems and programs. Zaichenko and Vinokurov (2018) examined the relationship between a student’s academic capital and career orientation and sought to understand the relationship between the acquisition of academic capital and a student’s career orientation (vertical and horizontal).

Interestingly, the preliminary findings of the study identified that there is not a direct relationship between a student’s career orientation and academic capital acquisition in high school. The authors directed these findings to current educational policy that is focused on establishing specialized career pathways in high school to support a student’s trajectory into a career. The authors stated that the results of their study do not support the strategic goals of the policy (Zaichenko & Vinokurov, 2018, p. 200).

Kim and Schneider (2005) explored the influence that parental involvement and support have on an individual's decision to enroll in college and, even more specifically, what type of institution to enroll in. The authors recognized the lack of focused studies on the impact of social capital on postsecondary education engagement, stating, "the effect of social capital on the transition to postsecondary education has rarely been examined" (p. 1182). Kim and Schneider (2005) examined the influence of "aligned ambitions" on an individual's college choice process. The concept of "aligned ambitions" specifically address the relationship between parental support and involvement with the goals of the adolescent (Kim & Schneider, 2005). The concept of aligned ambitions is the social capital exchange between the parent and the adolescent in which the adolescent benefits from the parental guidance and the parent benefits from the adolescent fulfilling an educational goal and, in turn, supporting the overall health of the family.

Kim and Schneider (2005) studied the influence of parental involvement and support on the choice to enroll in college, the type of institution to enroll in (2-year vs. 4-year), and the selectivity of the institution. Of particular interest to this research study, Kim and Schneider (2005) found that "students who experience greater residential mobility have lower odds of enrolling in a four-year vs. a two-year college; they also have lower odds of enrolling in any type of college" (p. 1191). An additional point of interest identified in the Kim and Schneider (2005) study is the notion that not all social networks (sources of social capital) are serving the future needs of the individual. The authors stated, "an interpersonal network can either facilitate or impede a person from envisioning alternative paths according to the resources and opportunities available"

(Kim & Schneider, 2005, p. 1197). Social capital has been identified as a contributing factor to an individual's decision to enroll in postsecondary education. The Kim and Schneider (2005) study raised the question if some forms of social capital may also be actively working against the future advancement of the individual while also potentially fulfilling a current need.

While the Kim and Schneider (2005) study focused on college choice and enrollment, Pishghadam and Zabihi (2011) studied the impact of parental education and capitals on a student's success while in college. Specifically, the authors examined the impact of these variables on the success of students in an English program. The study found that social and cultural capital and parental education – specifically the mother's educational attainment – all have a positive relationship with an individual's post-secondary success. “Parents of higher educational levels have greater success in providing their children with the skills they need to be successful in an academic setting” (Pishghadam & Zabihi, 2011, p. 53). One of the main skills explored in the study is literacy and the direct impact that a parent (through the transfer of cultural and social capital) and a parent's educational level (specifically the mother) has on an individual's literacy levels and long-term educational opportunities and achievements.

Orta, Murguia, and Cruz (2019) studied the impact of engaging in collegiate Greek life has on the acquisition of academic capital and persistence of Hispanic females in college. The study found that “ethnic sorority life provides students with resources valuable for academic success” (Orta, Murguia, & Cruz, 2019, p. 42). The authors referred to the sorority engagement as a way for students to build the necessary academic capital to support persistence and success. Study findings suggested that participation in

the organized Greek life supported the student's sense of belonging by reducing cultural shock and marginalization while also encouraging proud ownership of the student's diversity (compared to the dominant majority group). The results of the study indicated long-term benefits of engaging in Greek life beyond the academic capital needed while in college, the social capital acquired will support the individual's continued success beyond college (Orta, Murguia, & Cruz, 2019).

As previously outlined in Chapter 1, there are various types of postsecondary institutions (e.g., public vs. private, 2-year vs. 4-year, liberal arts vs. professional schools) that exist to serve the needs of the students who choose to enroll. However, does an institution's "type" and mission statement perpetuate social classism and stratification and impact the student's ability to acquire social capital? In a 2016 study, Stich and Reeves analyzed the role American higher education institutions play in perpetuating the current social classification system – by keeping minority, low income, or middle-class students from climbing the social and economic ladder. The authors stated, "the system, though allowing for greater access and educational opportunity, remains highly stratified, disallowing for equality of opportunity" (Stich & Reeves, 2016, p. 116). The authors explored the influence of academic capital on an individual's postsecondary enrollment and achievement. They stated,

the more academic capital one possesses, the more likely one is to attend and easily navigate prestigious, high ranking tier 1 schools that highly value particular types and quantities of knowledge.....privilege, then begets privilege, as these individuals become further immersed into the elite cultures of prestigious

institutions and later profit from their pedigree and credentials (Stich & Reeves, 2016, pp. 117-118).

This study supports the notion that an individual's acquisition, or lack, therefore, of academic capital not only influence the individual's decision to pursue post-secondary education but also the type of institution the individual enrolls in can have a long-term effect on the individual's economic and social mobility. The authors referred to this as "class-based academic capital" (Stich & Reeves, 2016, p. 127) and posited that this practice formalizes and perpetuates social classification stating, "these alignments indicate a rather unsettling, social reproductive pattern" (Stich & Reeves, 2016, 128).

A recent dissertation, completed by a fellow colleague at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, examined how the concept of capitals influenced the postsecondary participation of minority students from poverty-stricken areas in rural North Carolina. Brown (2018) presented the influence capitals have as a framework for educational research, and the impact capitals have on the educational attainment of an individual. The acquisition of social and cultural capital varies and therefore informs research in educational settings differently depending on the intent and purpose of the study.

The impact of postsecondary engagement and achievement has the potential to move beyond the individual's acquisition of cultural, social, and academic capital and to influence the larger community that surrounds the individual. Lange and Topel explored the societal impact (specifically to the workforce) of individual educational attainment in their chapter, *The Social Value of Education and Human Capital*, in the 2006 Handbook of the Economics of Education. Lange and Topel (2006) found that, in fact, there is

insufficient evidence to support the idea that schooling influences either private or social return (specific to a career).

This finding may seem incongruent with other research related to capital theory and economics. Lange and Topel (2006) explained that the individual employer (organization) learning must also be considered, and its impact cannot be ignored. The authors found that an individual's perceived ability is influenced by the employer's assumption based on the individual's educational attainment level. However, an individual's actual ability is understood only by the employer's learning based on the individual's work productivity/experience.

What does this mean exactly? "This means that most learning occurs within the first few years of careers, so any role of education as a signal diminishes fairly quickly" (Lange & Topel, 2006, p. 55). The educational attainment level of an individual may be what secures a job, but it will not be what allows that individual to succeed, only actual production relates to growth. The findings of the Lange and Topel (2006) study may seem like a contradiction to the current study. However, the attainment of a post-secondary credential is required before the foster care alumni can even have the opportunity to apply for and earn the position. Then, over time, the foster care alumni (now the employee) receives on-the-job training and practical experience that enable the employee to stay, grow, and be successful in the organization.

Qualitative Methods

Case Study using Narrative Inquiry

One of the advantages of using a case study as a research methodology is the ability to combine the approach with other types of research methods/reporting, like

narrative inquiry (Merriam, 2009). This combined methodology is used in the 2010 study by Marshall and Case. The authors told the story of a specific student to highlight the experiences of the “case” – disadvantaged students in a postsecondary environment in post-apartheid South Africa. Marshall and Case (2010) used narrative inquiry to report a specific participant’s experiences, which existed independently but also interdependently with the case. The case included 36 students in a third-year engineering course and involved a series of semi-structured interviews. The advantage of this reporting approach was the ability to dive deeper into a particular story (or set of stories) to increase understanding of the experiences. In addition to highlighting the story and prevalent themes in the student’s story, the authors provided recommendations for higher education practitioners.

Similarly, Lim, Honey, North, and Shaw (2015) explored the experiences/stories of nurses in New Zealand using a narrative inquiry and case method methodology. This approach was selected because a “complex phenomenon, qualitative research, specifically multiple case narratives, offer a useful way to describe and explain phenomena narrated by the participants” (Lim, Honey, North, & Shaw, 2015, p. 30). Like the current study of foster care alumni in a community college, the Lim, Honey, North, and Shaw (2015) study was an instrumental case study because it was interested in a particular issue (prescribing nurses). The authors used purposive sampling for participant recruitment and selection, semi-structured interviews for data collection, and thematic coding for analysis (Lim, Honey, North, & Shaw, 2015).

Another example of a case study using narrative is in the 2011 research by Etherington and Bridges. The authors sought to understand the experiences of clients

who received counseling services at a community counseling agency. “The study used a narrative case study approach to collect and analyze rich narrative accounts of clients’ experiences” (Etherington & Bridges, 2011, p. 12). To maintain ethical standards, this study partnered with the community agency for its participant recruitment (similar to the approach used in the current study). The study used interviews for data collection and then proceeded to analyze the data for meaning. The reporting included a retelling of portions of each participant’s story and then a section that described the significances of the collective stories. “Using a narrative approach to case studies, we have gained rich layers of information and understanding about the particularities of counseling from the client’s point of view” (Etherington & Bridges, 2011, p. 21). This study illustrated the power of combining the methods of case study with narrative.

The following sections provide a review of the different types of data collection strategies that were employed in this study.

Interviews

A Day, Riebschleger, Dworsky, Damashek, and Fogarty (2012) study researched factors that contribute to a foster care alumni’s decision to enroll in postsecondary education. Through the use of alumni interviews, the researchers were able to identify barriers and challenges that foster care alumni encountered that are unique to their population and experiences. The research design for this study was intended to provide a first-person voice to foster care alumni. This design was based on the work of Head (2011) and Zeldin, Camino, and Calvert (2003). These authors wrote about the importance of involving youth in public policy decisions for three main reasons: “to ensure social justice, support civic engagement, and promote positive youth

development” (Day et al., 2012, p. 1007). Foster care children and alumni are considered to be at-risk youth and are often marginalized by the dominant group. This study design included the foster care youth in policy decision making by allowing their voices to be heard and considered by policymakers deciding on social welfare programs that directly impact their lives.

Day et al. (2012) provided a brief justification for the study by outlining the target population’s high school completion and postsecondary enrollment trends as compared to the peer group. While not an in-depth analysis of the data, the authors gave a sufficient rationale for their study. Since this was a qualitative study, it is not surprising to see a smaller sample size. A total of 68 alumni were invited to participate in two panel discussions, but due to time limitations, only 43 alumni were able to speak about their experiences. The age range for participants was 15-23 years old. The researchers received IRB approval before the panel discussions, and participants were asked to sign informed consent forms. For minors, the individual’s caseworker was asked to co-sign the form.

While the primary data collection strategy for the study was the oral testimony by the alumni, it is important to note that the researchers provided the alumni with training before the formal panel discussion. The alumni were given the research questions before the actual panel and were given guidance on how to write about their experiences and how to tell their story. It is unclear how this training may have influenced, at all, the actual story given by the alumni. It is also unclear if the researchers accounted for this variable.

The data analysis methods included software that was used to identify themes in the electronic transcriptions from the panel discussions. The software coded the transcripts without any researcher interference. In addition to the technology that was used, two independent researchers coded the transcripts to identify similarities, differences, and main ideas. The data analysis identified eight common themes found in the experiences of the 43 alumni. It is unclear, however, if these eight themes emerged from the technology decoding, the independent researchers decoding, or a combination of all the methods used.

Included in the conclusion section of the study, Day et al. (2012) addressed policy implications that could result from the study findings. The researchers also identified the limitations of the current study, “the small and purposive sample,” and pointed out future research needs. What is not included in the conclusion, though, are the ethical considerations for the participants of the study. While the researchers sought out and received IRB approval and the necessary informed consent of the participants, there is no mention of what happened to the participants after the conclusion of the data collection period. It would be interesting to know if the alumni who participated in the study were any more successful than their foster care peer group due to their experience in the study and the panel discussions.

Case record review and interviews

Pecora, Williams, Kessler, Hiripi, O’Brien, Emerson, Herrick, and Torres (2006) studied the educational outcomes for individuals who were formerly in the foster care system. This study included a review of over 30 years of data from 23 different areas across the country. A unique aspect of this study is that all the participants were part of a

national program that is specifically geared toward financially and programmatically supporting individuals in foster care.

Interviews with foster care alumni supplemented the study's case record review. The study introduction provided a brief overview of the legislative changes that had occurred in the decade preceding the study. These legislative changes were intended to continue financial and housing support for individuals who age out of foster care but wish to pursue post-secondary education. The researchers then detailed the educational challenges that youth in foster care face as compared to their peer groups.

Unlike other qualitative studies that have small sample sizes, the Pecora et al. (2006) study reviewed the case records for over 1,600 foster care alumni and interviewed over 1,000 participants. The researchers focused on the mental health and educational achievements of the foster care alumni. Interestingly, the high school completion rates, for the foster care alumni, were higher than that of their peer group (the general population in similar age groups). The postsecondary participation and completion rates for the foster care alumni, however, were identified to be lower than the peer group.

Pecora et al. (2006) considered a variety of variables when determining the contributing factors to high school completion. These variables included gender, ethnicity, family background, medical history, placement history, and criminal history. This portion of the study, while qualitative in its methodology, used quantitative statistics to describe characteristics of the study population. The data analysis consisted of a review of the quantitative statistics to determine the likelihood that foster care alumni would complete high school. Unfortunately, the article did not include any information or analysis of the interviews completed with the study participants.

The study's conclusion section included implications for policymakers, state and federal legislatures, and social service agencies and programs. As far as ethical implications, the researchers did address the importance of educational achievement as it relates to an individual's overall personal and economic growth. The study could have done more to detail the inherent inequities related to the educational opportunities for individuals in foster care versus those in their peer group.

Administrative data review

Day, Dworsky, Fogarty, and Damashek (2011) used existing student data at a large 4-year university to determine if students, who were foster care alumni, had higher rates of dropout than peer students who were not formally in the foster care system. The study specifically looked at retention and completion rates in foster care alumni compared to those same data elements in peer students. The authors identified that this study was different from other similar studies in that it focused-on retention in a 4-year university environment and used a "like" comparison group (based on socio-economic status). The study sample was approximately 800 undergraduate students enrolled in a 4-year institution in the northern mid-West. The samples were grouped in cohorts determined by the initial enrollment date of the student. Student data, obtained directly from the university's student information system, was analyzed to determine the retention and completion rates of each group (the control group and the study group) by cohort. The researchers explicitly stated that two cohorts of students were excluded; they explained why the exclusion was decided and provided ways that the exclusion could bias the results of the study. This explanation is an example of how the authors addressed possible ethical concerns associated with the study findings.

For the data analysis, the researchers used SPSS to conduct two logistic regression models. The analysis looked at the influence that one or more independent variables had on the dependent variables being examined. The independent variables included race, gender, and foster care experience. The dependent variables were retention and completion. The analysis found a statistical significance between the dropout rates of foster care alumni and the control group. The researchers also provided policy and practice implications and recommendations.

Summary

Chapter 2 provided a review of relevant literature that supports the purpose of the current study. Research related to the study population, foster care alumni, and location of the study, community colleges, were explored. Studies that have used the conceptual frameworks of Bandwidth (and the related Growth Mindset and Value Affirmations) and Capitals (Cultural, Social, and Academic) were presented and analyzed. Prior research using the study's methodological approaches, case study and narrative inquiry, and the data collection strategies, interviews and administrative data reviews, were also outlined. Chapter 3 will now further detail the methodology of the study.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Research Questions

This study was based on the following primary research question: What are the lived experiences of foster care alumni that have contributed to their success at a community college? Two sub-questions were:

1. What experiences influenced their decision to enroll in a community college?
2. What experiences influenced their persistence and completion of a postsecondary credential/degree?

Population

The institution that served as the research location is a large, multi-campus, urban, traditional community college that offers technical certificate, associate, and select, workforce-driven bachelor degree programs and a variety of continuing education and non-credit course offerings. The institution is in the Southeastern United States. The institution serves over 60,000 students annually (including credit and non-credit enrollment), and the diverse student body represents over 180 countries (Broward College, 2020). The overall completion rate at the institution is 31 percent (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018).

The institution serves approximately 400 foster care alumni annually (Florida Department of Education, 2018). The completion metrics for foster care alumni at the institution fluctuate based on the cohort (e.g., 150% time to completion, 200% time to completion). The completion data set produced by the institution only identified degrees conferred (Broward College, 2020). Currently, the institution does not systematically track the completion rate of foster care alumni. The specific population for this study is

foster care alumni who are currently enrolled at the institution and have completed at least 50% of their degree program. This degree program milestone was selected due to the nature of the study. This study is a bounded case study that tells the stories of success of foster care alumni who have overcome obstacles to persist toward a degree. Of the approximately 400 foster care alumni enrolled at the college, just over 200 students are at the 50% or higher milestone (Broward College, 2019).

Methods

The specific research methodologies used for this study were case study (for data collection and analysis) and narrative inquiry (for reporting). Case study and narrative inquiry were selected because of the purpose of the study. The purpose of this study was to explore and understand the lived experiences of foster care alumni and if these experiences influenced the individual's decision to enroll in a community college, persist, and complete a credential/degree. Furthermore, "narrative became a better way of understanding the experience" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. xxvi).

Case study and narrative inquiry are forms of qualitative research because they are not concerned with numbers and the statistical significance of an independent variable on a dependent variable. They are not concerned with the generalizability of the data and findings. They are not necessarily, concerned with influencing widespread policy changes. For a case study, the "design is chosen precisely because researchers are interested in insight, discovery, and interpretation rather than hypothesis testing" (Merriam, 2009, p. 42). For narrative inquiry, "the researcher asks questions that will help them interpret and experience the world of the participant rather than try to explain

or predict that world” (Wang & Geale, 2015, p. 196). Both case study and narrative inquiry are concerned with the bounded system (the case/individual).

A case study is an “intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social unit” (Merriam, 2009, p. 46). The case for this study was not only foster care alumni currently enrolled in a community college but, instead, the case was even further bounded and limited to foster care alumni that are close (based on an established 50% milestone) to completion of a credential/degree. “By concentrating on a single phenomenon or entity (the case), the researcher aims to uncover the interaction of significant factors characteristic of the phenomenon. The case study focuses on holistic description and explanation” (Merriam, 2009, p. 43). The case study method, for data collection and analysis, was selected because of the specific research question and sub-questions of the study. The purpose of the study was to understand the lived experiences of foster care alumni and how these experiences influence the individual’s decision to enroll in, persist through, and complete a post-secondary credential. The data identified the influence of the lived experiences on the college life-cycle choices of the students. Merriam (2009) stated that “case studies illuminate our understanding of experience” (p. 44) and therefore was the most appropriate method for the purpose of this study.

Narrative inquiry was used, in conjunction with a case study, to report the study findings. Merriam (2009) highlighted the benefits of using a case study as a qualitative research methodology. One benefit identified is the ability to combine case study with other methods stating that a researcher could “present a person’s ‘story,’ hence combining narrative with case study” (p. 42). Narrative inquiry seeks to understand an individual and to tell the individual’s story within the context of society and time.

“Enhancing personal and social growth is one of the purposes of narrative inquiry” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 85). The stories were presented with an understanding of the three-dimensional space outlined in Chapter 1. In order for a story to be understood, it must be told within the context of interaction (personal/society), continuity (time – past, present, and future), and situation (place). Wang and Geale, 2015, argue that the “purpose of narrative inquiry is to reveal the meanings of the individuals' experiences as opposed to objective, decontextualized truths” (p. 196). Therefore, subjectivity, context, and personal perspective are integral to the stories retold in narrative inquiry.

The lived experiences of foster care alumni are their authentic stories. Collecting, analyzing, and retelling these stories and understanding the influence the lived experiences had on the individual’s college life-cycle choices was the purpose of this study. “Anchored in real-life situations, the case study results in a rich and holistic account of a phenomenon” (Merriam, 2009, p. 51). Case study and narrative inquiry were the qualitative research methods that perfectly aligned with the purpose of this study.

Participant Recruitment

Study participants were recruited using purposeful sampling. Qualitative research uses purposeful sampling to ensure that the participants “directly reflect the purpose of the study and guide in the identification of information-rich cases” (Merriam, 2009, p. 78). To protect the identity of the population, participant recruitment strategies utilized a three-tiered system. The researcher worked directly with two institutional offices (Student Outreach Services and a specialized grant program) and one external office (local non-profit working with the identified population). The researcher provided the

offices with informational items and flyers about the study inviting all interested participants to contact the researcher directly (included in Appendix A). The leads of each of the offices shared the information with the identified population. The researcher never had access to the contact information for the identified population except for those interested participants.

When interested participants contacted the researcher, additional details (e.g., number of interviews, length of each interview) were shared, via a short survey, to ensure continued interest and availability. Also, at this point, an informed consent form was shared with the interested participant. The interest survey and informed consent are included in Appendix B. The interest survey was developed by the researcher based on a review of similar documents. The informed consent was based on the web-based template provided by the IRB at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

While the final number of study participants could not be determined before recruitment, the study sample size sought saturation. “The size of the sample within the case is determined by a number of factors relevant to the study’s purpose” (Merriam, 2009, p. 82). While the number of foster care alumni enrolled at the study site is approximately 400, the number of students who are near completion (based on the established milestone) was expected to be considerably less. The final number of eligible students at the identified completion milestone (more than 50% complete) was approximately 200. Understanding that an identified sample size would need to be adjusted when the availability of the actual study population and the willingness of the participants was determined, the researcher sought to engage with approximately 15

participants. However, only eight eligible students responded positively to the study recruitment strategies and six completed the research protocol and interviews.

Since the study was focused on the success of the foster care alumni in the community college environment, the study participants were all working toward a credential/degree and were at least 50% complete. The credentials included a technical certificate (for employment advancement), an associate of science degree (intended for direct employment, e.g., an RN program), an associate of arts degree (intended for transfer to a bachelor's program), and a bachelor of applied science degree. The community college where the study participants attend offers select, workforce-driven bachelor programs. While students in the bachelor programs were not necessarily targeted for participation in this study, two of the study participants were bachelor students. Both, though, already earned their associate's degrees at the same institution.

Sex, race, and age did not exclude any participants. The demographics of the students that responded and consented to participate in the study were representative of the institution where the participants attend. The specific demographics of the study participants are explored in Chapter 4.

The study intended to tell the individual stories of the participants and highlight any common themes that emerged from stories. It is important to state that there is nothing "simple" about telling the stories in a qualitative research study which employs case study and narrative inquiry methods. Case study reports are comprehensive and detailed. "Perhaps the major point about case studies to keep in mind is that they are richly descriptive in order to afford the reader the vicarious experience of having been there" (Merriam, 2009, p. 258). Storytelling is a form of data reporting in the narrative

inquiry methodology that is deep and complex and compliments the detailed descriptions of case study reports. According to Kim (2015), stories have a beginning, a middle, and an end and are often “told.” While a narrative attempts to “understand” and “know” a portion of a story – a specific piece of the overall story. With this understanding, the stories that were told as part of this research study are narratives of the participants’ lived experiences in an attempt to understand and know the factors that contributed to the individual’s success in the community college environment. The study did not intend to tell the participant’s entire life story but instead focused on telling the narrative of the case – the student’s college life-cycle decisions and postsecondary success.

Data Collection

The confidentiality of the participants was a critical component of the study. Data collection was primarily collected through semi-structured interviews. The guided interview questions are included in Appendix C. The questions were developed by the researcher based on a review of the literature regarding community college enrollment, persistence, and completion. Face validity is important in instrument creation to ensure that the items included are “sensible, appropriate, and relevant” to the intended population (Connell et al., 2018, p. 1894). The instrument was shared with two experts in the fields of foster care transitional support and higher education to check and support the face validity of the guided questions. The foster care transitional support expert was from a local non-profit agency that specializes in supporting foster care alumni transition into independent living with one of the major components of financial independence being postsecondary credential attainment. The higher education expert was a student services and support administrator from the identified research institution. Both of these

experts were able to provide feedback regarding the guided questions to ensure that the intent of the interviews was apparent in and supported by the questions.

The interviews were conducted over three 1/2 hour-long sessions to maximize engagement and build trust. The first session focused on the choice to enroll in a community college, the second session focused on persistence, and the final session focused on completion and the next steps. The interviews were spaced out over a few weeks, which was shorter than the ideal 10-week period. The first interview would have taken place right before the term began as this interview was focused on enrollment. The second interview would have been scheduled between the 2nd and 4th week of the term as this interview focused on the factors that supported the participant's persistence (e.g., engagement with faculty, participation in co-curricular activities, usage of academic support programs). The third and final interview would have been scheduled around mid-terms (8 weeks into the semester) as it focused on completion. This schedule was developed so that the participant's story can be told over a period of time to add to the richness of the shared experiences. The reality of the timeline, though, was shorter and varied between the participants because of the unexpected length of the recruitment and the schedules and availability of the participants.

It was expected that each session would last approximately 1/2 hour, and each session was recorded for transcription purposes. An online transcription service (e.g., Rev.com) was used to transcribe the interview accurately. The interviews were scheduled around the participant's availability and in a location selected by the participant. An easy to use and secure internet scheduling software (e.g., Doodle) was used to schedule the interviews.

The researcher took field texts during each session. The field texts served as complimentary observational data to the semi-structured interviews. The field texts provided context to the interview setting as well as the interviewer's observation of the study participant. "Field texts, in an important sense, also say much about what is not said and what is not noticed" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 93). Field texts served as a data collection method but by nature are interpretative and were considered during the data analysis.

To also build trust and ease confidentiality and personal safety concerns, the participants were told that only the researcher would review the completed (recorded) interviews, transcriptions, and field texts. Participants were informed that no personal, identifiable information would be included in final narratives/stories. The participants were asked to identify a pseudonym of their choice for the study. "In qualitative research, replacing participants' real names with pseudonyms is the standard approach to protecting privacy" (Brear, 2018, p. 723). Recent research by Brear (2018) explored the standard use of pseudonyms in research and how this practice may inadvertently (or advertently) result in racial prejudice toward already marginalized minorities and emphasize the white privilege of the researcher. Allowing participants to select their pseudonym was intended to prevent unintentional ethnic profiling or racial-masking by the researcher.

Finally, participants were told that the recorded interview, transcriptions, and field texts would be kept for two years and then destroyed. The handwritten field texts would be locked in a filing cabinet at the researcher's personal home. The audio recordings of the interviews would be kept on the original recorder, which will also be locked in a

filing cabinet at the researcher's home. The electronic transcripts of the recorded interviews would be kept in a password-protected file on the password-protected computer that belongs to the researcher. The time frame for data storage was selected due to the records retention standards in the state where the study was conducted (Florida Department of State, 2015).

In order to validate and provide additional context to each study participant's academic history, administrative data were reviewed and included in the data analysis. The administrative data was focused on the study participant's academic experience throughout their community college tenure and highlighted common metrics related to postsecondary persistence and completion. The metrics included the total number of credits attempted, the total number of credits earned, the total number of semesters enrolled, credential/degree length, time to completion, and cumulative grade point average. The specific credential/degree that the study participant is completing was also verified and documented.

As previously noted, during the participant recruitment, the researcher worked directly with two internal institutional offices, Student Outreach Services, and a specialized grant program. The administrative data for each student who expressed interest in participating in the research study was provided to the researcher by the Student Outreach Services office (with the permission of the student to adhere to all FERPA regulations). The researcher did not disclose the names of the final study participants to the Student Outreach Services office. Therefore, while not all students who expressed interest became study participants, the administrative data was provided for all who expressed interest to protect the identity of the actual study participants.

Variables

The purpose of this study was to tell the stories of success of foster care alumni in the community college environment by understanding their lived experience and the factors that influenced their decision to enroll in a community college and persist through to the completion of a credential/degree. Specifically, the researcher sought to reveal the influence of specific life experiences on an individual's enrollment and completion in a community college. The study group was foster care alumni, students who aged out of foster care. Because of the underrepresentation of foster care alumni in postsecondary education, the study was conducted to understand their lived experiences and then retell their success stories. Thematic analysis was also conducted to identify any common themes among and between the success stories.

Data Analysis

“Data analysis is the process used to answer your research questions(s)” (Merriam, 2009, p. 176). This study intended to understand the lived experiences of foster care alumni enrolled in a community college who are near completion and to identify any common themes between the stories of the participants. In order to tell these stories and understand the influencing factors, interview transcripts, field texts, and administrative data were reviewed, organized, analyzed, and retold.

Narrative inquiry is closely related to the philosophy of hermeneutics, the study of written text (Merriam, 2009). The foster care alumni stories were studied, interpreted, and analyzed (using codes and categories/themes) for meaning to the individual and the case. “Field texts are the texts of which we ask questions of meaning and social significance” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 130). The analysis and retelling of the

stories were not a step by step process (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Instead, the analysis involved a continuous review of the data to understand the importance. “In narrative analysis, we attempt to keep the ‘story’ intact for interpretative purpose” (Riessman, 2008, p. 74). Similar to narrative, case study analysis and reporting “is a complex process that involves moving back and forth between concrete bits of data and abstract concepts.....between description and interpretation” (Merriam, 2009, p. 176).

Thematic analysis was conducted to determine if there were apparent threads of data that highlighted similarities among and between the study participants. Thematic analysis “is a method for systemically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57). The research questions for this study sought to understand the lived experiences that influenced a foster care alumni’s decision to enroll in a community college and what experiences influenced/influences the foster care alumni to persist to completion. If themes/patterns did exist among the “influencing experiences,” then there may be relevance and meaning. Thematic analysis “is a way of identifying what is common to the way a topic is talked or written about and of making sense of these commonalities” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57). The categorization of the themes can be either inductive (drawn from the actual words of the data) or deductive (overarching categories identified by the researcher). Research can have a combination of both approaches, but typically one approach dominates the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012). This study was particularly interested in a foster care alumni’s experiences with the postsecondary lifecycle (choice, enrollment, persistence, and completion). Therefore, the deductive approach was used for theme categorization. However, the analysis remained flexible, a

basic tenet of thematic analysis, to allow inductive patterns also to emerge, if apparent (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

The thematic analysis for this study followed the six phases developed by Braun and Clarke (2012):

1. Familiarize yourself with the data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing potential themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

Reading, re-reading, listening, and re-listening to the interview transcriptions, field texts, and administrative data were all part of phase 1 as the researcher became more familiar with and began to analyze the text critically. During this phase, the researcher began to “read the data as data” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 60). Phase 2 was when initial coding began. For this study, the researcher self-coded the data and used an online coding software (e.g., MAXQDA) to support the process. Braun and Clarke stated that coding must be “inclusive, thorough, and systematic” (p. 62), which is why a dual approach was used. Moving beyond the codes, phase 3 involved the identification of similarities/commonalities/themes. Themes that were directly relevant to the research questions of the study were mapped for further review and analysis. “Good themes are distinctive and, to some extent, stand-alone, but they also need to work together as a whole” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 65). The relevancy of the theme was determined based on the theme’s association with the bigger picture – the research questions. If other

themes emerged, they may be noted but will not be analyzed unless deemed pertinent to the research questions.

Reviewing the themes, as they related to the raw data and initial codes, were part of the 4th phase. The continued use of thematic maps was a key component of this phase. The goal of this phase was to have “themes that capture the most important and relevant elements of the data, and the overall tone of the data, in relation to [the] research question” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 66). Once the themes were reviewed and verified, they needed to be labeled and defined, which was the purpose of phase 5. Each definition that was created in phase 5 included specific quotes from the data that directly align to and describe the theme. The overall connection between the themes and the study’s research questions should be evident. The 6th and final stage concluded with the writing of the report in order to demonstrate how the themes “connect logically and meaningfully” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 69).

The retold stories of the individual foster care alumni, coupled with the thematic analysis of the collective stories, highlight the unique and common experiences of foster care alumni who have defied the odds and have achieved success in a community college environment.

Ethical Issues

In order to conduct the interviews with the foster care alumni at the study site (the community college), the researcher secured the approval of the college’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the IRB at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Both IRB approval processes required the researcher to submit an application that included the measures taken to protect the human subjects participating in the study. The applications

also required the researcher to detail how the study findings would be used and disseminated. Once the application review processes concluded, the IRB approvals were secured in Summer 2019.

As a current practitioner and administrator at the study site, the researcher recognized and remained aware of the layered relationship that exists with the study participants. The researcher does not have direct oversight of or influence over the study participants in the capacity of an administrator. The researcher consistently separated the role/identity of an administrator and a researcher. “Identities come into play via our perceptions, not only of others but of the ways in which we expect others will perceive us” (Bourke, 2014, p. 1). The researcher’s position within the institution was transparent to study participants. It was also the responsibility of the researcher to be upfront and honest with the participants on how the results will be utilized and shared. This transparency helped to build trust between the researcher and the study participants.

Also, the researcher was responsible for ensuring that the stories stayed true to the participant, even if the stories were sometimes hard to read or even believe due to their sensitive topics. “Dangers can emerge when and if researchers do not engage in processes that can circumvent misinterpretations, misinformation, and misrepresentation of individuals, communities, institutions, and systems” (Milner IV, 2007, p. 388). It was also important to retell the participant’s story without bias or filtering.

Staying true to the stories is as important as the validity of the study. More traditional quantitative researchers often question the validity of qualitative research. However, Polkinghorne (2007) stated that the issue is not with the validity of the research but instead with the apparent pull between traditionalist and reformist researchers.

“Different kinds of knowledge claims require different kinds of evidence and argument to convince readers that the claim is valid” (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 474). The stories themselves measure the validity of this study. “Narrative research issues claims about the meaning life events hold for people. It makes claims about how people understand situations, others, and themselves” (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 476). The intent is not to determine if the story the participant told is 100% accurate, but instead, the reader is asked to determine the level of “plausibility” of the story. Polkinghorne (2007) argued that there are gradations of confidence levels and that it is not a forced binary level (yes/no; accept/nonaccepted). It was the researcher’s responsibility to make sure the stories were told accurately and as reported by the participant. These stories highlight “narrative truths.” “Storied texts serve as evidence for personal meaning, not for the factual occurrence of the events reported in the stories” (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 479).

Another potential ethical issue was related to the use of the stories and study recommendations. Due to the nature of this study, the use of these stories and recommendations must be taken with caution due to the inability to generalize the recommendations to the larger student population. However, if framed correctly, the recommendations can be used to help create future training and development opportunities for educational practitioners to support a more comprehensive college experience for foster care alumni.

Since the researcher is also an administrator at the study site, there could have been a desire to reach out to study participants to provide targeted interventions or strategies to support the student. Since the confidentiality of the participants must be protected, the researcher could not reach out to the students. However, the researcher did

provide detailed information regarding the institution's student success initiatives to all study participants as part of the final interview session. This strategy enabled the researcher to provide continued support without singling out individual study participants.

Summary

This chapter summarized the methodological approaches to the study. The chapter started by identifying the specific research question and sub-questions of the study. The study population, foster care alumni, and research methods, case study and narrative inquiry were outlined. The steps to participant recruitment and data collection were reviewed, and the specific study variables and methods for data analysis were explained. The chapter concluded with a review of the ethical considerations made by the researcher. Chapter 4 will now explore the findings of the study.

Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of foster care alumni and how these experiences influenced the individual's decision to enroll in a community college, persist in a program of studies, and complete a credential/degree. The study took place at a large, urban, majority-minority community college in the Southeastern United States. The following sections provide an overview of the study participants, retells the narratives of the participants, identifies the themes present in the narratives, analyzes the significance of the themes related to the purpose and research questions of the study, and finally documents the strategies used to show the trustworthiness of the findings.

Participants

Approximately 200 eligible foster care alumni were contacted and invited to participate in the study. Eight students responded positively to the invitation, with six participants completing the study protocol of three interviews. The first interview focused on the student's foster care experience and their educational journey leading to enrollment in college. The second interview asked questions related to the student's experience in college, paying particular attention to the situations or people that helped the student stay enrolled and persist. The final interview focused on the student's success in college, their plans for post-graduation, and lessons they have learned on their journey.

The participants are all current students who have completed at least 50% of their program of study. All of the students are on target to complete a degree in this calendar year. The study location is a majority-minority serving institution with a majority female student population. The participants in this study are representative of the overall student

population as four participants identify as female, and two participants identify as male. All participants identify as Black or Hispanic. The participants' ages range from 20 to 30 years old. None of the participants reported having any children, and none are currently married. Table 1 provides an overview of the demographic data of the study participants.

Table 1			
<i>Demographic Overview of Study Participants (n=6)</i>			
<u>Participant</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Race/Ethnicity</u>
Kai	27	Male	Hispanic
Samantha	23	Female	Black
Sandra	24	Female	Black
Francisco	30	Male	Hispanic
Brianna	20	Female	Black/Hispanic
Caitlin	25	Female	Hispanic

The institution the participants attend is a community college that offers technical certificates, associate's, and workforce-driven bachelor's degree programs. The participants in the study represent both associate and bachelor degree offerings at the institution. Initially, bachelor's degree students were not going to be recruited. However, both bachelor's degree-seeking participants also earned their associate degrees at the same institution. Table 2 provides an overview of the academic data of the study participants.

Table 2					
<i>Academic Overview of Study Participants (n=6)</i>					
<u>Participant</u>	<u>High School</u>	<u>Program of Study</u>	<u>Length in College</u>	<u>GPA</u>	<u>% Credits Attempted v. Earned</u>
Kai	Diploma	Bachelor of Applied Science	8 years	2.64	59%
Samantha	Diploma	Associate of Art	3.5 years	3.02	76%
Sandra	Diploma	Bachelor of Applied Science	3 years	2.98	89%
Francisco	GED	Associate of Science	11 years	2.16	67%

Brianna	Diploma	Associate of Art	3 years	3.33	100%
Caitlin	GED	Associate of Art	6 years	2.6	51%

Participant Narratives

While the participants shared some common experiences and overarching themes (which will be discussed later in this chapter), each participant's story is unique to their life. This section retells the individual stories, and the lived experiences of the participants using a narrative inquiry approach for data reporting. These stories include the students' initial entry into and experience with the foster care system. And, the stories are relative to the students' choice to attend college, their persistence through college, and their pending completion of a degree. Following the three dimensions in narrative inquiry, outlined by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), the stories take into context the time, the environment, and the larger societal influences.

These are the stories of Kai, Samantha, Sandra, Francisco, Brianna, and Caitlin.

Kai

Kai is 27 years old and identifies as a Hispanic male. He has experienced postsecondary success by already completing an Associate of Arts degree and is currently pursuing a Bachelor of Applied Science degree. Despite his success, he has multiple course withdraws and failed attempts. He has attempted over 170 credits and earned only 101 (59%). His GPA is 2.64, and he is expected to graduate this year with a degree in Supervision and Management.

Kai clearly remembers the day, 22 years ago, that he was taken from his home and removed from the custody of his biological mother. He recounted the night that it happened. His mother had overdosed on pills, but he recalled not being overly concerned at first since he had seen her like this before. However, as the night went on, he realized

this time was different. He walked over to a neighbor's house, and they called 911. The police and an ambulance came. They took his mom in the ambulance; they took him to a foster care center. Kai shared that he never saw his biological mom again. He was five.

After a few weeks of being in the foster care center, Kai realized that this would be his new reality. He recalled meeting with a lot of counselors, therapists, and social workers. He remained in the foster care system for about two years, going in and out of different centers and homes. He mentioned that at one point, he was placed with his biological grandmother but did not stay there long because she was unable to care for him. He was also in a long-term placement for about one year and thought that he was going to be adopted by that family. The family had a biological son who had some behavioral issues, and Kai did not get along with him. Kai recalled having some issues at this time and being depressed and anxious. He was six, or maybe seven at this point and recalled thinking "if this is how it is going to be, if this is where I am going to be, I'm going to have to make the best of it and learn to just deal with whatever it is that comes."

Due to the issues with the biological son of his foster care mother, Kai was removed and placed back into a shelter and in and out of other foster care placements. Approximately six months later, he was placed with foster care parents who had their biological child and an adopted child both around Kai's age. "We kind of hit it off at the beginning because I never really had siblings...so it was like a surreal experience to have someone my age to be able to grow with." He was in this placement for about six months before the family decided to adopt Kai. He remembered feeling like he "could grow with these people." He has been with that family ever since.

Kai's educational journey started later than the traditional student as he was not enrolled in kindergarten until he was seven. When he finally started formal schooling, Kai was living with his adoptive parents, siblings, and grandparents. He described how he spoke both English and Spanish at home, but that his language skills were not academically proficient. Therefore, in addition to starting school late, Kai was enrolled in a dual-lingual (English and Spanish) immersion program. He remembered liking school and being involved in a lot of clubs and academic programs. He has always enjoyed art and music and credits his art as a productive and creative outlet for his emotions.

Despite starting school late, Kai stated that his primary and secondary educational experiences were rather stable and successful. He remembered hearing about college very early on in his life as both of his adoptive parents are college-educated and expected him to go to college. "I realized the importance of what it meant to go to college and to strive to learn more and have that knowledge. It takes you far in life." Upon graduating high school, Kai wanted to go to a university but decided, with input from his adoptive parents, to start at the local community college. "To be honest, I wanted to go to start off at [the university], but I realized that I wanted to get a grip of what college was like before I jumped full-fledged into that portion of my educational career. And so, I decided, you know what, I'm going to take my two years here at [the community college], I'm going to graduate and then I will pursue my bachelor's at [the university]." Kai's decision to enroll in the community college first was based on the thought that the community college would be an easier entry point into a successful college experience.

In addition to going to college, Kai also works full-time in his family's insurance business. Not wanting to become overwhelmed with his schoolwork and his commitment to the family business, Kai decided to enroll in college as a part-time student taking only a couple of classes each term. When recounting his first few semesters into his associate's degree, Kai shared that he started hanging out with the "wrong crowd" and engaging in illegal activities. This path diverted Kai's attention and focus away from school, which resulted in him either withdrawing from or failing his courses. Kai attributed this distraction and these failures as contributing factors that led him to leave school and reevaluate his goals.

Kai's period of self-reflection and introspection led him back to college and the decision to change his major from business to psychology. Kai spoke of his desire to study people in order to understand human behavior, including his own. Kai recalled that his success in his psychology courses gave him momentum to continue and persist toward his degree. Kai shared a great experience with a faculty member, which further reinforced his motivation to stay in school. "I think what really turned me on was the fact that I had a wonderful professor who was really engaged in the class...she was really cool, and I think that's what really motivated me to keep going down that area of study." Also in this course, Kai gained perspective about his own life experiences, "I learned a lot and applied a lot of the stuff that I learned to my own life, got a little bit more understanding from my past and tried to understand how my past worked with my current self... I learned a lot and really enjoyed it."

Unfortunately, even with Kai's new perspective on life and positive momentum in school, he admitted that he found himself in serious trouble again. Kai recounted his

struggles with drug addiction, which ultimately led to him being arrested. “The reality of facing ten years, I think that really puts things into perspective. I was dealing with some really, really heavy drugs; I was hanging out with some really stupid people.” Because of the self-destructive choices he made, Kai explained how his freedom and professional future were in jeopardy. Kai solemnly shared how the judge gave him a second chance by keeping him out of jail. “I was given another opportunity, another chance from that, and I’m extremely grateful.”

Kai described feeling an overwhelming sense of relief for this second chance but also questioned if he deserved it. In addition to the possible incarceration situation, Kai conveyed how he questioned his worthiness of the financial assistance that had been given to him. Kai spoke about the various financial aid awards he was given and the funding he received to go to school and virtually earn a degree for free. Why me, Kai asked, sharing that many other people also have hard lives and are not given the same opportunities. Kai said that he was hesitant to accept the financial support offered to him,

there are times where I look at the tuition exemption, and I don’t feel that I earned it. There really are times where I don’t feel that I’ve earned it because there are a lot of people who go through tough times and situations in life that I think they deserve it a little bit more. But for whatever reason, I grew up the way that I did, and I was offered that opportunity, and I needed to make the most of it.

Kai’s second chance came with consequences that altered his path moving forward. Kai shared his disappointment in having to change his major and career goals from psychology. During his legal troubles, Kai was told that he would have a difficult time qualifying for a license to practice as a psychologist because of his felony record.

Kai stated that he did not want to be defined by his past and that he was committed to taking full advantage of this second chance and became motivated to rise above his circumstances. Kai changed his major/career focus again, this time to marketing. Marketing is now his third major since he was first pursuing business and then psychology. However, Kai saw this as a way for him to combine his knowledge of business, his artistic/creative abilities, and his understanding of human behavior.

Kai revealed that he tried out for the college's varsity soccer team, but he did not make the squad. He was disappointed, but he saw it as an opportunity to focus more intently on his academics. He also shared that he continued to play soccer recreationally. When asked to reflect on his college experience and what made him successful, Kai expressed the need to understand the big picture and to set long-term goals but also to take one step at a time, recognize the short-term wins, and finally to not give up. He spoke a lot about having and never losing hope and finding healthy outlets that align with long-term goals,

Dedicate your life to serving, to helping, to creating, to innovating, and revolutionizing things in this world. I look back, and I see what I had to go through. My mom and losing her. Then having to grow up and dealing with addiction and having all of these things that really dragged me down. But, I knew the potential that I had and still have.

Samantha

Samantha is 23 years old and identifies as a black female. She is pursuing her Associate of Arts degree and is expecting to graduate this Spring. Samantha has made the Dean's List a few semesters and currently has a 3.02-grade point average. She has

successfully earned 41 credits while attempting 54 (76% of the credits attempted were earned).

Samantha recalled her earliest memories of her childhood, none of which included living with her biological mother. As soon as she was born, Samantha and her siblings were removed from her mother's care. Samantha and her siblings were placed with a guardian. Samantha and her siblings stayed with her guardian until the guardian's husband died and then Samantha's siblings moved to Georgia while she stayed in Florida with her guardian. Samantha reported going back and forth often between her guardian's house and the guardian's sister's house. The separation from her siblings was impactful on Samantha as she stated that her sisters have always been close to each other but not with her. When asked if this was hard on her, Samantha stated: "you get used to it."

Samantha shared that she moved around a lot when she was young, as she was not able to recall how many elementary schools she attended. She was held back twice in elementary school and attributed her multiple moves and the subsequent disruption as the cause of her inability to appropriately advance through elementary school. Despite experiencing academic setbacks in elementary school, Samantha excitedly recalled being placed into advanced mathematics courses in middle school. Instead of a traditional school, Samantha attended an alternative high school. She explained this decision, to attend an alternative high school, as a way to "make-up" the two years she was behind due to being held back while in elementary school. The alternative high school enabled Samantha to take traditional, blended, and online courses. She said that the high school allowed her to "stay focused so I could catch up on myself, and I did just that."

College was not a foreign topic for Samantha. She said that it was discussed

when she was growing up, and one of her sisters, who she still talks to, was the first to enroll in college and be successful. Samantha's sister served as motivation for her to also enroll in college. Samantha expressed her self-doubts, though, stating, "I never thought I could make it this far, honestly." Choosing which college to attend, however, was a challenge for Samantha. She credited her guardian and her guardian's daughter for selecting the college she is attending. They encouraged her to enroll, and the daughter went to the college's campus with Samantha and helped her fill out the admission application. The guardian's daughter even paid Samantha's initial fees.

Samantha described her feelings of discouragement when she was finally on campus. She remembered feeling alone and how she needed to navigate the physical campus, the emotional stress, and the academic rigor of college life all on her own. "I just maneuvered around." Samantha conveyed that the cost of college was also really starting to cause her stress. "I was so stressed out about, oh my God, how am I going to pay." She experienced some relief when a friend reached out to her to let her know about the financial assistance available to foster-care alumni provided by a local non-profit organization. Shortly after this conversation with her friend, Samantha applied for and earned a full scholarship through the non-profit organization and said she qualifies for this scholarship until she is 28 years old. The local non-profit organization also helps Samantha with career counseling and advising, housing, developing life skills, and provides general support. Samantha expressed that she no longer felt like she was alone as she began building a network of support.

One example that Samantha gave that highlighted her on-campus support network was her participation in campus student life. Samantha became involved on campus by

joining the student government association. She shared that she has always been very outgoing, even though she did not have many close friends growing up. She believed that it was her outgoing personality that helped with her roles in student government, which mainly involved surveying students on campus about their experiences and their participation in student life events. Her participation quickly escalated to a more formal commitment. “At first, I was just a team member, but then after that one year of me serving as a team member, I got promoted for office [officer].”

In addition to her role as a student government officer, Samantha spoke about her involvement with a specialized grant program. The specialized grant program is an on-campus program that supports students who are in difficult situations by connecting them to resources (financial, housing, food, and employment) and providing them mentors for continued guidance and support. Samantha spoke about the impact the specialized grant program’s team and her specific mentor have had on her ability to focus on her future. She expressed that she can be her true and authentic self when she is participating in events hosted by the specialized grant program. “This is me, and this is who I am, and this is who I’m going to be.” She connected her participation with the specialized grant program with staying in school. “I owe a lot to the team. They have made so many connections for me and provided me opportunities to express myself and to grow.”

Samantha discussed the personal experiences leading her to select Social Work as her major. She included how she changed her major a few times early in her academic career. She first selected communications, then psychology, and finally Social Work. She landed on Social Work, believing this major and career path combines both her love for communications (engaging in discussion and communication with others) and

psychology (understanding others). Samantha connected her experiences in foster care and her struggles, giving her first-hand knowledge of the lives and situations of her future clients.

Samantha has decided not to wait until she graduates before she starts helping others. She is using various social media platforms to share her story and her experiences so that others know that they are not alone. Samantha reported having over 10,000 followers on one of the social media applications and always received positive feedback and gratitude from her followers for sharing – even when the topic is difficult. Samantha shared that sometimes she gets really sad and thinks, “Why is this my life?” but then she seeks out a positive interaction with someone and “it’s kind of like a breath of fresh air, where they would like breathe life upon you.”

In addition to her studies and engagement on campus, Samantha also sings and participates in choirs at church and different singing opportunities on campus. She has always viewed music and singing as an outlet stating, “Honestly, I feel like if I didn’t have music growing up, I would’ve been lost my mind a long time ago.” Samantha shared that her childhood was a difficult one because her foster family did not also accept her for who she was/is. “They tried to tell me, ‘Hey, you talk too much.’ Or, ‘Hey, you do this. Hey, you do that.’” She did not want to change, even though they would tell her to, and she needed to accept herself fully. “I really had to learn who I was...I’m just going to be me.”

Samantha does not regret any part of her journey in college but said that she does feel like she could have completed her degree faster. “I’ve learned so much, and I’m just going to take what I learned and use it as a learning lesson, and next time, be better.” An

example Samantha provided about these learning lessons is about her financial aid refund checks and the benefit of saving money. Samantha shared that she would always take her refund checks and buy whatever she wanted. Reflecting on those spending sprees, she realized that it was wasteful. She now takes the bus to and from school and “makes it work” but recognizes that she could have saved her refund checks for a car. “I could’ve had a car by now if I was more financially smart in my decisions on where my money goes.” She acted on this lesson and opened a new bank account for her refund checks. She now saves all of the refund money so that she can get a car in the future.

As she prepares for graduation, Samantha expressed some uncertainty as to where exactly she is going to transfer but confirmed her plan to pursue a bachelor’s degree. When asked to think about how she has experienced success in college, Samantha said it is because she “never gave up. When I needed help, I asked for help.” She stated that she has a mentor whom she can “bounce ideas off of.” She also shared positive affirmations she tells herself, “You’re going to make it. You’re going to graduate. You don’t have to stress. You don’t have to worry.” She communicated having a positive perspective/mindset about her future and how she often reminds herself how far she has come and all that she has already overcome.

Sandra

Sandra is 24 years old and identifies as a black female. She has already earned multiple technical certifications, short-term workforce-driven credentials, and an Associate of Science degree, earning the Dean’s List and honor roll designations along the way. Sandra’s GPA is just under a 3.0, and she has completed 89% of the credits she has attempted. Because of the support she has received at the college, Sandra decided to

stay enrolled and pursue her bachelor's degree. She is on track to complete her bachelor's degree this year.

Sandra talked about her experiences within the juvenile justice system during her teenage years and how she was eventually put on probation. She shared how these situations caused her to have a very poor relationship with her biological mother. Their inability to forge a healthy, supportive relationship resulted in Sandra being kicked out of her mother's house. Sandra's mother then forfeited her parental rights. Sandra recalled being placed in the foster care system and how her biological brother tried to convince their mother to allow Sandra back into the family's house. Sandra communicated that she did eventually return to her family's home for a short period, but it was still not a healthy or stable environment. "I basically got into a situation where I was then 18, the legal age in America, but not fully stable to be on my foot and be out there to provide for myself, so I got kicked out [again]. Then, I was in really bad situations, and street activity and all types of stuff, harming myself and things like that."

Sandra found her way to a local non-profit organization. "They assisted me in changing my life." The organization provides housing to displaced children. "It basically helps youth at risk, along with kids who have been in the foster care system." Sandra conveyed that the organization has very strict requirements in order for residents to stay, including enrollment in school. It is this requirement that led Sandra to reconsider her education.

Sandra stated that because of the instability and struggles during her teenage years, she did not continue in high school and, therefore, did not graduate with her peers. The group home assisted Sandra with reenrolling in high school and eventually earning

her high school diploma. While completing her high school requirements, Sandra interacted with a teacher who “didn’t play around.” Sandra said that this teacher wanted her to succeed and assisted her in earning her diploma. Sandra admitted to not being too interested in college, but the group home she was living in requires residents to be enrolled in college in order to remain in the house. While she was at first hesitant about college, Sandra said

I did want to further my education at that point because I started wanting better for myself, and at that point, I was making great decisions in life and totally changing. I want to say that it [the motivation] was a little bit both of the instructor from my high school and the rules of living at the house.

Sandra reported that she was accepted into and received a scholarship to a university in a different part of the state, but she felt that moving and trying to find a new place to live would cause more stress than she needed. Therefore, she decided to stay local and enroll in the community college. Sandra’s decision to enroll in the local community college was based on convenience and stability more than preference.

Sandra shared that her initial experience at the community college was not a positive one. She felt that she needed to do everything on her own and that the college was not very helpful in advising her about her major/career opportunities nor her financial aid options. “It wasn’t until after I was personally paying out of pocket that I learned about other opportunities with financial aid and my situation.” Sandra shared her frustrations with the personnel at the college with whom she interacted. She felt alone and unsupported until she found the same specialized grant program that Samantha is

also a participant. Sandra is now the second student (Samantha earlier) who joined the specialized grant program and, in turn, found support.

Sandra found support and a sense of belonging with the specialized grant program's team sharing,

Sometimes, you're on campus, and not everybody is really friendly or able to help you the way you need. Nobody knows the story that people are facing, but I was one of those kids who, when I went home, I didn't have a mom and dad to help me register for classes. I'm first-generation, so everything's new to me, and through the [grant] program, I found Ms. O. It makes me feel like I have people here on campus that are supporting me, and just this summer I got approved for a scholarship with them, but before that, they were my support.

In addition to financial and emotional support, the specialized grant program provided Sandra with a mentor. Ironically, Sandra's mentor used to work at the group home where Sandra lives, so she shared the instant connection and existing level of familiarity between them. Sandra credited her mentor and the specialized grant program with her ability to stay focused, to stay in school, and to be on track to complete her bachelor's degree this year. "I don't think I would even be at my bachelor's if it wasn't for them."

The specialized grant program also connected Sandra with the college's career center. Sandra recalled a recent meeting with a career coach and expressed her excitement about finally pursuing her dreams and aspirations.

Even though I did know I had aspirations, I guess I want to call them dreams or something, I think I was so focused on myself that I didn't really, sometimes

when you're in self-development and self-care it takes a little while for you to be like, 'okay, now this is what I want to do. I want to pursue this; this is my passion' things like that.

While reflecting on her college experience, Sandra explained how she wishes that she would have known to seek out all opportunities when she first got on campus. She expressed how she struggled at the beginning and felt that she missed out on opportunities that could have supported her success earlier on. Sandra shared, "the more resources you have on campus and the connections, the more better off you are."

Francisco

Francisco is the oldest of the participants at 30 years old. He identifies as a Hispanic male. He is pursuing his Associate of Science degree in Office Management. In addition to being a student at the college, Francisco is also a fulltime employee on campus. He has been working at the college, first part-time and now full-time, for almost ten years. Francisco has struggled academically and has been placed on academic warning. He has completed 67% of the credits he has attempted. His GPA is just over 2.0, which is the minimum requirement for graduation. Despite these challenges, Francisco is on track to complete his degree this year.

As with all of the participants, Francisco's experience is unique to him. However, unlike the other participants, Francisco's story started abroad in Nicaragua. Francisco entered the foster care system, in Nicaragua, at three months old. He explained that his biological mother was moving to the United States, and she was unable to take him with her. Francisco shared that he was adopted fairly quickly and that his adoptive parents stayed in touch with his biological mother but that he did not have direct contact with her.

Francisco recalled a conversation he had with his adoptive parents when he was 11 years old, about visiting his biological parents in the United States. He believed that he was coming to visit for one week, but, instead, he ended up staying with them until he was 14. At 14, he reentered the foster care system, but this time in the United States. Francisco remembered first being placed in a shelter and then in multiple group homes. He considers himself “one of the few lucky ones” because he was only in three different homes between 14 and 18. Despite feeling lucky, Francisco shared that one of the homes was “extremely rough and chaotic.”

Francisco described his transition upon arriving in the United States as a difficult one for many reasons. First, he shared that he thought he was coming to the United States for only a one-week visit. However, he never actually returned to Nicaragua. Second, language and cultural transitions were challenging. Francisco’s native language is Spanish, and he only knew limited English. He also shared how different culturally, his new location was compared to Nicaragua. Third, he found himself part of a new family with siblings he never knew he had and parents he did not know. Francisco said that his biological siblings had much resentment towards him. His biological mom and his siblings were physically abusive towards him, “definitely very bloody sometimes. I ran away from home a couple of different times.”

Francisco recounted his educational journey, which started in a private elementary school in Nicaragua. He was a good student but also reported skipping school often. He would go to a park nearby and build things out of pieces of wood and other materials he would find in the park. When he came to the United States, he was placed into a public middle school. He recalled his love for reading despite his limited English proficiency

and fondly remembered his creative arts classes. He reported attending two different middle schools, one of which he described as a rather difficult environment. By his final year in middle school, Francisco was living in a shelter, and by high school, he was living in the group homes. Francisco stated that he attended two high schools before he decided to drop out of school. He eventually earned his GED.

When asked about forming connections to teachers/counselors during his primary and secondary school experiences, Francisco stated, “I never made any connections. I was never integrated long enough for me to connect. So no, I didn’t make any good connections when it came to guidance counselors and teachers. Yeah, none at all, actually.” However, the story was different for workers at the group homes where he was placed. Francisco shared that he is still in contact today with some of the workers from the shelter he was in during middle school and the homes he was in during high school.

When I came into the system through the group home, there were some people there who really took care of me. I was not the wild, aggressive fighter like many other of the people that were there, so it was much different. I believe they wanted to shelter me, and they did, and I believe they did a good job. To this day, I’m still in contact with many of them.

It was in his last group home when Francisco first thought about going to college. He had just earned his GED, and the woman in charge of the group home spoke to him about going to college. “She was able to really motivate me for school. So, it was in my last foster home when I was able to be really motivated and focused.” Francisco stated that he was required to leave the group home as soon as he turned 18 but that he was able to secure a spot in a transitional housing environment where he stayed for a few years.

For the past ten years, he has lived with a roommate, “it is one of the longest places I have been at one time.”

It was about the same time he moved in with his roommate that he started a part-time job at the college and enrolled in courses. He credited his early success to his academic advisor, who also happened to be one of his instructors. “He introduced us to things I never even dreamed of. It was my very first class and the last class I was very successful in. After that, it got difficult.” Francisco shared that he ended up stopping out of classes for approximately six years, but he stayed employed, part-time, with the college. Insecurities and circumstances caused his stop-out, he explained,

It was throughout that time that I still had a lot of questions; there was a lot of unknown, there was a lot of insecurities, there was a lot of what-ifs. I’m not sure what I wanted to do with my life. This was the first time I was on my own. It was the first time I was trying to identify who I was, what I was planning to do, and school once again did not become my focus.

When asked what brought him back to school, Francisco stated (again) that he was “lucky.” Francisco then shared the names of five college employees that not only motivated him to return but who also support him to stay in school and finish his degree. He attributes his persistence and success to the support of these colleagues/mentors. One of these mentors also happens to be his supervisor. When speaking about his supervisor, Francisco stated,

He came here with his high school principal style, like, I’m here to fight for you. I’m here. And though everyone else was doing that too, his passion, his desire to see things with a new perspective made a huge difference. And he’s like, I’m

putting you on a plan, and we're going to get this done. And if you can only do one class, then we'll do one class. I was highly motivated. I was inspired once again. I was like, Oh, I could do this.

In addition to his connections and support system on campus, Francisco expressed how involved he is in his church and how he leads a youth group for foster care children who are also members of the church. He reported that they are approximately 150 children in foster care that attend his church. It was through his engagement at church that he also met his mentor. Francisco stated that he has a great relationship with his mentor and the mentor's extended family. He can call him anytime with any question, "he's one of the first phone calls I usually make."

With graduation in sight and reflecting on his college journey, Francisco wishes that he would have focused more time on school and pushed a little bit harder. He also shared that he wished he was more open to counseling earlier in life to "work through hurt and pain and brokenness. I didn't do that to my later years, and I can see the impact that it's had emotionally." Despite these wishes, Francisco considers himself successful.

Even in the midst of chaos of going from place to place, from country to country, from being adopted to coming into a new family, to then group homes and then to be on my own, it has been very difficult, emotionally draining...but, I had people. I had good support, and I see that a lot of my peers didn't have that...so for me, the biggest difference that was made was just having a consistent mentor to walk with me through a long period of time.

After completing his associate's degree later this year, Francisco plans to stay at the college to pursue his bachelor's degree.

Brianna

Brianna is the youngest of the participants at 20 years old. She identifies as a black and Hispanic female. Despite attending 13 different primary and secondary schools, Brianna was able to start college as a dual enrollment student while still in high school. She is currently pursuing her Associate of Arts degree with a focus in pre-veterinary sciences. She has wanted to work with animals since she was seven. However, she is unsure if she will continue on this particular career path as she expressed an interest in changing her major to psychology.

I am currently studying with my endgame being a veterinarian. I really do just want to take a detour and focus more on Psychology because I am interested in being a Psychiatrist. I do feel that I would end up minoring in Psychology and think about doing a double major in the future.

Brianna's academic experience, in college, is very different from the other participants. She has successfully passed every course she has taken (attempting and earning 45 credits), she has earned the Dean's List multiple terms and has the highest-grade point average (GPA) of the participants at 3.33. Brianna is on track to complete her associate's degree this Spring. Despite this success, Brianna reported being worried about her grades, her GPA, school overall, and money. She also expressed her struggle with her career choice and is "seriously considering" changing her major.

Brianna stated that she was "never fully in the foster care system" as she was fostered and eventually adopted by a family friend. This type of experience is more commonly known as kinship care. Kinship care is a type of non-parental relative care that is an alternative to traditional foster care placements (Bramlett, Radel, & Chow,

2017). Kinship care can take many forms, and Brianna's experience initially started as public kinship care, meaning she was placed with a family friend but still had access to state-funded foster care programs (e.g., social workers, counselors, funding). Despite access to social workers for support, Brianna reported having so many different social workers assigned to her case that she was unable to form any real relationships with any of them. There was one caseworker she recalled connecting with, but when he moved away, she described feeling stressed and sad.

As previously noted, Brianna's primary and secondary educational experiences were very disruptive. She explained that she attended five different elementary schools, three different middle schools, and five different high schools. Because of this inconsistency, Brianna shared that she was not able to build close friendships. However, she recalled having a connection with a few teachers and school counselors that understood her circumstances and tried to help her stay on course.

Brianna shared that her biological mom talked to her about college while she was growing up, but it was not in a very positive light, "I was told that I would never get anywhere in life without a college degree." During her time in high school, Brianna recalled having one guidance counselor who was a great influence in helping her graduate high school. "She assisted heavily in helping me graduate." Brianna credited the same guidance counselor with helping her enroll in dual enrollment courses to get a jump start on college.

Brianna reported having a mentor whom she called "her lifeline." She can reach out to this mentor to discuss anything that is going on in her life. Brianna said that the mentor helps her stay focused on school and even helps pick out her class schedule each

term. She does not speak with the mentor a lot but reported checking-in with her at least once per month.

When asked to reflect on her journey and what has made her successful, Brianna stated, “I just keep telling myself that the sooner I finish, the sooner that I will be able to move out and start my own life.” She still lives with her guardian but shared her excitement and a little nervousness, to move away to college. “At this moment, I am living with my guardian until I get to go to [university]. I got accepted for Summer 2020 but not too sure if it is the best timing. I may reapply for the semester after. I’m still trying to figure everything out.”

Brianna also shared that “life as a child was very hard for me, so I am pleasantly surprised that I made it this far. The only thing we could focus on is the future because the past is not something that you can change. All I can do is my best.” Brianna is on target to graduate in the Spring. She is excited about transferring to a university within the state to continue her education.

Caitlin

Caitlin is 25 years old and identifies as a Hispanic female. She is completing her Associate of Arts degree and plans to become a teacher. Her college experience has been full of steps forward and steps backward. She has successfully completed only 51% of the credit she has attempted. She has numerous failed attempts, which placed her on academic warning multiple times. More than once, she was close to being academically suspended. Nevertheless, she has persevered. She continues, each semester, to enroll in classes and move forward toward completion. She is expected to graduate in the Spring.

Caitlin shared that her educational journey has not been an easy one. She attended multiple elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school. She believes that the multiple school placements are a result of her experience in the foster care system. Caitlin explained that her biological parents were drug addicts and abusive toward her and her siblings. She and her siblings were removed, multiple times, from their home by law enforcement. Caitlin and her siblings were moved between foster care placements and her parents' house constantly. She recalled being placed in approximately 15 foster care homes and two shelters between her elementary school and middle school years. At the age of 15, Caitlin was adopted by her foster parents.

Caitlin stated that she was diagnosed with speech, language, and comprehension deficits while she was in elementary school. She was placed on an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP), but she reported not receiving proper support services until middle school. "I could barely talk. I couldn't read. I didn't get to a 10th-grade reading level until the 11th grade of high school." Caitlin's middle school principal took a special interest in her situation and helped her academically and socially. Caitlin said that the principal would "give me clothes and stuff and help me. She put me into a program to help me with my language and reading because I would stutter like no tomorrow." Caitlin shared that it was at this point when she began to feel connected to the school. This connection and support system continued in high school. Caitlin described having a strong connection with two teachers who helped her navigate high school, catch up on her studies, and become more confident in her abilities. One of the teachers became "like a second father."

Caitlin recalled her first thought of attending college; it was when she was in the 11th grade. “I was scared for college because I was like, ‘I still have learning barriers.’” She explained that these barriers prevented her from earning a traditional high school diploma because she was unable to pass the state’s mandatory standardized assessment. Caitlin worked to earn her GED, which allowed her to then enroll in college.

Caitlin recounted her early college days and how she faced academic setbacks due to the time it took for the college to secure a copy of her IEP. “Everybody [at the college] was lost. Which was so tough.” When the college was finally able to secure a copy of Caitlin’s IEP, she was able to receive accommodations and resources within her courses. Unfortunately, Caitlin recalled still struggling in her developmental education and remedial courses and not experiencing a lot, of course success.

When asked why she chose to come to college, Caitlin said that she wanted to prove to herself that she could do it. When asked why she chose to attend the community college, Caitlin said it was a financial decision. One of her high school counselors told her and her mom that Caitlin could go to the community college on a full scholarship because of her experience in the foster care system. Caitlin had considered going to culinary school and becoming a chef, but she would have had to pay her way, and it would have been a very expensive decision. Caitlin decided to fall back on her second love, teaching. She was volunteering at a few local elementary schools and decided to pursue education as her major.

Caitlin explained that she is required to complete service hours in local schools as part of her degree requirement. She reported that she always does more hours than what is required. She loves being around kids and helping them succeed. Caitlin decided to

specifically major in Exceptional Student Education to help students who have learning disabilities as she does. “I want those kids to know that somebody actually cares.”

Caitlin is also part of the education club on campus and recently applied for the education honors society. With a GPA of just under 3.0, she is hoping her grades this term raise her GPA so that she is accepted into the honors society. Although she has experienced trouble completing her classes, when she does, her grades are usually a B or better.

In addition to going to school part-time, Caitlin also works full-time. Caitlin conveyed that she met her fiancé at her job and that he has become a source of inspiration for her. He supports her desire to become a teacher, and he is also finishing his college degree. Additionally, Caitlin shared that her (adopted) mom is another source of inspiration. While Caitlin is considered a first-generation college student because of her biological parent’s educational attainment levels, Caitlin’s adopted mother just completed her second master’s degree. Caitlin stated that she also has two mentors on campus, one a former academic advisor and the other a faculty member. When speaking about the academic advisor, Caitlin said, “she never gave up on me” and about her instructor, “she was always there whenever something happened to my family. She was there.” Caitlin explained that her inspirations and her mentors help her stay focused on school and stay motivated to finish her degree.

With graduation approaching, Caitlin reflected on her experiences. She reported feeling overwhelmed because of her journey, how close she was to being removed from school because of her poor academic progress, and know how close she is to completing. She is proud that she never gave up. “Once I saw that I was halfway done, I felt like I could accomplish it. So, I kept my head high, kept trying to cram the books, try to do my

best.” When thinking ahead to having her own classroom with students looking to her for guidance, she said: “I just want everybody to know that they can succeed, wherever they come from, whatever background, they can do it.”

Themes

The six student stories presented are each distinctly unique but also share common themes related to the participants’ lived experiences. Data coding and theme identification follow a specific approach. This study used the six-step process for thematic analysis identified by Braun and Clark (2012). These steps included:

1. Familiarize yourself with the data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing potential themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

Braun and Clark (2012) defined inductive and deductive thematic analysis and how research can combine both methods, but typically one approach is dominant. Since this study was particularly interested in a foster care alumni’s experiences with the postsecondary student lifecycle (choice, enrollment, persistence, and completion), the deductive approach was used for theme categorization. However, the analysis remained flexible, a basic tenet of thematic analysis, to allow inductive patterns also to emerge, if apparent (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

The themes for this study were identified through the analysis of the actual interviews (transcriptions) of the students. The researcher read and reread each interview

transcript multiple times to become familiar with the answers provided, concerning the study's primary research question and sub-questions while also paying particular attention to the specific words used by the students. The researcher hand-coded the interviews and used a software system as supplemental support. Commonalities found among the codes began to form initial themes. The themes were assessed for relevancy against the purpose of the study. A name for each theme was developed. These names provide clear descriptions as to how the themes relate to the study questions. Overall, four themes were identified.

One theme emerged through inductive analysis. Braun and Clark (2012) defined inductive analysis as a "bottom-up approach and is driven by what is in the data" (p. 58). This theme was drawn from the actual words found in multiple student stories. The theme does not necessarily align to or answer the primary research question of success, but it does highlight the (negative) impact of (certain) lived experiences on an individual's college lifecycle. The inductive theme is Historical Hardships.

Three themes were identified using a deductive approach. "A deductive approach to data coding and analysis is a top-down approach, where the researcher brings to the data a series of concepts, ideas, or topics that they use to code and interpret the data" (Braun & Clark, 2012, p. 58). The deductive data coding and theme identification align with the study's primary research question and sub-questions and the conceptual frameworks. The deductive themes are Human Connections, Healthy Outlets, and Hopeful Futures.

The themes, both inductive and deductive, are presented and defined below.

Inductive Theme

Historical Hardships. This study focused on foster care alumni who have experienced success in the postsecondary environment. The six study participants are success stories. They have all overcome insurmountable odds to move beyond their circumstances and establish a solid foundation for their future through their engagement in postsecondary education. Success, however, has not come easy, and the students found it hard, at times, to move beyond their past. Historical Hardships emerged as a theme through inductive analysis – through the words of the participants.

The theme of Historical Hardships aligns with the study's conceptual framework of Bandwidth. Verschelden (2017) defined Bandwidth as an individual's limited cognitive ability that is available to navigate everyday life, including academic endeavors. Each of the participants expressed Historical Hardships that impacted their cognitive ability to focus on school, and in turn, these hardships have hindered their educational progression. Five of the participants experienced obstacles early in their lives and their academic pursuits (e.g., being held back in elementary school, attending multiple primary and secondary schools, not finishing high school, and living in multiple foster care placements or group homes). Five students experienced setbacks later in life and while in college (e.g., failing classes, stopping out of school, getting in legal trouble, mental health issues, and housing insecurities).

Challenges and unresolved traumas have not been adequately addressed by at least half of the participants; therefore, impacting their ability to focus on their studies – these Historical Hardships have reduced the student's available bandwidth. These hardships are evidenced in the stories shared. Through tears, Samantha shared that she

did genetic research to find her biological father because she did not want the first time she saw him to be him lying in a casket. She expressed that she has so much to be proud of as she has overcome her circumstances. However, she also acknowledged that she longs for the love and acceptance of a biological parent.

While resilience and success are evident in each of the stories, at least half also has an underpinning of unresolved hurt. Francisco stated that when he is reflecting on his past and what he would tell his younger self, Francisco shared “be open to more counseling, to work through hurts and pain and brokenness. I didn’t do that to my later years, and I can see the impact that it’s had emotionally.”

The study’s primary research question sought to identify the lived experiences that influence an individual’s success in college. The lived experiences that are found within the theme of Historical Hardships do not align with the study’s primary research question. However, the experiences do align with the two sub-questions of the study as they are experiences that influenced the college choice of at least one student and the persistence of five students.

Sandra reported that she chose to enroll in the community college because the group home she was living in required her to stay enrolled in school in order to remain a resident. Sandra shared that she received a scholarship to a university in a different part of the state. However, she chose to enroll in the local community college due to her housing situation. She shared, “I got a scholarship for that university, but I figured because this [the community college] was local, I could really work and not have to be so stressed out about moving and stuff.” Sandra’s choice of where to enroll in college might have been different if she was not experiencing insecurities about her housing situation.

The Historical Hardships of five of the students impacted their progress toward degree completion, as evidenced in their credits attempted versus credits earned. The participant average is 68%, meaning that the students failed or withdrew from almost a third of the classes they have attempted. These academic setbacks extended the students' time to graduation, financially cost the students (in both time and money), and tested the psychological will/determination of the students.

When reflecting on their college experience, almost all of the participants expressed disappointment in how long it has taken them to complete their degrees. Francisco wished that he “focused more on school” and that he “would’ve done better.” Kai opened up about his journey, “I’ve limited myself a great amount. I don’t live in regret, but I am disappointed.” Even Brianna, who is the outlier of the group since she has completed every course she has attempted, stated: “I just keep telling myself that the sooner I finish, the sooner that I will be able to move out and start my own life.”

The inductive theme of Historical Hardships does not directly align with the primary research question because it does not influence a student’s success positively. Instead, the theme highlights the obstacles that threaten a student’s participation in post-secondary education and their persistence to completion.

Deductive Themes

Human Connections. The need for Human Connections was evident in each participant's narrative and is associated with the student’s ability to navigate college and everyday life successfully. Each of the students reported strong, supportive connections with individuals either within the college, a local organization (e.g., church), or at home. Some of the students experienced these human connections early on in their lives, within

the foster care families and facilities where they were placed for care. Some of the students experienced these connections in their academic settings, starting in middle school, throughout high school, and into college.

The theme of Human Connections is directly aligned with the study's conceptual framework of capitals - cultural social and academic capital (Bourdieu, 1986; St. John, Hu, & Fisher, 2010). Bourdieu (1986) identified the relationship between the acquisition of cultural capital and the familial investment in education. This type of capital building is found in Kai's and Caitlin's stories. Both Kai and Caitlin were adopted into families with strong connections to and expectations of post-secondary education. Both Kai and Caitlin have at least one adopted parent who is college-educated and, in turn, instilled that expectation in them.

Unlike cultural capital that is acquired from one's family, social capital is accumulated through networks external to oneself (Bourdieu, 1986). This type of capital building is found in all of the student stories except Brianna's. Samantha's, Sandra's, and Francisco's involvement in on-campus activities like the specialized grant program, student government, and employment have enabled them to build networks of support. Additionally, Samantha's, Sandra's, Caitlin's, Kai's, and Francisco's participation in off-campus activities like volunteerism, internships, recreational sports, and employment have allowed them to accumulate social capital.

St. John, Hu, and Fisher (2010) defined academic capital as "social processes that build family knowledge of educational and career options and support navigation through educational systems and professional organizations" (p. 1). Brianna, Caitlin, and Sandra all acquired academic capital through their engagement and relationships with

practitioners in their primary and secondary educational experiences. In their narratives, Brianna, Caitlin, and Sandra spoke specifically about teachers, counselors, and principals that encouraged and supported them to succeed.

These networks, of human connections, have guided the students throughout their student lifecycle (enrollment, persistence, and completion), which aligns the Human Connections theme with the study's primary research question of lived experiences that contribute to a student's success in college. The students each shared the following related to the impact of Human Connections on their success in college.

- I think it's important to really listen to the people that have been through it, lived through it, and are trying to give you this advice because it's wisdom. It's something they've been through. They've been there, done that, and they want you to actually succeed. (Kai)

- I've seen my sister. She was one of the first to go to college, and I see her go off and do so great. I'm just like, 'I know I can do it too.' She's always motivating me to keep going. (Samantha)

- So, then I met him [her fiancé], and he kept me going. (Caitlin)

- I do have a guidance counselor who is basically my lifeline. I call her anytime I need some assistance for even something simple. (Brianna)

- The one that I feel like has been holding me ever since I found them, I literally want to cry because they're really good people, is the [grant] program and the reason why I'm getting emotional is because sometimes you're on campus and ... nobody knows the story that people are facing, but I was one of those kids who,

when I went home, I didn't have a mom and dad to help me it makes me feel - like I have people here on campus that are supporting me (Sandra)

- I had people who were always very patient, understood my circumstances. But, also always asked me about school. (Francisco)

These Human Connections provided motivation and support to the students during all phases of their college lifecycle – college choice, enrollment, persistence, and completion. Furthermore, it is because of these connections that the students felt/feel supported and can continue despite hardships and setbacks (e.g., course failures, stopping out of school, legal troubles).

Healthy Outlets. Five of the students reported being actively involved in activities outside of school that – with school – support in cultivating a positive, holistic, healthy environment. These activities include recreational sports, creative arts, music, service/volunteerism, and internships. The students reported seeing the connection between these activities and their ability to focus, persist, and be successful in school (the primary research question and sub-questions of the study).

Similar to the theme of Human Connections, the theme of Healthy Outlets is associated with the study's conceptual framework of capitals, specifically social capital. As mentioned above, social capital is accumulated through networks external to oneself (Bourdieu, 1986). Samantha, Sandra, and Francisco are involved in on-campus activities, which enable them to build networks of support. Sandra, Caitlin, Kai, and Francisco participate in off-campus activities, which allow them to accumulate social capital.

During her narrative, Sandra spoke about the need to connect her educational choices with her career opportunities in the community. Sandra is the only study

participant who spoke about visiting the college's career center and completing an internship in her field of study. While the internship is not a requirement of her program, Sandra spoke about wanting to make intentional and strategic employment choices that complement her studies and further her skill set.

Samantha, Francisco, and Caitlin are all actively involved in service and volunteerism. They have committed time to help and support young children, many of whom are experiencing some of the same things they did as children (e.g., foster care and struggles with school because of a learning disability). Giving of their time results in personal satisfaction and fulfillment for Samantha, Francisco, and Caitlin. When speaking about her choice to volunteer and serve students with disabilities, Caitlin stated, "I want those kids to know that somebody cares...you got to do something you love." The students shared that they experience some level of healing and positive feelings through their service/volunteerism.

All of the experiences from these Healthy Outlets have connected Samantha, Kai, Sandra, Francisco, and Caitlin to larger social networks and therefore increased their accumulation of social capital.

The Healthy Outlets theme is also associated with the concept of Bandwidth (Verschelden, 2017) and specifically the recovery of bandwidth in order to free up cognitive resources available for academic pursuits. Verschelden (2017) identified Value Affirmation as a strategy for recovering bandwidth. Samantha's and Kai's narratives highlighted participation in activities that align with the value/importance the student has placed on music, exercise, and art.

Samantha shared that in addition to providing a healthy outlet for her emotions, her music serves as a storytelling mechanism. She feels safe being vulnerable through her music. When speaking about her singing, Samantha said, “some of the things that I probably wouldn’t tell people you’ll hear it in my music and you’re just like ‘Wow.’” The ability for Samantha to express herself and openly deal with past trauma helps her to move forward in her studies and focus on her future.

Like Samantha’s music, Kai spoke about this participation in recreational sports and creative arts as outlets for him. When speaking about how his love for art developed, Kai shared, “I grew to be an artist. The family that adopted me realized my artistic potential early on and put me into different programs, so I took advantage of it. I really did.” Art’s importance to Kai has continued to grow throughout the years, and it even influenced his selection of a program major, Marketing. This connection of his values (art) and his degree program have supported his persistence to completion.

Samantha’s healthy outlet, music, allows her to release negative emotions, and Kai’s healthy outlet, art, allows him to connect his passion with his studies. These Healthy Outlets bring Samantha’s and Kai’s values into focus, free up bandwidth, and allow them to dedicate the necessary cognitive resources they need to be successful in school.

Hopeful Futures. Like the theme of Healthy Outlets, the theme of Hopeful Futures is aligned to the study’s conceptual frameworks of academic capital and bandwidth, and the study’s sub-question related to experiences that influence completion. The students expressed being proud of how far they have come, which relates to their ability to build the necessary academic capital needed to navigate the community college

environment successfully. Additionally, the students' statements and actions related to their Hopeful Futures are examples of value affirmations. Value affirmations are methods identified by Verschelden (2017) and Cohen and Garcia (2014) as ways to overcome bandwidth limitations, cognitive resources, constraints.

Caitlin's message was simple, "I've done it, and I just want everybody to know that they can succeed, where they come from, whatever background, they can do it too." Caitlin shared her practice of creating vision boards to keep her focused on her future instead of her past, "I have two...one for my life and one for my wedding. I'm going to get my associate's degree and then my bachelor's degree before I'm 27." Caitlin's vision boards are an example of translating hopeful thoughts into intentional and strategic action.

Sandra spoke about experiences beyond even the college degree stating, "we're living in a different world today and the more skills you have, I mean the degree is awesome, but the more skills, internships, and opportunities that you get, it's just a better chance of your life bettering." Kai's reflection on his college experience is mostly focused on his future and graduate school. However, he also fully embraces his past, "I know that failure is a part of success, and for me, failing gives meaning to my success. It helps define part of my success, and when I look back, I'm going to appreciate and value those failures and those moments where I've fallen short." Similar to Kai, Samantha's future includes a reflection on her past, "you can do it! Keep going! You made it this far. Let's keep going. Why would you stop?"

Each students' narrative represents their complex, multi-dimensional, sometimes challenging life. And yet, each student expressed excitement and hope for what is ahead.

Analysis

This section analyzes the significance of the narratives and the themes to the study's research question: What are the lived experiences of foster care alumni that have contributed to their success at a community college? And the two sub-questions: What experiences influenced their decision to enroll in a community college? What experiences influenced their persistence and completion of a postsecondary credential/degree?

The three deductive themes – those that directly align with the study's conceptual frameworks and research questions - identified in the participant narratives are Human Connections, Healthy Outlets, and Hopeful Futures. Each of these themes aligns with the study's research question and sub-questions because each theme positively influenced/influences the postsecondary participation, persistence, and success of the student.

Human Connections is positively associated with the student's college choice, enrollment, persistence, and success in college. Each participant's narrative contains encouraging influences, including the presence of supportive adoptive parents, guardians, teachers, instructors, mentors, and advisors, that have guided the college enrollment, persistence, and success of the participants. These human connections are evidence of the student's acquisition of cultural capital (from their foster care parents/guardians and adoptive parents) and their accumulation of social capital (new connections outside of the familial/foster unit) and academic capital (new connections specifically in educational settings).

Similar to Human Connections, the Healthy Outlets present in the narratives are associated with the student's ability to broaden their social networks, their social capital,

through the participation in campus student life, on and off-campus volunteerism, and internships. These Healthy Outlets also help to combat socio-psychological underminers (Verschelden, 2017), like adverse childhood experiences and doubts of belonging, and help the student to reclaim bandwidth and the necessary cognitive resources to persist in college and complete a degree.

The theme of Hopeful Futures is also a positive influence and primarily associated with the student's motivation to complete a postsecondary degree. Each of the narratives included the student's recognition that a college degree was needed in order to have a better life. The participants expressed the need to earn a degree to secure not only a job but a career that would provide for long term financial success, stability, and independence. The cost (financial, intellectual, and time) of enrolling in college and completing a degree was outweighed by the benefit (financial, intellectual, and long term) of the college degree. The students understood the return on the investment for their futures. The students connected their long-term values to the completion of a college degree. Like Healthy Outlets, Hopeful Futures is also associated with the student's ability to reclaim/recover bandwidth in order to focus cognitive resources on staying on track and completing their degree and the acknowledgment that the acquisition of academic capital is a positive investment in their future.

Trustworthiness of the Findings

The study findings have been identified and analyzed. However, it is also important to understand the trustworthiness of these findings. Creswell (2013) identified eight strategies that qualitative studies can employ to validate study findings. This study utilized six of these strategies, clarifying researcher bias, using rich (detailed), thick

description, peer review, member checking, prolonged engagement and persistent observation, and triangulation. The final two strategies, negative case analysis and external audit were not used in this study.

In Chapter 3, the researcher's bias was clarified as part of the ethical considerations for this study. Creswell (2013) outlined the importance of this clarification by stating, "the researcher comments on past experiences, biases, prejudices, and orientations that have likely shaped the interpretation and approach to the study" (p. 251). The researcher is currently an administrator at the location of the study and therefore brings underlining assumptions and biases. By addressing these at the forefront of the study, helped to clarify the researcher's bias.

By using narrative inquiry as to the reporting methodology for this study, the researcher was able to use rich (detailed), thick descriptions to retell the stories of the study participants. Creswell (2013) stated, "with such detailed description, the researcher enables readers to transfer information to other settings" (p. 252). Each participant's narrative considers the time, person/society and space when retelling the story. This use of rich (detailed), thick descriptions as the reporting method for this study, therefore, supports the trustworthiness of the data and the findings.

A peer reviewer was recruited to read and review the data and findings from a methodology standpoint, as she has experience with qualitative research methods, and also to check the validity of the content. The peer reviewer is considered a content expert due to her two-decades-long experience working with foster care alumni. Creswell (2013) identified the peer-reviewer as "an individual who keeps the researcher honest; asks hard questions about methods, meanings, and interpretations" (p. 251). For this

study, the researcher and the peer reviewer discussed the study's methodology, the themes identified, the analysis of those themes, and the findings. The reviewer determined that the content and the findings are consistent with her experience working with the study population.

Creswell (2013) defined member checking as a data validation approach that “involves taking data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants so that they can judge the accuracy and credibility of the account” (p. 252). The six students who participated in this study were given a copy of their stories. The students were not given the actual interview transcriptions; they were only given the retold stories. The students were asked to read the account for accuracy and completeness. This study was able to engage all six (100%) of the participants in member checking. Two students requested minor edits for clarification. However, every student confirmed that their stories accurately represented their journeys concerning their lived experiences in the foster care system and the community college environment.

Prolonged engagement and persistent observation is another validation strategy identified by Creswell (2013). This strategy involves “building trust with participants, learning the culture, and checking for misinformation” (pp. 250-251). This strategy was partially employed in this study through the development of trust between the research and the study participants. The researcher spent multiple weeks engaging in conversations and interviews with the participants and allowed the participants to select the time and location for all meetings. This approach was used to support the comfort and confidentiality of the participant. Additionally, the researcher asked the participants to select a pseudonym to provide the participant with control over this piece of

personalization and identification. The researcher built trust with the participants throughout the study, therefore, supporting the validity of the findings.

Triangulation is the final validation strategy used in this study. Creswell (2013) defined triangulation as a “process that involves corroborating evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or perspective” (p. 251). The themes identified in this study align with themes identified in multiple other studies related to the lived experiences of foster care alumni in the postsecondary environment. These studies include: the Salazar, Jones, Emerson, and Mucha (2016) study, the Helios Education Foundation (n.d.) report, the Campie (2016) article, the Watt, Norton, and Jones (2013) study, and Hayes Piel (2018).

These publications identified themes similar to those found in the current study. Salazar et al. (2016) identified themes related to resiliency (hope), social networks (social capital), and dedicated support (human connections), which all support the successful persistence and completion of foster care alumni in the post-secondary environment. The Helios Education Foundation (n.d.) report included a recommendation for a singular, identified, contact on each college campus to support the diverse and complex needs of the foster care alumni.

The Campie (2016) article outlined the financial support foster care alumni receive from federal and state grants to go to college but also highlighted the need for more holistic approaches. The article referenced the need for a “stable, caring, and trusted educational advocate” to support the success of the foster care alumni (Campie, 2016, para. 10). This recommendation aligns with the current study’s theme of human connection. The Watt, Norton, and Jones (2013) study researched a college campus

program that supports foster care alumni. One of the findings from this study was the positive impact the utilization of a student's assets (e.g., resiliency, altruism, creativity) had on success in college (Watt, Norton, & Jones, 2013). This finding is associated with the current study's findings of healthy outlets (e.g., music, art, volunteerism) and hopeful futures. Finally, the Hayes Piel (2018) chapter outlined the challenges foster care alumni face in their transition to college. Like the other publications referenced, Hayes Piel identified the need for "connections with teachers and other supportive adults on-campus, as well as stable relationships with adults outside of school" (Hayes Piel, 2018, p. 25). This recommendation aligns with the human connections theme from the current study.

As noted, the findings and recommendations from the previous five studies, reports, and articles align with the findings and recommendations identified with the current study. Therefore, the triangulation process corroborates the findings and supports the validity of the current study.

Summary

Chapter 4 retold the stories of the study participants using a narrative inquiry methodological approach for reporting. The process of thematic analysis and the alignment of the identified themes, to the study's conceptual frameworks, were presented. An analysis of the alignment between the identified themes and the study's research question and sub-questions was provided. The chapter ended with a presentation of the methods used to validate the study's findings using six strategies defined by Creswell (2013). Chapter 5 will now provide a discussion of the study findings.

Chapter 5: Discussion

“If you don’t center the voice of foster youth in this conversation, you will be doing a disservice to the very population you’re trying to serve” (O’Donnell, 2019, p. 37).

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the study findings in relation to the purpose of the study and the identified research questions. A brief review of the study and the research questions is provided. A discussion of the findings, the identified themes, and promising practices is followed by recommendations for future research. The chapter ends with the final thoughts of the author.

Review of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of foster care alumni and how these experiences influenced the individual’s decision to enroll in a community college, persist, and complete a degree. The study assumed that understanding the lived experiences that impact an individual’s decision to enroll in postsecondary education and complete a degree would provide guidance to secondary and postsecondary practitioners to properly support the population and increase the postsecondary participation and success of foster care alumni.

The study sought to understand the lived experiences of specific individuals on a personal level and within the context of society, understanding that the environment and time influence the experiences. Using a case study methodology for data collection, the analysis for this study sought to find specific themes within, between, and among study participants in order to highlight similarities between the experiences of the population.

Research Questions

This study was based on the following primary research question: What are the lived experiences of foster care alumni that have contributed to their success at a community college? The two sub-questions were:

1. What experiences influenced their decision to enroll in a community college?
2. What experiences influenced their persistence and completion of a postsecondary credential/degree?

Discussion of the Findings

The narratives of the study participants provide firsthand, authentic experiences of lives impacted by disruption, instability, abandonment, addiction, and trauma. The stories also exemplify, however, commitment to self, determination, growth, and success. The students persevered, personally and academically, despite overwhelming odds stacked up against them. They did not do it alone, however. The inductive theme of Historical Hardships documented that despite having some positive experiences in college, some of the students are still dealing with influences (socio-psychological underminers) that hindered their persistence. The deductive themes identified in the narratives – Human Connections, Healthy Outlets, and Hopeful Futures – highlighted the need for connection (cultural and social capital) and layers of support (academic capital and bandwidth).

Historical Hardships

All of the study participants expressed that they still experience worrisome situations, particularly related to finances and dealing with unresolved childhood trauma. The theme of Historical Hardships is aligned to the concept of Bandwidth, specifically

the socio-psychological underminers that reduce an individual's bandwidth. Therefore, the theme negatively influences the student's persistence in college. Verschelden (2017) introduced the concept of cognitive bandwidth and socio-psychological underminers. Underminers directly inhibits an individual's cognitive ability and therefore reduce their bandwidth (Verschelden, 2017). Examples of socio-psychological underminers are microaggressions, stereotype threat, and doubts of belonging.

Throughout the narratives, it became clear that all of the students are still dealing with underminers that threaten their ability to focus on learning and the future. "Persistent worry about money, including regular access to adequate food, shelter, health care, safety, and so on, takes up parts of the brain that are not available for thinking, learning" (Verschelden, 2017, p. 1). In her narrative, Brianna expressed concern, "my worries usually include gas, money, and school...unfortunately, life is really hard." It is these types of concerns that reduce a student's bandwidth and ability to allocate the necessary cognitive resources to their classes, therefore, impacting their ability to persist and be successful in school.

Many of the study participants questioned their "belongingness" in college, another socio-psychological underminer, according to Verschelden (2017). The students were unsure if they fit in on campus and if they could be successful. Samantha shared her doubts, "I never thought I could make it this far, honestly. Because it takes me longer to learn." Similarly, Francisco shared that he was lost when he first started in college and felt overwhelmed because he was "navigating through the whole system" himself. Caitlin questioned her belongingness and ability to be successful in college due to her

learning disabilities. These doubts contributed to Caitlin stopping out of school. She shared, “I stopped out for like two semesters. I felt like I was going nowhere.”

For all of the participants, adverse childhood experiences have led to scars in adulthood that have not fully healed. Francisco and Kai shared their experiences, seeing a counselor to deal with their negative internal feelings and negative outward actions. Samantha discussed experiencing episodes of depression, and Brianna expressed doubt in her career choices. In Francisco’s, Kai’s, and Samantha’s narratives, these moments in their individual stories contributed to the student’s lack of persistence – meaning each one experienced a temporary stop-out at school due to these pieces of their stories.

Research completed by Salazar, Jones, Emerson, and Mucha (2016) identified the need for mental health services and counseling on college campuses for foster care alumni. Often, foster care alumni have limited access to proper and consistent mental health services. Moreover, even when mental health services are available, foster care alumni are less likely to participate. “Although mental health symptoms often persist after leaving foster care, college-age youth are less likely than non-foster youth to engage in formal mental health services” (Jackson, Colvin, & Bullock, 2019, p. 21).

Institutions that actively engage in methods that combat these socio-psychological underminers, like Growth Mindset (Yeager & Dweck, 2012) and Values Affirmation (Cohen & Garcia, 2014; Brady et al., 2016; Jordt et al., 2017), provide the necessary remediation for students in order for the student to regain bandwidth and the cognitive resources necessary to support persistence and success. These methods should be coupled with mental health counseling to support the overall wellness of the student.

Human Connection

Kim and Schneider (2005) stated: “those with greater opportunities to interact and maintain social connections with talented and successful individuals will thus accrue greater returns on their own education, not just from the standpoint of educational quality, but from the social capital gained while attending school as well” (pp. 1197-1198). The Human Connection theme is evidenced in all of the participant narratives and is aligned with the concept of capitals – cultural, social, and academic capital. The human connections present in the study participants’ lives positively influenced their decisions to enroll in college, to persist through college, and to complete a degree. The narratives highlight the positive impact of these human connections throughout the participant’s student lifecycle. All of the participants identified adults in their lives who helped them select and enroll in college and persist toward their degree.

Regarding enrollment, Kai’s and Caitlin’s influence came from their adoptive parents, while Samantha was influenced by her foster guardian and older sister. These examples of human connection are most closely associated with the concept of cultural capital. Bourdieu (1986) aligned cultural capital to the familial unit and the potential of the individual. These students acquired this cultural capital through their connection to their adoptive and foster families and the family’s investment in education.

Sandra’s source of support came from the group home she was staying in, and Francisco’s support came from coworkers. When reflecting on the connections he made through his job, Francisco said, “I’ve definitely had a lot of people throughout the past few years who have just pushed and pushed and asked and asked and did not stop asking. And to this day, I’m really thankful; they never stopped asking.” These examples are

more closely associated with the concept of social capital. Unlike cultural capital that is acquired through the familial (foster) unit, social capital is accumulated through the connection to external social networks (Bourdieu, 1986). Sandra and Francisco may not have had the opportunity to acquire cultural capital. However, they were included in networks that enabled them to accumulate the necessary social capital to support their college student lifecycle.

Brianna's support came from her high school guidance counselor. Unlike the other participants who acquired cultural capital from their families or accumulated social capital from their networks, Brianna's human connection and support are most closely associated with academic capital. Academic capital is similar to cultural capital in that it provides the necessary human connections to support the individual, but it is uniquely tied to academic environments. Zaichenko and Vinokurov (2018) defined academic capital as "the knowledge component of the student's human capital" (p. 189).

Brianna's connection to her guidance counselor exposed her to the opportunities gained from furthering her education and therefore supported her decision to enroll in college.

Regarding persistence toward completion, Kai's and Caitlin's influence again came from their adoptive parents. When speaking about her adoptive mom, Caitlin said, "My (adoptive) mom, she helped me a lot. She helped me with studying a lot. Whenever I needed to comprehend something, she helped me break it down a little bit better...she would stay up hours helping me." Pishghadam and Zabihi (2011) identified the impact of a parent's educational outcomes on a child's success in college. The results of the Pishghadam and Zabihi (2011) study are specifically aligned to the positive capital that

both that Kai and Caitlin acquired from their adoptive parents who, themselves, have postsecondary degrees.

Samantha and Sandra's support for their persistence through college came from staff members of an on-campus targeted student success specialized grant program. Francisco's support, for persistence, remained his coworkers, but he also received additional support from his mentors. Samantha, Sandra, and Francisco all expanded their social capital through participation in the specialized grant program (for Samantha and Sandra) and mentoring opportunities (for Francisco).

Franco and Durdella (2018) researched the effect of capitals on the educational outcomes of foster youth. The authors stated, "these familial and social support systems facilitated ways for the foster youth to realize their needs and served to assist them in achieving their educational goals and aspirations" (Franco & Durdella, 2018, p. 73). Additionally, Hayes Piel (2018) highlighted the influence of human connection on the college enrollment choices of foster care youth, stating, "decisions to pursue postsecondary education are logically influenced by the information and support foster youth receive from current placements and caseworkers" (p. 22). The theme of Human Connections aligns with the findings of other similar studies that focused on the positive influence that these connections have on the ability to acquire culture, social, and academic capital to support the individual's postsecondary enrollment, persistence, and completion.

Healthy Outlets

Many of the study participants reported identifying and engaging in healthy lifestyles outside of school. The students were honest and said that they did not always

make the right choices in their personal lives, and they did not always participate in healthy outlets. However, going to college and seeing the benefits of a postsecondary degree have helped them to channel their energy into activities and opportunities that support healthier lifestyles. The Healthy Outlets theme is present in many of the participant narratives and is aligned with the concept of social and academic capital and bandwidth.

Volunteerism is one example of a healthy outlet shared by some of the participants. An example is Francisco's participation with a local non-profit agency. "One of the things that I was really involved in was in Big Brother/Big Sister because automatically, those kids were most likely in transition." He specifically chose this organization because the kids are experiencing many of the same things he did growing up, and he feels like he will be able to relate to the kids and to help them stay on course to a better life.

The positive benefits of participating in activities (healthy outlets) outside of school but that are related to the student's values and long-term goals are supported by the research completed by Orta, Murguia, and Cruz (2019). Their study focused on the impact that participating in Greek life had on the success of students while in college. The authors found that participating in organized activities supported not only the persistence of the participants while in college but that the engagement also supported the individual in accumulating additional academic capital that supported their success beyond college.

Internships and service in the field of academic study are two additional examples of healthy outlets. They are associated with positive influences that contribute to the

persistence toward completion of some of the study participants. Sandra spoke about engaging in internships related to her major in order to connect her learning within the classroom to her future careers. This connection provides relevancy to her studies and helps her to build both social and academic capital. Sandra is working toward a bachelor of applied science degree in supervision and management. She has completed internships off-campus and is currently interning in a department on campus.

Similar to Sandra, Caitlin is actively involved in service hours beyond her classroom requirements, which contribute to her persistence and completion of her degree. Caitlin's major is education, and she completes field experience hours at local elementary schools. These service hours allow Caitlin to connect with students and also remind Caitlin how far she has come and where she is headed.

Opportunities and activities that allow the student to connect their educational studies to their career aspirations support not only their persistence and completion in college but also enable the student to acquire additional social capital that will benefit the student beyond their academics. The role of the community college, specifically, in creating these connections between foster care alumni participating in healthy outlets (e.g., internships and volunteerism) and the acquisition of social capital, is found in the research completed by Cutler White (2018). The author stated, "community colleges, with strong ties to local communities...are ideally situated to provide a structured support system for foster youth to have college success" (p. 59).

Beyond the acquisition of social and academic capital, the theme of Healthy Outlets also supports a student's ability to reclaim bandwidth and redirect necessary cognitive resources to being successful in school. An example of this connection, in the

participant narratives, is Samantha's self-reported therapeutic effects of her singing. Samantha described her singing as a form of storytelling and how it allows her to be fully engaged with who she is and to release the pain caused by adverse childhood experiences. Samantha's singing supports her positive mental health, which in turn supports her success in school. Another example is Kai's participation in recreational sports, which supports his overall physical health. This connection between positive mental and physical health and success in college is aligned to research by Salazar, Jones, Emerson, and Mucha (2016). The findings of this study connected the importance of positive mental and physical health as a contributing factor to the academic success of foster care alumni in the postsecondary environment.

Hopeful Futures

Each of the study participant's narrative outlines their belief in the need for a college degree in order to secure a better future. While many of them wish it would not have taken them so long, they are hopeful for what lies ahead. Francisco has set his sights beyond even his bachelor's degree, "my motivations are now higher and more ambitious. I do want to eventually go for my master's degree. I don't even have my associate's degree (yet), but I do want to think that far ahead." The Hopeful Futures theme is evident in all of the narratives of the study participants and is aligned with the concepts of academic capital and bandwidth.

St. John, Hu, and Fisher (2010) outlined the relationship between academic capital (with postsecondary success) and an individual's ability to experience cross-generational uplift (upward social mobility). The authors reframe the notion that academic capital – in the form of a postsecondary degree – can no longer be purely an

economic benefit to the individual and society (supporting the workforce engagement and financial independence of the individual), but it also must benefit social equality and mobility. “Former foster youth attending community college often perceive education as an essential aspect of their transition to stability as an adult” (Hallett, Westland, & Mo, 2018, p. 57). The accumulation of academic capital supports the student beyond college in building an external network within professional and social circles as well. These connections continue to provide the student with transitional support into the workforce in securing economic stability, and in experiencing social mobility.

A 2019 study focused on the impact of hope on the successful transition of youth aging out of care. While hope is commonly considered a mental capacity and thought process, for foster care alumni, hope must be more action-oriented. Sulimani-Aidan, Melkman, and Hellman (2019) stated,

Hope is manifested in capacities to clearly conceptualize goals (goals thinking), develop specific and viable strategies to reach those goals (pathways thinking), and initiate and sustain the motivation for using those strategies (agency thinking). Therefore, hope is not “wishful thinking”; rather, it is an understanding of how intentional thought leads to goal-directed action (p. 135).

Hope is associated with Yeager and Dweck’s (2012) Growth Mindset and Jordt et al.’s (2017) Values Affirmation. Caitlin, who has experienced the greatest number of academic setbacks (e.g., failed classes that impacted her persistence), spoke about how hard it was to see the bigger picture and how she often thought about quitting. She struggled because of her learning deficiencies and disabilities, but she remained hopeful. Jordt et al. (2017) identified values affirmation as a way to combat socio-psychological

underminers and achievement gaps in at-risk populations. Caitlin's narrative speaks to experiences that reinforce her values and provide her with the necessary resilience to overcome her deficits. "These last two semesters I got As and Bs. I've never had that. So, I was really happy about that and wanted to keep that going." Caitlin's hope is also evidenced by purposeful action. Caitlin shared her practice of creating vision boards to keep her focused on her future and goals. The theme of hopeful futures (the students' ability and decision to remain hopeful for the future) positively influence their persistence and degree completion and their lives beyond college.

Promising Practices

Similar to this study, Salazar et al. (2016) examined the postsecondary experiences of foster care alumni. The findings of this study support the previous research. "College-attending foster care alumni are a vulnerable group of students with unique strengths, supports, and challenges that affect their experiences in higher education" (Salazar et al., 2016, p. 263). The Salazar et al. (2016) study looked at the resiliency factors found in and the (positive) social capital networks built by foster care alumni. Resiliency is associated with two of the themes from this study - healthy outlets and hopeful futures. "Having a sense of purpose and a bright future indicates that a person is goal-directed, achievement motivated and possesses the persistence and optimism that facilitates finding and acting on meaning" (Salazar et al., 2016, p. 265). The (positive) social capital networks are aligned with the human connections theme. "For youth transitioning out of foster care, the development of social capital provides an opportunity to build or rebuild critical connections and support that may have been lost or compromised by traumatic experiences" (Salazar et al., 2016, p. 266).

Foster care alumni have unique challenges. Quantitative data highlights the underrepresentation of foster care alumni enrolled in and completing postsecondary education. However, like the Salazar et al. (2016) study, this study focused on telling the stories behind the numbers in order to identify practices and methods to improve the numbers.

Current literature, like the Salazar et al. (2016) study, identifies the need for targeted campus services and systems to support the entire student lifecycle – college choice, enrollment, persistence, and completion - of foster care alumni. Three practices, aligned to the themes identified in the study findings, are presented below. The practices are establishing a single-point-of-contact, creating a focused agenda on equitable outcomes, and building a campus culture that cultivates a student’s sense of belonging.

Single-Point-of-Contact

One example of this targeted support is a single-point-of-contact on college campuses that serves as the advocate for the foster care alumni’s needs – holistically – regardless of the “need.” The needs vary from support filling out a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) to emergency housing, from career counseling to identifying the correct college major to childcare concerns. This practice is supported by research completed by Cutler White (2018). Cutler White (2018) refers to this approach as a “Single Stop,” which provides the student with a case manager who is responsible for assisting the student through all phases of the student lifecycle (enrollment, persistence, and completion). This practice aligns with the themes of Human Connection and Historical Hardships.

The single-point-of-contact practice is highlighted in some of the narratives told as part of this study. Samantha and Sandra are both participants in the specialized grant program, where they were paired with a mentor who guided and supported them throughout their journey on campus and in their classes (Human Connection). Mentors can serve a significant role in the resiliency of the foster care alumni. “Mentors likely serve as hope models for youth in care demonstrating the connection among goal setting, pathways development, and agency deployment” (Sulimani-Aidan, Melkman, & Hellman, 2019, p. 136). For Samantha and Sandra, the mentors, by default, became the single-point-of-contact for their questions and concerns. The students reported finally “finding their way” once they became involved with the specialized grant program. While the result was positive, both students struggled on campus before finding the program. The institution where the study participants attend needs to take a more proactive approach to seek out the foster care alumni. The college needs to examine their communication and outreach processes in order to inform the students of the connections on campus and encourage participant engagement to support earlier positive academic and social outcomes.

The single-point-of-contact could also help to increase foster care alumni participation in on-campus activities and supports by reducing the need for the foster care alumni to continually self-identify to multiple college departments and personnel (Historical Hardships). “Stigma associated with the foster care label, or a desire to leave the foster care identity behind as they embark on their post-secondary careers, may prevent students from self-disclosing and thus prohibit access to needed and available resources” (Salazar et al., 2016, p. 264). College practitioners cannot ignore the stigma

that comes with being labeled as foster care alumni. The single-point-of-contact may help to alleviate the stress and hesitancy that the stigma brings by allowing students the opportunity to fully engage in the college community and maximize the use of resources available to them.

The needs of foster care alumni are various and abundant, but the source of information and support need to be singular in order to serve this at-risk population effectively. Sarah Wasch, an administrator/advocate at the Foster Care to College Project (FC2C), recommends the single-point-of-contact as the easiest and immediate improvement that college campuses can make to support foster care alumni. “Doing so streamlines communication on a variety of complex issues, including admissions and financial aid. The designated contact person reaches out to local school districts and child welfare agencies as well as helping students navigate financial aid paperwork” (O’Donnell, 2019, p. 37).

Equity Agenda

For the past decade, community colleges have focused on improving completion rates. More recently, however, the framework around the completion agenda has expanded with an imperative to focus on equity (Smith, 2019). The disparity between the growing enrollment rates among racial and ethnic groups and the paralleled widening of achievement rates among the same racial and ethnic groups are found in a 2018 publication by the National Center for Educational Statistics entitled, *The Condition of Education*. While a more diverse population of students is attending college, the completion rates for minority students continue to lag, and the achievement gap is widening. With foster care alumni being overly represented by minority and low-income

students, the focus on equitable outcomes must be a priority (Dworsky, 2018). The Equity Agenda practice aligns with the theme of Hopeful Futures.

Similar to this study's attempt to tell the stories behind the quantitative data, higher education researchers and practitioners across the country realized that more intentional work was needed to drill into the completion and graduation data and understand *who is not completing*. While completion rates have slightly improved, the initial work associated with researching equitable outcomes identifies that focusing on completion rates without intentionally focusing on equity will not decrease the achievement gap for minorities and at-risk populations (e.g., foster care alumni) and in turn will maintain the economic and social mobility gaps (Smith, 2019). The focus on equity requires a coordinated approach by all stakeholders within the institution.

This coordinated care and holistic approach are found in this study through Francisco's and Caitlin's narratives. Both narratives highlighted the impact of faculty, advisors, and administrators on the student's initial enrollment, persistence through, and completion of coursework toward graduation. Francisco and Caitlin spoke about the influence instructors had on their ability to be successful, and this was coupled with support from the students' advisors and administrators.

A 2018 Educational Advisory Board (EAB) report outlined the need for institutions to implement a variety of support practices that focus on equitable outcomes for completion. "The changing needs and circumstances of today's students, coupled with outdated institutional policies and practices result in persistent barriers to success that widen existing achievement gaps" (EAB, 2018, p. 5). The practices identified in the 2018 EAB report require engagement from practitioners and stakeholders throughout all

levels of the institution, from faculty and administrators to advisors and students themselves. The equity practices are also embedded in all phases of the student lifecycle, from recruitment to enrollment to retention to completion and even placement within the workforce community.

According to the EAB report (2018), the equity practices must influence the curriculum that is taught, the training that is offered for faculty and staff, the hiring priorities and practices of the institution, the student services offered on campus, and the business community partnerships formed. In addition to outlining the practices, the EAB report provided real-world examples of how each practice has been implemented on a college campus. The EAB report also identified the impact on student outcomes from the implementation. When implemented, the practices resulted in a more personalized and supportive approach to the student lifecycle and, in turn, increased likelihood for completion.

The focus on equity in completion outcomes and practices benefit the foster care alumni since this at-risk population is overly represented by minority and low-income students. The Salazar et al. (2016) study stated that “foster care alumni disproportionately experience many identities the field of education has deemed underserved and worthy of specialized supports” (p. 263). The participants in this study all identified as minority students in addition to being foster care alumni. Practices that support minority students, complemented by targeted support systems for foster care alumni, build a campus-wide, coordinated, and holistic network of support for completion.

Sense of Belonging

In addition to the single-point-of-contact and practices that focus on equitable outcomes, building a community to support a foster care alumni's sense of belonging (on the college campus) is also critical for persistence and completion. This practice is aligned with the themes of Human Connection and Healthy Outlets.

A sense of belonging is found throughout the student narratives in this study. Every student spoke about how, at one or many points throughout their college experience, they did not feel like they belonged in college, that they were not prepared enough to succeed, that there were too many distractions for them to focus on school—overcoming these doubts and feelings required each of the students to not only focus on their long-term goals but also to establish meaningful human connections on (and off) campus. These connections varied by student experience and may have been grounded in the faculty-student dynamic (Kai, Francisco, Caitlin), the mentor-mentee relationship (Samantha, Sandra, Brianna), the staff-student bond (Francisco, Caitlin, Sandra) and the association with students in similar circumstances (Samantha, Sandra, Caitlin).

Davis, Hanzsek-Brill, Petzold, and Robinson (2019) stated that “interventions such as orientation experiences, first-year seminar courses, mentoring, and promoting more intentional engagement with campus activities have all been shown to improve students' sense of belonging, and also their persistence” (p. 117). For foster care alumni who often feel marginalized and who are often labeled at-risk, it is critical for college campuses to purposefully create spaces and opportunities for this population to find connections (with other foster care alumni) and build community. Salazar et al. (2016) found that “colleges can also support students in getting firmly tied into the academic

environment (e.g., connecting with professors), which can lead to stronger academic networks that can pay off educationally as well as in relation to future career opportunities” (p. 275). A sense of belonging, therefore, can assist the student in building the necessary (positive) social and academic capital networks needed to be successful in college and the workforce.

Research completed by Geiger et al. (2016) documented the positive benefits of a campus cultivating a community of “scholars” to support the sense of belonging for foster care alumni. The authors found that this targeted strategy supported the retention, persistence, and success of the foster care alumni. In most of the examples provided in the narratives of this study, however, it was the student who sought out the connection and not the institution, necessarily, forging an easy path for the student to navigate their engagement options. More intentional outreach is needed to make students aware of the resources and opportunities to support these critical connections and, in turn, a student’s sense of belonging on campus. This proactive outreach could start, rather easily, with the implementation of the single-point-of-contact practice outlined above.

Recommendations for Research

The need for additional research on the postsecondary enrollment and success of foster care alumni is evidenced not only by this study but also by other sources. The recommendations provided below relate to who is doing the research and what data is being used to inform the research.

Identifying the Researcher

In Fall 2019, Johnson stated that research on former foster care youth (what this study refers to as foster care alumni) is mainly limited to research conducted by social workers and other social scientists. Johnson (2019) said,

The narrow disciplinary conceptions about who can or should pursue research on youth in foster care have likely constrained the advancement of empirical knowledge regarding their post-secondary education experiences beyond the aforementioned fields. This perspective likely has also limited coverage of the topic in higher education at large, rendering youth in foster care invisible in college student success efforts and discourse (pp. 1-2).

In order to understand and impact the academic outcomes of foster care alumni, research needs to be initiated, conducted, and analyzed by educational practitioners.

The best research model, moving forward, is a collaboration between the social workers and the educational researchers to ensure a holistic picture is captured and the story told. Building on a concept mentioned earlier, this coordinated approach to research may even support greater participation by the research population (because they will be asked to participate in fewer studies) and maximize the use and applicability of the data (because a variety of social services units will use it). The suggested collaborative research model approach has the potential to result in a coordinated care network that would influence and impact all of the social services that exist to support foster care alumni (e.g., social workers, health and human services, primary, secondary, and postsecondary schools, non-profit organizations, and public/private philanthropic organizations).

Identifying the Data

The institution where the current study took place can benefit from the following recommendations. However, before any additional research can be completed, the institution first needs to develop and implement a systematic approach to tracking the enrollment and completion of foster care alumni. Currently, the institution monitors foster care alumni enrollment by tracking the usage of the state's tuition and fee exemption. The tuition and fee exemption is only available to foster care alumni until the age of 28. If the institution has foster care alumni enrolled that are older than 28, then these students are not being tracked. Unfortunately, the current approach limits the institution's ability to fully capture the total enrollment of foster care alumni at the institution. Additionally, the institution only tracks the raw number of degrees conferred but does not monitor attrition. Therefore, the institution cannot calculate an actual completion percentage for foster care alumni at this time. Once more holistic data collection and monitoring approaches are implemented, the institution will be able to further develop the data sets using the recommendations outlined below.

The focus on equitable outcomes and the community college equity agenda discussed earlier, may also provide more targeted research on this at-risk population since institutions are now drilling down into the mounds of quantitative data available to them. Moving from a data-rich to a data-informed environment requires researchers and practitioners to go beyond the numbers, therefore combining qualitative data with the existing quantitative data. A fairly new concept known as "thick data" combines qualitative research methods (e.g., ethnography and observation) with large quantitative data sets. "Thick data is defined by its contextual complexity, which enables the

researcher to reflect upon how and why people do what they do” (Bornakke & Due, 2018, p. 2). Thick data enables the numbers to come to life and makes the research and subsequent recommendations more personalized to the needs and goals of the individuals being studied.

As previously noted, “foster care alumni disproportionately experience many identities the field of education has deemed underserved and worthy of specialized supports” (Salazar et al., 2016, p. 263). Therefore, opportunities for future research also include drilling down into the data even further by examining the success rates of foster care alumni by sub-population groups, including race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and other characteristics, including single-parents, homeless, formerly incarcerated, and recovering addicts. This granular approach to research also aligns with the equity agenda and thick data methods discussed previously.

Final Thoughts

"An investment in knowledge pays the best interest." - Benjamin Franklin

This study told the stories of six foster care alumni currently enrolled in a community college. Each student has unique backgrounds and personal challenges. Common themes appeared in their stories, though, that allowed the study to highlight promising practices and inform future research. The most important theme, however, was not one that emerged from the stories but instead was the reason for the stories – the theme of success.

These six individuals invested in their futures by choosing to enroll in, persist through, and complete a postsecondary degree. This investment will support the individual’s ability to secure stability, economic independence, and social mobility.

This study cannot, however, be the end of their stories. Instead, their stories must be the catalyst for action and collaborative change in the postsecondary environment. While the numbers for this study were low, the Salazar et al. (2016) study showcased the stories of hundreds of more college graduates who were also foster care alumni, and similar themes were present in their stories.

Educational practitioners can influence change in the postsecondary engagement and completion rates of foster care alumni. The EAB report (2018) showed that this change requires a deviation from outdated policies and practices, but that that the change is possible. Assisting foster care alumni in earning a degree and securing economic independence and social mobility not only helps the individual student but has lasting long-term impacts on the larger community.

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Appendix A

Participant Recruitment Informational Item and Flyer

Congratulations, Seahawks!

Your graduation is in sight.

Are you interested in participating in a research study that is designed to tell your story?

The study will give you an opportunity to tell your story of success and how you overcame the odds to reach your educational goals.

The purpose of my study is to understand your experiences that influenced your decision to enroll at Broward College, stay enrolled, and complete your degree.

If you would like to participate, you will meet with me three times over the summer for about 30 minutes each time.

If you have experience with the foster care system and are within one semester of your graduation, contact me for additional information.

Julia Philyaw
Doctoral Candidate and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Employee at Broward College
juliaphilyaw@gmail.com
954-298-3702

CLASS OF 2019

Appendix B

Communication Script

NOTE: The same script will be used for inquiries received via email and via phone.

Hello. Thank you for your interest in participating in my dissertation research. My study is focusing on the lived experiences of foster care alumni and how these experiences influenced your decision to enroll at Broward College, to stay enrolled, and to complete your credential/degree. My study seeks to understand your story and see if there are common, overarching themes between your experiences and those of your peers. Specifically, I am interested in the experiences that influenced your success.

If this is something you are still interested in participating in, I have a short survey to send you via Qualtrics that will give you additional information about the actual study procedures, for example, the interview process. By completing this survey, you are confirming your continued interest to participate.

Once I receive your completed survey, I will send you an electronic consent form to complete. The consent form provides you with additional information about the study, including any identified benefits and risks, as well as ways you can stop participation at any point. Once you have formally given your electronic consent, I will send you a web-based request so that we can schedule our interviews.

Are you still interested in learning more? Do you want me to send you the Qualtrics survey?

Thank you very much for reaching out to me. Feel free to contact me if you have additional questions.

Julia Philyaw

Participant Interest Survey

Thank you for your interest in participating in my doctoral degree research study. This survey is intended to provide you with additional details about the process, schedule, and time commitment so that you are able to make an informed decision about your participation. Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability.

1 – Are you able and willing to meet with the researcher at least 3 different times for approximately 1/2 hour each time?

- Yes
- No
- If no, thank you for completing the survey. No further information is needed.

2 - Are you able and willing to meet with the researcher, in person, at the mutually agreed upon location, at least 3 times in June, July, and August?

- Yes
- No
- If no, thank you for completing the survey. No further information is needed.

3 – Are you able and willing to allow the researcher to record our meetings for content validation and transcription?

- Yes
- No
- If no, thank you for completing the survey. No further information is needed.

4 – Are you willing to provide the researcher with a copy of your current unofficial academic transcript?

- Yes
- No
- If no, thank you for completing the survey. No further information is needed.

5 – If you answered yes to the previous 4 questions, you are invited to participate in the research study and are asked to review and complete the following informed consent.

IRB #: 19519

Formal Study Title: Defying the Odds, Stories of Success: A case study of Foster Care Alumni in the Community College Environment

Authorized Study Personnel

Principal Investigator: Julia Philyaw, M.Ed. Cell: (954) 298-3702
Secondary Investigator: Brent Cejda, Ph.D. Office: (402) 472-0989

Invitation

You are invited to take part in this research study. The information in this form is meant to help you decide whether or not to participate. If you have any questions, please ask.

Why are you being asked to be in this research study?

You are being asked to participate in this research study because you have experience in the foster care system, you are currently enrolled at Broward College, and you are close to completing your credential/degree.

What is the reason for doing this research study?

This is a research project that focuses on the lived experiences of foster care alumni that have contributed to the decision to enroll, persist, and complete a postsecondary credential at a community college. The purpose of the study is to explore the experiences of the foster care alumni and to provide an opportunity for their voice and their experiences to be better understood. In order to participate, you must be 18 years of age or older, a foster care alumni, and completing a degree at Broward College.

What will be done during this research study?

Participation in this study will require approximately 2.5 hours of your time. You will be asked to review all study materials (approximately 1 hour) and to participate in 3 interviews that will be approximately 1/2 hour each (total of approximately 1.5 hours). Please note that the interviews will be recorded using an audio recording device. Participation will take place at a mutually agreed upon location either on or off-campus. The interviews will take place over a 10-week period, starting in mid-June and ending in late-August. You will also be asked to provide a copy of your unofficial transcript.

How will my data be used?

Data collected in this study will only be used for the principal investigator's doctoral dissertation research. The data will be analyzed to determine if common themes exist between the lived experiences of the foster care alumni participating in the study.

What are the possible risks of being in this research study?

There are no known risks to you from being in this research study.

If you need assistance with any issues, you are able to contact [Henderson Student Counseling Services](#) at 954-424-6916 to receive free services.

What are the possible benefits to you?

While there is no direct benefit to you, the results of the study are intended to highlight the lived experiences of the foster care alumni and the factors that contribute to your decision to enroll, persist, and complete a postsecondary credential at a community college.

What are the possible benefits to other people?

While the primary intent of the study is to understand the experiences of the foster care alumni, if common, overarching themes are apparent, these themes may also provide guidance to postsecondary administrators on ways to better support this population and to increase the participation in and completion of foster care alumni in the postsecondary environment.

What will being in this research study cost you?

There is no cost to you to be in this research study.

Will you be compensated for being in this research study?

There is no compensation for your participation in this study.

What should you do if you have a problem during this research study?

Your welfare is the major concern of every member of the research team. If you have a problem as a direct result of being in this study, you should immediately contact one of the people listed at the beginning of this consent form.

How will information about you be protected?

Reasonable steps will be taken to protect your privacy and the confidentiality of your study data.

The data will be stored in a locked cabinet in the investigator's office and will only be seen by the research team during the study and for 2 years after the study is complete.

The data will be stored electronically through a secure server and will only be seen by the research team during the study and for 2 years after the study is complete. The electronic

documents will be saved on a password-protected computer that only the primary investigator can access.

The only persons who will have access to your research records are the study personnel, the Institutional Review Board (IRB), and any other person, agency, or sponsor as required by law. The information from this study may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings, but the data will be reported as group or summarized data, and your identity will be kept strictly confidential.

Please note that the Principal Investigator (PI) is a mandated reporter at Broward College. This means if you disclose a situation of sexual assault, violence, or misconduct, the PI is obligated to report the situation to the college's Title IX Coordinator. In these situations, confidentiality is not guaranteed.

What are your rights as a research subject?

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study.

For study-related questions, please contact the investigator(s) listed at the beginning of this form.

For questions concerning your rights or complaints about the research contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB):

- Phone: 1(402)472-6965
- Email: irb@unl.edu

What will happen if you decide not to be in this research study or decide to stop participating once you start?

You can decide not to be in this research study, or you can stop being in this research study ("withdraw") at any time before, during, or after the research begins for any reason. Deciding not to be in this research study or deciding to withdraw will not affect your relationship with the investigator or with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and Broward College.

You will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

Documentation of informed consent

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to be in this research study. Signing this form means that (1) you have read and understood this consent form, (2) you have had the consent form explained to you, (3) you have had your questions answered, and (4) you have decided to be in the research study. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Participant Feedback Survey

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln wants to know about your research experience. This 14 question, multiple-choice survey is anonymous. This survey should be completed after your participation in this research. Please complete this optional online survey at <http://bit.ly/UNLresearchfeedback>.

Participant Name:

(Name of Participant: Please print)

Participant Signature:

Signature of Research Participant

Date

Appendix C

Interview Questions

The interviews will be semi-structured with the intent to cover the topics and questions identified below. However, the interviews will ideally be more conversational with very little structured questions unless necessary.

Background information (if the participant feels comfortable sharing)

1. When did you enter the foster care system?
2. How many different placements did you have?
3. How many different schools did you attend?
 - a. Elementary?
 - b. Middle?
 - c. High?
4. How many different social workers did you have?
5. Did you form any close relationships? (social capital)
 - a. Foster parents?
 - b. Social workers?
 - c. Teachers?
 - d. Guidance counselors?
 - e. Peers?
 - f. Family?

Personal Information (if the participant feels comfortable sharing)

1. What is your current housing situation? (bandwidth)
2. How do you travel to and from school? (bandwidth)
3. Are you working?
 - a. Fulltime?
 - b. Part-time?
4. Do you have any children? (bandwidth)
 - a. If yes, how many? What age(s)?
5. Is there anything in your life that is worrisome to you right now? (bandwidth)
 - a. If yes, do you have adequate support to overcome these worries?

College Choice

1. Do you recall the first time you learned about college? (academic capital)
 - a. When was it?
 - b. Where was it?
 - c. Who was leading the conversation?
2. Are you a first-generation college student? (cultural and academic capital)
3. When you first learned about college, did you think it could be an option for you?
 - a. If yes, why?
 - b. If no, why not?

4. Did you participate in any college preparatory programs?
 - a. Summer bridge?
 - b. College fairs/visits?
5. Did you have any adults or peers in your life that were encouraging (or discouraging) you from going to college? (cultural capital)
 - a. If yes, who? Did you listen to their advice/guidance?

Enrollment

1. When did you decide to apply for/enroll in college?
2. Why did you decide on this institution?
 - a. Did you apply anywhere else? If yes, why did you decide against that school?
3. How did you learn about Financial Aid?
4. Have you taken advantage of different sources of financial assistance?
5. What type of services, on or off-campus, have you used?
 - a. What has worked for you? Why?
 - b. What hasn't worked for you? Why?
6. What is your major?
 - a. How did you pick your program of study?

Persistence

1. How long have you been attending this institution?
2. Have you ever stopped out? (bandwidth)
 - a. If yes, for how long? Why did you stop out? What made you decide to come back?
3. Have you ever changed your major?
 - a. If yes, how many times? Why did you change?
4. Are you involved in any clubs or organizations on or off-campus? (social capital)
 - a. If yes, can you explain your involvement?
 - b. If no, is there a reason why you have not engaged?
5. Have you developed any close relationships on campus? (social capital)
 - a. Student services?
 - b. Student life?
 - c. Faculty?
6. Do you have a mentor? (social capital)
 - a. If yes, who is your mentor? How often do you meet/talk? What type of things do you discuss?
 - b. If no, do you want a mentor? Do you think a mentor may help you?

Completion

1. How does it feel being in your final term?
2. What are your plans for after graduation?
 - a. Transferring?
 - b. Job?

3. Why do you think you have been successful?
 - a. What worked for you?
 - b. What didn't work?
4. What would you tell your younger self if you could go back to when you first started college?