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The Perspectives of Former Foster Youth About University Supports

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

by

Jamila Aisha Salisbury

2016

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Perspectives of Former Foster Youth About University Supports

by

Jamila Aisha Salisberry

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2016

Professor Linda P. Rose, Co-Chair

Professor Tyrone C. Howard, Co-Chair

This study examined the obstacles former foster youth faced during their undergraduate years at two highly selective public institutions in Southern California and the supports they say their universities provided to help them persist toward graduation. Former foster youth graduate college at a rate much lower than non-former foster youth. Extant literature around former foster youth focuses on poor outcomes such as homelessness and low academic achievement common to this population; however, the purpose of this was to discover what former foster youth say helped them to obtain their bachelor's degrees. The theoretical framework for this study was a framework of equity wherein I argued that the former foster youth's colleges were responsible for providing services to meet this population's personal and academic needs to remove any barriers to college completion. I used a phenomenological qualitative research design for this study and conducted hour-

long interviews with 12 former foster youth—seven college graduates and five graduating seniors. The findings indicate that former foster youth encounter obstacles such as trouble with transferring from community colleges, mental health problems and financial struggles. According to the former foster youth of this study, key people, programs and financial aid were on-campus supports that helped them persist through their undergraduate years. The data imply that there is still a need for more tutoring and career development opportunities for this population. Overall, these twelve former foster youth tended to have positive perceptions of earning their bachelor's degrees and seemed to be resourceful in finding on-campus solutions to problems despite some barriers that proved to be ongoing obstacles. In light of the findings from this research study, educational leaders should provide consistent funding for services for former foster youth and former foster youth liaisons should implement new programming to meet former foster youth's needs as they arise.

Keywords: Former foster youth, college graduation, bachelor's degrees, student perceptions, barriers, obstacles, supports

The dissertation of Jamila Aisha Salisbury is approved.

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2016

DEDICATION PAGE

This dissertation is dedicated to all my family members, friends, loved ones, colleagues and students who believed in me. I especially dedicate this dissertation to the former foster youth who shared their stories with me and to those who have helped them in pursuit of their bachelor's degrees.

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VITA

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Chapter One: Statement of the Problem

Introduction

The National Center for Education Statistics (2010) reports that 27% of youth in 2010 were in a non-family living arrangement. In one year, a total of 748,000 children were in foster care (Casey Family Programs, 2011). In the same year, one particular study showed that 74% of former foster youth involved completed high school as compared with 84% of the youth from the general population. The gap for college graduation was much wider. Since more than a quarter of the students in K-12 classrooms are foster youth, schools and colleges must work to ensure that this population has equitable access to college degrees. One of President Obama's goals through Race To The Top is to prepare all students for college and career, but the goal of college readiness and success can only be reached if former foster youth receive the supports they need (United States Department of Education, 2014). It is important, then, to understand what former foster youth say they need in order to finish college.

Much research investigates the educational experiences and poor outcomes of former foster youth, but little research focuses on what has made some of these youth persist through college graduation. In a survey of 1,377 youth in foster care, 40% expressed a belief that a lack of finances would prevent them from attending college (Kirk, Lewis, Nilsen, & Colven, 2011). Such a statistic is indicative of the commonly held low academic expectations for students in foster care and for former foster youth. However, some former foster youth have achieved academic success and have the ability to not only benefit similar populations, but also inform practice for educators through the sharing of their experiences. Studies like the one involving the 50 foster youth mentees

in the ASTI (Advocates to Successful Transition to Independence) program indicate the need for lasting mentoring relationships (Osterling & Hines, 2006). In a study where 96 former foster youth were surveyed about their support systems, those who had mentors were more likely to graduate high school than those who did not—a rate of 73% versus 47% (Collins, Spencer, & Ward, 2010). The 216 emancipated youth in the Pathways to College study reported that a rigorous high school curriculum, certain personality traits and the availability of financial aid were important to their completion of college (Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005). The voices of former foster youth are important voices in the ongoing conversation about how to help these youth to persist through college graduation.

Background

Barriers to college graduation. While over 70% of high school foster youth claim they plan to attend college, only about 4% actually go on to complete a bachelor's degree (Casey Family Programs, 2011; Kirk, Lewis, Nilsen, & Colven, 2011). This trend has been evident at the national, state and local levels where students who transition out of foster care fail to enroll in or graduate from college—often due to barriers such as few financial resources, lack of housing and mental and physical health problems (Casey Family Programs, 2011). Financial assistance, housing and health care are just a few solutions community agencies and colleges have provided to help break down the barriers to college graduation for these youth. In some cases, supports that assist former foster youth in overcoming these barriers have been provided by separate organizations, while in other cases colleges and universities have housed programs that connect former foster youth with resources to combat all the barriers they may face.

Existing solutions. Research indicates a plethora of solutions that have been implemented to address the financial, housing and mental and physical health issues that contribute to the lack of academic success among former foster youth. Financial aid opportunities like the Chafee Grant have been established to supplement the typically low income of former foster youth pursuing higher education (California Student Aid Commission, 2014). The Chafee Grant is free money—up to \$5,000 annually—offered to qualifying former foster youth. When completing financial aid applications, former foster youth are able to identify themselves as such. This and other information on the financial aid form signify colleges of students’ needs. Additionally, former foster youth are most often considered independent and are able to report little to no income on financial aid forms, which may make them eligible for additional assistance at institutions that have money for disadvantaged populations. Still, too often former foster youth find themselves barely making enough for their basic needs, school tuition and housing.

Colleges and community organizations provide housing solutions for former foster youth. Transitional housing programs offer affordable living to this population known to have few financial resources to pay rent in college dorms and other housing (Rashid, 2004). Independent Living Programs (ILPs) are courses designed to help former foster youth learn life skills to aid them through the transition to postsecondary education and careers (Rassen, Cooper, & Mery, 2010). In some cases, Independent Living Programs provide supplemental financial assistance that can help fund housing (Uesugi, 2009). However, those students who have the resources to live in campus housing still have difficulty finding shelter when dorms and university apartments close for winter,

spring and summer recesses. While some colleges keep dorms open to accommodate former foster youth, some students still report experiencing homelessness.

Other solutions that promote academic success among former foster youth focus on the students' mental and physical health needs. The new extended care offered through AB12¹ connects former foster youth with supports such as health care beyond the age of emancipation from the foster care system (Kerman, B., Barth, R. P. and Wildfire, J., 2004). Extended care has the potential to alleviate some of the stressors that might otherwise prevent these students from successfully completing college. In addition, on-campus programs focus their efforts, including counseling services, on retention for former foster youth. Yet, with all these supports and solutions, many former foster youth fail to obtain a four-year degree.

Related Studies

Some former foster youth who do graduate from college experience barriers along their paths toward graduation and either access resources to overcome those barriers or otherwise work around them. In 2005, Merdinger, Hines, Osterling and Wyatt of San Jose State University and the University of California at Berkeley, surveyed 216 former foster youth in one large state university system. Of the sample, 13.7% (29) had obtained their bachelor's degrees. The students reported that they did not have time to access on-campus supports, did not know about them, did not know where to find them or had transportation or language barriers when they needed those supports. More than 75% of the sample relied on financial aid and employment to support themselves; more than 70%

¹ AB12 (Assembly Bill 12) was implemented in September of 2010 to promote better outcomes for foster youth. AB12 permits states to extend assistance to eligible youth that remain in foster care up to age 21.

were renting a room, house or apartment; 23.1% reported not having a place to sleep on average 75 days out of the year; about 32% described their health status as fair or poor; and 35% received mental health services since discharge from foster care. In spite of the many challenges they faced and not accessing all of the services available to them, these youth still managed to finish college. One must wonder how many other students would have graduated had they received support in areas like the ones previously mentioned.

Uesugi (2009) interviewed former foster youth attending two California State Universities to discover what obstacles they faced in college and what they believed helped them to be successful. The students were undergraduates who were well on their way to college graduation. Uesugi documented the students' accounts of their life experiences and found common themes among the participants' responses. The students reported that emotional and psychological challenges as well as an absence of structure and lack of basic needs were barriers to their persistence. Internal characteristics such as resilience, external factors such as faith and support services such as the Educational Opportunity Program and the Chafee Grant all were said to have helped the students to persist. This dissertation study built upon the findings from both the Uesugi and Merdinger et al. studies.

Research Questions

This study explored the experiences of graduating seniors and alumni from two highly selective public universities in California to determine what helped them to persist through graduation. As with Uesugi's study, this project involved former foster youth from universities in Southern California. The difference is that the former foster youth were both college seniors earning and graduates who had already earned their bachelor's

degrees. Rather than conducting a quantitative study involving a questionnaire as with the Merdinger et al. study, this study had a qualitative design wherein I was able to capture a more detailed story behind the numbers. The questions that guided the research were the following:

1. What kind of school-related or personal life barriers, if any, do former foster youth from highly selective public universities in Southern California report that they faced in their pursuit of their bachelor's degrees? How did these barriers obstruct their paths?
2. What campus supports do these former foster youth say helped them to persist through their undergraduate years? How did these supports help them?
3. What campus supports do the former foster youth say are needed or can be improved to better help former foster youth to persist through graduation?
4. What are these former foster youth's perceptions of obtaining a bachelor's degree?
5. In what ways do the narratives of former foster youth from highly selective public universities in Southern California offer insight to educational leaders about the policies, practices and structures in place to support them on their paths toward graduation?

Research Sites

This research study involved former foster youth students and alumni from two highly selective public universities in Southern California, referred to in this study by the pseudonyms Metropolitan University (MU) and Suburban University (SU). MU and SU are both large research institutions with MU enrolling over 29,000 undergraduates and

SU enrolling over 25,000 in the fall of 2015. In the same year, MU received 92,000 freshmen applications and enrolled 5,680. For the fall of 2016, over 96,000 students applied to SU for the 6,000 spots for freshmen. The applications for these institutions require students to give a detailed history of their high school courses, extracurricular involvement, awards received and volunteer and work experience. Incoming freshmen must have a minimum 3.0 grade point average, a rigorous course load, take a college entrance exam, demonstrate leadership and complete two admission essays.

At MU there are approximately 200 undergraduate former foster youth. Students self-identify as former foster youth and choose to participate in the Beloved Scholars Group, a former foster youth program on nearly all California and some out-of-state college campuses (ETS, 2009). The program was launched in 1998 through collaboration between the South County Children's Fund and Beach College with the primary goal of promoting retention among former foster youth so as to provide this population equitable access to college degrees. Some students opt out of participation. In the 2014-2015 school year, up to 60 former foster youth at MU participated in the various programs and events offered. All of this study's participants from MU were members of the Beloved Scholars Group. The program director has conducted research about this student population and was invested in helping more former foster youth succeed by supporting this study.

At SU, the Beloved Scholars Group supported about 20 students each year and was present on campus between the 2001-2002 school year and the 2009-2010 school year (ETS, 2009). Former foster youth liaisons at both sites agreed to send formal emails to seniors and alumni to secure participants for this study.

Recruitment for this study yielded a diverse group of twelve participants. Of the eight who attended MU, 37.5 % identified as Black/African American, 37.5 % as White/Caucasian, 12.5% as Asian/Pacific Islander and 12.5% as Latino. The overall demographics of MU for the 2015-2016 school year included 4% Black/African American, 27.1% White, 33.5% Asian/Pacific Islander and 19.1% Hispanic students. Of the four participants in this study who attended SU, 25% identified as Black/African American, 25% as White/Caucasian and 50% as Latina. The overall demographics of SU for the 2015-2016 school year included 3% Black/Non-Hispanic, 15% White/Non-Hispanic, and 25% Hispanic students. The demographics of each institution may have differed when some of the alumni participants in this study were undergraduates.

Research Design

I used a qualitative research design for this dissertation study. Specifically, I conducted a phenomenological study wherein I collected data by way of in-depth interviews. A qualitative research design was appropriate because the quantitative story about former foster youth is already evident through research. It is clear that very few former foster youth earn bachelor's degrees. What are seldom present in research are the voices of former foster youth describing why they believe they succeeded in obtaining their degrees. Further, there is an absence in the literature of qualitative data about what additional supports might help other former foster youth earn their degrees in the future. A qualitative research design allowed for participants to share their lived experiences as undergraduate students and give their perspectives of the barriers and supports they encountered.

Methods. I conducted in-depth interviews with former foster youth seniors and college graduates who attended two highly regarded public institutions in Southern California. Each interview was conducted either via Skype or in person at a site agreed upon by the research participants and myself. I asked interviewees for permission to audio record the interviews, which I later transcribed through rev.com. I did member checking by having participants review transcriptions for accuracy. From participant transcriptions I looked for emergent themes as well as themes that fell into the theoretical framework for this study—equity versus diversity and deficit cognitive frames. I drew conclusions based on these themes. Data from the interviews describe how former foster youth seem to experience similar barriers to achievement as described in the literature and similar barriers to their fellow seniors and alumni. In addition, the data indicate that as undergraduates they were able to obtain almost all the supports they needed through their universities.

Significance of the Research

From my findings I recommend changes in practice to educational leaders and former foster youth liaisons at the participating universities. Some of the changes I recommend from the results of this study include 1) continued funding for former foster youth specific resources on campus and 2) implementation of career development workshops for former foster youth. Bringing attention to student outcomes and expressed student needs may cause educational leaders to provide greater resources to build programs to better assist this population and give them more equitable access to bachelor's degrees.

I will continue to inform others about my findings and recommendations by way of formal presentations and written documents—especially an executive summary of my research. Participants of the study will also be invited to share their experiences in panel discussions with key stakeholders such as university administrators, program coordinators and education foundations.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

More than half a million children in the U.S. are in foster care for some period of time in a calendar year (Casey Family Programs, 2011). These children are in the care of adults other than their biological parents because their parents for various reasons are unable to provide a safe, stable and loving home (DCFS, 2015). Foster youth sometimes change homes, and consequently, change schools multiple times. The constant movement leads to problems with foster youth's academic performance, which may eventually prevent them from meeting the requirements for high school graduation. Of those foster youth who graduate high school, very few enroll in college and even fewer finish college (Casey Family Programs, 2011).

Some of the barriers that prevent former foster youth from persisting through the completion of a bachelor's degree are problems with high school academic records, lack of financial aid, lack of housing, mental and physical health problems, and family problems. Solutions to these barriers exist on and off campus. Solutions may be programs that tackle one of the many barriers or programs that seek to address all the needs of former foster youth in pursuit of bachelor's degrees. Institutions that provide multiple resources set former foster youth up for equitable access to a college education.

I begin this literature review with background information about foster youth and former foster youth and about their educational experiences. Next, I present the theoretical framework for this study and argue that colleges have the responsibility to ensure former foster youth have opportunities to gain equitable access to bachelor's degrees. I then highlight some of the barriers that hinder former foster youth on the path

to college graduation and some of the current solutions in light of this theoretical framework. Finally, I conclude with an explanation of the services the campuses in this study provide and how further study was warranted in order to determine the extent to which the institutions connect former foster youth with solutions to the barriers they face.

Background

According to the Department of Children and Family Services (2015), foster youth are children who are unable to be cared for by their biological parents because their parents are no longer living or because the children have been exposed by their parents to a life of neglect, abandonment or abuse. A foster family provides a temporary home for these children with the intent of some day reunifying the children with their biological parents, if possible. A foster family may even consist of members of the child's biological family—aunt and uncle or grandparents, for instance.

In 2010, nearly 30% of youth were in a living arrangement with adults other than their parents (NCES, 2010). Each child in foster care has a caseworker that serves as a liaison between the child and foster family and the child's biological family. If the caseworker determines the child's biological parents are prepared to provide a safe and loving home for him or her, then the child is reunified with them. In some cases, reunification is attempted on multiple occasions.

Any youth or adult who was at any point a part of the foster care system as determined by state Child and Family Services organizations is considered a former foster youth. Foster youth may exit the foster care system at any time (DCFS, 2015). Exiting care may come as a result of being reunited with biological parents, as a result of adoption or as a result of aging out of care. Aging out of foster care, also referred to as

emancipation, occurs when foster youth turn 18 and become independent adults. Former foster youth may have been emancipated after being in care for various lengths of time. It is common for foster youth to have had on average three placements—to have lived in an average of three homes with different foster parents in each home (Casey Family Programs, 2011).

Constant movement among foster youth often leads to a disruption in their studies. Just as foster youth change care placements they also change schools. In one study, 65% of the former foster youth participants changed schools at least seven times (Casey Family Programs, 2011). Moving from school to school is one factor believed to contribute to the low rate of high school graduation among foster youth. Fewer foster youth are graduating high school than their non-foster youth counterparts.

Foster youth are considered an at-risk population because of their difficult family circumstances. In addition, 58% of foster youth are children of color, which is an overrepresentation when considering the 44% of children of color in the general population (Casey Family Programs, 2011). Black/African American and Hispanic youth make up 23% and 21% of those in care (U.S. DHHS, 2015). In a test of their math and reading proficiency on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, Black/African American and Hispanic youth ages 13 and 17 have consistently scored lower than their White and Asian/Pacific Islander counterparts since 1980 (NCES, 2010). The stressors of being in foster care coupled with the trend of lower performance often found among minority youth have the potential to make high school graduation and college readiness more difficult goals to achieve.

Research indicates that mental health problems hinder former foster youth in their pursuit of academic success. Thirty to forty percent of foster youth receive special education services in school (Geenen & Powers, 2006). Due to their various disabilities, these students rely on school counselors to help them create thorough individualized transition plans (ITPs). However, nearly 60% of the ITPs lack sufficient detail regarding action steps needed to achieve the established educational goals. In addition, these plans should involve the children, their caseworkers and their foster parents. However, for about 50% of the ITPs the children, caseworkers and foster parents are not present and do not sign off in agreement to take action. For foster youth a lack of proper preparation in high school is a potential hindrance to their completion of college.

Organizational learning theory, as described by Bensimon (2005), places the responsibility of student outcomes in the hands of educators rather than in the hands of the students themselves. The cognitive frames or belief systems that educators have about their students, their students' abilities and their students' performance affect student outcomes. Educators, especially at the college level, must examine their cognitive frames to determine how they might provide learning environments that produce more bachelor's degrees among former foster youth.

Theoretical Framework: An Equity Cognitive Frame

Most often, educators and researchers operate from a cognitive frame that focuses on issues or factors about former foster youth that are beyond anyone's control. When considering solutions to problems among this population, Bensimon's (2005) explanation of Argyris and Schon's learning loops would suggest that school personnel interacting with former foster youth engage in single-loop learning. Only the surface

issues are addressed. Educators attribute poor results to the unfortunate plight of this disadvantaged population. The youth and their situation are to blame. This type of attribution is an example of single-loop learning.

Of the three types of cognitive frames that Bensimon (2005) describes, single-loop learning most closely relates to the diversity cognitive frame and the deficit cognitive frame. Educators with a diversity cognitive frame value differences and operate from a mindset that as long as students from diverse backgrounds are given the opportunity to study at institutions of higher learning, then students have an equal chance at attaining the same goal—in this case, a bachelor's degree. Educators with a deficit cognitive frame associate differences in student outcomes with inherent deficiencies on the part of the students or with the stereotypically low achievement of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Double-loop learning causes educators to examine issues in light of what they are able to control—their own practices and beliefs. With double-loop learning, educators attribute inequalities in former foster youth outcomes to a need for change in their own cognitive frames. The cognitive frame that most closely reflects the ideals behind double-loop learning is the equity cognitive frame. When poor student outcomes call for change, educators operating with an equity mindset consider themselves responsible for producing better results (Bensimon, 2005). As educators begin to hold themselves accountable for educating former foster youth we will begin to see more equitable access to bachelor's degrees for this population.

Educators hold themselves accountable for the outcomes of former foster youth by first considering their narratives. Narratives are the first-person accounts of one's

experiences, which are also sometimes referred to as biographies, life histories, interviews, journals, letters and the like (Merriam, 2009). Clandinin and Connelly define narrative inquiry as “the intimate study of an individual’s experience over time and in context(s)” (Caine, Estefan, & Clandinin, 2013). In order to understand and subsequently resolve problems former foster youth encounter during college, educators must hear their stories, study them and make sense of them.

In a longitudinal study involving 106 former foster youth, Jones (2010) found that 13% left foster care and enrolled in a four-year institution, while 21% left foster care and enrolled directly in a community college. Of the youth in this study, those who attended community college persisted in college longer than those who attended a four-year college. Jones posits that the difference in persistence is due in part to the differences in the costs of the types of institutions with community colleges being more affordable for these often low-income youth. Colleges have increased the diversity of the type of students they admit by offering special financial assistance, but the financial assistance offered is not sufficient to help former foster youth advance to degree completion. Educational leaders of four-year colleges who aim to achieve equity would hear the narratives behind these data and offer scholarships and other funding to make their institutions and subsequently their degrees more accessible to this population of students.

Nevertheless, few former foster youth enroll in four-year colleges and even fewer graduate. Nearly 30,000 youth exit the foster care system each year, and one study shows that of those expressing interest in attending college only 3-11% actually complete their bachelor’s degrees (Casey Family Programs, 2011). This amount falls below the rate of non-former foster youth graduates. Barriers beyond what the average college student

experiences prevent former foster youth from persisting through graduation. A deficit cognitive frame suggests that former foster youth come to college with problems that cannot be overcome and that evidently hinder their progress to obtaining a bachelor's degree. A deficit cognitive frame would place the blame on these students or their circumstances for the low rates of degree completion. Even some former foster youth have adopted a deficit mindset about themselves when colleges and universities need to take the responsibility to meet students' expressed educational needs.

When one sample of former foster youth was asked what helped them to graduate with their four-year degrees, several participants answered that personality traits like determination and discipline were key (Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005). Factoring in student characteristics as keys for success suggests a personality deficit on the part of former foster youth who did not earn degrees. This deficit cognitive frame automatically disqualifies certain students for college graduation. I argue that student characteristics such as personality traits are not the deciding factors of who earns a bachelor's degree. Rather institutional characteristics and the practices and beliefs of college and university educators determine who walks the stage.

Studies show repeatedly the below average outcomes of foster children and of former foster youth. These outcomes range from those pertaining to academic deficiencies to mental and physical health issues to employment and housing problems. In some cases it is believed that no matter what educators do, attrition, depression and homelessness will be the reality for a majority of this population. Educators and institutions of higher learning operating from an equity cognitive frame seek to

investigate issues with this population and rethink their practices and beliefs about former foster youth to cultivate change.

In a study of 163 former foster youth and a matched sample of youth from the general population, not all indicators pertaining to the former foster youth proved negative (Farrugia, Greenberger, Chen, & Heckhausen, 2006). The former foster youth surveyed showed greater orientation toward job-related skills, while those of the general population showed greater academic outcomes. Additionally, there was no difference between the groups with regard to the number from each sample who dealt with depressed mood, poor behavior and low self-esteem. Since there were differences in this matched sample on the work orientation and academic orientation indicators only, it is important to acknowledge and then seek to understand the differences. Educators must ask themselves, *If one population is performing well academically and another is performing just as well occupationally, what can we do differently to ensure the playing field is leveled for both groups?* It is possible to hear former foster youth's narratives and then produce environments of equity wherein these students excel at the same rates as youth from the general population.

Barriers and Solutions

Transitioning from high school. High school academics carry a lot of weight in the determination of students' eligibility for college, especially for four-year colleges. Foster youth may switch high schools numerous times and deal with the issue of misplaced school records or of incomplete graduation and college entrance requirements. Some former foster youth report not having enough information about the requirements for college admission (Merdinger, Hines, Osterling & Wyatt, 2005). Others have access

to college information through counselors, but at times must rely on counselors who do not prepare sufficient educational plans to assist them with the transition from high school to college (Geenen & Powers, 2006).

In 2004, the Chafee Foster Care Independence Act was amended to require plans that would connect exiting foster youth with independent living programs (ILPs), housing and other resources (Geneen & Powers, 2006). Although these plans are mandatory for all foster youth transitioning out of care after age 16, the manner in which they are implemented is not streamlined across schools. Often these plans are not prepared properly and they do not give the academic guidance students need. The results are especially poor for those in special education. Geneen and Powers (2006) found that some of the most effective plans involved the students in the transitional planning, taught life skills such as advocacy, assisted in college preparation and enrollment, offered mentorship and taught students interagency navigation. As such, educators must rethink the level of gravity they attach to helping foster youth create plans for higher education. This important step could have some implications for how prepared these students are for college and college graduation.

The Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) presently serves nearly 2,000 high school age children in foster care and has assumed the responsibility of helping them prepare for college success (LAUSD, 2014). Through the new Foster Youth Achievement Program, the district has rolled out system-wide supports to assist students in grade school achievement and post-graduation preparation. Although the district serves about 8,400 foster youth altogether, the goal is to develop Individual Graduation Plans (IGPs) for each of the 2,000 high school youth. IGPs are written agreements

between students and their counselors as to the courses and other requirements students will meet to obtain their high school diplomas. IGPs are reviewed and renewed each new school year. System-wide implementation of IGPs for foster youth is significant as high school course requirements in Los Angeles public schools are now changing to directly reflect the A-G course requirements of the California State University and University of California systems. Therefore, foster youth who follow their IGPs to obtain high school diplomas will essentially be prepared for college admissions and set up for more equitable access to bachelor's degrees.

Financial resources. The lack of financial means to pay for a college education is another reason many former foster youth do not complete bachelor's degrees.

Generally speaking, former foster youth tend to earn little money. After high school, their annual salaries average around \$5,000 while their non-foster care counterparts who are independent (not reporting their parents' income for financial aid eligibility) make nearly eight times that amount (Jones, 2010). Such low income barely meets housing and food requirements. So former foster youth have a tendency to focus on pursuing employment to make ends meet rather than pursuing a college degree.

Much of the information foster youth receive about college and college resources comes from their social workers. If social workers are not knowledgeable about financial aid resources such as grants and scholarships, then foster youth miss out on applying for funding that could cover their tuition and other expenses. When students are not getting the information they need from the adults and educators in their lives, then they must become resourceful and seek out information themselves through internet searches and networking. United Friends of the Children is one resource that connects foster youth

and former foster youth with scholarships, jobs, housing and caring mentors (www.unitedfriends.org, 2015). However, schools and colleges have the potential to provide these youth with the help they need so they do not have to go elsewhere to seek assistance.

Since the majority of foster care placements do not become permanent homes, the support foster youth receive from foster parents is not permanent. College students from the general population can potentially call home for financial assistance—whether asking for money for tuition or books or for food or recreation. A study of foster youth in the ASTI (Advocates for Successful Transition to Independence) Program found that only 45% of participants felt that they had someone from whom they could borrow \$50 (Osterling & Hines, 2006). Of these foster youth, only 11% believed they could borrow money from a member of their foster families.

Rather than expecting foster families to bear the brunt of the cost of college, the California state government has implemented the Chafee Grant program to subsidize expenses for qualifying students (California Student Aid Commission, 2014a). The Chafee Grant is awarded to students whose dependency is established by the courts between ages 16 and 18. They must be current or former foster youth and not have reached the age of 22 as of July 1 of the award year for the grant. Although the California Chafee Grant awards up to \$5,000 a year to former foster youth pursuing a college education or technical or career training, \$5,000 is likely only sufficient to cover the cost of a year at a community college. To pay the price of a four-year institution, former foster youth must search for and depend on other financial resources.

Another college financing opportunity that exists in California is the Cal Grant program. However, as with the Chafee Grant program, awardees must meet certain criteria to be eligible for the financial assistance. To earn a Cal Grant, students must either attend a specific institution for college or career training or they must have earned at least a 2.0 grade point average in high school (California Student Aid Commission, 2014b). Even when meeting the requirements and maintaining eligibility for financial aid while in school, students' non-school expenses are not necessarily covered by these grants and other awards.

Housing. Former foster youth with little income and insufficient financial aid have difficulty obtaining housing. Some former foster youth are not able to afford the cost of university living, which is another reason they resort to attending community college—to avoid the often high prices of room and board (Jones, 2010). When students have sufficient funds to pay for rent in campus housing they must consider where they will stay during academic breaks. College dorms usually close for winter, spring and summer breaks leaving former foster youth with the option of couch surfing—moving from friend's home to friend's home—or being homeless until the dorms reopen. Returning to foster parents when dorms close is not an option for all students as the foster home is meant to be temporary, housing foster youth until they reach the age of independence.

Homelessness is not uncommon for alumni of the foster care system. In a study comparing the two populations, 22% of former foster youth reported experiencing homelessness for at least one day while 2-7% of youth from the general population in the same age range reported experiencing the same (Casey Family Programs, 2011). As such

a number of independent living and transitional housing programs exist for this population. The purpose of independent living programs is to prepare foster youth to become self-sufficient (Rassen, Cooper, & Mery, 2010). The purpose of transitional housing programs is to offer former foster youth affordable housing in their first years out of care (Rashid, 2004).

Santa Rosa Junior College in Northern California houses the independent living program on campus with one of its goals being to reduce housing problems among former foster youth to better set these students up for success (Rassen, Cooper, & Mery, 2010). In a study of the services provided at Santa Rosa and other community colleges, 16% of youth noted Independent Living Programs (ILPs) as being very helpful. Foster youth and former foster youth ages 16-21 can participate and even earn course credit for participation. Some colleges incentivize attendance by offering cash rewards to students. The independent living program provides youth with guidance as to how to search and apply for housing and teaches them other important life skills. Staff members, volunteers and social workers are available on campus to provide additional assistance outside of course hours. ILP educators realize the responsibility of providing an equitable learning environment for their students.

Transitional housing programs like that in the Rashid (2004) study provide shelter for former foster youth while teaching them skills for maintaining an independent lifestyle. Twenty-three homeless former foster youth were invited to participate in a transitional housing program where they paid low rent each month and had the option of taking a job-training course. The skills learned by those who completed job training assisted them in earning greater wages and more hours of employment than their

counterparts who did not participate in job training. All the money they paid for rent was put away as a savings and returned to them at the end of the program. An implication this type of program has for colleges is the potential many four-year institutions have for providing priority career counseling and housing in dorms or campus apartments. Educators must alter their practices to address former foster youth needs rather than suggesting that the youth themselves take ownership of their circumstances and do something about them.

Transition programs can set the stage for former foster youth to gain equitable access to bachelor's degrees. Osgood, Foster & Courtney (2010) note that one of the factors that help former foster youth to make a smooth transition to adulthood is school. Not only does the pursuit of higher education give students access to careers and important life skills, but schools may also connect students with programs that may further assist them in other areas. Unfortunately, as Osgood et al (2010) argue, there is often poor coordination of systems. The foster care system is not aligned with any specific transition program for those aging out of foster care. Research suggests that the same youth who are in need of parental support at the age of 14 are in need of parental support in young adulthood. So coordination of programs for minors with programs for foster care alumni are needed. Four-year degree awarding institutions ought to make transition programs available to give former foster youth an equitable chance at graduating.

Mental and physical health. Former foster youth often encounter mental and physical health problems that make persisting through college graduation more difficult. Mental health problems among former foster youth may have begun prior to enrolling in

college and arisen due to maltreatment or other trauma (Salazar, 2013b). A research study revealed that 25% of foster care alumni participants suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, which is a rate similar to the lifetime prevalence among U.S. war veterans (Casey Family Programs, 2011). Former foster youth who showed posttraumatic symptoms on a health screening while in college were more likely to disengage in their education (Salazar, 2013b). In addition, those students who felt their mental health was not well treated while in college were more likely to disengage than former foster youth who reported that their mental health problems were well treated.

Foster children with health problems that go untreated may see those problems worsen after exiting care and become a barrier to their college education. One study found that 50% of children in foster care had chronic medical problems (Casey Family Programs, 2011). Such medical problems lead to frequent absences or an inability to concentrate in school. In the college years, they may lead to the type of disengagement in schooling demonstrated among the former foster youth with the posttraumatic symptoms. For some their disabilities and other health problems serve as barriers that keep them from ever enrolling in college in the first place (Geenen & Powers, 2006).

While in foster care, state departments of child services provide medical and dental health care for foster youth (DCFS, 2015). Those youth who are still in care when they enter college have access to these resources. Through Assembly Bill 12 youth may be eligible for extended health care services until the age of 21, depending on their states of residence. Independent living programs and other organizations on and off college campuses provide counseling services for former foster youth (Rassen, Cooper, & Mery,

2010). And some programs simply provide a caring adult for them to talk to (Osterling & Hines, 2006).

Family and adult advocates. Problems with family, either biological or foster family, can be a barrier to college completion for former foster youth. Familial problems range from the absence of loving family members to emotionally or physically harmful encounters with family. One former foster youth noted that she found it strange that her college roommate talked to her mother on the phone every night, but also admitted to often feeling lonely and as if she had no one. The student expressed she felt her accomplishments did not matter because her biological family was absent and her foster family showed little interest in her education. Similarly, foster care youth who experienced little parental support while in care did not have high academic aspirations or expectations for attending or finishing college (Kirk, Lewis, Nilsen, & Colvin, 2011).

Adult advocates for former foster youth support them through their college years in hopes of seeing more former foster youth earn their degrees. Former foster youth who experienced severe maltreatment (physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse or neglect) may have experienced these with their own parents or other adult family members (Salazar, 2013b). Salazar's (2013) study of 329 former foster youth found that those who persisted were those students who accessed resources and adults to help them cope while continuing their studies. Instructors, volunteers and liaisons involved in the independent living programs at Santa Rosa and other community colleges personally walk with students to different offices on campus to meet with individuals that will help them with school-related and personal problems (Rassen, Cooper, & Mery, 2010). Court-appointed advocates and group-home staff members provide transportation to help

students get to class and social workers have check-in time with the youth to allow them to express their needs and concerns.

The ASTI (Advocates to Successful Transition to Independence) program connects foster youth ages 16-18 with mentors to help them prepare for the transition to adulthood (Osterling & Hines, 2006). The youth describe their relationships with these advocates as friendships. The advocates are consistent and dependable. They participate in recreational activities with the youth like going out to eat or going to the movies, but they also support foster youth academically, accompany them to court hearings and even take them to doctor visits. Without mentors as resources some of these foster youth would not have graduated high school. Mentors and other caring adults help fill voids that absent family members leave and actively support former foster youth in pursuit of a college degree.

Multiple studies call for a system-wide implementation of mentoring to give former foster youth equitable access to education (Kirk, Lewis, Nilsen, & Colvin, 2011; Collins, Spencer, & Ward, 2010; Osterling & Hines, 2006). The relationships former foster youth have with adults can be reflective of the type of relationships they have with adults in their biological families. The relationships can be short-lived, disjointed or non-existent. The ASTI mentors and mentees agreed that two years were not enough to cultivate all the skills needed for success in college and career (Osterling & Hines, 2006). The mentors expressed a desire to be better trained to help students in such areas as financial aid counseling. These advocates operate from an equity cognitive frame as they consider their practices and take on the responsibility to better assist foster care alumni in pursuit of a bachelor's degree.

Systemically implemented advocacy for former foster youth is an important move in the direction of equitable access to four-year degrees. A study of 96 former foster youth found that participants felt supported in their transition to adulthood when certain individuals and organizations helped with the transition (Collins, Spencer, & Ward, 2010). Specifically, participants stated that professionals, biological parents, mentors, friends and their parents, and organizations such as schools or colleges aided in their path to academic success. Of those who had a mentor, 73% completed a GED or graduated high school, compared with 47% of those without a mentor. In a survey of 1,377 foster youth and non-foster youth, participants said they too believed parental support was going to be important to their college completion (Kirk, Lewis, Nilsen, & Colvin, 2011). Hence, the guidance of an advocate or mentor is a necessary ingredient in former foster youth's educational trajectory.

College programs promoting equity. Some institutions have developed programs to provide former foster youth with equitable access to bachelor's degrees. Western Michigan University (WMU) has a program called Seita Scholars, which is named for Dr. John Seita, a WMU alumnus and former child of the Michigan foster care system (Unrau, 2011). Often institutions consider quantitative data pertaining to former foster youth and begin to implement programs they believe will benefit this population about which they have little or no qualitative data. Seita Scholars sets itself apart from other programs in that student participants have a voice in both the types of activities the program offers and the overall direction of services.

In addition to the mentoring component and learning of self-sufficiency skills evident in other programs, Seita Scholars co-teach University 101 courses for former

foster youth (Unrau, 2011). The Seita Scholars study was conducted only three years after the program's inception and the three-year retention rate was 80%. This high rate of retention indicates that participants were well on their way to earning their bachelor's degrees at rates similar to their non-former foster youth peers. Student-centered programs like WMU's Seita Scholars may be examples of success that colleges and universities can emulate as educators question their current ways of thinking about access to bachelor's degrees for former foster youth.

In 1998, the Guardian Scholars Program was launched at a university in Southern California with the mission to serve former foster youth and aid them through college graduation (www.orangewoodfoundation.org, 2015). Considering the low rates of former foster youth who obtain degrees from four-year institutions, California State University at Fullerton (CSUF), Orangewood Children's Foundation and Ron Davis (member of the CSUF Advancement Board) collaborated to create an on-campus program to serve this population. The Guardian Scholars Program was birthed at CSUF and today exists at dozens of colleges in California and a few institutions in other states such as Mesa State in Colorado and Hunter College in New York. The program takes into account all of the most common barriers to success that former foster youth face in pursuit of higher education and seeks to provide solutions for them all through one central location at the institution.

The Guardian Scholars Program differs from other solutions to the barriers that former foster youth face. Where programs exist to either provide academic support, financial aid, housing, health care or mentoring, Guardian Scholars serves as a central office on college campuses that provides resources and access to resources to help in each

of these areas (www.orangewoodfoundation.org, 2015). Prior to establishing Guardian Scholars on a campus, upper-level administration at the college or university must enter into an agreement with the Orangewood Children's foundation to provide 1) a financial aid liaison, 2) a dedicated program director, 3) housing assistance and 4) mentoring for former foster youth who participate in the program. Providing access to the most important resources through one program on campus has the potential to increase academic success among former foster youth. Similar to the way Seita Scholars polls the voices of program participants, I sought with this study for former foster youth to speak about the on-campus supports at Metropolitan and Suburban Universities that they believe provided them with equitable access to their college degrees—whether the on-site former foster youth program or other supports. The participants' personal narratives offer insight to educational leaders as to the degree to which campus programs are meeting the needs of this population or whether they are in need of improvement.

Conclusion

To earn their bachelor's degrees, former foster youth at times go to great lengths to overcome some of the challenges they face. For some a caring adult in their lives connects them with resources in the community or on their college campuses. For others the only option they have is to advocate for themselves. Whether seeking guidance counseling as they exit high school, financial aid upon entering college, housing in or near their campuses, health care services or counseling, former foster youth find themselves looking for help in a number of places. Rarely are resources accessible in one place for these youth. As a result, former foster youth experience having some of their needs met while other problems go unfixed. It is the responsibility of their respective

institutions of higher learning to provide the resources they need to gain equitable access to college degrees.

It became evident through this study that Metropolitan and Suburban Universities provided resources to meet the most prominent needs of former foster youth in order to see all their students successful in persisting through graduation. This equity cognitive frame was employed when launching the Beloved Scholars Group. This research study about what former foster youth believe were the on-campus supports that helped them as undergraduates resulted in data that will inform the development of existing programs like Beloved Scholars and of future supports for these youth.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Introduction

Former foster youth who have been among the few to obtain bachelor's degrees are in a unique position to inform practice at their respective institutions. Graduating seniors and college graduates, in particular, are able to recall the obstacles they encountered in pursuit of their degrees and recount the different services and programs they accessed to help overcome those obstacles. Upon sharing their perspectives, former foster youth provide insight to reaffirm the practices of the universities and encourage the implementation of new initiatives to meet the needs of current and future former foster youth populations. This study adds to the body of research regarding what former foster youth believe to be the on-campus supports that contributed to their completion of college.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What kind of school-related or personal life barriers, if any, do former foster youth from highly selective public universities in Southern California report that they faced in their pursuit of their bachelor's degrees? How did these barriers obstruct their paths?
2. What campus supports do these former foster youth say helped them to persist through their undergraduate years? How did these supports help them?
3. What campus supports do the former foster youth say are needed or can be improved to better help former foster youth to persist through graduation?

4. What are these former foster youth's perceptions of obtaining a bachelor's degree?
5. In what ways do the narratives of former foster youth from highly selective public universities in Southern California offer insight to educational leaders about the policies, practices and structures in place to support them on their paths toward graduation?

Research Design

I used a phenomenological qualitative design to answer the research questions. This design is appropriate because I sought to learn the perspectives of former foster youth regarding their lived experiences as undergraduate students (Creswell, 2014). Discovering a list of potential barriers former foster youth faced and a list of possible solutions would not suffice. According to Smeyers (2008), "It seems that in educational contexts it is not so much factors or elements that have to be studied as such, but the complex relationships between them." With a qualitative study I collected descriptive data about former foster youth's college obstacles and about not just their knowledge of but also their perceptions of the on-campus resources that helped them to overcome. This type of research design allowed me to determine if the findings echoed the existing research regarding former foster youth. As I analyzed the interviews line by line I recognized themes that have been repeated among my study's participants and among the greater population of former foster youth who have shared their stories (Ivey, 2012).

A qualitative approach brought forth understanding of both the differences and similarities in the ways former foster youth interpret their realities of pursuing a bachelor's degree (Merriam, 2009). Quantitative data already exist about the low rate of

college graduation among former foster youth. What is now available in research through this study is an explanation as to what leads to the success of the 4% of former foster youth who graduate from college each year. A phenomenological qualitative design allowed for the study of a population that is known for having intense and sometimes traumatic human experiences (Merriam, 2009). With such a large number of former foster youth in our population and so few obtaining degrees, it was important to consider the phenomenon of their overcoming trauma and the effects thereof to achieve college graduation. As the researcher I had the ability to bring to the forefront these students' narratives to provide informative data (Smeyers, 2008). The essence of their experiences will help educators to better understand the experiences of other former foster youth.

Sites

Two highly selective public institutions in Southern California were the sites for this study. The first is one of the largest in the state with approximately 200 former foster youth enrolled as undergraduates. Each year, about 25% of that population has readily accessed support services through the Beloved Scholars Group for former foster youth. The university began providing these direct services in the 2008-2009 school year. The second institution has grown in popularity and population in recent years and has been providing targeted services for about 20 former foster youth since the 2001-2002 school year (ETS, 2009). Some of the former foster youth participants in this study were current students and others were alumni; the former foster youth liaisons on campus were the avenues through which I gained access to these groups.

Conducting this study at the two highly regarded universities to determine what former foster youth thought were the most helpful on-campus supports informs university leaders of this population's needs. The reason this study involved participants from two universities is because the numbers of former foster youth who graduate from four-year institutions is so small. Not only did working with both schools allow for a larger sample of participants, but it also provided opportunity for comparison of what former foster youth said about the supports they received from their respective campuses.

Population/Sample

Former foster youth are an at-risk population about which there are much data reporting their poor college graduation outcomes. The voices of former foster youth who have graduated from college are scarcely heard in the literature. In addition, there is little research on specific supports that former foster youth accessed and about how alumni felt about the benefits of those supports. Therefore, I selected for this study a sample of former foster youth who were in their final year of college and who had already obtained bachelor's degrees. These former foster youth were identified through the Beloved Scholars Group database and on-campus former foster youth liaisons. I interviewed 12 former foster youth—eight from Metropolitan University and four from Suburban University—to gain an in-depth understanding of their undergraduate experiences. Since I serve a small population of foster youth in my work as a high school teacher, my findings also help inform the work I do with students. In addition, the results of my research help to inform practice for the campus supports the participants highlighted.

The group of participants for this study met the following criteria: 1) were seniors or graduates of either of the two institutions in this study, 2) were graduates of the classes

of 2005 to 2016, 3) represented diverse ethnicities, 4) represented a diverse group of majors and 5) represented each gender group. Most importantly, participants in this study contacted me directly in order to be considered for an interview.

I gained access to the sample of seniors and college graduates in this study through the universities' Beloved Scholars Group and former foster youth liaisons. I spoke with the program director for Beloved Scholars at one institution and the head of student affairs at the other. Each expressed gratitude for my interest in working with former foster youth and learning more about the services provided. My introduction to these on-site leaders included my research interests and why I chose to conduct this study. As a former high school college counselor and a current high school teacher, I have worked with students from disadvantaged backgrounds for many years. Some of my students are in foster care—both with biological family members and non-biological foster parents. Since their familial placements are temporary, my students have looked to me to connect them with resources at their destination colleges that will help them to be successful despite the life challenges they face. Each year my students have been admitted to institutions that house Beloved Scholars Groups and other campus supports that exist for the advancement of former foster youth. To know what help the universities have to offer assists me in my role as an educator. Additionally, my role as an educator helped me to gain access to student services personnel and buy-in for my study.

Former foster youth liaisons at both campuses agreed to help me in my research by forwarding an informative email about my study to current seniors and alumni requesting that they contact me directly if they were interested in participating. I offered

gift cards in the amount of \$10 to incentivize participation and also put all participants' names in a raffle for a larger prize—a new tablet.

The former foster youth who participated in this study were all graduating seniors and of Metropolitan University and Suburban University, two competitive institutions admitting students with a minimum 3.0 grade point average, extracurricular involvement and a number of other requirements. As a result, the universities' Beloved Scholars Groups enroll former foster youth who have a history of high performance that is unlike that of the average foster youth. These students may have overcome such barriers as financing college with the same type of resilience and persistence they applied to their high school academics and extracurricular activities. Thus, these students' undergraduate experiences may differ from those of non-MU and non-SU students in terms of the barriers they faced and the solutions they found to overcome those barriers. This study, therefore, did not attempt to generalize the experiences of the former foster youth participants to those of all former foster youth college graduates.

Data Collection Methods

The data collection method for this study was in-depth interviews with former foster youth college seniors and college graduates. I conducted semi-structured interviews, with a flexibly used list of questions lasting approximately one hour (Merriam, 2009). Each senior and alumnus was interviewed via Skype or at a site agreed upon by the research participants and myself. The reason for using interviews as research method was because hearing the stories of a population is a “way of knowing” (Siedman, 2006). Asking former foster youth about their stories is the first step to understanding their experiences.

I asked interviewees for permission to audio record the interviews, which I later transcribed through rev.com. Prior to data analysis, I did member checking by having participants review transcriptions for accuracy and offer their feedback. This was an important step as the purpose of interviewing is to understand the meaning that people make of their own experiences (Siedman, 2006). In the interview protocol, I followed Siedman's (2006) suggestion and asked open-ended questions to build a rapport and to allow the participants to answer in any manner they liked. I also asked the former foster youth to talk about the barriers they personally faced while pursuing their bachelor's degrees. The interview protocol included questions for participants to discuss the campus supports they believed to be most useful and what supports they believed were either missing or needed improvement. I asked specific probing questions about whether the barriers the former foster youth faced were the same barriers indicated in the research—financial problems, mental health problems and so forth. Finally, I asked questions not reflected in research that told me, for instance, how the former foster youth perceived earning their bachelor's degrees.

Data Analysis Methods

To analyze the qualitative data collected I first listened to the audio recordings of each interview and worked with rev.com to transcribe participant responses. Data from these former foster youth's interviews described barriers that were predicted by the literature, barriers that were unique to each of their experiences, on-campus supports their institutions evidently provided and on-campus supports others seemed not to be aware of. In addition, the interviews gave each participant's perspectives about what more could be done to assist former foster youth in completing college.

I looked at the data from each of the participant interviews separately. I looked for emergent themes from participant responses, color coded those themes and matched them across participants. I categorized the emergent themes based on the literature and created new categories based on data not reflected in the literature. I noted similarities and differences between what each former foster youth reported were barriers they faced and what they found to be helpful or in need of improvement.

Based on the findings from the data collection I was able to draw conclusions about the sites through which I conducted the study. The two sites for my study were similar. The data show some common themes among the graduating seniors and alumni from both campuses; however, I was not able to generalize to populations at other sites similar to the two in my study.

Ethical Issues

One ethical consideration for this study was the fact that it involved an at-risk population. To the best of my ability I did no harm. I thoroughly explained the study to all parties in advance both for clarity and to minimize risk of participation. In creating the interview protocol I was mindful of the way questions were worded as I was addressing sensitive topics. In addition, I was prepared to refer participants to on-campus counseling services or other professionals they could talk to regarding difficult experiences they had or feelings they may have had when recounting those experiences in the interviews.

With consent forms I expressed to participants what this study entailed, that confidentiality would be maintained and what benefits they could receive for participation. Examples of the benefits of participation were the monetary incentives and

the satisfaction of informing educators about the experiences of former foster youth and the supports they need. I have given and plan to continue giving back to the Beloved Scholars Group and former foster youth liaisons for their assistance with this study by volunteering my time to assist in areas of need, whether as a mentor, a career guest speaker or even an assistant in the office or at events.

Authenticity

The data produced by this study are authentic. I sought to give voice to the narratives of an underrepresented group of former foster youth regarding an important matter—what it took for them to earn their degrees (Whittmore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001). The findings chapter of this study includes verbatim quotes from participants for the sake of capturing ideals as they were expressed in participants' own words. Where possible I used multiple quotes from multiple people to shape the context of the issues discussed and to elicit an increased understanding and appreciation of those issues (Schwandt, Lincoln, & Guba, 2007). To further maintain authenticity, I involved each participant in the transcription process by way of member checks. The former foster youth were asked to clarify any information that may have been incorrectly recorded and to give additional detailed information where needed—such as the meaning of certain acronyms used.

For a study to be considered authentic, Guba & Lincoln (1986) argue that fairness is required (Schwandt, Lincoln, & Guba, 2007). The former foster youth who participated in this research study were given the opportunity to consent to participation, opt out at anytime during participation and decide to retract or change statements they made either during the interview or anytime afterward—especially, during transcription review. Where former foster youth gave differing responses to questions or seemed to

feel differently about a particular problem or on-campus support, I have purposed to include that disconfirming evidence (Schwandt, Lincoln, & Guba, 2007). For instance, some participants found on-campus counseling services to be in need of improvement, while others found those services to be helpful. One Suburban University student believed professors were hard to connect with, while another built strong relationships with at least two of her professors.

The data from this study are from the perspective of a sample of the former foster youth who earn their bachelor's degrees and are not representative of the entire population. However, the findings provide a thought-provoking discussion that could serve as a basis for future research.

Summary

This qualitative study was a phenomenological study of the lived experiences of former foster youth graduates from two highly selective public universities in Southern California. The study adds to the body of research an understanding of some of the barriers that former foster youth experienced and the ways they believe on-campus supports helped them. Former foster youth are part of a population that has received increased attention in recent research, but former foster youth who have obtained bachelor's degrees are a small percentage of the overall population of college graduates who have not been the focus of much of the literature. Hence, this was a population worthy of study. Since some research exists about undergraduates who participated in former foster youth programs at the California State Universities, this study explored the experiences of former foster youth graduating seniors and alumni of the highly regarded public Metropolitan and Suburban Universities.

To capture the experiences and perspectives of former foster youth earning and who have earned their bachelor's degrees, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews; and I used the transcriptions from the interviews to analyze the data, to identify categories and themes, and to draw conclusions. Because of the sensitive nature of some of the topics that arose during the interview, I was prepared to connect the participants with resources such as mental health practitioners who would be of assistance. Most important, I provided all participants with a consent form explaining the nature of the study and the potential benefits or harm that may result from their participation. The findings from this study inform future research about this population and inform university staff of ways to best serve former foster youth.

Chapter Four: Findings

Introduction

This study investigated the perspectives of former foster youth college seniors and graduates about the supports provided to them by each of their universities. Fewer than 5% of former foster youth nationwide complete a bachelor's degree, which is low when compared with the nearly 30% from the general population who complete the same degree. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify the supports graduates and graduating seniors say helped them to finish college. Twelve seniors and alumni of two highly selective, public institutions in Southern California participated in hour-long interviews to share their experiences as they pursued their bachelor's degrees. I found that participants from both universities encountered barriers to their education related to such areas as academics, transportation, finances, housing and health. At one institution, they were able to access on-campus resources to address most of the problems they faced. At the other, the alumni reported finding helpful on-campus supports, while the current senior reported having difficulty finding support. Data from each of their interviews are shared in this chapter.

I start the chapter with an overview of the universities involved in this study. Next, I include a description and demographic chart with information about each of the participants. I have changed the names of the colleges, of the individuals who were interviewed and of the specific programs referenced to maintain the anonymity and confidentiality of those involved. The sections that follow describe by university the answers to my research questions: the barriers the former foster youth faced, the supports the universities provided, the supports former foster youth felt were

missing or could be improved, how former foster youth perceive their college completion and what education leaders can learn from these former foster youth's narratives. I close the chapter with a summary of the overall findings from the study.

Overview of Participants

Metropolitan University. This study included eight students from Metropolitan University, a highly competitive public institution—four graduating seniors of the class of 2016 and four alumni of the class of 2015. These Metropolitan University participants had various personal backgrounds, were of diverse ethnic groups and pursued different areas of study. Table 1 lists information about both the Metropolitan and Suburban University participants.

Suburban University. Also included in this study were four students from Suburban University, also a large, highly regarded public institution—one graduating senior and three alumni of different classes. As with the Metropolitan University participants, these individuals also had varying personal backgrounds, came from different ethnic groups and had obtained their bachelor's degrees in a number of areas. Specific demographics of the Suburban University participants are in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Metropolitan University

<u>Name</u>	<u>Grad Year</u>	<u>Major</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Race/Ethnicity</u>
Daniel	2015	History	Male	Pacific Asian
Karen	2015	Economics	Female	American
Linda	2016	History	Female	Latina
Nancy	2016	Geography & Environmental Studies	Female	(not specified)
Jessica	2015	African American Studies & Anthropology	Female	African American
Michelle	2015	African American Studies	Female	African American
Jackie	2016	(not specified)	Female	African American
Brenda	2016	Anthropology Disability Studies	Queer	Latinx

Suburban University

<u>Name</u>	<u>Grad Year</u>	<u>Major</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Race/Ethnicity</u>
Jocelyn	2010	Political Science	Female	Mexican
Crystal	2006	Psychology & Social Behavior	Female	White
Noemi	2009	Criminology	Female	Latina
Lynette	2016	Political Science	Female	African American

Findings: Metropolitan University

Research Question 1: Barriers. As with students from the general population, former foster youth face obstacles in pursuit of their bachelor's degrees. Sometimes those obstacles lead to other obstacles that could, if not overcome, lead to a lack of persistence toward college completion. The eight former foster youth of Metropolitan University (MU) who were interviewed as part of this study reported experiencing several barriers during their undergraduate careers. For nearly all of those barriers,

however, the university provided supports that served as temporary and in some cases permanent solutions.

Academics. Academics proved to be challenging for six of the eight former foster youth from MU. Daniel said, “It was a challenge because of the rigorous academic work that they have compared to community college.” Along with Daniel, five other MU students had transferred from other institutions—one from a university and the rest from community colleges. Jackie said that MU “can’t be compared to community college.” She is especially referring to the fact that the community college she attended was on the semester system and that MU was on the much faster paced quarter system: “At community college, you could get a test and be like, ‘Dude, I’m not going to do any of these readings until week 5 when the test comes out.’ If you do that at MU, you’re basically going to fail. There just isn’t any time to stop. It’s basically high speed all the time.” Even Karen who was admitted to MU right out of high school expressed that she “didn’t go to a high school that really made [her] study.” The rigorous course load of MU was an obstacle that could have deterred some former foster youth from college completion.

MU former foster youth said that transferring and choosing a major were obstacles for them. Upon admission to MU one student notes that she struggled with transferring her coursework. Linda talked about MU and her previous college saying,

“they’re on different levels, different systems. I came here, I had to do foreign language, which I’m doing now. I had to do foreign language, had to do quantitative reasoning. I have to do a science. Over there I was done with that. Over there you didn’t have to do foreign language. It was foreign language or three literature classes. I was like, ‘Oh. Yeah. Literature, so I did literature. Then over here it’s like, ‘No.’”

Linda relied on the academic counselors to give her guidance as to what courses to take. Nancy, on the other hand, said it was hard to find “the right counseling to take the right classes.” She and Karen shared the challenge of choosing their majors. While Karen explains that she “chose the wrong major”, Nancy expressed that it was difficult “[f]inding the right path to [her] desired program of environmental studies or geography. As a matter of fact [she] was lead down the wrong path.”

Nancy and Michelle labeled the challenge of transferring as the challenge of non-traditional students. Michelle said a barrier she faced was

“Being able to get to school and eat and think, having money, balancing ... because I'm non-traditional, I'm 28, so I was still in my 20s then. It was that these are kids straight out of high school; they've got that math and science fresh on their brains. I'm sitting here like I need to go to tutoring after this, because I don't know if I'm going to do good on this test. How do I maintain the life of an adult while pursuing something that people younger than me are already doing?”

Michelle was also a single mom to a young child while in school. Balancing being a mother and a student among other responsibilities was something she and Nancy had in common. However, Nancy’s frustrations about being a non-traditional student were mostly academic. Upon entering MU in her junior year of college, she realized that she missed out on a lot of academic programs that were open only to incoming freshmen.

When considering their experiences at the first colleges they attended, Linda and Michelle expressed that connecting with their professors at MU was more difficult.

Linda was close with several professors in her first years of college and only one at MU. The one she did know at MU eventually moved on to work at another institution. Linda posited that perhaps the reason she did not build strong relationships with her MU professors was because MU was an institution where the professors are focused more on research than on teaching. Michelle said, “the community college is more tight-knit,

whereas MU, my lecture was 360 people.” Linda and Michelle seemed to agree that it was not as easy to connect with professors at MU as it was at their previous schools.

Just one of the eight participants in this study discussed the difficulty of balancing academics with extracurricular activities. Jackie said that “they” expect MU students to juggle so much. When I asked who “they” were, she said the counselors “want you basically to be a full time student. They want you to work part time. They want you to have a social life, involved in extracurricular activities . . . [Y]ou always get counselors at MU telling you, ‘Oh are you doing this? Are you doing this? Are you involved in an internship?’ ‘No.’ ‘Well, get to it.’” Although there seemed to be little time to balance MU academics with extracurricular involvement, Jackie stated that without going the extra mile to make sure that her resume was “up to par” she would not have been able to compete with other MU students who would apply for the same positions after college. The challenge of extracurricular and academic balance was one that Jackie understood needed to be overcome.

While the MU former foster youth listed many obstacles in their undergraduate pursuits, academic and otherwise, only Linda said she believed she had a learning disability. She had a hard time concentrating in class at times: “I thought I had ... I'm pretty sure I do, like ADD. Not ADHD, but ADD. I get really distracted. I procrastinate sometimes and now even more. I knew I did before, but I feel like I do a lot. I lose focus.” Karen and Brenda mentioned that they applied for and received extended time for taking exams, but Linda noted specifically that her challenge was directly related to her learning. She even compared her experience with that of her sister who was

diagnosed with dyslexia to further show that she might be dealing with a learning disability.

Mental Health. Linda believed she had a learning disability and three other MU participants mentioned they dealt with other mental and emotional problems. Jessica found it “depressing” dealing with school life on her own and not having parents who knew how to be of help. When Nancy considered the reason she seemed to struggle with presenting information orally for her classes, she said, “I guess I have some issues with insecurity from my childhood, too, which has led me to have fear of public speaking, anxiety issues.” Brenda confessed that “[i]t's been a challenge psychologically” pursuing her bachelor’s degree. She said that in the winter of her senior year she was admitted to the university’s psychiatric hospital.

Abuse. Linda reported experiencing abuse as a teenager that had lasting effects on her throughout her undergraduate years. She cried as she shared that she had been a victim of rape:

I was sixteen. It was like coercion. A twenty year old guy. It was really scary.

[...] Then I lived with my sister for those five years ... I started staying there when I was fourteen. I would sleep on the couch. My sister's boyfriend [...] would touch me while I slept. I never told my sister [...] I was dealing with that. [...] I had to get a ride from him everyday in high school, so that was really hard. That's why I did want to get a way too, towards the end. I was like, ‘Yeah. I want to get out of here. I do want to learn. I don't want to be here. I want to go live away in college.’ I didn't, because I couldn't afford it with loans, and so I still stayed there every day, seeing him [and attending Inland University], until I came here.

When Linda visited the on-campus office for mental health services

regarding her learning challenges, she did not find the assistance she hoped to find.

Issues began to surface regarding the sexual abuse she had experienced and she did not

trust that office to provide her with help with this trauma that was still taking a toll on her emotionally and mentally.

Transportation. Problems with transportation were barriers for three of the eight MU former foster youth. The means of transportation they did have were often unreliable. Even though Daniel had a car, it would sometimes break down on his drive to campus. Whenever Jessica needed to move in and out of university housing, she leaned on the help of family members. After some time, though, that became a hassle. As a result, she looked for housing options that did not require that she move as frequently. Linda relied on public transportation or rides from friends, which proved to be stressful. Without reliable transportation these students could not move into the dorms nor make it to class.

Linda discussed the issue of having a vehicle and gaining access to parking on or near campus. Before attending MU, Linda commuted for two hours to school on the bus and train all before sunrise. Attending school at MU, which is much farther from home than her previous university, Linda recognized that only a car would suit her transportation needs; however, she did not see how she would find the money to purchase a vehicle. Eventually, her sister co-signed on a used car with her only to see her run into another transportation obstacle: parking. Linda said,

“[A]ll the money I have I'm paying for parking. It's like a hundred and twenty-five dollars a month to rent out a parking spot from somebody's house, because no one's getting parking here I'm pretty sure. It's terrible. I applied, and you can't get ... I filed as a tour guide. You can't get a parking spot here. MU looks down on it unless you have proof that you have a job off campus, or an internship, or if you're a commuter. If you have a medical condition, or a job or internship off campus ... you need to have proof of it. We don't say that to people, like on my tours. We don't bring that up unless someone asks about it, but no one has parking.”

Daniel, Jessica and Linda all agree that reliable transportation is hard to come by. Guaranteed parking is too.

Finances. Financial problems were noted by five MU former foster youth in this study as obstacles they encountered in their journey toward college completion. A daily concern of theirs was how they were going to take care of day-to-day living expenses. Daniel said, “you kinda have to like juggle should I have breakfast at 8 in the morning or 11ish? Cause maybe you can kinda stretch it out a little bit longer and then you could have dinner. And maybe two meals instead of three meals. You kinda budget it that way.” As a mother Nancy learned to be resourceful. She took advantage of such opportunities as the government’s food stamp programs, but she said income was still definitely an obstacle for her. For Jackie, who was adopted by a loving family at a young age, money proved to be an issue for her because of her family’s financial status. At the start of her college career, Jackie’s parents retired, sold their rental property and helped pay for their daughter’s wedding. Jackie wondered how she would be able to eat and even pay tuition. While for many of her classmates going out to eat at expensive restaurants was routine, she did not have the money for it. Her priority was funding her education.

Jackie is the one former foster youth who discussed having problems with financial aid. While others mentioned that they were unsure of how they were going to pay for college, Jackie encountered obstacles directly related to the financial aid she was receiving. First, she said,

“I missed my financial aid deadline because I didn't know I was going to go to a college. I didn't turn in any financial aid because I didn't really know how to apply anyways because my parents, they only went to community college. I didn't really know how the whole application system works. I had to figure it out for myself. I missed some paperworks and I didn't turn in everything on time.”

Jackie's missed deadline served to be a problem for every university she had applied to. Unfortunately, other schools had no money to offer her at all. MU provided for her tuition the first year. She said,

"The second year is one thing. It got tight. It was tight the first year too because my parents were both retired. I had to really find out how I was going to pay for college. I had this scholarship the first year. Second year, it got really hard. My parents sold their rental house. That really affected it. They saw the rental house on the FAFSA. That really affected how I was going to receive financial aid because they didn't want to give me anything. I would be responsible for paying \$35,000. I'm like, 'I don't have that money.'"

As a result, Jackie applied for multiple scholarships. Still, the scholarships seemed only to barely chip away at the \$35,000 tuition cost.

Directly related to Jackie's lack of finances was her lack of clothing. She noted that the expectation for students seeking out internships and jobs was professional dress. She admitted that she did not have much to wear: "The only professional stuff I had was a pair of slacks and a shirt. The pair of slacks I got from a Goodwill and a shirt that I had bought from a clearance rack." Jackie did not want to burden her parents to ask for more money for clothing.

Linda's concern regarding finances was securing employment. She worried about getting a job while in school and maintaining it or finding a new one upon graduation. Brenda left a job where she was earning a nearly \$60,000 salary in order to pursue her education. She talked about how she struggled to remain financially stable ever since she started school. One major reason for the instability in her finances was the obstacle she unexpectedly encountered with her health:

"A month before they sent out acceptance letters, I was hit by a car, a motorcycle and I was in a coma for 38 days. This was in March 2013. I was accepted to MU and Bay University, but I had already attended MU while I was at Pier Community College because I wanted this school so badly. This was my dream

school, MU. I was told I wasn't going to walk again. I have a permanent neurological and physical impairment. Literally, I was broken in half. I have titanium rods from thigh all the way to ankles on both legs, and intestinal reconstruction. I mean, my mouth, my face was broken. I was in a wheelchair. I had plates, screws all over my leg, pelvis, and so I have been dealing with my disability which is chronic pain. My neurological and brain damage is getting worse but I don't have enough money to take care of it. I couldn't afford physical therapy. MU physical therapists for the athletes, they were helping me, but it was \$20 each time. Even \$20 for me is a week of food. Plus, they found that I might ... I don't know if it's ... because of the plates and all the rods and screws that were in my pelvis and my legs, something keeps getting worse in the pain and stuff. They're like, this exam is going to cost like, I don't know, I think it was \$3,000 or \$8,000. I don't have that. And MU Health Insurance doesn't cover that."

Brenda had to seek medical care on a regular basis. This took a toll on her financially.

Both her physical disability and the resulting financial strain of paying for medical expenses were obstacles during her undergraduate years at MU.

Housing. Directly related to finances is the problem of obtaining housing.

Brenda said she experienced homelessness twice in her last year of college alone. Prior to attending MU, she was concerned about shelter, which is why she applied to the summer bridge program. According to Linda, "If you're a senior here at MU, you don't get guaranteed housing. You come as a freshman you have three years. You've got three years. Come as a transfer, and you get one year." Since both Linda and Brenda were transfer students, they only were guaranteed a space in university housing for one year. They searched for other housing options, including off-campus apartments.

Personal background. Five of the eight MU participants believe that their personal backgrounds may have hindered them during their undergraduate pursuits.

Daniel talked about how he often felt the need to request extensions on assignments. He would talk with his professors about how he knew he could complete the tasks assigned, but that it would take longer than expected. He said, "[I]t was hard, I couldn't finish it by

the deadlines. And I felt vulnerable, y'know just all these feelings. You start thinking about the past. Maybe 'cause I didn't have the structure. I'm sure that was part of it. But now I have a certain educational background." Daniel imagined that his educational experience at his community college would have prepared him for the academics requirements of MU. Instead he realized that the lack of structure from his upbringing overrode the preparation he received at his previous institution.

The issues from Jessica's personal background that made her college experience more challenging were a lack of support and her need to advocate for herself. When I asked her about her last year of college, she said,

"Academic-wise, it was easier, I was balancing a lot of other stuff on top of that, like other stuff in my personal life like trying to graduate, because I don't really have that support. I mean, I have the support from my family. They're all cheering me on, but they don't know how to go about helping me. It was like me organizing who's going to come to my graduation, me sending out invitations, me doing everything."

It was stressful for Jessica to do things she believed her family should be able to help her with. She reported "having to be a grownup at such an early age and navigate the system. I didn't have no one to rely on, so it was me trying to advocate for myself, me trying to talk to this person and that person, stepping out of class and having to go call the financial aid office, because my parents couldn't do all that." To Jessica there was no bigger issue in her undergraduate years than feeling as though she had to take care of all school-related business on her own.

Although they did not note any specifics, Brenda and Nancy expressed that relationship issues were obstacles during their undergraduate years. Brenda said that among other things she had "relationship" problems and Nancy said that "being a single parent" was a problem.

Linda described her family as “toxic” and “not really supportive”, a personal problem that proved to be an obstacle during her undergraduate career. When she visited a psychologist to determine if she had a learning disability she needed to ask her parents about her behaviors as a school-aged child. Linda had not lived with her mother since the age of four and her father was constantly battling alcoholism and was never around. They could not provide information that would be helpful in arriving at a proper diagnosis of Linda’s condition. In addition, Linda shared that she often did not want to be at home with her sisters because they would find themselves having race-related arguments. Linda’s sisters would express how they hated a particular racial group, and Linda’s sentiment was that those arguments were “stressful”. Unfortunately, Linda faced racial issues in her workplace at MU as well.

Racial issues. Three of the eight MU former foster youth mentioned racial issues as obstacles they encountered in college. As part of her transition from a community college to a large public university, Michelle quickly picked up on the small number of African-American students. She said that in a lecture of 360 students there were “five African-Americans out of that 360.” To Michelle earning her bachelor’s degree was “bittersweet”: “I’ve had on an MU sweater on the boulevard by MU housing, and I’ve had an older guy say, ‘What are you doing with that sweater on?’ I’ve gone through a lot of microaggressions that have also made me shy away from sharing my education with people unless I feel like they’re intellectually with me.” Linda’s campus job was in the campus tours office. “That climate is really ... I hate it, but I need the money,” she remarked. She described one incident that changed the dynamics in the office at work:

“They have a quinceañera-themed party. [...] For me there’s a whole ceremony. You don’t go, and you don’t drink, and go get drunk off of that. It’s a religious

thing . . . Me confronting them really kind of rocked the boat. Now when I walk into the office it's kind of weird. I'm like the crazy Mexican.”

In relation to another controversial party Linda said, “This guy from Australia, he's like, ‘I don't understand what the big deal is.’ I was like, ‘Are you serious? Do you know what black face is?’ I started going kind of educating them. They're just like ... They just don't understand. The climate there kind of sucks, but it's a job. I'm almost done.” Jackie acknowledged that there were microaggressions at MU, but said that it was a good school and that she would not want to go to school anywhere else.

Sense of belonging. Along with the problem of feeling the need to advocate for herself, Jessica’s shy personality kept her from social interactions that would have helped her to adjust to college. She expressed that she was reluctant to make friends and caught the Greyhound home every weekend because she did not want to be at school. Similarly, Jackie believed that she did not fit in at MU. She said to herself, “‘I'm not going to hang out with anyone on campus. I'm just going to walk to my apartment and just go do my homework’ or I would just sit in a little quiet space until class starts.”

Nancy felt she did not fit in at MU because of her age. She said often the resources she was exposed to were not age-appropriate:

“I'm a 40 year old. Almost everything at MU is geared towards young people. Even with the Beloved Scholars Group, it's totally geared towards young. Even a lot of the people who are in the Beloved Scholars Group who I consider to be young, they're too old. Two of the people I was going around with [at the career event] last night, one of them was 28 and all of those programs that we went around, she was too old for.”

Nancy expressed that she participated in the former foster youth program, Beloved Scholars Group, but at one point decided not to return because of the age gap between

she and the other participants. However, she eventually returned despite the age disconnect she was experiencing.

Research Question 2: Supports. Students and alumni of Metropolitan University received multiple types of support for the challenges they faced. They attributed their being able to overcome their obstacles to a number of different people, programs, jobs on campus, financial aid, particular offices and departments, and an overall welcoming campus environment. No one participant obtained support from one entity; rather, a combination of supports was essential to their progression through and ultimate completion of their bachelor's degrees. This section details what MU graduating seniors and alumni reported as most helpful.

People. Of the MU former foster youth interviewed for this study, 100% named particular people on campus who played an active role in supporting their undergraduate pursuits. Five of the eight expressed that certain professors were instrumental in assisting them with their academics. Daniel said, "I felt supported by the professors." He went on to say, "They were very patient with me [...] mostly all of them were very understanding of my situation." Daniel felt he could approach his professors to request extensions for work and additional feedback when he needed help with his writing. When Karen approached her professors saying, "I don't really know what I'm doing," they worked with her during office hours to help her bring her grades up. After failing an exam, Michelle wanted to give up, but she could not after her professor told her, "If you withdraw, you're giving up on your kid and your degree." She felt motivated to keep trying.

Besides the assistance they provided in helping them to meet their academic goals as undergraduates, professors helped the former foster youth of MU to work toward their career goals. Nancy attributes part of her opportunity to earn her internship to the guidance of “a few key professors”. Brenda talked with one professor she said she had gotten close to and expressed her interest in earning a Ph.D.:

“That's great, [...]but why not law and anthropology?’ I was like, ‘Law? Okay,’ and then the next day I literally applied. I found out about this Law Program. I applied and I actually won the MU Fellowship. [...] It was a 6-month law fellowship, and I made more networks. This was last year. I finished last year, and because of that, I was told about a job at the MU Law School.”

Brenda, although she studied anthropology, had the opportunity to expand her horizons to a field she had not at first considered because of her professor’s encouragement.

Only Daniel mentioned that he found academic counselors and advisors very helpful, and only Michelle said that MU alumni and other affiliates paved the way for her to have a successful academic career. Michelle noted that the “data doesn't lie. I'm of color, and there are not many that have been there historically of color among the double-digit thousands that are there. Period. The majority of those that are of color almost always need help, when it comes to even just the emotional support, nevertheless the financial support.” She believed that African-American alumni and activists in the community around MU helped to make sure that she had access to campus resources such as academic support and scholarships.

Brenda and Jackie received a similar type of support from MU’s vice chancellor. When she participated in a Thanksgiving event with the Beloved Scholars Group, Brenda stood up to share what she was thankful for. Her heartfelt story about her accident and her gratitude for being able to breathe caught the attention of the vice chancellor, who

was present that evening. They met at the Thanksgiving event, but later saw each other in the LGBT Programs Office as well. It was then that the vice chancellor told Brenda she was hiring; Brenda applied for the job and was hired as an intern in the vice chancellor's office. This was not only an opportunity for Brenda to expand her network and meet people who would later become her mentors, but it was also a financial opportunity because she was offered employment. When Jackie's mother met the same vice chancellor and expressed that MU tuition was too costly for them, the vice chancellor worked with Jackie to apply for and obtain a full academic scholarship for the year. When her family's financial situation changed the next year, Jackie was still able to reach out to the vice chancellor to find a solution for her financial predicament.

Two of the MU former foster youth indicated that friends from MU were of support to them. At times those friends were the connection to other resources. Linda said that Jackie, who happened to be the president of the Beloved Scholars Group, helped her. Jackie told Linda, "Oh. You can have BSG help you out. They have a special scholarship fund." What Linda learned from her friend helped to alleviate some of the financial strain she had been experiencing. Similarly, Jackie gave her friends credit for offering support to her in her undergraduate pursuits. She shared that at MU, "I just learned so many things. There's so many inspiring people. I met Rochelle. A lot of my [community college sorors] came to MU.[...]Some of them are still my best friends to this day." Having friends to lean on at MU was helpful for Linda and Jackie.

Jackie and Jessica mentioned that Rochelle, director of the Beloved Scholars Group, was an instrumental support to them, especially when it came to personal matters. Jackie interned in Rochelle's office and came to know her as a mentor and someone she

could look up to. Jessica described Rochelle with these words: “She creates this feeling like you can talk to her about anything. That's what I really like about her. We know that she's a resource, so we know that if she doesn't know what's going on, she'll find out.” The environment Rochelle created in the Beloved Scholars Group office allowed Jackie, Jessica and others to find what they needed to overcome their obstacles.

According to Daniel, the Beloved Scholars Group hosted several events where he met other former foster youth like himself and found motivation to overcome the barriers he faced: “Sometimes going to those meetings you share similar or common histories. We’ve all been in the foster care environment and we understand, and for us to finish y’know and know the potential too after we finish, that was my push.” The other former foster youth of the Beloved Scholars Group were important supports for Daniel. The Beloved Scholars Group itself along with a number of other programs helped others involved in this study to push through to college graduation.

Programs. MU former foster youth named 20 different programs that supported them through their academic careers. Each of the 20 provided supports to the students for their challenges with academics, mental health, abuse, transportation, finances, housing, their personal backgrounds, racial issues and their sense of belonging. Of these programs, the Beloved Scholars Group was noted by 100% of the participants and the Scholastic Excellence Program was said by 75% of the participants to be supportive. All the other programs were each only described by one or two of the MU former foster youth as helpful.

The Beloved Scholars Group is the campus organization for former foster youth and the program through which I was able to gain access to the MU students and alumni

for this study. The Beloved Scholars Group office was mentioned by each of the MU participants as a place they were able to visit to find solutions to many of the barriers they faced. Financial, housing, health, career, social, emotional and other types of resources came through the Beloved Scholars Group office and those who worked there. Daniel said they provided “proactive resources” and someone who “believes in you”. Karen, in agreement, recalled that the Beloved Scholars Program provided “emotional support.” She continued, “If I didn't want to go to class, I could go stop by the office, and someone would talk me into trying to go back to class.” For other students, the Beloved Scholars Group provided a sense of belonging.

Four of the MU former foster youth discussed the social aspect of the Beloved Scholars Group. As Jessica put it, “They created social opportunities as well, so I always knew like, hey, BSG is having this event, I can go do that if I want to hang out with someone.” Linda said that at Beloved Scholars Group “everyone knows my struggle. You're all kind of in the same boat.” She went on to say that the sense of community she felt was helpful to her. Nancy recalled

“[m]eeting other people who have had a crazy childhood. That's kind of nice. Getting to know them and being part of the whole thing. Being a part of something instead of feeling alone is nice. Meeting nice people who have seen hardships in their life. What I've found is people who have known hardships in their life have more respect and kindness towards each other.”

The Beloved Scholars Group community made Jackie come out of her “comfort zone a little bit more”. She remembered receiving an MU sweatshirt from Beloved Scholars and the impact it had: “I didn't feel like I was an MU student, but that sweatshirt made me feel like I belonged there.” She recounted that this sense of belonging was further cultivated through group trips to theme parks and other places.

Half of the former foster youth at MU appreciated the personal support they received from the Beloved Scholars Program. Jackie learned that when it came to the director of the Beloved Scholars Program, “Basically, if you're struggling, you just go to Rochelle and tell her what's happening. Basically she'll do everything in her possible space to help you out [...] She really pushes me. She really believes in me. Things I didn't think I could do, she thought I could do. It's opened up so many doors for me.” For Jessica, having the Beloved Scholars Group created a sense of security. She said, “It just makes you feel secure. You have somewhere to run to.” Linda and Jackie noted the personal touch that came with the free items from Beloved Scholars. Jackie received “huge duffle bags of sheets and blankets and toothpaste, shampoo and conditioner” and “backpacks of school supplies”. Brenda’s response to receiving a “goody bag” was that “[e]verything in that bag was all I owned but it was all I needed.”

When asked if there were any non-school related problems that MU assisted with, Jessica remembered how the Beloved Scholars Group connected her with a health resource:

“My filling was actually coming out of my mouth. It fell out. My health insurance said that they wouldn't cover it, and I'm like, well I can't walk around with a hole in my tooth. Rochelle, she had referred me. I guess she knew of some program, it was called MU Brights or something like that, with the dental school, and it was basically free. I think I just went in for a drop-in visit. She just asked me how I was doing and I was telling her how frustrated I was with it, and then she told me about the program.”

The Beloved Scholars Group office connected Jessica to a free health resource about which she was unaware. To Jessica, having a dental problem was a potential hindrance to her undergraduate studies, and she was able to find a solution on campus.

Half of the MU former foster youth received financial support from the Beloved Scholars Group. Karen recounted that the Beloved Scholars Group offered grants. She described the process for grantees: “Yes, they do some grants if you attend meetings and fill out their requirements.” When she was first introduced to the Beloved Scholars Group, Linda was encouraged to “[a]pply for the MU book fund.” For Nancy they provided books and money for housing: “Last year for my internship, they helped me with a little bit of money to get my housing in [another state] and that was such a huge help to me. They really have been there for me. I'm really grateful for them. They've been the biggest support I've had at MU.” Beloved Scholars helped Jackie to purchase a laptop. Jackie remembered the Beloved Scholars Group also connecting students with a liaison in the financial aid office for further assistance with financial matters.

Housing was another support Linda and Jackie received from the Beloved Scholars Group. Linda said she and her peers would “get guaranteed housing”. She added that with the guaranteed housing in the dorms came “good food” in dorm cafeterias. Jackie talked about the MU Stay-Over Program: “Some of the students don't go home because we have, BSG has a partnership with MU so we can stay on campus through winter or summer break, as long as we like. We have a job on campus where we work for them. We get a little reduced campus housing rate.” Shelter is a basic necessity that that the on-campus Beloved Scholars Group was able to give MU former foster youth access to.

The Beloved Scholars Group also created opportunities for their former foster youth to obtain clothing. Jackie shared that a young man raised money for the purchase of the MU sweatshirts that she and Brenda remembered receiving. In addition, the

Beloved Scholars Group coordinated an event to help group members expand their professional wardrobes:

“Some donors donated professional clothing to every single foster youth who attended. It was up to 100 foster youth. Most of the foster youths there, they got more than 20 items. It was really awesome. Now I have a ton of slacks. I got a ton of dress shirts. I'm just so happy because now I don't have to worry about, ‘Where am I going to buy this? I don't really have a lot of money to buy it.’ [...] I know how important that is at MU because now they have so many career fairs and stuff. If you don't have any clothes like, ‘Really do you think anybody's going to hire you? They're not going to hire you when there are so many other students who are more sharply dressed than you.’”

Jackie expressed that she understood that her wardrobe could potentially affect the career opportunities open to her. MU helped provide the clothing she needed and gave support to she and others in preparing for their careers in other ways as well.

MU members of the Beloved Scholars Group had access to career services that three of the eight participants regarded as helpful during their undergraduate pursuits. Jackie felt she could contact the career specialist at any time for assistance with applying for jobs on campus. Mock interviews with the career specialist helped Jackie to land several jobs, including the teaching position she secured for the summer after her college graduation. Jessica recalled the helpful career workshops she attended for time management and other workplace skills, while Nancy gave credit to the career specialist for teaching her to put together a quality resume. Assistance with job and career preparation was one of the many ways MU former foster youth report being supported by the Beloved Scholars Group.

Seventy-five percent of the MU participants credited the Scholastic Excellence Program for supporting them during their undergraduate careers as well. Brenda recalled the financial support she received from the Scholastic Excellence Program. At times,

Brenda struggled to finance her housing: “They were always there, like, ‘Let me see what we can do.’ They would give me emergency loans. Usually emergency loans are \$300, but they would give me \$1500 and pay my rent.”

Most of the former foster youth in this study noted that the Scholastic Excellence Program provided academic support. Daniel attended their workshops. Jessica and Jackie both took advantage of their tutoring services as they had tutors present to support students taking general education courses. Michelle remembered that the Scholastic Excellence Program tabled at her community college and encouraged her to apply to a summer program to become acquainted with MU: “I got into their program, and I stayed on campus. They helped me finish up my application[s for college], and once I got into MU, voila! There they were still.” Similarly, Brenda shared that “they’re the ones that originally reached out to me while I was at community college, and they said to me, ‘Come and try a quarter of the year. We will help you apply for a scholarship. See what you can do.’ While I was at Pier Community College, I did that. I won a scholarship.”

Jackie talked about a particular Scholastic Excellence Program counselor who helped her choose the right classes for college completion and Linda recounted a particular course that she took through the program. Linda said,

“We talked about Black Panthers. It was just a lot of empowerment. I was annoyed at first, because they enrolled me in a Chicano Studies course, even though they had a history class that could’ve been used towards my major. That really kind of empowered me. [...] I was more driven to succeed here. Yeah, Just being here I’m glad I’m here though, because it really did open my eyes in terms of social justice and all that. A lot of people say that there’s nothing being said about it, but the classes I’m taking, especially education classes, that’s all it’s about.”

The course provided by the Scholastic Excellence Program made Linda feel empowered and happy to be at MU. She admitted, “When you look here around all you see is blonde

hair, blue eyes. You don't see us. That's really uncomfortable.” The Scholastic Excellence Program courses were able to meet students’ academic and social needs.

The course Linda took with the Scholastic Excellence Program was part of their summer bridge, which Brenda and Daniel also noted as helpful parts of their undergraduate careers. When she awoke from her coma, Brenda was discharged from the hospital because she did not have the funds to pay to stay there. Shortly afterward she applied for the summer bridge program and was admitted. Because of the Scholastic Excellence Program Brenda said, “I had shelter. I had tuition.” According to Daniel, in summer bridge “they group you for like five six weeks, they dorm you and they show you the ends and outs.” He added, “they showed us all the resources that they have and the culture shock it would be for some people.” The experience Daniel had with the Scholastic Excellence Program led him to say he felt supported at MU.

The Pantry was a program on campus that supported two of the former foster youth in this study whenever they needed food. The Pantry was simply a room with free food for students, especially for students with financial struggles. Daniel found it helpful because there he could get cereal, bagels and other items; this helped him to save money on groceries. Jackie found The Pantry to be beneficial when she was not able to make the long commute to pick up food from her parents back at home. Daniel and Jackie also recalled participating in the Food Vouchers Program. Jackie shared that “[t]hey offer 5 or 7, if you're a first time. Then after that, you could get an additional 10 every quarter. If you can prove you've used all your financial aid means, which means using all your grants and using all your loans.” She and Daniel used the vouchers to eat in the “mess halls”. Daniel said that it was “good ‘cause I got to eat with my friends.”

Michelle and Brenda received assistance from the Program for the Economically Disadvantaged. This program, Brenda explained, was essentially a committee of representatives from the Scholastic Excellence Program, the Beloved Scholars Group and other offices at MU. The committee served as liaisons between the students and the MU housing and financial aid offices. Michelle and Brenda both described the diligence with which the committee worked on their behalf:

Michelle: Debra “helped me from the moment I reached out to the moment I left in December, like getting me add-ons in financial aid, getting me emergency money. Doing things for me that I know was not the norm.”

Brenda: “[T]hey were like, ‘You know what? We’re going to help you with this scholarship. We’re going to help you with this apartment, and we’ll take it from there. We’re going to increase your financial aid.’ They did everything. They literally did everything in their power to help me.”

Michelle reached out to the Program for the Economically Disadvantaged when she realized she needed a laptop to do well at MU, but could not afford one with all of her other expenses. Brenda reached out when she was facing homelessness. The program supported them with the finances and other resources to overcome the obstacles they were facing.

Daniel and Jackie called the Campus Counseling Services helpful for the former foster youth of MU. Although, Jackie did not often take advantage of the opportunity to see a counselor, Daniel did. He said, “They used to give you I think 16, now they cut it to 8, the sessions that you get with the therapist.” Daniel expressed that he “struggled with academic things,” but attending counseling sessions helped him to cope. He said he would recommend Campus Counseling Services for any student. One counseling workshop Jackie recalled related to students dealing with their home lives when returning to their families during academic breaks: “They talked to us about how not letting the

stress or family members get to you. Instead of spending the whole time with your family, how about just going down there and spending 2 days with them and then going back up and spending the rest of the days at MU.” Jackie said these talks came before every winter, spring or summer recess, but were more helpful for her friends because she was adopted and did not experience the same stress when going home.

The remaining on-campus programs that the MU former foster youth referenced were each only mentioned by one individual. Some of the programs helped to address similar barriers they each faced. Karen, Jackie and Daniel found on-campus solutions to their academic obstacles. Karen shared that when she visited Graham Hall to apply for extra time for her exams it was easy to qualify. When she was in need of guidance, Jackie accessed the honors program; the honors program showed her the courses she needed to take. Daniel and Jackie worked with individuals in the Successful Writers Program and the Grad Prep Writing Program, respectively. Daniel said his visits with a writing tutor were helpful when the writing process became difficult. In particular, the Grad Prep Writing Program assisted Jackie with papers that were required to obtain jobs and scholarships.

Jackie found the Financial Literacy Center to be a helpful resource as well. There she learned budgeting tips as well as wisdom for managing her money in times when she was not working—like when her campus job was closed for academic breaks. One financial source Michelle named was the Office for Students with Children. However, she described ways this office supported her beyond financial assistance:

“They were able to give me that welcome feeling. I felt really excluded as a single parent, and African American, and older. They had a lot of community events where you could come out, bring your kid, and they had the graduation, so my baby got to have his own graduation. They purchased him his own cap and

gown. [...] And we were able to apply for the wish list, so when we came out here to [to live out of state], I had a bag full of things that I had put on the wish list for James, and they granted it. And my alumni plates on my car. They really, really helped.”

In addition to the Office for Students with Children, Michelle accessed financial help through the Johnson Scholars Program. Johnson Scholars provided scholarships for pre-med students during their undergraduate years.

Two of the MU former foster youth in this study participated in campus programs that were geared toward providing social opportunities for students. Daniel claimed he found the social and emotional support he needed through a group called Pride. He said, “They provided support to students like me that have similar history, similar interests. Encouragement. That helped me stay in school. Emotional support is big. It’s big. It’s almost, not make it or break it, but if you have a strong emotional support you can conquer the world.” Jackie noted that a social connection she found to be beneficial came through the Beloved Scholars Group. There she learned about the Wesah Center and the social events they provided for students such as skiing, snowboarding and road trips during breaks. These events were open to international students for low prices, but were free for former foster youth like Jackie.

The internship that Nancy found through MU faculty proved to be helpful to her overcoming the social and emotional obstacle she faced as an undergraduate: fear of public speaking. Nancy struggled with this, but she reported that she presented her “research at the student symposium. That helped me break through because, with a poster presentation, I was able to just do it over and over and over again. I think that’s a good way of breaking through.” Nancy’s internship helped with a personal problem while introducing her to careers in her field.

From the program that Linda accessed, Headstart, she was able to learn more about different areas of study and how they related to various careers. The first hour of a two-hour Headstart session included a discussion of jobs students could obtain upon graduation, and the second hour was a Q&A networking session with three professionals from the field. At Headstart, students who were not on the educational path to a particular career could learn what they needed to do in a graduate program to get on that path.

Jessica mentioned three campus programs that provided transportation for students: BuckleUp, Campus Transit and the Midnight Minivan. She explained,

“I would always go to the store, grocery shop with my roommate, so that way we could split the cost of BuckleUp. Also at MU, they have the Campus Transit on the weekends, I think on Saturday or whatever. They take people to the [grocery store]. I also found another smart way to go grocery shopping [... T]hey have this Midnight Minivan, and they'll drop you off literally by [the grocery store] and they'll pick you up. I'd get in the car with my groceries, I don't care, and they'll drop me off close to my house.”

Jessica shared that she figured out how to navigate the system. She claimed that because of these resources transportation was not a problem for her.

Brenda discussed how she had difficulty getting around with regard to her disability, but she found help through the Services for Students with Disabilities. Brenda's chronic pain required her to take what she called “serious medication”, so the Services for Students with Disabilities team told her, “‘We can help you with having more time with exams or talking to professors,’ and they would send out letters to the professors letting them know like, ‘Brenda is a student living with a disability, please try to accommodate.’”

Although each of the MU former foster youth involved in this study accessed a plethora of programs to aid them in overcoming the obstacles they faced, 100% of them found help through an on-campus support. Every former foster youth took advantage of resources provided by the Beloved Scholars Group. Most of them found assistance through the Scholastic Excellence Program. Individuals obtained support from other programs for their health, academic, financial, social and emotional, career preparation and transportation needs.

Departments and offices. Three MU students credited different offices and departments on campus for assisting them during their undergraduate careers. The offices where they found support were their major departments, the financial aid office and the vice chancellor's office. Brenda explained that it was because of the support of different departments on campus that she was still thriving at MU. Michelle recounted her experience with an advisor in her department. When she should not be allowed to repeat a course a third time, Michelle negotiated with the advisor to petition for an exception. Michelle knew the course would not count in her grade point average, but with her persistence she found an advocate who helped her. When Jackie's financial aid package was not sufficient due to her missing important deadlines, she was able to appeal and receive the assistance she needed with paying for school. Not only did Brenda work in the vice chancellor's office, but she also obtained other employment opportunities from that internship: "I started learning about all these different programs that are at MU. While I was there, I applied for another job. I had two jobs, even though they were only 10-job hours because we can't work over 20 hours."

Jobs on campus. Brittany talked about the jobs she had on campus as supports to her undergraduate experience. While others gave credit to people, programs and offices for connecting them with finances and financial resources, Brittany was the only person who said her on-campus employment helped her to persist through graduation. She held two jobs. She worked as a campus tour guide and as a mentor for the MU Foster Care Mentors Program. Brittany met with and mentored a youth age 18 or younger each month for a minimum of four hours. Brittany said the funds she earned as a tour guide were quickly spent to pay for her parking space near campus, but she earned an extra \$60 each month as a mentor.

Financial aid. The financial support that Brenda and Jackie received came in the form of financial aid. Brenda remarked, “I have been surviving on scholarships and work-study.” According to Jackie, “The first year they gave me this really big scholarship because they want you to come to MU. Then after you come to MU, they're like, ‘Oh, scholarship's gone.’ The first year, I was basically covered. I only had to pay 800 out of pocket for the whole entire year to live in the university apartments.” As a result, Jackie began to apply for scholarships. She applied for on-campus scholarships, including the honor’s scholarship. Jackie added that she applied “because I was like, ‘Man, if I don't do anything, I'm going to be in debt so much money. I don't know how to pay it off.’ Luckily I did get all of them.”

Welcoming environment. The support Jackie received determined whether she would be able to stay in school, and the support Michelle received determined whether she would choose to attend college at MU or another institution. Michelle chose MU

over Suburban University (SU) because of its welcoming environment. Michelle was admitted to both universities; however, she shared that

“MU was like scholarship, housing, come visit us on campus even if you've got the kid. It was very welcoming despite the lack of African Americans on campus. They were very open. They were very supportive from the moment I got accepted to the moment I graduated. SU, I felt like I wasn't as sure. As hard as I worked, I needed to be sure, so that's why I chose MU over SU. In general, because the first thing you get when you get admitted, they send you your financial aid letter [...] I had gotten a parent award. I had gotten a scholarship. The loans and scholarships were legit for my housing. My degree was paid for by them. I felt like SU wasn't as extensive in reaching out to people like me who are non-traditional, so I had to choose MU.”

Michelle considered the long-term benefits that the college she chose would provide both for her and for her son. With the welcome she received from MU she was able to see that she would find the financial support as well as the social support she needed as her undergraduate career progressed.

Research Question 3: Missing Supports. MU former foster youth identified several on-campus supports they believed could be improved and others they thought were missing—programmatic changes and additional services that would have helped them to persist toward graduation with fewer obstacles.

Programs. Daniel, Karen and Linda gave suggestions for improvement in the MU Beloved Scholars Group resource offerings. Daniel recalled the many free items he received from the Beloved Scholars Group and admitted that at times he felt bad when he was encouraged to take leftover items. He said, “Somebody less fortunate could use it. I at least feel that maybe the resources could be more, I don't know given to maybe a better match.” Karen said she would have benefited from career matching. The Beloved Scholars Group, she shared, taught students “to make an impression” in a job interview, but did not give guidance as to how to find the best career path. Linda suggested that the

group consider giving guidance as to how to find an apartment as well. Before Linda knew MU former foster youth were guaranteed housing, she did not know how to begin a housing search or even what questions to ask to get help. In addition to the guaranteed housing, Linda learned that as part of Beloved Scholars she was guaranteed priority registration for classes. However, this promise was not kept. Her suggestion for improvement was that the Beloved Scholars Group follows through with its promises.

Jackie and Nancy's suggestions were for academic programs at MU. Jackie said that tutoring through the "Scholastic Excellence Program is only helpful for students who are taking general education. Once you're done with general education, they really don't have specialized tutors." She thought something MU could provide were tutors for major-specific courses. What Nancy was looking for was support with applying for scholar programs. In her experience, entering MU as a transfer student meant she did not qualify for many of the university's scholar programs. Majority of such programs were open to incoming freshmen. She said, "Just knowing about more academic programs would have been really, really helpful."

Mental health services. A quarter of the eight former foster youth from MU expressed that the mental health services could be better. Typically, the mental health services students received at MU came through Campus Counseling Services. The complaints that Linda and Jackie had about were the limits on therapy sessions and the poor quality of the therapy. "You're only allowed to see them I think 7 times during the academic school year. That's nothing," Jackie shared. Linda noted that when students wanted more therapy sessions they were encouraged to seek "outside care", an option that Linda could not afford. When she believed she was contending with a learning disability

a counselor listened to the story of Linda's background and told her, "[n]ow that I think about it I don't think you have ADD. I think it's just a lot of stress you have." Linda did not agree with this and therefore did not return to Campus Counseling Services even though she admitted that she needed to speak with someone.

Abuse counseling. Linda thought perhaps a connection between the Beloved Scholars Group and the Assistance for Rape Victims Group was needed. She talked about how being raped while in high school still affected her in college because she never reported the incident or received any help. Linda cried as she expressed that she believed hearing from a representative of the Assistance for Rape Victims Group "would be really helpful for Beloved Scholars. We're all foster youth, like rape and all that's like super high amongst that [population]."

Finances. Jessica hoped that the Beloved Scholars group would have provided support for former foster youth with completing the financial aid applications. She remembered putting "that as one of my recommendations that I would have liked to see because that process, and even with taxes or anything like that was like, I don't know what the heck they're talking about." Although she was not able to take advantage of such services, Jessica reported hearing that tax and financial aid application assistance may have been offered in subsequent years per her request.

Food. From Jackie's perspective, MU's Food Pantry services could be improved. She noticed that often people who visited the "Food Pantry, they really don't need it. They just don't want to go back up to their dorms or go to the dining hall to go get food. People who actually do need it, when they go, there's nothing in there. The majority of the time, the Food Pantry is empty." Jackie recounted times when she found week-old

bread and other foods that did not sell in campus stores. She said, “Then there's maybe one can of soup and that's all you get. It could be a lot better. It really isn't, no, it's not that good.”

Personal background. Some of the supports that MU former foster youth wanted to see related to their personal needs. Daniel did not describe his desire in depth, but he said perhaps MU could have provided more “spiritual support”. Nancy felt that “everything is geared towards young people.” She said, “For me, it made me feel like I didn't fit in.” She would have liked to see more support for non-traditional students both with the Beloved Scholars Group and on campus in general. Michelle, on the other hand, said that on a scale of 1 to 10, she would give MU supports a rank of 10. She did not feel any supports were missing.

While Brenda agreed that at MU she learned that she is loved and that she has so many friends, she said there was still one thing that the university could never provide: “that nurture of my parents”. She shared,

“I don't really know what it's like to have parents. I don't think I'll ever have a mom or dad tell me, ‘I'm proud of you,’ you know what I mean? I don't know what that's like. I think I'll always be yearning for that. [...] There's this, I think, intimacy, for lack of a better word, that I think kids, children, and parents share. I think I'll always have issues because of that, because I don't have that. I think that's something in our being, somebody that gives birth to us or creates us, it is ... We're abandoned or something. I think that stays. I think that's why many of my friends throughout the system a lot of them killed themselves, never got out of drugs and stuff, or are homeless even now, or are in prison. I mean, I think, that's why that statistic exists. It could be all these resources, but something about that, I think, stays in our health, our psychological health, but I think I've been strong, stronger than most.”

Brenda attested to the fact that she was able to meet so many people in her years at MU. She built a relationship with the vice chancellor and even built a strong network of

mentors and friends. However, she felt the missing nurturing connection between she and her birth parents could not be replaced by any support service MU might offer.

Research Question 4: Perceptions. When MU former foster youth were asked to describe how they felt about obtaining a bachelor's degree, 100% had positive feelings about finishing college. Nancy said, "I feel extremely accomplished"; Jessica said, "I'm proud"; Jackie said, "I'm super excited." Linda shared that she feels "lucky" to be completing her bachelor's degree this year and that she could have easily been a part of the many negative statistics about former foster youth:

"It's just more meaningful. Not only that, but I'm like brown, and I come from a family ... I didn't say it earlier, but my mom's a prostitute. She still does drugs. My dad's this big alcoholic. He's a veteran, just always kind of ... he's always sad, because it didn't work out with my mom, and now I'm here. [...] Yeah. I definitely feel like really good that I'm getting that paper form here."

Brenda talked about the many people whose names she planned to write on the back of her cap on graduation day—all the people at MU who helped her along the path to her degree. Michelle expressed pride at the thought of all the hard work she put into earning her degree and said, "King. Harriet Tubman. Everybody is smiling down, because that's one more person that's added to that and made it through. [...] it's a sacred little token for me now. I don't feel like it's a piece of paper; I feel like it's a piece of my soul."

Half of the MU former foster youth noted that they felt a sense of empowerment or a sense of responsibility that came with earning their bachelor's degrees. For Daniel, it was empowering to realize he had gained the confidence to approach professors and be seen and treated by them as an equal. He could tell young people about the obstacles he faced and "plant the seed" to encourage them to pursue a college education too. Nancy said she too has "a lot more confidence now". Linda felt empowered to share with

students she has led on campus tours: “I come from a low-income community. Sometimes there's students who are low income and are like, ‘I don't know if I can afford it.’ I tell them, ‘Personally, I'm low income. I'm first generation. I can do it, you can do it. I even transferred, which is even harder to get in here, especially from another university.’”

Michelle echoed the sentiment that she had a responsibility to others who would come after her as MU former foster youth. She said, “I can inspire other foster youth, and I can be that example.” She continued by saying she felt she could use her degree as a motivator for people striving to obtain a degree: “I use it as evidence of the struggle and how it will always be there, no matter what you're going for: AA, a Master's, a PhD, a BA. It's all the same grind.”

Five of the eight MU participants mentioned that obtaining a bachelor's degree gave them new skills that opened up new opportunities for them. Daniel said that now he feels more aware of things: “Even at work I'm reading something and I understand it better than most people.” In addition to a greater awareness, Daniel attributed his better quality of life, the opportunities he had to travel and the ability he now has to choose a career rather than have one chosen for him to the experience of pursuing a bachelor's degree. In Karen's words, “just the fact that I graduated MU has become a confident item or confident badge of honor for anyone thinking about employing me. That's good. I'd say that's a safety net.”

Jessica, Nancy, Brenda and Jackie described earning a bachelor's degree as a pathway to higher levels of education or higher paying jobs. According to Jessica, earning a bachelor's degree earned her admission to graduate school. To Nancy

“It seems like the bachelor's degree is the new associate's degree. You know what I mean? If you're not going on to your master's, you just have a bachelor's. I feel like I've made it one step but I still have another major step to go to really feel accomplished. But the fact that I made it into MU after being through what I've been through in my life has been totally amazing. It's awesome.”

Jackie also described the need to pursue her education further, but she acknowledged that having a bachelor's degree would make her competitive for higher paying jobs. Brenda reflected saying, “Job-wise, if I want to believe what people say like people with degrees earn more, sure, I mean, I believe that. But to me, it's such a more personal thing. I think this has just changed the way I feel about myself and how I'll forever interact with the rest of the world from here on.”

Although they shared positive thoughts about earning their bachelor's degrees, Karen and Michelle also had mixed feelings about finishing college. Karen at first mentioned that a degree from MU meant she had a “confident badge of honor”, but later said, “I think it's okay. I think maybe I could've done something else, too. I'm not sure, but it's really hard for me to tell. I don't know. . . I don't know if I feel strongly about it either way. I see it as a safety net, but there's a lot of things that can be a safety net.”

Michelle posited that “[e]veryone has their own trajectory. [...] Who you are comes out in the process of your education, and that's why everyone is in different areas of education, no matter what level it's on. Nobody is above or below anybody.” She went on to say that “it's lonely at the top. Period. Especially being a foster youth. [...] You've just got to really want it. You can't be in it for the money. You can't be in it for the friends. You just have to really want it and know that you deserve it. That's why I'm a foster youth and I have my BA.”

Research Question 5: Narratives. These former foster youth narratives gave insights that are valuable for educational leaders. While the main focus of this study was to determine how former foster youth say their universities supported them with regard to the barriers they faced as undergraduates, interviewees from MU shared additional personal information and stories about their educational experiences prior to and while attending college at MU. They described their experiences with the following: being non-traditional students, mentoring others, non-university supports, various financial hardships, their personal backgrounds and their personal goals.

Non-traditional students. Six of the eight MU former foster youth were non-traditional students. Daniel, Nancy and Brenda held jobs prior to attending MU that they were not satisfied with. This dissatisfaction led them to pursue higher education. Daniel said, “being limited by my skills at the time, that's what made me want to go back to school.” Nancy was looking for the right career path: “I worked in a factory. It was a plastic boat factory. There were a lot of chemicals and I wanted to get into something that wasn't as damaging to the environment. I just felt like I was going down the wrong path constantly.” Brenda remembered making sufficient income on her job, but she was not passionate about her work. She decided to complete her transfer courses at the community college and apply for universities.

Their experiences at their community colleges had an impact on the MU participants. Nancy said she was instructed to take the wrong courses until she decided to attend a different community college; counselors at her new school helped expedite the process of her transferring to MU. Daniel had a better experience and recalled feeling supported by his community college since the summer he took his first class. At Pier

Community College, Michelle remembered, “The supervisors [at her library job] really showed a lot of guidance.” When she talked about her 3.0 grade point average, they encouraged Michelle to apply for the honors program. She spent nearly six years at the community college, but recalled a person’s words that always served as motivation to her: “‘It’s never too late for a flower to bloom.’ I will never forget her saying that, and I was like, ‘You’re right. Just because I’m 25 and I’m at a community college, I’m pregnant, doesn’t mean that I can’t go to a university. It doesn’t mean that I can’t even get into my dream school.’” Jackie was also encouraged by community college staff to join and work hard in the honors program and to eventually move on to earn her bachelor’s degree. She participated in her school’s transfer admissions program where she needed only to meet certain criteria to gain guaranteed admission to universities like MU.

Linda attended another university prior to transferring to MU and attributed much of what she learned about overcoming obstacles to the programs she participated in at that university. Through a summer transition program she learned that she was among only a few minorities who gained opportunities to attend the university. She learned strategies for navigating the college. Through the Educational Advantage Program, Linda attended monthly workshops:

“It was about grade point average. It was about what you need to do to graduate, financial planning, knowing if you don’t pass this class, you could lose financial aid, some things like that, just a bunch of things. They have you fill out a graduation planner, so you know what you have to take. They just did so many things, and you had to do it. They put a hold on your account if you didn’t go to these things.”

In addition to the Educational Advantage Program, Linda participated in a program for enhancing her college reading skills. She also spoke of the social activities that helped her to find a sense of belonging at her institution. When she transferred to MU, Linda

found that the resources she had access to at her previous school were similar to ones she found when she began to participate in MU's Beloved Scholars Group.

Personal background. MU former foster youth gave credit to their middle and high schools for the inspiration to attend college in the first place. Karen said that her high school teachers always expected her to go to college and would not allow her to settle for anything different. When she considered what influenced her, Jessica said, "It mainly came about due to my teachers throughout middle school and high school really who saw something more in me. I just got good grades just because I just did it, but a lot of them pushed me and got me to think about going to college." Linda did not think anything of college since she had no family members who attended. However, when a representative from a university came to speak in her high school classroom, she became curious and decided to apply.

The MU former foster youth of this study shared the stories of their upbringings and discussed the ways some of their early life circumstances still impacted them today. Linda was not sure if she could consider herself a former foster youth. She said that when she and her brother were young they got hold of and consumed some of her mother's drugs and nearly died. They were taken from Linda's parents and put into foster care for just a few weeks. Linda and her brother were then placed under the guardianship of their grandmother. When she considered how her family life affected her over the years, Linda decided to join the Beloved Scholars Group. Nancy shared,

"Me and my sisters, I have two sisters, we got taken away from my mom because we were living in, basically, piles of trash and she was doing drugs and stuff. Social welfare came in after getting several reports of how bad the situation was and they took us away from her. Then there was a court case made from that. My grandparents didn't want us to be separated into the foster system so they took us in to keep us together. The court allowed them guardianship, so I think that's

what a ward of the court is. They didn't adopt us or anything like that. With that, in my opinion, I feel like that can even be a lot worse than foster care, to be honest with you. With my grandparents, they fought all the time because they had to take us on and my grandpa was totally abusive to my older sister. It was really stressful and we ended up staying with people who we didn't know at all a lot of times. They were abusive as well. It was never anything that was really controlled by the welfare system.”

Nancy experienced homelessness and even saw her daughter's husband become addicted to drugs. However, she was able to stay focused and persist through graduation.

Michelle remembered why she was placed into foster care: “because my mother's husband was physically abusing me, and I was in the first grade. I reported my own abuse to my first grade teacher. So I put myself in the system, because I knew I wasn't supposed to feel the way I felt that day.” Michelle said that despite these circumstances she is proud that she made it through college.

Brenda noted that mental health services helped her along her journey to obtaining her bachelor's degree. In her words, Brenda had a “really troubled, troubled youth.” She said, “I OD'ed on crystal meth when I was 18, which was the year that I was supposed to emancipate.” A judge told her, “If you do not have any behavioral issues for a year, you graduate from high school, you enroll in community college, and you find a job, I won't move you to a state mental hospital.” Brenda enrolled in college, but could not make it past the first two semesters. She spent time in a mental institution and accessed different types of therapy for majority of her life—art therapy, anger management, alcoholics anonymous and others. Brenda said it took her 21 years to complete her bachelor's degree. She accessed mental health services to help her through as she recalled, “I was physically abused and tortured as a kid by the woman that gave birth to me.”

Brenda and others of the MU former foster youth found different sources of motivation to overcome the obstacles they faced during college. Brenda said, books “is how I came to work through the abuse with the woman that gave birth to me.” Brenda talked about her belief in a higher power and how her faith also helped. While at the community college, Michelle noticed other students wearing university sweatshirts and thought that maybe she needed to learn about them and what their goals were so that she could potentially make some changes to her own academic plan. Fifty percent of the MU former foster youth noted that there were particular people in their lives who encouraged them to finish college; 75% said that family supported them in their efforts and 86% said they motivated themselves.

Finances. MU students described a number of obstacles that came about because of their finances. Linda would not have been able to afford applying for college had she not learned from high school counselors that she qualified for application fee waivers. Then while in college at Inland University, Linda discovered she could not afford a vehicle. She first took public transportation and later carpooled with a verbally abusive classmate. When she was admitted to MU, she believed it best to live on campus to avoid transportation problems. Jessica found at least four free or affordable transportation resources that helped her get around MU and key places near campus; she split the expenses with roommates to cut costs even more. To address her financial needs, Nancy said, “I’ve always gotten food stamps and the stuff that you have to get. You have to be resourceful as a single parent and trying to go to school.”

Mentoring others. Daniel, Brenda and Jackie expressed a desire to mentor other students because of the support they received from MU programs. Daniel became a

mentor for the transfer program that helped him to transition into the university. He said, “I felt part of the university. I was doing something to help others because that’s what helped me transfer and get encouraged to achieve higher.” Brenda believed, “‘I have to give back to the Scholastic Excellence Program,’ so I became an SEP peer counselor.” Jackie shared that she enjoyed mentoring a little girl through the MU Foster Care Mentor Program. She said that students in this program were going through the process of being adopted much the way she did when she was young.

After college. Some MU former foster youth disclosed their plans after college. Linda desired to pursue a path to become a teacher, but was discouraged in a number of ways. She expressed that finances hindered her from being able to pay for the exams required to apply for admission to master of education programs. On the other hand, Jackie talked about the encouragement she received from the career specialist in the Beloved Scholars Group. The career specialist helped Jackie to apply for a teaching position so that she could earn income while pursuing her master’s degree and working toward a teaching credential.

Findings: Suburban University

Research Question 1: Barriers. The former foster youth college senior and three alumni of Suburban University (SU) who participated in this study faced barriers to their undergraduate pursuits. Those barriers were both similar to and different from those that the MU former foster youth faced. The students of SU who were interviewed reported experiencing obstacles related to academics, mental health, transportation and finances, their personal backgrounds and a sense of belonging.

Academics. Three of the four SU participants from this study noted that the rigor of SU academics proved to be an obstacle. Jocelyn recalled getting the first B she had ever received. Noemi had a similar experience: “It was a very difficult transition, just because I was used to getting all As in all my courses. When I went to SU, I got my first C minus. That was very difficult. Obviously because of the quality of work, you compare for a transfer student versus somebody that has been prepared for an SU lifestyle [right out of high school].” For Lynette, it was not easy to balance the rigorous course load with other priorities.

Noemi was a non-traditional student and she felt that coming into SU as a transfer student was a challenge. There were programs on campus that she could access, including the former foster youth Beloved Scholars Group like the one at MU, but Noemi shared that “because I was a transfer student, I really didn't feel like I qualified for some of their assistance.” An outside organization known as the South County Children’s Fund encouraged her to join Beloved Scholars.

Lynette and Crystal encountered the obstacle of a lack of guidance. Lynette talked about “not knowing where to go to for resources, because there weren’t very many resources on campus.” Crystal would have liked some assistance from an academic counselor in choosing the right major. She expressed,

“I think also choosing what I wanted to do. I went in undecided. Maybe they just expected that you would know or once you picked a major, you were set in that. I did change my major a couple of times and then I changed it back because I didn’t want to stay longer. I wish I would have done the teaching credential five-year program because at least I would have been prepared for something. It would have taken me an extra year, so I just decided to graduate on time. I just wish some of the counselors would have figured that out, I guess, or helped me decide on something to help prepare me for the future.”

For Crystal, choosing a major was a barrier during her undergraduate years. Rather than pursuing the path she was most interested in, she chose to stick with an area of study in order to finish school in a timely manner.

Since she transferred from community college, Noemi noticed that her SU professors were not as accessible as the professors she had at Saint Margaret's College. Noemi reported that

"They are doing research or they are very busy, or they have classes that have about two hundred students, so they don't even know your name. That too was an obstacle that I felt like if I could just get ... 'Tell me what I can improve in, maybe I could do better', but they didn't have time to meet with me. I had to rely a lot on the tutors, and really the writing styles from the tutor to the professor sometimes is very different."

Noemi considered this lack of accessible professors to be a barrier to her academic performance.

Lynette experienced barriers as an SU undergraduate that she considered to be distractions to her academics. At one point she was attending school while working full time. Problems at home with her family began to affect her concentration and eventually caused her grades to slip. Lynette feared that she would not be able to graduate, and therefore had to reevaluate her priorities if she expected to complete college in 2016.

Mental Health. Of SU's former foster youth, Jocelyn expressed the emotional obstacles she encountered—particularly, loneliness. During academic breaks SU provided former foster youth with the option of staying on campus in the dorms. She said,

"I stayed there through Christmas and I remember one of the dorm assistants, the kind of people, the grad students who kind of take care of the dorms said, 'It's because of people like you that we can't go home.' It really hit hard, it really hurt. It wasn't a moment where I felt like I wanted to say, 'Well, at least you have a home to go to,' but it was hard; it was isolating, it felt lonely."

Jocelyn shared that although SU provided this service to help former foster youth, she still experienced obstacles that were beyond the external provision of shelter.

Transportation and finances. Transportation and finances were obstacles for half the SU former foster youth. The issue Noemi encountered with transportation was the cost of parking. She remembered that SU charged \$200 to \$300 per quarter for a parking space on campus. She emphasized that a quarter was only ten weeks and that she would have to pay that expense three times each academic year. Noemi complained that as a former foster youth and a young parent parking and other expenses had a tendency to add up quickly. Lynette's financial obstacle was employment. Although she once held a job, she said she was now worried about finding another one.

Personal background. Jocelyn, Noemi and Lynette all named personal problems and issues from their personal backgrounds as barriers they faced during their undergraduate years. Jocelyn said one of her biggest obstacles was

“Sometimes feeling like not everybody around me got how hard things could be and how lonely family was. There were times when I would hear my peers say, ‘Oh, God my mom wants to go shopping again. Can't she realize like I'm in college or something.’ I don't know, but I'm like, ‘Wow! I don't have that.’”

Jocelyn remembered that when she was in school she had a sister who was still in the system, a sister who was homeless and a mother who was still living with her abuser.

Lynette discussed that things were not going well with her family either: “It's sometimes hard for me to juggle that home life with being at school. I was distracted, and I was isolating myself a lot. I stayed at home, and so I didn't really do too well second and third year.” Lynette added that it was difficult to balance school with home life and with other personal relationships.

Noemi faced obstacles as a mother and as an employee while studying at SU. Because she needed to be home for her kids, Noemi did not have the flexibility to take the evening or weekend classes she wanted to take. Course scheduling was a problem. Noemi missed school and her on-campus internship during her senior year when her son got hurt and had to have major surgery. At times her personal life became an obstacle to her educational pursuits.

Sense of belonging. Three of the SU former foster youth claimed that social problems such as not feeling a sense of belonging were hindrances during their undergraduate careers. Lynette described “not being around things that were familiar” as a problem. As far as other social issues were concerned, she went on to say:

“Well, I can say that I'm the only person I know who has come from my background, and also being a minority at SU, I know that they say that there's lots of minorities, but it's usually ... It's like a huge Asian population, and there's different minorities within that population. I don't see too many people here that look like me or that come from a background similar to me, so it was hard to feel like I fit in at first, even sometimes now.”

Crystal discussed that she had a lot of friends who were a part of the Beloved Scholars Group at another university, but she did not feel the same “sense of community” at SU. Noemi did not get involved with many extracurricular activities until her senior year of college because the demands of SU academics required her to spend most of her time focused on her studies rather than the social aspect of college.

Research Question 2: Supports. The senior and the three alumni of SU found support right on campus for a number of the barriers they encountered. They reported feeling that their support came from key people, campus programs, certain offices on campus, the financial aid they received and the school’s welcoming environment.

People. Key people on campus at SU helped to support the former foster youth to push through to graduation. Particularly, mentors, professors, academic liaisons and friends were named among the study's participants as helpful resources. Mike Johns was named by two of the former foster youth as a mentor. During their undergraduate years he served as the coordinator of the Beloved Scholars Group. Jocelyn shared that since she started at SU Mike "met with me and would set up quarterly meetings to just check in, see that I was taking the right classes, really pushing me to already think about extracurricular." Crystal considered the personal problems she may have dealt and shared with Mike: "I don't think I ever had any. Mike is the one who I met with all the time, and he would just ask me how things are going. I guess if I needed the help, he could have helped me, but I didn't. I guess I keep to myself." Crystal believed that perhaps she did not reach out to Mike the way other former foster youth did because she was adopted at a young age and relied more on her parents. However, she acknowledged that Mike was available to support her.

Three of the four SU students recounted that mentor professors provided them with support as well. Both Jocelyn and Lynette had the same mentor professor, Dr. Julian. Jocelyn said that being a Beloved Scholar and being a mentee to Dr. Julian is the reason why by the end of her freshman year she was

"learning about all these extracurriculars. By the second year I was applying for summer fellowships, looking for research programs. I got my first research funding from their research center and started doing research on US, Mexico boarder relations. I was kind of in the dark of like what was conducting research, what was IRB. I think when normally most college students didn't consider that till their last year of college, doing their senior thesis, I was doing it as a sophomore, first semester."

Dr. Julian encouraged Jocelyn to study abroad for a year and take advantage of a number of other opportunities. Ten years after he mentored Jocelyn through her research, he mentored Lynette through hers: “I did a summer program with him and he became my mentor for my current research [...] I had my GPA drop embarrassingly low and he's still trying to help me, so he's a really, really good person to have on your side. He's been there for me for the last year. I'm really grateful for him.”

For Jocelyn, Noemi and Lynette, a mentor professor was someone they were able to reach out to for assistance with personal matters. As Jocelyn recalled, “My sister and I decided to surprise our foster parents during Christmas and they basically kicked us out. It was not a fun Christmas day and because my career mentor is such a workaholic, he was at SU, so I just kind of crawled over there and he kind of knew.” Jocelyn went on to explain that she could just go to Dr. Julian’s office and hang out. In the same vein, Noemi described how she relied on her mentor professor quite a bit and touched based with him weekly: “He got to know us on a personal level.” She shared that when she panicked because she had locked herself out of a class where she had been teaching some younger students he was very patient and came to her aid. Noemi’s professors were also understanding when she missed school during her son’s operation. Lynette developed a close relationship with one of her business professors who worked with her to start a personal wellness club on campus.

Professors were helpful as both personal and academic mentors to three of the SU students. Jocelyn worked with a professor her senior year to complete her thesis. It was a collaborative project between an SU faculty member and a professor from Brazil. Although Noemi’s general experience was that her professors at SU were not as

accessible as she would have liked them to be, the professors of the one-unit seminars she enrolled in were very helpful: “It wasn't needed for me to take this, I took advantage of this because these classes as well, you could talk to a professor like right in front of you. [...] This is where I would get that feedback that I needed.”

Crystal, Jocelyn and Lynette reported that academic liaisons were people from whom they received support. Although she did not frequent the academic counselor's office, Crystal said, “I maybe met with an academic counselor a couple of times just to make sure the classes I was taking were going to be on track for graduation.” Jocelyn found the financial aid liaison for the Beloved Scholars Group to be someone who was “always there and super approachable.” Jocelyn remembered that the liaison was aware of Jocelyn's circumstances prior to her arrival at SU. She knew about former foster youth specific grant and scholarship information, about the process of emancipation from the foster care system and so forth. Similarly, Lynette shared, “There is a lady in financial aid who had been helping me since [...]right as I got accepted into the school. Her name is Jenn, and so she knows about my story.” Jocelyn described the process of managing her different financial aid packages for studying overseas as a process where she did not have to explain herself or feel frustrated because of the advocate she had in the financial aid liaison.

Friends were key people who helped two of the SU former foster youth to persist toward graduation. The friend Lynette leaned on was her roommate: “My first year of college, I had a roommate and she was really amazing. She became my best friend and she helped me get through a lot of stuff that was going, and she has just been my support system.” Jocelyn became best friends with another former foster youth she met through

SU's Beloved Scholars Group. She said, "It often did feel like I only had someone like Meg" and it was "so awesome to meet someone like me."

Programs. There were 11 on campus programs total that the SU students gave credit to for assisting them. Similar to the students at MU, SU former foster youth regarded the Beloved Scholars Group as essential to their overcoming obstacles as they pursued their bachelor's degrees. Beloved Scholars was especially noted as instrumental in helping students to obtain shelter, finance their education and become acclimated to the university.

The Beloved Scholars Group was an on-campus former foster youth program that provided resources to three of the SU former foster youth of this study. Crystal explained that it was not a stand-alone program, but that its umbrella entity was SU's Scholastic Excellence Office. She disclosed that she had the opportunity to live in the dorms because she had received a scholarship from Beloved Scholars. According to Jocelyn, "One of the things that the Beloved Scholars Group kind of really emphasizes with their schools is that they provide year round housing for their students. They don't close the dorms." Jocelyn received sufficient enough financial aid from Beloved Scholars that she was able to quit the two jobs she held in high school, live on campus and focus on school.

The Beloved Scholars Group offered financial support as well as an opportunity for students to attend a summer transition program. Crystal explained that the scholarship funds that SU students received from the Beloved Scholars group were provided by the South County Children's Fund. Students had the ability to earn larger scholarship amounts if they became peer mentors for other former foster youth through the Fund: "I think my Beloved scholarship was \$6,000 a year I want to say and then if

you're a peer mentor, you got \$7,500.” Crystal remembered that the purpose for offering the financial incentive was to encourage former foster youth to give younger students like themselves college student role models to look up to. In addition, she recalled “[t]hey had me do a summer transition program at that time. I don't know if they still do. That helped a lot actually going into college. You make friends that way.” Jocelyn attended summer transition as well. Crystal said she believed that SU should continue doing programs like these because they help keep students involved and prevent them from losing interest in school.

Noemi benefited from a different SU transition program—a transfer course. She said, “I couldn't just get in that class and then be like, ‘Okay I got the resources I'm leaving.’ I felt that that class was so helpful.” As a result of what she was able to gain from the transfer course, Noemi decided to teach a transfer course for other students coming in.

When she was not teaching others, Noemi was attending tutoring at SU. Noemi shared, “I was able to gradually work towards good grades at SU [...]aking advantage of the resources and tutoring, professors that would take extra time to give me critique on my papers.” She admitted that she “probably would have not done so well without all that tutoring.”

While Noemi did not specify the type of tutoring program she participated in, Lynette shared that she received tutoring from SU's Undergraduate Student Services Office. She said,

“Before I got accepted into SU, I was looking for a program similar to the Educational Advantage Program, and I found the Beloved Scholars. I saw that online, and I called up and they said they didn't have that but they have something

called Undergraduate Student Services. I go to the Undergraduate Student Services Office at least three times a quarter, three or four times a quarter.”

According to Lynette, Undergraduate Student Services offered one session of tutoring for free each quarter. She said that the sessions were typically \$100. She explained, “That actually was very, very helpful, because I was taking a math class and I was struggling and I took a tutorial. It helped me pass the class.” Other academic supports Lynette received from Undergraduate Student Services were priority registration for classes and access to textbooks and i>clickers she could check out for class.

Similar to the way other SU former foster youth obtained housing through the Beloved Scholars Group, Lynette said she obtained housing through the Undergraduate Student Services Office. Lynette had the option of staying on campus: “I guess with SU, guaranteed housing is only for the first year. I had access to guaranteed housing all four years. I just only utilized it for the first three. [...] I think it's something the school does for former foster youth. Yeah, because they knew that I was.”

Lynette considered her extracurricular involvement at SU to be another factor that helped her persist toward graduation. “I was going to some club meetings,” she said. “I was trying to join more clubs. I was just pretty much trying to see what the school had to offer in terms of social things, but I haven't done a club in two years. In the beginning, that's what was helping me get through everything.” Lynette joined the Black Student Association, played rugby and shared that the campus club she helped lead “was a spiritual club, just finding different ways to connect with your inner peace and be happy and expand your relationship with God or whoever you believe in.”

Jocelyn, Noemi and Lynette noted that academic enrichment programs were supports to them during their undergraduate years. Jocelyn hesitantly took her mentor’s

advice and studied abroad in Brazil: “I went for a year and it was the best thing I could have done for my career.” She said it “really like impacted my experience.” The program Noemi was a part of was called Enhancing Academics Through Internships. This program linked students with paid internships. Noemi was required to take a course with the internship. She was exposed to a career of her interest and encouraged to continue her education after her bachelor’s degree. Noemi reported that the program helped her to “work on the skills of networking.” Prior to beginning her senior research project, Lynette participated in Summer Enrichment. Summer Enrichment was “a month long program where you are isolated to just your cohort. It's like an introduction to a PhD program and doing research.” Lynette said it was intense, but worth it.

Offices. Two of SU’s former foster youth college graduates mentioned offices on campus that were of assistance to them when they were students. While Crystal saw the resources available through the career center, she admitted that she did not take advantage of those resources much. However, she and Jocelyn showed gratitude for the offices that provided health services. Crystal said, “I love their on-campus medical center. Living in the dorms and having everything right there was pretty awesome.” Jocelyn shared, “Then I reached out to mental health services my junior year when I started experiencing more like nightmares and things that I was really not able to handle on my own. Then that was really useful. I really got what I needed out of it and I thought I needed to do that before I went overseas.”

As Jocelyn frequented the campus mental health services office, Crystal often visited the financial aid office to find assistance. She said the purpose of those visits was “[j]ust to make sure that my financial aid was squared away, in particular, for studying

abroad. I studied abroad for a semester through Beach College though, but while I was at SU. I took a leave of absence first semester and went to Beach. I had to deal a lot with the financial aid office at that point to get everything situated.” The financial aid office played a key role in supporting Crystal’s academic pursuits.

Financial aid. Lynette noted that financial aid money was an on campus support at SU that she found to be helpful. Jocelyn and Crystal shared that they received financial aid in the form of scholarships through the Beloved Scholars Group. Lynette did not find the Beloved Scholars Group on campus; however, she stated, “The school offers certain scholarships, but you have to meet certain criteria. Sometimes I meet the criteria.”

Welcoming environment. Jocelyn mentioned the importance of the financial aid she received from SU’s Beloved Scholars Group, but she especially noted the welcoming environment the program provided. She recalled,

I mean I had a really soft landing because when I got accepted I was actually debating between MU and SU, and MU was really just kind of starting their program and SU had it for a while. When I got there ... Well, before I accepted which school I was going to, SU just really welcomed me, gave me a tour. The Beloved Scholars Group coordinators at SU did that and they introduced me to a mentor who was the associate dean of one of the schools and they basically told me like, ‘Look, you come here and you are not going to feel like you are in a big school. You are going to have people guiding you all through this program.’”

It was helpful for Crystal to experience that sense of belonging. She had a similar experience living on the Multicultural Floor in her dormitory: “[M]y dorm hall was just filled with people who were from so many different backgrounds, races and ... I didn't feel out of place. I actually felt really comfortable.”

Research Question 3: Missing Supports. Of the suggestions from SU former foster youth regarding missing supports that the university should implement for the

future, 100% of the recommendations were programmatic in nature. One of the four SU participants did not believe her school was missing any particular supports for former foster youth. Noemi said, “I was able to tap into a lot of services. Whenever there was an obstacle I figured out a way of either overcoming it or just working with it.” On the other hand, the other three interviewees mentioned the need for the Beloved Scholars Group, career preparation, mental health service awareness, finance workshops, academic advancement services and social opportunities.

Beloved Scholars Group. Crystal and Lynette considered it important for SU to have a center on campus just for former foster youth resources: the Beloved Scholars Group. While Crystal had the privilege of accessing services as a Beloved Scholar, the program was no longer at SU once Lynette became a student there. Lynette’s thought was “maybe they should bring back the Beloved Scholars Group. I think that would definitely be helpful, or just even do socials with people from this type of background just so students can meet one another and not feel so isolated and by themselves.” Crystal said, “I know it’s hard when there’s only a few Beloved Scholars, but to build it into a program, I think it’s pretty necessary.”

Mental health services. Jocelyn felt it would have been helpful to have better exposure to SU’s mental health services through the Beloved Scholars Group. She recounted her experience of discovering their on-campus counseling services on her own. She said,

“I think if there was something that I would encourage maybe Beloved Scholars to put a little more into that is just having maybe a day where all the beloved scholars go there and just kind of maybe have a point of contact because I think I went there kind of like any other student would go in there and see what it's about and then eventually do it.”

Jocelyn's suggestion was for former foster youth to have a liaison among the campus's mental health specialists.

Career preparation. More opportunities for career preparation was a support three of SU's former foster youth said was missing during their undergraduate experiences. They believed that those career preparation opportunities could come through the Beloved Scholars Group. According to Crystal, Beloved Scholars helped students to graduate, but did not focus much on career or graduate school exposure. She said about SU, "They have a career center, and maybe I stopped in once, but I don't know if there's a way to include that as part of a Beloved Scholars Group that the students do go there. Because it's intimidating to just go randomly into these centers where you don't know anyone." Jocelyn had learned about different iterations of Beloved Scholars on other campuses across the nation and admired the professional development components some of them had. She shared,

"I think that would have been nice because I think as fosters we know we could make it because we've survived, but sometimes we don't know how to ask for help when we don't know how to do something. We either avoid it or we just kind of trip and fall and I think in terms of networking and just acting professionally, just building that professionalism that I think a lot of people get from home or from growing up in more educated backgrounds that most fosters just don't get exposed to."

Some of Jocelyn and Crystal's specific suggestions included career fairs, resume help, required internships through Beloved Scholars, job shadowing and professional development workshops about such topics as how to dress, how to network and the importance of sending thank you notes after meeting someone.

Finance workshops. Lynette would have liked to see offerings of finance workshops during her time at SU. She was especially interested in

“financial management, because even though I was a foster kid, I had to take out so many loans. I'm scared to look at how much it's costing me to go to school here. I have the Chafee Grant, but that's \$5,000 a year. Tuition at SU is \$30,000. The financial aid includes loans and grants. I just had to take a lot of loans, and I want to start paying some of that back now and develop a plan for how I can tackle that at least.”

Lynette felt that help with money management was something that would be useful at SU.

Academic advancement services. Lynette and Crystal said that on-campus tutoring services and study abroad exposure were academic advancement opportunities that could be improved at SU. Although Lynette mentioned that she took advantage of tutoring services offered through SU's Undergraduate Student Services Office, she shared that tutoring is something she was still in need of. She was only permitted to attend one free tutoring session per quarter, but was looking for more consistent support with her coursework. Crystal studied abroad with the Beloved Scholars Group at Beach College while she was a student at SU and thought that it would have been helpful if SU's Beloved Scholars encouraged its students to study abroad.

Social opportunities. Half of SU's former foster youth who were interviewed for this study advocated for more social opportunities. Neither Crystal nor Lynette felt a sense of community. Crystal attributed this to the fact that she was a commuter, while Lynette posited that the lack of community she felt could be due to the absence of the Beloved Scholars Group on campus. “I only went to my classes and then went on,” Crystal shared. “That's something I think they can improve on if they haven't already. Especially for foster kids.” Lynette remembered wanting to fit “in with people who had similar backgrounds to me and maybe knew some of the stuff I was going through.” She mentioned social gatherings for former foster youth as a missing support because “[i]f

they don't see anybody else who has already done it and believe that they can do it, how are they supposed to even consider? Because they don't see people around them doing this type of thing.”

Another missing social opportunity Crystal discussed was the development of independent living skills among former foster youth at SU. She had participated as a mentor for an independent living skills program for younger students. As she shared, there were

“[F]oster kids who came. They’re living in group homes or sometimes foster homes and Beloved Scholars would bring them and we would teach them independent living skills and they could earn little independent living skills bucks. It was just this whole program. What I was just thinking right now is if they included some independent living skills for college kids because when you're 18, you still don't know anything. They could implement some sort of program like that where you learn about how to get your medical coverage after you graduate and you don't have it at school and maybe you get a job that doesn't offer it. I don't know what else, what other services that a lot of the kids still need support after ... Not just after high school but after college too. I don't know if there's a way to incorporate that, and maybe other schools do it and they already have figured that out. SU didn't have anything like that.”

Echoing Crystal's sentiments, Lynette expressed a desire for mentorship apart from the academic mentorship she was receiving from her professor.

Research Question 4: Perceptions. Despite supports that may have been missing, the three SU former foster youth alumni and the graduating senior all had positive perceptions of obtaining their bachelor's degrees. They talked about feeling a sense of responsibility and now being in a position to become role models. Some mentioned the support having the support of their families during their pursuits, and some acknowledged that their degree would open up new opportunities for them.

Jocelyn, Lynette and Crystal believed being a former foster youth college graduate meant they had to share their experiences with others and become role models.

When she considered the number of former foster youth who graduate with bachelor's degrees each year, Jocelyn said,

"I was just sharing that with a colleague today. That same statistic. It reminds me why I can't be silent about my past because while I used to be ashamed of my past—a lot of fosters, we have such bad reputations, movies and everything—but I just think I have to be vocal. [...] I can't be ashamed of that and so I think I'm always thankful [...] The reason it came up today was because my mentee just got a fellowship and I was crying, I was just crying [...] At least at SU, like our graduation rate was something like 86% when I left which was much higher than the average graduation rate at SU. I know I got really really lucky and I just remind myself of that and I just try to pave forward. The reason I have my mentee is because I had mentors and I really believe in the power of that."

In addition to being an example for her mentee, Jocelyn was the first of her siblings to graduate college; her younger sister and older sister obtained their bachelor's degrees and followed Jocelyn's lead in applying for graduate school as well. Lynette said, "[I]n light of recent circumstances, I'm ecstatic and excited that things are finally looking up for me, I feel like I'm very blessed to be in the position I am in [...] I'll be able to set a good example for my siblings to be able to do the same thing, because they don't have a lot of role models." Likewise, Crystal shared, "Now I can teach my kids to be global citizens as well."

The positive sentiments Noemi and Crystal had about finishing their bachelor's degrees related, for them, to the support they received from their families and even familial issues they overcame. Noemi said she would sometimes converse with her teenage daughter, who reminded her of her hard work:

"'You don't understand the degree of how hard it is what you did', but I guess to me it's because I lived it, so I don't have that outside perspective. So it's not that difficult for me, but I just do feel blessed. I would say actually, I'm exceptionally blessed, I feel proud too. Mostly I'm thankful because my husband stuck with me this whole time, my family pushed me through. They were patient when I wasn't there or I missed family gatherings or things like that, they understood. At first they didn't."

From Noemi's perspective, God was watching over her family to help them through difficulties that she understood to be common among former foster youth: teen pregnancy, drug abuse and incarceration. She said that although she would sometimes forget college graduation statistics for former foster youth, she could say obtaining her bachelor's degree while dealing with her family struggles happened because of her faith.

Crystal's feelings about earning her degree were

"I guess I'm proud of it, but I owe a lot of it to my parents, of course, for what they did and getting me to overcome the obstacles that I had. They got me when I was two, but even then, there's a lot that could happen in those first couple of years. I'm very fortunate that they set me on the right path. Whereas, I know a lot of kids don't have that support, which is too bad. I'm proud of it."

Noemi and Crystal felt blessed and proud to have earned their four-year degrees from SU.

Jocelyn, Noemi and Crystal perceived that having a bachelor's degree gave them access to new opportunities. They each described these new opportunities as being career-related. Crystal said she had not yet needed her degree for the jobs she pursued, but Jocelyn explained that she would not have been able to enter her career without it. While she was in college working toward her bachelor's degree, Jocelyn's mentor informed her that a career in foreign affairs required graduate education. Jocelyn was not even aware that graduate school existed. She said, "Getting the bachelor's exposed me to what was really necessary for my career. Now I make an awesome income, I provide for my family and I have stability." In comparison with Jocelyn, Noemi enjoyed the flexibility of being able to apply for different jobs while being competitive enough to obtain them.

Research Question 5: Narratives. The former foster youth of SU who participated in this study had background stories that give insight into other factors that affected their undergraduate experiences. Those background stories were similar to those of the former foster youth who attended MU. Jocelyn, Noemi, Crystal and Lynette talked about being non-traditional students, their personal backgrounds, their experiences with former foster youth programs and their post-college pursuits.

Non-traditional students. Noemi was the only of the four SU former foster youth to transfer from a community college. However, Lynette took community college courses through her high school's middle college program. When she started at SU, she was just eight units from earning her associate's degree. This early college experience inspired Lynette to pursue her bachelor's. Upon learning that Saint Margaret's College offered financial aid and even childcare, Noemi made the decision to attend. Noemi received much support from her community college in her first undergraduate years. She started with remedial courses in math and English, but took four or five courses at a time and summer school to graduate in a timely manner. Noemi said that pushing herself to attend summer school helped prepare her for life at the university. It was at Saint Margaret's that Noemi found that she could participate in a transfer guarantee program; mentors told her to consider applying to SU because she was making the grades and participating in extracurricular activities and academic enrichment programs that would help her to qualify. Noemi expressed that her community college was a "great support".

Personal background. SU's former foster youth gave accounts of the life experiences that led them to pursue a college degree and what kept them motivated.

Jocelyn even noted her concern about the absence of a family network that could have hindered her from functioning at her full potential.

For all four of the SU former foster youth who were interviewed, there was some sort of family-related influence on their decision to attend college. As a child, Jocelyn witnessed her mother being abused by her father. She remembered her mother's words: "I think it was especially after she would get beat up that she would kind of say, 'If you get an education, you'll get a good job and you'll never have to depend on a man.' I think it stuck to me that if I wanted to be independent and not have to face that then I'd have to be smart and go to college, so yeah." The woman who inspired Noemi was her brother's social worker:

"She was very different in the way that she took time to talk to my mom—to talk to her and listen to her, but in a kind and respectful way, and not demean her or make her feel like a bad parent. All of that, I was able to capture at a very young age and realize how different she made us feel. I always said, 'You know what? I want to be that. I want to make the positive impact, like she has done on us.'"

In addition, being a teen mother made Noemi realize that if she were to pursue her dream of attending college she had best do it while her child was still young and she could take advantage of programs for students who were parents.

The inspiration Crystal and Lynette had for attending college came from non-biological family members. Crystal was adopted at the age of five. Her adoptive parents always expected that she would obtain a college education. They enrolled her in a magnet high school to prepare her. Not only did Lynette find her inspiration for advanced schooling in her foster family, but she immersed herself in her studies to be prepared:

"Well, I was in foster care with a Hispanic family for eight years, and they always encouraged me to get an education. School for me was just my way to get away

and get my mind off of things that was happening in my family, so I just became very involved in school. When I was in high school, actually ninth grade, I ended up moving in with some family, and they let me know about a program called Middle College.”

Lynette found an outlet in her schooling and the Middle College program gave her the opportunity to take college courses before college.

Noemi and Lynette credited their families for motivating them during college.

Lynette recalled feeling motivated when her brothers and sisters told her they were proud of her and to keep going. Noemi said while they did not at first understand the value of her attending college, her family eventually became her greatest supporters. When she recognized the level of sacrifice required to finish school, Noemi talked with her husband about it:

“I technically just had to sit down and talk with my husband and tell him like, ‘Listen, there are certain classes that I have to take in the evening and I know that it's not the best, but in order for me to graduate and in order for me to meet the requirements, I need to take these classes.’ What I would do is then I would only take one night class.”

Noemi’s husband encouraged her educational pursuits at SU. Noemi explained further that now that her family is able to see her in her career as a social worker they understand the importance of education.

Since she was the first in her family to go to college, Noemi remembered having to advocate for herself and learn about college on her own. She discovered the required math and English assessments and upon taking them was placed in remedial courses. As she visited offices and talked with campus faculty and staff, Noemi was told she qualified for The Educational Advantage and other programs. She said, “I would meet people and then that's how I slowly started to learn how to take advantage of the resources.”

Noemi and one other student described how self-motivation helped them to complete their bachelor's degrees. As Noemi put it, "Personally, it was just my motivation, my goal. I had goals, I guess I had set my own goals, my expectations and I wanted to see those goals come through." Noemi took more than the average load of courses to finish college in no more than five years, but also to stay motivated and interested in school. When she encountered an obstacle she took the initiative to seek after SU on-campus resources to meet her needs. She went on to explain that "[A] lot of people say it's very difficult, it's not attainable, but I think that is, if you take advantage of the resources, it is. You might have some hurdles on the way, but I think you just have to know how to navigate the system. A lot of us, don't know how to navigate, but once you learn, you'll be able to manage." Lynette spoke plainly when she said, "I don't want to have wasted the last four years of my life by being here and not being able to graduate."

Lynette's personal and professional goals were motivation to pursue her bachelor's degree. Lynette had aspirations of helping her family, but recognized the need to help herself first. She said, "Therefore, I need to finish school and be the example that they need to see." Her goal was to become a pediatrician. Lynette understood that this meant she needed to earn her four-year degree before pursuing medical school.

Jocelyn became aware that growing up she missed out on guidance that would have helped her in some of her academic and professional pursuits at SU. She claimed that she did not have access to a professional network through her family:

"I think because foster youth we don't have a network like a lot of our peers do, whose parents are highly successful executives at businesses or whatever, we have to really build our resume and make as much during that time in college. And so then I went out of state [to study]. Had I not gone I certainly wouldn't be where I am now. I would not be a diplomat living overseas for sure."

SU provided the help Jocelyn needed with building a network for her future career when she applied for and was granted the opportunity to study in a different state and in a different country.

Former foster youth programs. Noemi and Jocelyn expressed their appreciation of the supports they received from outside former foster youth resources before and during their time at SU. Noemi was introduced to SU's Beloved Scholars Group through her involvement with the South County Children's Fund—the fund that gave scholarships to former foster youth attending SU. She explained that “[a]s a foster youth, South County was a huge support for me, because in terms of scholarships and then in terms of support, too. They would have somebody check in on us once a semester, when we turned in our grades, just to see how we were doing and things like that. That was very helpful.” South County provided Jocelyn with what she referred to as a “life mentor”: “My mentor that Beloved Scholars provided me was just more like an academic professional development mentor. [My life mentor] was where I ran to when everything else was falling apart.”

Jocelyn and Crystal reiterated the gratitude they had for SU's Beloved Scholars Group's support. Jocelyn advocated for the replication of the program on other college campuses, and when she learned it was no longer funded at SU said, “It's really sad.” She summed up what she felt about Beloved Scholars in these words:

“I was the brightest a star could have ever been because of this program and I really can't emphasize it more. And I think I knew it when I was going through it, but when I went to [an Ivy League for graduate school] and it was so isolating because they didn't have a program like that in a social network, I appreciated it even more. Because it was really difficult not having a Meg or not having a Dr. Julian who already knew my situation and could just help me in the way he knew how to help me or whatever. But I think my time at the Ivy League school, I got an awesome degree and I graduated with a very awesome GPA and a stellar

experience, but it wasn't what it could have been had a program like Beloved Scholars been there as well. Because of the Beloved Scholars, SU will always have a very very special place in my heart because I never felt alone. I never ever felt alone. I think up till the day that I married in September, everyone, like half of my desk were people that somehow were connected to the Beloved Scholars Group. It's that much into my life. It's just going to be a part of my life forever.”

Jocelyn believed the Beloved Scholars Group to have played a major role in her completing college. Similarly, Crystal shared that her friends who were Beloved Scholars persisted through graduation, but her friends who were not former foster youth did not all graduate. Crystal was the first of her friends to graduate college.

Summary

This chapter discussed what the twelve former foster youth from Metropolitan University and Suburban University claimed to be barriers they faced in college as well as supports they found on their college campuses. The participants indicated what supports they felt their colleges were missing, shared their perceptions of earning bachelor's degrees and even shared narratives of their backgrounds to help contextualize their experiences.

While they were students in pursuit of their bachelor's degrees, MU and SU former foster youth contended with obstacles surrounding their academics, mental health, transportation, finances, personal lives and a sense of belonging. Some MU participants mentioned that they had the experience of being abused, while an SU former foster youth talked about seeing her mother abused. Another difference between MU and SU participants was that MU students tended to run into obstacles with housing that were not common among their SU counterparts.

All twelve former foster youth found people, programs, jobs, departments, financial aid and welcoming environments at their respective institutions to help them in

overcoming these barriers. Eleven mentioned the great resource they found in the Beloved Scholars Group, while one felt it was unfortunate that she attended SU after the program ceased to exist. Participants from both campuses believed improvements could be made to the career development offerings and the mental health service offerings and connections through the Beloved Scholars Groups.

Overall, MU and SU former foster youth felt positively about obtaining their bachelor's degrees. Some said finishing college would not have been possible without the financial or emotional supports they received from their universities. Others admitted that personal factors such as familial support and self-motivation helped them to persist through graduation. Each former foster youth had a unique story to tell, but those stories have insightful connections that educational leaders could perhaps learn from.

The following chapter will discuss the implications of what MU and SU former foster youth considered to be barriers and supports. It will explore the meaning behind what they deemed to be missing supports during their undergraduate experiences and possible reasons for their perceptions of earning a degree. Chapter five will also offer recommendations for educational leaders and ideas for future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

To offer equitable opportunities for former foster youth to earn their bachelor's degrees, it is essential for educators to develop an understanding of these students' unique circumstances and the supports that help them to reach graduation. Through in-depth interviews, this study examined the perspectives of twelve former foster youth who had graduated from or were seniors at two highly selective, public universities in Southern California. The main purpose of this study was to learn what the former foster youth said were barriers they faced at these highly selective colleges and to determine how the universities supported them in their efforts to overcome those barriers. The data from this research imply that universities either have supports or have the ability to provide supports to help this population to overcome nearly all of the barriers they face.

In this chapter, I offer a discussion of this study's findings. Next, I include recommendations for educational leaders and for former foster youth liaisons based on this study's theoretical framework. Then I share how this study adds to extant research. Finally, I explain the study's limitations and identify implications for future research. I close the chapter with a personal reflection.

Discussion of the Findings

Research Question 1. The data from this study show that barriers the former foster youth of MU and SU face are academic and personal in nature. Two prominent academic barriers evident from their interviews are the experience of transferring into the university and the rigorous course load. That many of this study's participants transferred is in line with the literature, which indicates that most former foster youth

who graduate high school and attend college matriculate to community colleges (Jones 2010). Often those who attend community college fail to transfer for lack of understanding of the requirements (Merdinger, Hines, Osterling & Wyatt, 2005). Nancy attended a community college where she received incorrect guidance about the courses she needed to complete to transfer. She would not have been counted among MU's class of 2016 if she had not landed at a different community college where knowledgeable counselors assisted her through the transfer process. Although, the former foster youth in this study who transferred attribute their successful transition to the help of programs, professors and courses at their previous institutions, the data prove that adjusting to a new college is still a challenge.

Indicated by the data is the notion that MU and SU academics are challenging for former foster youth. This is true for those who transferred and those who did not, and may be due to a lack of preparation the former foster youth received at their high schools or due to the high expectations of these selective institutions. Linda recalled participating in a course to help build her college reading skills, while Noemi was required to enroll in remedial courses. In addition, this study's participants looked for their professors to make themselves available to provide tutoring or one-on-one assistance with coursework. They say that because of the number of students in their classes it was difficult to get personalized assistance from professors; therefore, they relied on tutors, mentors and staff in other offices on campus. According to Collins, Spencer & Ward (2010), former foster youth who have mentors or other adult advocates in their lives have better academic outcomes than former foster youth who do not have the same support. The need for mentors is unique to the former foster youth population as they do not typically have

parents on whom they can rely for advice or even a listening ear when they encounter problems with school. When professors are not accessible, former foster youth need tutors or others on campus that might serve as mentors or advocates—department personnel, career specialists and the like.

Among the personal barriers that MU and SU former foster youth report facing are mental health problems and racial issues. Depression and loneliness are the two mental health struggles that were named among participants. Jessica and Lynette would leave school to go home regularly and refrained from involving themselves in school programs and activities for a period of time; however, they also reported that problems with their families were the cause of much of their depression and disengagement. The Beloved Scholars Group was persistent in reaching out to Jessica about events they were hosting until she finally began to attend. After decreasing her extracurricular involvement, Lynette still found a caring advocate in Dr. Julian, the professor mentor over her research project. According to Salazar, former foster youth may disengage in school if they have mental health problems that are not well treated (2013b). Lynette did not mention whether she accessed counseling services at SU the way Jocelyn did, but most of the MU students agreed that the counseling services at their institution were not satisfactory. The students are not given a sufficient number of sessions with MU therapists and the few sessions they are allotted are not helpful.

Interestingly, this study's data imply that racial issues are barriers that MU and SU former foster youth encountered. Nine of the twelve participants were members of minority racial groups. Three of these nine remembered experiencing race-related issues and what two of them called "microaggressions", while three others talked about a longing

to fit in with students from the same background or be around people who were like themselves. More than half of foster youth nationwide are minorities (NCES, 2010). Those who enroll in college at institutions like MU and SU will find themselves in the minority on these campuses as well. It is important that they are able to find a sense of belonging at their universities regardless of what their different personal identifiers may be.

Insufficient finances are another finding from the former foster youth accounts. The data indicate that former foster youth have financial problems that affect a number of academic and personal areas including tuition, housing, food and clothing. According to Jones's study (2010), the cost of four-year institutions may be a deterrent for former foster youth who tend to make far less annually than their non-former foster youth counterparts. Jackie was going to decide against attending MU when she learned of the cost of attendance, but after talking with the vice chancellor she gained access to additional financial resources through the academic scholarship the vice chancellor offered. Similarly, Jocelyn would have continued to work two jobs if it were not for the scholarship SU provided for her tuition and housing. As the years progressed and new expenses arose, Jackie expressed not wanting to ask her parents for help with money for food or the clothing she needed for her internship search. In their study, Osterling & Hines (2006) found that less than half of the former foster youth felt they had someone from who they could borrow money and only 11% felt they could borrow money from their foster families. Having enough money to fund their education and their personal expenses continues to be a problem for former foster youth.

Research Question 2. The findings from this study highlight the importance of key people and programs as well as financial aid in helping former foster youth to overcome barriers on their paths toward graduation. Former foster youth often do not have their parents to encourage them through their studies or any important undertaking. A caring adult advocate played a role in pushing those in this study to go to class, to not drop out of school and to apply for academic enrichment programs and scholarships. This is similar to what the Rassen, Cooper & Mery (2010) study found where independent living program staff at Santa Rosa College walked with former foster youth to different offices on campus to deal with school-related and personal matters. In a different study, former foster youth who had mentors obtained their high school diplomas or GEDs at higher rates than the former foster youth without mentors (Kirk, Lewis, Nilsen, & Colvin, 2011). Similarly, the former foster youth of this study connected with key people on their campuses whom they referred to as resources and people who would find solutions for them if they themselves did not have the solutions. Most of the people who supported these former foster youth were not doing so because their job descriptions required that they specifically work to assist this population. However, the professors, friends, financial aid liaisons and others who supported MU and SU former foster youth operate from an equity cognitive frame when they assume the responsibility of ensuring barriers to graduation are removed from the paths of former foster youth.

Data from this study show that on-campus programs are essential to former foster youth's bachelor's degree completion. MU former foster youth named 20 helpful on-campus programs and those from SU named 11. Of this study's twelve participants, 100% named on-campus programs that assisted them in some manner. All but one

student described the support they received from the Beloved Scholars Group—the former foster youth program on campus. That one student attended SU after the program lost its funding and was no longer housed on site. She felt it would have been helpful to have a space where she could meet other former foster youth like herself and overcome the isolation she experienced from not knowing anyone with a similar background. The Beloved Scholars Group is not unlike the Seita Scholars program at Western Michigan University—a program for former foster youth where students are able to find support specific to their needs (Unrau, 2011). Seita Scholars former foster youth have their voices and suggestions heard and executed, which is emulated with the Beloved Scholars Group. Beloved Scholars access resources such as scholarships, interview and resume assistance, professional clothing, career fairs, guaranteed housing and someone to talk to about any of their personal concerns. Former foster youth liaisons at both MU and SU have demonstrated an equity mindset by having the flexibility to meet students’ needs. The Beloved Scholars Group director at MU, for instance, assisted students with obtaining funds to purchase laptops when they expressed they did not have the technology necessary to be successful in school. SU kept the dorms open during academic breaks for former foster youth even after the closing of the Beloved Scholars Group office.

According to this research study, financial aid helps former foster youth to persist through college graduation. The former foster youth of this study looked to their respective institutions to provide them with the financial assistance they could not easily obtain from their parents who had low incomes, were no longer in their lives or who simply refused to assist them with financial aid applications and financing college. Jones’s (2010) study found that former foster youth annual salaries averaged at about

\$5,000—not enough for tuition or personal expenses. This study’s participants were able to meet tuition costs, pay rent and make other purchases with financial aid they received through their universities: grants, scholarships, loans and work-study. Karen mentioned that the Beloved Scholars Group offered grants, while other students noted that they provided scholarships. Crystal was able to afford living in university housing because of the Beloved Scholars Group scholarship. Brenda was able to overcome the obstacle of homelessness, a problem common to former foster youth who have no parents to go home to, when the Program for the Economically Disadvantaged granted her emergency loans to use to pay her rent. Brenda said she also survived off of scholarships and work-study. Those who participated in this study found financial aid to cover the cost of attendance at MU and SU; nevertheless, former foster youth often go to great lengths to find the financial assistance they are in need of and may not be aware the resources exist until they encounter a serious problem.

Research Question 3. This study’s data indicate that former foster youth believe their colleges are missing course-specific tutoring and sufficient career development opportunities. At MU students are able to access tutors who assist them with comprehending and completing assignments for general education courses. According to Jackie, when students begin their major coursework, the Scholastic Excellence Program does not have specialized tutors available to help students. Lynette shared that at SU’s Undergraduate Student Services Office students are only allotted one free tutoring session per quarter. Former foster youth should have access to tutoring or an equivalent source of academic support for any courses they are taking in order to have equitable access to their bachelor’s degrees.

Results from both MU and SU show that former foster youth desire more career development during their undergraduate years. Interestingly, a study of 163 former foster youth and a matched sample of non-former foster youth found that the former had greater orientation toward job-related skills (Farrugia, Greenberger, Chen, & Heckhausen, 2006). Prior to attending SU, Jocelyn held two jobs. Noemi quit her job to attend SU and Brenda left a nearly \$60,000 salary to attend MU. Several of these former foster youth had career-related requests for future supports at MU and SU. Karen would have been able to better decide on a major of study had she had more exposure to careers to determine which path was best for her. She noted that MU's Beloved Scholars Group prepared students well for interviews, but she did not know which job or career was suited to her talents and personality. Jocelyn suggested the university host workshops about how to dress professionally and about proper post-job interview etiquette. She believed not having parents with a network of professional friends deprived her of this professional knowledge that some of her peers had. Echoing Jocelyn's sentiments, Crystal expressed that she would have appreciated access to job shadowing and mandatory internship opportunities. In addition to the career services both institutions already provide, MU and SU could implement programming that offers former foster youth more direct exposure to careers to not only give them equitable access to degree completion but also to career readiness.

Research Question 4. The dominant perception among former foster youth regarding the accomplishment of obtaining a bachelor's degree is positive. They believe having a bachelor's degree offers them more skills, more career opportunities, access to graduate programs and an empowerment to be an example to their families, other former

foster youth and young people who have yet to consider college. Participants from both MU and SU used such words as “proud”, “blessed” and “lucky” to describe their feelings about finishing college. Karen, although she believed she could have attended college or done something else, still referred to her degree completion as a “confident badge of honor”. Additionally, several participants said that apart from the supports they received from key people, programs and other supports on campus, they felt they motivated themselves to reach graduation. Determination and discipline are traits that research shows other former foster youth said were important to their obtaining their four-year degrees (Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005). For Michelle, having self-determination did not mean that any student was better than another as she claimed that all students have their own educational journeys. I assert that where the students are not able to motivate themselves or produce the resources necessary to advance to degree completion, the universities have the responsibility to fill in the gaps and provide them with equitable opportunities.

Research Question 5. Educational leaders can learn from these data that former foster youth are resourceful, yet still in need of support. With 31 campus programs named along with a number of professors, mentors and financial aid liaisons, the twelve MU and SU former foster youth of this study have evidently sought and found helpful services on their campuses. Noemi found professors to give her feedback on her work, but still did not earn the GPA she hoped for. Brenda asked for and obtained assistance with paying rent, but still experienced homelessness twice in her last year of school. Jackie’s conversation with the vice chancellor linked her with a full academic scholarship her first year, but she still qualified for little financial aid her second year. Daniel found a

sense of belonging with groups on campus, but he felt he still lacked “spiritual support”. It is the responsibility of educators to continue to listen to the voices of former foster youth for the purpose of determining their needs on their paths to graduation and working to meet them.

Recommendations for Educational Leaders

Recommendation 1: Provide funding for consistent resources for former foster youth. For three of the four participants who attended SU, the Beloved Scholars Group was an important resource much like Seita Scholars was for former foster youth in Michigan (Unraa, 2011). Therefore, I recommend re-launching the Beloved Scholars Group on that campus. Jocelyn remembered it being a program through which she could meet people like herself. In the absence of the program, Lynette spent her years at SU longing to but never meeting any other former foster youth. A physical space on campus dedicated to the support of former foster youth would meet students’ expressed need for a “sense of community”.

Where it is not financially feasible to provide a center for former foster youth, I recommend identifying a former foster youth liaison on campus as another option. Lynette noted that there was a woman in the financial aid office at SU who assisted her with concerns that were specific to her personal background. She realized that the Undergraduate Student Services office gave her access to former foster youth specific support as well. However, Lynette could not name a person on campus who knew her circumstances and could connect her with additional resources if needed. Studies show that adult advocates are important in the lives of former foster youth; therefore, SU needs

a liaison that former foster youth can look to for support (Collins, Spencer, & Ward, 2010).

Recommendation 2: Provide professional development for former foster youth liaisons. Former foster youth liaisons serve as mediators between former foster youth and a plethora of on-campus and off-campus resources. Encouraging them to take on additional responsibilities may seem overwhelming. I recommend each institution provide professional development opportunities for former foster youth liaisons at the two campuses involved in this study to exchange best practices with liaisons at other institutions. Then liaisons may add to their tool kits efficient methods for executing new supports based on newly identified former foster youth needs.

Recommendation 3: Improve mental health service offerings for former foster youth. For SU, I recommend educational leaders introduce former foster youth to on-campus mental health services. A quarter of foster care alumni deal with post-traumatic stress disorder among other mental health problems (Case Family Programs, 2011). Lynette spoke of isolating herself because of problems she had with her family. She did not mention accessing mental health services, nor did she express awareness of those services. Jocelyn considered them to be very helpful and thought the Beloved Scholars Group could connect students to their resources. Establishing one on-campus contact for former foster youth at SU would be the first step to providing mental health and other campus connections.

Recommendations for Former Foster Youth Liaisons

Recommendation 1: Implement career development workshops for students. In addition to the commended services already provided by the SU career center and MU's

Beloved Scholars Group, I recommend former foster youth liaisons implement career development workshops. These workshops should include the following topics: How to Choose a Major, Determining a Career Path, Pre and Post Interview Etiquette and Securing an Internship in Your Field. As students participate in these workshops, I recommend that presenters request and consider feedback from the former foster youth about any other career knowledge they would like to be taught.

Recommendation 2: Offer more services that cater to former foster youth who are non-traditional students. I recommend former foster youth liaisons offer more programming for non-traditional students, especially transfer students. Seven of the twelve former foster youth in this study transferred from other institutions and expressed that transferring into a new campus culture and experiencing the age gap between themselves and their fellow students made adjusting to their new schools difficult. While former foster youth admit that they enjoyed participating in the Beloved Scholars Group and connecting with people who were “in the same boat” or had similar backgrounds, some of the students from MU shared that they sometimes did not feel they fit in. I, therefore, recommend socials specific to transfer students. This will provide an opportunity for staff to introduce new transfers to resources they will find useful and an opportunity for those transfers to network with one another.

Recommendation 3: Provide workshops to help former foster youth navigate online resource centers. The website for MU’s Beloved Scholars Group for former foster youth is fairly new. The website has grown from a single page of general information to an entire directory of resources ranging from academic support to financial assistance to housing options. Osgood, Foster & Courtney (2010) report that there is a poor

coordination of services in helping former foster youth transition to adulthood, which is why I recommend former foster youth liaisons host workshops to introduce to them the Beloved Scholars Group website and how to navigate through its resources. During these workshops, I recommend former foster youth request students share what additional resources they would like to see added to the webpage and subsequently make those changes.

Contributions of This Study

This study contributes to the literature data about former foster youth and more specifically about former foster youth college graduates by explaining some of the struggles they faced in college and how on-campus resources were of support to them. Studies exist that show the poor academic outcomes of foster youth and former foster youth, but few studies tell the stories about those who obtain a college degree. The Merdinger et al. (2005) study is one wherein participants chose pre-established survey items to describe their experiences in obtaining a bachelor's degree. This study differs in that the college graduates and graduating seniors from MU and SU participated in semi-structured interviews wherein they were able to share their experiences in their own words. Their personal narratives are important because telling their own stories allowed the former foster youth to make meaning of their experiences.

Important additions to extant literature, are the data this study found regarding the manner in which universities provide supports for former foster youth. Much literature about former foster youth acknowledges the role mentors and caring adults play in these students' lives. However, this study adds to research the emphasis former foster youth

themselves place on the role programs play in their persistence as undergraduates. It also highlights the fact that helpful resources exist for them right on their campuses.

New knowledge this study adds to the area of former foster youth research is the notion that former foster youth want to give back and mentor others. While they were still students at MU and SU the former foster youth of this study began to mentor students through the campus programs that helped them in their transition into the university. Some mentored new students, while others assisted their peers by introducing them to available resources.

Another contribution this study makes to current research is the findings about the experiences of former foster youth who transfer into four-year institutions. Existing data show that many former foster youth enroll in community colleges and eventually drop out. The data from this study highlight the experiences former foster youth who began their educational careers at community colleges and went on to transfer and complete their bachelor's degrees. This study found that some struggled to adjust to their new schools. Although, these former foster youth met the requirements to gain admission to highly selective institutions, they still found the course load to be quite rigorous.

Finally, this study reiterates the findings of previous studies. Former foster youth at these institutions recall facing the obstacles described in literature pertaining to finances, housing, physical and mental health, and family. In addition, being double minorities seemed to increase the number of obstacles former foster youth faced—former foster youth parents and former foster youth racial minorities, for instance. Despite these and other challenges, the determination and discipline the Merdinger et al. study participants claimed to possess led to a resourcefulness in this study's former foster

youth. The former foster youth of MU and SU sought after resources and in most cases found them.

Limitations

The data from this research may be used to inform practice and may add to existing research. However, the study does have limitations. The main limitations are related to the sample. Twelve participants make for a small sample with eight former foster youth from MU and four from SU. This is due in part to the limited recruitment options for the population of students who were graduating or who had graduated from these institutions. MU's former foster youth liaison only had possession of email addresses for current students and for alumni of the class of 2015—19 former foster youth in total. Student affairs personnel at SU had contact information for only three former foster youth. I relied on social media posts and repeat emails to recruit participants. My efforts resulted in a majority female sample. Only one of the twelve was male. Although, there are fewer female than male children in the state of California, there is an overrepresentation of females in foster care for each ethnic group (Webster, Armijo, Lee, Dawson, Magruder, Exel, Cuccaro-Alamin, Putnam-Hornstein, King, Rezvani, Wagstaff, Sandoval, Yee, Xiong, Benton, Tobler, & Romero, 2016). This may explain the greater number of female participants in this study. In addition, the sample of MU former foster youth participants was nearly homogenous in terms of the years in which they graduated.

The sample from this study is not representative of the population of former foster youth college graduates at large. This study does not claim to represent the thoughts of other former foster youth from highly selective institutions in Southern California or from

any other university. The participants from MU and SU are only able to speak of their own experiences.

Implications for Future Research

The data from this study highlight the barriers former foster youth faced in college and give insight to the supports they either did or did not receive from their universities. This research indicates how former foster youth perceive having earned their bachelor's degrees and what education leaders can learn from their narratives. However, this study's interview protocol did not inquire into the background stories of former foster youth. All information the participants shared about their foster care experiences and their family lives was offered of their own accord. Future research could inquire into the foster care experiences of former foster youth college graduates to determine how their experiences in care either differ from or resemble one another.

While this study captured a glimpse of the narratives of the former foster youth involved, future research might include a more in-depth narrative inquiry. A narrative inquiry would require longer than one-hour interviews and more deliberate contextualization of the participants' stories. To develop a fuller picture of their stories, interviews with university staff that worked with the students to provide them with direct support services would also be essential.

Some of the barriers that this study's participants encountered are barriers that upon graduating college some continue to face. Additional research is needed to learn about former foster youth college graduates' post graduation experiences. Such a study could determine whether these bachelor's degree holders pursued advanced degrees or

careers or whether students experience greater hardship due to their new responsibility of paying back student loans.

Personal Reflection

I was surprised to find that one of the first former foster youth participants I interviewed was not forthcoming with information about her experience. However, one of my last interviewees admitted that she does not often open up to people. She felt she had to be guarded, but said she found it easy to talk to me. It is interesting to consider whether this reluctance to share personal accounts kept the MU and SU former foster youth from expressing more than what they described in our interviews. At any rate, those who shared stories of abuse, of abandonment, of depression and of poverty, in my estimation, came across as incredibly resilient. They spoke of their ongoing challenges, but also discussed healthy relationships they have with friends and even biological family members. Two former foster youth talked about the importance they placed on forgiving their parents for what they exposed them to as children.

It also surprised me to hear the degree to which former foster youth struggled with finances. I had assumed that former foster youth would automatically receive free money and no loans to attend college. The Chafee Grant is a \$5,000 grant specific to former foster youth, but the majority of those involved in this study did not qualify for it. Similarly, they would not qualify for aid specific to students entering college right out of high school. Nor would they qualify for certain aid if there were large gaps in their education or if they used the Cal Grant, for instance, for the maximum number of years it is offered to students.

I was most moved to hear one former foster youth share that MU had done everything they could for her and in many ways rescued her, but they could not provide the nurture of her parents. She cried as she talked about the biological connection that parents and their children have—a connection that she said could not be replaced. For her, this connection would forever be tied to her psychological health. Of all the programs and all the caring people who could impact hers and the lives of other former foster youth to provide equitable access to bachelor's degrees, none could erase the lasting experiences of their pasts.

APPENDIX A
RECRUITMENT MATERIALS

Dear Fellow Bruin,

There are more ways than one to give back to your university. This spring, I would like your help in giving back to UCLA by providing the institution with information about the on-campus services that have helped former foster youth and about how we can make our supports better.

Your input about how to best support former foster youth is valuable. Please join me for an interview to discuss your experience as a former foster youth and senior or graduate of UCLA. For participation in this UCLA research study, you will receive a \$10 gift card and have your name placed in a drawing for a brand new tablet. Participation in the study is not required in order to participate in the drawing.

If you are interested in participating in an interview, please contact me directly via email at jamila.salisberry@gmail.com. In your email please indicate the following:

1. Your Full Name
2. Graduation Year
3. Undergraduate Major
4. Gender
5. Race/Ethnicity

I am interested in hearing the perspectives of a diverse group of individuals as all of your stories are important. I look forward to meeting and speaking with you.
Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Jamila Salisberry

Jamila Salisberry
EdD Candidate, UCLA GSE&IS
jamila.salisberry@gmail.com

Dear Anteater,

There are more ways than one to give back to your university. This spring, I would like your help in giving back to UCI by providing the institution with information about the on-campus services that have helped former foster youth and about how we can make supports better.

Your input about how to best support former foster youth is valuable. Please join me for an in-person or Skype interview to discuss your experience as a former foster youth and senior or graduate of UCI. For participation in this UCLA research study, you will receive a \$10 gift card and have your name placed in a drawing for a brand new tablet. Participation in the study is not required in order to participate in the drawing.

If you are interested in participating in an interview, please click [here](#) to fill in your contact information. Please include the following:

6. Your Full Name
7. Graduation Year
8. Undergraduate Major
9. Gender
10. Race/Ethnicity

I am interested in hearing the perspectives of a diverse group of individuals as all of your stories are important. I look forward to meeting and speaking with you. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Jamila Salisbury

Jamila Salisbury
EdD Candidate, UCLA GSE&IS
jamila.salisberry@gmail.com

APPENDIX B INFORMED CONSENT FORM

University of California, Los Angeles

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

The Perspectives of Former Foster Youth About University Supports

Jamila Salisbury, from the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), is conducting a research study.

You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are a senior or graduate of UCLA or UC Irvine and a former foster youth. Your participation in this research study is voluntary.

Why is this study being done?

This study will explore the experiences of former foster youth undergraduates and alumni from two highly selective, public universities in Southern California to determine what on-campus supports they say helped them to persist toward and through graduation and what supports they believe would have been helpful. This project will involve participants from both UCLA and UC Irvine who have obtained their bachelor's degrees or who will be graduating the year of this study. The purpose is to capture a more detailed story behind the low numbers of former foster youth who graduate college in order to inform university leadership of the best ways to support this population.

What will happen if I take part in this research study?

If you volunteer to participate in this study, the researcher will ask you to do the following:

- Meet at a location predetermined by the researcher or by the participant.
- Participate in one audio-recorded interview between March and April 2016 to discuss on-campus supports at UCLA/UCI for former foster youth.
- Answer interview questions such as:
 - What on-campus supports helped you to press through college graduation?
 - At what point in your undergraduate experience did you begin to take advantage of the resources this on-campus support had to offer?
 - What services did the [name of on-campus support here] provide for students?
 - Which of these services did you take advantage of?
 - Which of these services did you consider to be most helpful?

- Why?
 - To what extent did the [name of on-campus support here] assist you with non-school related problems?
 - How often did you access these resources?
 - What services did the [name of on-campus support here] not provide that would have been helpful to you?
 - How or why would these additional services have been helpful?
- Review the transcription of your interview for accuracy and clarification of details.

How long will I be in the research study?

Participation will take a total of about 1.5 hours. The interview will last approximately 60 minutes. Reviewing the transcribed interview and providing feedback will take at most 30 minutes.

Are there any potential risks or discomforts that I can expect from this study?

You can expect minimal risks or discomforts from this study. In the event that you feel uncomfortable you may choose not to answer a question, discontinue your participation in the study or contact a professional from the list provided for further assistance.

Are there any potential benefits if I participate?

You may benefit from this study by having the opportunity to share your perspective of the supports your college provided for former foster youth. You will help to inform practice among educational leaders who can make changes to programs to better serve this population. In addition, the results of the study will inform the body of research around university strategies for helping former foster youth undergraduates to persist through college graduation.

A final benefit to participation is the \$10 gift card incentive and the chance to win a brand new tablet in a drawing. The approximate chance of winning the drawing is 1 in 40, and participation in the study is not required in order to participate in the drawing.

Will information about me and my participation be kept confidential?

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can identify you will remain confidential. It will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by the use of pseudonyms when data are transcribed. In addition, data will only be shared with the research participants and UCLA faculty sponsors of this research, Drs. Eugene Tucker

and Tyrone Howard, unless the participants agree to share data with a wider audience.

What are my rights if I take part in this study?

- You can choose whether or not you want to be in this study, and you may withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time.
- Whatever decision you make, there will be no penalty to you, and no loss of benefits to which you were otherwise entitled.
- You may refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer and still remain in the study.

Who can I contact if I have questions about this study?

- **The research team:**
If you have any questions, comments or concerns about the research, you can talk to one of the researchers. Please contact:

Jamila Salisberry at 213.458.3023 or jamila.salisberry@gmail.com OR
Dr. Eugene Tucker at etucker@g.ucla.edu OR
Dr. Tyrone Howard at thoward@gseis.ucla.edu
- **UCLA Office of the Human Research Protection Program (OHRPP):**
If you have questions about your rights while taking part in this study, or you have concerns or suggestions and you want to talk to someone other than the researchers about the study, please call the OHRPP at (310) 825-7122 or write to:

UCLA Office of the Human Research Protection Program
11000 Kinross Avenue, Suite 211, Box 951694
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1694

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

SIGNATURE OF STUDY PARTICIPANT

Name of Participant

Signature of Participant

Date

SIGNATURE OF PERSON OBTAINING CONSENT

_____ Name of Person Obtaining Consent	_____ Contact Number
_____ Signature of Person Obtaining Consent	_____ Date

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

College Graduates Interview Protocol

In this interview I will ask you questions that pertain to your experiences as an undergraduate student and as a former foster youth.

1. How did you become interested in attending college?
2. Tell me about your first year of college.
3. Tell me about your second and third years of college. How were they different from your first year of college?
4. How was your last year of college? Was it the same as other years or more or less difficult?
5. Please discuss any obstacles, if any, you faced in pursuit of your bachelor's degree?
 - a. How did you overcome these obstacles?
6. What on-campus supports helped you to press through to college graduation?
 - a. How did you find out about this support service?
 - b. At what point in your undergraduate experience did you begin to take advantage of the resources this on-campus support had to offer?
 - c. What services did the [name of on-campus support here] provide for students?
 - d. Which of these services did you take advantage of?
 - e. Which of these services did you consider to be most helpful? Why?
7. To what extent did the [name of on-campus support here] assist you with non-school related problems?
 - a. How often did you access these resources?
8. What services did the [name of on-campus support here] not provide that would have been helpful to you?
 - a. How or why would these additional services have been helpful?
9. What besides the [name of on-campus here] helped you in your pursuit of your bachelor's degree?
10. According to research statistics regarding former foster youth, only 3-4% of former foster youth graduate college with a four-year degree. How do you feel about obtaining your degree?
11. What effects, if any do you believe having a bachelor's degree has had on your life?
12. What other information would you like to share?

Current Seniors Interview Protocol

In this interview I will ask you questions that pertain to your experiences as an undergraduate student and as a former foster youth.

1. How did you become interested in attending college?
2. Tell me about your first year of college.
3. Tell me about your second and third years of college. How were they different from your first year of college?
4. How has your last year of college been? Has it been the same as other years or more or less difficult?
5. Please discuss any obstacles, if any, you have faced in pursuit of your bachelor's degree?
 - a. How have you overcome these obstacles?
6. What on-campus supports have helped you to press toward college graduation?
 - a. How did you find out about this support service?
 - b. At what point in your undergraduate experience did you begin to take advantage of the resources this on-campus support had to offer?
 - c. What services does the [name of on-campus support here] provide for students?
 - d. Which of these services did/do you take advantage of?
 - e. Which of these services did/do you consider to be most helpful? Why?
7. To what extent has the [name of on-campus support here] assisted you with non-school related problems?
 - a. How often did/do you access these resources?
8. What services did/does the [name of on-campus support here] not provide that would have been helpful to you?
 - a. How or why would these additional services have been helpful?
9. What besides the [name of on-campus here] has helped you in your pursuit of your bachelor's degree?
10. According to research statistics regarding former foster youth, only 3-4% of former foster youth graduate college with a four-year degree. How do you feel about obtaining your degree?
11. What effects, if any do you believe having a bachelor's degree will have on your life?
12. What other information would you like to share?

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