



Invited summaries of research for scholar and practitioner allies of foster alumni and other traditionally hidden college student populations

## Hidden College Student Populations

Not visibly identifiable  
Often without voice  
Often resistant to self-identifying

## R is for Thursday Network of Oklahoma

[risforthursday@okstate.edu](mailto:risforthursday@okstate.edu)

[education.okstate.edu/  
risforthursday](http://education.okstate.edu/risforthursday)



**Welcome to the inaugural issue of The Scholar-Practitioner!** This bi-monthly publication of invited research summaries targets the research-to-practice gap for U.S. scholar and practitioner allies for former foster youth and other traditionally hidden college student populations. The first six issues pre-empt the **National Conference for Engaged Scholarship on Foster Alumni and Other Traditionally Hidden College Populations**, the nation's first research conference in this interdisciplinary area of study. **Save the Date:** The conference will be held February 19-20, 2020, in Washington D.C.

*Financial support for The Scholar-Practitioner and the 2020 conference is being provided by the Spencer Foundation and the OSU Christine Cashel Professorship in Higher Education & Student Affairs. The 2020 conference leadership team is: Kerri Kearney and Lisa Will, OSU; Lori Tiller, University of Georgia; Jennifer Geiger, University of Illinois; Royel Johnson, The Pennsylvania State University; and Megan Piel, The University of Texas at San Antonio. The conference will be held in concert with, and with conference support from, the 39th Annual Conference on the First-Year Experience, National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, University of South Carolina (director Jennifer Keup). A conference RFP will be available in late spring/summer 2019.*

## “Family” Ties for Foster Alumni in College:

Kearney, K. S., Naifeh, Z., Hammer, T., & Cain, A. (2019). “Family” ties for foster alumni in college: An open systems consideration. *Review of Higher Education*, 42(2), 793-834.

## Research Summary

The existence and support of traditional (biological or legal) family units for undergraduate students are assumed in American higher education (Thomas, 2002). Foster alumni college students, defined for this study as students who spent a portion or all of their adolescent years in foster care or similar conditions, generally disrupt *traditional* notions of parents and family. What makes this population unique is its members' histories of removal from their family homes and support structures. As they transition into higher education, their experiences are complicated by systems not designed for them. This study sought to understand, from the perspectives of *successful* foster alumni college students, who they include as family and how family influences their college experiences.

This qualitative, multi-case study was guided by the following questions:

1. How do successful college students who were in foster care or foster care conditions as adolescents (i.e. foster alumni) define “family”?
2. In what ways do successful foster alumni college students report that family members (as defined by the students) have influential roles in their college lives?

Eight successful, self-identified, foster alumni college students were engaged in data collection over six months to three years.

Because traditional higher education theories related to student retention and persistence silenced the unique experiences of participants, open systems theory was instead used.

*In the full-length article, findings are presented for each case (each student participant). This summary focuses only on the cross-case (overall) findings.*

### Cross-Case Findings

Foster alumni's definitions of family systems were complex and did not generally follow traditional definitions, and yet family was very much present.

Boundary management activities, including the use of contemporary social media as a tool, were crucial.

Reconsidering boundaries and strategic valuing of family members were common activities.

### Implications for Practice

All students spontaneously referenced family-related experiences with higher education that made them feel different from their non-foster peers. FAFSA, for example, uses legal definitions of parent (and for valid reasons); however, these foster alumni students *seemed to assume that biological and legal definitions of parents and family continued to apply* once they were at their college campuses. **Implication for colleges:** Look for unintended or unnecessary biological and legal

assumptions about "parents" and "family" in college websites, printed materials, current practices, and processes. Clear definitions of terms such as parent and family should match *the task at hand*; members of a student's support network, when not related to legal processes, should be identified by the *student*. Unnecessary legal and biological definitions of parents and family may be ostracizing and potentially detrimental to students' feelings of belonging on campus.

Family definitions and relationships were progressing in unforeseen ways. Particularly for foster alumni who aged out of care, their 18<sup>th</sup> birthdays may be the first time that some biological family members, particularly biological parents, were allowed to have contact; thus, traditionally-aged students may face numerous complicated and evolving family-related decisions throughout college. **Implication for colleges:** Remain flexible and supportive. Let the student be the leader in defining and including family.

Multiple students in this study spontaneously said that not just university processes, but also interactions with university employees, caused them to feel their differences were on display or that they did not fit in. **Implication for colleges:** All individuals in higher education benefit from receiving information about serving the foster alumni population in

much the same ways that education is provided for serving other minority populations.

Multiple boundary management strategies and tools applied by these successful students were complex and depended upon someone's actions or influence *in a particular moment*. All considered boundary management key to their successes. **Implication for colleges:** It may be useful to teach aspects of boundary management in early coursework, orientation, and/or freshmen year activities (possibly for all students).

### Conclusions

Defining the concept of "family" and identifying family members was very complex. However, students had both traditional and self-defined family whom they turned to for guidance or support. Our understanding of the family ties of foster alumni in college will also remain complex and evolving. As the higher education literature and college campuses recognize and provide greater voice to this group of students, *they* should become our teachers so that we may better support them toward our common goals.

Full article available at: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/712616>

Thomas, L. (2002). Student retention in higher education: The role of institutional habits. *Journal of Education Policy*, 17(4), 423-442.

## SAVE *the* DATE

FEB. 19-20, 2020



WASHINGTON D.C.

[education.okstate.edu/risforthursday](http://education.okstate.edu/risforthursday)



## NATIONAL CONFERENCE FOR ENGAGED SCHOLARSHIP ON FOSTER ALUMNI

and other traditionally hidden college populations

**"I want to receive ongoing email updates about the national conference in 2020." Go to: [education.okstate.edu/risforthursday](http://education.okstate.edu/risforthursday) to sign up!**