

The Scholar-Practitioner

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National Conference for Hidden Student Populations

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<https://nchp.okstate.edu>

Current Hidden College Student Populations

May include those who have foster care histories, justice-involved experiences, who are survivors of sexual violence or sex workers, recovering substances addicts, who face housing insecurity, who are considered Third Culture Kids/Individuals, or who have sought/seeking abortion care.

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The Scholar-Practitioner is a monthly publication of research summaries that targets the research-to-practice gap for U.S. scholar and practitioner advocates for hidden college student populations.

This publication reinforces the work of the **National Conference for Hidden Student Populations (NCHP)** by providing a space to share research applications for practice. NCHP was the first research conference dedicated to this multidisciplinary area of study.

The NCHP 4th conference, hybrid format, will be held February 28 - March 1, 2024, at University of Texas—San Antonio. **Conference presentations can be attended online. [Registration is now open!](#)**

From Foster Care to University

Lord, K. V. (2022). *From foster care to university: An ethnography of academic challenges*. [Master's thesis, Texas State University]. Graduate Theses and Dissertations. <https://digital.library.txst.edu/items/af7de22d-6538-4be8-bdff-00be529980ed>

Students experiencing foster care (SEFC) face distinctive challenges in college, which are influenced by factors like childhood trauma, economic instability, and lack of family support. Conducting in-depth interviews with nine SEFC at Texas State University (TSU), this study delved into their nuanced experiences, shedding light on barriers and facilitators encountered during SEFC's journey through higher education.

Problem/Background

Dworsky and Pérez (2010) identified six barriers hindering the academic success of SEFC, including a lack of encouragement for post-secondary education in the child welfare system, unpreparedness for college work, absence of family support, unawareness of financial aid opportunities, mental health issues, and inadequacies in college student services. Jeffrey Arnett's concept of 'emerging adulthood' is critiqued for neglecting the experiences of low-income and first-generation college students, with SEFC facing a critical life stage where finding a stable safety net is imperative for survival (2015). Concepts like 'Survivalist Self Reliance' and the 'Strengths Perspective' in social work are discussed as coping mechanisms and paradigms that encourage recognizing the resilience of SEFC, emphasizing the importance of fostering a healthy sense of self for success in higher education.

Methods

I conducted a qualitative study at TSU, interviewing nine SEFC to explore their experiences in navigating higher education. Employing an ethnographic approach, my thesis offers valuable perspectives on why SEFC persists in their academic struggles. This study provides crucial insights into the academic challenges SEFC faced, including admissions processes, academic expectations, and mental health management.

Results & Implications

The interviews with former foster youth attending TSU revealed significant challenges they faced in pursuing higher education. The participants highlighted a lack of understanding about tuition fee waivers, absence of family guidance, and internalized feelings of inadequacy. Many participants were unaware of the tuition waiver provided by the state of Texas while in college, and even if aware, they hesitated to disclose their foster care history due to fear of stigma.

Several participants expressed difficulties in discussing sensitive topics like abuse in class, leading to lower GPAs and higher dropout rates compared to non-foster care peers. The lack of emotional support, uncomfortable classroom experiences, and choosing majors impacting mental health were highlighted as significant challenges. The students pursuing majors in social work, counseling, psychology, and law aimed to help other foster youth, reflecting a commitment to a "pay it forward" approach despite the emotional toll it takes.

One major obstacle identified was the reluctance of SEFC to utilize office hours, showcasing a sense of shame and self-reliance. The interviewees revealed the challenges of feeling judged for

their status, lack of awareness about available resources, and a disconnect with the cultural and social capital required in academia.

The importance of campus support programs like Foster Care Alumni Creating Academic Success (FACES) was emphasized by the participants. FACES provided a sense of belonging and practical assistance, such as help with FAFSA applications, housing, and course registration.

Despite academic successes, the challenges faced by SEFC were evident, leading to dropout decisions influenced by financial struggles, mental health stressors, and lack of family support. Recommendations include streamlined trauma-informed care training for faculty, accessible information on tuition waivers, and enhanced housing support for SEFC without guarantors. These suggestions aim to address the unique needs and challenges faced by former foster youth at TSU.

Conclusion

The research underscores the need to recognize and address the unique challenges faced by SEFC at TSU, emphasizing the importance of tailored support systems. It highlights the integral role of foster care cultural

identity and the necessity for adequate tools for success for children in institutionalized care. The qualitative perspective of the study adds depth to predominantly quantitative research on SEFC, emphasizing the significance of considering participants' narratives in developing more effective support systems. The interviews revealed how SEFC creatively adapted habits and knowledge from the foster care system while navigating admissions, challenges, and mental health struggles at TSU. College, which is often a period of self-exploration for traditional emerging adults, becomes a fragile security net for SEFC, impacting their perception of grades, class discussions about abuse, and the guilt associated with surviving the foster care system. Despite insightful findings, the study acknowledges limitations, including small sample size and age focus, yet contributes valuable perspectives to understanding SEFC experiences.

References

- Arnett, J. J. (2015). *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties*. Oxford University Press.
- Dworsky, A., & Pérez, A. (2010). Helping former foster youth graduate from college through campus support programs. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 32(2), 255-263.

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