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Persistence, Motivation, and Resilience: Older Youth Aging Out of Foster Care Attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)

Belinda Davis Smith Ph.D., LCSW
Morgan State University, bdavissmithphd@gmail.com

Dana Burdnell Wilson MSW, Ph.D., LCSW
Morgan State University, Dana.Wilson@morgan.edu

Tiffany Y. Lane Ph.D., MSW
Wester Chester University, tlane@wcupa.edu

Sonja V. Harry Ph.D., MSW
Winston-Salem State University, harrysv@wssu.edu

Isiah Marshall Jr., Ph.D., MSW
Daemen College, imarshal@daemen.edu

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Introduction

Are older youth in foster care resilient, persistent, and motivated to move beyond their collective circumstances? This qualitative study examined the experiences of young adults who were in or had recently left foster care, and who were college students attending a Historically Black College and University (HBCU). Older youth in foster care are typically between the ages of 18 to 21; however, the participants in this study ranged in age from 20 to 23 years old. Therefore, the authors of this study define older youth as those between the ages of 20-23.

Although African American children and youth are disproportionally overrepresented in the public child welfare system (Hill, 2006), there is a paucity of empirical studies that focus specifically on the educational outcomes and college experiences of African American youth aging out of the foster care system. Lacking in the literature are studies that examine the experiences of college students formerly in foster care, who attend HBCUs. This limitation underscores the need to increase the body of knowledge on the population of college students attending Historically Black Colleges and or Universities.

In recent years, a surge of empirical studies have emerged and examine the attributes and unique experiences of young adults formerly in foster care who attended post-secondary institutions (Wolanin, 2005; Seyfried, Birgen & Mann, 2007; Rassen, Cooper, & Mercy, 2010; Unrau, Font & Rawls, 2011). Youth aging out of foster care without stable family connections, or relationships with committed adults are at higher risk of leaving college without earning a degree. According to Emerson (2007), 70% of older youth in foster care aspire to attend college; however, only 10% actually attend. Of that number, a mere 4% earn a degree or certificate and even fewer (2%) earn a bachelor's or graduate degree. Wolanin (2005) argued that the impact of foster care on youth age 13 or older, even for a period as brief as one year, has a tremendous impact on their decision to attend college. An unintended consequence is that professionals such as teachers, social workers, foster parents or mentors who work with older youth in foster care often do not promote or encourage college attendance (Pecora, Downs, Levine & Emerson, 2000; Davis, 2006; Seyfried, et al, 2007). In fact, greater attention is focused on achieving permanency at the expense of attending college, which may be viewed as an unrealistic "pipe dream."

Transitioning into Adulthood

The process of transitioning from adolescence to young adulthood is clearly a monumental milestone. In most instances, graduating from high school, attending college, and acquiring more independence is an exciting stage of development. However, standing on the threshold of becoming an adult can be laden with uncertainty regarding one's readiness for the responsibilities and privileges of adulthood. According to Clark and Crosland (2009), moving into adulthood is a challenging process for all older youth, regardless of family background. With the high cost of living and the compromised economy, it is not uncommon for young adults to remain at home longer and to require family support. Settersten and Ray (2010) contended that this is a normal part of transitioning into adulthood. Osgood, Foster and Courtney (2010) argued that the socio-economic status of young adults is a determinant of whether the transition to adulthood will be a smooth one. They further explained that college students from middle-class families experience less stress, as opposed to non-college bound youth from working class families. It may be further argued that challenges are amplified when youth in foster care age out of the child welfare system without the benefit of having family support to help buffer their adaption and adjustment as adults.

Several scholars consider family support to be an important factor for a successful transition into adulthood (Furstenburg & Hughes, 1995; Mortimer & Larson, 2002; Osgood, Foster & Courtney, 2010). Since the mid-1980s, there has been a steady increase in the number of empirical studies that focus on older youth aging out of foster care. These studies have examined the many challenges encountered by foster care youth once they have been emancipated from the child welfare system. Examples of the problems they confront include: (a) dependence on public welfare, (b) homelessness, (c) mental illness, (d) substance abuse and (e) poor educational outcomes (Barth, 1990; Cook, 1991; Courtney, Piliavin, Grogran-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Festinger, 1983; Jones & Moses, 1984; Nevada KIDS Count, 2001; Piliavin, Sosin, Westerfelt & Matsueda, 1993; Leathers & Testa, 2006; Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, Raap, Cusick, Keller, Havlicek, Perez, Terao & Bost, 2010; Mc-Coy Roth and Freundlich, & Ross, 2010).

Settersten and Ray (2010) also considered college as a pathway for young adults to achieve self-sufficiency. Given the high cost of a college education, young adults across the board are more likely to assume greater responsibility in contributing to their own financial expenses, whether obtaining student loans or balancing work combined with school obligations.

Despite these factors, college students who have family supports stand to benefit from having this safety net to help meet the challenges of transitioning into young adulthood.

Current literature on educational outcomes for youth in foster are suggests that the possibility of college attendance is bleak (Pecora, Williams, Kessler, Hiripi, O'Brien, Emerson, Herrick & Torres, 2006). Regardless of the age at which young people are placed in foster care, they are likely to experience disruptions in their schooling at both the elementary and secondary levels. Family chaos, changing schools, frequent absenteeism, and repeating grades are some of the challenges that youth in foster care experience which often negatively impact their educational experiences and outcomes (Bruce, Naccarato, Hopson & Morerelli, 2010; Dworsky, 2010). Dworsky (2010) optimistically posited that older youth aging out of foster care aspire to attend college at a rate similar to young adults in the broader population. Conversely, Wolanin (2005) contended that even though foster youth aspire to attend college, they may not further their education because they lack familiarity with the process involved, and are often uniformed of the resources available to support their college aspirations.

Policy Trends Impacting Older Youth in Foster Care

Older youth, ages 18 to 21 years old exit the foster care system either achieving permanency through reunification, legal guardianship, kinship care, or adoption, or through reaching the legal age of adulthood, often referred to as "aging out" (McRoy-Roth, DeVoogth, & Fletcher, 2011). Upon aging out of foster care, young adults are considered independent and must legally assume responsibility for themselves (English, Morreale, & Larsen, 2003; Georgiades, 2005; Avery, 2009). The number of young adults that transitioned out of foster care dropped to under 28,000 in 2010 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2011). When young people depart from foster care without the support of adults committed to helping them transition into adulthood, they often become vulnerable to multiple risks such as poor educational attainment, homelessness, unemployment, substance abuse, and poor physical and mental health (Barth, 1990; Courtney and Piliavian, 1998). Additionally, Massinga and Pecora (2004) argued that limited attention has been given to examining the strengths that young people have which enable them to survive the significant challenges of growing up in foster care.

According to Freudlich (2009), the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997 was passed primarily to ensure child safety and to reduce the length of time children remained in foster care**.** ASFA also made

provisions for States to receive additional funding to secure adoptive homes for youth in out of home care. Funding is also offered to families who adopt children with special needs including: (a) older youth, (b) sibling groups, (c) children with physical and mental disabilities and (d) children of color. These four groups comprise the population of youth considered most difficult to place in permanent homes. This often leaves older youth, especially African American youth, receiving fewer services while in foster care, achieving permanency with a family at lower rates, and they are more likely to emancipate to independence, or "age out" of foster care. (Courtney & Barth, 1996).

The Title IV-E Independent Living Program was enacted in 1986 to address the unique needs of older youth aging out of foster care. Empirical studies found that a significant number of the homeless population included youth who had aged out of foster care and needed more supportive services (Wolanin, 2005). The Title IV-E Independent Living Program and subsequent services were initiated to provide: (a) educational opportunities; (b) counseling and support services; (c) life skills training; (d) outreach services; and (e) family planning and parenting classes (Clark & Crosland, 2009; Nearly two years after ASFA was passed, former President Bill Clinton signed the Foster Care Independence Act into law. During the, Hillary Rodham Clinton galvanized support from Congress in 1999 to enact this legislation to increase services and supports for older youth in foster care toward improving their outcomes as they approached adulthood.

Emerging from the Foster Care Independence Act was the implementation of The John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFIP). The mandates of this policy provided $140 million to States, and lead to an increase in the number of supportive services provided to prepare young people for a successful transition to independence (Leathers & Testa, 2006; Leigh, Huff, Jones & Marshall, 2007). In 2002, the Educational Vouchers Training Program (EVT) was added to the CFIP. This program extended financial support to youth in foster care who attended public post-secondary academic institutions or vocational schools up to age 21 (Administration for Children and Families, 2007).

To address the difficult transition from adolescence to young adulthood, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 was passed, extending the funding for youth to remain in foster care to age 21 (Unrau, Font & Rawls, 2011). Implementation of this extended funding varies from state-to-state; therefore, young people may leave foster care at different points between the ages of 18 to 21 years old, depending on the State in which they reside. Findings from recent studies suggest youth transitioning to independence at age 21 have been

determined to have better outcomes, particularly those who continue on to post-secondary education. Furthermore, the potential is greater for college graduates to earn a higher income in comparison to those without a college degree (Peters, Dworksy, Courtney, & Pollack, 2009). Equipped with a college education, older youth who have been in foster care are also less likely to rely on public assistance. These findings amplify the importance of having access to supportive adults in the lives of young adults as they transition into adulthood.

African American Youth in Foster Care

African American children and youth are disproportionally overrepresented in foster care and represent only 14% of the child/youth population, while comprising 24% of the foster care population (Child Trends Databank, 2014; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children and Families, 2014).There is a respectable body of current knowledge examining the overrepresentation of African Americans' involvement within the public child welfare system (Hill, 2006; Chipungu & Bent-Goodley, 2004; Brown & Bailey-Etta, 1997). Poverty is one of the main causes of the alarming rate of African Americans' involvement in the system (US GAO, 2007). Although many children and families involved with the child welfare system have a history of poverty, it has been argued that race is a determinant at each decision point from reporting an incident to the Child Protective Service (CPS) hotline, substantiation, placement in foster care, and what type of permanency outcome youth achieve. African American children also have longer stays in care, frequently experience multiple placements, and often age out of the system without adoption or other enduring family ties (Leigh, Huff, Jones, & Marshall, 2007; US GAO, 2007). According to Hill (2006), African Americans generally receive fewer services, underscoring a reason for poorer outcomes, including homelessness, mental health challenges, and a lack of a sufficient level of education to support their independence.

Given consistent reports of negative outcomes following foster care placement, particularly among African Americans, it is critical to further examine the cadre of young adults leaving foster care who do continue their education at post-secondary institutions. This study sought to explore the internal and external factors that influenced youth formerly in foster care to attend a post-secondary institution, particularly an HBCU, and to explore their college experiences.

Significance of Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have an unparalleled history of serving as viable resources for educating African Americans from diverse social, economic and educational backgrounds. As institutions of higher education, HBCUs are recognized for their unique ability to meet the educational, social, and cultural needs of students from a wide range of backgrounds. According to Wilson (2007), many students and graduates of HBCUs come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Even so, college attendance becomes possible at HBCUs because of the lower tuition costs, more accommodating admissions policies, and the mission to serve disenfranchised populations of young people with academic promise; thus, resulting in greater opportunities for youth to graduate from college. (Wilson, 2007).

With the passage of landmark federal legislations such as Brown vs. Board of Education in 1954 and the Higher Education Act of 1965, segregation is no longer an overt barrier used to exclude minority student acceptance and enrollment at majority institutions (Kim, 2002). In fact, greater efforts have been made to increase diversity on college campuses, providing prospective college students with a broad spectrum of colleges and universities to consider. This has fueled debates questioning the relevance of HBCUs in contemporary times. Some contend that HBCUs are no longer relevant, since race is not considered to be a determinant of admission into majority institutions (Fryer and Greenstone, 2010). Others argue that despite the vast selection of choices, HBCUs are still important because of the nurturing and supportive environment that is maintained as a part of the culture of HBCUs (Brown & Davis, 2001; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Palmer, Davis & Maramba, 2010). It is also argued that at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), African American students are considered minorities, whereas at HBCUs, African American and other students of color are in the majority. Their racial identity is less of a factor in the social and emotional situations that are often stressful for young adults attending college (Brown, Morning & Watkins, 2005; Hamilton, 2009). Additionally, HBCUs continue to educate the underserved, particularly first generation college students, into the twenty-first century.

In 2006, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights conducted a briefing with a panel of five distinguished educators to assess the effectiveness of Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Unquestionably, HBCUs were recognized for nurturing students who needed additional support and preparatory coursework as a result of receiving inadequate secondary

educations. Furthermore, HBCUs have been credited with enriching the lives of its students and graduates during and beyond the college years. Based on a review of existing studies, Palmer, Davis, and Maramba (2010) found HBCUs to offer more family-oriented, supportive and nurturing learning environments, compared to predominately White institutions (PWIs). Based on the findings of their investigation, it could be argued that attending an HBCU could be a positive and transformative experience for African American college students; especially those who are facing imminent, involuntary independence, after aging out of foster care. Johnson C. Smith University, an HBCU in Charlotte, North Carolina was at the forefront of embracing youth involved with the foster system through a Foster Care Initiative (Hawkins, 2012). In 1987, St. Paul College in Lawrenceville, Virginia (which has since closed) established the Single Parent Support System program, which permits single mothers to reside on campus along with their children. Notably, such initiatives reflect HBCUs proclivity to engage the community by extending opportunities for vulnerable populations such as youth in foster care, and young and single parents, who otherwise would be unable to pursue a college education.

Recognizing the challenges that older youth aging out of foster care face, HBCUs must grapple with how to retain students who have extraordinary challenges as a result of their experiences. Wilson and Smith (2011) argue that university/child welfare partnerships are critical to ensure successful educational outcomes for youth who are enrolled in college. Furthermore, there is a dire need for more empirical studies emphasizing the unique experiences and needs of older youth formerly in foster care attending college, particularly those attending HBCUs. It is important to highlight not only the challenges, but also the perseverance and resiliency of college students who were formerly in foster care. It is hoped that child welfare agencies and postsecondary institutions, particularly HBCUs, will forge partnerships to address the unique needs and ensure better educational outcomes for college students currently or formally in foster care.

Research Questions

As such, to better understand the experiences of youth journey to college and their current experiences the following research questions were developed using information presented in literature and theoretical framework used for this study. The authors of this study seek to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What were lives like for older foster care youth after emancipation/leaving the foster care system?

RQ2: How were family and friends an effective force in getting older youth to attend an HBCU?

RQ3: How do older youth, who have aged out of the foster care system, view the HBCU experience?

RQ4: How did older youth, who have aged out of the foster care system, arrive at making the decision to attend an HBCU?

RQ5: How are older youth, who are attending an HBCU, better off in any way?

Methodology

Purpose of the Study

The concept for this phenomenological, qualitative study materialized while the lead author taught a prerequisite course for student admission into the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) Department at a Historically Black University (HBCU) located in a large metropolitan city in a Mid-Atlantic state. One of the class assignments required students to analyze their families and to critically examine the composition as well as the family dynamics. Following this assignment, students who had been raised in foster care reached out individually to the professor to express their difficulty with completing the assignment. The students also revealed the unique challenges they encountered as undergraduate students who recently, or would soon age out of the foster care system. It became apparent that although older youth in foster care may appear to be an anomaly in higher education according to the literature, there is a cadre of college students currently or formerly in foster care who aspired to obtain a college education. Many of these students major in social work and many would benefit from a program that was aware of and sensitive to their educational and social service needs. It is hoped that more institutions of higher learning will be open to the development of a deliberate plan to work toward the successful graduation of these young adults from college.

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the factors that influenced college students who were formerly in foster care, to decide to attend college, specifically an HBCU. The study further sought to learn more about the college experience of this population of students.

Creswell (1998), asserted that a phenomenological study provides a description of the lived experiences of multiple individuals regarding a phenomenon. To that end, using a phenomenological research design was considered most appropriate for this qualitative study in order to better understand the lived experiences of the four participants in this study. The primary goal of this study was to advance the body of knowledge on older youth who were transitioning from foster care and attending postsecondary institutions, particularly HBCUs. An additional aspiration of this study was to forge partnerships between child welfare service providers and HBCUs. As such, students could be exposed to college during their high school years, and once they entered college, supportive services could be offered to them, with the goal of improving their college retention and graduation rates.

Theoretical Framework- Resiliency

The resiliency theory guided the exploration of this study on older African American foster care youth. Rutter (1987) identifies resiliency as a temporary protective mechanism or process by which an individual adjusts to stressful conditions at diverse points in life. He notes that the emphasis should be on these protective factors rather than on risk variables associated with the individuals. As such, this study sought to explore the circumstances or attributes that exist in the participants' lives and or systems that mitigated or removed risk and increased their well-being (Child Welfare Gateway, 2014).

The resiliency theory is relevant to this exploration as it allows the researcher to assess, explain, and understand the students' ability to persist despite the monumental challenges they experienced while in foster care and on their journey to college. This framework also integrates a strength perspective that allows the researchers to examine the internal and external factors that positively influenced the participants' successes. (Bruce, Naccarato, Hopson & Morrelli, 2010).

Merdinger, Hines, and Wyatt (2005) advanced the body of literature on the role of resiliency to examine factors that enable youth in foster care to successfully pursue postsecondary education. Werner (1992) suggested that "a positive temperament, faith in one's abilities, available opportunities, and resources at important life transitions, role models and mentors who provide access to information, and act as gatekeepers for the future are associated with resiliency factors" (p. 265). Bruce et al, (2010) noted that opportunities exist to conduct empirical studies on the impact of child welfare policies using the resiliency framework to magnify the attributes that older foster care youth possess that help them overcome almost

insurmountable challenges. Through a resiliency lens, this study sought to contribute to the body of knowledge about the experiences of older foster youth in college from a cultural perspective.

Sampling Strategy

A non-probability approach is often used in exploratory studies where collecting as much data as possible is the overarching purpose (Grinnell, Williams & Unrau, 2012). Purposive sample strategy was used to recruit participants for this study. According to Grinnell and colleagues (2012), purposive sampling is one of the four types of non-probability sampling procedures used when a sample is purposively chosen. The authors further propose that purposive sampling is typically used in exploratory research. Four students who attended a large public HBCU located in a Mid-Atlantic state were interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide. Student participants were required to be currently in foster care or aged out of care within the past three years, but must not yet have completed their college degrees.

A snowball sampling approach was used to recruit participants. Fliers were posted at high-traffic locations on campus and announcements were made in classes. Although the sample size was small, it is considered appropriate in a qualitative research study, and provides deeper insight into the students' experiences as older youth aging out of foster care as well as their experiences at an HBCU.

Sample Characteristics

The four (n=4) participants in this study were young adults ranging from ages 20 to 23. All of the study's participants were African American (n=4). Two (n=2) were female and two (n=2) were male. With the exception of one participant, most of the participants in this study (n=3) aged out of the foster care system at the age of 21, while enrolled in college, and one student was in a kinship care placement at the time and approaching emancipation. Each participant (n=4) reported experiencing child neglect as the contributing factor to their placement in foster care, although one participant reported having been both neglected and abused by the biological family. Also, all of them had been placed separately from their siblings yet they maintained close ties with their siblings. They all described their relationships with their biological parents as strained or non-existent.

The student participants' trajectory through foster care varied. For example, one student was placed in foster care as a teen-ager with a relative, which was the only placement for the student. Another student was placed into foster care at age eight and the placement remained stable until

the last years in foster care. The other two participants entered foster care as young children and experienced multiple placements that ranged from traditional family foster care to group home placements.

Data Collection

Inclusion in the study was not limited to Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) students. However, awareness of the study and willingness to participate was greater among BSW students. Each participant was given an orientation of the study purpose and presented with an informed consent form prior to conducting the interview. Students were also encouraged to query the researchers regarding any concerns or questions that emerged during the interviews. Additionally, participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any retribution.

Participants were interviewed individually by one of the three members of the research team that included the principal investigator, co-principal investigator, and a doctoral student. Interviews were held in the School of Social Work, in an office environment where confidentiality was ensured. The interview guide was developed based on a review of the literature on older youth aging out of foster care attending post-secondary institutions. The 12 questions on the interview guide inquired about the participants' experiences in foster care and their pathways to college. Prior to data collection, the instrument was pretested by the research team to determine whether the questions provided measurability. The audio-recorded interviews took an average of one hour and 30 minutes to complete and then a review of the responses was conducted with the participants. The research team transcribed all of the interviews.

Data Analysis

This qualitative phenomenological study sought to understand the lived experiences of African Americans who were formally in foster care and to explore the factors that influenced their decision to attend college, in particular at a Historically Black University.

Phenomenological researchers "attempt to understand the people they observed from the peoples' perspective – to understand their feelings, their views of reality and the special meaning to them" (Rubin & Babbie, 2013, p.304). Analysis of the data occurred by initially listening to the interviews multiple times before they were transcribed. The interviews were then transcribed and read by the researchers to collect notes on the participants' responses. The researchers' next strategy was to remove, organize, and analyze descriptive and narrative data. The researchers

amalgamated noteworthy descriptive narratives to formulate overall themes. This method produced categories and themes of narrative-texted based descriptions (Charmaz, 2006) describes this method as qualitative coding; a process used to move beyond the concrete to a more interpretive analysis of the data.

Trustworthiness of the data was established in several ways. For example, if it was unclear or further explanation or clarification was needed, the primary author contacted the participant to schedule a follow-up interview to ensure the information was accurately understood. The co-investigator and research assistant also independently read the transcripts, conducted content analysis, identified and coded emerging themes, ensuring two separate coders. The team read through all of the analyses and suggested revisions. Discrepancies between coders were discussed, resulting in agreement on what codes, categories, and related themes were to be utilized. The procedure resulted in a body of themes across all interviews. Content analysis of narrative data involved deductive techniques consistent with grounded theory. Primary themes emerging from the interviews addressed important factors and the impact on the relationship between young adults in foster care and their trajectory to and college experience.

Results

Based on the research questions, the findings of this qualitative study revealed valuable information pertaining to the lived experiences of African American youth who were formally in foster care. Several themes emerged from the data analysis and organized around the research questions for this study. The authors organized the themes into two categories: journey to college and current college experience. The themes that emerged under category *Journey to College* include: 1) internal and external influences and 2) choice of college. The themes that emerged under the category *College Experiences* include: 1) current support systems, 2) advice for young people, and 3) University recommendations. In addition, each category also was tied to a research question in which each participant provided a response to answer that question. The findings presented below represent a summary of themes that consistently emerged from the student participants' interview. To ensure the preservation of the authentic scope of the participants, narratives are presented to support the themes. To protect the participants' privacy, pseudo names are used.

Foster Care Context

With the exception of one participant, all of the students had "aged out" of the foster care system, at the age of 21 at the time of the interviews. Their experiences in foster care differed with regards to placement type and length of time in care. For example, Ramona entered foster care around age 8 or 9, and her placement was stable for about 10 years. However, her foster placement disrupted during her first year in college due to a traumatic event that resulted in her becoming ill. Nonetheless, she continues to maintain a relationship with her former foster mother. Although she was a participant in an independent living program, she felt uncertain as to whether upon emancipation from foster care she was fully prepared to live independently, especially since she was enrolled in college and did not have the resources to support herself. In contrast, Jeffrey reported he was placed in foster care at a very young age (7) and it was stable until his teen years, leading to placement in a group home.

Jeffrey describes the experience of aging out of foster care:

> "I can honestly say that it was one of the worst experiences because I was not as equipped you know for the real world, even though I was trained on independence. I really felt that I was put out. So yeah, it was one of the worst experiences."

He further noted:

> "Not having shelter, not having a place of safety when I got emancipated. Also, not having a lot of family, conducive (?) to turn to who have their own place, let alone living with six or seven individuals."

The idea of aging out for the participants was life changing and difficult for them to face. Not surprisingly, the glaring reality of aging out of foster care was that these young adults were expected to function as self-sufficient adults at the beginning of their trajectory into adulthood without the benefit of a stable family support system. Although the fact that they are attending college offers a glimmer of hope for the possibility of a better life, it does not negate the uncertainty they feel about expected independence. These responses of the older youth clearly answered RQ 1 that sought to gain a better understanding of their lives after emancipation.

Journey to College

The four participants in this study described their journey to college and the multiple reasons why they decided to attend college. The participants described their respective circumstances in the context of being in foster care, in multiple placements, experiencing physical and emotional abuse, problems in school, and living in poverty. Despite the challenges these youth faced, they described their personal motivation and determination to attend college. Although the participants described these experiences as personal goals and aspirations, they also contributed their successful journey to college to social supports, which included foster parents and social workers. The participants reported that they were involved in activities such as academic enrichment and college preparatory programs during high school as a part of their journey to college. The responses in the section *Journey to College* and the section regarding *External and Internal Factors* provide insight for RQ 2 that asked about family and friends being an effective force behind them attending the HBCU and RQ 3 which sought to identify internal motivations of each participant. Also, responses to RQ2 can be found in the section on *Current Support Systems.* As you have seen and will continue to see, these youth relied heavily on familial social support and that certain family members or loved ones were the reasons they felt motived to attend an HBCU.

External and Internal Factors – Resiliency

The external factors are the systems that influence the individual from the outside. For the purpose of this study, the researchers explored participants' personal relationships, organizations and groups affiliations, in addition to other systems. Internal factors are participants' innate abilities and attributes that relate to their personal development. From a resiliency perspective, the external and internal factors that supported the youth in their journey to college were protective factors that helped them persist in spite of adversity. According to the Child Welfare Gateway (2014) "protective factors are conditions or attributes in individuals, families, communities, or the larger society that, when present, mitigate or eliminate risk." When protective factors are present, the likelihood of well-being is increased (Child Welfare Gateway, 2014). The following section presents participants' accounts of the external factors that supported their journey to college.

External Factors. Michael described how he was reluctant to go to college because he needed money to survive but eventually realized, with

the help of his social worker and group home staff, that he needed to go to college:

> "*After my Aunt put me out of her house, my social worker got me placed at Martin Pollock. I had to go to school (college). I passed the GED on the fly and passed it with flying colors. I was in a group at M.P, they wanted to integrate youth into society and you lived in your own apartment. They gave me an ultimatum that made me want to go school. At the time, I wanted to make money. My social worker knew some people at the University and she was able to get me in. I was still trying to make money through the card tournaments, so I went to Texas and my social worker called to say it was my orientation. Because I was out of town at the time, someone represented me.*"

Ramona described how her foster care mother advocated for her educational needs and supported her personal well-being, she recounted:

> "*As a result of being abused and neglected before being placed in foster care, I had a lot of emotional difficulties and I was very unstable. I started to bloom when I was placed with Ms. J. She was my foster mother for 10 years. She placed me in the best schools and advocated for me to get out of special education classes and pushed for me to get mental health services.*"

Jeffrey expressed how friends, mentors, and helpful professionals encouraged him to attend college because he was starting to go down the wrong path in life, he recounted:

> "*I had several people that encouraged me to go to college. I was told that getting a college education would help me beat the odds. Also, I was beginning to get in trouble -- becoming involved with the juvenile justice system.*"

Jeffrey described specifically how his girlfriend's support played a major role in his college and personal endeavors:

> "*I had a girlfriend at work who was attending community college. She realized that I was smart, but not using it. She introduced me to community college and I enrolled, which I realized that this was a place that I could stand out, be myself and become successful.*"

Internal Factors. To understand personal attributes that helped participants navigate the challenges they faced that could potentially disrupt their ability to persevere, reflects the overwhelming responses related to

their internal characteristics. When asked how she made it to college, Ramona stated "*just having resiliency*". This response speaks to the internal abilities that played a critical role in recognizing her potential to overcome hardships. All of the student participants indicated how their foster and biological families, financial situations, and other related issues could have hindered their success in college. However, they were determined to beat the odds and graduate from college. The following section presents participants' accounts of the internal factors that supported their journey to college.

Terry described how her experiences at home with her biological family affected her grades, but despite her setbacks she knew her potential, she described:

"*My situation at home affected my academic focus. My grades show where I was going through the most. At first I was like what's the point of me going to college and then I rationalized how can I help myself and my family- which would be to further my education; So just seeing where I came from and where I can go I decided that furthering my education would allow me to help myself and my family. …I came from place of oppression, but I realized that I can still be great.*"

Jeffrey explained his drive to be successful and how he planned to reach his academic and personal goals:

"*I know my mission. I know it's not something to do, it's something I wanted to do for years and my drive has not changed, my drive is still at 100% and I don't see me getting burned out, I don't see me relaxing; basically I had to find myself; I had to prioritize, knowing what I needed and what I didn't need. I was in the fast life at one time and I knew I really didn't need it; I'm still getting a chance to know myself*"

Ramona described how taking the advice of her foster mother to seek professional services, assisted her with identifying her personal abilities:

"*Me being in therapy I see that I have a lot of potential. I have always known that, but it's just putting it into action and as far as the internal stuff, those are the things that have helped; just having that resiliency.*"

Michael discussed personal attributes and how he wanted to break his biological family's detrimental cycles of poverty and instability:

> *"I have the ability to learn and I realize that I didn't want to be like my parents, my brother, homeless, living from paycheck to paycheck. I didn't want to die before 21 years. I did want to have a family, stable income. It motivated me that I could do better. For a long time, you trick yourself to believe that you can't do better."*

The participants' testimonies above are consistent with several scholars' arguments that the majority of youth in foster care have the desire to attend and graduate from college (Courtney, Terao & Bost, 2004; McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White & Thompson, 2003). The participants in this study exhibited resiliency. Multiple protective factors buffered their risk and aided in their successful journey to college. The findings of this study support the Seyfried et al. (2007) study, which examined the education resiliency of four African American college students who were formerly in foster care. Their study expanded on the personal and communal factors related to the participants' enrollment in college and achievements. The participants were determined to rise above adversities that included: placement in foster care, poverty, abuse, educational setbacks, and lack of supports. In their purist of a college education, the participants felt that a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) would act as a protective system that would meet their personal and academic needs.

Choice of College

"HBCU's are close knit communities." This quote captures the collective perspectives of the study's participants and highlights their reason for choosing to attend an HBCU instead of a predominantly white institution (PWI). Most of the participants indicated they valued HBCU's and felt they provided a setting where they would thrive. The central idea of going to school with people like themselves in culture and national origin greatly influenced the participants' *choice of college.*

Terry described her desire to attend a HBCU:

> *"All of the schools I chose were HBCUs just because the fact that I went to a high school that was predominately white and wanted to be around people of my descent."*

Ramona provided insight on her impression of HBCUs while in high school. She stated:

> *"I chose a historically black college mainly because I wanted to. I like diversity, but at the same time I saw how historically black colleges were more for like a community and close knit. I was drawn to that so I just gravitated towards it."*

According to Jeffery:

> "*I researched other institutions after attending community college, I felt that based on my current situation, attending an HBUC would better for my career plans and it was also more accessible.*"

The participants also reported that their respective support systems did not directly recommend that they attend an HBCU, although Michael indicated that his social worker played a role in facilitating his enrollment into the college he is presently attending because of her knowledge of the institution and her belief that this would be a good fit for him. The participants also explained that the HBCUs they decided to attend were selected based upon the institution's accessibility and their prior exposure to the campus, since they all are from the state where the university is located.

These findings provide some evidence that African American youth in foster care attend HBCUs for cultural and communal reasons. These cultural and communal reasons answer RQ 4 which sought to answer why the participants choose an HBCU. The notion of attending a university that presents a strong and caring environment is something that the participants in this study valued and sought as they pursued a higher education. Therefore, it may be argued that HBCUs could play an even more viable role for youth currently or formerly in foster care, particularly towards addressing the educational and cultural needs of young adults and especially those who are underserved due to their foster care experience.

In summary, despite the hardships experienced by the participants, the results suggest that the participants are resilient, persistent, and motivated to overcome insurmountable challenges in an effort to move beyond their collective circumstances. Furthermore, factors that contributed to the educational advancement of the participants are reflective of their respective personal attributes (internal factors) such as faith and an internal belief system that drives them to succeed. Additionally, social supports consisting of foster parents, social workers, family members, and friends, along with a "kin-like" educational environment (external factors) at a

Historically Black College and University, helped them to endure the challenge of pursuing a college education.

Current College Experience

Having a safety net of a stable family to rely upon for financial support and encouragement or having a place to reside whether remaining at home while enrolled in college or returning home during school breaks, buffers the challenge of being a college student. For college students who have aged out of foster care, not having these resources are overwhelming challenges they continuously experience. In spite of their motivation to attend and graduate from college, all of the participants encountered financial challenges. As a result of financial deficiencies, many of them expressed concerns centered on the lack of support on campus, especially with securing financial aid for school. This section's responses are a clear indication of RQ5, how each participant viewed the HBCU experience.

Terry described her experience with financial aid:

> *"Every semester, my money for some reason does not fall into place at the right time so I make my schedule way ahead of time but it will get dropped, so every semester I have to go back and try and get overrides and some department don't want to do it, so its pushing back my matriculation so right now I am semester behind. I guess the ET (Educational Training Voucher) funding doesn't go through in time or they don't send the check on time".*

Jeffery shared his financial challenges and the lack of support from family members due to their limited resources:

> *"As a college student, I'm financially deficient and without a home. Being emancipated I can't go to my immediate siblings because they are going through things within their home. Also, just being financially deficient…. that's about it. My major challenges are looking for money for school, trying to stay successful in this university."*

The absence of supports was also associated with the uncertainty of housing during the holiday and summer breaks. In fact, quite a few of them feared homelessness. Ramona poignantly described the stressors she experienced related to school breaks:

> *"Having a family I can come to all the time, not having to think about that, not having to think about what where I am going to lay my head at night, where I was going to go for the Thanksgiving break or*

Christmas break, not having to second guess that. I'd know deep down in my toe nails where I was going to go."

While the participants choose to attend and enjoy the HBCU experience, they collectively suggested progressive initiatives to accommodate youth who are in foster care that attend postsecondary institutions. Some of the recommendations include: colleges and universities should consider having extended housing throughout the calendar year, including summers and holidays, implement support groups, assign advocates, and host mentorship programs amongst former foster care youth.

Current System Support

A range of responses were provided regarding *current support systems* of the participants. In most instances, the participants indicated support came from: (a) former foster parents, (b) family members, (c) social work faculty and students, (d) sorority members, and (e) the faith community.

Jeffrey shared his view of his current support:

"My support system now would be the students. The students that I worked with now look up to me as a person all about propelling and excelling academically. So, most of the students drive me to want to do better. When I see students smiling and saying that they commend me for helping them out, that gives me self-gratitude. Also I have old mentors and people in the School of Social Work that put me in positions that I never been in; of power. And, they also see me going through with the position of power. I think that it gives me a lot of self- gratitude too to know that I am an important aspect somewhere. I had problems when I was younger about my importance; always had problems juggling whether the fact of if I was significant in someone else's life. The School of Social Work, students here, my friends and my biological family now, they all urge me to go further. They let me know that I am important."

Terry considered her strong religious beliefs as her support system. For example:

"First I would say God, that's who I lean on in every situation when I doubt or when I'm happy- whatever the situation may be. Other than that, I have been a very closed person, so I don't really reach out to people. After God I would say my best friend A.? she knows my whole situation, I have expressed it with my line sisters (sorority) so every time I have a problem, I have been able to talk to them since

> *I've been in the process and other than that no one that's not their fault –people do reached out to me but I am a little skeptical of them to reach back."*

Conversely, the participants described the impact of not having adequate support systems. For example, they were dropped from enrollment in their classes because funding through the Educational Training Voucher program had not been submitted. Each semester funding was not applied properly because the financial aid staff was not certain of how to apply the funding. They categorically reported that navigating the college process could be a difficult process because of their unique status.

Ramona shared her view on the level of support provided by the child welfare system:

> *"With the exception of the Keys for Life Program, the system failed me - they didn't get me through any tough times. Having a support system would have helped me."*

Advice for Young People

All of the participants had words of encouragement for young people following in their footsteps. For example, some of the comments shared were: *"make the best of it, keep your head up, stay focused, and don't let anything stunt your growth.* Collectively, they acknowledged although young people involved with foster care may not have an easy path, with *motivation and focus,* they would be able to overcome the barriers they will face. "Don't give up" was a common theme, given the challenges faced based on their foster care background. They categorically believed that internal factors, suggesting a belief in oneself, resiliency, and self-motivation were important attributes needed to move them beyond their circumstance. In spite of the challenges and fears, the participants had words of encouragement for foster care youth aspiring to attend college.

Ramona's poignant advice to foster care youth:

> *"I would encourage youth to be self-directed and to become their own advocate. I would teach them the skills needed on how to appropriately advocate."*

Jeffrey indicated:

> *"I often go to seminars and five minutes of speeches from social workers inspire me. I often tell young males to stay focused,*

> *regardless of what going around them even if the world is coming to an end. I tell them to stay focused and set your primary goals in achieving them. My advice is to stay focused."*

Michael's advice:

> "*The advice that I would give to youth in foster care is that when I look back, I would have asked more questions, take it seriously. When you are in foster care, the negatives can turn into positives. They will pay for school, but you have to make the best of it. It's really hard to get there. It's really hard to stay focused. Coming from this background, there is drama from family and money problems. It's a lot to deal with.*"

University Recommendations

All of the respondents thought that the university should have a specialized program for students who were formerly in foster care. They indicated that the university should have an understanding of the emotional impact of foster care on young people, as well as an understanding of the various community programs and resources that might assist in the smooth transition from foster care to college. Perhaps the registration process would be more efficiently used if there were a liaison, or some designated person to ensure that things did not fall through the cracks. Ensuring that financial aid staff are adequately trained and knowledgeable of the Educational Training Voucher (ETV) may stand to prevent some of the delay with applying funds to student accounts and make the registration process less strenuous. Furthermore, residing in campus housing during the academic year and not having a place to go during semester breaks created continuous stress with which they were preoccupied. Therefore, providing housing year-round would reduce their anxiety about becoming homeless.

Terry commented:

> "*Every semester my money for some reason does not fall into place at the right time so I make my schedule way ahead of time but it will get dropped. So every semester I have to go back and try and get overrides and some departments don't want to do it, so it's pushing back my matriculation. So right now I am semester behind. I guess the ETV funding doesn't go through in time or they don't send the check on time. Actually I gave the paper work to financial aid and I was told that our university is the only school that makes you do the work. It's kind of been lack of communication.* "

The participants also recommended that universities provide opportunities for students who were formerly in foster care to meet, network, and form support groups. They indicated having a safe place to talk, the availability of group therapy, or even social events could possibly be helpful steps that the university could take. Knowing that they were not alone as college students with foster care backgrounds was voiced several times, although the importance of respecting the confidentiality of each student's experience was voiced as a major concern.

Michael's views highlight the challenges that young adults without family support face and he offered recommendations on how the university could be of help:

"The university should take notice of the people in foster care. They should have a program for students to let them know that they are not alone, that you are not different in a bad way. I don't know that I want to join a foster care group, but you do need help even if it with having a mentor that you help you through some of the challenges of getting through college as a student without family supports".

Limitations of Study

Using this type of methodology, the results can only be generalized to the participants within the research study and not a larger body. For this research to be generalized to a larger segment of the population, a larger sample must be used. A quantitative method will allow for the use of multivariate or powerful statistics. These statistics will reveal if there are significant relationships between the independent variables and the unit of analysis. Another limitation of this research was some of the respondents may have felt uncomfortable about their anonymity. The respondents may have been more comfortable in a neutral setting. Although confidentiality was explained to the respondents and they willingly signed the proper consents, in the future some participants may be reluctant to participate due to their concern over protecting their anonymity.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to answer five research questions generated by the authors. It is our hope that through the efforts of this study, there will be an increase in the body of knowledge on older youth who were aging out of foster care, who are clearly a vulnerable population based on their experiences in out of home care. The study also sought to examine the internal and external factors that influenced their decision to attend an HBCU, along with their overall college experience. Using a phenomenological qualitative approach, intensive interviews were

conducted with a sample of four young adult college students attending an HBCU at a large, urban focused public university in a Mid-Atlantic State. This approach provided a voice to the experiences of college students, currently or formerly in foster care, facing independence, and aging out of foster care. The study's findings stand to increase the awareness of key stakeholders in the child welfare system and at colleges and universities, particularly HBCUs, of the educational trajectory of youth in foster care, as well as a glimpse of their experience at postsecondary institutions. It is also hoped that partnerships will be forged between public and private child welfare agencies and colleges and universities, to ensure that youth who are involved with the foster care system are provided with the necessary services, supports and opportunities to pursue a postsecondary education.

Although the small sample size (n=4) of young people who attended only one HBCU, represents a limitation of the study, these findings will help stakeholders in the field of child welfare practice identify gaps in service delivery and areas where program improvements may be developed in an effort to provide more relevant and effective support to young people emancipating from foster care, attending, navigating, and graduating from college. Despite the limitations, the findings provide an understanding of internal and external factors that impact their decision to attend college, specifically HBCUs. The findings also suggest that the participants believed that the HBCU they attended provided significant educational and cultural supports that were crucial to their college experience.

Most of what can be gleaned from this study is that despite the insurmountable challenges these young adults have experienced resulting from being involved with the child welfare system, they are persistent, motivated, and resilient. The attributes that helped them persevere, certainly, are *internal factor*s. All of the participants wanted a better life, especially since their childhood and adolescence were fraught with varying degrees of uncertainty and instability. Not having a stable family escalated the challenges of transitioning into young adulthood. Additionally, the pursuit of a college education presented another set of obstacles including: lack of family support, financial aid challenges, housing concerns, and the most notable stressor - losing the safety net of foster care services and funding which at times, worked to impede their ability to focus on academics.

Some of the e*xternal factors* that assisted the participants to endure were the support of foster parents, social workers, friends, and their involvement with organizations that encouraged them to continue their education beyond high school. Additionally, most of the students felt a sense of camaraderie with other students and faculty, which provided

further support of the viability of HBCUs long-standing history in serving as a pathway to not only educate students but to extend nurturance in the process. Furthermore, this study underscores the importance of universities and child welfare agencies forging partnerships to create opportunities to recruit and retain students to their institutions (Wilson & Smith, 20011). Developing such networks will help to ensure that youth in foster care matriculate to college, which is a positive outcome, but it does not end there. Retention is a very important determinant of the extent to which youth in foster care remain and graduate from college. Even though financial aid challenges are not uncommon amongst many college students, it appears that there is some ambiguity on the university's part with knowing how to apply the Chafee Educational Training Voucher. Consequently, this has caused the students to report that they have had their schedules dropped, which delayed their matriculation.

Invariably, the transition into young adulthood is a major milestone for all young people. In today's society where a college education is heralded as the gateway to obtaining gainful employment, there is an increase in the number of young people attending college. Those with family support, have a safety network to help manage the transition into adulthood. The reality is that there are students in college without a network of family support who do not have foster care backgrounds, and they confront some of the same challenges. However, young adults who have been involved with the foster care system have a unique set of experiences and circumstances, notably the separation from their family of origin and placement in out of home care, that establish their comparable needs, and which could be addressed with similar types of resources.

The absence of family and social supports may be very difficult for youth formerly in foster care who are in college but having an environment that promotes a family-like community could perhaps help to alleviate the effects of lacking a reliable family system. The participants in this study identified the HBCU environment as one where they would fit in because of their perception of communal educational supports they felt they needed. Understanding their perceptions and experiences are crucial to the development of effective supports. To that end, to increase the likelihood that youth in foster care defy the odds, it is vital to examine strategies to help ensure self-sufficiency among vulnerable groups such as African American youth in foster care. This study provides an impetus for the child welfare system to increase the level of focus on youth with college potential, to ensure that youth in foster care not only achieve permanency, but have access to information and supportive services related to postsecondary education, particularly at HBCUs.

As professional child welfare services strive to be more culturally sensitive and competent, social workers and other helping professionals who work with youth in foster care may help by exploring HBCUs as potential resources, understanding how these systems may provide unique support for their clients. Additionally, this research suggests that it may be beneficial for key stakeholders in child welfare to forge partnerships with HBCUs as viable educational postsecondary resources. These partnerships may allow for conversations and collaborations between these systems to address the needs of this vulnerable population so that appropriate supports may be available to youth on campus as they leave foster care. Notable supports suggested by this research include: housing counseling, assistance with financial aid needs, and social support networks. Building partnerships with HBCUs may also increase the number of youth in foster care that attend college and graduate. Considering the distinct experiences of this at-risk group, it is important to look at different ways to assist them with increasing their overall well-being in order to be productive in society. Additional research on the impact of HBCUs on foster care youth is also indicated to inform social work practitioners, child welfare stakeholders, and higher education systems.

Future research on the role of HBCUs for youth in foster care should be examined to better understand how partnerships may be formed and sustained to support youth currently or formerly in foster care.

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