



## National Conference for Hidden Student Populations

nchp@okstate.edu

<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, or who are considered Third Culture Kids/Individuals

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**The Scholar-Practitioner** is a monthly publication of research summaries that target 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 will be virtual and held on February 28 - March 1, 2024.**

## "I'd Rather Rely on Myself": Understanding Risk and Resilience in College Students from Foster Care's Approach to Help-Seeking

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### Background/Problem

Foster care alumni have some of the lowest rates of college degree attainment compared to all other underrepresented student groups (Geiger et al., 2018). Help-seeking has been identified as instrumental to college success (Parnes et al., 2020). However, studies of youth exiting the foster system indicate that this population exhibits pseudo-independence and is resistant to help-seeking even in times of critical need (Kools, 1999). The purpose of this research was to explore students from foster care (SFCs) internalized attitudes and beliefs toward help-seeking and how these influenced their help-seeking behaviors in college.

### Methodology

This qualitative study was conducted in a large four-year university in the southeastern United States. At the time of the study, the institution offered no dedicated services to SFC. We recruited students enrolled under the state's tuition waiver for foster care alumni. The final sample comprised 13 junior and senior, all-female, racially diverse students. We interviewed students on Zoom following a semi-structured interview protocol. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded following Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-stage procedures for reflexive thematic data analysis, producing five distinct yet interrelated themes.

### Findings

**The Lone Ranger: "I'll Figure it Out Alone".** Participants embodied multiple intersectional statuses associated with matriculation risk. Yet, their fervent self-reliance propelled them to overcome formidable barriers to college access and persistence, with a paucity of formal support. During the college search, students took pride in figuring out the complex college application and tuition waiver program. Upon entering college, they encountered an institution not attuned to the needs of SFC, wherein tuition waivers were routinely mishandled, resulting in an array of registration and financial aid issues. Students preferred to resolve these issues independently and proved adept at navigating complex systems and advocating for their rights.

### The Paradox of Help-seeking:

**High risk=low service use.** Service utilization revealed paradoxical elements of participants' approach to help-seeking. Low-threshold services such as the gym, library, and wellness center were routinely utilized. Yet, students disdained campus services intended to meet more acute needs, such as food insecurity and mental health. The food pantry was avoided due to fear of being outed as a student in poverty. While students had faced mental health problems, they did not feel the university counseling center therapists were equipped to address foster care issues.

**"I'm not like the other kids in foster care": The survivor-thriver identity.** Students all mentioned that they were different from other youths from foster care. Intrinsic to the survivor-thriver identity was a commitment to succeed, seeded by a sense of responsibility to the family and caregivers who had supported them. At a deeper level, participants' commitment to success was motivated to prove they were unlike their birth parents or other youth exiting the foster care system. This self-narrative engendered adaptive help-seeking behaviors because they were determined to overcome all obstacles. However, feeling different resulted in social isolation as participants also felt disconnected from their non-foster care college peers.

**Avoidant mode: Disappearing.** A success narrative led to a high level of achievement yet also represented the tipping point

when help-seeking could become maladaptive. Patterns of avoidance were linked to fear of being judged or evaluated as a stereotypical kid from foster care. Avoidant behavior often emerged in the contexts of academic and financial need, wherein participants endured undue hardships in lieu of help-seeking. When participants encountered academic challenges, professors were sometimes avoided for fear of their negative appraisal. Students struggled to ask for help for money as they feared being perceived as a cadge, a label incompatible with their identity as different from the norm.

**Remove the need for help and remove the risk.** Many students received services from nonprofit organizations that provided critical and timely support. Services ranged from single-service programs providing free or reduced-cost textbooks to comprehensive programs that provided housing and living expenses. Beyond the provision of practical support, participants valued the relationship with staff within these organizations who were highly attuned to the barriers faced by SFC, which in turn diminished the self-stigma associated with soliciting the service.

### Conclusion

Results revealed that SFC are exceptionally resilient, yet their "lone ranger" mentality disconnected them from peers and created resistance to utilizing formal institutional support in times of need. Because participants gravitated to people and programs

sensitive to the needs of SFC, institutions should consider providing staff and faculty training to create awareness of the needs of this hidden group and create opportunities for SFC to build community. Because SFC exhibited distrust of institutional programs and people and disliked things being done on their behalf, the institution should include SFC's voice in creating more inclusive campuses.

### References

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- Parnes, M. F., Kanchewa, S. S., Marks, A. K., & Schwartz, S. E. (2020). Closing the college achievement gap: Impacts and processes of a help-seeking intervention. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 67, 101121.

## NCHP

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**Research Presenter** - Present an original empirical work.

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Free webinar with Dr. Lisa Schelbe

**October 23, 10.00 am EST**

Explore the real-life youth experiences of aging out of foster care

Register: [bit.ly/3Rgrbbj](https://bit.ly/3Rgrbbj)

To sign up for ongoing email updates about the 2024 national conference and/or for archives of *The Scholar-Practitioner*, go to: <https://risforThursday.okstate.edu>

