Narratives of Former Foster Youth in Higher Education

A Dissertation Presented for the

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this narrative inquiry is to learn about the experiences of former foster youth in higher education. Nationwide, 26,547 youth emancipate from foster care each year. Former foster youth who continue with education beyond high school may elect to receive supportive services through the state's independent living program. Although these services are intended to provide the necessary support while the youth completes a post-secondary degree program, research has shown that fewer former foster youth enter college and complete a degree than their non-former foster youth peers. Further, there has been very little research that explores firsthand experiences of former foster youth as college students.

Narrative inquiries are most suited for small numbers of participants in qualitative research studies. Moreover, the best way to understand the human experience is to hear it firsthand from those who have lived it. For this study, eight former foster youth were interviewed about their experiences in foster care and as students in a large, southeastern U.S. community college. Findings from the data were presented as profiles in the youth's own words and through an analysis of the themes found across interviews. Two over-arching topics that relate to the research questions were addressed: meaning-making experiences and identity construction. Within those two topics are themes that support each one. The findings revealed that meaning is made through the transitions former foster youth have experienced, the preparation for college they have had, the connections they have made, and whether or not they feel in control of their lives. The resulting themes of crisis, commitment, transformation, and confidence help to understand how identity is constructed for these youth.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

At the end of fiscal year 2009-2010, the Tennessee Department of Children's Services (TDCS) reported 7,077 children were in foster care (Tennessee Department of Children's Services [TDCS], 2011). While many would eventually return to the custody of a family member, some would "age out" of the foster care system, or exit custody after reaching the age of eighteen years-old. These are young people who had never been reunited with family, adopted or otherwise provided with permanency in their lives.

Nationwide, 26,547 youth emancipate from foster care each year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). Many of these youth are left to fend for themselves with little or no support. Those choosing to continue into post-secondary education may request voluntary services including housing assistance, case management, tuition vouchers, and other monetary incentives. The John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (Chafee Bill) was conceived to complement the support of former foster youth provided through state funding and to help youth make the transition from foster care to self-sufficiency. The bill doubled previous Title IV-E federal funding from the Independent Living Initiative of 1986, making available funds for education, vocational and employment training. It also included provisions for training in life skills, substance abuse prevention, and for long-term connections to interested adult mentors (National Foster Care Awareness Project [NFCAP], 2000). Additionally, the Chafee Bill required that outcome measures be used to assess state performance, including educational attainment, employment, homelessness, non-marital pregnancy, and incarceration.

Congress amended the Chafee Bill in 2001 with passage of the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Amendment. This amendment provides for education and training vouchers

(ETVs) to assist current and former foster youth with post-secondary education or training. The ETV allows up to $5000 per year that participating youth may access up to age 23, as long as they are making satisfactory academic progress in their programs.

Every state provides some form of independent living services to former foster youth. Services include monetary incentives to pay for tuition, housing, and other educational needs such as tutoring and placement tests. Non-financial services include case management, transportation assistance, and life skills classes. In Tennessee, the Independent Living Program (ILP), a division of TDCS, facilitates access to Chaffee Bill funds along with other state funding. To be eligible for ILP services, the youth must have been in a foster care placement until the age of 18 years old (19, if adjudicated delinquent). The intent of the program is that youth would be supported effectively in order to complete their college education or other post-secondary training so that they could find well-paying employment and become self-sufficient, contributing members of society. Youth may receive services up to their twenty-first birthday. Those needing transitional living services may be allowed access up to age twenty-three. Transitional living includes services such as case management, access to housing, and assistance with transportation but does not include the tuition vouchers that those in voluntary post-custody receive.

Former foster youth are less likely to attend college than their peers who were not in foster care (Brandford & English, 2004; Wolanin, 2005). Among the reasons for this are multiple placements and the associated school changes, poor or inconsistent social supports, and low educational expectations from caregivers, educators, and other adults involved with the youth (Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005). Research further suggests that former foster youth are less likely to earn a college degree than their non-foster youth peers (Courtney,

Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010; Davis, 2006). For example, Davis found that 26% of former foster youth had earned a degree or certificate within six years of enrollment, compared with 56% of their peers who had not been in foster care. Although these statistics are startling, they do not provide an explanation for the lack of success in higher education that former foster youth have experienced. It is important to note that former foster youth are much like any other high-risk youth. This study is not meant to be a comparison between former foster youth and other high-risk populations of youth. Lemon, Hines, & Merdinger (2005) postulate that former foster youth's challenges are unique because they must transition out of foster care and into the adult world more abruptly than those who were not in care.

One of the developmental milestones for all youth is that of identity formation. Self-exploration is a critical pathway to personal identity; however this is one area that many former foster youth lack. Experiences such as abuse, neglect, and multiple placements impact the ability to focus on individual needs (Yancey, 1992). For example, the process of separation from the family in order to establish one's own identity involves the support of close family ties. Foster children are told from the very first placement that their time with a foster family is temporary. Additionally, biological parents may be abusive, addicted to substances, or in the penal system and are often unable to provide the type of support necessary for the process of identity formation (Kools, 1997).

As foster children reach the age of majority, the state mandates that these youth are now independent, forcing them into a world where they are expected to function as adults, yet without familial support. Research has suggested that those former foster youth who are successful are the ones who have established a meaningful connection with an adult, such as a foster parent, teacher, coach, or other interested person (Wolanin, 2005; Yancey, 1992). Those without this

connection are at risk for homelessness, financial difficulties, and physical and mental health problems (Courtney et al., 2001; Lemon et al., 2005). It is difficult to imagine how those youth without such connections are coping. The struggle to find one's way in college may be nothing compared to the struggle to find one's way in life. Many former foster youth are in the unenviable position of having to do both.

Statement of the Problem

While there seems to be increased interest in former foster youth by researchers, quantitative studies on the subject offer little insight into the meaning of college from the perspective of the young people themselves. Most of the available publications report statistical data via public and private agencies such as Chapin Hall and the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Few studies address the life experiences of former foster youth, often considered an invisible population (Hochman, Hochman & Miller, 2004). Much of the literature tends to focus on particular traits, such as resilience or ability (Davis, 2006; Hines, Merdinger & Wyatt, 2005; Merdinger et al., 2005; Wolanin, 2005). Others have researched access to higher education (Davis, 2006; Shin, 2003; Wolanin, 2005). The problem is that very little research explores firsthand experiences of former foster youth as college students in order to gain insight into this population. The stories they have to tell could add to the body of literature by providing a perspective not found in other research studies.

Purpose of the Study

Several studies have documented the challenges that former foster youth face. There has been a lack of qualitative research conducted that explores how former foster youth make meaning of their experiences in college. In this study, I bring the voices of former foster youth to the forefront. The only way to understand the human experience is to hear it firsthand from

those who have lived it. The purpose of this narrative inquiry, then, is to understand the lived experience of former foster youth as college students.

Research Questions

The research questions that I explore in this study are the following:

1. How do former foster youth make meaning of their experiences in college?
2. How do former foster youth construct their identities as college students?

A qualitative study provides an opportunity to give voice to the experience of college by former foster youth. The literature on this subject has shown that these youth have been less successful than their peers at staying in college and completing degree programs. This study provides insight into how this group of young people constructs meaning as they navigate their way through college.

Theoretical Framework

The human experience can be understood through social constructionism, an approach that assumes that "the terms by which the world is understood are social artifacts, products of historically situated interchanges among people" (Gergen, 1985, p. 267). The social constructionist takes the standpoint that identities emerge out of interactions with others. How former foster youth negotiate their identities as college students can be found in the meanings that the young people attach to these terms. What does it mean to be a former foster youth who is also a college student? This is something that I and others can only learn through those who have experienced it.

The way in which I view this study is from a narrative perspective. Woodruffe-Burton & Elliott (2005) assert that "narrative research generates knowledge about the social or individual construction of reality through story-telling" (p. 461). The stories that we have about ourselves

are a way to make meaning and understand the experience. Bruner (1990) argues that meaning making is a narrative process. While we negotiate meaning with others, we also begin to understand the other's experience through the stories that are told. This is important to keep in mind with former foster youth, who may have very difficult stories to tell. The result of our negotiation is a collaboration between me, as researcher, and the former foster youth.

Clark & Rossiter (2008) point out that narrative is both a social process and a way to construct identity. The construction of identity is a developmental process that generally occurs during adolescence. Youth in foster care at this critical time have experienced trauma, the least of which is the separation from family. Polkinghorne (1991) argues that abuse by a family member can cause a disintegration of the narrative plots that each of us employ to give meaning to our lives. If a youth is deserving of love, for example, then it becomes impossible for the youth to integrate the recollection of abuse by a parent. This could lead to a loss of identity, resulting in despair. For Clark & Rossiter, "the choice of narrative – the sense we make of an experience – determines how we respond to and manage the experience" (p. 62). The narrative inquiry is a way of understanding reality and it is the former foster youth's reality of his or her experience that I am attempting to understand.

Significance of the Study

The availability of qualitative data on former foster youth in higher education is scarce. This study provides insight into the experiences that they have being out of foster care and as students in higher education. Knowledge of the lived academic experiences of this population helps to identify current practices that contribute to success or barriers that prevent positive academic outcomes. It also helps me and other college counselors to develop programs that better assist these youth in the retention of and persistence toward degree completion. Narratives

from the voices of these young people provide another lens through which higher educational policies and practices may be informed. The stories that former foster youth have to tell are compelling and need to be heard by all who have a vested interest, including counselors, administrators, and faculty in higher education, as well as case managers in the child welfare system and researchers in these areas.

Background on the Research

As a licensed counselor, I hear stories from students every day. A major element of counseling is that it allows a student to relay his or her experience in the form of a story in order to convey meaning (Hays & Wood, 2011). My interest in foster youth dates back to my childhood, when my family fostered a high school friend of my older sister. Pam lived with us during her junior and senior years of high school after abuse by her father was confirmed through the state social services department. Although our family was already large – six children and two parents – we readily made room in our home and our hearts for one more. I observed how my parents included Pam as one of the family, treating her no differently than any one of their biological children. Although only eleven years old at the time, I was keenly aware of the sacrifices my parents were making in order to keep Pam safe.

Years later, my interest was rekindled early in my career while working at a group home for older teens in foster care. I noted the number of moves teens made while in state custody and wondered how that affected them. Later, I worked as an Independent Living Specialist with TDCS and assisted teens who were aging out of custody and attending college. I routinely saw my clients “crash and burn,” as one colleague put it. The former foster youth I worked with were rarely successful in college. Each semester I would contact the colleges that the youth on my

caseload were attending only to find that they had failed all or most of their classes. I couldn't understand what was going on in their lives that prevented them from being successful.

After several years of working with former foster youth through TDCS, I acquired my present position as counselor with the local community college where I have been for over six years. Because of my prior association with TDCS, I became the unofficial liaison between the college and TDCS. Again, I saw former foster youth come to the college and repeatedly fail their classes. With my curiosity peaked, I began tracking each former foster youth and found more negative than positive outcomes. Some of the students would seek me out to assist them with issues of concern, however most would simply fall out of contact with the school, their case managers, and the Independent Living Specialists. They would reappear when they were in crisis, for example becoming homeless or arrested. By this time, however, these youth would need more than academic assistance. I was constantly asking myself what I could do to better assist this population. What I realized was this: I did not have the slightest idea of what former foster youth were experiencing as college students. As I travelled with the eight former foster youth during the re-telling of their past experiences, I was surprised by the rash of emotions that flooded me. After all, I have worked in this field and with this population for more than a decade. It is almost unbelievable that these young people are able to be in college at all and I feel compelled to share their stories of courage in this forum.

Assumptions, Delimitations, and Definitions

Having worked with current and former foster youth in a variety of situations, some assumptions have formed for me. There is something going on in the lives of former foster youth which contributes to their success or failure in higher education. Something is happening, or not, that affects whether they will persist in academic programs and even the youth may be

unaware of what is going on at the time. Further, I think that this is verbalized through the stories that they relate about their experiences. There is an emotional healing that comes from telling one's own story and this is especially true for former foster youth.

Because of my previous work with foster youth, some personal assumptions have developed over the years. The first is that I assume all foster youth dislike TDCS. This comes from working with older foster youth in a group home setting where complaints about TDCS caseworkers, rules, policies, and legal advocates were constant. It was very rare that a youth would say anything positive about TDCS, so I assumed that a negative feeling prevailed. Another personal assumption I had was that foster youth accepted post-custody services because of all that they gained financially from the State. I assumed that many would not have thought about remaining in post-custody services were it not for the monthly living allowance and other financial incentives provided by TDCS through its independent living program.

This research study focuses on one particular subset of the community college population. Because I chose to research the experiences of former foster youth, the results of this study may not be applicable to other populations in other settings. For example, findings may not apply to former foster youth in a university setting. Further, former foster youth in another part of the country may not have the same outcomes. Therefore, it is important to recognize that this research will provide valuable first-hand insights for this particular population alone. It is not my intent to suggest otherwise.

Some key concepts are utilized throughout this dissertation. Therefore, the following definitions will prove useful:

1. Aging out of Care/Exiting care: the act of leaving foster care by an emancipated youth. Once out of care, the youth has no further involvement with the state and there

is no duty of care towards the youth, unless a request is made for post-custody services.

2. CFTM: Child and Family Team Meeting where the youth, family members, education consultants, and others interested in the youth's care meet for planning purposes and goal setting.
3. Former foster youth: young adults who have left foster care because they have reached the age of 18 years old, or have been emancipated prior to age 18 through a court order.
4. Foster care: the provision of 24-hour care and supervision of a child under the age of 18 years old who has been placed by a court order into the custody of the state. Foster care may be provided through trained individuals or couples through the Tennessee Department of Children's Services or through private agencies who specialize in the placement and treatment of foster children.
5. Independent Living Specialist (ILS): a DCS staff person responsible for specific regions in Tennessee. Youth who age out of custody meet with an ILS to develop a post-custody plan. ILSs are responsible for teaching Life Skills classes to teens between the ages of 15 and 17. They also work with the post-custody case manager who ensures the delivery of supportive services to youth exiting custody.
6. Independent Living Program: a program through DCS that is responsible for the oversight of all post-custody services to former foster youth.
7. Post-custody services: services provided by DCS to a former foster youth at his or her request. The youth must be enrolled in a school or training program in order to be

eligible for these services. Services include housing assistance, case management services, tuition vouchers, and other financial assistance.

8. Transitional living services: services provided by DCS to former foster youth who are not in post-secondary education. Services include case management, housing and transportation assistance, but no other financial incentives.

Overview of the Chapters

Chapter one provides a background to the services available to former foster youth as they attend college and the issues that led to my interest in this research. In chapter two, a relevant review of the available literature is presented. Chapter three outlines the methodology used to research and analyze the data collected, while chapter four presents the findings. Finally, chapter five provides a detailed discussion, along with implications for further research and practice.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

One widely accepted predictor of former foster youth success is educational attainment (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Emerson, 2006; Merdinger et al., 2005; Wolanin, 2005). Research suggests, however, that very few of these youth are successful in higher education and only a small percentage go on to complete degree programs (Courtney & Dworsky, 2005; Courtney et al., 2007). The most recent longitudinal study completed by Chapin Hall compared 23 and 24 year-old former foster youth with a nationally representative sample of the same age that included education as a critical domain when reviewing the process of aging out of care (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee & Raap, 2010). Of particular interest is the finding that 2.5 percent of former foster youth had completed a bachelor's degree compared to 19.4 percent of their peers. Additionally, the type of school former foster youth were enrolled in differed from their counterparts. Almost half of the former foster youth in the study were enrolled in a two-year college, whereas over two-thirds of their peers were enrolled in a four-year institution.

Community colleges play an important role in the education of former foster youth. Because of their fractured academic histories, these students do not perform as well as their peers on standard placement tests such as the ACT or SAT (Wolanin, 2005). Low tuition rates coupled with remedial education provide opportunities for former foster youth that four-year universities do not. Further, community colleges offer general preparation for bachelor's degrees as well as career and technical education programs. The latter assist students in obtaining the critical skills necessary and to quickly complete programs of study that will qualify them for immediate employment. Cooper, Mery & Rassen (2008) assert that "the ability to move rapidly into careers

can be extremely important for students who struggle financially and seek to become self-sufficient" (p. 4).

This chapter is divided into four parts. The first is an overview of the foster care system in Tennessee and its impact on those aging out of custody. The second is a review of the state and federal policies that support former foster youth in higher education and the services provided to those taking part in the DCS Independent Living Program. An examination of social constructionism, identity theory, and narrative identity research will provide a context for the ensuing study. Finally, a discussion of the recent literature on former foster youth research that has been conducted is provided.

The Foster Care System in Tennessee

In Tennessee, foster care is generally a last resort for families in crisis. When a child comes to the attention of the Tennessee Department of Children's Services, some kind of abuse or neglect has been or is currently taking place. While placement with a family member is the best case, this option is not available for many children. Non-relative family foster homes or group homes operated through private agencies become the next-best choice for many children. Reunification with the child's family is the goal during the time a child is placed in foster care, however adoption or long-term foster care become the best option for some children (Wolanin, 2005).

Specific to Tennessee foster children is a federal civil rights lawsuit filed in 2000 against the state of Tennessee and TDCS on behalf of 9,000 foster children. Known as the Brian A. lawsuit after the first named plaintiff, the suit alleged that children in the care of TDCS suffered serious physical and psychological damage due to multiple placements, failure to provide necessary services and treatment, and inadequate monitoring and supervision. A settlement was

reached in July, 2001 that called for significant reform, including lowering the number of cases allowable to TDCS staff, training for case managers, developing appropriate foster home placements and services, and enhancing the state's computerized monitoring system. A committee made up of experts in the child welfare field, known as the Technical Assistance Committee (TAC), was appointed by the judge in the case to report on compliance in each of the above areas.

Included in the *Brian A. v. Bredesen* (2001) settlement was a provision specific to older youth, requiring that TDCS "shall have a full range of independent living services and shall provide sufficient resources to provide independent living services to all children in the plaintiff class who qualify for them." (P. VI.I) In monitoring educational objectives of foster children, the TAC found that the primary focus of much of the case planning for older youth was on obtaining a high school diploma, with little or no attention to post-secondary education (TAC report, 2010). Reports from the TAC have assisted in the more recent reform of TDCS's Independent Living Program.

By the time young people in foster care reach the age of 14, a life skills assessment should be completed by the youth and his or her caregiver. The Ansell Casey Life Skills Assessment is used because it is based on the developmental age of the youth, rather than the chronological age. The results of the assessment are compared to benchmark data for similar demographic characteristics and can help to identify areas of need. This assessment is completed annually for as long as the youth is in foster care. Additionally, older youth in foster care are offered life skills training through the Independent Living Program to prepare them for self-sufficiency. The training consists of instruction in areas such as budgeting, household

management, time management, hygiene and self-care, education and housing issues, and employment skills.

As foster youth approach the age of 18, TDCS case managers work closely with each youth in preparation for his or her transition from care. Six months prior to a youth's exit from care, a meeting is held to inform the young person of available options, such as post-custody or transitional living services. Post-custody services are for youth exiting custody with plans to continue their education or enroll in a post-secondary training program. It is also available for youth who have not yet obtained a GED or high school diploma, so that they may complete their education programs. Transitional living services are time-limited for those youth who do not intend to continue with an education or training program. Some youth refuse all services offered through the Independent Living Program. While it is not mandatory that youth take advantage of these programs, they are made aware of their availability at this meeting.

Participation in an Independent Living Program (ILP) has been identified as one of the external factors associated with college attendance for former foster youth (Merdinger et al., 2005). Not all youth eligible for services receive them, however. In a study of 217 former foster youth, Kerman, Barth & Wildfire (2004) found that 59% did not receive any of the ILP services available. Lemon et al. (2005) suggest that participation in an ILP may act as a "protective factor for youth who face more difficult challenges while in foster care" (p. 268). In their study, the role of ILPs was examined in the transition to young adulthood with a sample of former foster youth enrolled in college in California. They found that ILP youth were more likely to have received information about financial aid in high school, and were significantly younger when they began college than the youth in foster care who did not receive ILP services. The ILP youth also received information or training on nine other items associated with independent

living such as opening a bank account, obtaining car insurance, balancing a checkbook, finding a place to live and setting and achieving goals (Lemon et al, 2005). Although these studies support the positive effects of ILP services on educational attainment for former foster youth, it remains unclear why this population continues to lag behind their peers who were not in foster care with regard to degree completion.

Policies that Support Former Foster Youth

There are two types of policies that support youth as they emancipate from foster care and exit custody. The first is a federal policy called the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, also known as the Chafee Bill. The Chafee Bill requires that youth have a valid education or job training plan and that they comply with the program guidelines, which include maintaining a minimum grade point average and satisfactory academic progress in their programs of study. The Chafee Bill includes provisions to assist former foster youth to attend post-secondary education or training through education and training vouchers (ETVs). It also provides money for other services, including room and board, case management, and training for foster families and case managers with regard to issues specific to youth aging out of custody. Each state must contribute at least a 20 percent match of the funds received from the Chafee Bill. In sum, the money is used for ETVs for post-custody youth and for wrap-around services for youth ages 14 through 21. Wrap-around services include items such as high school yearbooks, driver's education fees, car insurance, and child care assistance for youth who are also parents. A full listing of wrap-around services are found in Appendix D.

Some youth who age out of foster care are not vested in pursuing a traditional education or job training plan, but may have need for ongoing support in order to be successful. These youth are typically referred to the Transitional Living Program for support services in the areas

of employment, job-training, life skills, money management and ongoing intensive case management through contracted services. The Chafee Bill funds these programs as well; however the youth do not receive ETV assistance. Youth receiving this service meet with a case manager weekly and build skill sets that assist them in being successful as adults. Transitional living services are time limited, generally lasting between three and six months after the youth's exit from custody. Former foster youth who do not pursue a post-secondary education may request post-custody services any time prior to reaching the age of 21, provided they enroll in college or other post-secondary training.

The second type of policy is through individual states. To comply with the guidelines of the Brian A. settlement, TDCS adopted a number of policies specific to older youth. In order to ensure that assessment, case planning, and service provision for older youth address their independent living needs, TDCS Policy 16.51 describes the Independent Living Plan (ILP) as a section of the Permanency Plan for all youth in state custody age fourteen and older. This policy places the responsibility on the case manager to develop the plan while the youth is a minor and in the custody of the state. The policy specifies that special attention must be paid to the youth or young adult's input and preferences in its development. The integration of goals that project the young adult's increasing ability to manage all aspects of their own lives self-sufficiently, with all available options for the establishment of legal, physical and relational permanency and support, is essential.

Case management for those receiving post-custody or transitional living services include assessing strengths and needs, navigating educational systems, and accessing healthcare (Tennessee Department of Children's Services [TDCS], 2010). The case manager is responsible for facilitating IL wrap-around funding through the Chafee Bill, as well as assistance with

transportation when necessary. TDCS guidelines state that case manager contact with a former foster youth is "required at least twice quarterly and can take the form of face-to-face visits or phone calls" (p. 33). Case managers must make one home visit upon receipt of an assigned case and every time a former foster youth moves into a new residence. The policy further suggests that "it may be necessary for contact to increase until the young adult is established" (p. 33) into a new job, job-training program, or college.

Because of these federal and state policies, youth who exit custody at age 18 and attend college appear to have many supports in place to achieve academic success. Funding from the federal Pell Grant, along with Chafee Bill tuition vouchers will generally pay for all of a former foster youth's educational expenses at a state-operated college. Case management services provided by TDCS's post-custody unit ensure that the youth is provided with all of the funding that he or she is eligible to receive. Additionally, the post-custody case manager acts as a liaison with colleges, healthcare providers, landlords, and any other offices that interact with the youth.

Theoretical Contexts

In order to gain a better understanding of the experiences of former foster youth, the lens through which I approach this study must first be examined. Social constructionism provides a context to understand how participants make meaning of their experiences. Because I am also interested in how each former foster youth identifies as a person, a former foster youth, and a student, an examination of identity theory and narrative identity will be helpful.

Social Constructionism. Social constructionism is a term coined by Gergen (1985), emphasizing that knowledge is expressed through language and is based on our social experiences. The way in which we understand our surroundings and each other is through our social interactions. This knowledge does not have one final Truth, but rather a multitude of

truths that may change and evolve depending on our interactions with others. The knowledge that we have about others and ourselves is a product of these social exchanges. The early work of Berger & Luckmann (1966) suggests a relationship between individual and social perspectives. Reality is based on a world shared with others and language is the order that helps us to make sense of it all. To Berger & Luckmann, there is a temporal structure to this reality, meaning that there is a beginning, middle, and end just as there is to a story. Similarly, Bruner (1990) proposes that it is "culture, not biology, that shapes human life and the human mind, that gives meaning to action by situating its underlying intentional states in an interpretive system" (p. 34). Further, he suggests that there are two ways that people organize and manage their knowledge of the world. The first he calls *logical-scientific* thinking and is more specialized for treating physical things. This type of thinking is supported in traditional education systems. The second is *narrative* thinking, for treating people and their plights (Lutkehaus & Greenfield, 2003). Narratives allow people to create a version of the world in which they can envision themselves. It becomes a personal world where each individual can find a place where he or she belongs.

Shotter (1997) argues that the aim of social constructionism is to change the relationship between people through the way they talk. His view is that conversational activities are the foundation of everything we do relationally. That is, they provide the basis for how a person is placed in relation to both the self and others in the world. Shotter's theory is that the emphasis of social constructionism is on the "contingency and creativity of human interaction – on our making of, and being made by, our own social realities" (p. 10).

While social constructionism emphasizes interaction with others, children in foster care have a difficult time having their voices heard. Changes in policy under *Brian A. v. Bredesen*

(2001) encourage TDCS case managers to allow foster youth a voice in planning for their futures. According to TAC (2010), the monitoring committee appointed by the court, a significant variation in the quality of case work was found, "with 30% of the cases falling far short of the expectations of Department policy and only 21% clearly meeting those expectations" (p. 13). By hearing the stories that former foster youth have to tell, I hope to gain an understanding of how they socially construct their relationships, as well as their own identities, within higher education.

Identity Theory. After many years of counseling experience, I already sense that identity is constructed based on the experiences a person has in life. When negative experiences occur over and over, the person begins to view him or herself as the problem, effectively internalizing external events. In identity theory, the assumption is made that individuals desire to verify who they are even if that identity is negative (Burke & Harrod, 2005). Erikson (1968) supports identity formation as a reflexive process for adolescents that involves making a commitment to various roles based on values and relationships with others.

Marcia (1980) builds on Erikson's theory with an identity status model. In this model, two components necessary for a mature identity are crisis and commitment. Crisis refers to the choices an adolescent makes between various alternatives that are meaningful to him or her. Commitment is the degree to which a person is invested in those alternatives. Marcia's model identifies four statuses: identity diffused, foreclosure, moratorium, and identity achieved. There are four domains in which adolescents may identify: occupation, sex roles, politics, and religion. In *identity diffused*, youth have not experienced crisis, nor have they made a commitment in any of the domains. Most young adolescents fall into this status, however commitment is usually made through peer pressure and parental influences. In *foreclosure*, no crisis has occurred,

however a commitment may have been made to one or more of the domains through the influence of family or friends. For example, an adolescent may identify strongly with a particular religion based on the commitment of the family in this domain. However, people who remain in this status for too long may make impulsive decisions that can have negative consequences. Adolescents in *moratorium* status may be experiencing various crises, but without making any commitments. Youth in this status generally feel unbalanced and unsatisfied, sometimes acting out in rebellion. The status of *identity achieved* have experienced crises, evaluated options, and come to a resolution in order to make a commitment. Many college students are working on this achievement, as adolescents rarely complete all four domains by the end of high school (Meeus, 1992).

Marcia's (1980) identity status model is helpful in understanding the development of former foster youth identity. As a consequence of their social and educational conditions, these youth have fewer opportunities to engage in exploration of various identities. Additionally, the influence of family and friends has been disrupted because of abuse or neglect issues, making commitment to any of the alternatives less likely. By the time the youth age out of custody at age 18, foster youth are already behind their peers in the formation of their identities.

Narrative Identity. The theory of narrative identity is most often associated with Ricoeur (1984; 1992), who suggests that narratives are both lived and told. The narrative identity mediates between the way the world is and the way it ought to be. Similarly, McAdams (2004) developed a life story model of identity, in which the self is understood as an ever-evolving story. In this model, identity takes the form of a story complete with setting, scene, character, plot and theme.

The development and creation of one's life story is one of the critical processes of young adulthood. Often this coincides with the college years, where a narrative identity is developed. The relationship between identity and narratives is well documented (Lodi-Smith et al., 2009; Shotter, 1989; Somers, 1994; Woodruffe-Burton & Elliott, 2005). It is through narratives that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world. This is true for the formation of identity, as well. For example, we come to be who we are by situating ourselves within a social narrative. McAdams (1996) suggests that a narrative identity is a subjective assessment of past experiences that creates a meaningful self in the present.

The perception of self is constructed in relation to a number of characteristics or identities (Gergen, 2009). There is the social self, the academic self, the athletic self, and so on. How we identify with these various characteristics is dependent upon the experiences we have. Narratives construct our experiences and consequently, are a way to understand them. The creation of a life story is integral to the formation of identity (Lodi-Smith et al, 2009). These narratives never represent a single voice, but are multi-authored jointly by the self and others (Anderson, 1997; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). I question if narratives of former foster youth and therefore, the beliefs they have about themselves, might provide some insight into how successful they are in higher education.

Stryker (1968) posits that identity is based on shared meanings that develop out of interactions with others. People tend to name others and themselves in order to understand various roles within a social context. "The naming invokes meanings in the form of expectations with regard to others' and one's own behaviors" (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 225). At its core, identity theory seeks to categorize the self as an occupier of a role, which then guides behavior. In their study on former foster youth, Mulkerns & Owen (2008), found that these youth

identified strongly with help-avoidance behaviors, even in the face of severe negative consequences. It is my intent to learn more about identity formation through the narratives of participants in this study. Former foster youth are important because of the stories they have to tell. It is an intentional act on my part to find these students so that I, and others, might learn from them.

Recent Research Studies

As stated in Chapter I, there is very little research on former foster youth and what is available is more quantitatively-based. One of the first studies to examine college attendance of former foster youth was a mixed-method design by Merdinger et al. (2005). In their "Pathways to College" study, 189 former foster youth at California State University participated in a survey mailed to them. Later, 27 former foster youth participated in interviews with researchers. Findings showed that support from significant people in the lives of former foster youth was a major factor in college success. Additionally, a challenging high school curriculum and stability in schools was considered essential to college academic success. While this study contributed to the knowledge base of former foster youth in college, the students were already successfully attending a four-year university. Further, it was very much a quantitative study and, while interviews took place, the voices of former foster youth are conspicuously missing.

Taking data from Merdinger et al's. (2005) research, Hines et al. (2005) studied the role of independent living programs (ILPs) for foster youth and former foster youth. A comparative analysis was completed using the survey data and looked at the differences between those who were enrolled in an ILP versus those who were not. Findings indicated that those who received ILP services were more likely to be African American or Mexican/Latino and were in non-relative out of home placements. Findings also indicated that ILPs appear to be a protective

factor for former foster youth while in college. As with Merdinger et al's. study, the findings are important, yet lack the voice of the former foster youth.

There have been few recent dissertations completed on former foster youth in college. Uesugi (2009) completed a research study that looked at the reasons why former foster youth succeed in college, despite their negative life experiences. Uesugi used grounded theory as his method and the study focused on several theories surrounding resiliency. While his research provided a voice for former foster youth in college, his focus on success and participants consisting of juniors and seniors in a four-year university were limiting factors. Similarly, Daly (2011) completed a phenomenological study addressing the transition issues that former foster youth face. Like Uesugi, this research focused on success factors only. Both of these dissertations were through universities in California, neglecting a large former foster care population in the United States.

Summary

It is clear that former foster youth face many barriers as they transition from care. This chapter has provided an overview of the background of foster care in Tennessee, the policies that support former foster youth, and the contextual basis for the ensuing study. Further, qualitative research on former foster youth is lacking. Success factors notwithstanding, the voices of these youth are missing in the literature. Although the Chafee Bill provides many supports for former foster youth and policies have been changed within TDCS due to *Brian A. v. Bredesen* (2001), there is still much work to be done. Chief among this is to allow foster youth a voice in planning for their futures. Along with input from foster youth, formation of identity status is an important developmental milestone. As these youth situate their experiences within stories that make sense to them, they also develop a better vision of their future. These narratives will be a valuable

addition to the body of research currently available and contribute to a further understanding of this population.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

This chapter focuses on the methods used in this study. Although there are no prescribed methods for qualitative research design, there is a body of research that informs and guides the procedures I used (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2005; Grbich, 2009; Seidman, 1998). First, a discussion of narrative approach that I have chosen for this study is provided. This is followed by data collection and analysis methods used for this study. An explanation of the site selected, how participants were chosen and recruited, and how the resulting findings will be presented is then discussed. Finally, I address trustworthiness and ethical considerations in the design of this study.

Theoretical Approach

For this study, my approach is from an interpretivist-constructionist perspective (Bogdan & Biklin, 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 1985; Merriam, 1998). I share the view that the world is constructed, interpreted, and experienced by people in their interactions with others and with wider social structures. This inquiry involves collaboration between me, as the researcher, and the former foster youth who provide details on how they experience the world. Further, I concur with Merriam's (1998) view that truthful reporting of actual experiences help to inform my understanding of their world.

My interest in hearing the stories of former foster youth stems from a desire to understand their experiences as college students. Therefore, I look to narrative inquiry for this research design. I use this because narrative models "allow researchers to gain insight into the way human beings understand and enact their lives through stories" (Sandelowski, 1991, p. 163). For me, narrative is both the phenomenon of the study and the method by which I can make

sense of the data. Connelly & Clandinin (1990) make the distinction between the two by calling the phenomenon a story and the method a narrative. Keeping this qualification in mind, this research study uses an analysis of narrative model (Creswell, 2005). This method was chosen because it is most suited for "capturing the detailed stories or life experiences of a single life or the lives of a small number of individuals" (p. 55). In an analysis of narratives, the interview is considered a discursive act through which stories are gathered. This type of analysis contains both a description of the story, as well as the themes that emerge from the stories.

The way in which people relate and understand their experiences is through the stories they tell about themselves. According to Anderson (2007), narratives are "the discursive way in which we organize, account for, give meaning, understand, provide structure, and maintain coherence to the circumstances, events, and experiences in our lives" (p. 15-16). Murray (1989) suggests that narratives are the process for mediating between social theories and personal experience, allowing for the construction of identity. Individual reality is formed, informed, and reformed through the stories that people tell about themselves. Narratives influence relationships through a shared understanding. As Gergen (1994) asserts, "stories serve as communal resources that people use in ongoing relationships" (p. 189). Therefore, a person's narrative both and defines and strengthens a relationship.

Unlike ethnographic studies, where the researcher is studying what actually happens in the lives of certain people, the narrative study is about the stories a person gives from his or her point of view. It is the person's own life history, or self story, and is a representation of how life is seen at that given moment in time. Sandelowski (1991) suggests that these stories are actually reconstructions of the life history and the outcome of the story is simply a re-telling of that history that may change each time it is told. For example, a person's story might change

depending on the audience, how the person is feeling at the time, or even as a result of a point that he or she is trying to convey. Further, Polkinghorne (2005) notes that these stories are not just a retrieval of past events, but reconstructions of them. "The purpose of the exploration of remembered events is not to produce accurate recalls but to provide an occasion for reflection on the meaning these events have for the participant" (p. 143). Therefore, narratives must be taken at face value in the moment they are given. The need to be reflexive throughout this research was important because events may not have been as they actually occurred, but rather how the student chose to tell his or her story.

Participants

Former foster youth do not stand out in the college population. They do not look or act any differently than any other student in higher education. For this reason, it has been difficult to track and research this population. To access participants after approval was obtained from the University's Institutional Review Board, I contacted TDCS Independent Living Specialists who serve the counties surrounding SCC. I chose this route of access because of my relationship with the college where the study was completed. The IL Specialists work directly with former foster youth to assist them in gaining admission to colleges and accessing financial incentives through the Chafee Bill.

A recruitment letter was developed requesting the assistance of former foster youth by participating in an interview. I was advised by the IL Program Manager to send the letter to the TDCS research committee for approval. While formal permission was unnecessary, the committee did request that a sentence be added to the letter indicating that TDCS did not provide any indentifying information to me in advance (E. J. Henderson, personal communication, July,

11, 2012). The letter, with changes, was sent by IL Specialists to former foster youth admitted to Southeast Community College in order to recruit participants (see Appendix C).

In the selection of participants for this study, I have chosen a purposeful sampling method, where particular interviewees are chosen "because they are believed to facilitate the expansion of the developing theory" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 73). I have developed the following criteria in choosing participants:

1. Former foster youth;
2. Attending Southeast Community College at least part-time;
3. Over the age of 18;
4. Receiving post-custody services through TDCS; and
5. A balance between male and female.

The recruitment letter sent to those youth enrolled at SCC had my contact information and specifics about the research that I was conducting. The students then approached me via phone call or email to indicate their interest in participating in this study. All former foster youth who agreed to participate were invited to meet with me individually at a time convenient to both of us, where I outlined expectations and provided answers to any questions. Our meetings took place off campus at a mutually agreeable setting. After explaining how I planned to research this population, I asked if the student was willing to participate in my study, assuring each that participation was voluntary. A signed informed consent form was obtained from each student prior to the interview and I advised them of their rights and responsibilities as participants in this study. As an incentive for participation, I provided each participant with a $25 gift card to Target at the completion of the interview. This was an important aspect of the study and I believe that it was an influencing factor in order to obtain participation in this research. I also

provided information about how confidentiality would be approached by using a pseudonym that each participant chose, as well as keeping all tapes and written notes locked in a file cabinet within my locked office and keeping any online data in a password-protected file. Once the student had obtained all answers to his or her questions regarding the study, the interviews began.

Initially, ten former foster youth agreed to participate in this study. Two of the ten missed several appointments, however and eventually did not respond to further inquiries from me. A total of eight former foster youth participated in the interview and follow-up discussions and are the foundation of this study. These eight were evenly divided in gender with four males and four females. Their race was an almost even split between White and African American, although one participant referred to his race as “Black and White.” An overview of their demographics is provided in Table 2. In the table, the term “adjudication” refers to the court order that was issued at the time he or she entered into custody of the state. Delinquent adjudication means that the youth committed a criminal act and is in need of rehabilitation. Dependent/neglect means that the youth either suffered from abuse or neglect by a parent or guardian, or does not have anyone to act as a parent or guardian due to illness, death or incarceration.

Table 1.

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Race	Children Y (#) Or N	Years in Custody (#)	Adjudication
Allen	21	Male	African American	N	2 (2)	Delinquent
Carmen	20	Female	African American	N	6 (17)	Dependent/ Neglect
Crom	19	Male	White	N	2 (2)	Delinquent
Holly	23	Female	White	Y (2)	3 (5)	Dependent/ Neglect
Jeremy	21	Male	"Black/White"	N	17 (9)	Dependent/ Neglect
Justin	23	Male	White	N	1 (1)	Delinquent
Lily	21	Female	White	Y (1)	.5 (3)	Dependent/ Neglect
Rachelle	19	Female	African American	N	13 (9)	Dependent/ Neglect

Note. The symbol (#) after "Children" refers to the number of children a participant has. The symbol (#) after "Years in Custody" refers to the number of placements a participant reported.

In addition to basic demographics of the participants, other information was obtained through the interviews. Table 3 provides an overview of the academic information uncovered, including number of semesters in college, academic major, grade point average, and number of colleges attended (including SCC).

Table 2.

Participant Academic Information

Pseudonym	Major	Semesters Completed	GPA	No. of Colleges
Allen	Political Science	8	2.58	1
Carmen	Social Work	5	2.01	1
Crom	Pre-Medical	3	2.66	2
Holly	Paralegal Studies	1	3.23	1
Jeremy	Undecided	2	0.00	1
Justin	Elem. Education	3	0.64	1
Lily	Business	8	3.28	1
Rachelle	Criminal Justice	3	1.25	2

Site Selection

Southeast Community College (SCC) is a large two-year college with over 11,000 students. It has five campuses within two counties, providing in-person and on-line courses to traditional (aged 18-24) and non-traditional (over age 25) students. It is the main feeder school for the area's large southeastern university, the flagship institution in the state. While many of the students transfer to public and private universities, SCC also offers applied science associate degrees that provide students with skills needed in order to obtain employment positions in the community without the need for a bachelor's degree. As noted earlier in Chapter II, this is a

large draw for former foster youth, who have little financial support outside of grants and loans and who are interested in getting through a degree program as quickly as possible.

I chose this college for two reasons. The first is that there are more former foster youth attending SCC than other colleges in the area, according to the TDCS Office of Independent Living in Nashville, TN (S. Bosson, personal communication, May, 2, 2012). The second reason I chose this college is that having participants come from the same college will provide continuity in this study. Students attending nearby four-year colleges, for example, will have differing experiences than at a community college, such as dormitory living, larger class sizes, and access to various social and sporting activities. This, in turn, changes the experiences that these students may have.

Students who attend SCC have varying academic preparation. Some may come directly from high school, having followed a college-prep pathway. These students have completed the academic coursework in preparation for college-level work. Other students lack much of this academic preparation, having followed a technical path in high school or dropping out and obtaining a general equivalency diploma (GED). These students generally require remedial or developmental courses in order to prepare for their college-level classes. Most former foster youth fall into this category due to low ACT/SAT scores, no matter which pathway was followed within the secondary education and preparation (Wolanin, 2005).

Data Collection

During the fall 2012 semester, Southeast Community College had 16 students enrolled in either part-time or full-time study (S. Bosson, personal communication, January 24, 2013). All enrolled former foster youth at SCC were invited to participate in the study through a recruitment letter sent by the IL Specialists. While I planned to interview the participants, I remained

mindful of the part I would play during our interactions. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) note that "the way an interviewer acts, questions, and responds in an interview shapes the relationship and therefore the ways participants respond and give accounts of their experience" (p. 110). Other ways that the interview could be affected are time and place of the interview, as well as how formal or casual the interviewer may be with the participant.

I conducted one in-depth interview with each participant in order to find out about each youth's educational, family, and social histories, as well as any plans for the future. I wanted to learn of their experiences as college students and how they assign meaning to these experiences. This provides a deeper understanding of how each former foster youth identifies himself or herself. Each session was digitally audio-taped and the results transcribed and coded based on themes found within the transcripts. At the end of the interview, each participant filled out an information form that provided demographics such as age, race, year in college, and number of years in foster care. A follow-up meeting was then arranged where an *interim text* of our initial interview was shared (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). These are "texts situated in the spaces between field texts and final, published research texts" (p. 133). Interim texts allowed me to write my interpretation of the interview with former foster youth and then negotiate how the data were portrayed in print. In doing this, a more accurate account of the participant's story was written and revised as necessary. The follow-up interview allowed time to discuss any questions or concerns that the student or I had regarding the data. Only three of the eight participants returned in person for the follow-up meeting. The rest were sent a copy of the interim text via email and were able to send comments to me along with any questions they had. Although none of the participants had questions, each responded with positive comments and thanks for the opportunity to share his or her story.

This study utilized two strategies for obtaining data. The first was the in-depth interviews featuring open-ended questions. Interviews included a comprehensive personal history of each former foster youth. The interview protocol is provided in Appendix A. The second strategy included multiple sources of data in order to provide a sense of the whole story, as suggested by Connelly & Clandinin (1990). These include the transcripts and interim texts of conversations I had with former foster youth, but data also came from field notes and a reflexive journal that I kept detailing my experiences and reflections. Finally, I made use of archival documents, such as newspaper articles or photographs that the former foster youth was willing to share.

Data Analysis

Data collection and data analysis, according to Merriam (1998), should occur as a simultaneous activity. Therefore, interviews were transcribed by me immediately after they occurred, while they were fresh on my mind. I decided to transcribe the interviews myself because this was a good way to remain embedded in the research. I could walk through each interview over and over in my mind while listening to and typing the words of my participants. As Seidman (1998) notes, “interviewers who transcribe their own tapes come to know their interviews better” (p. 98). I wanted to know my participants inside and out, making self-transcribing the only alternative for me.

Once transcribing was complete, the next step was to select one transcript for initial analysis and highlight salient words and sentences. This is considered the more traditional approach to analyzing interview data (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Grbich, 2009; Seidman, 1998). A thematic analysis is essentially the organization of excerpts in the transcripts into categories. Again, I chose to complete the analysis on my own as opposed to using a computer program. I

found this worked well for me due to the small number of participants in this study. Patterns began to emerge from the narrative and themes were taken from sets of patterns. Using Seidman's (1998) suggestion, I remained aware of each passage's relevance to my research questions. I then used those themes to search through the remaining transcripts, adding new themes as they arose during my reading. I read through each transcript multiple times and continued to mark passages that stood out to me. I then grouped the passages into meaningful segments and color-coded them. This provided me with a good way to keep the large amount of data I had organized within an easily searchable context.

After I analyzed the transcripts for themes, I used Clandinin & Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional space approach as a framework for this inquiry. A three-dimensional space provides a scaffold for analysis and interpretation. This space "allows our inquiries to travel – *inward, outward, backward, forward,* and *situated within place*" (p. 49). The dimensions of inward and outward include personal and social interaction, feelings, hopes and moral dispositions. Backward and forward dimensions provide a continuity of past, present, and future. It is attending to the temporal issues surrounding the narratives. Situation addresses the physical places or the storyteller's places to re-story the events that have been narrated. Remaining aware of these three dimensions as they were transcribed, coded, and turned into profiles allowed me to remain within the experience, even as I was alone with my writing. Table 1 provides an overview of the three-dimensional space and its components.

Table 3.

Three-dimensional Space

Interaction		Continuity			Situation/place
Personal	Social	Past	Present	Future	
Look inward to internal conditions, feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, moral dispositions.	Look outward to existential conditions in the environment with other people's feelings and their intentions, purposes, assumptions and points of view.	Look backward to remember experiences and stories from earlier times.	Look at current experiences, feelings, and stories relating to actions of an event.	Look forward to implied and possible experiences and plot lines.	Look at context, time, and place situated in a physical landscape or setting with topological and spatial boundaries with characters' intentions, purposes, and different points of view.

Note. Adapted from "Narrative Analysis: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research," by D. J. Clandinin and F. M. Connelly. Copyright 2000 by Jossey-Bass.

The next step in my analysis was to move from field texts, or transcripts of interviews, into research text, or the finished product (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In writing the research text, the memory of the field experience is "selective, shaped, and retold in the continuum of one's experiences" (p. 142). As I read through the transcripts multiple times, my memories of the unspoken words, as well as shared understandings between the participants and me became part of the finished product. Voice inflections, tone, gestures, and facial features were all remembered as I listened to and read their words. While the transcripts provided a catalyst for my memory, the interview experiences helped to organize the large amount of information I had into topics and themes.

Another type of field text that I used was a reflexive journal that I kept during the research process. Clandinin & Connelly (2000) call this the "experience of the experience" (p. 88). Here, I kept notes to myself about questions I had as well as reflections about participants, my inner doubts, and even reminders of each former foster youth such as where we met and the clothing each wore. The nuances included in this journal provided a reminder of the experience and helped as I began to write the research text. In addition to the reflexive journal, I made use of archival documents that helped to contextualize this study. Documents included TDCS manuals, policies, and legal filings that provided needed historical and supporting evidence. I pored over newspaper articles and professional newsletters that addressed former foster youth and their independent living needs. All of these helped to further inform the analysis and interpretation processes.

The findings from the data are presented in two different ways. First, I have presented each former foster youth's narrative as a profile, providing a snapshot of each as shared with me during our time together. Profiles are an "effective way of sharing interview data and opening up one's interview material to analysis and interpretation" (Seidman, 1998, p. 102). Each profile presented is "mindful of balancing the tensions of writing within the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, of writing in ways that narratively capture the field experiences, and of balancing these with the audience" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 154). In other words, I must establish a voice for my participants that will portray them as they intended to be heard while keeping my audience – other researchers – in mind. Profiles are presented as a first-person narrative and in the words of the participants. I have chosen to remove certain speech characteristics such as ums, ers, and other idiosyncrasies. This is done out of respect for the participants, as it neither adds to nor takes away from narratives. I have added my own words in parentheses in order to clarify

certain aspects of the narrative and have put ellipses in places where words were removed. When removing words, sentences, or even entire paragraphs, I have been careful to remain faithful to the story each participant was trying to tell. The profiles as presented may be out of sequence with the original transcripts. This was done to present each narrative in a time-space continuum that accurately reflects each former foster youth's story.

The second way to present the findings is through themes found between and throughout interviews. The focus here is on what is told, rather than how it is said. Themes that emerged from the analysis addressed the two research questions of how former foster youth make meaning of the college experience and how they construct their identities. Although I did not begin with a set of themes in mind for either research question, I realized that those themes relating to the second research question on identity seemed to fit Marcia's (1980) identity model. Because of this, I used Marcia's model as a guide when presenting the findings on constructing identity.

Ethical Considerations

The main attraction for a narrative study is "its capacity to render life experiences, both personal and social, in relevant and meaningful ways" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 10). One of the potential problems with narrative studies, however, is that researchers can fake the data and deceive the reader. Connelly & Clandinin suggest two things a researcher can do to avoid this. First, the researcher must find a way to take on the role of critic during the process of writing. This can be done by approaching the data from various viewpoints within the study. For example, I might write from the viewpoint of a faculty member, a TDCS staff person, or the parent or foster parent of the student. This allows me to critically reflect on what is written and how I write it. The second thing a researcher can do is to acknowledge what Connelly &

Clandinin call the “Hollywood plot” (p. 10). This is when everything brought up throughout the paper is eventually smoothed out in the end for a nicely-balanced story. Instead, the researcher should be open about limitations by writing from the role of the critic, as discussed above. By bringing up other possibilities, the reader is able to attend to other alternatives and untold stories.

An important ethical consideration is with my role as a college administrator at SCC. I have access to information on former foster youth attending SCC and could easily have looked up contact information in order to access those students for this study. I chose, however, to view my role as a university researcher, rather than SCC administrator. In order to avoid confusion, I approached TDCS Independent Living Specialists in local and surrounding counties to publicize my study and the need for participants. This kept me within the bounds of my positions at both institutions.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative research is naturalistic by design. Studies are conducted in context-specific or real world settings, as opposed to a laboratory. While reliability, validity, and generalizability are standard terms in quantitative research, qualitative researchers use other criteria. Guba & Lincoln (1989) have identified four terms that establish trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the findings. Credibility is the equivalent of internal validity and reflects confidence in the compatibility of the findings with what actually happened. Transferability is linked to external validity and is “concerned with the extent to which the findings can be applied to other situations” (Merriam, 1998). This is similar to the concept of generalizability in research. The equivalent of reliability is dependability, which can be addressed by providing as much detail as possible about the research methods used so that other researchers might be able to replicate the study. Lincoln & Guba (1985) argue that a

demonstration of credibility ensures the dependability of a study. Finally, confirmability is associated with objectivity where researcher bias should be bracketed so that the results of the findings might not be affected. Table 4 provides an overview of the four criteria along with some of the activities associated with each.

Table 4.

Trustworthiness Criteria

Criterion	Facilitating Activities
Credibility	Prolonged engagement Persistent observation Peer scrutiny of the project Triangulation (use of multiple sources, investigators, methods)
Transferability	Develop working hypotheses with rich description of time and context
Dependability	Inquiry audit performed by peer investigator In-depth description for replication of study
Confirmability	Inquiry audit Triangulation Reflexive journal

Note. Adapted from "Fourth Generation Evaluation" by E. G. Guba and Y. S. Lincoln. Copyright 1989 by Sage.

It is expected that research findings exhibit a level of confidence that may establish quality within a study. To do this, I submitted my findings to participants through interim texts in order to receive feedback regarding the events as written. Clandinin & Connelly (2000) suggest

that this is done not only to make sure that facts are correct, but also to ensure that the participant's voice and signature are authentic. I checked with participants to inquire if they saw themselves or their identities in my writing and not just their words. A colleague at SCC who is in a faculty position agreed to read through interview transcripts and provided feedback on themes that were identified. This type of peer review provides another way to check the reliability of coding. Further, I submitted my findings to an external auditor so that an unbiased opinion was obtained. Creswell (2005) supports having someone not connected with the research study to read through the completed manuscript and see if it makes sense. I asked a co-worker from SCC's counseling office that is knowledgeable about former foster youth and has a master's degree in counseling, as well as a terminal degree in higher education administration to be this auditor. I was also continuously reflexive throughout the research and writing in order to realize any biases or assumptions I may have.

Summary

College students who grew up in foster care have long been an invisible population and have blended into the college community, even as they have struggled academically, socially, and personally. Using rigorous qualitative methods, I conducted a research study that investigated this rarely found population of college students. As they tell their stories and together we make meaning of the experience, I have provided a forum where former foster youth can make their voices heard.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

Although the focus of this research is to understand how former foster youth make meaning of their experiences in college and how identity is constructed, each participant talked about his or her time in foster care, as well. This is part of their life stories and gave a sense of where they had been before going to college. To provide a holistic perspective of each youth, I have restoried each interview to present the profile as a chronological sequence of events (Creswell, 2005). This provides a person, place, and time narrative that honors each participant's experiences.

Clandinin & Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional inquiry space frames the narratives. It is helpful to remember the inward and outward, backward and forward, as well as place location of each former foster youth's story. Where have they been? Where are they going? These are parts of the narrative that "can only be sensed and understood from a reading of the full-blown inquiry" (p. 55). Stories are told from a remembered past, as well as from a present day perspective. Clandinin & Connelly submit that these stories contribute to possible future plotlines. As I listened to each story, I could "see" in my mind the past places each former foster youth had been, where they are currently situated, and possibilities that the future holds.

Profiles of Former Foster Youth

As described in Chapter III, the findings from this study are presented in two different ways. In this section, I share the interview data in the form of profiles of each of the participants. The profiles help to give a sense of the experiences of each former foster youth. The eight former foster youth interviewed shared their stories in an open and honest way. What each shared is not the whole of their lives, however. While I learned much about their lived experiences, I

recognize that there is so much more that was left unsaid. Each story was different, yet similar in many ways. The following are the stories of each participant that was shared during our interviews.

Allen. *Allen is a 21 year-old African American male who was placed into custody due to delinquency. He was initially placed at a youth development center for six months, then stepped down to a foster home placement where he stayed until he "aged out" of custody. Aging out is the term used for reaching the age of eighteen years-old while in the custody of the state. He is a political science major and is due to graduate from SCC this year.*

I got in a little trouble in (my hometown). My charge was aggravated robbery…I got involved in a gang. Basically, guilty by association is what you would call it in gangs. If you hang out with gang members of a particular gang, then after a while, the enemy of that gang is either going to declare you as a part of that gang, or since that's all you're pretty much around, you become more interested in the gang life. I was a well-known gang member. How it came about – I was actually twelve and my brothers were gang-banging and I just thought it was what you're supposed to do at my age, because everybody was doing it, so why not? Gang-banging is basically claiming the gang that you claim and you're for that gang, you wear the colors of that gang, you throw up your different signs. You meet other people from that gang. If there's a war with other gangs, you are supposed to react for your gang. And I got involved with it at twelve years old.

I found (an) interest in this gang because…they were kind of going around communities. My mom worked all her life…she was working quite a bit, like seven at night until seven in the morning. She was a good provider, but we're at the house and we're teenagers or around that age and mom's gone. We have free time – let's do all types of stuff. At that time, gang violence was

at its peak and we were warring with other gangs and maybe three or four weeks before I got incarcerated, I got shot so it wasn't looking too good. I had been shot, I'd been shot at, I'd committed crimes – not where anyone was injured of course, but just gang-related stuff. I had three near-death experiences before the age of 17. One of my older brother's incarcerated for the same crime (as mine) – aggravated robbery. We got locked up the same day and the reason he didn't get involved with DCS is he was 17 and his birthday was the next month. So, the Judge decided to try him as an adult. He's still locked up. I've never hear anything like it. A first-time offense (and) he got seven years. On a first-time offense! Because of my age…the Judge decided to use DCS as a method of punishment and sent (me) to (a) Youth Development Center (YDC).

I stayed at (YDC) from October of 2008 to April 2009. It was a requirement that you attend school, as well as other things. They try to help you find a job around the (YDC), if you have good behavior. I had good behavior there and we did have school in the morning. I decided that because I did so poorly in school in (my hometown)…to get into the GED program. I was behind (in school) and I was supposed to be in the tenth grade. I (had) failed the ninth grade twice already, so I was way behind. I received (the GED) in…2009, around March, I believe.

At the YDC I got involved into a mock trial program…and I did good and we got into the competition. It was a competition with a lot of high schools in that area. (The Judge that started the program), he kind of took me under his wing and after the program asked me…if I wanted to go back to (my hometown) or what would be some other options. I wasn't ready to go back to (my hometown), but I was ready for a transformation in my life where I was trying to do better. I looked at my life and I looked at my age and looked at the trouble I was in for my age. Being very young and (I) decided that I did not want to end up in situations like this for the rest of my life. I don't want to become another statistic. I decided to stay in this area and go to a foster

home. My (foster parents) decided that they would have me in their house and I moved in with them…April 28, 2009. I stayed with (the foster family) until spring semester of 2011, so almost two years and I stayed with (them) the whole time. I met many of the other foster children that was living in the house – I saw a lot of them come in and out. I think that the family structures that they came from caused them to act out. Certain fears that were never answered in their lives. A lot was revealed to me when talking to a lot of those (foster children) one on one and they let me know what happened in their family life that caused them to act out.

The (foster parents) were both white and it was really a culture shock. When I lived in (my hometown)…(it was) this big city and people walk around and it's just there. And (here), I actually like it. It's more slow and slow pace. You get to sit and relax without hearing gunshots and all this other stuff. It's really a release and a time to reflect. This town's so slow and (I thought), what's everybody doing? And I began to think this is how people live that's not in an urban city where crime and violence is at its peak. I started to think more about the future in the sense that I don't want to live in a bunched-up city and so close to everybody and people step on your feet and no hospitality. I'm becoming more peaceful and relaxed. I love it, actually.

I started (SCC) fall 2009, so I just sort of lived with (the foster parents) until the semester started. (At SCC), it was a struggle, because I didn't finish high school and so a lot of the stuff that they were teaching – I had no clue what was going on. I had to take a composition test and I was placed into developmental classes. So I just made a priority that – I'm here now – I just tried the best I could. I wasn't a brilliant math student at all, but reading and writing…I kind of did better in those classes and (then) it was time for college course classes after that. (At first) it was a struggle (because) my first English class, I got a D. I still had work to do as far as getting to

that level of college course material. But just bit by bit I was (doing it). I did better in English and I just started taking the other requirements for my major.

I always felt that politics may be a subject of interest (to me). I want to get into some type of radio broadcast where some form of political or social studies is involved. I want to be more involved in public speaking or ministering of younger males like myself as well as get more involved into political science. Just thinking more politically correct, I guess. I need to work on my speaking skills more. I have taken public speaking (class) and I did pretty good. I think I got an A in that class. I grew up in church and my uncle was always…well-spoken. I kind of listened and tried to pick up a lot on what he said and the way that he spoke. I like hearing people talk.

I try to study religion and history. That is like my side thing to do. I love to read about history and I love to read – not necessarily to teach religion, but to debate religion in a good…manner among people in different religions to come up with a clear perception of truth, in a sense. I love to do that. I do a lot of research when I'm by myself. I just bought twenty new books and I started reading them. But I want to get more involved in writing. I took…Early American Literature (class). (The teacher) was so amazing and he made it so interesting and the readings that we had…for the class were so interesting as well. So after that class, I began to read more literature and then I took African American Literature (class) and I began to read that more as well. I'm beginning to actually write in a little sense, but that's not to perfection. I have so many ideas about some of the oddest topics. I always wanted to write a book about travelling where you meet different people and different nationalities of people. I want to call it *The Book of Faces* because I can remember faces and remember something about those faces. I'd rather go stay with the people and learn and eat and do all types of fun stuff. I would definitely want to

start in the US before travelling abroad. If it's possible that the opportunity comes to travel around the world, then that would be really a plus. A big plus.

For me, I had a transformation while I was in (YDC). It started off as a religious transformation…I found Islam as a religion of choice. I think one thing was that there were people – even when I'm wrong – that really cared (about me). Like this Judge I mentioned earlier. He didn't have to come to the (YDC) and try to get us involved in a mock trial program. He was doing it out of his free time, his love for helping young males and I think that kind of is what triggered me to (think) somebody really cares in a sense. Whereas, I'm from this gang life, live for the day, nobody cares but the gang and it's all for the gang, you know. And once I got locked up…no one aids me or no one aids my family. So to me, a person like (the) Judge as well as the counselor at (YDC), the various people in DCS that I spoke with – I think actually cared and that triggered me to do better, because somebody cared. But the gangs in (my hometown), it's hard to break away from them. The only thing that helped me is to not go back to (my hometown), because I think it has a spirit that pulls you back into negativity. It's hard to get away from. (my hometown) is a great tourist city – tourist attraction. I actually didn't live in a ghetto. My mom's house is like five minutes from Graceland. So we didn't live in a ghetto or hood, but growing up with so many friends that are from that life…you just meet those people (and) you go into their houses and see how they live. No joke, it's like going into a third-world country. Third-world! There's just a spirit of drowsiness or laziness that people just want to sit around the house smoking weed. I smoked marijuana and I drank. But I know plenty of people that used other stuff. Once I saw that I thought, I gotta get out of here. I can't do this.

Carmen. *Carmen is a 20 year-old single African American female who is in her sixth semester at SCC, although she remains a freshman, having completed less than 30 credit hours*

of undergraduate coursework. Carmen currently lives alone in a home owned by her aunt and receives post-custody services through DCS. While transcribing Carmen's narrative, I counted 17 moves that she discussed between the ages of 12 and 18, when she aged out of custody. She is currently studying to be a social worker.

…I was turning 13 or so and I was put in (custody) for dependent neglect. Me and my mom didn't really get along. Before that, my auntie had guardianship, but they ended up sending me back home and then I got put in state's custody. I couldn't stay with (my auntie) because she had three kids and a disabled husband, so they (DCS) thought that was too much for her. So, when I came into care…I was sent to (the capital city) to a mental institution because they didn't have any homes open. I had to stay there for about two weeks and then I went to a home in (a suburb of the capital city). They had two biological kids and one foster child. We didn't really get along because they'd been together for awhile so they were kind of close. So I went to (a foster home in a rural city) and stayed with an old woman there. I didn't stay with her very long, because I got in trouble. She had told me to separate my clothes for the laundry and I did that and then she told me to pick them all up because my room was messy. I was confused…and she got mad and said she was going to throw all my clothes away. I was trying to get into the room but she was standing in the doorway, so I squeezed between her and the door. She said I pushed her, so I ended up going to Juvenile (detention).

I did a lot of moving. Minus three of them, it was because I got into trouble. They would move me because I was pitching a fit or yelling or something. I think the only time I've actually done something extremely bad was, like twice. I think I pushed my auntie once and the other time I was just threatening people but I wasn't really going to do anything. Most of the time I was getting into trouble…because I asked DCS to do something and they wouldn't do it, so I got

myself in trouble. Because DCS tends to do stuff when you get in trouble instead of when you ask politely…like, if I wanted to move a home or something. In our permanency plans…we'd have CFTM (child and family team meetings). We'd go to the meetings and they'd ask us what we want our goals to be, but they never actually listened. On my plan, it was to be adopted and I didn't want to be adopted and they kept putting it on there. And they made me do an adoption video and I didn't want to be adopted, because at this point, I was already 17. ..and they kept pushing it on me…so I acted out.

Both group homes had their own (private) schools. (At the first group home), you had no choice but to go to their school. At (the second group home) you could work your way into public school. When I was in their school (the second group home), we were doing addition and subtraction for math and I was a junior. So, of course it bored me because it was like elementary school, so I acted out…and so they started making me do GED online, which made me even more mad because I didn't want my GED. Basically, (they) did that just to keep me from acting out. The reason we were doing addition and subtraction is because that was the level that everybody else was on, which I didn't find very true or right. At (the first) group home, I don't even think we did math at all. We had class, but I don't think math was one of our subjects. So…when I got to (public) high school, I was behind in math. I didn't do well on that part in my ACT, which meant I had to take developmental classes at (SCC).

(At SCC), I basically just had to do (the admissions process) myself. My auntie, she tried to help me as much as she could, but she's kind of older. She's my great-aunt, so she didn't really know everything, but she tried. I kind of just filled out the papers and my auntie…paid for my admissions fees. I was extremely nervous and jittery (on the first day of classes), so it took me awhile to get used to it. I still get jitters sometimes because I really don't like being in

crowds, so sometimes I get anxious. (Summing up the college experience in one word would) probably be “hectic”! Three semesters ago… I failed all my classes except one. The only reason I passed that class was because of my teacher and it was my Social Welfare class. She worked at (a community mental health agency) and she kind of knew my situation, so she wouldn’t pick on me. I couldn’t make it to class sometimes – well, I could make it to class, but the bus stopped running by the time class let out. So she actually took me home after class because she didn’t want me to miss class. One time, I had to miss a test because of something that was going on and I couldn’t come to class and so she just let me take the test home and bring it back to her. So, she basically did a lot for me. She’s one of my favorite teachers…and I really like her teaching style.

My mentor started working with me a couple of years ago. She gave up her position (at a community agency) to do full-time ministry at her church, because she’s a youth minister. I started going to her church, so I’ll see her there and she adopted me as her little sister, so I have her phone number and all that. She’s the one who helped me with most of my (college paperwork). DCS isn’t really as helpful as they like to make theirselves seem. So it’s normally side organizations that we (former foster youth) get the most help from. I’m in a few youth councils that are all foster youth and we all talk and share stories…because they (DCS) don’t really tell you much. When I first aged out of custody I went without a bed for like a year and a half because I didn’t have any money to get (one). I went to (the state capital) to speak on one of the councils and I think it came up and this lady was like, “Oh, we have money for that. They’re (DCS) supposed to help you and give you money to furnish your house if you don’t have it.” I talked to some other youth and they…didn’t know either. A lot of people (former foster youth) don’t know about post-custody unless they come across someone who’s in post-custody, because not a lot of the case managers tell kids about (it). I think I found out through some random

person and not through my case worker. They're (the case workers) just like, "Where are you going when you age out?" One of my (former) foster brothers still moves from couch to couch all the time because he doesn't have anywhere to go. I guess (DCS should) prepare us better so we know what to do when we do age out because we just get booted and we're left alone. So, if we don't have other contacts, then it doesn't usually end too well.

I'm in two organizations that are for foster children so we all just talk about things and that helps. If one of us doesn't have a job, we're like, "Oh, this place is hiring" and things like that. And if somebody doesn't have a place to stay, they're like "Can I crash with you for awhile?" I see them (other former foster youth) at meetings. Most of them have Facebook, so I talk with them there and a few of them have my number so I can talk to them that way. All of the councils have Facebook pages that are private…and we just talk to each other through there. I don't know how many times I've heard somebody say that "One of my foster brothers is locked up." One of my (former) foster sisters that lived with me at my auntie's house, I saw her in the Just Busted paper one time and it really hurt my feelings.

Crom. *Crom is a 19 year-old white male who was placed into state custody at age 16 due to juvenile delinquency. He spent only six months in out-of-home care before being returned to his home. He is in his third semester at SCC, having spent his first semester of college at another community college in an emergency medical technician program of which he reports he was "kicked out." Crom then transferred to SCC, where he is currently enrolled in a pre-medical program. He receives only the Chafee education and training voucher through post-custody services and lives at home with his mother, father, and younger sister.*

At first it (foster care) was fairly annoying. All the meetings with my case managers and stuff like that, you know. I wasn't used to it and didn't know what to expect, but it wasn't nearly

as bad as I was led to believe. I can't remember her (case manager) name, but she was very nice and she did a lot of stuff to help out. She authorized me to visit my family pretty quickly so…I wasn't causing too much trouble. (The foster care experience was) tedious. That's all it was. You know, playing the waiting game because it was already established that I was going to be let out as soon as possible, because I had no reason to stay in the system. I was only in the system because my house environment was considered unstable at the time because of various reasons…parents aren't there enough for appropriate supervision, stuff like that.

There's pros and cons to being home. At least at home, I don't have to worry about getting into trouble because someone decided to throw my name into the mix. There's always problem kids there (at the group home) you know, starting fights or something and you're just like, really can we just move along because this is getting annoying at this point. I didn't get into trouble. I got into trouble at my last place (an in-patient program before the group home) because I wasn't too conformative and that wasn't something they really liked. They like to have nice little stamped-out kids to send out into the world. I'd be a bad soldier. I'd get shot for insubordination. "I'm not doing that. Go away." It gets me in trouble at work, too. I'm an anomaly. I'm not going to do something if everyone else is, because then it's not fun. I'm sort of the hipster of trouble to be annoying. I just wanted to go back home. I was tired of eating crappy meals all the time. Having good food is (a) very good incentive to not cause trouble.

I went to a school…it was owned by (a community mental health agency). I had to go there because it was too late in the semester for me to go to regular schools. It sucked. Overall, it was pretty disorganized and chaotic, because it was an alternative school where they took all the kids that got kicked out of regular school. So everyone there was doing their own thing to make chaos. And the teachers weren't obviously very enthusiastic about doing anything and they

didn't really do anything more than what they were required to do. Like if you asked questions, they'd usually pass you over. And they were trying to keep somebody from trying to kill somebody else with a stapler or something. Most of what I did was independent study anyway. I got high school credit from (those classes), but I think that if I was glued to the ceiling, I still would have got credit for my classes. I didn't have to do anything. I just sat in the corner and did occasionally whatever the teacher had for me to do. And that was it. There was nothing else, because the rest of the day was them (the teachers) trying to keep the trouble-makers from making too much chaos.

I ended up having to wait (to take the ACT) because the school I was at had me set up to take the exam over at (a public university), but because I transferred out, I wasn't there for the day so I lost my free ACT (provided to all students in the state). Plus, I had to pay for my own when I went back to (public high school). I didn't bother (getting help from DCS). I figured that the resource was there, but I didn't feel like going through the crap that required me to do so. I made it to college (because) I gave a damn about getting out of high school. I'm fairly certain that most of the others (students) thought they'd be able to live successful lives as drug dealers. It was my own doing that I was (prepared for college work). I'm certain that if I had spent any amount of time at the alternative school, then I would have failed out of the first semester and then just given up on everything and gone to work at McDonald's or something. Because I don't see there being any benefit to an alternative school except separating the kids that can work and the ones that can't.

I enjoyed the atmosphere of the classes (in college). But the issues I had with the instructor (at the previous college) were too much and I had to leave. I was in the EMT (emergency medical technician) program and we were pretty much just a glorified taxi which

was another turn-off. I thought it would be a bit more an adrenaline rush and it was more, “Oh, Mrs. Johnson needs to have her IV taken out. We’ll call an ambulance and have them do it for us.” Okay. It kind of sucked a lot. I’ve enjoyed it (at SCC). I’ve always liked learning in general but I had a lot of fun the first semester. Probably more than I should have considering I didn’t do too well in a class or two, but it’s part of being a freshman.

I was originally a nursing major but I switched my major to pre-med this semester because I realized that I don’t have any bedside manner at all. And if I was to constantly be in contact with the same people, I’d eventually get reported for sarcastic comments or something. I’d just be joking around and stuff. There’s always someone that takes the jokes too far and so that would eventually happen and I’d get in trouble and then I’d be “I don’t want to do this anymore” and then I’d go back to school and pretty much start over from scratch. So I figure at least if I’m going to start over, I’m not having to do as much make-up work. My current plans – goals, whatever you want to call it – (are) to get my bachelor’s in pre-med and then apply for citizenship in Sweden and then go from there to whatever university to get the proper accreditation for a master’s level doctor in radiology or something and work at a research facility. (Sweden) has all the things I’m really looking for. It’s cold, the people are fairly nice, and it’s a small country. So I don’t have to worry about masses and politics and things that stall progress. And, you know, it’s Sweden. It’s got one of the best metal (music) scenes in the world and that’s also a big draw for me as well.

The good thing about my current plan is that I can flex it however I need to (in order) to meet whatever demands I need. I haven’t put down like this year, this goal. If I do that, I’ll end up undercutting myself in some form or fashion and then miss out on something that could be good. By leaving it generalized, I’m able to respond and adapt. Sort of like battle plans, I

suppose. You know, best laid plans never survive first contact. So you leave stuff simple. Easier to work around and easier to respond to whatever anomalies you didn't see.

The staff (at SCC) are really nice. The average age of the classes I've been in…I've seen somewhere near thirty or forty. The people are trying to come back to make themselves more competitive in the job market with an education, so there's not too many people here that I can identify with and talk to on a regular basis. But the staff, you know – the teachers and stuff – I've had a few conversations with them and they're a lot of fun. They're involved and willing to help. I haven't had any issues with any of them. I've been trying to help with the starting of the philosophy club but that's been messed up because of work. I can't meet at the times and as far as I know, they're not going to be changing the meetings for those. It's hard to get the free time to do the things you want when you have other responsibilities, but that's sort of the price you pay to be able to do those things.

Holly. *Holly was placed into custody at age 16 after her mother had passed away and her father was too ill to care for her. She had been placed at a family foster home with her younger brother, but when she became pregnant, her foster family requested she be moved. She was placed at a group home that specializes in teen pregnancies. Holly discussed several changes in placement after she had her baby and left her initial group home before she aged out of custody. Holly is in her first semester at SCC, having taken a few years off after aging out. She married a man who is not the father of her first-born child and now has a second child with him.*

It was hard not being with family all the time. My mom died when I was 12 and then I lived with my sister because my dad couldn't take care of us. Then I got put in state's custody and I was with my brother's foster parents and then went to (a group home). It was my sophomore year in high school and it was summertime when I went to the group home and I

attended the on-site school there. The (DCS) case worker that I had, I don't think he really cared or knew what was going on. So when I went into labor with (the baby), they had nowhere for me to go until the night after they were supposed to discharge me from the hospital. They kept me in the hospital another night (until) they could find a place for me. So that was his, "Okay, there you go" type of placement. The (foster home) I went to right after I had (the baby), it wasn't the cleanest and we ended up – there was like four or five of us at (the group home) that had all been in it – and we all had the same case worker. They ended up taking her (the foster mother) to court and having her rights as a foster parent stripped or something. I'm pretty sure the foster home was closed. (After that) I left and I was put in a foster home and went to (a public high school) for like, six weeks and then went to (a second group home) and went to (a different public high school). It was hard making new friends and getting used to everything else and then having to change schools again. (The second group home) closed and then they had that lawsuit that no one under the age of 13 was allowed in a group home or whatever, so I fell under that because of (her baby), so they moved me to another foster home and then I graduated (high school).

I had four or five (DCS case workers) within a two year span. I remember two who were good…but I didn't like (one case worker). I didn't care for him because he always did what I didn't want him to do. Like with custody with (the baby) and the visitations (with his biological father). It was set up that (the baby's) daddy had to go up to DCS to see him. Well, the court said if he didn't show, the visits weren't supposed to happen. Well, I wasn't allowed to drop (the baby) off there, because I was still at the point of wanting to kill him, so it was always an argument. So I wasn't allowed up there. Somebody from (the group home) or somebody was taking him up there. There was numerous times within a three or four month span that (the

baby's) daddy didn't come up there. It was his mom and his girlfriend at the time that would come up and it never got stopped. It was court ordered! But you can't stop people. There was a lot of things with (the baby) that wasn't supposed to happen that happened. Or I was forced into signing papers when (the baby's father) went into Americorps or something like that. They wanted me to sign papers saying that I was going to take care of (the baby) while (the baby's father) was there. I threw a fit about it because (the baby) was already with me and…there was no reason for those papers. (The case worker) said either I sign it or he was going to sign it.

I think…that had I not been in state's custody and had (the baby), or not had (the baby) in state's custody, I wouldn't have graduated (high school). Because, in state's custody, I had a whole lot of people that helped and were always there when I needed a break with (the baby), or needed help or anything like that. They would always help me out. In the long run, it was better (being in foster care) because there was more people around to help and not judge or make comments because I was so young when I had (the baby).

(After graduation from high school) I registered for college at SCC. I did all the financial aid myself and it got messed up so I ended up not going. I didn't have anybody to help me and I think that's why it got messed up. So I took a couple of years off and now I'm back. I kept saying I was going to go back to school after (the youngest) was born, so I just figured I was going to do it now and quit postponing it. It was just stressful being back in a school situation again. I'd been working and then staying home with the kids. My youngest, he had hydrocephalus when he was born, so he's had (about) six surgeries. We think what happened was they lost his heartbeat for like, six minutes when I was in labor with him, so they put the internal monitors on and we didn't know it at the time, but it can cause hydrocephalus. But, he's fine – you wouldn't even know anything was ever wrong with the kid.

This semester I have math, reading and English – all the fundamental or learning support to get to college level and it's stressful because it's stuff that I don't remember learning at all. The math is what's stressful out of everything. This advisor that set me up (with classes), he set me up on all the fundamental classes this semester, which everybody's told me that I shouldn't have done, because it's hard to have all three of them in one semester. There's so much thrown at you. I'm doing all right. I'm just stressed out because of the test deadlines with math. I plan to major in Paralegal Studies, which I'm not real happy about because I have to take all those classes at (another campus). I don't like that at all. I'm five minutes away from (the main) campus. But, oh well, I'll get used to it.

Jeremy. *Jeremy is a 21 year old single male who reports his race to be "black and white." He is in his second semester at SCC, however he withdrew from his first semester due to homelessness. Jeremy has spent the majority of his life in foster care, his narrative represents nine moves in placements. He is currently renting a motel room with two friends who are also students at SCC.*

Well, like I said, I been in foster care all my life pretty much. And I mean, they treat you…all the foster homes I been in treat you okay as far back as I can remember. But, I was always bad. I guess I had problems. I got in trouble. A lot. For just stupid stuff…like nothing real bad. But yeah, one time I did try to burn down a house. I didn't *try* to burn down the house. I was playing with fire…and I got in real trouble and they just thought I was crazy, I guess. So they sent me up to another foster home. I got switched around to a lot of foster homes. Some of them wasn't that bad, they just had to move me. I went in (to foster care) when I was a baby and then I got to go back to my mama. And then I went back in (foster care) around (age) six or seven. I had two…biological sisters and a biological brother. We was all sent to foster care and they split

us up, so I haven't seen them since. Last I heard, my brother was in (a nearby town). He's deaf, so he can't hear. He uses sign language, but he's playing basketball – that's when I saw him. Heck, he didn't even remember me. I don't know, he probably did, though. But I haven't seen my two sisters since last I heard they got adopted by a couple and moved to Florida. I think they got their names changed, too.

After that, I got switched to a new home and these people down there were mean. They adopted me. At first, everything was okay and I was about…eight (years old) when they adopted me. I had…three other foster brothers and one sister. And they all got adopted, too – one at a time. These people had a lot of money and we ended up moving up to (a rural county). Things just started getting worse because they wouldn't feed us and stuff…because, like I said, I did stupid stuff and got in trouble. We started getting in trouble and then we started getting beatings for the stuff we did. And then they put me in the closet. I know, it's crazy. We were on the news and everything and we were living in a mansion up there. But…I guess she got all that money from us. We had to clean and do a bunch of chores and stuff and if we didn't do them, we'd get in trouble for that, too.

She (the adoptive mother) took care of a bunch of animals. She had her husband build a mini house for the animals. She had cats and dogs and she treated them better than us. And we had to take care of them and if…my foster sister…didn't clean the animal house, she'd get a beating. She (the adoptive mother) inspected it. I'd take the dogs out and walk them. They'd let me out of the closet to do my chores. I had my own room at first. Then it got to where I was scared to come out of the room. We had two bunk beds and the four brothers…all shared the room. I just started pissing up by the bunk bed because I was scared to go out of the room. They had…this alarm and every time the door opened, this alarm would go off. It would make…a

beeping sound. She (the adoptive mother) just always wanted to know what we was doing at every moment. So the alarm would go off and then I just got scared because every time I'd go out of the room, she'd get mad about something. I just started pissing and they found out about it. I got the beating of my life for that. And it'd get so crucial. I've been thinking about that every day almost. The dude (adoptive father) would grab our hands right behind our backs (demonstrates by holding his hands behind him) and he'd use a pvc pipe on every one of us. He'd put our hands behind our backs and hold our feet and then put his – like somehow he held our hands and feet behind us. And then he just starts beating us with the pvc pipe. That's when I got sent to the closet. They put a lock on it so I wouldn't get out. But, they had put others in the closet sometimes.

But, I was the only black dude – well, mixed – but she (adoptive mother) called me a nigger and everything. But, the others were all white. She'd always talk about our mothers like they were whores and stuff like that. Oh, now it just got crazier and crazier and then one day, I guess (foster sister) just got tired of it. I was about 13 and I guess…she was 14. She just decided to run away to the neighbors and tell them what all was going on. Course, we didn't know…where she had went. She (adoptive mother) just told me to go up and check the dog house and make sure (foster sister) was still in there – see if it was clean because I had to come back and report to her. And she (foster sister) was gone so I came back and told her (adoptive mother)…and she went to look for her and couldn't find her. Then, she (adoptive mother) got a call from the police station and they wanted her to come down there and get her (foster sister). So when we got down there, they (police) took us away from her (adoptive mother) and put them (adoptive parents) in jail. But, they bonded out overnight and they (DCS) put us in foster care.

My case worker…moved all of us together because we didn't want to get split up at first. We went with these people in (another rural county), so I went with them the longest. They (the foster brothers) got in trouble (and) we had to move because we all had problems. I had ADHD – I still do pretty much. I stayed with them like, three years and they was going to adopt me and then I got in trouble at school. (Some other students) were selling weed and joints…and I had one on me and somebody told…and I had to go to the school office. So they put me in the alternative school and I guess she (the foster mother) decided she couldn't deal with me no more and I had to move. The other two boys (foster brothers)…went somewhere else completely. They (DCS) split them up after we all left that home.

I went to (another foster home) and I stayed there for a pretty good time. Then I got switched out of that home to another home that was in (a large city suburb). I got into trouble because I ran away from that home…to go to a party with a friend, so he (the foster father) couldn't deal with me no more so I got switched to (a nearby county). Now, (these foster parents), they pretty much was not doing everything by the book…I pretty much could do anything over there. We could smoke cigarettes, get drunk. First time I ever got drunk was when I was 17 in that foster home and the dude (foster father) gave it to me. We'd cut down trees with him and he'd give us whiskey. Course, he was drinking, too. I ended up running away from there because they were going to put me in a group home, I think. I was…17 and I stayed with my friend. I didn't want to stay on the run because it was getting hard to eat, so I just turned myself in. Course, I had to go to Juvenile (detention) for that and then my case worker moved me to (a rural county)…a couple weeks before I turned 18.

My case worker told me about the independent programs I could have went into and I chose not to. That's where I messed up. Course, you know, when you're in foster care all your

life, you just tired of it and you just want to get out. I didn't want to go to no independent program. So I aged out. I went down to Mobile, Alabama with a friend and I got stuck down there and I was homeless. People had to show me around because I was young and then they got me in this program down there where I got my GED. That was the best feeling to finally achieve something. I stayed there about six months. My case worker mailed me all my stuff like my insurance card, my social security and all that. The people in Mobile really helped me get back in school, because I told them I was probably going to go to (SCC). I was 19 at this time and was getting back in school. When I first came (to SCC)…all I thought about was the money. And I thought it was going to be easy. But I really didn't pay attention. I was talking all the time. I pretty much…had to quit school because I was in another homeless situation. Then, I had to live with a friend and so after I got the money (from the Pell Grant), I quit school, which was dumb on my part.

Since then, I was just living with friends and so now I'm just back in school. My friends…had been in school and so they helped me to get back in, too. I'm just trying to change my life around and try to finish school and *be* something. (A local ministry program) helped me to get back in school, too. I don't know what I was thinking. I'm just glad I got that second chance to do the right thing. I've got so many things I want to be. I thought about, since I was in foster care, to be a social worker…to help somebody because I've been through the stuff that they've been through and I could sort of like, be a mentor or something. I'm sort of a Christian. I've been going to church and I got saved. You know, the Bible says to forgive and all that, so I try to do that.

I enjoy (school), I really do. I enjoy having my assignments done before I even have to. It makes me feel good. It's a good feeling – actually, it's a great feeling. Some assignments are a

challenge, but I usually end up working through them. Now that I pay attention, it is easy, but it's hard to just sit in one place at a time. I can pay attention now without (medication). I think I do need a tutor or something like that. I (also) need a job. When I'm not at school, I need something to keep me busy. My (roommates) have jobs and they are also going to school as full-time students. We rent a hotel room right now. We pay weeks at a time. We're waiting on our school money so we can go in on a house. We want a four bedroom house. But, with our school money, we aren't going to have anything left. We might be able to buy some clothes and something like that, but we have to pay maybe three or four month's rent with our school money. We've pretty much got it all planned out.

Justin. *Justin is a 23 year old white male who was placed into state custody due to juvenile delinquency for on-going drug charges and was ordered into a youth detention facility to serve a finite amount of time. Upon his release, he was able to receive post-custody services to assist with his college education. After his first year at SCC, Justin took a few years off and has recently returned. Justin currently lives at home with his parents and is in his fourth semester at SCC. He is majoring in education and would like to be an elementary school teacher.*

I came to (SCC) the day after I was released from custody. It was not good. The environment was so drastically different. I was allowed to come for freshman orientation earlier in the summer. My counselor (from YDC) brought me and…he…let me go free. He let me eat with my mom after and he even let me sit in the front of the truck that we came in, so I didn't have to be shackled in the back. I had my own personal clothes, so I appreciated being able to do that. It was a privilege, but it was no fun getting out (of the youth development center) and then the next day having to start (school) and being overwhelmed with the amount of people that were just everywhere here. The first class I remember just not knowing how to feel with sitting in a

group of people, so I was really overwhelmed and I guess just going from that change – the restrictions to no restrictions and being around everybody and no in-between. I didn't really have any time to adjust. I saw a Judge…when I was 18 and I had requested (to be released) a week or two weeks earlier to adjust. He cut a day off (time served) because I would have had to stay that Monday (that school started). So Sunday was my release date instead of Monday.

When I got out of (the youth development center) – I had seen a psychiatrist and I was on medicines there – they sent a month or two supply and I never took any of it. There was an antidepressant and an anti-anxiety and I don't know what else, but I quit taking it and I don't remember why now. I don't know what my thinking was then. I know a lot better now. I spent it seems like most of my life trying to find the right combinations (of medication). My motivation for using (drugs) in the first place was always to self-medicate for depression and anxiety like a lot of people do. I didn't follow up (with a psychiatrist) when I got home. If I wanted to, I know I could have seen a psychiatrist and continue the medication and if I really wanted to, I could have seen a therapist. Of course, I didn't want to. I had better things to do at the time, I thought. I guess I'd had so much therapy in (the youth development center). I didn't have anyone pushing me to do any follow-up after I left. I'm sure I had plenty of people recommend (it). I wasn't on any probation or under any kind of restriction or supervision, so I also had that behind me. Throughout my adolescence I had caseworkers, social workers, psychologists – just an array of not always very effective help, but it felt like there was nothing available.

There's just so many emotions – the freedom – and finally getting out of the place that just everything was so overwhelming and that night I used. The night I got out I actually ran into somebody that I had been in (the youth development center) with and I just thought that was so ironic. I remember being so overwhelmed, but good feelings. But I didn't really know what to do

with it, I guess. I was actually hoping to find some sort of benzodiazepine for the next day because I was overwhelmed and I was dreading it so much. The guy I ran into had some marijuana and I smoked it. I just started right off and I (started) using a lot of cocaine, even in school. I used pretty much anything I could get my hands on. I know my…mind was still sick. Even though I did use in (the youth development center), I still had the same mentality, the same way of thinking. So when I got out…I would even research drugs as a replacement. I know how crazy that is now. I want to say that I would have eventually used, maybe not that night, but I think that being released earlier would have given me a little more of a chance to adjust. I remember I had to stop asking my parents what I could eat or if I could have this or do that. It's just such a big adjustment.

I was in (the youth development center) almost a year, but I'd been in rehab before that. I got kicked out of rehab and, because I was on probation at the time, it was like the final straw. Originally, the Judge said that I would have an indeterminate sentence in foster care. Then they changed their mind and said I would have a determinate sentence to age 19. I was pretty shocked by that. I remember being terrified then. In ways, I did learn certain things and it did change me in certain ways and it changed me in negative ways. I understand why I was there, though. I put myself there. It is hard for me to understand my thinking with certain things.

The classes at (the youth development center) were really a joke, some of them. In a way, I understand, some of them would be good teachers, but they couldn't handle the students. Or, some were good at handling the students, but couldn't teach very well. After I graduated, I ended up being a teacher's assistant and a library assistant to a teacher's aide. There was supposed to be a teacher in the class, but there never was. There was just a teacher's aide. I remember my geometry class was just…completion work, so I didn't try. I just filled in the work because it

wasn't really gone over. The most difficult part about school there was dealing with the other students. The work wasn't hard because there were so many lower…resource-considered kids. Even the regular high school classes were really kind of dumbed down. I remember the principal would have no interaction with the students at all. He would stand at the door coming to school and hold the door open and that's all you'd see of him. The assistant principal did all the work, seemingly. So, being the teacher's assistant, I got a better understanding of how that works. It wasn't coordinated very well and there wasn't much school. I got my diploma. I even gave a speech. I was considered a student speaker at graduation. I think I was like one of three that got a diploma and the rest got GEDs.

I probably wouldn't have gotten my diploma if there hadn't been…a lot of one-on-one help. So, if I'd been at public school, I never would have gotten my diploma. I just didn't function then – I didn't want it for myself. I remember one semester I was sick so much one of the teachers told me during the finals I could just go to sleep. Just lay down and go to sleep because there wouldn't be any way I could pass. I just didn't work and I'd get in too much trouble. I went to (a private school) and they eventually wouldn't take me back. I guess I just got in so much trouble there. I was into drugs and drug-related things and I wouldn't listen to anybody. I figured they just couldn't take me anymore. I was just too much of a disruption to the other students there. So I went to (a public alternative school) when I was a junior and they really helped me and let me work with the kids there. They had the (County school) psychiatrist or psychologist evaluate me and they pretty much said that I did drugs and got into trouble because I wanted to and I needed to go to someplace like (juvenile detention school). My parents said that I had emotional issues and I had problems, so I think that's why they settled on (the public alternative school), but then I went to (the youth development center) instead.

The first day at (SCC) and walking through the large crowds of students…put me in a panic. The way it kind of unfolded for me coming out of (the youth development center) and the next day starting college. It's not necessarily a large college. And walking into class, I remember seeing people that I had known from one of the schools before. But, I didn't have any friends and I kind of felt alone and just overwhelmed. So, it's very hard to focus on math. I think that's why it was easier for me in the (flexible learning) class. There were just a few people and the teacher. I didn't have to push myself to go there because it was more voluntary. I feel like in leaving (the youth development center), the biggest difference (was) the other students. I was always watching what they were doing, making sure they weren't going to hurt me, and then going to a college classroom where there were people behind you – rows of people behind you – and everybody's trying to write down and take notes. It's just such a different setting. I didn't have to worry about who was behind me and that's taken years to slowly get over. It's taken me years to not have to sleep by a weapon. But I'm okay now without any of that. I see now how that was…irrational and it's not very healthy thinking. But, I guess fear plays a big part in it. Going to (SCC) was just very intimidating to me.

I guess I knew I was in trouble from the beginning. I didn't know how I was going to be able to do the work or the amount of homework or studying. The first week or two, I was already overwhelmed with it. I never really learned how to do homework. I guess the difference between the high school classes that I went to and the college classes were so dramatically different. I really did want to come (to college), but I wasn't equipped, I don't think. I feel like I never learned how to really try my hardest in school. (At previous schools) there's no real homework. I eventually dropped out of two (classes) and I stayed with the writing class that I had, I guess partly because I really enjoyed that class, which makes a big difference. The teacher really

pushed me to do (the work). I really liked the teacher. I know that was the only credit that I had from my first year. I remember she made me promise her to do certain things and she really pushed me to finish. When I think about it I know that (made a difference) because obviously she was more individualized. It wasn't like my other classes where I wasn't getting as much help or I was getting behind.

At first I was living with my parents and then, within six months or so my parents kicked me out and I was living with a girlfriend. My girlfriend talked to me and wished that I would stop (using drugs) and I did for awhile. My second semester, I had the same classes as her and we would talk each other out of coming (to class) and eventually I didn't finish any classes that semester. I guess anxiety has a lot to do with it because at the time, I was on bad terms with my parents and that stressed me out all day and night. They'd never kicked me out before or anything. Every semester since (then), I've told myself I would go back, but I haven't until now.

I was clean for awhile (in the second semester) and I had a class with an old friend. He had asked me to split a pill with him. He ended up committing suicide not long after that. I remember I wanted to so bad, but it didn't really work out and so I do remember I was clean for awhile then. That went on for a year or so and then I started using without her (the girlfriend) knowing for about a year. Then I came out and told her and she told my family and they were going to try to get me into a facility, but they couldn't (because of insurance). So, I detoxed myself and then about a month later I was clean. Not long after that, I got shot in the hand and I had to start back on pain medicine and she (girlfriend) started using with me then. Eventually me and my parents got on good terms and they would let me come back, but I ended up staying with the girlfriend and…we got our own apartment.

There were people who helped me and it's hard to know how to help certain kids, but it seems like a lot of the help – there was always something missing. I don't know exactly what. I never learned the tools to help with coming to college. I still feel like I'm lacking in some ways and I know with addiction you do tend to stop your mental and spiritual growth, but I know that you catch up a lot quicker in ways. I still feel like I'm behind in ways, too. I still have trouble with homework and focusing for long periods of time, but I don't let my anxiety get to me nearly as much and I'm not worried about all the people in my classroom, so I'm not scared to come to my classes. I know it was just a fear in my own head. I don't have all those anxieties. For about two years or so after getting out of (the youth development center), that was my life, so that's all I knew. I felt consumed by it. I still feel like part of me is still there, but…for the longest time that's all I would talk about. It took a long time to adjust. So, when I think about it, I don't know if (being released) a week or two (earlier) would have made a difference. If I had that time in between, it would have helped, though. But, if I had got out on a Monday instead of Sunday, I might have used that as an excuse not to go to college at all.

Lily. *Lily is a single white female who is 21 years-old and has a six year-old son, Mikey. She is in her fourth year at SCC and will graduate this year with two degrees: one, an associate of applied science in management and the other, a general associate of science. She plans to attend a large, southeastern US university next year to complete a bachelor's degree in business. In the six months she was in foster care, she had three different placements before she aged out and accepted post-custody services. She currently receives only the Chafee educational voucher.*

Before we (Lily and her son, Mikey) went into state's custody, my mom was really bad our whole life. (She) was a really bad, abusive alcoholic. We were taken away from her by our aunt when I was in fifth grade and (an older brother) was in sixth grade. He was taken away from

her again when he was in seventh grade, because my mom got us back right after our aunt took us. I'm pretty sure DCS was probably involved because they made her go to rehab before she could get us back. I remember her being in jail.

My mom's crazy. One time, before I even had Mikey, one of my friends stayed the night. My friend was in the shower while we were getting ready to go to bed and my mom started breaking everything in my room. All of my baton trophies, all of my ballet trophies, everything in my room. For no reason whatsoever. I asked her what she was doing and I was crying and asking her to stop. And then she said she didn't know what she was doing and she was s piece of shit. She started completely hitting herself in the face. So by this time, my friend had turned off the shower and she's crying in the bathroom. To get my mom to calm down, I had to sit on top of her and hold her arms down to make her stop hitting herself. I had to tell her the no, she wasn't crazy, she was fine and she was just drunk and she needed to go to bed. So I finally get her to go to bed and I go to check on my friend and she was in the bathroom bawling – crying because she's freaking out. My mom just liked to show her ass off all the time.

I was 14 when I got pregnant and 15 when I had (Mikey). I met Mikey's father through my brother. (Mikey's father) came over to smoke weed with my brother and my mom and I thought he was cute. I was young and stupid. Some people believe that marijuana isn't a gateway drug, but I think it is. He (Mikey's father) went from marijuana to different things, then to crack and then selling crack. I found out about it and I was out of the picture. I left my mother's because of alcohol, why would I stay with him? So, I told the court about it and they made him take drug tests to get his (parental) rights. He's tested positive for cocaine three times, so he doesn't do anything for us and he doesn't try. But that's okay, I've done it for six years now. I think I can do okay.

Right before I went into state's custody, I had to go through six months of anger management and a mental health evaluation. The one and only time I ever defended myself was (when) she hit me with my son in my arms. I handed my son to my brother and I took her on and told her to hit me again, but she wouldn't. The next day, me and five of my friends were getting ready for prom and she came out of the bathroom with just a towel on and started hitting me over and over again. I let her hit me in my face seven times with her fist without doing anything at all. I just (kept saying), "Mom, stop." I finally hit her back and I hit her twice in front of my friends. My brother's girlfriend was helping us get ready, because she's a cosmetologist. She's the one that called the cops. The police came and took pictures and…my friends were freaking out. I went to a neighbor's house and called DCS and said I wanted out of that house. (But) I still went to prom. That was my normal life for me and I wasn't going to let her take that from me. When it started, she really didn't want me to go and that made me want to go even more. That was one of the big things that little girls look forward to. I had to cake on some more makeup where I had bruises after we got done, but I was already ready and I was not going to not go! That's what I told (DCS), too. I'm going! It was a pretty crazy night.

Each time (one of these) altercations happened, my mom told (DCS) that I was bi-polar and schizophrenic. They believed what she was saying because she's very persuasive, I guess. So I bought (a digital recorder) and took it home and for three days just taped it under a table and recorded. I was 17…and I'd done enough research to where I could get myself and my son out (of the house). So I went to the guidance counselor (at school) and told them I wanted a guardian ad litem sent to my school and then I hit play on (the recorder). He listened for a few minutes and he told me I was not to leave that school and they were going to pick up my son. I was just determined that I wasn't going to let my son be raised how I was. So (DCS) picked me up from

school that day, we went and got my stuff, and we went to the main (DCS) building. We had to sit there for a few hours while the paperwork was taken care of and they tried to find me a place to go.

They (DCS) thought they were going to have to put me in a group home until they could find me a foster family to live with, but they found one…that night. So I moved in with them and…the whole downstairs…she had for me and my son. We had our own little living area and bathroom. But it wasn't a great experience for the fact…the lady was more or less doing it for the money. And then she took advantage of the fact that…I was a teen-aged girl that could babysit for her children and she could leave all the time and leave her kids with me. She had me driving her kids to school. That's one of the things that devastated me the biggest is…if I just moved into that house and she was already trusting me enough to leave her children with me, no. That's not cool with me. I was not okay with that at all. And she like to smoke weed, so that's why I turned her in. It didn't bother me in front of me. My mom had always smoked, and I was older so that was fine, but the children of her own that were younger and…my kid that was really young. I was NOT okay with that. So I quickly told on her and she ended up getting her license to be a foster parent taken away. Then I went to another foster home for a short time…and I went to a different lady's house and that's where I stayed for the rest of the time. I went to three homes (in six months). The last home was just perfect and she actually just wrote me on Facebook the other day and invited me to her church. Unfortunately I have to work and I can't. She was absolutely amazing – a wonderful Christian lady. I stayed at the same (high school) the whole time. That was good that I didn't have to change schools. (DCS) didn't want me to, since I was already a senior and I'd already done all four of my years there. And I was twirling in the band, so they didn't want to take that from me, I guess. I was very thankful.

The whole time I was going through state's custody, I guess the biggest battle that I faced was…(having to) sign custody of my son over. For the foster parents to be able to get the money for (both) me and my son, they made me sign (custody papers). That was devastating for me. It hurt a lot, but as soon as I turned 18, they signed him back, so it wasn't a big deal I guess. For me it hurt really bad. He was never separated from me. We were together through the entire ordeal. I'm pretty sure when I turned 18 my foster mom would have allowed me to stay with her, but I didn't want to. I just wanted to be on my own with my son, because my mom resented me for leaving and if I was on my own and that wasn't thrown up in her face anymore, that there would be a way for us to build a relationship back. So that's the reason that I left.

As soon as I turned 18, I got into post-custody. They give you living expenses…until you turn 21. So that helped a tremendous amount because once I left I moved out on my own. I think the biggest thing that helped was getting paid for school. A counselor at (high school) helped me get into SCC, because I had no idea what I was doing and I was really freaking out. It didn't even hit me till…I think it was past the deadline and I was…ready to roll into school. My counselor came up to me and (asked) if I had done anything about (registering for college) yet and I said no. She pulled me into her office…and made me do it.

I was really scared at first at (SCC). I've always been a really good student, though. I've always made honor roll even with all of that (turmoil). I was still making straight As. School is just my thing, it just works for me. Half the time, I don't even study for my exams. I just go in and take them and I make really good grades. So I was scared because I was afraid it was going to be a big change. But, it hasn't been that hard for me. I had to have developmental reading and writing…and all the core basic classes, so I think that helped a lot ease into college. They were really easy classes.

The only thing that's been hard is time management. I really envy the people that have a full-time job and just get to go to work and then go home and do nothing. I hate having so much homework. And I don't have internet because I can't afford it. So, I go to friends' houses all the time and that makes it that much harder…especially when there's a huge paper due. It will be nine o'clock at night and I'll still have my kid out and his bedtime is nine-thirty. So I'm trying to have to hurry up and rush my paper when I really want to spend four more hours on it to make it perfect. I thought about getting a roommate just so that I can afford internet, but I like it just being me and Mikey. I've heard too many horror stories (about roommates) and watch way too much Judge Judy! I don't have cable, either, so I watch her all the time.

I think for me, it's different than from most other foster kids, because I had different foster brothers and sisters in different foster homes and I was a lot more mature than they were. I guess just because I've been through a lot in my life and I had to grow up really quick. I think the biggest thing that probably would have helped me the most is if I had been taught more about how to build credit before I left (foster care). But I signed up for post-custody and I'm really glad I did. I don't know what else I would have done. I get (DCS) money for school and I get Pell (grant) and other (scholarships) because I was on the Dean's List a couple of times. I guess I would say (I am) blessed. I mean, I have friends who have children, too, and they're having to work full-time and come to school just to pay for their bills. And for me, where I was in state's custody, they (DCS) pay for my school (and) I get all of my money back. Not just some of it – all of it. And so I'd say I'm blessed for sure, because without that, I would not have any time with my child.

Rachelle. *Rachelle is in her first year at SCC, having completed two semesters at a state university previously. She is a 19 year old single African American female and plans to major in*

criminal justice. Rachelle currently lives with her foster mother, her biological sister, and her foster mother's two children. She is receiving post-custody services that assist with housing and tuition for college.

I guess the first time I was in foster care I was about five. First I went from my birth parents. They couldn't provide for me – there was some talk about drug and alcohol problems. So, first I was moved with my aunt and I don't know what happened, but I got put into foster care with my two other sisters. I was in two foster homes back in California. It was pretty good, I guess. I was really young and I don't remember too much. I just remember being bounced around – I do remember that part. After the foster homes in California, I moved to Tennessee and I was put in foster care. I don't remember why we came here, but I remember meeting this family. It was really big. After a year, I got adopted, so I was adopted from the time I was about 8 until I was 14. That was a really abusive situation and I was put back into foster care when I was 14. I've been to four homes since then. Those weren't really good experiences. I guess every family's different, but a few of the homes I just wasn't happy with what was going on. I was really depressed and I had to switch school all the time and that wasn't really fun.

During the adoption period my sisters were having behavioral troubles, so they were sent back to California, so we were separated. The adoptive home we were in, it was really bad. And then one of my sisters actually ended up coming back and then she went back to California because I guess she was acting out and my adoptive mother didn't like that very well. So, she got sent back where she went back into foster care. My sisters are both older than me. My sister that goes to (SCC), we actually met in my adopted home. I guess that was when I was about ten, she was eleven. This lady (the adoptive mother) takes trips and she adopts kids from all over. We had ten or fifteen kids in that home, so my sister came from Indiana. When we were removed

from that situation, we wanted to stay together and they (DCS) decided not to separate us. I heard my other sister is working and going to college in California. I guess she found a family member or somebody to live with.

I went to three different high schools, but academically, I definitely felt prepared for college. I was a nerd in high school so I was definitely ready for college. When I aged out I decided to go into post-custody where the state will pay my tuition for college as long as I keep up a certain GPA and I decided to stay with my foster mom until I can get on my feet. We get along really good. My foster mom helped me with all the admissions and financial aid papers. The whole college process – getting in – I couldn't have done it without my foster mom. My first year, we sat down at the computer every night and she helped me. Then, this year I did most of it myself. She helps me occasionally, but I feel like I've done it mostly by myself this year. I have a post-custody case worker through DCS but I don't ever speak to her or anything. I'm not even sure who she is. Before I went to college, I had a case manager but we changed two or three times. I knew the first lady and I guess she stays here in (the city) and she would meet and talk to us about all the post-custody stuff, but once I went to college I know I had one, but I just never saw her.

It was really stressful my freshman year, but this is actually my second year and I'm technically a freshman. I didn't do too well at (the university). I guess because it was my first time away from home, having so much freedom, I guess there was no one to make me do my work and make me go to class. I made a lot of friends and I'd hang out instead of going to class. My first day of classes there, what was going through my head was, I'm an adult going to class by myself. I woke up this morning by myself and went to class. I was like, this is it, I'm on my own. But it was really intimidating because it's really big there. I got used to it – it was fun. The

first month or so I was still 17 so I had to come home every weekend because technically I wasn't allowed to be out of the city. It was something about the post-custody because I was still 17. My foster mom would come…get me and then drop me back off. I don't have a driver's license yet, but I have a permit. I came to my foster mom when I was 16, but there was a lot of problems getting my birth certificate and my ID so we weren't really able to get my actual permit until just now. I didn't do too well at (the university). There was an academic dismissal, but I kind of wanted to move back home because I needed to be by myself more and get things done. Then I came back home and went to (SCC).

It's so much smaller (at SCC) so you know all of the people that are around you. You get more help academically and you know where everything is just in case you need some help with something or some counseling or have a question. There's always someone that can help you or you can ask. At (the university), I had to run around a bunch of different places and run across campus to do something. My first semester at (SCC) I did pretty good. I'm majoring in criminal justice. I've always been obsessed with (that) and I want to be a cop and move up from there.

There are a couple of upsides to being in foster care and being able to have your education paid for is definitely one of them. Overall, I'd say my experience in foster care hasn't been perfect, but I think that by growing up in the system, I've learned a lot of things that I otherwise might not have learned. Growing up in foster care kind of forces you to grow up a little bit faster. The best part of being in foster care is all the services you're provided with, like independent living classes and college funding.

Summary of the Profiles. Profiles provide an inside look at the lived experiences of former foster youth while in state custody and as college students. It is through the voice of the participant that readers can come to know more about each of the youth in this study. Had I

presented profiles in the form of a third person narrative, participants would seem distant and less compelling. Seidman (1998) concludes that writing profiles in the third person "allows the researcher to intrude more easily" (p. 104) into the story that is being told. These are the stories of how each lived during their time in foster care and beyond. It is important to preserve the narrative and present it as such. In the next section, I present an analysis of the themes found within the narratives.

Thematic Analysis

In the previous section, participants of this study were presented through profiles of their life stories in their own words. This section presents the themes found within the interview transcripts of the participants. Here, I address the findings of how former foster youth make meaning of their experiences and how each constructs his or her identity as a college student. I present findings in two over-arching topics that relate to the research questions: meaning-making experiences and identity construction. Within those two topics are themes that support each one. For meaning-making, themes are transition, preparation, connection, and agency. Identity themes are crisis, commitment, transformation, and confidence. The themes that emerged offer insight into how former foster youth make meaning of their experiences in college, as well as how they construct their identities.

Meaning-making Experiences. People make meaning of the things they experience in life. Kramp (2004) asserts that, in narratives, "meaning is assigned to experience, and intentionality becomes apparent" (p. 8). These experiences cause us to reflect on the past and are a stimulus for creating change in the future. Four themes emerged from the data that relate to how former foster youth make meaning of their college experiences: transition, preparation,

connection, and agency. These themes support a frame for understanding former foster youth experiences.

Transition. As discussed in the first two chapters, the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 was designed specifically to assist foster youth in transitioning to adulthood. A transition is the process of change and the former foster youth in this study provided me with the story of the many changes that occurred in each young life. Former foster youth are accustomed to transitions (Courtney et al., 2007). From the initial transition to a first placement – whether that was a foster home, group home, or youth development center – to the transitions to new schools, the former foster youth in this study moved quite a bit. Carmen probably summed it up best, declaring, "I did a lot of moving." Justin was moved the least amount, having only one placement while in custody. However, he had also been in two different in-patient rehabilitation programs for his drug abuse. Jeremy, who was taken into custody as a baby, talked about the number of moves he made:

> And so I got switched around to a lot of foster homes. Some of them (weren't) that bad, they just had to move me. I had two sisters (that) were in foster care. Two biological sisters and a biological brother. We (were) all sent to foster care and they split us up, so I haven't seen them since.

Being moved from foster home to foster home is difficult on children, but losing the family that one was born into can be devastating. Jeremy has not seen his biological siblings since he was a small child, yet he has not forgotten them, as evidenced by including them in his narrative.

Like Jeremy, Rachelle had been moved quite a bit during her time in foster care. She, too, had siblings who were initially with her in a foster home in California. She is unsure of how they

got to Tennessee, but does remember that her two older sisters were with her when they were moved to a foster home there. Her sisters were eventually sent back to California and Rachelle stayed in the foster home placement in Tennessee. “I was really young. I don’t remember too much, I guess, but I remember being bounced around. I do remember that part.” Rachelle and Jeremy had very similar stories. Not only had both been in foster care most of their lives and had siblings they were separated from, but both were adopted by large families around the age of eight. Both of these families had adopted many children and both were quite abusive to the children. The stories were so similar, in fact, that at first I thought they might have been in the same adoptive family and was surprised to find that these were, in fact, two different families. Both Rachelle and Jeremy reported they were removed from abusive adoptive homes, based on their descriptions, at about the age of fourteen and placed back into foster care where each stayed until the age of eighteen.

Transitions did not just occur with the former foster youth’s living arrangements. Changes in school placements happened nearly as often as their housing changes and the result was not always positive. Crom and Justin related how the teachers in the schools within their placement institutions were more involved with handling the students’ behavioral issues than they were with teaching school subjects. Crom explained, “I just sat in the corner and did occasionally whatever the teacher had for me to do. And that was it. There was nothing else, because the rest of the day was them trying to keep the trouble-makers from making too much chaos.” Justin was very insightful with his comment, “I guess in the classrooms there’s so much else going on that how can you focus on the education?” Holly expressed how stressful these transitions were to her: “It was hard making new friends and getting used to everything else and then having to change schools again.”

In addition to changes in homes and schools, the former foster youth would have multiple foster brothers and sisters in each of the foster homes. Living with various non-relatives requires adjustments for everyone involved, and not all of the participants interviewed fared well. Allen was very philosophical about the other foster children in the home where he was placed:

> Oh, I met many of the other foster children that was living in the house. I (saw) a lot of them come in and out. I've been a witness to that. I think that the family structures that they came from caused them to act out – certain fears that were never answered in their life. A lot was revealed to me when talking to a lot of those students one on one and they let me know what kind of happened in their family life that caused them to act out.

Allen acted as a mentor to the younger foster children in the home, listening to them as they told their stories. Conversely, Carmen saw other foster children in the home as intrusive when she was placed into a new foster home:

> …the other foster child that was already there and (the) biological daughter, we didn't really get along because they'd been together for awhile so they were kind of close. So, we didn't really get along so that didn't work.

Sometimes, the foster home placement was a dangerous place to be. Carmen disclosed that one of the foster home placements she was sent to had an adult male living in the home who had been convicted of child molestation. "My case manager found out a little bit afterwards, so she moved me out of the house." Jeremy lived with a couple that, in his words, "pretty much was

not doing everything by the book" and "I pretty much could do anything over there." According to Jeremy, the foster father would give the foster children in the home cigarettes and whiskey.

> First time I ever got drunk was when I was seventeen in that foster home and the dude gave it to me. Like, he gave me whiskey. We'd do work with him – we'd cut down trees with him and he'd give us whiskey. Course, he was drinking, too, but I was seventeen – I didn't think about it.

Similarly, Lily's first foster home placement was with a woman who "smoked weed in front of her own children." Lily had watched her mother drinking alcohol and using drugs in front of her and her son for years. It was the reason that she was placed into state custody and she was determined that she was not going to put up with that kind of behavior in a foster home. According to Lily, "I turned her in really quick and she got her license taken away. I mean, if I'm going to turn in my own mom, I'm going to turn you in, you know."

Justin's placement at the Youth Development Center was probably the most traumatic. He recounted feeling so threatened at the YDC that he would sleep with a weapon of some sort with him at all times. "It's taken me years to not have to sleep by a weapon, but I'm okay now without any of that." When he returned to his parents home after his release, he remembered, "I had to stop asking my parents what I could eat or if I could have this or do this or do that. It's just such a big adjustment." As in Justin's case, the transitions that take place while a child is in foster care can have long-lasting effects.

Preparation. College preparation means being prepared academically, emotionally, physically, and mentally. Former foster youth experience this preparation differently from their non-foster youth peers in that they have not had the traditional home life and the high school

experience has been anything but normal. As noted earlier, when a foster youth has a move in placement, there is also a move in schools (Wolanin, 2005). Only one of the former foster youth participants in this study stayed in the same high school the entire time. Lily stated she was purposely left in her original high school, "since I was already a senior and since I'd already done all four of my years there." Although she did not experience the fractured academic preparation that the other youth did, Lily still felt less prepared than her peers in some ways:

> I think the biggest thing that probably would have helped me the most is – because I'm trying to buy a house and I can't because I have no credit – is if I had been taught more about how to build credit before I left. I think that was the biggest thing that would have helped me.

Preparation in the area of life skills is something that is mandated under *Brian A. v. Bredesen* (2001). Lily had only been in custody for 6 months before aging out and she admits that there was a lot going on in that short time including court hearings, three changes of placement, and completing her high school requirements in order to graduate. Carmen also felt there was information that was not being provided:

> DCS really isn't as helpful as they like to make themselves seem. So it's normally side organizations that we get the most help from. I'm in a few youth councils that are all foster youth and so we all talk and share stories. So it's normally other organizations that help and not DCS because they don't really tell you much. They have stuff that they can do to help us, but we don't know it because they don't tell us.

Carmen went on to talk about how she went without a bed for a year and a half, but found out when she went to a state meeting for former foster youth that DCS had money to help out with furnishings. Her advice to DCS is to start "telling us about stuff because we don't know what they can do."

All former foster youth participants talked about their high school experiences. Of the eight interviewed, only Allen and Jeremy obtained their GED, while the rest received a regular high school diploma. Even so, many of those who got a diploma did not feel adequately prepared for college-level work. Justin, Crom, and Carmen talked about classes at the facilities in which each had been placed were "dumbed down," according to Justin, in order to teach students of all academic abilities in those classes. For Crom, "I think if I were glued to the ceiling I still would have got credit for my classes." Carmen stated:

> That (one) group home, I don't think we even did math at all. We had class, but I don't think math was one of our subjects. So, when I got to (public high) school, I didn't do well on that part of my ACT which meant I had to take developmental classes at (SCC).

In fact, only Crom and Rachelle went directly into college-level classes while the rest of the former foster youth participants were placed into developmental classes. As noted in Chapter II, former foster youth do not score as well on placement tests as their non-foster youth peers because of their fractured secondary school experiences (Wolanin, 2005). Allen knew he was behind in his high school coursework, so he opted to begin GED classes when he was placed at the YDC. He recognized that he had "no clue what was going on" in his college classes because of the lack of formal high school education.

Connection. Each of the former foster youth interviewed was able to identify someone with whom they had a strong connection. Crom, Holly, and Jeremy had DCS case managers that were instrumental in helping them during their time in foster care and as they aged out of custody. Each of the case managers made sure the youth had important documents, such as birth certificates and social security cards. For Allen, it was the Judge who volunteered his time at the YDC where Allen was placed. “He was doing it out of his free time, his love for helping young males, and I think that kind of is what triggered me to like, oh wow, somebody really cares in a sense.” The Judge talked to Allen, asked him what he wanted for himself, and most importantly, listened to him. Allen also cites supportive foster parents who assisted him as he first began his college career. He added, “…there was people – even when I’m wrong – there was people that really cared, actually.” Rachelle also cited her foster mother as the person who most supported her. She responded, “I couldn’t have done it without my foster mom.”

Allen, Carmen and Justin talked about instructors at SCC that were most helpful to them. Allen described an English literature professor that was so interesting, a desire was sparked to read more and to take other literature courses. In Carmen’s case, transportation became a problem during one semester when she had taken a night class:

> I could make it to class, but the bus stopped running by the time class let out and so she actually took me home after class because she didn’t want me to miss class. One time, I had to miss a test because of something that was going on and I couldn’t come to class and so she just let me take the test home and bring it back to her, so she really did a lot for me.

Justin remembered that his developmental writing instructor "made me promise her to do certain things and…she really pushed me to finish. I really liked the teacher." Justin stated that he didn't remember even meeting any of his other instructors that first semester at SCC, but admits that he didn't work as hard in those classes. However, he also reported that only the writing instructor gave him extra attention in class and he reported feeling a connection to her.

For Lily, that special person was another student at SCC:

> My first semester I met a girl…and it was her first semester, too. We just clicked and I decided she was really cool and I wanted to go have classes with her. So I just started copying her schedule and she was a business major. So I changed my major and I just kept copying her schedule and this is where we are now.

Lily went on to say that this girl became her best friend and they have taken most of their classes together. Lily's advice to others who may be in a similar situation is to "find a buddy in your major." She states that having this friend to study with and help each other out through the semester has assisted in her success at SCC. Lily is due to graduate in the spring semester of 2013 and she plans to continue her education at a nearby university in order to obtain her Bachelor's degree.

Agency. The capacity for people to act independently and make their own choices is called agency. Race, ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status are a few of the factors that influence agency. Agency differs from identity in that it is about the control a person feels in his or her life rather than a process of development (Bandura, 1989). Those who are in the custody of the state rarely have the ability to act independently or make choices, since this is something normally done by case managers, therapists, foster parents, and others within the system of care.

Agency or lack of it could be heard in the words each former foster youth used during interviews. For example, Lily displayed a sense of control in her life when she took it upon herself to audiotape her mother and go to DCS:

> I taped (an audio recorder) under the table and I'd done enough research to where I could get myself and my son out. So I went to the guidance counselor and I told them I wanted a guardian ad litem sent to my school and then I hit play on that thing and he listened to it for a few minutes and he told me I was not to leave that school and they were going to pick up my son.

Lily also illustrated agency when she talked about her strengths as a student, stating "School is just my thing. It just works for me." Similarly, Crom related his agency regarding school when he stated that being prepared for college-level work was "my own doing". Additionally, he talked about his future plans:

> The good thing about my current plan is that I can flex it however I need to meet whatever demands I need. I haven't put down like this year, this goal. If I do that, I'll end up under-cutting myself in some form or fashion and then miss out on something that could be good. By leaving it generalized, I'm able to respond and adapt.

Allen made several references to decisions he had made on his own or in collaboration with others, such as when he made the decision not to return to his home city after being released from the Youth Development Center:

> One of the Judges…he kind of took me under his wing and after the program, they were asking me did I want to go back to (my

> hometown), or what would be some other options. We decided not to go back to (my hometown) and instead stay in (this area) and go into a foster home. And we decided to do that.

Allen's use of the word "we" shows that he had some say in where he was going to live, indicating a sense of control over his life.

In contrast to Allen, Lily, and Crom, several of the former foster youth interviewed showed a certain lack of agency. Jeremy and Holly, for example, talked in more of a passive voice, as though life was done *to* each of them. Jeremy's lack of agency was evident in the way he described his years in foster care. Several times during the interview he stated, "…they sent me to another foster home" or, "…I got switched to a new home." When discussing his placement into an alternative school, Jeremy reported, "…they put me in the alternative school…" Holly made similar comments, such as "…I got put in state custody" and "…they moved me to another foster home."

Although Carmen talked about causing trouble in order to get what she wanted, she also placed the blame for her actions on others, such as DCS:

> We'd have CFTM (Child and Family Team Meetings) meetings. We'd go to the meetings and they'd ask us what we want our goals to be and all that stuff, but they never actually listened. Like, on my plan, it was to be adopted and I didn't want to be adopted and I kept saying that, because at that point, I was already seventeen and it was only going to be a year before I aged out. I didn't really want to be adopted and they kept pushing it on me. They just tried to make me do stuff that I didn't want to do, so I acted out.

Carmen's narrative suggests an intentionality in the trouble she caused. It appears that Carmen was able to get her way whenever she acted out – whether her goal was to be moved to another placement or to attend the school she wanted. Whether or not Carmen actually had some control in this situation, she clearly seemed to feel that her only recourse was to act out or get into trouble.

Identity Construction. In Chapter II, a discussion of identity formation was provided. While identity emerges from stories that are told, Marcia's (1980) model of identity status contributes to a deeper understanding of how former foster youth construct identity. Marcia reasoned that identity formation was the product of two psychosocial tasks: crisis and commitment. Crisis concerns a change that takes place with the person and a decision is made regarding that change. Commitment involves the degree to which the person believes in the choice he or she has made. Marcia maintained that the successful resolution of identity leaves one with the skills and confidence needed to pursue a career or vocation.

Former foster youth project a number of aspects of their identities through their narratives, including gender, sexual identity, foster child, student, cultural identity, career plans, and for some, parent. While reading through transcripts, words and phrases began to emerge that eventually led me to four themes. Those that stood out as directly relating to identity construction are crisis, commitment, transformation, and confidence. As previously noted, although I was not looking specifically for these themes, I found that they supported the model that Marcia had developed.

Crisis. While the term "crisis" can signify a turning point in one's life, it is also another word for "trouble." Life troubles can result in a reflection on the past and be a stimulus for future change. One theme found through each participant interview was that of personal troubles. From

Allen's initial statement that "I got into some trouble" to Rachelle's depiction of her sisters' "behavioral troubles," each former foster youth made mention of this is some way. It is interesting to note that each of the male participants took personal responsibility for the trouble in their lives, while the females either blamed others or did not talk about personal trouble. Rachelle only discussed her siblings' troubles, making no mention of her own. Holly and Lily, the two teen mothers of the group, depicted their family's trouble, yet did not reveal any that either may have directly or indirectly caused. Conversely, Jeremy said he "…did stupid stuff and got into trouble." Justin stated, "I wouldn't listen to anybody and I was impulsive and…I started acting out instead of searching for other outlets…" Crom, while taking responsibility, also provided his own reason behind causing trouble, saying "I'm sort of the hipster of trouble to be annoying."

The ability to look back and take personal responsibility for negative events that have happened is an act of maturity (McAdams, 1996). Not all former foster youth were able to do this. Carmen, for example, did not exhibit personal responsibility:

> Most of the time I was getting into trouble is usually because I asked DCS to do something and they wouldn't do it, so I got myself in trouble. 'Cause DCS tends to do stuff when you get in trouble, instead of when you ask politely. The only way I was getting in trouble was when they'd tell me "no" first.

Carmen was placing the blame for her inability to control herself squarely on DCS. In her view, if DCS and others had done everything she'd asked, Carmen would not have been compelled to cause trouble. According to Marcia (1980), identity achievement is connected with those who

"tended to take more personal responsibility for their own lives" (p. 164). The type of thinking that Carmen exhibited does not assist in the development of identity.

Sometimes accepting personal responsibility for trouble can be detrimental. For Jeremy, physical abuse was the result of his perceived trouble-making. He talked about how he was locked in a closet after his adoptive parents found out he was urinating in his bedroom. Jeremy stated he did that because he was afraid to leave his bedroom, as there was an alarm on the door and "every time I'd go out of the room, she'd get mad about something." He accepted the fact that a beating from his adoptive father with a pvc pipe was just punishment for not doing his chores correctly or for talking out of turn.

> …we started getting in trouble and then we started getting beatings for the stuff we did. We had to clean and do a bunch of chores and stuff and if we didn't do them, we'd get in trouble for that, too. The dude would grab our hands right behind our backs and he'd use a pvc pipe on every one of us.

Commitment. Making a commitment to people or things is one of the life events that suggest attainment of maturity and consequently, identity. In the ongoing construction of identity, "that which one negates is known; what one affirms and chooses contains an element of the unknown" (Marcia, 1980, p. 161). Each participant voiced his or her views about career goals and commitments. From their statements, the degree of commitment was evident. For example, Jeremy talked about several possible careers, yet remains undecided in his major:

> I've been thinking about being a doctor. My plan B is to fall back on a CNA or something, but I'm really trying to be a doctor. That's what I want to do. It's just interesting…just helping people and all

> that. But then again, I got so many things I want to be. I thought about – since I was in foster care – to be a social worker, to help somebody because I've been through the stuff that they've been through. I could sort of like be a mentor or something.

Jeremy is still searching for which path he should take and the difference in coursework between becoming a doctor and becoming a social worker differ widely. Both, however, are in the helping fields and Jeremy may have narrowed his career search without being aware of doing so.

Carmen was another of the former foster youth who did not seem to have a firm commitment to a career or major. She talked about "switching back and forth between Child and Family Studies and Social Work," but her reason for identifying that field of study was because her mentor – a social worker – wanted her to take those classes. In fact, Carmen did not talk about her hopes or dreams for herself at all. When questioned about this, Carmen replied:

> I don't really look too far ahead because things don't turn out the way I want them to. I'm used to not wanting things because they don't work out. I don't really have…people ask me what I want to do all the time (laughs). I kind of give a general statement, I'm not really specific.

Carmen has made a conscious effort not to make a commitment because, in her experience, it hasn't worked out for her. Marcia (1980) notes that one reason why some young people do not form an identity is because the risk is too high to let go of a past that is certain for a future that is not. It takes a leap of faith in order to commit and Carmen is not yet ready to take that risk.

In contrast to Jeremy and Carmen; Holly, Justin, Lily, and Rachelle were very clear in the commitment to their majors and career choices. Rachelle was very direct: "I've always been

obsessed with Criminal Justice. I want to be a cop and move up from there." Holly reported knowing that majoring in Paralegal Studies was the best choice because, "There's not a lot of overtime involved and I can make decent money and take care of my kids." Justin stated that he had known from a young age that he enjoyed working with younger children. His major in Elementary Education "seemed like a good fit and was something I was really interested in doing." Lily was the most committed to her major, although she was also the one closest to graduation from SCC:

> Management. I just don't want to manage a restaurant. I like Accounting – I want something to do with that. I want to go to (a nearby university) and get my Business Administration degree concentrating in Accounting.

Finally, Allen and Crom talked about careers in general terms. Each had committed to a major, although neither could align a specific career with that major. For Allen, a degree in Political Science is in his sights, yet he reported an interest in radio broadcasting or "ministering to younger males like myself." Additionally, Allen was interested in travelling and writing a book:

> I always wanted to write a book about travelling where you meet different people and different nationalities of people. I want to call it *The Book of Faces* because I can remember faces and remember something about those faces and just write in the book about different areas I visit and the people that I met…

Crom was initially in an Emergency Medical Technician program at another community college before transferring to SCC. During his first semester at SCC, Crom's reported major was

pre-nursing, however he has recently changed that to pre-medicine. Crom described his change in plans:

> You know, I was originally a nursing major, but I switched my major to pre-med this semester because I realized that I don't have any bedside manner at all and if I was to constantly be in contact with the same people, I'd eventually get reported for sarcastic comments or something.

Crom displayed an internal understanding of his temperament and adjusted his career goals to meet that new knowledge. Both Crom and Allen have a sense that there are various alternatives available to them and each is making choices based on his values and goals for the future. While neither may have fully reached identity achievement, they are exploring all available options in order to make the best possible decision.

Transformation. The psychosocial task of crisis involves making a change in one's life. As I thought about how we bring about change in our lives, Allen's reference to a transformation in his life made me realize that all former foster youth in the study identified a point at which they came to an understanding of who they were, where they were, and where they were going. Allen talked about a "religious transformation" and added:

> Not only that, I just thought…I looked at my life and looked at my age and looked at the trouble I was in for my age – being very young – and decided that I did not want to end up in situations like this for the rest of my life. I don't want to become another statistic.

Allen talked about the gang that he was involved with in his hometown and reported a realization that he wanted more for himself. Understanding that change is needed in one's own life and committing to that change based on an internal value or belief is evidence of identity achievement (Marcia, 1980). Even though Allen may not have achieved identity status, he is reflecting on areas of his life needing attention and has committed to making a change.

Several of the former foster youth talked about looking back on the past. Justin abused drugs from the time he was in middle school. "I wouldn't listen to anybody and I was impulsive and it was basically a combination of – I just didn't fit in, especially in public schools." Justin went on to say that he probably wouldn't have graduated from high school if he hadn't been sent to the Youth Development Center (YDC). Similarly, Holly stated:

> I don't think that – had I not been in state's custody and had Nicky, or not had Nicky in state's custody – I wouldn't have graduated. Because in state's custody, I had a whole lot of people that helped and were always there when I needed a break with Nicky, or needed help or anything like that.

As a teen mother, Holly understands now that she needed a good deal of help with her newborn baby while also being in high school and without that help, she might not have graduated at all.

Carmen remembered one semester in college when she wasn't doing well: "I stopped taking my medication for…mental illness and so that sent me into a downward spiral and I ended up failing all my classes…" Jeremy, who also had quit attending classes one semester due to homelessness stated, "Right now, I'm just trying to change my life around and try to finish school and *be* something." Rachelle, who had two less than successful semesters at a large

university reflected, “I guess there was no one there to make me do my work and make me go to class so…I made a lot of friends up there and I’d hang out instead of going to class.”

Learning from past experiences is a kind of transformation that can lead to change for the future. In Lily’s case, it was her past experience growing up with “a really bad, abusive, alcoholic” mother. When Lily became a mother herself at age 16, things changed for her:

> I just stayed and tried to deal with it. That was fine with me,
> because I’m used to it. I’m a very strong person and I can take it.
> But once my kid was in the picture, uh-uh. I won’t put my son
> through that.

Lily made a decision to make a transformation in her and her son’s lives and she took action by contacting DCS.

Confidence. Identity achievement leads to confidence in one’s skills and abilities. For the former foster youth in this study, all eight identified doing well in school to various degrees. Although there is no one definition of what doing well means, what is important is the individual’s certainty in his or her academic skills. In discussing his schoolwork, Jeremy stated, “It’s a good feeling – actually it’s a great feeling. Some assignments are a challenge, but I usually end up working through them.” His assertion that he can work through challenges is an indication of the confidence he feels in his abilities.

Some of the former foster youth talked about confidence in doing college-level work. Rachelle reported feeling very prepared for college: “I was a nerd in high school, so I was definitely ready for college.” Although she did not do well academically in her first two semesters, Rachelle understood that her lack of success had more to do with her behavior than with her ability to do the work. Crom also reported feeling prepared stating, “But most of that

was my own doing." His tenacity regarding his academic abilities was evident: "I've always liked learning and I'm really pretty good at it." Lily was very confident of her academic ability:

> I've always been a really good student. I've always made honor roll. Even with all of that, I was still making straight A's. School is just my thing – it just works for me. Half the time, I don't even study for my exams. I just go in and take them and I make really good grades.

Marcia (1980) suggests that confidence contributes to a secure self, which is necessary in order to risk the vulnerability needed for the achievement of identity. Each of the former foster youth interviewed for this study verbalized confidence with regard to academics. This could translate to feelings of self-assurance in other areas of life.

Summary

In this chapter, I chose to present the narratives of former foster youth as profiles because it provides a way of sharing their experiences as told by each of the participants. While the telling of their stories allows each of the former foster youth to make sense of their own lives, it also allows others to understand and learn from their experiences. Seidman (1998) suggests that profiles allow researchers to present the participant in context, to clarify intentions, and to convey a sense of process and time, which are all components of qualitative analysis.

This chapter has also presented the findings related to the research questions of how former foster youth make meaning of their experiences in college and how they construct their identities as college students. Meaning-making experiences produced four themes: transition, preparation, connection, and agency. These four areas are key to how the former foster youth in this study make meaning of their experiences in college. Crisis, commitment, transformation, and

confidence were the four themes elicited from the narratives with regard to identity construction. I have used Marcia's (1980) model of identity status as a guide. In Chapter V, I will discuss conclusions drawn from this research, along with implications and recommendations for further studies.

CHAPTER V

Discussion, Implications, Future Research

I found the stories of the eight former foster youth both heart-warming and gut-wrenching. Each has suffered profound loss in such a young lifetime, yet each persists in moving forward. Allen, Carmen, Crom, Holly, Jeremy, Justin, Lily, and Rachelle have much in common. Not only are they all SCC students, but they share a history of being placed in out-of-home care. Each faced the adjustment of living in an unknown and sometimes mistrusted environment. Yet each made the decision to take the next step and attend college in order to make a better life. The fact that they have hope for the future helps me to understand that there is a resiliency in these young people that would otherwise not have been known.

In previous chapters, I have presented the research and method I chose for the current study. I have provided the findings from the data in two different forms: as profiles told by each participant in their own words and as a thematic analysis. This chapter begins with a summary of the study. I then discuss the findings from the narratives presented, as well as implications for practice. I conclude with recommendations for future research.

Summary of Study

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of former foster youth as college students and how their identity is constructed. Through a narrative inquiry, I interviewed eight former foster youth who are all students at the same community college to get a sense of who they are and where they came from. I use narrative inquiry because “it is a way of understanding experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). As discussed in Chapter I, former foster youth are less likely to enroll in college and those that do are less likely to complete a program of study.

The eight participants are currently enrolled students at Southeastern Community College (SCC) and receive post-custody services through the Tennessee Department of Children's Services (TDCS) Independent Living Program. I conducted one in-depth interview with each participant, using an interview protocol featuring open-ended questions. Follow-up with each participant was completed either in person or via email and included the use of interim texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) that each former foster youth could read over, ask questions about, and provide clarification as necessary.

Data analysis was completed using Clandinin & Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional space approach. This provides an analytic frame that helps to place each of the narratives into parts that can be better understood. The three dimensions or parts for analysis included interactions, both personal and social; continuity, including past, present, and future; and situation or place, where physical setting is considered, as well as intentions, purposes, and points of view. Themes were drawn from these parts that helped provide an overall understanding of their experiences. For example, each former foster youth talked about their experiences with moving to multiple foster homes. While describing these homes, participants narrated a picture of who lived with them and what interactions were taking place, allowing me to be there in the moment with them during some painful situations. Further, analysis was carried out using multiple sources including interviews, field notes, and a reflexive journal that I kept. A peer review of codes and themes was completed, as well as having an external auditor read through the findings to make sure they made sense.

Findings were presented in two ways. Using Seidman's (1998) approach, interview transcripts were arranged as profiles and as themes. First, I re-storied the interviews chronologically and presented them as individual profiles. This provided each participant's

narrative in story form to give a sense of each life experience. It helps to get to know the former foster youth and allows the reader to get a sense of the person and his or her history. The second way findings were presented was as a thematic analysis of the interviews. Repetition of key phrases between the interviews helped me to make initial interpretations as they related to the two broad topics of meaning-making experiences in college and construction of identity. A careful analysis led to themes supporting each topic. A discussion of the findings ensues in which I address the research questions guiding this study and findings from the narratives of the participants.

Discussion of Findings

At the outset of this study, I had several assumptions that related to my years as a counselor and my experiences working with current and former foster youth. In order to keep these assumptions isolated, I had to remain intentional in my attitude of not knowing. Anderson (1998) reflected, “not knowing freed us from needing to be experts on how clients ought to live their lives, the right question to ask, and the best narrative” (p. 64). Instead of relying on *my* past experiences with other foster youth, this attitude helped me to remain present with the participants in this study and open to the story each was constructing. In the end, I believe that it helped me to see things that I might otherwise have missed. As a result of rigorous analysis methods described above and in Chapter III, I was able to separate myself from the history I have had working with foster youth and former foster youth. The research questions guiding this study are the following:

1. How do former foster youth make meaning of the experiences in college?
2. How do former foster youth construct their identities as college students?

Although I expected to find something new or different in the way that former foster youth construct their identities, Marcia's (1980) identity status theory seemed to fit the data obtained through interviews. For this reason, I tie findings related to the research question on identity very closely to Marcia's theory. Further, the findings from this study have helped me to take a more holistic view of former foster youth. I have found that there is not just one issue, but a mixture of past and present experiences that contributes to the success or not of this population. These experiences are affected by identity and the degree of commitment and confidence these youth employ.

Initially, I assumed that former foster youth had a negative view of TDCS. During the course of this research, however, I have come to understand how false that assumption was. Former foster youth spoke well of most of their case managers and others who work with and for TDCS. Most reported a favorable view of TDCS, which I found surprising. Holly, for example, indicated that she was a better mother because of the help that she received and felt that she would not have graduated from high school had she not been in state custody. In addition, I assumed that former foster youth had other motives for accepting post-custody services aside from college attendance. I have come to learn that this was, at least for this group of participants, an unfounded assumption. Jeremy denied that money was the reason that he agreed to post-custody services, explaining that getting a degree so that he could "be something" was most important to him.

Meaning-making Experiences. Previous literature has revealed that children in the foster care system are subjected to frequent moves in placement (Courtney & Dworsky, 2005; Courtney et al., 2010; Hochman et al., 2004; Wolanin, 2005). What is not known is the extent of these moves and the effects they have on the foster child. The former foster youth interviewed

for this study reveal multiple transitions in short periods of time. For example, Lily and her son were moved three times in the six months that they were in foster care. Courtney et al. (2007) note that social support plays an important role during the transition process. Although I can assume that there are emotional and social consequences with moving from place to place, hearing about this from the former foster youth provided a perspective not previously reported in the literature. Many times, a move in placement required a change of schools. School transitions were notable in the narratives of the former foster youth. Several of those interviewed mentioned the effects that these moves had on them, such as difficulty with adjustments. These on-going effects may be one of the reasons why former foster youth in college are not as successful as their non-foster youth peers.

Merdinger et al. (2005) report that former foster youth do not fare as well in college because multiple school changes result in fewer credits transferring from high school to high school, lower placement test scores, and increased high school drop-out rates. Findings from this study point to a disruption in academic preparation for college because of the fractured secondary school experience. Several of the participants considered the alternative high schools they attended to be low-quality educational programs. Participants revealed that alternative schools didn't teach them anything and were more about keeping them busy than educating. This is related to the *Brian A. v. Bredesen* (2001) Technical Assistance Committee (TAC) finding that TDCS appears to pay very little attention to education objectives beyond high school. Preparation for post-secondary education was not a primary concern, according to participants of this study. Although this is a high-risk population, educational objectives should be the same for former foster youth as for their non-foster youth peers, regardless of the school setting.

The narratives reveal that there may be other reasons former foster youth are not as prepared for college as their peers. Truancy in high school due to gang membership, drug use, or emotional issues such as anxiety caused participants in this study to miss school regularly and fall behind their non-foster youth peers. Poor supervision in the home prior to being placed into state custody, parental drug use, and teen pregnancy were other complicating factors. For participants in this study, these issues happened well before any legal intervention occurred, yet were significant in how well each would be prepared for college. It is no wonder that these youth have difficulty adjusting to college when they are still trying to make sense of the past.

One of the protective factors for former foster youth is being connected to someone who cares about them (Lemon et al., 2005). The findings support this, as participants identified a person or persons in their lives with whom they were connected. Participants expressed that those connections helped them to prepare for college, as well as helping them to remain in there. Day, Dworsky, Fogarty, & Damashek (2011) suggest that one reason why more former foster youth drop out of college is that "they arrived on campus without strong connections to caring adults whom they could turn to for support" (p. 2339). Significant connections appear to be the reason why each of the participants in this study continues to be enrolled in college. In fact, Carmen, Justin, and Lily point to their connections with faculty as the reason for passing certain classes. Although none of the former foster youth's connections were tied to family members, participants in this study pointed to case managers, college faculty, and even other students as meaningful.

Narratives of the former foster youth indicated the sense of control each felt in his or her life. Riessman (2002) asserts that human agency can be found within the style of speech a person uses, as well as their words. Some participants spoke in a passive voice, effectively giving

responsibility for what happens in life to someone or something else. For example, Jeremy related what happened after he left custody at age eighteen: "…people had to show me around because I was young and then they got me in this program down there..." For Jeremy and others in this study, outside forces seemed to be controlling their lives. Other former foster youth displayed agency with active wording, such as "I don't want to become another statistic" (Allen) and "I wasn't going to let my son be raised how I was" (Lily). Former foster youth who feel in control of their futures tend to be more resilient (Hines et al., 2005). That sense of resiliency leads to high goals and expectations, college degree completion, and fewer emotional and psychological problems. It is interesting to note that the participants whose narratives were identified as having agency were also the ones closest to graduation at SCC.

Identity. Findings from the narratives indicate how identity is constructed for these youth. Narratives and identity are connected in the way people tell their stories. Woodruffe-Burton & Elliott (2005) acknowledge that "we come to know ourselves by the narratives we construct to situate ourselves in time and place" (p. 462). How former foster youth make sense of themselves in light of past events reveals their identities. For example, one of the most salient words from the interviews was "trouble." Participants discussed causing trouble, making trouble, getting into trouble, and being trouble. I came to realize that words trouble and crisis are intimately related. Marcia's (1980) identity model supports the idea that it is through crisis that people make a decision and commit to one of various alternatives. Although Marcia terms crisis as a "decision-making period" (p. 161), I argue that it remains related to causing, making, getting in, or being trouble. These acts of trouble are the impetus for something else to happen, which then leads to a decision being made. Several of the former foster youth described an act of

trouble and then being moved to a different foster home. Carmen noted that causing trouble was the only way she knew to spur decision-making within DCS.

Once in college, students are able to try out alternatives and choose degree programs to follow. For the former foster youth in this study, “choice” has not been part of the everyday vocabulary. While in foster care, much of the decision-making was left to case managers, therapists, and legal advocates. Narratives revealed that commitments to degree programs were sometimes the result of interventions from others. For example, Lily chose her program because she wanted to continue taking the same classes as her new friend. Carmen chose hers because her mentor recommended it for her. However, most commitments to degree programs came from an inner passion for particular areas that seemed to always be present, according to the participants. Allen reported he’d always been interested in politics. Rachelle stated she’d “always been obsessed with criminal justice…” while Crom and Justin reported always knowing they wanted to work in the areas of medicine and education respectively. That inner knowledge for former foster youth regarding degree programs is something that has not previously been reported in the literature. Where it comes from and when does the youth know about it would be a matter for future research.

All participants reported living in some difficult environments both with birth families, foster and adoptive homes, or institutions. Marcia (1980) suggests that those people with more strained authoritative relationships and a lower frequency of paternal relationships are generally those who struggle with occupational or ideological issues and are considered to be having a crisis of identity. This seems true for Jeremy, as he was the only participant who did not identify a specific degree major in college. However, this theory was not supported for the rest of the former foster youth. Lily, for example, did not have a paternal relationship at all, yet was very

clear regarding occupational and ideological issues dating back to at least high school. The same was true for Allen, Carmen, and Rachelle who grew up without a father in their lives, yet held beliefs that guided them, as well as making firm commitments to degree programs.

Construction of identity for the former foster youth in this study was found in transformations and confidence in their perceived abilities. Allen's narrative provides a good example as he talked about a transformation in his life. As I began to think about changes that occurred in each of the former foster youth's lives, Allen's words kept coming back to me. The analysis of the narratives showed some type of transformation that led to a better understanding of who each was as a person. McAdams (1996) states that memories of significant past experiences help to develop a plotline that makes up identity. Pals (2006) notes:

> Some memories fit neatly into the existing story line that has already been constructed, thus providing identity continuity, whereas others challenge the story line and invite identity questioning and transformation (p. 1081).

A reflection on past experiences allows us to understand where we are currently and help us to decide where we want to be.

An analysis of participant's stories supports Marcia's (1980) idea that successful achievement of identity leaves people with a confidence in their abilities. All of the former foster youth interviewed conveyed a sense of confidence in their academic skills. Even though three participants had overall grade point averages that were below the standard 2.0 expected for students, all expressed a certainty in their ability to do the work. Although some continued to explore career alternatives within the chosen degree program, each reported a confidence that the

chosen major was best for him or her. Only Jeremy had not committed to a major, yet he still expressed a confidence in his ability to complete the requirements in his classes.

Summary of the Findings. As discussed in Chapter II, educational attainment is a predictor of success for former foster youth (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Emerson, 2006; Merdinger et al., 2005; Wolanin, 2005). Participants in this study expressed multiple means through which they made sense of their college experience. Meaning was made from the importance assigned to past experiences. The resulting themes of transition, preparation, connection, and agency provide insight into how that meaning was understood. Numerous transitions affected college preparation. Connections with a significant person in life seemed to positively affect college retention for participants. The sense of control, or agency, each former foster youth felt in his or her life relates to resilience (Hines et al., 2005). These are the ways that meaning emerged from the narratives of the former foster youth in this study.

In addition to meaning-making experiences, participants constructed their identities through four key areas: crisis, commitment, transformation, and confidence. Marcia (1980) notes that “a well-developed identity structure, like a well-developed superego, is flexible” (p. 160). The former foster youth in this study did not have the support of a biological family during the critical identity-developing years. They were busy adjusting to new living arrangements, schools, social lives, and babies. The trouble that each attested to brought various alternatives in which a decision would ultimately be made. A commitment to a career or ideology brought a transformation for the former foster youth in this study. This brings about a confidence in ability or skill.

Implications for Practice

This was a study of human experience and as such, the findings can be applied to practice. For example, this study contributes to and improves my practice of counseling in a community college environment, as well as for all college counselors. Because these young people have a history of abuse and neglect in their lives, their mental health has suffered to some extent. Hearing these stories and learning about the experiences former foster youth have lived through provides a good understanding of this population for college counselors. However, these narratives have also provided a glimpse into the resiliency that lie within former foster youth. As noted in Chapter I, previous research has investigated the concept of resilience in former foster youth. Hines et al. (2005) suggest that "psychological development is highly buffered and self-righting and that resilient behavior can occur at any developmental stage" (p. 392). Although most of the former foster youth in this study have been subjected to some of life's most negative experiences, they continue to search for a positive future.

The results should be of interest to those in the fields of education and social work, as these are areas that impact the success, or not, of these youth. The data pointed to specific areas that have helped these former foster youth and could help others to be successful students. For example, most of the youth interviewed talked about people who had helped them in college, whether it was faculty, another student, or foster parents. Former foster youth could benefit from mentoring services at colleges in order to assist in their retention and success. This could take the form of peer mentoring or through college faculty, staff and administration. The mentoring does not necessarily have to be through the college, however, as other organizations such as DCS or private community agencies could provide these services. Although participants in this study reported they were assigned a case manager through TDCS while receiving post-custody

services, many reported that they rarely see this person and a few did not know the name of their post-custody case manager or how to contact that person. As discussed in Chapter II, TDCS policy requires that case managers have at least two visits every three months, either face-to-face or via telephone call (TDCS, 2010). Mentors could provide regular communication and support with former foster youth on a weekly or even daily basis. This is something that case managers through TDCS do not have the capability of doing.

Another area that some former foster youth described as helpful was in being able to complete high school with a regular degree. Although two of the participants obtained a GED prior to college admission, the majority completed high school with a regular diploma. This was important to lay the groundwork for further education, even though most were placed into developmental coursework due to placement test scores. Regular class attendance and social interaction contribute to college preparation for students. While traditional in-person GED classes themselves may be meaningful for students, participants in this study reported feelings of isolation from others because their classes were online within the institutions where they were placed. It is sometimes easier for foster care agencies to place youth into GED classes, but, as in Carmen's case, it may not be what the youth wants.

Several of the former foster youth interviewed talked about the poor quality of the alternative schools they attended while in custody. Educators and administrators responsible for these types of programs could benefit from listening to what these and other former and current foster youth have to say about their experiences with these programs. A change in focus from "high school completion" to "college readiness" would better prepare foster youth for the demands of higher education courses.

A disturbing part of the findings was hearing the former foster youth recount the number of moves they made while in foster care. Since 2001, the Brian A. settlement has addressed issues of multiple placements and was one of the reasons for the lawsuit in the first place. It is apparent that this continues to be a problem, as Carmen remembered 17 moves, Jeremy and Rachelle each had nine, Holly had five, Lilly had three, Allen and Crom each were moved twice, and Justin had one placement. Participants acknowledged the emotional and social stress that it placed on them and I urge those within TDCS to address this issue.

College administrators should deem the findings of this study of interest as well, since they are responsible for putting into place policies that aid in student retention. Because many colleges and universities are now receiving state and federal funding based on student graduation rates, retention for all students is critical. Former foster youth are at higher risk of dropping out of college (Hines et al., 2005; Merdinger et al., 2005), so attention to this population may assist in overall retention rates.

Limitations

The research findings here should not be considered the norm for all former foster youth in college. Just as each person is unique in his or her own way, each narrative provides a point of view at one moment in time. These are the stories of eight former foster youth in a particular area of the United States and in a specific type of college. Findings could be different elsewhere. Additionally, all of these former foster youth were receiving post-custody services through TDCS. Former foster youth who are in college but not receiving these services may have a different experience altogether.

As mentioned previously, there were some personal limitations that could have affected this research study. My career as a counselor has involved on-going contact with foster children

and former foster youth in many capacities. Because of this, I have been privy to the inner workings of TDCS, private agencies that support foster children, and higher education. It was necessary for me to step back from that prior knowledge in order to really hear what participants in this study were trying to convey. I have talked about approaching the interviews with an attitude of not knowing, yet that was difficult to do at times. During some of the interviews, participants would bring up places or names of people with whom I was very familiar. While some may view this as a limitation, I argue that this prior knowledge allowed me an understanding that other researchers of former foster youth may not have had. For example, I already had an understanding of the jargon used within foster care such as “aging out” and “CFTM” (Child and Family Team Meeting) so I did not have to interrupt a participant’s narrative to ask questions. Although researcher bias is always possible, I feel that this was worked out as much as possible through reflexive journaling, peer consultation, and vigilance on my part to remain open. These are the same tactics I use every day as a counselor, making this a less difficult task.

Recommendations for Future Research

Former foster youth are a difficult population to research. As previously mentioned, they do not stand out and cannot be found based on gender, race, disability, or other marginalized traits. Once I had access to this population, I found that there was a great willingness on the part of the former foster youth to talk about their experiences. Assistance from local or state organizations designed to support former foster youth is essential in locating and researching this group. However, this is not an impossible task and those who decide to conduct future studies may benefit from the following recommendations:

1. Research on former foster youth who are attending alternative schools would be of interest in order to get a better understanding of the non-traditional environment and how it affects learning outcomes.
2. Longitudinal studies following foster youth as they "age out" of custody would be helpful. Although each of the youth in this study talked about the high school experience, researching them as they progress through secondary school or GED classes and into higher education would be of interest.
3. Longitudinal studies following former foster youth to degree completion, either two- or four-year programs, may help to understand the experiences of former foster youth year-by-year.
4. A comparative study of youth receiving independent living services and those who do not would provide insight into the benefits and disadvantages of those services.
5. A study comparing youth who live in a foster home while in college versus those who move into apartments or dorms would provide an understanding of the type of support necessary for this population.

These are only a few of the types of research that could be conducted with former foster youth. Different parts of the country and/or world might yield different research studies.

Conclusion

The narratives of these participants add to the limited body of research on former foster youth in higher education. Findings were not intended to support or reject a theory. Instead, it was to bring light to an often invisible population in order to understand their experiences as college students coming from a non-traditional home environment. As Riessman (2005) contends, "narratives do not mirror, they refract the past" (p. 6). Analysis of the interviews

revealed that meaning is made through the transitions they have experienced, the preparation for college they have had, the connections they have made, and whether or not they feel in control of their lives. Further, identity construction for participants was best understood through Marcia's (1980) identity status model. The resulting themes of crisis, commitment, transformation, and confidence help to understand how identity is constructed for these youth.

Former foster youth are a rarely researched, marginalized population. I was privileged to be able to share time with these eight young people and hear their stories. Although there is much that I learned from them, I realize that I have only scratched the surface. I invite fellow researchers to join in this quest to learn more about former foster youth. It is my hope that a conversation has begun that will continue on as we all think about the education, treatment, care, and coordination of foster care services in this country.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Pseudonym: _____

Introduction: Thank you for participating in this study. During this interview, you will have the opportunity to share with me your personal experiences as a foster youth and college student. I want to remind you that your identity will remain confidential. So, I want you to feel free to speak openly about your experience. Will it be okay for me to record the interviews?

Once I get these interviews completely transcribed, I would like to have you review them for accuracy. Would you be willing to do that for me? Before we begin, I want to give you the opportunity to ask me any questions pertaining this study or information you would like to learn about me.

Interview:

Time of Start Interview:
Time of End Interview:
Date:
Location:
Interviewer:
Interviewee:

Open-ended Questions:

1. Tell me as much as possible your experience of being a foster youth. Stopping at present day, trace your experience as far back as you can.
2. What was it like to be in elementary and/or secondary school as a foster youth?
3. What was it like to apply to college?
4. What stands out for you during your experience so far at community college?
5. What are your hopes for the future?
6. What would you say to someone who is in foster care and about to age out? What advice would you give that person?
7. What would you like to tell DCS? Is there anything you'd like to see stay the same, change, or be different?

Following the interview, a Participant Information Form will be filled out by each former foster youth (see below).

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION FORM

1. Age:
2. Major:
3. Year in college:
4. Ethnicity:
5. Gender:
6. Marital status:
7. Number of years in foster care:
8. Current living arrangements:
9. Number of children (if any) and ages:
10. Person(s) you can count on:

Appendix B

Informed Consent

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

Narratives of Former Foster Youth
In Higher Education

INTRODUCTION
You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Kathleen B. Douthat, a Doctor of Philosophy candidate from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. The results from this study will contribute towards a doctoral dissertation.

You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you identify as a former foster youth enrolled in classes at Pellissippi State Community College (hereafter called PSCC). You must be aged 18 or older to participate. Your participation is voluntary. Please take as much time as you need to read the information sheet. You may also decide to discuss it with your family or friends. You will be given a copy of this form.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY
The purpose of this study is to learn about the experiences of former foster youth in higher education. The voices of former and current foster youth are missing from literature. This study will give former foster youth the opportunity to share their stories about their personal experiences about being a foster youth and attending college. The goal of this study is to provide educators and social services providers a better understanding of this population.

Response to the interview questions will constitute consent to participate in this research project.

INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE STUDY
You will be asked to participate in one in-depth interview (approximately 90 minutes) during the Fall 2012 semester. You may be asked back for additional follow-up interviews. In the interview, you will be asked a series of questions related to your past experiences as a foster youth as a college student. In order to get a complete account of your experience, each question will be built on the next. All interviews will be digitally recorded and notes will be taken. The interviews will be conducted on campus, behind closed doors for privacy. All interviews will be transcribed. After the interview, you will be invited back to review the transcriptions for accuracy. Additional questions may be asked at this point for clarification. You will be given a false name (pseudonym). Please remember your pseudonym, since all of the data collected will be associated with this pseudonym.

RISKS
There are no anticipated risks to your participation; you may experience some discomfort during

_____ Participant's initials

the interview while you are discussing your past experiences as a foster youth. You may skip any questions that may make you uncomfortable. You may discontinue your participation in this study at anytime. You will be provided with information about campus counseling services at the close of the interview if necessary. There will be no cost to you if you choose to utilize the services on campus. All information is strictly confidential, including your identity, which will remain anonymous. If any discomfort or uncertainty occurs, you can stop the interview.

POTENTIAL CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The Principle Investigator is currently a PSCC employee who has a working relationship with the Counseling Services department. However, her work does not, and will not impact student grades, financial aid, or any other college services in any academic or personal way.

BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

You will not directly benefit from your participation. However, your participation in this study has the potential to increase society's awareness of foster youth as college students. Your stories may help inform educators, social services providers and policy makers in shaping policy and practices to improve the quality of life and access to higher education for current and former foster youth.

CONFIDENTIALITY

There will be no information obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you. Your name, address or other information that may identify you will not be collected during this research study. The information collected about you will be coded using a fake name (pseudonym). You will have the right to review/edit your interviews upon request. All handwritten notes, data and audiotapes will be stored and locked in the office of the principal investigator (Kathleen Douthat). All data stored on a computer will be secured by a password. When the results of the dissertation are discussed, no information will be included that would reveal your identity. All audio-tapes and data will be stored for three years after the study has been completed and then destroyed. Your name will not be published or shared with anyone outside of the research, including the Counseling Services program staff or administrators at PSCC.

COMPENSATION FOR PARTICIPATION

You will receive a $25 gift card to Target for your participation. Payment is contingent upon your completion of the interview process as stated in the section above titled, "Information About Participants' Involvement in the Study".

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact the principal investigator, Kathleen B. Douthat, by telephone at (865) 539-7293 or email at kdouthat@utk.edu. If you have questions regarding your rights as research participant, contact the University of Tennessee Office of Research Compliance at (865) 974-3466.

_____ Participant's initials

PARTICIPATION
You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and still remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from the research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

Your alternative is to not participate. Your grades or other services at PSCC will not be affected whether or not you participate. Your decision whether or not to participate is not academically related; so your decision will not impact you academically. Participation in the study will not be part of your experience in any academic program.

CONSENT
I have read the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's signature _____ Date _____

Appendix C

Recruitment Letter

Recruitment letter to be sent via TDCS email to current

Pellissippi State Community College students

Dear Former Foster Youth,

DCS has not given me your identity, but is sending this letter for me because you are a former foster youth enrolled in classes at Pellissippi State Community College. My name is Kathleen Douthat and I am a Doctor of Philosophy candidate from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. I am conducting a research study on the experiences of former foster youth that are in college at PSCC. I would like to ask you to consider participating in this research study. Participation in the study is voluntary and not connected to PSCC. You must be aged 18 or older to participate. The study involves meeting with me for one interview and a follow-up meeting at a location convenient to you to talk about your college experience. The interview should take approximately 90 minutes to complete and the follow-up meeting should last approximately one hour.

If you are interested, please contact me at (865) 804-4978 (cell phone) or by email at kdouthat@utk.edu. All participants will be compensated for your time with a $25 gift card to Target. If you have questions or need more information about this study, please feel free to contact me at the phone number or email address above.

Sincerely,

Kathleen B. Douthat. Ph.D. Candidate
University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Department of Educational Psychology and Counseling

Appendix D

IL Wrap-around List
Independent Living Program for Youth Ages 14-21

Educational

Name	Eligibility
Testing fees (SAT, ACT, GED)	Youth in state custody or young adults receiving DCS Voluntary Post-Custody Services
Post Secondary Application	Youth in state custody or young adults receiving DCS Voluntary Post-Custody Services.
Tutoring	Youth in state custody or receiving DCS Voluntary Post-Custody Services.
Summer school	Youth in state custody or young adults receiving DCS Voluntary Post-Custody Services. High school only.
Independent Living Class Stipend	Youth in state custody or receiving DCS Voluntary Post-Custody Services
Graduation Package	Youth in state custody or young adults receiving DCS Voluntary Post-Custody Services
Good Grades Incentive	Youth in state custody age 14 & up attending elementary, junior, or high school.
Yearbooks	Youth in state custody or young adults receiving DCS Voluntary Post-Custody Services
Membership/activity fees for extracurricular or leadership activities	Youth in state custody or young adults receiving DCS Voluntary Post-Custody Services
Senior Event Related Transportation	Youth in state custody or young adults receiving DCS Voluntary Post-Custody Services
Honor/Senior Class Trip (School related activity)	Youth in state custody or receiving DCS Voluntary Post-Custody Services - in high school or college.

Housing

Housing Application/Fees for Post Secondary	Young adults receiving DCS Voluntary Post-Custody Services and applying to college/ training programs.

Name	**Eligibility**
Job Training	
Materials for Vocational Studies	Youth in state custody or young adults receiving DCS Voluntary Post-Custody Services
Completion of job readiness training	Youth in state custody or young adults receiving DCS Voluntary Post-Custody Services
Job start-up costs	Youth in state custody or young adults receiving DCS Voluntary Post-Custody Services
Transportation	
Driver's Education Class Fees	Youth in state custody or young adults receiving DCS Voluntary Post-Custody Services
Driver's Testing Fees	Youth in state custody or young adults receiving DCS Voluntary Post-Custody Services.
Car insurance	Young adults receiving DCS Voluntary Post-Custody Services.
Transportation grant	Young adults receiving DCS Voluntary Post-Custody Services and commuting to school and/or work.

Special with Independent Living Director's (or Designee's) Specific Approval

Car repairs	Young adults receiving DCS Voluntary Post-Custody Services.
Housing Related Fees	Young adults receiving DCS Voluntary Post-Custody Services. Fees may include initial housing start-up costs such as deposits (phone, utilities, rental). **Housing deposits are to be disbursed One Time Only.** Fees may also include the intial rental payment to secure housing until other financial supports, such as the Independent Living Direct Payment Allowance, are established. Emergency rental payments may also be authorized.
Tools/ Equipment (Technical/Vocational Programs)	Young adults receiving DCS Voluntary Post-Custody Services and attending a technical school program.
Other special needs – unique to youth services	Youth in state custody or young adults receiving DCS Voluntary Post-Custody Services
Child Care Assistance	Young adults receiving DCS Voluntary Post-Custody Services and attending an educational program.
Youth Leadership Stipend	Youth in state custody or Young Adults receiving DCS Voluntary Post-Custody Services and participating in Academy to become leaders of Youth Councils, or participating in Youth Leadership activities.

Vita

Kathy Douthat was born in Detroit, Michigan and grew up in the nearby suburb of Berkley. She completed requirements for a Bachelor of Science in Health Education in 1982 from Central Michigan University in Mt. Pleasant, Michigan. Following the completion of her undergraduate degree, Kathy eventually moved to Hot Springs, Arkansas where she began working in social service positions. In 1987 Kathy and her husband and infant son moved to Bloomington, Illinois. After the birth of her second son in 1989, Kathy began working with the McLean County mobile crisis unit, where her interest in mental health began. In 1992, Kathy and her family moved to Knoxville, Tennessee where they remain today. She continued to work in the social services and mental health fields and in 2004 completed her Masters of Education degree in Counseling and Guidance from Lincoln Memorial University in Harrogate, Tennessee. Kathy has worked as a counselor, administrator, and children's services specialist, obtaining her licensure in Alcohol and Drug Abuse Counseling and in Professional Counseling through the state of Tennessee. Additionally, she is a National Certified Counselor, as well as an Approved Clinical Supervisor. Kathy began her doctoral program in 2008 and completed a certificate in Qualitative Research Methods in Education at The University of Tennessee at Knoxville in 2010. She is currently a mental health counselor at Pellissippi State Community College in Knoxville, Tennessee, where she has been employed since 2006. Upon acceptance of this dissertation, Kathy will have graduated with a Ph. D. in Educational Psychology and Research from The University of Tennessee at Knoxville in 2013.