# "It's just hard reaching out": Factors affecting help-seeking behaviors among independent college students.

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**independent college students**

**Abstract**

Foster care alumni and other independent students experience considerable difficulties in pursuit of higher education, due to a lack of family support, financial problems, and the impacts of their experiences of maltreatment and system involvement. Nonetheless, many of these students are reluctant to reach out for help when they encounter academic or personal challenges. The purpose of the present study was to examine factors affecting help seeking behaviors among foster care alumni and other independent students enrolled in a four-year university. We conducted in-depth, individual interviews with 23 independent students ages 18-23, as well as 5 university staff connected to a campus-based support program serving these students. Thematic analysis of the qualitative interviews pointed to a range of individual, interpersonal, and institutional factors affecting students' willingness to seek assistance on the college campus, with students' perspectives sometimes diverging from staff's perspectives. These findings may inform the development of effective campus-based services and supports for independent students enrolled in higher education institutions.


*Key words:* Foster care alumni; help-seeking; post-secondary education; self-reliance; independent students

**Introduction**

In the United States, independent students include college students who are emancipated minors, whose parents are deceased, who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless, and who are current or former foster youth or wards of the court (Cruse et al., 2018). These students, who are disproportionately women and students of color, carry more financial and familial obligations than dependent students and are more likely to be living in poverty (Cruse et al., 2018). While these students face considerable economic and pragmatic challenges in pursuit of their degrees, they may also be less likely to reach out for help when they encounter difficulties (Morton, 2017). This study examined the factors relevant to help-seeking in a sample of 23 independent students and five campus-based staff at one Northeastern university.

**Literature Review**

**Developmental Impact of System Involvement**

Approximately 20,000 young people were emancipated from the foster care system in 2020 (Children's Bureau, 2020). While there is great variety in the experiences of foster care alumni after exiting the system (Keller et al., 2007), their emotional and relational development during emerging adulthood is often influenced by their experiences in systems of care (Berzin et al., 2014; Munson et al., 2013; Okpych & Courtney, 2018). Many young people with histories of system involvement face difficulties in forming new relationships and building connections with their peers due to feeling different, frequent moves due to placement changes, and the emotional consequences of interpersonal trauma (Hines et al., 2005; Horn, 2019; Kools, 1999; Schenk et al., 2018). To manage a stigmatized identity and protect against further loss and rejection, some adolescents in long-term foster care employ strategies of self-protection, including guarding their status in foster care, distancing themselves from others, and keeping relationships instrumentally useful but emotionally superficial (Kools, 1999). The lack of formal and informal support during this stage, particularly for those whose connections with family were tenuous or conflicted, make the transition to adulthood more challenging (Blakeslee & Best, 2019; Geenen & Powers, 2007; Hines et al., 2005; Marion et al., 2017). For many foster care alumni, friends, co-workers, counselors, social workers, teachers, supervisors, classmates, as well as paid caregivers are sources of support (Blakeslee & Best, 2019; Hines et al., 2005; Katz & Geiger, 2019)

**Foster Care Alumni in College**

While many foster care alumni aspire to attend and graduate from college, the transition to college is often difficult (Bowen et al., 2020; Cheung et al., 2021; Skobba et al., 2018). A study of foster care alumni in California found that a majority (61.8%) had enrolled in college but only 9.6% of the sample (n=719) had completed a 2-year or 4-year degree (Okpych et al., 2021). Research on independent students, including foster care alumni and homeless students, shows that many report academic challenges, housing instability, financial insecurity, and ongoing mental health needs (Hines et al., 2005; Opsal & Eman, 2018). Some independent students also report feeling under-prepared (both academically and emotionally) for college (Cheung et al., 2021; Skobba et al., 2018), and many find higher education alienating and isolating (Horn, 2019; Miller et al., 2020; Opsal & Eman, 2018). In addition to social and material support, foster care alumni and other independent students also need a sense of belonging on campus and access to social capital to help them navigate life as college students, as well as postgraduate life (Katz & Geiger, 2019; Skobba et al., 2018).

Campus support programs can help provide independent students with financial assistance, housing assistance, case management, and ongoing support (Gillum et al., 2018; Johnson, 2021; Randolph & Thompson, 2017). Evidence shows that campus support programs were considered helpful especially for low-income students, students of color, and care leavers, among others (Horn, 2019). However, these students may struggle to take advantage of available campus supports (Dumais & Spence, 2021; Miller et al., 2020). Factors that enhance the success of campus support programs for foster care alumni include ease of access, staff who understand students' lived experiences, and relationships that respect students' histories in foster care without requiring them to repeatedly share their stories (Miller et al., 2020; Schenk et al., 2018).

**Help-Seeking and Self-Reliance**

The literature on historically underserved students, including first-generation college students and foster care alumni, indicates that these students are more likely to rely on themselves, rather than seek help from others (Schenk et al., 2018; Watt et al., 2013). Studies show that most first-generation students are self-reliant and prefer to cope with their problems by themselves using online resources, instead of seeking help from other sources (Chang et al., 2020; Payne et al., 2021). Negative perceptions of faculty as intimidating authority figures can lead some first-generation students to rely on themselves or their peers for assistance (Payne et al., 2021; Richards, 2022). One study found that even when experiencing anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic, first-generation students were less likely to see emotional help from friends, family, or professionals, citing skepticism about the utility of such

support (Jeong et al., 2021). Other factors discouraging first-generation students from seeking help include fear of being a burden to others and familial pressures to be self-reliant, emotionally stoic, tough, and resilient (Chang et al., 2020). Additionally, many first-generation college students lack the network connections and social capital that can facilitate their transition to college (Schwartz et al., 2018). An intervention designed to empower first-generation students to cultivate connections with others on campus was associated with improved attitudes and behaviors around help-seeking, closer relationships with instructors, and higher GPAs (Schwartz et al., 2018)

The literature identifies several barriers to help-seeking among foster care alumni at the individual, interpersonal and systemic levels, most of which are linked to their histories of involvement in systems of care (Pryce et al., 2017). While in care, youth report having little control over their own decisions and few opportunities to exercise agency (Goodkind et al., 2011; Hokanson et al., 2019; Olson et al., 2017; Samuels & Pryce, 2008; Semanchin Jones et al., 2018). The frequent disruptions in relational histories of foster care alumni have been linked to attitudes towards help-seeking (Seita et al., 2016). In a sample of 66 young adults who had exited care, Seita and colleagues (2016) found that longer stays in foster care, greater number of placements, and lack of permanency arrangements were all linked to lower orientations to help-seeking in their social networks.

In addition, the disrupted attachments experienced by many youth in care shape their attitudes towards disclosure. Since many report feeling that they had no control over their stories while in care (Semanchin Jones et al., 2018), youth with histories of foster care tend to be strategic and intentional in their decisions about whether, when, and to whom they open up about their painful pasts (Eldridge et al., 2020; Kools, 1999; Steenbakkers et al., 2016). Studies of system-involved youth also found that participants were skeptical of the effectiveness of formal services offered to them, based on past difficulties in accessing support through the foster care system (Blakeslee & Best, 2019; Goodkind et al., 2011; Munson & Lox, 2012; Schenk et al., 2018). Past negative experiences in previous helping relationships and systems of care may inform a reluctance to seek help in young adulthood (Hokanson et al., 2019).

The stigma associated with system involvement can also impede help-seeking. Several studies of system-involved youth identify feelings of pride, embarrassment, stigma, feeling like a "burden", and fear of stereotypes or being misunderstood as barriers to help-seeking (Hines et al., 2005; Horn, 2019; Katz & Geiger, 2019; Lenkens et al., 2020; Morton, 2017).

One of the strongest findings in this literature is the concept of survivalist self-reliance (Hokanson et al., 2019; Lenkens et al., 2020; Morton, 2017; Pryce et al., 2017; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). First coined by Samuels and Pryce (2008), this concept describes a preference for self-reliance and a sense of pride in avoiding dependence on other people and systems. This stance is often a consequence of the parentification many foster care alumni experience in childhood, combined with pride, a desire to be independent, a history of negative experiences in asking for help, and a fear of continued dependence on systems of care (Goodkind et al., 2011; Lenkens et al., 2020; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Some foster care alumni avoid help-seeking, seeing it as developmentally inappropriate for young adults (Hokanson et al., 2019). This reluctance to seek help is also associated with American cultural beliefs about independence (Goodkind et al., 2011; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). In the United States, success in adulthood is traditionally equated with independence, self-sufficiency, and personal responsibility, resulting in a tension for foster care alumni between their desire for independence from systems of care, and their ongoing need for support from adults (Munson & Lox, 2012).

Samuels and Pryce (2008) identify survivalist self-reliance as both a source of risk and a source of resilience for foster care alumni. Several studies note that foster care alumni derive a sense of pride in their own self-reliance, as well as knowledge that they possess internal strengths and resources to manage their affairs independently (Goodkind et al., 2011; Hokanson et al., 2019; Katz & Geiger, 2019; Lenkens et al., 2020; Morton, 2017; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). At the same time, survivalist self-reliance can also inhibit the development of healthy supportive relationships for young people, as well as impede help-seeking in times of need (Goodkind et al., 2011; Morton, 2017; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). In the college context, survivalist self-reliance can be a barrier to academic achievement (Morton, 2017). Morton (2017) found that foster care alumni who encountered academic and financial challenges expressed a sense of determination to solve problems independently and blend in with their classmates. These feelings affected the decisions they made as college students (such as choosing to drop a course without consulting an advisor first), impacting their academic progress towards their degrees (Morton, 2017).  At the same time, studies emphasize that these young adults have dual needs for support and autonomy (Morton, 2017; Paulsen & Berg, 2016) and are interested in forming relationships with supportive adults (Appleton et al., 2021; Eldridge et al., 2020; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014).

**The Current Study**

The extant literature on help-seeking among foster care alumni, first-generation college students and other independent students has so far primarily and appropriately focused on the perspectives of young people. In this study, we sought to expand our analysis of help-seeking to include the perspectives of university staff who work closely with foster care alumni and other independent students. Following Pryce et al. (2017), we also worked to understand the role of individual, interpersonal, and institutional factors in help-seeking, drawing on the perspectives of both students and staff at one university.

**Methods**

The present study was based on in-depth, qualitative interviews with 23 undergraduate students ages 18 to 23 enrolled in a regional university in one Northeastern state, as well as 5 university staff connected to a campus-based support program for independent students. The study procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) affiliated with the authors' university. Students were eligible to participate in the study if they responded affirmatively to the following question on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form: "At any time since you turned age 13, were both of your parents deceased, were you in foster care, or were you a dependent or ward of the court?" A list of email addresses for eligible students was provided to the research team by the Office of the Dean of Students. A recruitment flyer was then emailed to all eligible students; those who expressed interest in participation were contacted by members of the research team to confirm eligibility, explain the study procedures, and answer any questions. Individual, in-depth interviews were conducted virtually (i.e., through Zoom) from December 2020 to April 2021. Prior to the interview, each student completed an electronic consent form and a brief demographic questionnaire.

As part of the interviews, students were asked about their participation in a campus-based support program designed to serve foster care alumni and other independent students. The program provided personalized academic, social, and life skills support to eligible undergraduate students, including one-on-one mentoring, case management, access to summer housing, and social programs, activities, and workshops. The program's staff included a full-time master's level social worker, and two graduate student interns. Additionally, the program was supported by two staff persons in the Office of the Dean of Students and the Office of Financial Aid.

A semi-structured interview guide was used to discuss students' participation in the program, including their attitudes towards help seeking and factors related to engaging in help seeking behaviors. Student interviews were audio-recorded, naturalistically transcribed verbatim, and checked for accuracy prior to analysis.

**Students' Characteristics**

All participating students were aged 18 to 23 years, and over two-thirds identified as women, and African American or Hispanic. Approximately 35% were freshmen, 20% were sophomores, 20% were juniors, and 20% were seniors. Students came from a variety of majors, including biology, business administration, justice studies, psychology, and others. The average, self-reported GPA for the participating students was about 3.0. About 30% of students reported histories of foster care, nearly 10% were wards of the court but did not disclose foster care histories, and the rest were independent because they had no contact with their biological or adoptive parents, or their parents were deceased. More than two thirds of students indicated that they were the first in their family to attend a four-year college or university.

Over 50% of participants reported that they resided in the campus dormitory during the school year, while the rest resided off-campus. When asked about living arrangements during the summer break, nearly 40% reported that they remained on campus. The extent of participation in the campus-based support program described above varied considerably among the respondents, with about 60% reporting some participation during the past year (e.g., attending a workshop or an event, meeting with staff, utilizing resources provided by the program, etc.), and the rest reporting little or no active participation during this period. A full description of participants` characteristics is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Participants' Demographics (*N*=23)**

| Characteristic | n (%) or Mean (range) |
| --- | --- |
| **Age** | 19.83 (18-23) |
| **Race and Ethnicity** | |
| Non-Hispanic Black | 9 (39.1%) |
| Non-Hispanic White | 7 (30.4%) |
| Hispanic or Latinx (any race) | 7 (30.4%) |
| **Sex** | |
| Male | 8 (34.8%) |
| Female | 15 (65.2%) |

**Year in School**

| | |
|---|---|
| Freshman | 8 (34.8%) |
| Sophomore | 5 (21.7%) |
| Junior | 5 (21.7%) |
| Senior | 5 (21.7%) |

**Independent Status Type**

| | |
|---|---|
| History of foster care | 7 (30.4%) |
| Dependent or ward of the court~ | 2 (8.7%) |
| Other independent status | 14 (60.9%) |

**First generation college student**

| | |
|---|---|
| Yes | 16 (69.6%) |
| No | 6 (26.1%) |
| Unknown | 1 (4.3%) |

**Living arrangement: School year**

| | |
|---|---|
| Campus dormitory | 13 (56.5%) |
| Other stable housing^ | 9 (39.1%) |
| Unstable housing^^ | 1 (4.3%) |

**Living arrangement: Summer**

| | |
|---|---|
| Campus dormitory | 9 (39.1%) |
| Other stable housing | 11 (47.8%) |
| Unstable housing | 3 (13.0%) |

**Participation in campus-based support program**

| | |
|---|---|
| Actively participated in the past year | 14 (60.9%) |
| Did not actively participate in the past year | 6 (26.1%) |

|  |  |
|---|---|
| Not familiar with the program | 3 (13.0%) |

~Student was dependent or ward of the court but has not disclosed foster care history
^Stable housing includes permanent living arrangement with family, partner, roommate, friend, etc.
^^Unstable housing includes "couch surfing", or a temporary living arrangement with friends or relatives

**Staff Interviews**

In addition to student interviews, we conducted in-depth, individual interviews with     five staff members affiliated with the campus-based support program (i.e., a full-time social worker, two graduate student interns, and two administrators). These interviews were designed to capture the staff's perspectives of the mission and goals of the program, its major strengths and limitations, and the extent of student utilization of the services provided. For the present analysis, we analyzed portions of staff interviews discussing service utilization issues and factors related to student help seeking behaviors. The procedures for staff interviews were identical to the student interviews (i.e., individual interviews conducted virtually through Zoom between December 2020 and April 2021).

**Analytic Strategy**

We employed a structured thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with two data analysts per transcript and bi-weekly peer debriefing. Each analyst read half of the transcripts multiple times, and generated an initial list of codes, drawn from participants' words as well as sensitizing concepts (Padgett, 2008). The research team met to refine the provisional codes and develop a standardized code list, which was used to code all the transcripts. Each transcript was coded by two different analysts and codes were compared to identify discrepancies. The research team met to discuss and resolve discrepancies through a process of consensus-building. After this first cycle of coding, the second cycle involved organizing the codes into higher-order themes and sub-themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).  Initial themes and subthemes were evaluated against the data, and themes that did not fit the data were discarded.

The research team employed several strategies to ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of the qualitative analysis (Padgett, 2008). Interviewing multiple sources (both students and staff members) and having multiple coders for each transcript allowed for triangulation of both sources and analysts (Padgett, 2008). Each analyst kept memos of coding decisions to create an audit trail, and the PIs kept a log tracking decisions regarding coding and interpretation of findings. Negative case analysis was also employed to evaluate examples that did not fit the proposed themes. The research team met biweekly for peer debriefing and reflections on the process of data analysis. The research team also invited all student participants to participate in member checking (Padgett, 2008).

Five student participants met with the two principal investigators to review findings. Participants validated the structure of the study's findings, contributing to the trustworthiness of the analysis.

**Positionality**

Our research team included two university professors and four graduate research assistants, two of whom assisted with all stages of data collection and analysis for this study, and two assisted with the review of the literature and participated in team meetings to discuss the findings. All six of this study's team members were female; three were White, two were Black and one was Latina. None of us have lived experience in the foster care system, although several of us have research and work experience that seek to understand the relational and developmental experiences of foster care alumni and other system-involved youth. Our beliefs about the importance of listening to young people in their own words, as well as our social work values of social justice and the importance of human relationships shaped this research. Five of the research team members were born outside the United States and brought a curiosity about the value of independence and self-reliance in the American cultural context. We practiced reflexivity throughout this study, to reflect on our experiences during data collection and analysis.

<div align="center">

**Findings**

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Our thematic analysis of the transcripts grouped the factors affecting help-seeking into three categories: individual factors, interpersonal factors, and institutional factors. We describe each of these factors in turn. All names are pseudonyms.

**Individual Factors**

Both students and staff identified several individual factors that affected help-seeking among independent students. Most of these factors were described as inhibiting help-seeking. Students described a range of personal reasons for not reaching out for help, including personal feelings of discomfort and lack of knowledge, while staff primarily described students' difficulties in terms of their failure to think ahead and be proactive. Students also described themselves as willing to ask for help, in certain cases. Each of these sub themes are described below.

*Discomfort with Help-Seeking*

Both staff and students identified personal reluctance as a major barrier to help-seeking among independent students. We identified several sub-themes in students' responses, including a preference for self-reliance, pride, and doubt about the effectiveness of services.

**Preference For Self-Reliance**. Almost half (n=12) of the student participants described their reluctance to ask for help in terms of a preference for self-reliance. As an example, one student explained:

I have a hard time reaching out to people when I do need stuff… usually I do stuff on my own, or figure it out. So it's not that I didn't have access to it. It's just hard approaching other people for help… it's just like asking other people for help when like I know for me, the majority of my life. It's like, you know, you got to learn to do stuff on your own in a sense even though that there is help. It's just hard reaching out (Jade, 18 years)

Several students explained that they prefer to try to solve problems on their own before going to another person for help:

It depends on the situation, but most times I wait it out and I try to change, like either like my behavior towards something, um, or ask other people's like advice from there. And then like, if it, if I feel like I can't handle it, like at all, then I typically would ask for help. (Hannah, 21 years)

A number of students identified not wanting to be a burden on others as the reason they prefer to solve their own problems. Imani, 18 years explained, "I just figure I don't want like be a burden to someone else first, you know, like if I can do it on my own I'll just do it that way because it's the easiest." In the interviews, some students also admitted they struggle between wanting to ask for help and the sense that they alone are responsible for themselves.

**Pride.** In addition to believing that they alone are responsible for solving their own problems, some students (n=6) admitted that pride plays a role in discouraging them from asking others for help:

I don't want to feel like a charity case but I'm just certain situations like…I'm struggling in this class or adjusting or, like, just financially like problems like that. Like, I know that you guys could help me, but it's just like hard going to people for personal reasons, in a way, I think it's that like I know a lot of people like my age, we keep it like you know between ourselves and it's hard because we suffer alone in a sense (Jade, 18 years)

Another student described feeling embarrassed about her status as an independent student, which kept her from opening up to others. For Sydney (age 21), participating in the campus support program for independent students was a turning point:

It's helped me understand that there is nothing wrong in opening up to people and telling people what's wrong with you, expressing yourself and asking for help most of all is what the program has helped me to

> be able to, if I see that there's someone who's able to help me I should open up my mouth and say, I'm in need of help instead of allowing myself to drown mentally, emotionally, or even financially or …in every aspect of my life. There's nothing wrong in asking for help because you may ask for help and you may get even more help than you expected to get (Sydney, 21 years)

Other students reported similar feelings, revealing that their desire to ask for help coexisted with feelings of embarrassment about needing help from others. Relatedly, 3 staff referenced the stigma associated with involvement in the foster care system as a potential barrier to engagement with the program. As an example, one staff member reported,

> Some students have told me in the past that they don't want to come in here with this identity of being, you know, part of a program for former foster kids, they want to remove that, they want to start over. They want to start fresh... (Staff)

Both staff and students acknowledged that feelings of embarrassment can inhibit seeking assistance.

**Doubt.** A small number (n=5) of students reported that they were reluctant to reach out for assistance from campus supports because they were skeptical about the effectiveness of these programs. Many of these students had previous negative experiences with similar programs or systems of care, which they did not experience as beneficial. One student (Alexis, 21 years) reported, "I went to like therapy classes, um, when I was younger, when my brother passed away and I just feel like it didn't help, like to keep bringing it up every week." A staff member observed this dynamic as well:

> We'll have students who will come in and they'll be very cold and you'll ask them questions and they'll give you one word answers. And they're not. They're just not open to receiving assistance. Yeah. We have a lot of students who have been involved in the system of child welfare for much of their lives and many who feel that they have been wronged by a number of systems. And so it makes it very difficult for them to want to continue trying to engage with these services. (Staff)

According to the independent student participants, their doubt in the efficacy of formal supports, along with their preference for self-reliance and sense of pride, contributed to their reluctance to reach out for help.

***Lack of Planning***

In contrast, the staff attributed students' overall reluctance in seeking help to their failure to plan ahead. As an example, one staff member reported that "the main number one thing is they wait too long to solve a problem." Another staff attributed students' reluctance to reach out for help to their own confidence in their abilities:

> I can think of several students where I tried to meet with them to come up with a transition plan and they said that they got it. And when it comes to, when it's time for them to leave they don't have it. And then my conversation with them is like, well, I tried to get you to come in here to have a conversation because we could have had this conversation a year ago. That's what it is. Students think that they have a handle on it…. I think it's because students act in the now, and don't think about the later. And I think that's just this generation, that's the way they operate. They don't operate in the future, they operate in the now, so, and that's the students that tell me 'oh, I'll worry about that later.' (Staff)

Several staff described a pattern in which students wait until too late in the semester to ask for help, by which point their options are limited. For example, one staff member explained how students' problems, if left unaddressed, can escalate over a period of time:

> So, they'll show up and say I'm having a problem in my class... and you find out that they're really struggling academically in the semester. Why, because one or the other, they'll say, Oh, I didn't really, you know, pay attention maybe in the beginning because I didn't have the book because I didn't have the money to buy the book. And so, they went for a month and a half without the book or the code and didn't ask for help. Didn't ask for support, didn't say you know, I don't have the money for this, where can I get it? Instead, they went without. So, they put themselves at a disadvantage when they didn't have to… So, they've missed, you know, two months of work so now the faculty is saying, no, I can't make up two months of work, you should drop the class, or you should, you know, repeat the class and whatever when if they would have sought help in the beginning, they would have gotten the book or the code and then hopefully done the work.

Overall, staff noted that students often wait until they are in crisis to reach out for help, and asserted that independent students needed to be more proactive in managing their lives as undergraduate students.

### *Lack of Knowledge*

Both students and staff referenced insufficient knowledge for completing necessary tasks. Nearly one-third (n=7) of the students identified a lack of knowledge as a barrier to asking for help, particularly in regard to tasks

related to being an independent student on campus. For example, one student reported needing to contact the office for disability resources, "but I didn't even know how to even reach out to them. And I just figured it out, like maybe a couple of weeks ago after I already got on academic probation" (Anthony, 20 years). Other students cited having to navigate new and unfamiliar legal and financial tasks as independent students. Students who still have open cases may be used to having workers introduce new programs and resources, rather than having to seek them out independently:

> So the programs that I'm involved with because I have an open case with my social worker, because you know I haven't, I age out at 21. ...they introduce me to these new programs, but they make sure that the people that are in charge with my case for that program like they have meetings or a certain time that we're we're supposed to meet. So when people are, like, asking me to meet with them so we can talk over things, I feel like that works better for me than having those resources out there but you know it's up to me to go look for it, you know. (Andrea, 20 years)

Among the staff, there was also an acknowledgement that lack of knowledge may pose a barrier for these students. One staff member stated,

> I would say this for pretty much any student, but I would say that they don't realize how much life costs. And I don't think they really understand what it means to put let's say $2,000 down on an apartment, security for apartments. I don't think they understand what it means to you know to really be on your own until they do. (Staff)

The lack of knowledge, along with a reluctance to ask for help, both functioned as barriers for help-seeking.

***Willingness To Ask For Help***

At the same time, a majority (n=14) of the 23 students interviewed indicated that they would be willing to ask for help, under certain circumstances. As an example, one student stated, "I don't have like any issues or problems to reach out." Another student shared their willingness to seek out support from campus resources:

> I feel like if I need I will definitely reach out because I am someone who does struggle academically at times. If I see myself in a situation where I really just can't figure out the assignment or anything on my own, I will definitely go to those resources. (Destiny, 19 years)

Nine of the 14 students who acknowledged a willingness to ask for help also endorsed some form of reluctance to ask for help. For example, one student explained that with regard to reaching out for help:

I think I'm pretty comfortable. But I think I do wait until I have no other option, you know… Because I feel like if I can do it on my own then I'd rather do it that way. But if I really need help then I figure it's time to reach out, to reach out. (Imani, 18 years)

Overall, both students and staff reported a range of individual factors affecting help seeking, such as feelings of pride and doubt, a preference for self-reliance, lack of awareness of available resources, and challenges related to planning ahead and willingness to ask for help. Although some students expressed willingness to reach out for help under specific circumstances, feelings of reluctance and ambivalence towards seeking help was common.

**Interpersonal Factors**

Moving beyond the individual, both students and staff identified several interpersonal factors relevant to help-seeking. In our study, the importance of students' personal connection with program staff was a recurring theme, identified in two-thirds (n=15) of student interviews. Qualities of the relationship, including genuine care, consistency, frequency, and support, facilitated the development of supportive relationships, which strengthened students' willingness to ask for help with difficult issues. Students were also alert for potential judgment or paternalistic attitudes from university staff. At the same time, several interpersonal factors functioned to inhibit help-seeking, including the pandemic context of online communication and communication from faculty or staff that students experienced as impersonal or uncaring. We discuss each of these sub-themes in turn.

*Facilitating Factors*

**Establishing A Personal Connection.** Students described several characteristics of program staff that helped them feel comfortable and facilitated the development of a personal connection. Students valued program staff who were friendly, open, and able to empathize with their situations. In talking with program staff, one student (Anthony, 20 years) appreciated that "it felt like he actually wanted to like, hear me out."

In addition, students emphasized the importance of having regular communication with program staff to facilitate the development of a personal relationship. One student emphasized the importance of "constant communication", explaining, "just like a check-in or, um, maybe like once or twice a week, um, having like an activity or something like that, I feel like that would definitely, um, be helpful in, like, building that relationship" (Hannah, 21 years). Students also expressed a preference for regular, individualized contact with a specific person that would allow them to build a personalized relationship over time.

Along with frequent and consistent contact, students described the importance of feeling supported, encouraged and motivated by program staff, especially staff who share their lived experience of being the first in their families to graduate from college:

> When I go to him and I went out of his office. I'm like, I'm a new person, I know I can do this. ... he's like, No, no, I know you can do it, like, keep on going to college is hard, but you can do it and just having that motivation somebody telling me, they're like, you can do it, you can get there…. I just see him. And I'm like, I know I can do it because he did it. And I think that's what keeps me motivated more from this program. (Chris, 19 years)

These factors helped students assess the potential for a personal connection and begin to build a relationship with program staff.

**Knowing Someone Is There.** Students appreciated knowing that their social worker was "really really there for most of us" (Sydney, 21 years), and felt that this reliability helped them stay connected to the program. Elijah (20 years) echoed this sense of comfort and confidence in the relationship:

> That's how I felt this sense of security that he, he wouldn't, he would have me if I need, if I ever needed to reach out for anything or assistance or like a program or grants, I could just reach out because I feel like he would, he would do what he could do to support me or anyone else that's in the program. (Elijah, 20 years)

*Inhibiting Factors*

Over one-third of students (n=9) described several inhibiting factors related to the interpersonal process of asking for help. These included identifying the potential for judgment or condescension from adults, being online, and communication from staff or faculty they experienced as impersonal or uncaring.

**Judgment.** In their interactions with adults on campus, students were alert for communication they experienced as judgmental or condescending. For example, one student expressed a wish to have "someone, I can just talk to get advice from without feeling like I'm being judged or looked down on based on the situation that I'm going through" (Natalia, 19 years). Another student (Sydney, 21 years) described feeling doubtful upon receiving emails with offers of assistance:

> When I started reaching out to the dean's office and they would like send me emails like, "Okay, get back to me." At first I was kind of like, "Are these people really going to help me, like do they even understand like, are they really - are they gonna judge me or are they gonna think oh I'm lying?" (Sydney, 21 years)

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A different student (Brandon, 19 years) described his reluctance to interact with a university employee: "She kind of talks to me [in a] condescending tone and I just don't like kissing people ass, especially people that talk down to me. So I just don't interact with her when I, when I don't have to." For these students, a concern that they would be judged or condescended to functioned as an inhibiting factor in reaching out for assistance.

**Uncaring Responses.** In addition to concerns about judgment, students also described receiving communication from university staff or faculty that they experienced as uncaring, which discouraged students from reaching out for help. Some students described professors who did not appear understanding of the challenges faced by independent students:

> One of my textbooks is like a $300 textbook and like I definitely can't afford that. And I had to tell my professor that I wasn't, that I just simply can't do that, and we were kind of going back and forth because she didn't really want to be accommodating. (Jordan, 20 years)

Some students expressed a wish that their professors would actively invite students to ask for help. Jordan, 20 years mentioned "professors just kind of not wanting to deal with students as much...the reaching out isn't there." Another student suggested that professors start by "notifying the students like, 'Hey if you ever need anything just let me know'" (Matthew, 20 years). One student elaborated on this:

> I feel like some of the teachers, they don't really personalize with students, it's like, Okay, hello welcome today's lesson is this, okay the homework is this and then that's it. They don't make it feel like you're comfortable enough to go to them and ask for help. Even though, like they say these are my office hours and everything, but they're just some of them I feel like they just don't care. I don't know if it's because of the pandemic, or that's just the way they are. I think that's been hard. (Jade, 18 years)

For these students, some of the communication they received from university faculty and staff functioned as a barrier to asking for help.

**Remote Learning Environment.** For many students, the shift to remote instruction necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic also made it more difficult for them to form relationships with university staff and faculty. Several students mentioned that they find it easier to build relationships with their instructors when classes are in-person. A student (Imani, 18 years) explained, "I think I just connect more with people in person." Another student echoed this sentiment, adding that in online interactions, "I get like nervous and I'm not one to be like really open

and...to reach out really, unless I like really need help" (Kayla, 18 years). This student looked forward to a return to being on campus:

> I feel like that will be a time when I'm actually like reaching out. Cause I can actually go to like the people and see what they're like and see like, if I feel comfortable with... talking to them and stuff. (Kayla, 18 years)

Some students mentioned that they found it harder to reach out for assistance with people they had only interacted with through videoconference technology:

> But then, in a sense, like since everything's online you feel like you can't really go to someone and talk to them or talk to the teacher because it's like I've never met you. I've only ever seen you on a screen. Yeah, just like another student another number. So it just feels that way. (Jade, 18 years)

For these students, the mandatory pivot to online instruction left them feeling less connected to their instructors and other supportive university staff. Positive, encouraging interactions helped students build relationships with faculty and staff, establishing a foundation that supported help-seeking. At the same time, concerns about judgment, uncaring responses, and being online inhibited the connections students could build with faculty and staff.

**Institutional Factors**

In addition to individual and interpersonal factors, we identified three broad institutional factors relevant to student help-seeking: difficulties navigating university services; insufficient staffing to meet student needs; and policies that failed to meet the needs of independent students, particularly during a pandemic. We discuss each of these below.

*Difficulties Navigating University Services*

Students affirmed that "it's not so easy to get help, especially in college" (Destiny, 19 years) and described challenges finding the right person to help them with academic and personal issues. We identified two sub-themes under the heading of "difficulties navigating university services." Students and staff argued that support programs for independent students needed higher visibility. In addition, both students and staff suggested that more active, personalized outreach would benefit independent students and facilitate help-seeking.

**Increased Program Visibility.** A quarter of the students interviewed (n=6) suggested that programs for independent students should have higher visibility on campus among both students and staff. Many of the students only learned about the program months or years into their time as undergraduate students, and they wished they had

heard about the program earlier: "when I became an independent student, I wish my financial aid advisor or even my regular advisor would have told me about it." (Alexis, 21 years) Others suggested that greater visibility could help with barriers to help-seeking:

> It can be really intimidating to ask for help and acknowledge that help is reaching out to you. So, I think just like advertising more and putting more of their information out there that way people know what it's about (Jordan, 20 years)

Staff also argued that the campus support program for independent students deserved greater visibility throughout the university, including upper administration:

> I think if there was more of the senior leadership acknowledging the program and some of the things that we do here, I think faculty would buy into it, like it will trickle down. Everyone would, even students would buy into it but, you know, it has to start from the top down. (Staff)

In addition to better advertising, both students and staff emphasized the importance of active and personalized outreach by support services.

**Better Outreach.** Nearly half (n=12) of the students and most (n=4) of the staff discussed the need for the program to initiate contact with students and provide more information to students upfront. Students mentioned that they preferred to have program staff reach out to them directly to share information about the program and actively invite them to participate. One student explained:

> I feel a lot better when, when they reach out to me... I could be a little hard-headed when it comes to asking for help...I feel better when it when I see like what the program is about, what they do, or can they do for me like I feel better like seeing the information beforehand, before I guess like not knowing and asking for help if that makes sense. (Matthew, 20 years)

Echoing this, another student reported, "I think it broke the barrier because they reached out to me first, which was nice because, you know, instead of me reaching out and being all shy" (Jordan, 20 years). Students also mentioned that they are less likely to pay attention to mass emails but might respond more positively to personalized outreach:

> I wouldn't mind reaching out, but then again, it's hard because like I said it's hard going to people, but I would I would respond to someone if they said they sent me like a "Hey, I'm so and so and, you know, I'm a fellow. And I was wondering if you needed anything" and then I'm like, okay, so they care, they seem

chill. So I'll talk to them and then build a relationship because it's hard it's really hard going to someone and

asking for help. (Jade, 18 years)

Program staff affirmed that they do indeed send personalized outreach emails to students; however, the response rate

is low. One staff explained:

I know that's not really an effective method because a lot of students do not read their emails. And in

speaking, when I do come in contact with a student who I had never met before, they say oh, I thought that

was just, you know, a spam or I didn't see the email, it got lost in the emails… We send emails throughout

the year to students trying to engage the students and let them know that we're here to support them, but I

think that process could be a little bit better.  (Staff)

Several of the staff acknowledged that in-person events (which were suspended temporarily due to the COVID-19

pandemic) are a more effective method of connecting with students than email.

*Insufficient Staffing*

Both students (n=3) and staff (n=4) argued that independent students on campus would benefit from a more

robust support program staffed with multiple social workers and social work interns. At the time of the evaluation,

the program operated with a single social worker, divided between multiple roles on campus, who also supervised

two social work interns. Staff recognized a need to provide some students with case management services and after-

hours support, which the program is currently not set up to provide. One staff member observed that students' needs

have increased considerably as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic: "homelessness is on the rise now because of

COVID, so it's just about every day that I receive two to three students who are homeless or have other social

service needs" (Staff). Overall, there was consensus among students and staff that more staff were needed to offer

more intensive and personalized outreach and support to independent students on campus.

*Limited or Inflexible University Policies*

Students (n=5) referenced several programmatic and academic policies that affected their willingness to

seek help as independent college students. Mental health services on campus are frequently time-limited. For some

independent students with histories in the foster care system, this was a major barrier. One student explained it this

way:

I don't like starting therapy. If it's only going to be eight weeks, I don't like doing that...I'm not opening up

to nobody within eight weeks. And I'm not even going to start with you, cause I'm not going to tell you I'm

not going. We're not going to get to anything that's going to be beneficial to me in eight weeks. I don't even

trust you in eight weeks. So, so that's another limitation. (Brandon, 19 years)

Students also expressed reluctance to utilize support services with a rotating cast of staff. One student shared, "when

I first transferred in, the only thing that deterred me at first was because my friend was telling me that when you go

to [student counseling services], sometimes you don't always get the same person that you're always...talking to"

(Tiana, 23 years). Having enough time to build trusting relationships with a consistent presence was important for

these independent students.

In addition to these programmatic policies, students (n=6) also expressed frustration with university

policies that they experienced as inflexible and punitive, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students also

mentioned inflexible academic policies in some of their college courses during the pandemic:

But I think in terms of academics, especially like for independent students… there's a lot of things going on

in our life like between the pandemic and maybe if people like lose family members and then, just you

never know what people are going through, so I think academically I think it could have been more relaxed

(Imani, 18 years)

Overall, students' experience of the university context, especially during the pandemic, also contributed barriers to

help-seeking.

## Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine factors that affect help seeking among foster care alumni

and other independent students enrolled in a four-year university in the United States. We examined independent

students' perspectives on help seeking, as well as the perspectives of staff who work with these students, whose

perspectives sometimes overlapped and other times diverged. In line with prior research (Hines et al., 2005; Horn,

2019; Katz & Geiger, 2019; Lenkens et al., 2020; Morton, 2017), students' willingness to reach out for help were

associated with a range of individual, interpersonal, and institutional factors.

**Students' Perspectives on Help Seeking**

Participants identified a range of individual factors affecting their desire and ability to seek assistance from

campus-based programs. Consistent with prior studies (Dumais & Spence, 2021; Hokanson et al., 2019; Katz &

Geiger, 2019; Lenkens et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2020; Morton, 2017; Pryce et al., 2017; Samuels & Pryce, 2008),

many students expressed a preference for self-reliance and a reluctance to reach out for help through formal

channels. These students noted that they preferred to solve their problems on their own and did not want to be a "burden" on others. Furthermore, some struggled with feelings of embarrassment and the belief that they alone are responsible for resolving their challenges. Other participants expressed doubt in the efficacy of formal supports due to negative experiences with similar programs in the past, or with systems of care, more generally. Students were skeptical that campus-based programs and services could be helpful for them, and expressed negative views towards disclosing their personal problems. Overall, these findings echo prior research on help seeking among foster care alumni and first generation students, which pointed to a survivalist self-reliance orientation (Chang et al., 2020; Payne et al., 2021; Samuels & Pryce, 2008;), selectivitiy towards personal disclosures (Eldridge et al., 2020; Steenbakkers et al., 2016), and skepticism of formal services due to past difficulties in accessing support through formal channels (Blakeslee & Best, 2019; Goodkind et al., 2011; Munson & Lox, 2012; Schenk et al., 2018).

At the interpersonal level, students pointed to several factors serving as facilitators or inhibitors of help-seeking behaviors. Students were more likely to reach out for assistance when they perceived the university staff to be caring, friendly, open, and able to empathize with their situations. In addition, they emphasized the importance of regular communication with staff to facilitate the development of a personal relationship that would make it easier for them to open up and reach out for help. Participants expressed a preference for regular, individualized contact with one consistent staff person who they could connect with on an emotional level. In contrast, lack of consistent, personalized contact, and the perception of staff as impersonal, uncaring, judgmental, or condescending, contributed to students' reluctance to seek assistance. These findings mirror prior research on the importance of caring and empathetic adults who understand students' lived experiences and are able to form meaningful, lasting connections with them (Miller et al., 2020; Schenk et al., 2018).

Students also identified several institutional factors that impacted their help seeking behaviors, such as difficulties navigating university services, and inflexible policies that failed to respond to their unique life challenges. Participants encountered difficulties finding a consistent person to help them with academic and personal problems, and were reluctant to use services that were time-limited, had a rotating cast of staff, or were perceived as inflexible. They noted that they needed time and consistency to open up about their problems and reach out for assistance; however, such attributes were absent from the majority of campus-based services. The need for consistency and relational closeness with significant adults was discussed in prior research on foster care alumni (Ahrens et al., 2011; Miller et al., 2020; Munson et al., 2013).

These factors related to help-seeking are relevant for students with histories of involvement in systems of care. Both foster care alumni and first-generation college students may have less knowledge about how to navigate complex university bureaucracies. Assessing the level of genuine care and concern from university staff is important for students with histories of maltreatment and system involvement. These findings must also be interpreted in an American sociocultural context that valorizes self-reliance and stigmatizes help-seeking and dependence on others (Samuels & Pryce, 2008).

**Staff's Perspectives of Students' Help Seeking Behaviors**

While much of the extant literature highlights the importance of genuine connection with supportive adults (Opsal & Eman, 2018; Paulsen & Berg, 2016; Semanchin Jones et al., 2018), most of the studies focus exclusively on the perspectives of foster care alumni and other underserved students, rather than the adults who work with them. In this study, the staff's perspectives on students' help seeking behaviors differed somewhat as compared to those reported by the students. At the individual level, staff emphasized individual-level deficits, such as students' difficulties planning ahead, and failure to be more proactive when reaching out for assistance. This finding echoes previous studies that identified some challenges among system-involved youth in planning for the future (Bowen et al., 2020). Staff argued that the students often waited until they were in crisis before opening up about their academic or personal challenges and asking for help to address them. This delay meant that their options were more limited, and the problems had escalated to a point that they were harder to address. The staff asserted that students needed to be more proactive and reach out for assistance earlier to avoid the cascading, negative effects of multiple, unaddressed challenges. This expectation that students take initiative to act in their own best interest may not match the limited experiences some students had in exercising personal agency within the child welfare system (Goodkind et al., 2011; Semanchin Jones et al., 2018).

At the interpersonal and institutional levels, the staff's perspectives were generally more aligned with those of the students, though differences continued to exist. For example, both staff and students discussed the need for better outreach and more frequent contact; however, the staff focused less on the relational aspects of such challenges, and tended to emphasize factors such as inadequate staffing and the need for additional employees to provide more intensive outreach and support. Moreover, the staff asserted that programs serving foster care alumni and other independent students had a limited visibility on campus and were often ignored by the university's upper administration, which led to inadequate allocation of resources. Although the staff recognized that students needed

consistent and caring adults to engage with as part of campus-based services, they generally paid less attention to this aspect and failed to recognize that the staff's own characteristics and engagement styles were influential in this regard. Instead, they focused on students' individual characteristics, such as their reluctance to plan ahead and unwillingness to accept help from adults, and emphasized institutional barriers, such as limited staffing and inadequate allocation of resources.

**Implications for Practice**

The findings of the present study can inform the development of effective campus-based services and supports for independent students enrolled in higher education institutions. The students' perspectives on help seeking suggest that simply making services available on campus may not translate to their effective utilization. Students who have been in foster care, those whose parents are deceased, and those with severed family connections represent a unique population requiring trauma-informed services that account for their prior experiences with inconsistent or unsupportive relationships (Johnson, 2021; Okpych & Courtney, 2018; Seita et al., 2016). As noted in prior studies (Eldridge et al., 2020; Steenbakkers et al., 2016), independent students are often cautious about personal disclosures and need longer periods of engagement to open up and reach out for assistance. University staff serving these students should be trained on trauma-informed services (Semanchin Jones et al., 2018), and recognize that they need time and opportunity to build trust before meaningfully engaging with programs. The staff in the current study viewed students' reluctance to reach out for assistance as failure to plan ahead, while the students indicated that they needed time to establish a personal connection with staff. Training staff to provide trauma-informed, relationally-oriented services can lead to their improved utilization and effectiveness. The pivot to providing services virtually necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic further underscores both the need and the challenge of establishing genuine connections between faculty, students and staff.

In this study, many students identified both a willingness and a reluctance to ask for help, reflecting the ambivalence these students feel about depending on others. The challenge for university staff who work with these students is to find ways to respect their dual needs for autonomy and connection (Paulsen & Berg, 2016). Campus support programs for foster care alumni and other independent students may expect students to demonstrate initiative in their efforts to engage with the program; however, some students may require a more intense level of relationship-based case management services. Programs that empower students to cultivate social capital (Schwartz

et al., 2018) can provide opportunities for students to exercise agency, while affirming interdependence as valuable and developmentally appropriate for young adults (Samuels & Pryce, 2008).

The current findings also have implications for broader university services, such as academic advising and mental health counseling. Foster care alumni and other independent students may be reluctant to access these services because their structure fails to meet their needs. Students in the present study expressed reluctance to engage in services that were time-limited, had a rotating cast of staff, or were perceived as inflexible or not responsive to their life challenges. These characteristics are inherent in most campus-based services, which tend to be transient, impersonal, and adhere to strict regulations that limit flexibility. The inconsistency between the needs of independent students and the structure of university services offers one explanation for why these students struggle to take advantage of available campus supports (Johnson, 2021; Miller et al., 2020). To address such challenges, colleges and universities should offer services that take into account these students' need for relational consistency, including offering longer-term mental health supports, assigning an academic advisor with whom they can built a lasting bond, and training staff to respect these students' complicated histories without requiring them to repeatedly share their stories (Miller et al., 2020; Okpych & Courtney, 2018).

**Limitations and Future Directions**

The study findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, this study was based on a convenience sample of independent undergraduate students enrolled in one university in the Northeast. As a small qualitative study, these findings are not intended to generalize to other locations and populations. Moreover, the present sample was heterogenous with respect to students' independent status, including foster care alumni and independent students who have not been in foster care. Although we have not observed meaningful differences in attitudes towards help seeking between foster care alumni and other independent students, it is possible that certain unobserved characteristics affected the study findings. Last, the data collection period for this study coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, thus, students' attitudes towards help seeking were likely impacted by the transition to online learning and limited access to various campus-based services. Despite these limitations, our data provide meaningful insight into the help-seeking attitudes and behaviors of independent students.

Future research should further illuminate the differences in staff and students' perspectives on help seeking, and how discrepancies in this regard may impact service utilization and effectiveness. Moreover, it is important to identify and test effective mechanisms for training university staff on trauma-informed approaches to improve

service delivery for the independent student population. Last, more research is needed to establish the effectiveness of campus-based support programs for foster care alumni and other independent students, including identifying specific program characteristics that may relate to improved student retention and increased graduation rates.

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