ENGAGED SCHOLARSHIP
on
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POPULATIONS

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VIRTUAL CONFERENCE
September 15 - 16, 2021
Stillwater, OK

National Conference for Engaged Scholarship on Traditionally Hidden Populations (NCHP)

AGENDA

Day 1.

2:00 p.m. – 3:30 p.m.   2020 Research Team updates

3:30 p.m. – 4:00 p.m.   Closing and overview of tomorrow

Day 2.

12:00 p.m. – 12:15 p.m.   Overview of conference

12:15 p.m. – 1:00 p.m.   Concurrent Session 1

1:00 p.m. – 1:45 p.m.   Concurrent Session 2

1:45 p.m. – 2:00 p.m.   Break

2:00 p.m. – 2:45 p.m.   Concurrent Session 3

2:45 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.   Closing

3:00 p.m. – 4:00 p.m.   Crucial Conversations

4:00 p.m. – 5:00 p.m.   Getting involved in 2022

National Conference for

ENGAGED
SCHOLARSHIP
— on —
FOSTER
ALUMNI

& Other Traditionally Hidden College Populations

Our deepest thanks to:

The Spencer Foundation . . . the 2020 planning team: Jennifer Geiger, Royel Johnson, Lori Tiller, Megan Piel, & Kerri Kearney . . . conference coordinator Lisa Will . . . Co-PI Jennifer Keup . . . Lauren Writer . . . Oklahoma State University faculty, graduate research associates, staff, & administration . . . our conference team leads . . . Mitch Harrison . . . Fostering Academic Achievement Nationwide . . . University of Illinois at Chicago . . . the National Research Collaborative for Foster Alumni and Higher Education . . . Brad Williams . . . the OSU Christine Cashel Professorship . . . our fellow researchers & practitioners . . . our familes . . . & the many students who share their experiences so that we may learn.

Concurrent Sessions

Session 1

Nathanael Okpych
Ties that bond and bridge: Exploring social capital among college students with foster care histories

Jennifer Farinella & Lisa Schelbe
Examining the lived experiences of foster care alumni in graduate school

Session 2

David Meyers
The cost of early independence: Unmet material needs among college students with homelessness or foster care histories

Terrence McTier Jr.
The careers we can pursue as college students with criminal records

Session 3

Mauriell Amechi & Christine Norton
A phenomenological study of college students with foster care experience during COVID-19

Meggan Lloyd
Centering equity for students with foster care experience: Institutional gaps & opportunities

Please note: In order to further assist teams in literature reviews for their studies, a webinar drawing from two published reviews of the literature on foster alumni in college is available at the Conference Site Canvas page. A special thank you to **Royel Johnson**, Pennsylvania State University, and **Jennifer Geiger**, University of Illinois at Chicago, for this special contribution to the Conference.

Ties that bond and bridge: Exploring social capital among college students with foster care histories

Presenter: Nathanael Okpych & Lori Gray

Abstract: Our study explores the social networks and social capital among a sample of first-year college students with foster care histories who were participating in a campus-based support program (CSP) at a Midwestern university (n = 26, response rate = 93%). Data were collected from a novel social network instrument called FC-Connects, which was designed for students with foster care histories. We find that, early in their college career, students have ample bonding capital (emotional, practical, and personal advice) but bridging capital (college advice and academic support) is in shorter supply. Consistent with social capital theory, bonding support was commonly accessed through close relationships with family and peers, while bridging support was leveraged through distant relationships with professionals. Diverging from theory, professionals and mentors from the CSP were key sources of bridging capital but also had close relationships with students. Our whole-network analysis identified a few students who were important connectors in the network, and found that roughly one-in-three students were isolates, having no connections to their classmates in the CSP. Finally, students high in avoidant attachment (emotional guardedness and self-reliance) were less likely than their peers to report having enough emotional support and viewed their supports as less dependable.

Problem: Connections to resourceful individuals are at the same time critical and challenging for college students with foster care backgrounds. On the one hand, relationships with adults, peers, communities, and programs can supply vital information, resources, and emotional support. Forming connections to competent, resourceful individuals can be a deciding factor in their likelihood of persisting. On the other hand, harmful and unpredictable experiences with past relationships lead some youth to steel themselves against future pain and disappointment. Given their past relationships and current opportunities, the constellation of supportive individuals can dramatically differ from one student to the next. As a field, we are just beginning to understand intricacies of the relational webs of students with care histories. With few exceptions (e.g., Blakeslee & Keller, 2018), little research has investigated social network characteristics for this specific population of college students. Although social network instruments have been adapted or developed for the population of foster youth (Courtney et al., 2014; Blakeslee, 2015; Jones & LaLiberte, 2013; Rosenberg, 2019), these tools are not specifically geared to foster youth in college. As such, they may inadequately or imprecisely capture social network and social capital features relevant to college success (e.g., college advice, academic support).

Theoretical Framework: With its focus on network-embedded resources and the influence of community membership, social capital theory is an apt framework for studying the connections foster youth make in college. Based on an extensive review of social capital research in higher education, Mishra (2020) presents a model of the types of social capital theorized to promote academic success for underrepresented college students. Consistent with general social capital theory, Mishra (2020) finds that students' close ties with family, peers, and home communities are important sources of bonding capital, which primarily help individuals to get by" (Lin, 2001; Putnam, 2000). These close-knit ties provide emotional and practical support, instill pro-education values (e.g., importance of education and discipline), and undergird students' resilience and determination. Same-race bonds are particularly important for underrepresented minority students. As Mishra (2020) underscores, "Shared negative experiences related to discrimination and stereotypes binds them together and they learn to cope with the challenges by supporting each other emotionally…" (p. 100307).

Bridging capital, which helps individuals to "get ahead" (Granovetter, 1973; Lin, 2001; Putnam, 2000), includes connections to individuals who serve as cultural guides, assist with navigating college, usher connections to new circles of information, and leverage their influence on behalf of the student. Mishra's (2020) model places particular emphasis on information-related social capital. Bridging ties provide specialized knowledge to improve academic performance (e.g., understanding course material, preparing for tests) and navigate the logistics of college (e.g., selecting a college major, completing financial aid forms). Connections to faculty, learning communities, successful members of home communities, and others may not be particularly close, but they open pockets of information and resources that may

otherwise remain inaccessible. Mishra (2020) again emphasizes the importance for underrepresented minority students to have ties with same-race individuals who can serve as role models and help cope with experiences of discrimination.

Mishra's (2020) model also acknowledges value derived from group membership. The social cohesion view of social capital emphasizes the sense of solidarity, shared identity, mutual support, and values and norms stemming from being part of a collective (Coleman, 1988; Crossley et al., 2015; Putnam, 2000). For example, learning communities on campus not only support students academically, but also cultivate self-efficacy and belongingness: "[learning communities allow students to] develop connections [and] sense of community and support systems" (Mishra, 2020, p.100307). Families and home communities (e.g., religious and ethnic groups) instill important values and hold students to high expectations.

Methodology: Data were collected from first-year college students participating in a CSP for foster youth that was housed in a four-year public university in a Midwestern state. After obtaining IRB approval, students were recruited early in the fall 2019 semester, and the online survey was administered by one of the authors during students' First Year Experience course. The survey was designed to take approximately 30 to 45 minutes to complete, and participants received a $30 cash incentive. Twenty-three students completed the survey during their FYE course, and three students completed the survey in the next three weeks (response rate = 93%).

Social network and social capital data were collected from the Foster Care Connections in College (FC-Connects) survey instrument. FC-Connects was based on an adaptation of the Social Support Network Questionnaire used in a large study of foster youth (Courtney et al, 2014). After constructing the FC-Connects instrument, feedback was obtained from an expert researcher and program administrator who work with foster youth in college. Next, in fall 2018, the authors completed five cognitive pretests with students in the University's CSP to obtain structured feedback on each survey item to improve the instrument's validity and performance.

FC-Connects is administered in Qualtrics and takes approximately 20 minutes to complete. Students were asked to name key people they would turn to for help succeeding in college for five types of support: emotional, practical, college advice, personal advice, and academic support. For each type of support, students could nominate up to four individuals. Students then viewed the roster of nominees (range 0-20) and had the opportunity to add names they may have forgotten. In total, each student's roster could have ranged from 0 to 24 distinct nominees. Next, information was collected about each nominee, including the nominee's relationship to the student, age, how long the student has known the nominee, how often the student was in contact with the nominee, how close the student felt to the nominee, how dependable the nominee was, and the nominee's level of education. The third part of FC-Connects asked students to rate how familiar each nominee was with every other nominee on a four-point Likert scale. FC-Connects concluded with five general questions about asked participants to rate, overall, whether they had enough people to turn to for each of the five types of support (1=Enough people to turn to, 2=Too few people to turn to, and 3=No one to turn to).

The Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (ECR) (Brennan et al., 1998) was used to assess participants' level of avoidant attachment (AA). Based on responses to 18 items scored on a seven-point Likert-style scale, a standard AA score was calculated by taking the average of the eighteen items (Cronbach's alpha = .87).

The survey collected information on students' gender identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, age, foster care history, educational background, current employment, and educational aspirations.

Findings: On average, students nominated 8.5 distinct individuals they could turn to for support (median = 8). Students had more people to turn to for bonding capital (emotional, practical, personal advice) than for college-specific bridging capital (college advice and academic support). About two-fifths of the nominees were biological family members, foster family members, or peers. Another large group was affiliated with the CSP (32.8% of all nominees).

Emotional support, practical support, and personal advice were the most common support types. Academic support and college advice were less prevalent support types. Thus, most nominees could help students to "get by" (bonding capital), but fewer can help them to "get ahead" academically (bridging capital).

Most individuals (62%) were nominated for more than one type of capital (i.e., multiplexity) Since multiplex ties involve the flow of more than one type of resource, they tend to be stronger and more cohesive (Kadushin, 2012). About 8% of nominees could be turned to for all five types of support, 17% could be relied on for two or more types of bonding support (emotional, practical, and/or personal advice) but not for bridging support, and 3% could be relied on for both types of bridging support (college advice and academic support) but not bonding support. The largest category of multiplex ties (34% of all nominees) consisted of individuals who provided a mix of some bonding and some bridging capital.

Consistent with Mishra's (2020) model for underrepresented students, ties were stronger with nominees available for bonding capital than those available for bridging capital. Biological family, foster and adoptive family, and friends outside of college tended to be relied on the most for bonding capital and were seldom relied on for bridging capital. Conversely, college professors, TAs, and tutors were sources of bridging capital but seldom sources of bonding capital. Some nominees did not fit neatly into the strong tie-bonding capital and weak tie-bridging capital principle. The CSP mentors and CSP coaches/staff were prime sources of college advice and academic support, but were also sources of bonding capital. Thus, CSP personnel were heavily relied upon, not only for help with "getting ahead" in college, but also for "getting by."

The whole-network analysis of the 26 participants found that eight (31%) were isolates, meaning they did not nominate any of their CSP peers and none of their peers nominated them. There were two students (s8 and s25) who were each nominated by four peers and were important intermediaries in linking other students.

Associations between students' AA scores and most network characteristics were not statistically significant (p > .05). One exception is that students high in AA were less likely than others to report that they had "enough" people to rely on for emotional support ($\chi^2=4.1$, p = .04). Additionally, higher AA scores increased the risk of a nominee being rated as "usually dependable" rather than "always dependable" (Relative Risk Ratio = 2.2, p = .029). Said differently, youth higher in AA were more likely to rate their nominee lower in dependability.

Implications: Overall, students had less bridging capital than bonding capital. This was especially true for advice with college matters and decisions, with the average number of available supports (3.2) being about a full person less than each of the three types of bonding capital. College advice and academic support correspond to Mishra's (2020) information-related capital, which she underscores is instrumental to college success for underrepresented students. Given how important bridging capital is, one actionable step is to ensure students with care histories are connected to institutional agents soon after arriving on campus and throughout their first year. These contacts should be more than a one-off interaction, both because it may take time to establish trust (Morton, 2018) and because students will need sustained support throughout the critical first year.

Findings show that CSP-affiliated staff, mentors, and peers are particularly important sources of information-related capital for the foster youth in the study. If connections to CSP-affiliated individuals were subtracted out, the total number of college advice and academic support relationships would each be cut in half. The findings underscore the importance of CSPs as sources of bridging social capital. Had the CSP not been present on campus, it is possible that the students may have sought alternative supports. However, it is questionable whether these substitutes would be as readily available to provide the same level of support as CSP staff, or may not have appropriate knowledge of the unique needs of students with foster care backgrounds.

A particularly important finding is that multiplexity was the norm rather than the exception in most relationships that students had with their nominees. These multiplex relationships, especially the ones that cross bridging and bonging capital, may be particularly important for foster youth. For example, students may present with a bonding need (e.g., questioning whether they belong in college) but a bridging need could quickly emerge (e.g., tutoring referral). These findings have implications for possible ways to augment social capital of other underrepresented student groups. It is noteworthy to consider how CSP staff and mentors became a prime source of bridging and bonding capital for foster youth in a relatively short time span, early in their college career. The findings point to the importance of programs being staffed by professionals who are proactive and persistent with connecting with the students, who share

characteristics of and/or have specialized knowledge of the unique needs of the student group they serve, and who aim to be emotional supports to students as well as purveyors of information, technical assistance, and resources.

The whole-network analysis revealed several youth who were highly connected to others in the network. If CSP staff are able to identify these students early on, they could be engaged as cohort leaders to help shape the cohort culture and serve as prime influencers and conveyers of information within the CSP. Since these students are especially adept at connecting with other students, they could be recruited to bring in some of the isolates into the fold.

Examining the Lived Experiences of Foster Care Alumni in Graduate School

Presenters: Jennifer Farinella & Lisa Schelbe

Abstract: This study seeks first to understand the experiences of foster care alumni who attempted, pursued, or attained an advanced degree. In exploring this phenomenon through a qualitative research approach, we leveraged Astin's theory of student involvement and Schlossberg's transition theory in combination for the conceptual frameworks. Ten participants were interviewed twice each. Transcripts were analyzed for common themes in capturing the phenomenon of graduate education pursuits by individuals with background experiences in the foster care system. Findings help to generate a base understanding of these experiences through the voice of participants, as little remains known at the undergraduate level, and less at the graduate level. The implications include (a) strengthening the education pathway with postsecondary assistance, (b) further understanding and increasing provisions of funding resources, and (c) dedicating campus-based supports, including establishing a point person, assisting with degree identification, and trauma-informed care practices, to better assist foster care alumni in the transition to graduate education.

Problem: For many, higher education serves to increase opportunities in the workforce and higher lifetime earnings; as the level of degree attainment is higher, the availability of benefits often increases. Frequently, these opportunities are more readily afforded to members predisposed to access and achievement in postsecondary experiences and remain elusive for many members identifying as vulnerable. A vulnerable population of interest is foster care alumni, those individuals with dependency system experiences. Previous research indicated foster care alumni often espouse desires to attain higher education at the same proportion as their nonfoster care peers; however, the reality is few gain access and fewer attain a degree.

Theoretical Framework: This study leveraged Astin's theory of student involvement and Schlossberg's transition theory as theoretical foundations for the conceptual framework to guide the study. Astin based the student input-environment-student output (I-E-O) model on student inputs or characteristics upon entry to postsecondary education and the institutional environment shaping student outputs or outcomes of postsecondary experiences (Astin & Antonio, 2012). Additionally, Schlossberg's (1984) theory examines the components of an individual's ability to experience and resolve transition through the four S's of self, situation, strategy, and support. See Figure 1 for representation of how the two frameworks converge. This theoretical framework was central to the conceptualization of the study as well as guiding the coding of the data.

Methodology: The data for the study are transcripts of semistructured interviews conducted by the first author. Sampling methods included outreach for potential participation from campus based support programs, individuals who graduated from campus based support programs; social media, and snowball sampling. Participants were incentivized with the provision of a $25 Amazon gift card per interview. Each interview was digitally recorded and professionally transcribed verbatim.

Ten participants were included in the study and each participant completed a brief pre-screening questionnaire and two interviews. Study participants all had experience in the foster care system and within the last 6 years had enrolled in advanced degree programs, including graduate or professional education programs. The questionnaire captured basic demographic information about participants. Participants were mostly female (9/10) and were from different racial backgrounds (5 identified as white; 3 as Black or African American, and 2 as Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. Participants had spent between three months and 19 years in foster care. Most (7/10) spent between 3 and 10 years in care. Of the 10 participants, seven individuals held or were working toward an MSW degree, one individual held Master of Education degrees in School Counseling and Clinical Counseling, one individual has a degree in Master of Science, Exercise Science and Health Promotion, and another individual was in pursuit of the Master of Science, Counseling degree.

Findings: The phenomenon of the lived experiences by foster care alumni in an advanced degree program cannot be succinctly summarized. The experiences are each unique, yet there are some similarities. As the impetus for involvement in the child welfare system often differs for each foster care alumni, so did the subsequent life experiences. Although each participant followed a unique journey, they shared commonality in their experiences. Findings explored overcoming adversity in transition to the focused event (i.e., advanced degree pursuit), balancing foster care alumni

identity and impact on the output of graduate education, ultimately defying the odds of higher education achievement as a member of this vulnerable population, and the supports and strategies used in doing so.

Participants openly discussed their transitions in higher education and the impact of their foster care alumni status with a significant focus on examining their experiences within their advanced degree program. Participants of the study conveyed not only desire to attain an advanced degree, but also need. Although each participant shared unique undergraduate experiences, many focused on the commonality of community found within their undergraduate program, particularly juxtaposed to many of their advanced degree experiences.

Participants were able to share narratives, including elements of self, and how their foster care experiences potentially positioned them in their advanced degree program. Before exploring their advanced degree program experience, it was essential to understand their educational background, their selection of an advanced degree program, and, ultimately, their impact of the foster care alumni status in that pursuit. A commonly experienced repercussion for individuals involved in the care system can be disruption to their academic trajectory or learning environment, either through school moves or prolonged absences. Additionally, it is understandable that school may not be a foremost focus for those experiencing trauma if concerns of safety and security take thought precedence.

Participants shared the respective environmental aspects experienced during their advanced degree. Several expressed feeling an expectation of knowledge from professors and university personnel. Throughout the interviews, all the participants discussed their need for some extent of support as they pursued their advanced degrees. For each, their support may have looked different, but many discussed the need for encouragement and assistance from relational, financial, institutional, and mental health outlets. Although acknowledging the need for support, some participants also shared challenges accessing or reaching out to those channels.

Many participants shared greater awareness of self and security in their own identity during their advanced degree and discussed opportunities to help younger generations of foster care alumni.

Implications: The implications derived from the insight gained throughout the study include (a) strengthening the education pathway with postsecondary assistance, (b) further understanding and increasing provisions of funding resources, and (c) dedicating campus-based supports, including establishing a point person, assisting with degree identification, and trauma-informed care practices, to better assist FCA in the transition to graduate education. Higher education practitioners, inclusive of administration, faculty, and staff must prioritize postsecondary education as an inclusive and opportunistic environment for foster care alumni, particularly as compared to peers without foster care experience and other invisible and marginalized student populations.

The study's findings emphasized the establishment of stronger pathways between an undergraduate degree and graduate degree pursuit for FCA and the ability to strengthen the pathways and awareness of advanced degrees earlier throughout the K-12 experience. Additionally, knowledge of funding sources available to FCA and access to these sources required increased understanding from institutional personnel. Furthermore, study participants communicated a desire for holistic support from institutions of higher education. The campus-based support for advanced degree-seeking FCA could include (a) direct connection with a point person, (b) assistance identifying and pursuing advanced degree possibilities, and (c) equipping all university personnel with skills and training to best serve FCA through establishing a trauma-informed approach.

Although individuals may aspire to continue in their academic journey, funding is imperative to make the transition a reality. Akin to other individuals of low-socioeconomic status, foster care alumni can experience challenges in breaking cyclical poverty if paying for education contributes to sources of debt. Many participants completed their undergraduate education with little or no debt due to the funding provisions associated with their foster care alumni status, yet mandated state and federal funding for eligible foster care alumni at the advanced degree landscape is relatively nonexistent. In some states, educational and training vouchers are maximized at the age of 23 or once used for only 5 years. State tuition waivers available in 22 states have variable age, eligibility, and usage requirements with respect to the state (Administration for Children & Families, 2012; Federal Student Aid, 2015; Guardian ad Litem Program, 2016). Watt and Faulkner (2020) conducted a study on the access and use of tuition waivers by eligible FCA and found "youth who utilize the waivers are 3.5 times more likely to graduate than youth who do not use the waivers" (p. 6). Although

this finding was relative to bachelor's degree pursuits and their participants did not exceed age 24, the likelihood of increased enrollment and completion by FCA paired with waiver usage is promising in continuing the promotion of enrollment in all postsecondary education.

The implications of greater funding affect more than higher education institutions. Higher education leaders should seek solutions in partnership with state and national initiatives. However, institutional leaders can assist in building a greater knowledge base surrounding the available funding for foster care alumni through state, national, or organizational initiatives in addition to possible institution-specific outlets.

The Cost of Early Independence: Unmet Material Needs among College Students with Homelessness or Foster Care Histories

Presenter: David Meyers, Kim Skobba, & Dian Moorman

Abstract: Youth who have experienced foster care or homelessness often struggle to pay for college and meet material needs. Deficiencies in family support and insufficient financial resources to cover basic needs often persist into young adulthood making the transition to college especially difficult. This study explores how college students with foster care or homelessness histories balance material needs at a time when rising college costs have outpaced financial aid packages. Our research draws upon the life and education pathways of 27 college students, all attending four-year institutions, who had a history of foster care placement, homelessness, or both. This research examines the question: How do college students with homelessness or foster care histories manage material needs with limited resources? Our findings suggest that many of the students in the study experienced a fragile and seemingly unsustainable balance between meeting material needs and academic demands. The current financial aid model, which relies on significant contributions from parents, was insufficient for most students in the study. Results support the need for interventions that improve the ability of students with foster care and homelessness histories to manage their material and academic needs as college students.

Problem: Only a small portion of young adults with foster care or homelessness experience succeed in graduating from college, despite aspirations and motivations to achieve this goal (Geiger & Beltran; 2017; United States Government Accounting Office, 2016). Among youth with a history of foster care, an estimated 10% enroll in four-year colleges and a smaller portion go on to receive a degree (Geiger & Beltran, 2017). While data on college enrollment and completion among youth who have experienced homelessness is scant, available research suggests patterns are similar to foster youth (United States Government Accounting Office, 2016). Youth who have experienced foster care or homelessness often struggle to pay for college and meet material needs. Deficiencies in family support and insufficient financial resources to cover basic needs often persist into young adulthood making the transition to college especially difficult (Osgood, Foster, & Courtney, 2010; Tierney, Gupton, & Hallett, 2008; United States Government Accountability Office, 2016).

Theoretical Framework: During emerging adulthood, which begins in the late teens and extends to the late twenties, young adults often receive a substantial amount of material and social support from their families (Arnett, 2004; Swartz, 2008). This extended path to adulthood has been shaped by cultural, demographic, and economic changes that have complicated the path to independence for young adults. Among the forces affecting the extended path to adulthood include hindered residential independence due to rising housing costs, delayed marriage, and the need for a college education (Settersten & Ray, 2010). These forces have resulted in delayed independence in adulthood, with majority of young adults in the U.S. unable to achieve self-sufficiency until they reach their early 30s (Cunningham & Diversi, 2013). While the inability to reach financial and residential independence reaches across income groups, some young adults receive more parental support than others. Schoeni and Ross (2005) found that parents provide adult children ages 18 through 34 with an average of $38,000 in total material assistance (housing, food, educational expenses or direct cash assistance), with an average of $2,200 per year. In addition to material support, parents in the study provided an average of 367 hours of time support. High income families provide three times as much material support as lower-income families; the amount of time assistance provided by parents is the same across income groups (Schoeni & Ross, 2005). At a time when young adults in the U.S. are typically experiencing a longer transition to adulthood, homeless and foster youth are experiencing a foreshortened path. For young adults who are homeless or leaving foster care, this material and time support from parents is often not available. Instead, they experience a more compressed transition into adulthood and carry a broader range of responsibilities at an earlier age than their peers (Tyler & Schmitz, 2013; Wade & Dixon, 2006). A study by Singer and Berzin (2015) found that while the general population experiences a gradual adult identity through the emerging adulthood phase, youth with foster care experience were more likely to feel like an adult all the time during this transitional period.

Methodology: Data were collected over the course of one academic year. The initial face-to-face interview, conducted prior to or during the first few weeks of fall semester, covered the participants' biographical information since the age of 15, including housing, family experiences, education, employment, and other life circumstances. The researchers

conducted two follow-up interviews about 3 and 9 months after the initial interview, which focused on specific topics and provided the opportunity to gather updates on any changes in the participants' academic or life circumstances. The first follow-up interview was completed by 26 of the 27 participants. This interview, which was conducted about 3 months after the initial interview and near the end of the first semester of the academic year, included a series of questions about academic and social support and material hardship. The third interview, conducted midway through spring semester, focused on participants' perceptions of their future and input on ways to improve the college experience for students who had experienced foster care or homelessness. The third interview was completed by 25 of the 27 participants, the remaining two participants did not respond to our contacts. These follow-up interviews also provided the opportunity to clarify any content from previous interviews for participant validation.

Findings: In general, the students in this study experienced early independence in three ways: 1) through long-term experience in foster care; 2) living independently as a minor due to running away, being kicked out, abandoned, or death of a parent, or 3) homeless with their family. These pathways into homelessness and care were similar to the findings of previous research summarized by Tierney and Hallet (2012). While there was typically a predominant path to early independence, some students experienced more than one situation during high school. Sixteen participants chronicled life experiences during high school that included loss of a parent, abuse, abandonment or conflict with parents and caregivers, which led to them living without formal caregivers in high school. Seven were homeless with family members and were often required to assume adult responsibilities because their parents needed family members to help out financially, or the participant had to leave the family to live with others due to financial pressures and lack of stable housing. Four participants had long-term experiences in foster care. For students who had experience in foster care, earlier life experiences included taking care of siblings or parents or living without family members in a group home.

The data analysis resulted in three primary themes, which we have labeled as: 1) Getting by on their own, 2) Meeting material needs requires creative strategies, and 3) The Catch-22 of managing academic and material needs.

Implications: In recent years, students who have experienced foster care and/or homelessness are being recognized as experiencing similar issues that may be addressed in similar ways. Supports, however, have been uneven in their development; more supports exist for students who have experienced foster care. And while those supports are not adequate to address all of the needs that these students experience, fewer still exist for students who have experienced homelessness prior to or while enrolled in a postsecondary program.

The findings of this study point to the enduring need for financial and social support that will help students navigate challenge of attending college without the support of parents or guardians. While a college degree is increasingly necessary for economic advancement, the process of getting a college degree is difficult for students who have experienced homelessness or foster care. It is our hope that the findings of this study will inform that development of policies that recognize the unique needs of this student population, programs that are designed to designed to aid in the transition from K-12 to postsecondary education as well as support the proliferation of campus based programming that is well supported by campus administrators designed to provide discrete supports to students who have experienced foster care and/or homelessness.

A Phenomenological Study of College Students with Foster Care Experience During COVID-19

Presenters: Mauriell Amechi, Kay-Anne Darlington, & Christine Norton

Abstract: COVID-19 has disrupted the lives and educational experiences of many students in the U.S., contributing to a heightened sense of anxiety, instability, and uncertainty. However, for young adults (18 or older) aging out of the foster care system, evidence suggests the pandemic has only exacerbated inequalities across several domains: college achievement, access to basic needs (e.g., housing and food), employment, mental health, and wellness. While researchers have sought to assess the impacts of COVID-19 through public polls, considerably little is known qualitatively about how college students with a history of foster care are coping with the myriad consequences of the pandemic and economic downturn. Drawing upon 25 in-depth, multi-round interviews regarding the pandemic and its impact on their educational experiences, preliminary findings show that college students with lived experience in foster care are disproportionately affected by COVID-19 due to remote learning, as well as challenges meeting their basic needs related to food insecurity and housing instability. Participants also reported difficulties maintaining their mental and physical health. Policy and practice implications include the need for increased funding priority for emergency relief, as well as ongoing support initiatives in higher education to promote formal and informal support networks.

Problem: The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has unequivocally disrupted most students' lives in the U.S., contributing to a heightened sense of anxiety, instability, and uncertainty. However, for young adults (18 or older) aging out of foster care, early evidence suggests the pandemic has only exacerbated inequalities across several domains: college achievement, basic needs (e.g., housing and food), employment, mental health, and wellness (Amechi, 2020). Researchers at the Field Center for Children's Policy, Practice, and Research conducted a national poll to explore the pandemic's impact on the educational progress and general well-being of young adults with a history of foster care(Greeson et al., 2020). Based on online survey responses, two-thirds of the participants reported that COVID-19 affected their educational progress, more than have reported anxiety and depression symptoms, and nearly half said their living situation changed. However, while existing evidence points to exacerbation of existing inequalities among this vulnerable population, considerably little is known qualitatively about how this particular subgroup of students are coping with economic, psychological, socio-emotional, and academic consequences of the pandemic and economic downturn. By centering student voices, this study seeks to illuminate perceptions of COVID-19 responses by higher education institutions and community-based organizations.

Theoretical Framework: Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs and Garmezy's (1986) Resiliency framework will be used for analytic sensemaking. Maslow's (1968) theory addresses the biological and psychological needs of humans. From a five-stage pyramid design, Maslow's need hierarchy consists of physiological needs (satisfying hunger) at the foundational level, followed by safety, love and belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization needs. These needs are interrelated and critical to becoming a happy, normal, and healthy individual. According to Maslow,"if the physiological needs are relatively well gratified, there then emerges a new set of needs" (p. 376). Conversely, if a particular need is unfulfilled at one level, this may present a barrier to moving higher on the pyramid of needs and can potentially lead to disruptions in positive and healthy human development (Maslow, 1968). Maslow's framework will be useful in understanding the importance of having access to basic needs, economic security, and stability of physical and mental health toward achieving successful transitions to adulthood.

While Maslow's need hierarchy will serve as the primary framework through which we will view the data, we use Resiliency theory as a secondary framework, acknowledging the protective factors (i.e., personal assets and resources) that foster youth leverage to overcome adversity. Resiliency theory centers on "positive contextual, social, and individual variables that interfere with or disrupt developmental trajectories from risk to problem behaviors, mental distress, and poor health outcomes" (Zimmerman, 2013, p. 381). Integrating a Resiliency perspective in the conceptual framework provides the scaffolding for studying and understanding why some young people with a history of foster care are coping effectively despite instability and risk exposure caused by COVID-19. Alternatively, it may reveal distinct risk factors among those who are less resilient.

Methodology: Thus far, this pilot study has recruited 50 participants across multiple institutions with lived experience in foster care, across a broad range of social identities categories (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, ability status). All sample

participants were 18+ and older and were enrolled as an undergraduate or advanced student. Students were excluded from this study who identified as not having involvement in the foster care system.

Our purposive sampling strategy recruited students at Old Dominion University, Texas State University, and Rio Grande University. The PI also worked with the National Foster Youth Institute, a foster youth advocacy non-profit organization, to distribute our call for participants through their website, and we were able to recruit youth at other universities across the country as well. We also recruited students in Texas by reaching out to Foster Care Liaisons in Texas through Education Reach for Texans, a non-profit that supports foster care success in post-secondary education. Finally, we recruited students to participate in this study through personal and university websites, social media, and our respective professional networks.

Participants were emailed a link to complete the informed consent process and demographic questionnaire via Qualtrics. The Qualtrics form required participants to read the informed consent form and directly opt-in to participate in the study before proceeding to the next page. Next, the Qualtrics survey asked demographic questions regarding the participants' background. No formal signature was needed; participants clicked "yes" on the survey to agree. No waiver of consent is allowed.

After completing the Qualtrics consent form and demographic survey, the PI or co-PIs scheduled and conducted semi-structured interviews using a semi-structured protocol. In total, members of the research team conducted two interviews over the phone with each participant. Each interview was provided between 60-90 minutes, though some were shorter due to variations in participants' responses and differences in interviewers' styles. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed for data analysis.

Semi-structured interviews followed an interview guide which included questions about participants' experiences in foster care, as well as their experiences while in college during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the first interview, our research team wanted to capture how well universities responded to students' needs, and how COVID-19 affected them as students. In the second interview, the research team examined the support systems of participants, along with the impact of COVID-19 on mental and physical health, food insecurity and housing stability. Both interviews gathered data about the presence or lack of support from their institutions of higher education, as well as community resources they might've utilized to cope with the effects of the pandemic. The two interviews took place over a one to four-month period, depending on participant and researcher availability.

Of the 50 students who completed the Qualtrics survey, 25 completed interviews. This subset of our sample for whom we were able to collect qualitative data includes a majority of females, with 21 participants identifying as female and four identifying as male. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 32, with 20 participants in the 18-23 age range, four participants in the 24-29 age range and one participant who is 32 years olds. Seventy-two percent of the participants self-identified as first generation college students (i.e. they replied 'yes' to the question, 'Will you be the first person in your family to complete a college degree?'). Thirty-six percent of participants identified as Hispanic or Latino, 24% as White, 20% as 2 or more race, 16% as Black or African American and 4% American Indian/Alaska Native. There was representation from all levels in the college experience: 10 freshmen, 4 sophomores, 4 juniors, 2 seniors, and 5 recent graduates.

Findings: In April 2020, colleges and universities received emergency funding from the Department of Education to support students impacted by COVID-19. On average, participants reported receiving $976.07. Most described this level of funding as adequate to help them get through the immediate crisis and reported that the funding was used for rent, transportation, groceries, books, etc.

However, findings show that even with these emergency grants, as the pandemic continued, college students with lived experience in foster care are disproportionately affected by COVID-19 due to remote learning, as well as challenges meeting their basic needs and maintaining their mental and physical health.

Participants reported that the abrupt switch to remote learning was very challenging, due to a lack of access to reliable technology, as well as difficulty sustaining motivation and engagement in the learning process. They felt very

disconnected from the classroom community and from their professors; however, the presence of campus support programs specifically tailored for former foster care students was helpful in maintaining their support system.

Other identified support systems were parents, friends and significant others, biological family members, and case workers or other support staff. However, participants often found themselves in a care-giving role with their biological family members who were also in crisis because of COVID-19.

Along with these stressors, participants reported that being isolated from the people in their support systems due to mandatory lockdowns and quarantines affected their mental and physical health in a negative way. Increases in feelings of depression and anxiety, as well as struggles to stay healthy and even Though their universities offered some services in these areas, they did not specifically target former foster youth.

When asked how they were keeping themselves physically healthy and safe during COVID-19, participants reported wearing masks, washing their hands, social distancing; however, many also reported being essential workers and being exposed on a daily basis in their jobs. Several reported having contracted the COVID-19 virus, and feeling scared to have to deal with that on their own. In general, students perceived that they weren't getting the support they needed re: physical and mental health, especially due to wait times counseling and health appointments.

Finding also showed that the COVID-19 pandemic influenced students' access to food, both in terms of quality and quantity. Several students reported eating more "junk food" because it was cheaper and easier to access. They reported not having enough of the kinds of food they wanted to eat, and also had to cope with food insecurity. Many of them reported that their universities had food pantries but transportation was often a barrier.

Housing instability was also a problem students identified. For the students who were on campus, several had to find alternative living arrangements when campuses closed early due to COVID-19. Students living off-campus definitely felt the hardship of paying for rent during COVID-19, especially if they lost their jobs related to the pandemic. Some students found support through Supervised Independent Living programs, and others through COVID relief funds.

Implications: This study's preliminary findings show that college students with lived experience in foster care are disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic; therefore, it is essential that this population of students become a priority in higher education and that federal and state policies provide additional funding to support these students. There is already a gap between former foster youth and traditional college students in terms of college retention and graduation (Day, et al, 2011). Further ignoring the structural barriers, stressors and lack of support that exist for this group of students may exacerbate an already difficult educational journey.

Practice and policy implications include implementing and funding campus support programs to enhance students' support systems and create greater access to resources. Campus support programs and coordinated foster care advocates may help provide more strategic communication with foster care youth transitioning into college about the support available, as well as increase retention and graduation of enrolled students.

Likewise, students who not only had access to campus support programs, but also had access to extended foster care services were impacted less by the COVID-19 pandemic especially in the areas of housing stability and food security. This qualitative data provides rationale for the extension of extended foster care. Some have even called for a moratorium on the aging out process during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to prevent abandoning already vulnerable young adults in the midst of a global crisis (Amechi, 2020).

One of the most salient implications for practice that we are seeing in our preliminary findings is the need for greater mental health support, especially in the midst of a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. Not only are students with lived experience in foster care more at-risk of exhibiting mental and behavioral health problems (Day, et al, 2011), the pandemic has also triggered past childhood trauma. Participants in this study reaffirmed the devastating impact the isolation from COVID-19 has had on their mental health and asked for the provision of more easily accessible mental health support services.

It is essential to prioritize foster care students for emergency funding, for housing, for food assistance and for physical and behavioral healthcare resources on college campuses. Higher education professionals should seek to minimize unnecessary transitions for former foster youth during times of crisis, and should consider establishing campus support programs that partner with community organizations to meet the unique needs of former foster youth, especially in times of crisis.

<h1 style="text-align:center">Centering Equity for Students with Foster Care Experience: Institutional Gaps & Opportunities</h1>

Presenter: Meggan Lloyd

Abstract: This study explored the postsecondary educational landscape for students with lived experience of the foster care system in the state of Pennsylvania. Using a critical qualitative case study approach this study explored institutional responses of support for students. Additionally, this study sought to understand how postsecondary institutions were responding to a new specific state-mandated tuition and fee waiver policy for students with experience in foster care. Validation theory was utilized as the theoretical framework providing a way to think through support for students from an institutional level. Institutional gaps as well as opportunities for postsecondary education to evaluate support were highlighted in the data. A *holistic intentionality of equity* framework for students with experience in foster care is offered as one possible framework for institutions to think and work through observed gaps and opportunities.

Problem: Over the last several decades higher education has undergone a shift from a system targeted for members of the elite society to intentionally enrolling students across demographic identities (Jones, 2013). Despite this disparities in graduation rates continue to exist and traditionally underrepresented student populations, such as the population of students with experience in foster care still have lower rates of degree completion than their peers (Jones, 2013). The population of students with experience in foster care has been present in postsecondary education for decades, but "policies and practices to promote success in higher education have not been sufficiently keeping up with the notable growth" (Shirley & Flores, 2019, p. 14). Though research has been conducted on the experiences of students with experience in foster care in postsecondary education, this population of students still remains largely invisible. Support for students with experience in foster care in postsecondary education primarily has come in the form of financial assistance, such as tuition and fee waivers, or the creation of campus-based support programs. Despite these advances gaps in postsecondary educational institutional support still exist.

Theoretical Framework: Validation theory was the theoretical framework guiding this study. Validation theory is an asset-based theory rooted in the experiences of nontraditional student populations, addressing experiences of invalidation nontraditional student populations may experience both in and out of the classroom (Linares & Munoz, 2011). Validation as defined by Laura I. Rendon (1994) is an "enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in-and-out-of-class agents that fosters academic and interpersonal development" (p. 44). Through the Transition to College project study researchers found that nontraditional students enrolled in postsecondary education with the underlying expectation they would not be successful (Rendon, 1994). This belief was in stark contrast to traditional students who enrolled under the predominant belief they would be successful in postsecondary education (Rendon, 1994). The researchers, however, discovered that at some point in their trajectory the nontraditional students began to believe both in themselves and in their capacity to succeed. Transformation of this belief stemmed in large part from institutional agents interceding on their behalf and assisting them in navigating postsecondary education (Rendon, 1994). Through validation, students began to believe and see themselves as successful (Rendon, 1994).

Six elements comprise validation theory. First, responsibility for initiating contact lies with the institution, not the student (Linares & Munoz, 2011). The theory advocates for transition of the institution from passive to active; institutions are to advocate for students as opposed to students having to self-advocate (Linares & Munoz, 2011). The second element of validation theory states when students experience validation their desire to learn is enhanced, as well as their self-worth (Rendon, 1994). Third, the theory positions validation as a likely prerequisite for student development and fourth that validation can occur both in and out of the classroom setting (Rendon, 1994). Finally, validation should be seen not as a stop-gap measure but rather as a process occurring throughout a student's journey in higher education and is particularly crucial for students during their first week and first year (Rendon, 1994). Vital to the epistemological and ontological assumptions of validation theory is the underlying asset-based discourse, as opposed to the deficit-based archetype (Linares & Munoz, 2011).

One of the student populations validation theory has not been utilized for is the population of students with experience in foster care. Validation theory provides an appropriate framework for understanding supports offered to students with experience in foster care by postsecondary institutions, and if these supports validate or invalidate a student's experience. Additionally, previous research utilizing validation theory as a theoretical framework has used the framework to address individual student experiences. Minimal research has utilized the framework to understand how validation occurs at an institutional level: both of these were gaps this study sought to address. Validation theory

proffers a theory to assist higher education institutions with the postsecondary education success of nontraditional students, and as such, should become an intentional and regular mode of operation for institutions, instead of an afterthought (Rendon, 2002).

Methodology: This study was a critical qualitative case study. The design for this study was a single, instrumental case study methodology (Stake, 1995). The case for this study is the state of Pennsylvania (PA), bounded by the geographical boundaries of the state. The selection of a state as the case presented a unique way to study the landscape of postsecondary education of students with experience in foster care from both postsecondary education institutions as well as state-specific policy. Policies for these students vary from state to state, and as such it is imperative to understand the landscape of postsecondary education within a state-specific bounded study. Participants were recruited for participation in the study at both the postsecondary educational level, as well as the state level. First, participants were recruited from postsecondary education institutions throughout Pennsylvania, both from institutions currently operating a campus-based support program and five institutions without a specific campus-based support program. Two staff members from each institution were recruited to participate, a staff member at the administrative level (Dean of Student Life or position equivalent), and a support staff position (Director of Student Life or position equivalent). Secondly, two full-time staff members were selected to participate in the study who were associated with a state-wide initiative supporting students with experience in foster care. Finally, PA state legislator staff well as staff from the Juvenile Law Center, located in Philadelphia, PA, were recruited regarding the FosterEd waiver.

Two data collection methods were employed in this study: interviews and document analysis. For the interviews this study used an in-depth, semi-structured interview protocol for each interview. A total of 13 interviews were conducted: 10 postsecondary institution interviews, nine with a campus-based support program and one institution without a campus-based support program; a PA state-wide initiative, the Juvenile Law Center, and a higher education advocacy organization based in PA.

The second data collection method used in the study was document analysis. Documentation was gathered in the study both by the researcher as well as shared during data collection by interview participants. Documentation shared by interview participants during data collection included program flyers, program brochures, online news articles about campus-based support programs, a Powerpoint presentation given by a participant on supporting students with experience in foster care, an example of an intake form, links to program webpages, and a report conducted on the FosterEd waiver. Additional documentation was gathered by the researcher. Institutional documentation was collected, including publicly available information on campus-based support programs such as webpage information and news articles, as available. Information was also captured from institutional websites from "About Us", "History," "Mission", "Vision", and "Strategic Plan" webpages, as well as information regarding the FosterEd waiver from institutional websites. Finally, publicly available documentation regarding the FosterEd waiver was complied. All public news reports and articles published during the period of June 2019 through January 2020 about the FosterEd waiver were amassed.

Findings: The major thematic findings of the study are divided in three components of postsecondary educational support for students with experience in foster care: systems of support, infrastructure of support, and intentionality of support. The first major thematic finding explores how support for students with experience in foster care was framed in the data through the context of systems. Systems of support speaks to the current institutional and state-level systems students navigate through to receive support. This was articulated through the emergence of two subthemes: (1) resources & agency, and (2) inclusion and exclusion. Central to the subtheme of resources & agency dealt with identification and outreach for students with experience in foster care. Varying approaches to identifying students and the outreach tactics used in reaching and supporting those students were discussed. Challenges of both processes were also highlighted, including absence of participation in targeted resources. Paramount to this second subtheme is the idea of inclusion versus exclusion. Institutional supports were discussed in the context of inclusion, through broad definitions of eligibility as well as folding students into existing programming. State supports conversely were discussed through the context of exclusion, limiting students through policies.

The second major thematic finding explores the infrastructure of support utilized to support students with experience in foster care. A central component to supporting students with experience in foster care is a unified commitment across all levels of institutional support in order to achieve meaningful outcomes. However, a dichotomy was observed between perceived and communicated commitment messages purporting support for students with experience in foster care and the operationalized reality of this message of commitment. The subthemes speak to addressing the needs of

students through limited resource allocation, specifically in the context of benevolence and funding. Infrastructure of support focused upon the reliance on benevolence to support students, as well as limits to financial infrastructure for resources.

The third major thematic finding correlates to the intentionality of support programming for students with experience in foster care. Intentionality is articulated here in the context of both motivating factors for wanting to support students with experience in foster care, as well as the subsequent proactive versus reactive approaches to this support. Motivating factors were discussed in the data at the postsecondary education level and the community level. Proactive versus reactive approaches were also observed at the postsecondary education level as well as the state level. Finally, intentionality of support was also discussed in the context of assessment of support programming.

Implications: This study has multiple implications for both postsecondary education, in the context of institutional implications as well as policy implications, and additionally implications for research.

In thinking through implications for postsecondary education, in order to assist in retaining and supporting students in reaching degree completion, I argue for postsecondary education to embrace what I call a *holistic intentionality of equity* for students with experience in foster care. Centering equity in support is crucial if institutions are to address pervasive opportunity gaps for this student population. While components of this framework may be present, there is a current disconnect in utilizing all components of the framework when offering support for students. This *holistic intentionality of equity* framework has six components: asset-based discourse, intentional programming, resource allocation, equity infrastructure, advocacy, and assessment. These components are illustrated through a circular model as opposed to a linear one, illustrating the need for each of them continuously. This framework is presented as one possible way for institutions to think through centering equity in support programming and institutional response.

This study also highlights areas for future research recommendations as well. The theoretical framework of validation provides a useful framework for conducting research regarding students with experience in foster care, and as such researchers should continue to utilize it, as well as other asset-based frameworks. Little research has focused on how institutions not running specific campus-based support programs support students with experience in foster care. Further research should be done on how these institutions are responding to the needs of students with experience in foster care, particularly in light of state policies such as tuition waivers. Conducting this study prior to the start of a tuition waiver being implemented additionally provided an important understanding of the implementation and operationalization of these waivers. The literature surrounding the effectiveness of such waivers is still minimal, however, and as such future research should be conducted on how, and if, these waivers assist in degree completion rates for students with experience in foster care.

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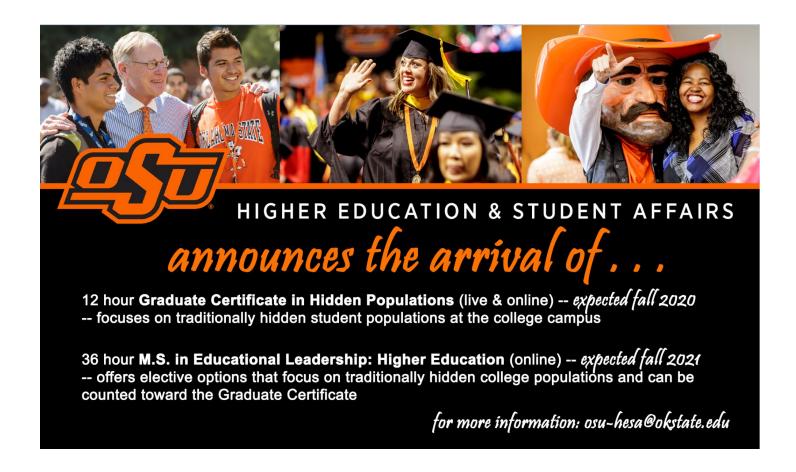
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