

The Power in Their Stories: Using Student Voice and Determination to Address the Experiences
of College Student Formerly in Foster Care

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Dedications

To my mom, your role-modeling and prayers have fortified me into the educated woman that I have become. Thank you for being my rock throughout my educational journey. Doctors Jacksons, party of two, me and you.

To Alexandria, thank you for your unwavering support during these past three years. Through every challenge, you have been present offering positivity and believing in me. For that, I am forever thankful.

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Preface

This study explores the lived experiences and persistence strategies of college students who were formerly in foster care. Using a qualitative approach, it examines how these students navigate higher education systems and access institutional resources, with particular attention to support structures grounded in justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI). The goal of this research is to elevate student voice and inform policies and practices that enhance their collegiate success.

The study was approved by the University of Tennessee's Institutional Review Board in early Fall 2024. Data collection and analysis occurred between September and December 2024, with the study completed in early 2025 during the inauguration and the beginning of President Donald J. Trump's second term. During this period, several executive orders, specifically Executive Orders 14152, 14173, 14190, and 14191, were issued, each significantly influencing the American education system. These orders impacted areas such as federal grant funding, state jurisdiction, and higher education initiatives, particularly those related to JEDI support structures. Because these executive orders were enacted after the conclusion of data collection, their implications are not directly reflected in the study's findings, recommendations, or conclusions. However, the relevance of these policy shifts to the population studied is clear. As a historically marginalized group, college students formerly in foster care often depend on JEDI-driven programs and resources. Policy changes that alter or reduce access to these supports may create additional barriers to persistence and degree attainment.

Given the evolving nature of federal education policy, it is important to contextualize this study's implications within the policy landscape that existed prior to January 2025. Readers

should interpret the findings with an awareness of the shifting educational and political context and consider how future policy developments may influence the conditions and opportunities available to students with foster care experience.

Abstract

For students formerly in foster care (FFC), the transition from the child welfare system to college is not just an academic pursuit; it is a journey defined by resilience, identity exploration, and hope. This qualitative narrative inquiry, presented in a three-article format and guided by Deci and Ryan's Self Determination Theory, explored how FFC students experience access, transition, and persistence in higher education. Centering storytelling as both method and data, this study positioned FFC students as content experts of their own educational journeys. A transformational finding was the foundational role of hope that is rooted in survival, self-awareness, and the desire to create a future distinct from that of their biological parents. Rather than fostering a victim mentality, for these students, foster care experiences often catalyzed self-determination and purpose, especially within their collegiate experience. From this research the FFC Tripod Model of Collegiate Persistence and Support emerged. This model proposed that institutional awareness, community support, and student self-advocacy were pivotal and interconnected components of FFC student success. The resilience of these students underscored the urgency for policies and practices that are not only informed by their voices but also developed in collaboration with them. This study emphasized that institutions could foster more inclusive and supportive academic environments by recognizing the distinct needs and strengths of FFC students.

Keywords: Formerly in Foster Care, persistence, higher education

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Entering higher education can be a difficult transition for students; however, students who have experienced foster care have additional and unique challenges when compared to their non-foster care peers. More than 23,000 children age out of foster care every year (National Foster Youth Institute, 2017). College students formerly in foster care¹ are a small fraction of the student population within higher education (Barrat & Berliner, 2013; Dworsky, 2018; “Foster Care Facts”). For this demographic of student, while around 80% aspire to attain post-secondary degrees, only 10% of foster youths attend college and from that 10% only 3% will graduate (“Foster Care Facts”), thus, relegating FFC students as an underrepresented group on college campuses. Several factors contribute to the significant decrease from aspiration to reality (Dworsky, 2018). Scholars (Dworsky, 2018; Okumo, 2014) within this area of research seek to further reveal what could be responsible for inhibiting post-secondary success for FFC students. Some of these factors include lack of preparation for a post-secondary education, the need to repeat foundational courses, lack of additional assistance from parents and family, and, therefore, the absence of family privilege (Dworsky, 2018; Seita, 2014).

The lack of family privilege, defined by Seita (2014) as, “strengths and supports gained through primary caring relationships” (p. 8), poses an additional challenge for FFC students. Family privilege highlights the importance of familial roles and how that influences the development of a young person (Seita, 2014). This form of privilege is often overlooked when compared to other forms of cultural capital. Seita (2014) stated, “few contemplate how many benefits, both hidden and seen, exist for those with solid family connections...like the air we

¹ Hereafter, Formerly in Foster Care will be referred to as FFC

breathe, we take family for granted and do not recognize how important it is until its absence is felt” (p. 8).

In conjunction with the lack of family privilege, FFC students have specific academic achievement challenges that are uniquely aligned with their experience in care (Barrat & Berliner, 2013). There are pivotal disadvantages pertaining to postsecondary education accessibility and educational history by not having a consistent home base and familial unit (Barrat & Berliner, 2013). The instability of placements/ housing that accompanies aging out of the foster care system and potentially entering higher education remains an ongoing challenge faced by FFC students. National working groups on Foster Care and Education (2017) reported that “youth in foster care frequently experienced placement changes, and these placement changes lead to educational instability as youth move from school to school” (para 2). The National Foster Youth Institute (2017) reported, “33% of children had changed elementary schools 5 or more times, causing them to fall behind academically” (para 7). There are distinct educational factors present for FFC students such as foster placement, changes in placement, and a lack of collegiate preparedness leading to secondary education instability. These need to be examined critically when reviewing research surrounding FFC students (“Foster Care Facts”; National Foster Youth Institute, 2017).

Dworsky (2018) continues to examine the educational difference once entering higher education between foster youth students and their non-care peers noting that there continues to be substantial gaps in educational achievement for FFC students in comparison to their peers who have not experienced foster care, which continues once entering higher education. FFC students are not persisting at the same rate as their first-generation peers, another student

demographic that experiences additional challenges as the first in their family to navigate the higher education landscape (Day et al., 2013; Dworsky, 2018). A study by Day et al., (2013) conducted a study that examined the graduation rates of FFC students and first-generation college students, which yielded the findings that FFC students have higher drop-out and lower graduation completion rates than first-generation college students. A significant discovery from their study found that students from both populations were in good academic standing, noting the differences in their graduation and dropout rate are more likely due to non-academic factors. Barrat and Berliner (2013) discovered FFC youth are less likely to graduate from high school, enroll in college, and graduate from college supporting the literature on FFC students' having lower persistence within higher education than their non-care peers.

The frequent relocations due to placement changes influence not only class performance but also their social interactions outside of the classroom. Select non-academic challenges for this demographic are mental health concerns, housing security, personal relationships, and financial stress (Dworsky 2018; Pecora et al, 2006). Once these students are admitted and enrolled at higher education institutions, the challenges of their foster care background coincide with the expected transitional stress of entering higher education. Potential barriers are present not only in the collegiate classroom but also through the holistic experience of FFC college students. This can range from participation in organizations to mentorship with faculty/ staff. Current research shows that due to numerous school changes, several FFC students fail to create meaningful relationships with others, therefore, having a greater tendency to lose friends impacting their overall mental health and increasing feelings of loneliness and isolation (National Foster Youth Institute, 2017). FFC students traditionally exhibit more mental and behavioral

concerns in comparison to their non-foster care peers (Pecora et al., 2006). The National Foster Youth Institute (2017) reported “25% of children who have aged out of the foster care system still suffer with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)...tens of thousands of children in the foster care system were taken away from their parents after suffering from extreme abuse” (para 2). The personal experiences of FFC students should not be overlooked or disregarded when developing support structures for increase post-secondary success for this demographic. To help retain these students, there should be unique support measures within higher education institutions, beyond traditional academic support, offered to FFC students.

FFC students have unique lived experiences that can impact their transition and success into higher education. As difficulties continue to present themselves, involvement with campus resources and personalized connections with campus staff and knowledge of partners can help mitigate these challenges by giving FFC students direction on where to go for assistance (Dworsky, 2018; Okumo, 2014). This study plans to examine the FFC students’ overall collegiate experience with a focus on how their self-determination, specifically how social relatedness (with peers, faculty, and staff), autonomy, and competence influence their persistence in higher education.

Statement of the Problem

Although there has been an increase in current research on FFC students, scant literature focuses on FFC students from the perspective of the students, or their perspective of barriers encountered within higher education. There is a gap in the literature examining self-determination and its influence on the persistence of FFC students from the student perspective. The current research on FCC students examines academic success by retention and graduation

rates. The National Foster Youth Institute (2017) stated that students who have experienced foster care have low applicant percentages, retention rates, and graduation rates. Dworsky (2018) said “between 1% and 11% of foster youth graduate from college, depending on the age at which graduation rates are measured” (p. 12). One of the hindrances to success in higher education for FFC students is that student support staff do not understand the unique challenges of this student demographic, which limits effective intervention and advocacy that can be offered to this student demographic.

The gap in the literature pertains to a lack of research examining FFC students and the support they receive by engaging with non-academic student support services including staff members, organizations, or extracurriculars. The retention rates of FFC students through the support of academic on-campus offices, for example, specialized college programs, are being examined. However, there is a lack of research that looks at retention through student narrative, specifically by investigating sense of belonging through connections with non-academic offices and support staff.

Current research examining FFC students either seeks to understand how a specialized collegiate program influences academic success for FFC students or focuses on different dimensions of well-being. There is limited research that examines the influence of ability, the perception of that ability, and social connectedness as it pertains to collegiate persistence for FFC students. Dworsky and Perez (2010) found that the lack of support from the child welfare system for FFC students to attend higher education institutions trickles down to the case workers and foster parents, giving the FFC student extremely limited support in their post-secondary aspirations. Okumu (2014) stated that researchers need to “explore how the college experience

shapes other aspects of the cognitive-structural development for this population [students who have experienced foster care]” (p.16). Kirk and Day (2011) offered the suggestion of “an assessment of whether exposure to leadership opportunities like participation as a camp counselor or in other peer-mentoring projects could actually enhance college retention rates for college-enrolled foster care youth” (p. 1179). Unrau, Dawson, Hamilton, and Bennett (2017) advocated for “a detailed analysis of the reasons that participants temporarily or completely stop in their pursuit of a college degree” (p. 71). These researchers point to the need for further studies on retention and persistence in postsecondary institutions for FFC students including the influence of collegiate involvement and connections. This study will begin to fill that gap by utilizing student voice to investigate the extent and type of support needed for FFC students as they matriculate within higher education institutions. Examining the relationship between self-determination and persistence rates of FFC students will speak to the calls for scholarship in this area and allow researchers to analyze how sense of belonging to an institution affects the persistence rates of FFC students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine how FFC students’ overall collegiate experience, specifically their self-determination, including social relationships (with peers, faculty, and staff), autonomy, and competence influences their persistence in higher education.

Research Questions

This study is framed by Deci and Ryan’s (2012) self-determination theory to examine former foster care students' sense of autonomy, competence, and social relatedness in relation to

their experience in higher education with a specialized focus on their persistence. This study will be guided by the following questions:

1. How do FFC students describe their experience in higher education?
2. How do FFC students' self-determination influence their persistence in higher education?

Significance of the Study

Higher Education

The research for FFC students who are not in specialized collegiate programs is limited or does not measure student success from a holistic viewpoint. Currently in the United States, there are only a limited number of collegiate programs created to support FFC students, and these programs are currently regionally bound to the west coast. This study will add additional knowledge on FFC students in higher education, specifically those located in the southeastern region of the United States. Currently, only a small number of higher education institutions have established programs to support current FFC students. This study will add to the body of literature on FFC students through an investigation of the lived experiences of FFC students who are not involved in a specialized program within the southeastern United States. Most higher education institutions support these students on a case-by-case or as-needed basis, especially since there is not a requirement for the students to disclose their former foster care status. Based upon previous research when there is not a dedicated person or office to support FFC students, they tend to be bypassed impacting their persistence at the university (Dworsky, 2018; Pecora et al., 2006). This study will utilize student voice to define success and barriers within higher education, assisting institutions with development of intentional and effective forms of outreach

and support for FFC students. By allowing FFC student voices to describe what they need and are missing to be successful within higher education, this study will provide institutions with a roadmap for how to better support this demographic of students.

Higher education is approaching the projected timeline of the demographic cliff as it pertains to enrollment rates. Higher education is predicted to have its highest enrollment in 2025 and then be on a downward trend for the next twelve years, which can be largely attributed to the decrease in children born during and following the recession of 2008 (Hoover, 2020). This study will assist higher education institutions with reimagining their student population through active engagement with government agencies and policymakers in making higher education more accessible and equitable for FFC students. Institutions will need to think about accessibility barriers they can remove to steady enrollment during this time. However, between 2027 and 2032, a projected decrease from 3.85 million high school graduates to 3.74 million is anticipated and with this decrease in high school graduates, entering cohorts will be more diverse, encompassing more first-generation and low socioeconomic students (Hoover, 2020). This study will bring awareness to best recruitment and retention strategies for FFC students. Higher education will need to not only increase inclusivity for but redevelop its recruitment practice to meet the suspected melt of the “demographic cliff.” As this study leans into gaining FFC student’s insight on the higher education experience, a byproduct of this study will be an advancement in higher education recruitment practices of diverse student demographics. As it pertains to retention, this study will allow students to name what barriers influence their persistence. By looking at FFC students at a large southeastern institution, which currently has limited support structures in place in comparison to west coast schools like the Guardian

Program throughout California (“Guardian Scholars Program”), higher education will need to create and execute “foster-friendly” practices within their institutions. Higher education institutions will be able to think through how they can implement and address barriers for FFC students based upon their unique lived experiences and voiced needs that have been highlighted from this study. Therefore, this study will contribute to literature and better it by giving a greater understanding to higher education institutions about how their practices can inadvertently hinder and create barriers for FFC students; however, through this increased awareness, institutions can alter their current procedures to develop and fortify foster-friendly policies.

Persistence, Resilience, and Retention

This study is situated within the broader context of higher education and centers on the academic achievement of students with foster care experience. Core to this investigation are the concepts of persistence, resilience, and retention, each of which will be explored in relation to the educational trajectories of these students. McCoy (personal communication, January 2020) articulated a framing distinction by stating, “institutions retain, and students persist,” a perspective that informs this study’s conceptual differentiation among persistence, resilience, and retention.

Higher education institutions can implement a wide range of resources designed to support student success, which many are classified as retention strategies. These institutional initiatives may be broadly applied across the student population or tailored to address the specific needs of groups, such as FFC students formerly. Retention efforts, grounded in institutional responsibility, are shaped by both research on college students and narratives of student experiences. However, institutions cannot feasibly create individualized retention plans for every

student; instead, they must critically assess which supports can be universally applied, while also identifying and addressing the systemic barriers they may perpetuate, barriers that often disproportionately affect historically excluded populations such as FFC students.

While retention is the responsibility of the institution, persistence is the responsibility of the student. Persistence refers to the individualized, agentic process through which a student continues toward degree completion despite challenges. Institutions can provide resources, foster inclusive environments, and actively work to remove structural barriers. However, if a student chooses not to engage with these supports, or cannot engage due to constraints beyond institutional control, and subsequently does not complete their degree, that student has not persisted. This distinction reinforces the importance of understanding persistence as an outcome deeply tied to student motivation, decision-making, and lived realities.

For FFC college students, persistence is intimately connected to resilience. Resilience encompasses the ways in which students draw upon their lived experiences including past hardships within and beyond the foster care system to remain committed to their academic and personal goals. In this study, participants frequently aligned their resilience with long-term objectives, including college graduation and future professional success. These aspirations served as guiding motivators, reinforcing their persistence even in the face of institutional or personal challenges.

While persistence and resilience are closely related, they are not synonymous. Persistence refers to a student's continued enrollment and progression toward a degree over time and is measured through academic metrics such as retention rates, credit accumulation, and graduation outcomes. Resilience reflects a student's internal capacity to adapt, recover, and remain goal-

oriented in the face of adversity. It is less about linear academic progression and more about the emotional, psychological, and relational endurance that enables a student to continue forward. In the context of FFC college students, resilience often manifests in navigating unstable housing, financial precarity, lack of familial support, or institutional misunderstanding, all of which appear in retention data and significantly shape a student's capacity to persist.

For this study, resilience can be the foundation upon which persistence is built, particularly for students who carry the weight of complex life histories. For FFC students, resilience is cultivated through previous experiences of survival, coping, and resourcefulness. Preceding and enabling persistence within academic systems, resilience empowers college FFC students formerly to draw upon their lived experiences as they navigate and contribute to new, often uncharted, spaces within higher education. Recognizing this distinction allows institutions to more holistically support FFC students, not only through tracking persistence metrics, but also by valuing and nurturing the resilience that makes such persistence possible.

Government Agencies

The research may show that being in foster care affects education attainment and development for students for not only their K-12 experience, but also as they transition into collegiate education (Barrat & Berliner, 2013). This study will provide government agencies like the Department of Children Service with information about the longitudinal effects of foster care as it relates to the FFC experience in higher education. By analyzing factors such as competence, autonomy, and social relatedness, this study provides a holistic look at FFC students on college campuses giving government agencies a firsthand 360-degree view of the impact that foster care on FFC collegiate students. There is current research on FFC students' higher education, but this

study will uniquely address not only FFC experience in higher education but also their persistence. Through this study government agencies that interact with and provide for FFC youth will have direct information from FFC alumni about the pipeline from care to college. With the addition of this knowledge, agencies can develop effective programs or halt harmful practices based upon the findings of this study and the longitudinal effect on FFC students. By gaining a descriptive narrative of the FFC experience in higher education, including how their unique lived experience of being in foster care, influences their persistence, competency, autonomy, and social skills as a young adult, government agencies are provided with personalized data from FFC alumni that can be used to inform foster care policies and procedures. Therefore, this study will contribute to literature by providing a greater understanding for how government agencies can provide better structure and support to students during and post care, specifically regarding educational advancement for FFC students as they transition into higher education.

Policy Makers

As FFC students enter higher education, they have distinctive lived experiences that not only influence their arrival to higher education but also their continuation. To create access and equity for FFC students in higher education, there needs to be information that answers the questions surrounding student needs from a policy and monetary stance. This study seeks to better understand FFC students' needs at it pertains to policy-related topics by asking questions that focus on what helped and hindered their experience and persistence in higher education. This study will examine policy on all levels including micro level components such as institutional norms to macro level of higher education policy. Through these intentional

questions and a focus on student voice, current policymakers will have the qualitative data to examine policies to see how they impact FFC youth's path towards and through higher education.

This study will also address how financial status influences higher education persistence for FFC students. FFC students traditionally receive federal and state aid from FAFSA and additional state funding; however, this study will allow students to discuss the potential positives and negatives of financial aid as an FFC student. As policymakers develop funding models for FFC students, this study will provide FFC student-voiced feedback on their financial assistance in acknowledgment of their unique lived experience and lack of family privilege. Therefore, this study will contribute to literature by giving a greater understanding of how federal and state policies affect FFC students while providing information on which policies should be reassessed to be inclusive and equitable to FFC students in higher education.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is based upon Deci and Ryan's (2012) self-determination theory while using a micro level of analysis specifically concentrating on FFC students in higher education. This framework has an intersection of both holistic and academic support; however, self-determination theory also puts the responsibility on students while acknowledging what higher education can do to better support them.

Self-determination theory is derived from social psychology, specifically the idea that one's social environment influences personal motivations, behaviors, and outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Self-determination theory focuses on the individual. One of the theory's core tenets is that all people can naturally evolve and develop; however, self-determination theory revolves

around the psychological and psychosocial characteristics of a person (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Self-determination is an essential factor in a successful transition into adulthood and higher education (Field & Hoffman, 2012). This theory looks at the needs and inclination of personal well-being that humans need to be motivated (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Researchers have described self-determination theory as the “macro-theory of human motivation, emotion, and development” (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009, p. 134). Self-determination is a useful tool when analyzing the trajectory of FFC students’ emergence into adulthood

Self-determination theory is a pillar of transitional success, especially within higher education, due to its roots in adaptability, motivation, and relationship-building (Field & Hoffman 2012; Getzel, 2014; Salazar et al., 2017). Deci and Ryan (2012) explain that self-determination theory starts with a baseline understanding about the duplicitous nature of humans; therefore, acknowledging that humans can be motivated and diminished as they encounter different life circumstances (Deci & Ryan, 2000). There are three psychological needs that compose self-determination theory: autonomy, competence, and social relatedness, which are used when evaluating growth and motivation as it pertains to well-being and development (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Deci & Ryan, 2012).

All students have foundational experiences that connect to all three psychological needs of self-determination theory. College students encounter the need for motivation and resilience through their post-secondary education experience. As students transition into higher education and enter a phase of moratorium, they all experience different behaviors that relate to autonomy, competence, and relatedness. However, for FFC students, their previous lived experiences that

connect to competence, relatedness, and autonomy are more likely to have a connection with previous lived trauma.

Within self-determination theory, external factors more commonly cause an impediment to personal and social maturation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). However, Ryan and Deci (2020) suggested that the best environment for competence to occur are those that “afford optimal challenges, positive feedback, and opportunities for growth” (p. 1). The ideal educational setting values and is aware of how their institution supports or undermines the psychological needs of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

The research from self-determination theory supports the holistic lens of student support. As students are given safe spaces to explore and develop the psychological needs found in self-determination, findings show that these students not only perform stronger academically but also have better life skills outside of the classroom. Incorporating sense of belonging for FFC students in higher education institutions, brings in a new lens to review persistence. The current research on students who have experienced foster care regarding higher education focuses on the traditional lens of academia and academic success within the classroom, but not through a development vantage point that examines their self-determination through the aspects of autonomy, competence, and relatedness to others (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Instead of mainly focusing on academic ability, which research shows is like the first-generation peers, self-determination theory allows for a full assessment of persistence of FFC students.

Self-determination theory examines amotivation, external motivation, and intrinsic motivation through growth mindset. Motivation, both intrinsic and external, is connected to action or behavior while rewards are synonymous with outcomes of the behaviors. When

analyzing motivation, Ryan and Deci (2000) stated: “Motivation concerns energy, direction, and persistence” (p. 69). All styles of motivation influence not only students’ overall wellness but also their academic performance (Ryan & Deci, 2020). When analyzing motivation of any form, there needs to be an awareness of the impact of external factors.

Intrinsic motivation looks at the ability to persuade or convince oneself to act in a way that is congruent with their goals and aspirations, specifically with the goal of relating to growth for oneself without any persuasion from others or external factors (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Intrinsic motivation is the ability to self-inspire oneself to complete an action focused on the idea of self-fulfillment (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Those reasonings can be connected to self-interest, fulfillment, passions, or simply enjoyment of a topic or action.

External motivation encompasses the idea that a certain action will lead to rewards instead of self-growth. Extrinsic motivation, according to self-determination theory, can be divided into four subcategories. Those are external regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation, and integrated motivation. External motivations can lead to both intrinsic rewards and external rewards through its four-phase regulation process. The four phases of external motivation build upon themselves creating a pathway to intrinsic motivation resulting in self-determination theory. External regulation means that actions are solely motivated by external factors to avoid punishment or to gain a reward from others. This form of external motivation contradicts intrinsic motivations and perpetuates concepts of control and manipulation. Finally, actions that are externally regulated are not maintained at a consistent level (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Unlike external regulation, introjection is motivation driven to avoid consequences that one will inflict upon themselves. Actions driven by introjection are not related to passion or enjoyment the way intrinsically motivated actions are. However, the maintenance and consistency of introjected regulation are moderately maintained when compared to external regulated behaviors. Identification is a step closer to intrinsic motivation than introjected regulation. Identified regulation is when actions can be identified because of positive outcomes. The actions have an elevated level of autonomy but are not fully intrinsically driven. Ryan and Deci (2000) specifically use the examples of exercising to be healthy. This action is not intrinsically motivated because exercising is extrinsically motivated for an outcome of health. The final stage of extrinsic motivation is integrated regulation, where identification is added to the action piece, knowing that action is taking place and actively including it. This comes with an acknowledgement that its addition will support or align with values and overall well-being. This process transforms extrinsic motivation to self-determined extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Besides extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation, there is amotivation. External and internal motivation has both intentionality toward an action and some form of motivation. However, amotivation lacks both the determination to move into action, which coincides with the motivation to act. According to Deci and Ryan (2000), in the self-determination theory, people who tend to be motivated are those who do not care about the outcomes or those who do not believe that they have the skills to be successful.

The present study includes the three psychological needs of Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory, competence, relatedness, and autonomy. For this study, definitions will be

adapted from Ryan and Deci's (2000) explanation. The psychological needs of self-determination theory, relatedness, competence, and autonomy are not siloed but collaborate with and influence one another. Allowing students to have a space where they can explore, take risks, and develop their psychological and psychosocial needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness can influence self-determination and control over choices in life including continuing in higher education and, ultimately, graduate.

Niemiec et al. (2006) showed the importance of supported spaces to explore autonomy and how that improves competence and personal well-being. Autonomy focuses on the importance of being able to make personal decisions for oneself and control over one's actions and decisions. Autonomy embodies the ownership that a person has on their own actions, specifically behaviors that are self-supported or valued instead of those exploited by others (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Ryan and Deci (2020) analyzed the concept of autonomy and its influence on diverse and inclusive learning environments. FFC students' care averages several different placements, which commonly affects education resulting from changing schools. This instability could factor into their learning strategies; therefore, inclusive learning environments support students with nontraditional secondary education experiences can be valuable (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Competence is the ability to act effectively and efficiently, which leads to successful behaviors. Competence is related to being or feeling proficient. This also includes the growth a person can experience from experiencing mastery. Relatedness looks at the importance of having, maintaining, and sustaining personal connections and relationships with others. The last component of self-determination theory is relatedness. Relatedness encompasses the opportunity and ability to connect with others, feeling like one belongs and is driven through the lens of

respect and care (Ryan & Deci, 2020). An absence or intentionality towards these three psychological needs can create more struggles and challenges as it relates to overall wellbeing and motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2020). By utilizing competence, autonomy, and relatedness, FFC students develop a variety of skills that lead to a higher likelihood for success within postsecondary education (Getzel, 2014).

Relatedness is the need, want, and capacity to form authentic sustaining relationships with others, including peers and adults. Competence is the belief and proficiency to learn, complete, and master ideas and materials. Autonomy is the ability to be self-sufficient within the decision-making process that leads to reflective actions, attitudes, and behaviors.

Sense of belonging is related to all aspects of Deci and Ryan's (2012) self-determination theory, but especially relatedness. Relatedness emphasizes the importance of not only having peer support but also mentorship through professional staff members. Deci and Ryan (2000) examined how relatedness leads to self-determination which could be a factor when evaluating persistence. Research shows that mentorship with an influential adult helps FFC students feel supported, especially as they transition out of care.

Persistence utilizes competency and autonomy from Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory. For purposes of this study persistence focuses on the student's commitment to engagement and academic matriculation. Persistence can be measured by the student's enrollment status in the university. Maintaining enrollment within a higher education institution is solely dependent on the student. Students can be supported and encouraged by external parties such as a mentor, community, or staff; however, the student's academic performance is aligned to progression within the degree program. Relatedness from Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-

determination focuses on the importance of having a community and support system and its connection to personal progression. However, autonomy and competence are internally focused looking at the person's ability and perception of that ability. A student's ability or how they perceive their ability is not mutually exclusive to their persistence. This includes students' ability to seek help from others both personally and academically if they are struggling.

According to Ryan and Deci (2020), there is a need for more qualitative research that uses self-determination theory to analyze the educational setting of students. They emphasize the importance of examining competence, relatedness, and autonomy for outcomes that yield self-determination and motivation. (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Niemiec et al. (2006) connects self-determination theory and family privilege in their study by exploring the intersectionality lack of family privilege for FFC students. By utilizing Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory, this study can seek to understand how the three components of relatedness, autonomy, and competence influence a sense of belonging and persistence for FFC students.

Three-Article Organization

This dissertation is designed in a three-article format, with a focus on FFC students and their persistence. Two of the three studies are theoretically framed in Deci and Ryan's (2012) self-determination theory to examine former foster care students' sense of autonomy, competence, and social relatedness in relation to their experience and persistence.

Article 1: A systematic review of the lessons learned from formerly in foster care college students at public higher education institutions

This systematic review seeks to address FFC students with a focus on what the empirical research says about FFC students. From this systematic review, major lessons from the literature

include both negative (barriers) and positive (opportunities) components. Within each major finding, there are five themes to include advancement barriers (i.e., mental health challenges, instability, loneliness and isolation, financials, and lack of understanding); and influential success factors (i.e., “that one person,” specialized college programs, financials, new opportunities, and peer social support). The discussion of this study examines how higher education can utilize the influential success factors to overcome the barriers for the persistence of FFC students. The implementation of these factors is outlined at the macro, meso, and micro-level within higher education.

Possible journals for submission include: *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, *The Journal of Higher Education*, *The Journal of College Student Development*, and *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*.

Article 2: Increasing the visibility of FFC college students through narrative inquiry

Narrative inquiry allows for participants to holistically tell their story, not just as individuals but also in relation to their lived experience, social context, and environment (Clandinin, 2006). FFC students can voice their fully lived experiences within and external to higher education. Through narrative inquiry, FFC students can tell their story uniquely rather than generalized by their experience in care. Through this method, FCC students can make meaning through their experiences (Clandinin, 2006). Narrative inquiry also allows the researcher to understand how their previous experiences influence their current environment (Clandinin, 2006). For FFC students transitioning out of foster care and into higher education, this is a change that an underrepresented group of students have experienced.

Clandinin and Caine (2008) add to this perspective by noting that narrative inquiry is a “phenomena of people's experiences and a methodology for narratively inquiring into experience and thus allows for the intimate study of individuals' experiences over time and in context” (p. 542). FFC students are a hidden demographic with only around 3% graduating with a college degree (“Foster Care Facts”). A narrative inquiry allows for these students to be the tellers of their experience giving voice and agency to FFC students. Ryan and Deci’s (2000) self-determination theory will be the focus relying on the core pillars of social relatedness, competence, and autonomy.

Possible journals for submission include: *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, *The Journal of Higher Education*, *The Journal of College Student Development*, and *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*.

Article 3: Using self-determination theory to redefine higher education barriers and student persistence: Power of FFC student voice

This study seeks to examine students who have experienced foster youth in relation to their experience in and access to support while in public higher education institutions within the United States. With over 20,000 youths aging out of care each year and only 700 graduating from higher education, there is a gap in educational trajectory as it pertains to FFC students (“Foster Care Facts”). The challenges of transitioning into higher education do not end once these students are admitted at universities but continue throughout their enrollment. However, several universities are unaware of how and, thus, are ill-equipped to support FFC students due to lack of knowledge about the unique lived experiences of FFC students. As institutions work to

retain students, there needs to be an awareness of factors that hinder student persistence, especially as it relates to vulnerable demographics such as FFC students.

This article will provide additional information about barriers that FFC students face during their time in higher education utilizing their voices and lived experiences. A narrative inquiry methodology will be used allowing for student voice to name and describe any barriers within their post-secondary experience. By utilizing Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory, barriers can be classified into the three tenets of SDT, autonomy, social relatedness, and competence.

Possible journals for submission include: *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, *The Journal of Higher Education*, *The Journal of College Student Development*, and *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*.

**CHAPTER 2: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF THE LESSONS LEARNED FROM
FORMERLY IN FOSTER CARE COLLEGE STUDENTS AT PUBLIC HIGHER
EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS**

Abstract

This systematic review seeks to address college students who were formerly in foster care. The research question focuses on what the empirical research says about college students who were formerly in foster care. This study utilized literature from the Education Resource Information Center (ERIC) and Academic Search Complete databases with selection criteria that focused on students attending an institution within the United States, who aged out of the foster care system. From this systematic review, two major findings were found. Within each major finding, there are five sub-themes. The first major finding was advancement barriers, which include mental health challenges, instability, isolation, supplementing financial aid, and understanding. The other key finding is influential success factors categorized into “that one person,” specialized college programs, financial support, fresh start, and social connectivity. The discussion of this study examines how higher education can utilize the influential success factors to overcome the barriers for the persistence of college students formerly in foster care. The implementation of these factors is outlined at the macro, meso, and micro-level within higher education.

Keywords: **college students, foster youth, formerly in foster care, advancement barriers, and influential success factors**

Introduction

As institutions reimagine how to keep enrollment steady, formerly in foster care (FFC) youth are not only capable of filling that need, but, more importantly, they desire the opportunity to do so. Higher education has grown in enrollment of diverse student populations. Student demographics that have been historically excluded in higher education now have a space and a voice in the academy. As diversity in higher education has grown for a variety of student groups, such as students of color, first generation students, and LGBTQ+ students, these increases have not been similarly seen in FFC students. Most higher education institutions have staff support or student programming for underrepresented identities. However, these same support structures are lacking for FFC students. Few U.S. states have high impact practices or resources for FFC students that acknowledge their unique lived experience (Dworsky & Perez, 2010). Through an awareness of FFC students' lived experiences, the transition to higher education can be more normalized for FFC students (Uranu et al., 2017).

FFC youth generally are neither applying to college, nor persisting at similar levels of their non-care peers. Of the 23,000 youth that age out of foster care each year, 16,100 aspire to attend college (“Foster Care Facts”). Of the 16,100 youth, only 920 will graduate from a higher education institution by the time they are twenty-four years old (“Foster Care Facts”). However, 11,500 youth will have experienced homelessness at some point within their young adulthood and 5,750 will have negative encounters with the judiciary system by the age of twenty-one, ranging from time incarcerated or having to appear before a judge (“Foster Care Facts”). The data clearly show a significant pipeline from aging out of foster care to homelessness and this transition happens within three years of aging out. Dworsky (2018) reports that “20,000 - 30,000

18- to 21-year-olds age out of foster care without permanent homes.” The National Foster Youth Institute (2017) reports that around 20% of children who were in foster care will become instantly homeless at the age of 18. Examining these statistics at the macro level draws attention to the decline of young adults in the workforce, need and stewardship of taxpayer dollars for their support, and the many disheartening outcomes of the foster care system.

If only 3% of those who age out of foster care have a post-secondary education degree by the age of 24, implications are that there is a systematic flaw in the foster care system regarding higher education preparation as well as a severe lack of resources for support if these students do enter higher education. The foster care system requires that all youth within its care complete schooling until they age out. However, the current foster care system and the instability of placements causes deficits to the educational achievement of individuals currently in foster care. To address and rectify these deficits, there must be action through foster care reform. Additionally, campus and government leaders should create and advocate for equitable reform that supports youth in foster care in their transition to higher education.

Dworsky and Perez (2010) discovered six key challenges to achieving and completing post-secondary education for college students formerly in foster care. These barriers include : 1) lack of encouragement to pursue higher education from the child welfare system; 2) lack of academic preparation due to placement instability; 3) no familial financial support; 4) lack of awareness of the financial aid available to them for higher education; 5) mental health challenges with limited support, which negatively affects their academic performance; and 6) ill-informed higher education support staff who are unaware of how to address the unique challenges of this student demographic (Dworsky & Perez, 2010). In a more recent study,

Dworsky (2018) created a list of factors possibly responsible for inhibiting post-secondary success. Some of the findings in this study echoed her 2010 study with Perez, including that FFC students are not being adequately prepared for a post-secondary education, FFC students may need to repeat foundational courses, and most FFC students have no additional assistance from parents and/or family (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Dworsky, 2018).

Echoing Dworsky and Perez's findings in their 2010 study, the National Foster Youth Institute (2017) shares that FFC students have a high percentage of mental health concerns. Their lived experiences heavily influence their worldview and shape their cognitive abilities and psychosocial progression. Transitioning into higher education has several challenges for all students; however, these challenges are exacerbated for FCC students due to their unique lived experiences. Jackson, Colvin, and Bullock (2019) bring awareness to the mental health disparities between college students formerly in foster care and their peers, stating that 80% have serious mental health concerns compared to their non-care peers. When considering their unique backgrounds of FCC, these students enter higher education with the standard transitional shock of entering higher education, while also navigating the additional layers of their past trauma. To counteract the effect of trauma on college students formerly in foster care, higher education institutions should develop support policies that concentrate on increasing FCC's sense of belonging and mattering.

There are certain levers that can be implemented to positively impact FCC students' experience within higher education. Hass, Allen, and Amoah (2014) explored perceived pivotal moments in academically successful FFC students. The authors specifically focused on "turning-point events" described as "a change in the quality and direction of one's life trajectory" (Hass et

al, 2014, p. 387). There is ample evidence of the challenges of the FFC college experience, yet there are limited findings on what helps these students achieve academic success. A positive and holistic collegiate experience is dependent on more than just classroom performance. As students encounter challenges in one area of life, these experiences will likely transfer into other areas. If students are struggling personally, academics can also be at risk, influencing persistence, retention, and graduation rates. Research shows that there is a decrease in enrollment and graduation for FFC students; however, the literature supports findings that indicate FFC students are not leaving higher education due to their academically preparation, but rather because of factors influenced by their foster care background (Dworsky, 2018; Dworsky & Perez, 2010).

The personal experiences of FFC students, prior to entering higher education, should not be overlooked when examining their retention to graduation rates. Research has begun to identify strategies to address the challenges faced by FFC students as they transition to higher education. Pecora (2012), a prominent researcher of educational achievement for FFC students, specifically calls for educational awareness, policy reform, and additional programming and services to better support this student demographic. Additional components which may lead to greater success or retention of FFC college students are programs and services offered by institutions. These unilaterally need to be either implemented or enhanced to better serve FFC students on university campuses. Difficulties even with the implementation of specific programs, challenges certainly will continue to present themselves, yet it is paramount that student involvement and campus partners are aware of these difficulties and prioritize addressing them. This is critical since one misstep can end a foster youth student's academic career. There is a low percentage of FCC students consistently retained to graduation (Dworsky, 2018). This clearly points to the

need for higher education institutions to assess current practices to ensure they are foster-friendly. To examine the challenges that face FFC students, a systematic review of the literature focused on college students, formerly in foster care, was conducted. This systematic review seeks to name and outline not only challenges FFC students face, but also success factors that can help support them through their higher education journey. This research will be guided by the following research question: What does the empirical research from 2001 to present inform us about college students formerly in foster care who are attending public higher education institutions in the United States?

Methods

Prior to the literature search, key words and selection criteria were narrowed to assure I collected a focused set of research studies that addressed the guiding research question. The selection criteria focused on students attending an institution within the United States, who aged out of the foster care system. The keywords, initially searched within the abstracts only, included: *foster youth*, *foster care*, or *formerly in foster care*. I decided to include only studies that occurred within the United States because the statistical data upon which the research question for this study was based were archived in the National Foster Youth Institute, which collected US empirical data and statistics.

I utilized the Education Resource Information Center (ERIC) and Academic Search Complete databases to gather the literature for review. The ERIC and Academic Search Complete databases were accessed through the University of Tennessee's library system. These databases include myriad forms of research including dissertations, book chapters, and academic journals; therefore, I was able to access a more robust selection of studies. To start my search,

the main key word used was *foster youth* in the search of abstracts, which resulted in many articles, including literature focused on all ages of foster youth. Since this study specifically focused on college students, I narrowed the keywords to *foster youth*, *college students* and added *formerly in foster care*. I specifically noted *formerly in foster care* because I sought to know what the empirical data said about college students who had aged out of the system versus those who had experienced foster care prior to the age of 18. Aging and being adopted out of the foster care system yield a different lived experience including varied forms of privilege and capital for those adopted. I designed my search to ensure that the three key terms were found within the abstract. This process yielded 105 results. I wanted my studies to range from 2001 to present and only consist of book chapters and academic journal articles since they are both peer-reviewed forms of literature. This narrowed the studies included in the count to 74. I decided to use 2001 as my cutoff date since this was the period when rising awareness and support for collegiate youth formerly in foster care began as well as change to federal and state level policy. The Federal Care Independence Act of 1999 created the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (Geenen & Powers, 2007). In 2001 Congress created the Education and Training Voucher Program, which was added as an amendment to the Chafee Foster Care Independence Act (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010; Dworsky & Perez, 2010). The Chafee Foster Care Independence Act allows college students formerly in foster care to receive up to \$5000 per year for education related costs up until the age of 23 if they received funding before the age of 21 (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010; Dworsky & Perez, 2010). Once removing studies that were internationally based and those that were duplicated from ERIC and Academic Search Complete, 69 studies advanced to the abstract review process.

As the primary author, I independently screened the 69 articles based upon the search criteria and I sought to determine if the abstract of the article might answer the research question of this systematic review. Through this process, 42 articles were removed. The final study count for this systematic review was 27 articles. **Figure 1** shows the article selection process described above. Of the articles selected for the systematic review, there was a wide variety of topics discussed, including topics from mental health concerns to navigating financial aid. When analyzing the article type utilized, the majority were mainly academic journals. From the 27 articles selected, one was a book chapter and 26 were from academic journals.

Findings and Major Themes

After examining the research about collegiate students formerly in foster care, the major findings were divided into two main categories. The key findings of this systematic review are advancement barriers and influential success factors. The advancement barrier findings and influential success findings are, respectively, categorized into eleven subsections: mental health concerns, instability and unpreparedness, loneliness and isolation, financials and unmet basic needs, lack of understanding, “that special person,” specialized college programs, financials, new opportunities and resiliency, and peer social support.

An overview of the selected articles guided understanding of these findings as well as points to the types of research from which these findings were gleaned. **Table 1** gives a brief description of each of articles within the systematic review, including author(s) of the article, date of publication, article topic, article type, advancement barriers, influential success factors, and which database from which the article was retrieved.

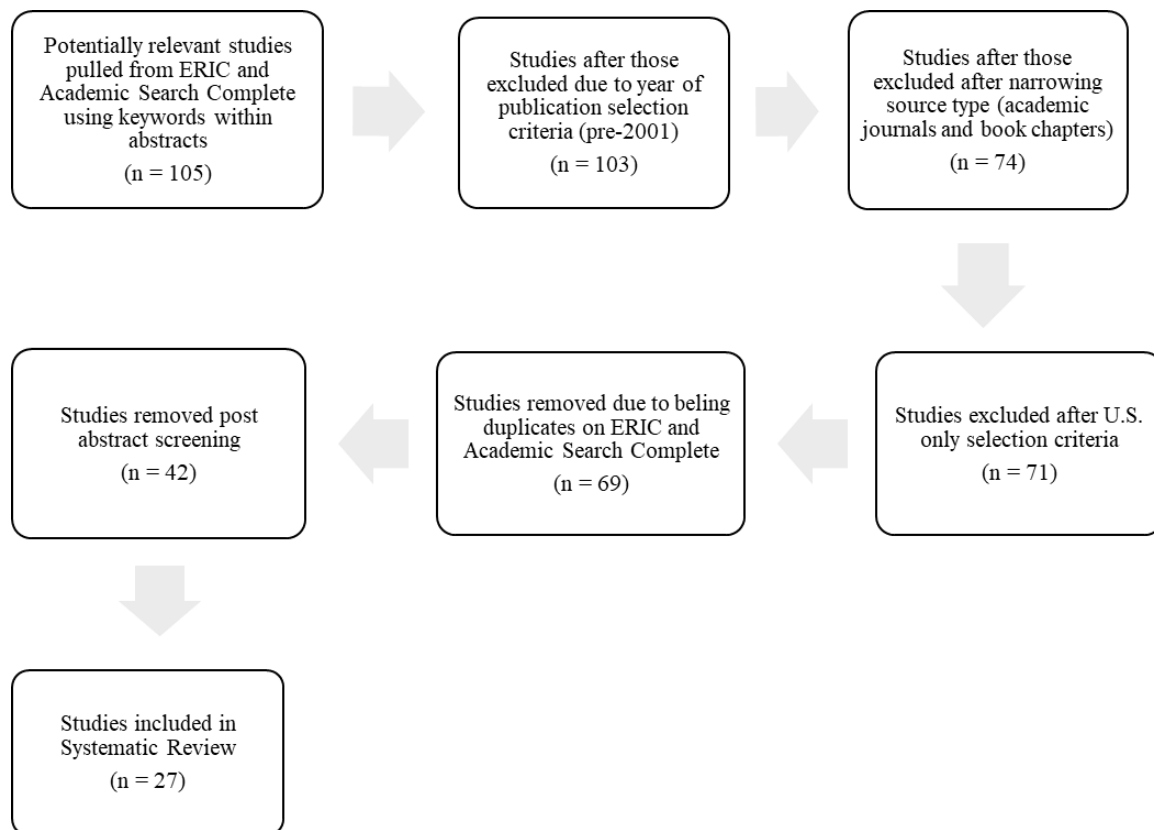


Figure 1.
Article Selection Process

Table 1 *Studies Analyzed in Systematic Review*

Author	Year	Article Topic	Article Type	Advancement Barriers	Influential Success Factors	Database
Amechi, M.H., Stone, B.D. & Williams, J.L.	2020	HBCUs and black college students formerly in foster care	Academic Journal	Instability; Mental health concerns; Lack of understanding	Mentorship; Specialized college programs	Eric
Cheung, J.R., Lietz, C.A., Carpenter, B.M., Stiz, E. & Lietz, B.C.	2021	Resiliency in FCC college students	Academic Journal	Lack of understanding; Financials; Unpreparedness; Mental health concerns	Resiliency; Awareness and understanding; Peer social support	Academic Search Complete
Day, A., Dworsky, A., Fogarty, K. & Damashek, A.	2011	Retention and graduation for FFC college students	Academic Journal	Mental health concerns; Financials; Unpreparedness	Mentorship; Pee social support; Specialized college programs	Academic Search Complete
Day, A., Reibschleger, J. & Wen, J.	2018	Engagement in pre-college programs for FFC college students	Academic Journal	Unmet basic needs	Specialized college programs; Financials	Academic Search Complete
Day, A., Reibschleger, J., Dworsky, A., Fogarty, K. & Damashek, A.	2012	Transitional challenges	Academic Journal	Lack of understanding; Unmet basic needs; Mental health concerns; Isolation and loneliness	Mentorship; "That one special person"	Academic Search Complete
Franco, J. & Durdella, N.	2018	Influence of social and family backgrounds	Book Chapter	Lack of understanding	Mentorship; Peer social support; Specialized college programs	Eric

Table 1 (Continued)

Author	Year	Article Topic	Article Type	Advancement Barriers	Influential Success Factors	Database
Gray, L., Font, S. & Unrau, Y.	2008	Mindfulness in first year students	Academic Journal	Intrinsic motivation	Resiliency	Eric
Hernandez L. & Naccarato, T.	2010	Program review of scholarship and service available for FFC students	Academic Journal	Financials; Intrinsic motivation	Specialized college programs	Academic Search Complete
Horn, J.P.	2020	Influence of stigma and connections on FFC college students' persistence	Academic Journal	Lack of understanding; Unpreparedness; Lack of social support	New opportunities; Specialized college programs	Academic Search Complete
Huang, H., Fernandez, S., Rhoden, M.A. & Joseph, R.	2018	Serving FFC college students	Academic Journal	Financials; Mental health concerns; Lack of social support	Specialized college programs; Peer social support; Resiliency; Mentorship; Awareness and understanding	Academic Search Complete
Lane, T.V.	2017	Experience of African American FFC college students	Academic Journal	Mental Health Concerns	New opportunities; Resiliency	Academic Search Complete
Lee, D.Y. L	2010	Attending four-year college in southern California as a student formerly in foster care	Academic Journal	Lack of understanding; Loneliness and Isolation; Instability	Mentorship; Specialized college program; New opportunities	Eric

Table 1 (Continued)

Author	Year	Article Topic	Article Type	Advancement Barriers	Influential Success Factors	Database
Miller, J., Benner, K., Kheibari, A. & Washington, E.	2017	College support programs for FFC college students	Academic Journal	Lack of understanding; Financials; Unmet basic needs	Mentorship; Peer social support; Specialized college programs; Awareness and understanding	Academic Search Complete
Mountz, S., Capous-Desyllas, M. & Sevillano, L.	2020	Educational trajectory for LGBTQ FFC youth	Academic Journal	Unpreparedness; Lack of understanding; Unmet basic needs	Specialized college programs; Financials; New opportunities	Academic Search Complete
Okpych, N. & Courtney, M.	2018	Avoidant attachment on college persistence and completion	Academic Journal	Mental health concerns; Loneliness and isolation	Peer social support; Specialized college programs; Resiliency	Academic Search Complete
Okpych, N., Park, S.E., Sayed, S. & Courtney, M.	2020	College support programs and educational vouchers influence on persistence for FFC college students	Academic Journal	Unpreparedness; Financials (FAFSA)	Financials (additional resources)	Academic Search Complete
Okumu, J.O.	2014	Transition into higher education	Academic Journal	Loneliness and isolation; Mental health concerns	Mentorships; New opportunities	Eric

Table 1 (Continued)

Author	Year	Article Topic	Article Type	Advancement Barriers	Influential Success Factors	Database
Pecora et al.	2006	Employment and educational outcomes	Academic Journal	Instability; Mental health concerns; Unpreparedness	Mentorship; Peer social support; Awareness and understanding	Eric
Rassen, E., Cooper, D.M. & Mery, P.	2010	California community college and college students formerly in foster care	Academic Journal	Financials	Specialized college programs	Eric
Ruff, S.C., Linville, D. & Kjellstrand, J.	2022	Needs of FFC college students during COVID 19	Academic Journal	Financials; Mental health concerns; Unmet basic needs	Social support	Academic Search Complete
Salazar, A. M., Jones, K.R. & Emerson, J. C.	2016	Strengths, challenges, and supports from foster care graduates	Academic Journal	Financials; Mental health concerns; Lack of social support	Resiliency	Eric
Salazar, A.M. & Schelbe, L.	2021	Post-college success for FFC college graduates	Academic Journal	Lack of understanding; Mental health concerns	Peer social support	Academic Search Complete
Sim, K.E, Emerson, J., O'Brien, K., Pecora P.J. & Silva, L.	2008	Support and services need to continue education	Academic Journal	Lack of understanding	Financials; Awareness and understanding; Peer social support; "That one special person"	Academic Search Complete

Table 1 (Continued)

Author	Year	Article Topic	Article Type	Advancement Barriers	Influential Success Factors	Database
Strayhorn, T.L.	2021	Experience of African American FFC male college students	Academic Journal	Lack of understanding; Loneliness and isolation; Unmet basic needs	Mentorship; Resiliency; Peer social support	Academic Search Complete
Watt, T. & Faulkner, M.	2020	Assessment of Texas wavier utilization for FFC college students	Academic Journal	Financials	Awareness and understanding (state financial support)	Academic Search Complete
Watt, T., Kim, S. & Garrison, K.	2018	State support and transitions to post-secondary enrollment	Academic Journal	Financials	Awareness and understanding (state financial support)	Academic Search Complete
Yeager, R., Vienneau, L. & Henderson, C.	2001	Achieving higher education	Academic Journal	Instability; Lack of understanding; Lack of social support	Financials; Specialized college program	Eric

Advancement Barriers

Mental Health Concerns

Students who were formerly in foster care have an increased percentage of mental health concerns (Amechi et al., 2020; Cheung et al., 2021; Day et al., 2011; Day et al., 2012; Huang et al., 2018; Okpych & Courtney, 2018; Okumu, 2014; Pecora et al., 2006; Rassen et al., 2010; Ruff et al., 2022; Salazar et al., 2016; Salazar & Schelbe, 2021). Their previous lived experiences heavily influenced their worldview. Furthermore, experiences also shaped their cognitive abilities and psychosocial progression (Lane, 2017).

Transitioning into higher education can present several challenges, yet when considering their unique backgrounds, these students enter higher education with not only the transitional shock of collegiate life, but also the attached trauma of their past. The literature reviewed (Amechi et al., 2020; Cheung et al., 2021; Day et al., 2011; Day et al., 2012; Huang et al., 2018; Okpych & Courtney, 2018; Okumu, 2014; Pecora et al., 2006; Rassen et al., 2010; Ruff et al., 2022; Salazar et al., 2016; Salazar & Schelbe, 2021) cohesively showed that mental health concerns are a barrier to success for students formerly in foster care. The mental health concerns the research review highlighted included PTSD, anxiety, stress management, and survivor guilt (Cheung et al., 2021; Day et al., 2011; Day et al., 2012; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010; Okpych & Courtney, 2018). Lane's study (2017) observed the collegiate journey of African American males who were formerly in foster care and discovered that mental health concerns were the most common barriers across this specific group of FFC college students.

Instability and Unpreparedness

The consistent movement and instability of FFC youth is a disadvantageous by-product of being raised in care. Consistent change to the living environments of FFC youth, because of having several home placements, has resulted in students having attended on average more than five high schools before they graduated high school. This results in a significant detrimental impact to both the academic and professional trajectory of FFC college students. The consistency of relocation results in increased home life stressors influencing both academic performance and the ability to form interpersonal relationships. These both have lasting effects on FFC students as they transition into higher education. The continuous transfer of high schools means many of these students face different course content, performance tracking, and lesson plans which can create additional challenges as it pertains to learning. This instability affects knowledge attained, which can make the academic transition into college more difficult for students formerly in foster care. K-12 academic instability for students formerly in foster care can cause inequitable gaps to academic achievement, specifically within the classroom.

The literature explicitly noted that academic instability from high school, due to several home placements, can result in FFC students feeling underprepared for their transition into higher education (Chueng et al., 2021; Day et al., 2011; Franco & Durdella, 2018; Horn, 2020; Mountz et al., 2020; Okpych et al., 2020; Pecora et al., 2006). Something that impacts students formerly in foster care specifically is the unique concept of academic inequity. Specifically, these students experience challenges pertaining to preparedness, access to resources, and connection with faculty and staff both in secondary and postsecondary education.

The housing instability felt by many of the students formerly in foster care tends to be transferred into the collegiate dwelling or housing system. Residence halls closing for breaks and other changes that require students to move out creates a lack of consistency, which can be a trigger for associated trauma (Lane, 2017; Okpych & Courtney, 2018). As previously mentioned, mental health concerns are a barrier for students formerly in foster care; however, these barriers do not live in a vacuum but rather can intersect causing more complex struggles for this student demographic. An example of this is a student who may be struggling academically due to lack of preparedness. This same student is now being faced with a loss of housing during the winter closing, which may result in a catastrophic derailment and subsequent withdrawal of the student due to lack of sufficient support. In this example, there are many opportunities an institution of higher education has to intervene and assist these students.

Loneliness and Isolation

The majority of students formerly in foster care do not benefit from family privilege implying that these students have a very contentious relationships with those within their foster or biological family unit (Horn, 2020; Lane, 2017). The literature shows that students formerly in foster care felt like an outsider within their own home (Horn, 2020; Lane, 2017). Some research participants state that when they were in foster homes, they felt unloved by their parents when they compared themselves to the biological children of their host parents (Horn, 2020; Lane, 2017). Other participants were in group homes. These participants felt like they did not have a family unit, instead they felt they had roommates (Horn, 2020; Lane, 2017). This overarching lack of support within the primary care unit is then transferred to their social community resulting in a lack of social support, as their social community is not sufficiently prepared for the

challenges these students may face. A constant theme across studies was that the absence of harmonious relationships at home affected FFC college students' abilities to create healthy social relationships with friends and instructors within higher education (Day et al., 2012; Horn, 2020; Huang, 2018; Salazar et al., 2016; Yeager et al., 2001).

When assessing loneliness and isolation within FFC college students, the instability and housing complexities FFC students have experienced during their time in care can influence their collegiate sense of belonging (Day et al., 2012; Horn, 2020; Lane 2017; Yeager et al., 2001).

After many moves due to placements changes, FFC youth may stop building authentic relationships since losing surface level relationships is easier than losing genuine ones. The research exposed that this mindset towards connections with others is habitual by the time FFC students enter higher education (Day et al., 2012; Horn, 2020; Lane 2017; Yeager et al., 2001). Entering higher education with coping strategies to prepare themselves for movement or loss of friendship can make it harder for FFC college students to form significant relationships within their campus community (Horn, 2020). Without a sufficient support system or organic connections with other students or staff, FFC college students can have continued feelings of isolation and loneliness throughout their collegiate experience. This highlights the importance within higher education institutions to form a dedicated office or team focused on connecting with FFC students to help bridge the challenges they may face.

Financials and Unmet Basic Needs

Financial support is a duplicitous theme regarding FFC college students. This section will address the negative aspect of finances for this student demographic. Later within this review, the positive aspects of finances will be examined. The financial aid process, specifically the Free

Application for Federal Student Aid, FAFSA, is difficult for FFC students to understand (Okpych et al., 2020). Throughout the literature, FFC college students note that not having family or parental income makes the FAFSA even more challenging to complete since much of the information requested is based upon familial income (Okpych et al., 2020; Salazar et al., 2016). Most non-foster care students have parents, family members, or school guidance counselors who can assist them in completing the FAFSA. However, students formerly in foster care do not have parents to aid them in completing this essential process. Their circumstances are more complex, so school support is limited due to a lack of knowledge, and this translates into their academic and financial preparation for higher education (Okpych et al., 2020).

This challenge continues to persist as students enter higher education and must complete the FAFSA every year. Some participants said that the uncertainty surrounding the results of the FAFSA, which are unknown year to year, created anxiety. For FFC college students, this introduced the reality that their time in higher education is possibly fleeting, as the funding could disappear from one year to the next (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). FFC college students, in many circumstances, independently navigated the higher education financial circuit (Mountz et al., 2020). For many higher education institutions in the U.S., there is not someone specifically designated on campus to support students formerly in foster care through the financial aid process creating. This lack of support creates additional stress on FFC college students regarding their college financial status (Day et al., 2011).

Once students have finalized their financial aid, there are additional circumstances that require students to seek supplementary funding. These may include supporting their basic needs, their biological family needs, and non-tuition related expenses like books or school supplies

(Cheung et al., 2021; Day et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2017; Ruff et al., 2022; Strayhorn, 2021).

FFC college students, usually, do not have the opportunity to call family for financial assistance when money grows tight, resulting in FFC students' need to find the funds themselves. Many FFC students turn to several forms of employment as a strategy to remain financially afloat. (Salazar et al., 2016). The intensity of this schedule allows little time for rest, which ultimately hurt FFC college students' academic performance, raising them to question the true value of higher education (Horn, 2020).

Lack of Understanding

Even though within the past two decades there are over a million children either currently in foster care or adults who have aged out of the American foster care system, there is still very little knowledge, for those who did not experience it, about the foster care system and the experiences of those within it. FFC college students noted that peers, instructors, and university staff members have limited, if any, knowledge about the foster care system and its implication on collegiate success (Amechi et al., 2020; Cheung et al., 2021; Day et al., 2012; Franco & Durdella, 2018; Horn, 2020; Lee, 2010; Miller et al., 2017; Mountz et al., 2020; Salazar & Schelbe, 2021; Sim et al., 2008; Yeager et al., 2001). This unique experience makes it difficult to find a person the student on whom can rely on, find empathy in, and with whom to show personal vulnerability with.

FFC college students are not required to disclose their circumstances and background and at times they may choose not to share. A key reason why FFC college students decide not to disclose their youth identity is the stigma that comes with being formerly in foster care (Horn 2020; Salazar & Schelbe, 2021; Strayhorn, 2021). The studies in this review consistently report

that FFC college students desire and crave a sense of normalcy when compared to their collegiate peers (Horn 2020; Salazar & Schelbe, 2021; Strayhorn, 2021). Using non-FFC students as a baseline, the literature found that FFC college students experience a higher level of imposter syndrome once entering higher education (Horn 2020; Salazar & Schelbe, 2021; Strayhorn, 2021).

Influential Success Factors

“That One Person”

The most referenced influential factor in the success and resiliency for FFC college students is the theme of “that one person” which is coded together with mentorship. for the purposes of this review. Between these two subthemes, the concept of having a supportive adult figure was clearly the standout support measure for FFC student’s success within higher education (Amechi et al., 2020; Day et al., 2011; Day et al., 2012; Franco & Durdella, 2018; Huang et al., 2018; Lee, 2010; Miller et al., 2017; Okumu, 2014; Pecora et al., 2006; Sim et al., 2008; Strayhorn, 2021). The concept of “that one special person” was mainly described within the research as a social worker, mentor, advocate, supportive adults, or welcoming teacher (Amechi et al., 2020; Day et al., 2011; Day et al., 2012; Franco & Durdella, 2018; Huang et al., 2018; Lee, 2010; Miller et al., 2017; Okumu, 2014; Pecora et al., 2006; Sim et al., 2008; Strayhorn, 2021). An important distinction of this one influential person is that, according to the literature, it was never a peer, yet it was always someone with a raised positionality, or more specifically, an established adult (Day et al., 2012; Franco & Durdella, 2018; Miller et al., 2017; Pecora et al.; 2006; Salazar et al., 2016; Sim et al., 2008). When assessing the narratives of FFC college students who had persisted through higher education, a supportive adult was integral to

their journey. Due to the instability faced in early life, these students seek guidance and direction. Within high school placement, there are few adults, teachers, or mentors in whom FFC college students feel comfortable confiding, yet this trend can change when FFC college students enter higher education (Horn 2020; Salazar & Schelbe, 2021; Strayhorn, 2021). Through interactions with faculty and staff, FFC college students can create new and impactful relationships. FFC college students believe that entering higher education can help them attain the normalcy they seek while providing them with the educational and professional foundation to pursue their aspirations (Horn, 2020). The most impactful way for FFC students to be guided is through a personal and intentional relationship with an adult who is truly invested in the betterment of the student.

These relationships with their one special person do not just function within the professional sphere but carry over into the personal. The participants of these studies note that their mentor is the person they reach out to during times of crisis and celebration including to their mentors' house for holidays, or to an interview or bought them items, as needed (Amechi et al., 2020; Day et al., 2011; Day et al., 2012; Franco & Durdella, 2018; Huang et al., 2018; Lee, 2010; Miller et al., 2017; Okumu, 2014; Pecora et al., 2006; Sim et al., 2008; Strayhorn, 2021). This one special person brings relational support for these students, ultimately becoming their family. A common consensus from FFC college students' narratives is that there are very few positives about being or formerly being in the foster care system, but what made the experience tolerable were special people entering their life and giving them hope for their future (Amechi et al., 2020; Day et al., 2011; Day et al., 2012; Franco & Durdella, 2018; Huang et al., 2018; Lee, 2010; Miller et al., 2017; Okumu, 2014; Pecora et al., 2006; Sim et al., 2008; Strayhorn, 2021).

Specialized College Programs

There are a variety of different specialized college programs for FFC college students across the United States. The state of California uses the Guardian Scholar program, which offers support and aid to FFC youth at both public two-year and four-year institutions. Some schools using the Guardian Scholar program even extend initiatives to support FFC graduate students (Lee, 2010; Rassen et al., 2010). Specialized college programs are a growing endeavor within higher education and one of the most influential factors to FFC college students' success. The literature highlighted that specialized collegiate programs help destigmatize being a FFC college student by creating safe spaces that support understanding and awareness of their previous care experience (Cheung et al., 2021; Day et al., 2018; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010; Huang et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2017; Sim et al., 2008). The comradery within these programs allows students to find support from their peers. Having connection to peers with similar experiences helps FFC youth to navigate collegiate life with others through a similar lens (Day et al., 2011; Franco & Durdella, 2018; Huang et al., 2018, Miller et al., 2017; Okpych & Courtney, 2018).

Specialized programs also create designated campus professionals who can advocate for FFC college students' needs (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010; Huang et al., 2018). These offices intentionally hire staff that are familiar with, or alumni of, the foster care system, which offers FFC students support through the critical mentorship relationships (Amechi et al., 2020; Day et al., 2018; Franco & Durdella, 2018; Huang et al., 2018; Lee, 2010; Miller et al., 2017). The specialized college programs prioritize having an understanding and awareness of the individualized needs that accompany the transitioning out of foster care, normalizing this. This helps to ease the transition process for FFC college students (Cheung et al., 2021; Day et al.,

2018; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010; Huang et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2017; Sim et al., 2008).

This intentional hiring practice helps FFC college students feel like they matter and belong, minimizing the stigma that comes with FFC college student identity.

Financials

Post navigating the application process for federal and institutional funding, FFC college students fortunately normally receive additional financial aid packages through state waivers, and support funding (Okpych et al., 2020; Watt et al., 2018; Watt & Faulkner, 2020). Several students in recent research studies noted that not having to worry about the financial implications of earning their degree removed a great amount of stress from the transition process into higher education (Okpych et al., 2020). This financial freedom allowed FFC college students to devote their time more fully to their academic performance and social connections. For several participants, this was one of the first times they did not have to worry about finances (Mountz et al., 2020.; Okpych et al., 2020; Sim et al., 2008; Yeager et al., 2001). Institutions that had additional support through specialized college programs were able to provide additional resources such as dorm room furnishings, books, and even childcare for those students who were also parents (Day et al., 2018; Mountz et al., 2020; Yeager et al., 2001). This financial support allowed FFC college students to have time to focus on themselves and what they hoped to attain from higher education creating a new opportunity for themselves.

New Opportunities and Resiliency

FFC college students seek a fresh start outside of their FFC identity while transitioning to or persisting in higher education (Lane, 2017; Lee, 2010; Okumu, 2014). FFC students no longer must associate with the foster care system or label if they choose not to and have a chance for

new opportunities. There is a chance for self-discovery outside of their “foster youth” label. Much of the literature demonstrates how FFC students with additional underrepresented identities emphasize the importance of a fresh start (Lane, 2017; Mountz et al., 2020; Strayhorn, 2021). This beginning of a new chapter allows for FFC youth to further learn and develop other parts of their identities (Lane, 2017; Mountz et al., 2020; Strayhorn, 2021). Additionally, the transition into higher education can help create separation from previous lived experiences that were trauma induced (Lane, 2017).

Higher education can be seen as a ticket to a new future for FFC college students (Horn, 2020). Seeking a degree opens doors to new opportunities, furthering personal advancements, careers, passions, and an avenue of support to basic needs through campus resources (Horn, 2020). The collegiate experience can be seen as the epitome of a new beginning and gives FFC college students the ability to be whoever they want outside of their foster care circumstance. This feeling of a new beginning influences not only their educational trajectory, but also their personal development. FFC students noted that they did not want to be like their parents and aspired to improve on the experiences of their parents (Lee, 2010; Okumu, 2014). This acknowledgment of wanting to break their familial cycle, while not having a support system to help them, can lead to questioning of their capability. However, their resiliency, fueled by a desire to do and be better, overcomes this doubt (Cheung et al., 2021; Gray et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2018; Okpych & Courtney, 2018; Salazar et al., 2016; Strayhorn, 2021).

Peer Social Support

Earlier in the systematic review, the theme of mentorship and finding “that special person” was expanded upon as an influential success factor for FFC college students. The

literature further builds on this idea of influential relationships, noting that having a peer social support system benefits FFC college students (Cheung et al., 2021; Day et al., 2011; Franco & Durdella, 2018; Huang et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2017; Okpych & Courtney, 2018; Pecora et al., 2006; Ruff, 2022; Salazar et al., 2016; Sim et al., 2008; Strayhorn, 2021). Due to their previous lived experiences and the accompanying instability, forming steadfast friendships can be challenging for FFC college students (Horn, 2020; Okpych & Courtney, 2018). However, the literature shows that once this peer support system is built, it plays a vital role within the resiliency of students formerly in foster care (Cheung et al., 2021; Gray et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2017; Okpych & Courtney, 2018; Salazar et al., 2016; Sim et al., 2008; Strayhorn, 2021). This resiliency can be seen as an increase in self-esteem, self-discovery, self-awareness, and self-determination (Gray et al., 2018; Salazar et al., 2016). When examining the effect of resilience for FFC college students, the research mentioned decreased depression and increased student persistence in higher education (Cheung et al., 2021; Day et al., 2011; Gray et al., 2018; Horn, 2020; Okpych & Courtney, 2018). Their resiliency helps them remain optimistic and as they enter higher education and seek to make relationships with their peers. FFC college students have a better chance of success within higher education when they have social support and authentic relationships with not only a mentor but also their peers (Cheung et al., 2021; Day et al., 2011; Franco & Durdella, 2018; Gray et al., 2018; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010; Horn, 2020; Mountz et al., 2020; Okpych & Courtney, 2018; Pecora et al., 2006; Salazar et al., 2016; Sim et al., 2008).

Discussion

This systematic review highlights both barriers and success factors for FFC college students entering, and persisting through, higher education. Until there is systematic policy change within the foster care system, there is limited change within higher education that can be accomplished to eradicate the barriers faced by former foster youth. Since most of these barriers appear beginning during adolescence, capitalizing on change within higher education is critical, yet challenging. Despite these challenges there are influential success factors that can be implemented to counteract the barriers that students formerly in foster care face on college campuses.

On the macro level the higher education system should work to ensure that inequities for students formerly in foster care are addressed. Research shows that the percentage of foster youth who want to attend higher education is on par with the national average for students, yet only 10% of students formerly in foster care apply to higher education institutions, which is not at all proportional to the national average. Higher education should offer more transitional or specialized programs for former foster youth who aspire to secondary education. The institution of higher education should consider re-examining their admission and financial aid funding for this student demographic. This will aid former foster youth in understanding their options as it pertains to post-secondary education.

When examining the meso-level of higher education, universities should create offices that provide support for students formerly in foster care. Institutions are beginning to develop basic needs offices to address housing and food insecurity. This is one step in the right direction; however, dedicating an office and staff to advocate for this student demographic can help reduce

some of the barriers outlined in this systematic review. One of the most influential success factors explored in this review is the value of student advocates. A dedicated office allows for staff members to support students formerly in foster care while collaborating with campus partners that have been shown (Amechi et al., 2020; Day et al., 2011; Franco & Durdella, 2018; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010; Horn, 2020; Huang et al., 2018; Lee, 2010; Miller et al., 2017; Mountz et al., 2018; Okpych & Courtney, 2018; Pecora et al., 2006; Rassen et al., 2010; Salazar et al., 2016; Yeager et al., 2001) to positively affect students' collegiate experience, such as the counseling center and university housing.

Finally on the micro level, by creating these offices, institutions have developed advocates and support systems for college students formerly in foster care as they navigate their fresh start into higher education. Fifteen of the eighteen studies included in this systematic review discussed the positive influence of a mentor or specialized support program on these students' collegiate success. If offices are developed and successfully implemented on post-secondary education campuses, literature shows they would benefit the persistence of college students formerly in foster care. Due to the unique lived experiences of FFC college students, higher education institutions can use the literature from this systematic review to better support FFC students as they transition onto their campus.

Recommendations for Further Research

Future research should include a study that examines the graduation percentage of students who were formerly in foster care, comparing these graduation rates between states or institutions. The differential variable could be institutions that have a specialized college program for students formerly in foster care versus those that do not have a specialized program.

As more institutions strive to be “foster-friendly,” research should consider longitudinally examining the implementation process, engagement between campus community and FFC students, and the success of FFC graduates of initiatives that strive to make higher education more equitable for FFC students.

Conclusion

Navigating higher education is difficult and it is filled with rewarding opportunities. This systematic review examined the literature and highlighted specific advancement barriers and influential success factors that college students formerly in foster care experience due to their unique lived experiences. Some barriers to success include: mental health concerns, the culture of instability, learned isolation through frequent loneliness, supplemental financial aid, and the overarching lack of understanding of FFC college students’ experience in foster care.

Influential support factors which research shows help to counteract these barriers are: “that one special person” who becomes family, specialized college programs that address the academic experience from a holistic viewpoint, financial support through need-based aid, new opportunities to rewrite their narrative, and social connectivity that creates a foundation for supportive relationships. Higher education should incorporate practices that allow for these success factors to be implemented on a macro, meso and micro level. There are barriers for students formerly in foster care, yet higher education can address them holistically while promoting success factors to create a more equitable and ultimately successful experience for college students formerly in foster care.

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**CHAPTER 3: INCREASING THE VISIBILITY OF FFC COLLEGE STUDENTS
THROUGH NARRATIVE INQUIRY**

Abstract

This study investigated the experiences of college students formerly in foster care (FFC) and the factors influencing their persistence within higher education. By addressing collegiate awareness, representation, and resources, the multifaceted relationship between FFC students and their institution was further examined. Utilizing a narrative inquiry approach, the research highlighted the unique challenges faced by FFC students, including social isolation, stigma, and adverse lived experiences, which often hinder their educational attainment. The study uncovered themes related to self-determination, resilience, and the importance of supportive relationships. Key findings revealed that autonomy, social relatedness, and competence significantly impact the academic success of these students, emphasizing the need for higher education institutions to implement targeted support systems for FFC students. The graphic depictions of the findings, illustrating the interdependence of institutional awareness, community support, and student self-advocacy in fostering an inclusive educational environment. Ultimately, the research advocated for increased visibility and tailored resources for FFC students to enhance their persistence and success in higher education.

Keywords: **Formerly in foster care, advocacy, higher education persistence, and self-determination**

Introduction

Higher education is evolving to support diverse student demographics and experiences. As institutions promote justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion, historically excluded groups have gained increased access to higher education. These historically excluded populations, include queer, Black, and first-generation students. With increased access to resources that amplify success metrics, including retention and graduation rates these populations are succeeding. However, the visibility and support for formerly in foster care (FFC) students has not kept pace with these other groups. Throughout this systematic reframing of equitable assistance, FFC students remain underrecognized and neglected in the higher education landscape. FFC students and their considerations toward success are often a "forgotten population" within institutions (Gillum et al., 2018).

Once FFC students enter college, they are absorbed into the general student body or placed into another specialized student population. Multiple studies align FFC students with first-generation students, especially when benchmarking academic achievements (Gillum et al., 2018). The gap in academic progression between FFC students and their non-care peers is evident, with only 10% of FFC youth entering higher education and around 3% graduating (Day et al., 2012). These disparities do not start in higher education but stem from primary and secondary education inequities perpetuated through the college application process and into graduation (Dworsky, 2018).

FFC students leave higher education not because they are intellectually unable to persist but due to other intrapersonal challenges influenced by their FFC identity (Day et al., 2012). Many institutions have programs to support underrepresented student populations. Yet, the

retention infrastructure specifically for FFC students is underdeveloped due to a lack of knowledge from the institution. A few states have implemented high-impact practices that acknowledge the unique lived experiences of FFC students; however, that continues to be the exception rather than standard operating procedure (Dworsky & Perez, 2010). To increase awareness and representation of FFC students within collegiate settings, support needs to fully encompass an understanding and acceptance of the lived experience of FFC.

Collegiate Awareness of FFC Students

One reason FFC college students fail to matriculate is the general lack of awareness from staff and instructors regarding the unique challenges of these students (Dworsky, 2018). Jackson et al.'s (2019) study highlighted two key findings about needed support for FFC collegiate. The first is the importance of having a designated mental health provider specialized in providing tailored care to FFC youth. If this is not available, offering providers with niche training to increase their ability to deliver more fitting support to FFC students also increases success (Jackson et al., 2019). The second important finding is the need to create specialized programs for FFC students to ensure they have continued support throughout their undergraduate careers (Jackson et al., 2019). By integrating recommendations into practice, institutions can create more inclusive and effective support structures that empower FFC students to thrive academically and personally.

Current support structures for FFC college students are classified into the two following categories: essential need support and supplementary experiential support (Gillum et al., 2018). A core aspect of essential needs support is addressing basic needs such as food, housing, and healthcare insecurity. These challenges do not onset for FFC students during their collegiate

experience but are a lived norm for them (Gillum et al., 2018). Supplementary experiential support can be defined as resources pertinent to the FFC experience, including mental health providers, social workers, and court appointed special advocates (CASA) (Skobba et al., 2023). Whether the assistance is for basic needs or supplementary experiences, these support pillars can be neither utilized nor effective without financial backing. This highlights the need for institutions to fund their support efforts for FFC students. Without institutional aid, FFC students seek multiple employment opportunities to support themselves fiscally.

FFC students work to mitigate their collegiate inequities with little to no communal support. Higher education was not originally designed to support historically excluded populations like FFC students. It was built for the elite and then made accessible to the middle-class. This expanded access to higher education has transformed the collegiate experience to a common familial tradition. This is not the case for FFC students, who often lack a stable family unit. A unique challenge for FFC students is the lack of "family privilege" (Seita, 2014). Family privilege is the advantage youth with strong familial bonds receive through ample support during their upbringing (Seita, 2014). Youth with high family privilege also have increased self-assurance, fueling their confidence to enter new and unknown experiences like higher education (Seita, 2014). Family privilege is seen most through the financial support that parents provide to their children. Current research shows that students aged 18 to 33 typically receive about \$2,200 per year from their parents (Gillum et al., 2018). The impact of familial and institutional support can robustly impact the collegiate experience and educational trajectory of FFC students. This study seeks to gather more information from FFC students about their collegiate experience

through two research questions: 1) How do FFC students describe their experience in higher education? and 2) How does self-determination influence their persistence in higher education?

Literature Review

Visibility of FFC College Students

FFC students are often described as a "hidden minority" within higher education (Kamalumpundi et al., 2024). As hidden minorities, they face challenges such as social isolation, stereotyping, and imposter syndrome. These students can be stigmatized more than their peers, which can intensify feelings of othering, perpetuating a decrease in their sense of belonging. When FFC students are grouped with first-generation students, the nuances of their unique lived experiences, particularly their foster care backgrounds, are diluted.

A lack of institutional support and understanding creates subtle but significant barriers to FFC students' persistence and success in higher education. The psychological and socio-emotional support from finding mentorship and representation is crucial to fostering persistence. Retention rates increase when historically excluded students find staff or faculty who share their marginalized identity (Pyne & Means, 2013). However, FFC students are particularly vulnerable to invisibility, with only around 3% of FFC youth earning a college degree by age 24 (Dworsky, 2018). Institutions with specialized programs for FFC students possess greater insight into their needs. Still, more prominent universities without dedicated faculty or staff support systems struggle to fill this knowledge gap, inevitably adversely impacting practice.

Research highlights that "college persistence, retention, and graduation rates continue to be problematic for underrepresented students" (Pyne & Means, 2013). When examining the persistence of FFC students, their narrative is often centered around their FFC identity; however,

this identity intersects with other identity components, such as ethnicity, language, and nationality, making their stories more dynamic. These intersections can reveal the "complexities of life at the center of multiple sociopolitical stigmas" (Pyne & Means, 2013, p.187). Although inclusion is growing as a core value within higher education, it does not always translate into equitable student practices. Students who lack visibility and representation tend to receive less equitable support, especially when their identities are overlooked in higher education. For FFC students, who navigate and experience systems that view them through a deficit lens, finding a counterbalance for these assumptions helps promote success and persistence as they continue within the education system. These counterweights should address the fullness of their lived experiences through multifaceted models of motivation.

As higher education evolves, so does the demographic makeup of the student population. Traditionally, diversity efforts have focused on groups like African American and Latino students, but the landscape of higher education is increasingly accommodating new and diverse student demographics, including FFC students (Mukherji et al., 2017). Several demographics have remained hidden; however, in the evolving narrative of diversity and inclusion in higher education, there is space to add visibility and recognition to historically excluded populations, especially as the higher education cliff approaches (Knox, 2024). Addressing the barriers and developing new support systems for FFC students will improve institutions as they seek to reach and sustain their enrollment goals and create avenues of success for these students.

Earning a degree significantly boosts social mobility for FFC students, helping them secure better opportunities as adults. However, FFC students remain "invisible" within higher education, due to their FFC status only made known through self- disclosure and the small

percentage who apply, attend, and matriculate. To support these students effectively, it is essential to understand better the "social reality" they face within the education system (Pyne & Means, 2013).

Educational Experience for FFC Students

The institutional and social experiences of FFC students are key to their commitment and success in higher education. Students must engage academically and socially to persist within an institution (Nora & Cabrera, 1993). However, FFC students remain an underserved and largely invisible group, limiting their access to the resources needed for success. This lack of support contributes directly to lower retention and graduation rates than their non-FFC peers.

In their 2019 study, Jackson et al. noted several specific challenges FFC students face, including the complexities of the college application process, inadequate preparation for independent living, the absence of supportive adults, and insufficient financial and emotional resources to cope with academic and social stress. The stigma surrounding FFC students is that many institutions fail to address this population's needs adequately. As a result, FFC students often lack the academic and social strategies and support to stay on track for degree completion (Piel et al., 2020).

Although most universities offer broad support services, these services are typically not tailored to the unique needs of FFC students. While age-wise, they are often considered traditional students, their lived experiences are closer to those of adult learners with academic needs that differ significantly from those of their peers. The resilience, dedication, and independence that FFC students demonstrate in overcoming challenges are often overshadowed

by the lack of targeted institutional support. The alignment of their strengths and exclusive institutional support offers a customized approach toward academic success and persistence.

Some states have taken significant steps to advocate for their foster youth populations, particularly in higher education. However, no federal oversight or department monitors FFC students once they enter higher education (Winerip, 2013). States like California, Texas, Ohio, North Carolina, Michigan, Washington, and Virginia have made strides in creating specialized programs and advocacy initiatives for FFC students (Winerip, 2013). These states can serve as models for other regions that have not yet developed similar support systems.

While some states are leading the charge, many institutions lack representation for FFC students, obstructing their collegiate academic success on the national level (Jones & Varga, 2021). Despite their challenges, FFC students often develop emotional resilience, which helps them make sense of their past experiences and navigate the future, particularly when they lack social capital and experience social isolation (Jones & Varga, 2021). FFC students' resilience can be harnessed to improve campus culture and student success if institutions recognize and support their unique needs. Research highlights two key components of emotional resilience for FFC students: advocacy and independence (Jones & Varga, 2021).

FFC students prioritize their time and resources for their basic needs over building social capital. Fostering a sense of physical and financial safety intersects with the academic success of FFC college students. Economic stability is critical to a sense of security, as financial challenges often impact their personal lives and academic performance. Youth exiting foster care frequently face heightened challenges, including unemployment, housing insecurity, mental health issues, and healthcare concerns (Strayhorn, 2021). These challenges can detract from their ability to

focus on their academic work and contribute to lower persistence and decreased graduation rates. Many FFC students seek employment opportunities to cope with these issues, which can further strain their academic performance and ability to make social connections (Strayhorn, 2021). This focus on perseverance can lead to social isolation and weaken their sense of belonging in the post-secondary education landscape.

Strayhorn (2021) also discussed how mentorship and allyship, particularly from individuals with similar identities, can help FFC students, especially Black men, persist in higher education. Research has shown the importance of protective factors, such as assurance of basic needs, in fostering resilience among FFC college students (Dworsky, 2018; Jones & Varga, 2021; Neal, 2017; Strayhorn, 2021). A key challenge is the lack of awareness about FFC students' needs from an institutional level. If institutions are unaware that these students are present, they cannot adequately address their needs or provide appropriate support. Currently, institutions rely on students to seek help when needed. This process is counterintuitive for FFC students, who prefer to resolve their problems independently rather than reach out to faculty or staff (Jones & Varga, 2021). FFC students are more likely to develop high levels of self-efficacy and independence, decreasing the chance that they will seek help from institutional representatives unless necessary (Jones & Varga, 2021). This challenges institutions that rely on students to come to them with concerns. Instead, institutions must take a more proactive approach to identify and support FFC students, prompting them to receive the resources and mentorship they need to succeed.

The persistence and success of FFC students in higher education depend on their ability to navigate systemic barriers and personal challenges. These students require specialized support

not only to address their unique experiences but also to help them build resilience, independence, and social capital. By increasing awareness, creating dedicated support systems, and fostering a more inclusive environment, higher education institutions can improve retention and graduation rates for this underserved population.

Core Pillars of Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Research on the success of students formerly in foster care (FFC) within higher education is limited, but emerging studies highlight several key themes among successful FFC college alums (Dworsky, 2018; Lovitt & Emerson, 2009). These themes are categorized into three core areas: individualized resilience, the need for support services, and the impact of relationships with others (Dworsky, 2018; Lovitt & Emerson, 2009). The most significant contributor to resilience and FFC students' ability to access resources is positive social relationships. (Samuels & Pryce, 2008).

Self-determination theory (SDT) is derived from Deci and Ryan (2012) and their research on motivation within various social contexts. This theoretical framework provides a valuable structure for understanding these dynamics. The established framework of SDT is that humans are naturally primed to want to evolve, showing that there is a presence of intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2012). SDT posits that motivation and well-being are fostered through three basic psychological needs. Deci and Ryan (2012) noted that the three pillars of SDT are competence, autonomy, and relatedness, which are called "essential for optimal development and functioning" (p.417). Self-determination theory explores the cohesion of intrinsic motivations, basic needs, and psychological well-being, focusing on how it relates to a high quality of life through examination of accomplishment, connection, and independent resilience (Deci & Ryan, 2012).

This theory centers on the concept that to have ongoing development and steady motivation, all three pillars of SDT need to be active and engaged. Relatedness focuses on the interpersonal connection between humans, but Deci and Ryan (2012) also described it as "belongingness or love" (, p. 425). This concept within SDT does not mean dependency but rather the inverse, the ability to have one's agency while in a relationship. Autonomy is the independence and ability to navigate one's social setting in a revitalizing, non-monotonous approach (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Competence highlights developing skills and realizing one's potential (Guiffrida et al., 2013).

For FFC students, autonomy has been limited due to the structured environment of foster care, where caregivers and systemic policies often restrict decision-making. Approximately 25% of youth in foster care age out of the system at 18, leaving them with few opportunities to develop independence or self-advocacy skills (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). This lack of autonomy continues to impact their college experiences, where they may struggle to navigate institutional norms or advocate for their needs in unfamiliar academic environments. However, as FFC students gain resilience and receive positive reinforcement from supportive individuals, they feel more empowered, enhancing their competence and autonomy (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). This growth facilitates their transition from foster care youth to successful FFC college students and, eventually, to alumni. Yet, only about 10% of youth in foster care transition to college, and only 3% successfully graduate (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Research also highlights a critical distinction between the support needed for FFC youth to graduate high school and the support necessary to help them persist through higher education (Day et al., 2012; White et al., 2018). While resources during these two stages vary, FFC students need consistent humanistic support

throughout all stages (White et al., 2018). This support is vital for high school graduation, successful college enrollment, and persistence.

Higher education is experiencing a demographic shift with an increase in non-traditional college students (Johnson et al., 2016). FFC students are often categorized as non-traditional students due to age, familial obligations, and financial responsibilities (Johnson et al., 2016). Accordingly, they are more likely to encounter the same challenges as non-traditional or adult learners (Johnson et al., 2016). However, Johnson's et al., (2016) study showed that non-traditional college students face significant barriers, yet consistently perform academically on par with or even better than their traditional peers. With this steady benchmark, the unique lived experience of FFC students remains overlooked in SDT research, particularly concerning their academic persistence.

Advocacy Through Narration

As a research methodology, narrative inquiry is essential in examining how FFC students articulate the relationship between their experiences and college success. Unlike quantitative research, which seeks to explain phenomena, narrative inquiry focuses on understanding lived experiences through storytelling. It allows for extracting rich qualitative data, where participants' voices provide a deeper, more nuanced understanding of their experiences (Creswell, 2012). Through narrative inquiry, researchers and participants collaboratively construct meaning from their stories, emphasizing the power of personal connection in data collection (Clandinin & Caine, 2008). As Clandinin and Caine (2008) described, narrative inquiry offers an "intimate study of individuals' experiences over time, within specific contexts, thus preserving memories, prompting reflection, and connecting past, present, and future experiences" (p. 542).

For FFC students, narrative inquiry provided a platform for self-reflection and advocacy. Their stories were not merely a recount of past hardships but a testament to their resilience and perseverance. The challenges these students face, stemming from their time in foster care, created significant academic and personal disadvantages. However, these difficulties also served as the backdrop for their strength and determination, driving them to overcome obstacles and succeed in higher education. Through narrative inquiry, the complexity of their experiences could be fully understood as researchers seek to uncover the outcomes and the impact of the experiences themselves (Bhattacharya, 2017). As Bhattacharya (2017) argued, narratives allow researchers to explore hidden assumptions and deeply embedded personal beliefs, shedding light on aspects of experience that participants may not consciously recognize.

Using the voices of FFC students is vital to highlight gaps and identify the specific needs that must be addressed for their educational attainment (Clemens et al., 2017). As a powerful tool for social change, narrative inquiry invites participants to share their stories, thus allowing researchers to work alongside them to help further delve into the meaning-making process of their lived experience. This collaborative approach has led to more informed, effective interventions by involving youth who have directly experienced foster care, which not only empowers the individuals but ultimately benefits the community (Day et al., 2012).

The foster care system, often viewed through a deficit lens, carries a complex stigma that can lead to judgment and misunderstanding (Clemens et al., 2017). However, disclosing their foster care history can negatively affect FFC students. FFC students are cautious when revealing their background, fearful that it will expose them to stereotypes or discriminatory treatment (White et al., 2018). The associated stigma can make it difficult for FFC students to academically

and socially integrate into the college environment, hindering their sense of belonging and further complicating their journey toward graduation (Dworsky, 2018). Despite these challenges, narrative inquiry allows FFC students to reclaim their stories and advocate for themselves. Using their experiences as a source of strength, they can challenge the negative assumptions surrounding youth in the foster care system and redefine their identities within higher education. This process promotes their empowerment and contributes to the broader conversation about the needs and reality of FFC students in higher education.

The intersection of SDT and narrative inquiry offers a powerful lens for understanding the experiences of FFC students in higher education. By focusing on autonomy, competence, and relatedness, SDT helps explain the psychological processes that support FFC students' academic persistence. Subsequently, narrative inquiry provides a rich, qualitative understanding of how FFC students navigate their unique challenges and triumphs. Together, these frameworks highlight the importance of consistent support, meaningful relationships, and a shift in perspective from deficit-based models to those that emphasize resilience and agency. When heard and understood, the stories of FFC students can serve as catalysts for institutional change, advocating that these students have the resources and opportunities necessary to succeed.

Methodology

This study explored the visibility and validation of former foster care (FFC) students in higher education by examining their entry, experiences, and persistence, using storytelling tools for understanding. Using narrative inquiry, the research emphasized a humanistic approach that centers on the participants' lived experiences. This approach was ideal for rendering life experiences in relevant and meaningful ways. Narrative inquiry is grounded in the belief that

"narrative is both the phenomenon and method" (Creswell, 2012, p. 2), allowing for a deeper understanding of how these students make meaning of their academic journeys.

Recruitment, Participant Demographics, and Study Setting

The study occurred at Summitt University (SU), a prominent institution in the rural southern United States. SU was in the process of implementing "foster-friendly" policies, although it currently lacks a specialized program for FFC students. Six FFC students were purposefully selected for the study based on specific criteria: they must have completed at least one semester at SU, have a history in foster care, and have been placed with non-familial caregivers (i.e., not with relatives) during their time in care. This demographic was chosen to better understand how the absence of family privilege influences their experiences in foster care and higher education.

The participants varied in academic standing, ranging from first year to final semester students. Their experiences in foster care were diverse in terms of both length of time spent in care and relationships with foster families. The selection of six participants aligned with narrative inquiry methodology, which typically works with smaller sample sizes, five to fifteen, to allow for a more focused, rich analysis of individual experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2009).

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to share their stories freely while adhering to a flexible framework. This approach encouraged a deeper exploration of the participants' personal experiences, allowing themes to emerge naturally. Each participant completed one interview. Interviews were conducted via Zoom and lasted up to 60 minutes, with all sessions recorded for transcription. Ensuring participant

confidentiality, each participant selected a pseudonym, and all materials, including informed consent forms, recordings, and transcripts, were securely stored.

The anecdotal stories told by the participants were open and axially coded into more significant metrics. The axial codes were cross analyzed in relation to the two guiding research questions. The code map and the alignment with the study's research questions can be referenced in **Table 2**. A key feature of narrative inquiry was the process of member checking, which ensures the accuracy and authenticity of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2009). Participants were sent their transcripts and a link to their private folder to review the material. They were encouraged to confirm or suggest changes. If any revisions were needed, a follow-up meeting of up to 90 minutes was scheduled for discussion. This iterative process continued until both the researcher and the participant agreed on the final version of the transcript. Data collection was considered complete only after all participants completed the member-checking process. Rivera (2020) highlighted that allyship between the researcher and participants is crucial when exploring post-foster care experiences in higher education.

Narrative as a Unit of Analysis

In narrative inquiry, stories serve as the unit of analysis, with the researcher and participant working collaboratively to derive meaning from lived experiences. The research focused on understanding the stories beyond what appears at the surface level. As Sarcedo (2022) stated, "narrative is... analytic examination of the underlying insights and assumptions that the story illustrates" (p. 208). Through this method, the study followed an inductive approach, allowing themes to emerge naturally from the participants' narratives rather than imposing predefined categories.

Table 2 *Open and Axial Code Map*

Open	Axial	RQ1	RQ2
Breaking biological generational cycles	Biological impacts through the generations	Yes	Yes
Conflicts between biological father and mother			
Defining maternal relationship			
Differences between self and biological parents			
The declining health of the biological mother			
Deportation of a biological mother			
Differing in educational achievement			
ESL Biological mother			
Grief and death of a parent			
Father in Mexico: no connection			
"I will not be like my mother."			
Multi-faceted father relationship			
No desire for contact with biological mom			
Perception of biological parents during time in custody			
Questions for biological mom			
Reunification Option			
Reunification with biological mom			
Unwanted connection to biological mom			

Table 2 (Continued)

"Good Adults"	Power of Positive Community	Yes	No
Two diverse friend groups			
Influential People- professors			
Influential people: Older Sister and Guardian			
Influential People: Youth pastor and wife			
Satisfaction with friends from high school			
Social capital in the community during time in foster care			
Diversified clubs/ friend groups			
Found/ Created Family			
Positive Community			
Power of Community			
Satisfaction with friends from high school			
Small friend circle			
Two best friends			
Special person: Sister-in-law			

Table 2 (Continued)

	Self-discovery through post foster care	Yes	No
Advocacy for self			
"Most myself that I have ever been."			
Autonomous over physical			
Authentic self: connection to Latina identity			
I do not want to be stupid, so value the second perspective			
Emotional support			
Empathy, compassion, and understanding for others			
Freedom to be "child" while in foster care			
"I can do hard things."			
Importance of confidence			
Indecisive decision-making			
Intersecting Identities			
Intrinsic motivation			
Perceptions of "Normalcy"			
Working through the hard			
Personal growth with self-discipline			
Reassurance on the "Right" way			
Resilience through the unexpected			
Spanish language impact on identity and experience			
"Bad" People			
Care's experience on their professional future			
Decrease in socialness after foster care			
Changing schools frequently			
Cruelty in the world			
I do not trust to new adults			
Pride in FFC status			
Take Care of Vs. Raise			
Not disclosing due to not wanting pity from other			
Vitality of trust			

Table 2 (Continued)

Financial Consideration of College Fresh Start	FFC's higher education priorities and experiences	Yes	Yes
Future involvement in foster care as an adult			
Futuristically focused			
Professional advancement			
Professional belief			
Professional Networking			
Academics as a vehicle			
Belief in self within college			
Proof of foster care experience to college			
Resource awareness shift			
Resources for FFC in comparison to 1G			
Mental health resources			

Table 2 (Continued)

Appeasing case workers to avoid DCS	Specialized foster care	Yes	Yes
Care and medication upkeep	situations		
Difficult police encounters			
Guardianship challenges			
Unalignment between self-labels and actions, especially with			
adults			
Independence within foster care			
Independent under new guardianship			
Medical overlook within foster care			
Micro-community of foster youth			
Mom and dad to new mom and dad			
Negative interaction with DCS			
New guardianship			
Passing of adoptive parents			
Reconnection to foster family			
Religious foster family			
Religious impact on care			
Time in foster care as stolen time			
Traumatic entrance into care			
Triggers to expected noise			
Triggers to noise			
Unsafe activity to get basic needs met			
Adverse post-care experiences			
Influence of Authority			

Table 2 (Continued)

	Relational Strength and Stability	No	Yes
Impact of foster care on siblings			
Impact of one's actions on siblings			
Relational closeness			
Sacrificing for others (siblings)			
Actions for the betterment of self and siblings			
Advocacy for siblings			
Desire for stability			
Avoidant social interaction with strangers			
Minimal want of a peer-based social circle			
Housing insecurity			
Mental health concerns			
Anxiety surrounding basic needs			
Basic survival focus			

Note. This table contains the open and axial code of the findings concerning the research questions. R1 examines the influence of self-determination on persistence for FFC college students. R2 focuses on persistence barriers within higher education for FFC college students.

The iterative nature of narrative inquiry also highlighted the importance of collaboration between the researcher and participants. The researcher's role was to translate the participants' lived experiences into telling while they share their expertise in their own lives. The process of story construction and validation was empowering for both parties, as "there is no telling it like it is, for in the telling there is making" (Creswell, 2012, p. 121). This collaborative storytelling created space for empowerment, where the researcher and participant contribute to meaning making.

Using narrative inquiry, this study aimed to provide a deeper understanding of these students' unique experiences, challenges, and triumphs. The collaborative nature of narrative inquiry and the member-checking process ensured that the participants' voices remain central to the research. Ultimately, this study aspired to shed light on how FFC students navigate their academic journeys, empowering them to reclaim their stories and advocate for success.

Findings

Participant Findings

Autonomy: "I can be a child again."

Autonomy was fundamentally linked to choice, having control over one's decisions and environment. For the participants in this study, autonomy was experienced during their time in foster care, where they had the opportunity to exercise choice and agency. Central to this experience was trusting foster families or guardians, who provided the safety and stability necessary for the participants to engage in self-determination and decision-making. Being given a secure environment allowed them to alleviate the stressors they had faced before entering foster care, facilitating their personal growth and academic development.

The participants emphasized the critical role of kind and protective foster families. One participant, Donna, described how once placed with her foster parents, she was shielded from the complexities of her case. This allowed her to relinquish concerns about the future of herself and her siblings after being their primary advocate for over three years. Donna was able to step back and trust the adults around her to manage the situation. This newfound autonomy allowed her to focus on her academic goals, like attending college, an opportunity she had not previously believed possible. Donna's shift from caretaker to student enabled her to channel her intellectual capabilities into her studies, earning the ACT scores necessary for admission to Summitt University (SU). Donna continued to refer to her foster parents as "mom" and "dad," and their home remains a place of comfort and belonging for her during breaks from university.

Similarly, Ruby shared how her guardian respected her need for independence, allowing her to continue advocating for her siblings, who were placed in a separate foster home. Her guardian did not diminish her agency but instead supported her advocacy by teaching her how to approach it confidently. This support was instrumental in Ruby's successful campaign for family reunification, which was granted following her high school graduation.

For Donna and Ruby, the safety and security provided by their foster families created an environment where they could confidently exercise their autonomy. The ability to make choices in a secure, non-punitive setting fostered positive associations with self-determination. This experience of independence in foster care promoted their personal development. It allowed them to apply these skills in new contexts, such as higher education, further enhancing their overall growth and self-empowerment.

Social Relatedness: "Some people are just mean."

The foster care system involved several key stakeholders, including biological parents, foster parents or guardians, social workers, family court judges, and occasionally law enforcement. Through their experiences in foster care, participants interacted with numerous individuals whose beliefs, behaviors, and ethical viewpoints significantly contradicted their own. These encounters sometimes resulted in interactions that, intentionally or inadvertently, caused more harm than good.

One participant, Simon, recounted how their foster parents withheld necessary medication for their mental and physical health conditions, which led to significant health consequences. Simon understood that within the foster care system, caseworkers can support access to medical attention for illness during case workers' home visit, even if the foster family is opposed to that medical care. Simon had to make complex health decisions to safeguard their well-being and care within the systemic constraints of the foster care system. After leaving this foster family, Simon was placed with a guardian who supported them while navigating post-secondary education. A conflict arose when Simon and their guardian disagreed on handling a sensitive situation between Simon and the guardian's son. While the family preferred to ignore the issue, Simon believed it was essential to address it openly, highlighting a key ethical divergence between them. Simon stressed the significance of aligning words with actions, particularly for those who claim to be doing good or want external validation for doing the right thing.

Similarly, Donna shared how her initial emergency foster placement led to troubling circumstances, particularly involving the foster family's grandson. The grandson made

inappropriate comments to Donna's younger brother, necessitating the family to seek alternate housing arrangements. Ruby, another participant, faced a similar situation involving her younger sibling's foster placement, leading her and her guardian to take action to secure new housing for her siblings. These experiences illustrate the ethical challenges foster youth encounter as they balance opposing moral perspectives and advocate for their self and the well-being of others in a system that is often complicated and inconsistent.

Competency: Life lessons

Several participants reflected on how their experiences in foster care shaped their lives and informed their time at SU. Simon, for instance, discussed how past experiences of adults betraying their trust made them cautious around authority figures. They remained highly aware of the adults in their lives. Their confidence in the faculty members within their field of study grew due to the authenticity and care consistently shown by the professors; however, Simon continues to be wary of other faculty and staff on campus.

Zachary compared the lessons learned in foster care with those from living with his grandparents, stating, "My foster family taught me more life lessons than living with my grandparents." He noted that his foster family instilled practical life skills he still uses, while his time with his grandparents has left him feeling less equipped to care for himself because they just "provide his basic needs."

Ana Sofia discussed how her socioeconomic background shaped the lessons taught by her adoptive parents and guardians. Her adoptive parents, who had a lower socioeconomic status, emphasized the importance of safety, like having clean clothes, a safe home, and food provided. After the death of her adoptive parents, her guardians, who had a higher socioeconomic status,

provided stability and taught her about self-esteem and personal growth. With her basic needs no longer a concern, Ana Sofia explored experiences that broadened her sense of community engagement and self-sufficiency, focusing on becoming "well-rounded" personally and academically.

Consistent FFC College Student Experiences

Autonomy: Freedom and "A fresh start"

Participants in this study reported an increased sense of independence during their time in foster care, which played a significant role in shaping their ability to navigate hardship and overcome challenges. This mindset, developed through experiences of self-sufficiency, was a driving force in their desire for a fresh start, particularly at Summitt University. Attending SU represented a crucial step toward achieving their future aspirations. A key characteristic of this demographic was their future-oriented perspective, which reflects their ability to envision and actualize a positive future despite their past adversity.

For these participants, the notion of a "fresh start" extended beyond relocating to a new place. All participants expressed a strong desire for a fresh start, with attending SU central to their plans to build a future of which they could be proud. The reasons for wanting this new beginning varied. Some aimed to break generational cycles by distancing themselves from their biological families, while others focused on pursuing a specific career they had always dreamed about. Regardless of the motivation, the shared theme of future focus was evident in all interviews. Participants were focused on excelling academically and determined to build professional networks and connections supporting their career goals. It embodied a shift in mindset from being defined by their experiences in foster care to taking control of their futures.

Ruby, for instance, emphasized the importance of networking in her business field, regularly attending faculty office hours to foster these connections as she prepares for her future. Donna shared how her fresh start at SU aligned with her aspiration to become a mother. She recognized that a career in engineering would provide financial stability, enabling her to support her future children. Whether focused on personal or professional aspirations, all participants demonstrated a strong sense of agency, knowing they had the opportunity and autonomy to fully commit to their futures at SU, propelling them toward their long-term goals.

Social Relatedness: Advocacy and "Trust within friendship"

Advocacy was a core value for the participants in this study, initially rooted in advocating for others and later evolving into self-advocacy. This shift is grounded in trust, care, and authenticity. All participants discussed the importance of trust within their inner circle of friends, highlighting truth as the origin of their closest relationships. A common theme was the need for trust when deciding whether to disclose their status as former foster care (FFC) youth. Except for Ruby, all participants indicated that they only share this information with close, trusted friends. Ruby was vocal about her experiences and even gives speeches on the foster care system. Despite this openness, Ruby shared the same sentiment as her peers regarding the importance of trust in her friendships. Aware of the assumptions and stigmas associated with it, the participants do not openly disclose their FFC status, even though they do not feel shame about their foster care experience. When discussing their participation in the study, participants expressed frustration over the lack of platforms to discuss their foster care experiences. They were eager to explore this aspect of their identity and its impact on their collegiate life.

Competency: External Validation and "I can do hard stuff"

When summarizing their foster care experiences, all participants expressed gratitude for their foster families or guardians, acknowledging that not all foster families are perfect.

Recognizing that there are "bad" foster families in comparison to theirs, they emphasized that their experiences before and during foster care were still challenging and contained hardship. A common theme across all participants was the development of a mindset focused on overcoming adversity.

Simon and Feather both shared stressful experiences from their time in foster care. Simon told a story about how the Department of Children Services and a high school security guard chased them around the football field one day in high school. Simon shared that considering all their challenges, they would never return to that period in their life again. Feather described the day she was removed from her biological parents' care as both the most complex and most memorable moment of her foster care journey. Because of that day, she experiences a high heart rate and instant fear of loud noises ranging from fireworks to knocking. Even fifteen years later, she still unravels how that day impacted her adulthood and time at college. Reflecting on their complex lived experiences, participants highlighted experiences that defined their identities as former foster care (FFC) students. These moments showcased not only their resilience but also their ability to navigate the challenges of their past while pursuing the goals of their future.

Discussion

Narrative Inquiry and the Student

This study emphasized the role of storytelling and experiential learning in fortifying students' competencies. Through retelling their experiences, participants tapped into a deeper analysis of their lives, connecting what happens to what it means (Didion, 1968). Narrative inquiry allowed the students to pinpoint moments of competency within their lived experience. The process of narration empowered the storyteller, offering not only control over their story but also the opportunity for critical reflection on events, perceptions, and experiences. Many participants in this study expressed that they had few opportunities, if any, to share their stories about being in foster care. The varying feelings among biological siblings regarding their foster care experiences further complicated open conversations. Moreover, support systems outside the foster care system often lacked understanding or approach the topic with deficit-based assumptions, which leads to judgment or pity. As a result, participants tended to avoid discussing their foster care experiences.

This narrative inquiry challenged the deficit mindset surrounding the experiences of former foster care (FFC) students, an area often lacking resources and awareness for this group. Storytelling played a crucial role, offering insight into their strength and openness. Through vulnerability and honesty, participants gained personal insight and foster a deeper connection to their growth. Trust and transparency in storytelling create this connection, transforming their experiences into a source of strength and competence.

Participants emphasized that they feel no shame about their foster care backgrounds, seeing it as a key part of their story, though not the whole. Their narratives were evolving as they

transition from youth to adulthood and from foster care to higher education, with this journey building on their past and highlighting their resilience and strength in higher education. As FFC students navigated this shift, they encountered significant barriers perpetuated by underrepresentation and marginalization within the collegiate environment.

Visibility and the Institution

Visibility within higher education was closely tied to institutional support and backing. By diversifying campuses and creating space for former foster care (FFC) students, institutions fostered positive social change by dismantling barriers and cultivating a culture of awareness. A dedicated and supportive community was crucial for FFC students' success and persistence, as it reinforced their intrinsic value. While institutions cannot mandate faculty and staff to remain in their roles, a robust support network for FFC students can mitigate the challenges that arise when staff members transition out of the institution, resulting in FFC students losing their one trusted adult within the institution. This perceived breach of assurance caused FFC students to detach or stop engaging with the university and their support staff because the credibility of care from the institution is directly associated with that person. For FFC students, trust was built through actions with people and systems, such as higher education.

FFC college students' absence of family support and the inability to turn to parental figures for unexpected expenses or challenges significantly stressed their experience. Institutions that recognized this challenge and provide appropriate resources were advantageously situated to retain these students and support their path to graduation. The need for fiscal support is a recurring theme in the stories of FFC students, underscoring the importance of financial assistance in promoting their persistence.

With 400,000 youth in foster care and more than 20 million college students in the United States, the intersection of these identities remained rare, reinforcing a lack of visibility and exclusion for FFC students in secondary academia. Visibility directly connected with a sense of belonging and mattering. When FFC students felt valued by their institution, they are more likely to thrive and contribute to a culture where others with similar experiences feel welcomed.

The institution was critical in providing a safe and supportive social context where students can develop their self-autonomy to make informed choices about their futures without feeling pressured or controlled. The institution was not just a provider of resources but also an enabler of choice and awareness. With accessible resources and a culture of shared understanding, FFC students were empowered to shape their collegiate experiences. Visibility meant having choices. It did not conform to a one-size-fits-all model or squeeze into another similar option that does not fully encapsulate their foster care experience, like a first-generation status. As institutions continue to expand and specialize their support for FFC students, they increase FFC students' visibility on campus, broadening their opportunities for personal, academic, and professional growth.

Conclusion

This study explored the barriers and life experiences that FFC college students encounter while persisting in higher education, including how chronicled barriers, intrinsic motivation, and social connection impact their persistence. By utilizing narrative inquiry as not only a methodology of storytelling but also a method and means of analysis, the researcher and participants emphasized the personal and social significance of their lived experience in foster

care. There was a special consideration on the higher education experience and its impact on their attainment of education and self-determination.

FFC students were resilient, resourceful, and ambitious, developing strategies to overcome the overt barriers they face in higher education in hopes of graduating and being one step closer to their aspirations. FFC students offered a unique perspective that adds value to higher education through diverse experiences. Their stories held significant power, and when faculty and staff within higher education have increased cultural competence, they were able to better support underrepresented and often invisible student demographics like FFC students. The inequity within higher education arises from the additional challenges FFC students encounter due to the lack of awareness and support in higher education institutions, which have yet to adapt to be foster-friendly or educated on best practices to support this demographic. Cultural competence encouraged a more nuanced understanding of students' lived experiences, which help prevented misinterpretation based on assumptions, allowing for a more comprehensive view of the student's complexities (Wright et al., 2017).

Higher education must evolve to meet the needs of its increasingly diverse student body. This change can only occur if institutions actively listen to and learn from the students who are most knowledgeable about their experiences. FFC students offered valuable insights that can drive the reimagining of equitable policies and practices. However, the real challenge was finding these stories and empowering FFC students to become change agents within higher education institutions.

Entering higher education for FFC college students was more than the next educational step; instead, it was entering and navigating yet another system unprepared to support their needs

due to systemic complacency. This lack of awareness from institutions made it difficult to strategically plan for the support these students require, given their unique experiences. The success and persistence of FFC college students were attributed to their resilience, self-determination, and supportive community; however, there was an opportunity and space for higher education to be a positive factor. Institutional and systemic change should not be based solely on research or assumptions but by actively involving FFC students and prospective students. Their voices should be central in shaping how support services are designed to be truly inclusive and equitable without pressuring the marginalized population to problem-solve for the multi-billion-dollar higher education industry. The balance of acknowledgment and definition based on foster care status is a vital distinction for educators. Previously, being in foster care was a substantial part of their story, but there are many others. The power within this study was the boldness and the self-assured sense of identity highlighted by each participant through the narration and reflection of their lived experience.

Future Research

Future research should focus on identifying protective factors for FFC students, mainly how the intersectionality of their lived experiences affects the effectiveness of various support measures. Further exploration of FFC students who belong to multiple "invisible" populations and using Yosso's community cultural wealth model as a theoretical framework to understand these intersections could gain further insight into the collegiate experience, institutional support, and education attainment or persistence. Although the disadvantages and setbacks FFC students face in higher education may not be entirely eradicated, they can be mitigated through focused intervention.

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**CHAPTER 4: USING SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY TO REDEFINE HIGHER
EDUCATION BARRIERS AND STUDENT PERSISTENCE: POWER OF FFC
STUDENT VOICE**

Abstract

This study explored the postsecondary education experiences of students formerly in foster care (FFC) through narrative inquiry methodology, emphasizing their voices and stories. FFC students face significant barriers to achieving collegiate success, including housing instability, mental health challenges, lack of support, and financial constraints. Using self-determination theory as a framework, the research identified how autonomy, competence, and social relatedness affect these students' persistence in higher education. The findings revealed that while FFC students demonstrate resilience and a strong desire for independence, they often navigated complex institutional challenges without adequate support. The study highlighted the critical need for specialized programs and policies that address the unique needs of FFC students. By amplifying the voices of FFC students, this research aimed to inform practices and policies that foster equitable support systems, ensuring that higher education becomes more accessible and inclusive for this vulnerable population.

Keywords: Formerly in foster care, higher education barriers, resilience, and self-determination

Introduction

Each year, thousands of students formerly in foster care age out of a system designed for temporary care, stepping into adulthood with little support and immense responsibility. The pursuit of a college degree becomes not just a personal ambition but a monumental challenge, one that requires navigating financial constraints, social isolation, and the absence of familial safety nets. These obstacles, invisible to most, form an intricate web of barriers that threaten to derail educational aspirations before they even begin.

Students entering postsecondary institutions often encounter opportunities that can shape their futures. Yet, for those raised in the foster care system, these opportunities are frequently overshadowed by persistent inequities that leave them disproportionately disadvantaged (Okpych & Courtney, 2021). Many FFC students come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, grappling with limited emotional, academic, and financial support systems (Okpych & Courtney, 2021). Post-care life circumstances, including financial burdens, parenting responsibilities, and the necessity of employment, become significant predictors of collegiate success (Lovitt & Emerson, 2009; Okpych & Courtney, 2021).

Compared to their non-care peers, FFC students are one-sixth as likely to earn a college degree (Okpych & Courtney, 2021). Upon aging out of foster care, these students are thrust into adulthood, required to assume full financial and personal responsibility for their well-being, often without the benefit of familial privilege to guide their transition (Seita, 2014). The absence of traditional support structures intensifies the difficulty of pursuing higher education. While a college degree is associated with improved quality of life and economic mobility, stratification in higher education along lines of income and race continues to limit accessibility for historically

excluded groups (Blumenstyk, 2015). For FFC students, deciding to pursue and persist in higher education is a pivotal choice with longitudinal implications. At 18, these students face the daunting task of determining their educational trajectory with limited resources, restricted social support, and few experiential references to guide their decisions.

The purpose of this study is to explore the postsecondary education experiences of students formerly in foster care, using narrative inquiry to center their voices and illuminate their unique journeys. By capturing their stories, this research seeks to understand not just the barriers they face but also the strategies they employ to persist and succeed within higher education systems. This study is framed by two research questions about the FFC collegiate experience. The first question is how FFC students describe their experience in higher education and the second is how FFC students' self-determination influence their persistence in higher education.

Self-determination theory (SDT), encompassing social relatedness, autonomy, and competency, offers a valuable lens to examine these experiences. Foster care is often characterized by multiple placements made without the child's input, limited authentic relationships, and constrained decision-making opportunities, with life-altering choices primarily dictated by the state (Lovitt & Emerson, 2009; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Upon aging out, these students are suddenly expected to navigate higher education independently, equipped with minimal life experiences to guide critical and costly decisions about their futures. The presumption that FFC students possess the self-determination competencies needed to succeed ignores the historical deprivation of agency and stability inherent in their upbringing. As such, examining how these students develop, and express self-determination becomes a vital inquiry in understanding their persistence in higher education.

The challenges for FFC students are twofold. First, there is the initial hurdle of accessing higher education, which requires overcoming systemic barriers related to academic preparation, financial aid, and housing security. Second, even after gaining admission, FFC students must navigate an institutional landscape that often lacks the nuanced understanding needed to provide adequate support. Although specialized programs for FFC students are increasing, there is limited research on how institutions without these programs can meet their needs. With over 400,000 youth in foster care across the United States (National Foster Youth Institute, 2017) and an impending demographic shift affecting higher education enrollment, fostering inclusion for FFC students is critical. This inclusion is vital for institutional sustainability and necessary to support the long-term success and aspirations of FFC students. Institutions must recognize that enhancing accessibility and persistence for FFC students is not merely an ethical imperative but also an essential strategy for promoting equity and inclusion.

While institutions strive for student advancement and graduation, in their pursuits they can overlook the diversity of student's experiences and backgrounds. FFC students represent a diverse group whose experiences in care vary significantly, shaped by factors such as placement stability, caregiver relationships, and socio-economic contexts. Yet, certain shared realities persist, such as the lack of stable support systems, barriers to financial aid, and challenges in forming social connections (Dworsky, 2018). Support structures within higher education must avoid a one-size-fits-all approach and instead develop strategies that address the distinct challenges faced by FFC students. Effective support requires a nuanced understanding of their lived experiences and the creation of resources that foster belonging, autonomy, and resilience.

A critical, yet often overlooked, element is the invisibility of the FFC identity. Unlike other marginalized identities, FFC students do not possess visible markers that distinguish them from their peers. The choice to self-identify is deeply personal, often influenced by concerns about stigma, misunderstanding, or pity. This invisibility can lead to their unique needs being overlooked, leaving them vulnerable within institutional systems. Addressing this requires a proactive approach from institutions, fostering environments where FFC students feel empowered to share their stories without fear of judgment.

This study seeks to empower FFC students by providing a platform to share their narratives. While research on FFC students is growing, narrative inquiry offers a unique method to capture the depth and complexity of their experiences. Through authentic storytelling, this study will identify not only the barriers hindering their persistence but also the resources they have leveraged or could benefit from in their academic journeys. By amplifying FFC student voices, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how higher education can become more inclusive and supportive of this resilient, yet often invisible, student population.

Literature Review

The literature highlights the academic and personal challenges faced by formerly in foster care (FFC) students as they transition into and persist within postsecondary education. Although research on FFC students is growing, it often emphasizes individual characteristics over institutional factors influencing college completion (Okpych & Courtney, 2021). This study utilizes Deci and Ryan's (2012) self-determination theory (SDT) to explore how the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and social relatedness shape FFC students' experiences and persistence in higher education.

Self-Determination Theory and Foster Care

SDT emphasizes the importance of self-motivation and growth, anchored in three core pillars: social relatedness, autonomy, and competency (Deci & Ryan, 2012). When these elements are positively reinforced, they strengthen FFC students' self-determination, contributing to both personal and professional growth. Each pillar interrelates, suggesting that deficits in one can impact the others (Niemiec et al., 2006). For example, Niemiec et al. (2006) highlighted that the lack of relatedness or social support from families and communities could diminish autonomy and competence. These are critical components of successful academic persistence.

FFC students often face unique barriers. Their experiences frequently include limited decision-making opportunities (autonomy), weak support networks (relatedness), and low self-confidence (competence). These compounded disadvantages create significant hurdles to higher education access and persistence. Recognizing these psychological needs allows institutions to develop strategies that foster success. Institutions that ignore these needs risk perpetuating inequitable environments. Therefore, proactive measures that address these three SDT components are vital in supporting FFC students.

Unique Characteristics Impacting Higher Education

Housing Instability

Housing instability is a persistent challenge for FFC students. Frequent placement changes during foster care disrupt academic continuity and hinder the formation of stable interpersonal relationships. These disruptions can carry over into college life, exacerbating difficulties with academic performance and social integration. During semester breaks, when

residence halls close, FFC students often struggle to secure temporary housing. This instability contributes to anxiety and academic stress, highlighting the necessity for continuous housing options (Pecora, 2012).

The National Foster Youth Institute (2017) reported that the frequent relocation of FFC students not only impacts their academic outcomes but also fosters distrust towards adults, leading to difficulties in forming meaningful relationships. Disruptions in educational settings result in gaps in learning and lower college entry test scores, ultimately influencing college enrollment and success rates (Pecora et al., 2006). Stable housing during academic breaks can mitigate stress and enhance educational outcomes, making it a vital institutional consideration for supporting FFC students (Pecora, 2012).

Mental Health Concerns

Mental health is another significant barrier affecting FFC students. Compared to their peers, FFC students exhibit higher rates of mental health challenges, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression (Pecora et al., 2006). These challenges stem from adverse childhood experiences within the foster care system and can adversely impact resilience and persistence in higher education (Williams, 2012). Mental health concerns directly affect students' sense of autonomy and competence, limiting their ability to navigate academic challenges.

Studies show that trauma from foster care experiences has lasting psychological effects. Salazar et al. (2018) highlighted the need for trauma-informed interventions, advocating against over-clinicalizing or retraumatizing these students. Instead, they suggest fostering environments where students feel empowered and supported. Jackson et al. (2019) emphasized the importance

of institutional policies grounded in SDT to better support this demographic. These include access to specialized mental health services, peer support groups, and academic accommodations that enhance resilience and persistence. Tailored interventions, including mental health training for educators and counselors, are crucial for creating environments that promote well-being and academic success (Jackson et al., 2019).

Lack of Support

FFC students frequently report feelings of exclusion and lack of support in both personal and academic settings. The absence of "family privilege," defined by consistent emotional and financial backing, limits their ability to succeed in higher education (Seita, 2014). This deficit impacts their capacity to form healthy social relationships, contributing to feelings of isolation and loneliness (Dworsky, 2018; Jackson & Cameron, 2012).

Family privilege plays a significant role in collegiate success. Financial and emotional support from parents, often taken for granted by other students, is not readily available to FFC students. Hallett and Westland (2016) noted that parents typically contribute an average of \$2,200 annually to support their adult children until age 34. This form of assistance is absent for most FFC students, making their journey in higher education significantly more challenging. Without these support systems, FFC students face heightened stress and limited access to resources, emphasizing the importance of institutional and peer support networks.

Financial Support and Policies

Financial instability is one of the most significant barriers FFC students encounter. Federal initiatives, such as the Title IV-E Independent Living Program and Education and Training Vouchers, offer limited financial support that fails to fully cover the rising costs of

higher education (Okpych et al., 2020). While these programs provide stipends up to \$5,000 (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010), they are often insufficient for the comprehensive needs of FFC students, especially considering housing and living expenses.

Financial aid processes, including the completion of the FAFSA, can be particularly challenging for FFC students. Many struggle to provide parental financial data, which is typically required (Okpych et al., 2020). This gap in support highlights the broader financial inequities facing FFC students. Policy reforms, such as extending foster care benefits under the Federal Care Independence Act to age 25, could bridge this gap and enhance financial security (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011). The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2011) projected that raising the age of foster care support would reduce societal costs and increase lifetime earnings for FFC students by over \$100,000. Institutions should streamline financial aid processes and ensure that students are aware of available resources. Providing dedicated financial counselors and workshops for FFC students can alleviate some of these challenges, enhancing their ability to persist and succeed.

Unique Lived Experiences

FFC students bring unique, complex experiences into higher education settings. These experiences can range from financially providing for younger biological siblings to navigating mental health concerns from foster care experiences. Their histories, shaped by trauma and resilience, inform their academic pursuits and social interactions (National Foster Youth Institute, 2017). These experiences, however, are often misunderstood or overlooked by peers, faculty, and administrators (Dworsky, 2018).

Lack of awareness about the complexities of foster care can create barriers to trust and support. FFC students often struggle to find reliable mentors or advocates within higher education, complicating their academic navigation. Their unique experiences shape their worldviews and psychosocial development, affecting how they engage with institutional systems and peer communities (Dworsky, 2018).

Moreover, the transition into higher education involves overcoming not just academic challenges but also the lingering effects of their foster care experiences. Many FFC students confront the dual challenge of adjusting to college life while managing unresolved trauma. Institutions must foster inclusive environments that recognize these complexities and provide safe spaces for students to share their narratives, seek support, and develop connections.

Addressing housing stability, mental health, support systems, financial barriers, and recognizing unique lived experiences are critical in enhancing the persistence and success of FFC students. Higher education institutions must be intentional in designing support structures that acknowledge the complexities of FFC student identities. Proactive strategies, including tailored financial aid, specialized mental health services, and inclusive campus cultures, are essential for fostering equitable educational experiences. In doing so, institutions can empower FFC students to thrive and succeed, ensuring that their past does not define their future.

Methodology

This study utilized a narrative inquiry methodology to explore the postsecondary education experiences of formerly in foster care (FFC) students, focusing on barriers in higher education. Narrative inquiry emphasizes authentic storytelling, allowing participants to reflect on

their personal histories and strengths while assessing their self-determination through resilience narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004).

Participant Selection and Recruitment

Participants met specific criteria: they had to be formerly in foster care, not placed with family members, and have completed at least one semester of college. This approach ensured the inclusion of students lacking familial privilege during their foster care experience. Six participants were purposefully sampled, offering a diverse range of experiences (Creswell, 2012).

Recruitment began in fall 2024 at Summit University (SU), a large research institution in the rural southern United States serving around 35,000 students. Approximately 100 students at SU had experienced foster care or housing insecurity. The Office of Enrollment Management, in collaboration with the Dean of Students, identified eligible participants. Recruitment emails were distributed by a proxy staff member, and interested students completed a screening questionnaire to confirm eligibility.

Study Setting and Design

Summit University is situated in a region with legislative initiatives promoting "foster-friendly" policies, though SU lacks a specialized support program for FFC students. Participants varied in academic classification, placement duration, and personal backgrounds. Semi-structured interviews provided consistency while allowing flexibility to explore unique experiences (Opsal & Eman, 2018). Each interview, conducted via Zoom, lasted up to 60 minutes, was transcribed, and securely stored. Pseudonyms were assigned, and participants received personal folders with their consent forms, recordings, and transcripts.

Member Check Process and Data Analysis

Participants reviewed their transcripts for accuracy, suggesting edits if necessary. Follow-up meetings, lasting up to 90 minutes, addressed revisions, ensuring authentic representation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Data were analyzed through open and axial coding to identify themes across individual and collective narratives (Bhattacharya, 2017). Codes were categorized by relevance to research questions, preserving the richness of participants' stories and ensuring comprehensive thematic analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Findings

Participant Backgrounds

Feather

The most influential day in the Feather's foster care experience was the day that they were taken into foster care. When Feather was around five years old, they were taking a family nap with their biological mother and father. They were planning to go to the park later that afternoon, but Feather's parents said they needed to nap first. While Feather was trying to fall asleep, there was a loud knock on the door but before their father could open the door, the door was busted open by the police. "It was men with guns pointed at me and my family." Feather described this situation as being "swatted."

Their house was surrounded by police officers and loud noises were permeating the space. Feather recalled being outside sitting on their mother's lap while their mother repeatedly told the police and caseworker, "please do not do this." Feather was taken by the case worker to the Department of Children Services building. In the bottom floor of this building, they were taken to the stuffed animal room and the case worker invited Feather to pick one out. Feather did

not want a stuffed animal; they wanted their family. Finally, Feather picked out a flamingo to appease their case worker; Feather hated that flamingo. The flamingo was nothing more than a physical representation of the worst day of their life. The case worker took Feather to their new foster home. That night, Feather refused to sleep in the bed offered to her and slept on the couch in the living room. For the next two years, this was Feather's home.

While in this foster care placement, Feather had a stable family, who can be described as “very Christian.” Feather recalled this timeframe in their life as one marked by “always being at church.” Feather’s foster parents had two biological kids and five other foster children totaling eight children living in their foster home. Feather had to be independent due to multiple children within the home. Feather shared a story about their medical care was unmaliciously overlooked by their foster parents due to them having to split their attention across eight children. Their experience in foster care was described as fortunate and thankful for the micro-community that they had with the other foster children within the foster home. After a year, Feather’s biological mother was granted visitations, which resulted in Feather being reunited with their biological mother.

Simon Maples

Simon had an extremely difficult experience with entering higher education. College was never planned for with Simon. They were aware of college and knew that it was a traditional next step for high school students; however, there was minimal belief that it would be theirs. In high school, Simon was inspired to explore college due to an English teacher/ yearbook advisor who took a special interest in Simon. While transitioning through a challenging life situation that

ended with Simon in the foster care system, they were encouraged to keep persisting by that same English teacher.

Simon applied to all the state schools in their home state of North Carolina, and they were accepted by over 80% of them. However, they were only offered out-of-state tuition by those schools. After further investigation, Simon discovered that they were not considered a “ward” of their home state. Simon detailed this experience by saying, “according to the state of North Carolina, I never existed.” Even though they had been in foster care for years in that state, so much so, that they had adverse experiences with the Department of Children Services chasing them around their high school, they were invisible and forgotten when it came to higher education. Simon knew which accepted school within their home state they were planning to attend until proof of residency became an issue. Simon decided that if they were going to financially pay out-of-state tuition, then they were fully committing to an out-of-state school to start fresh and experience a new chapter of their life.

Upon their high school graduation, one of their friends, who had recently moved to a new state, told Simon that their mother would sign to be their guardian. Their new guardian had an older child who attended Summit University and told Simon that if they went to a community college in their new home state, then they could transfer to Summit University and receive in-state tuition. Simon liked that idea and followed the course, doing one semester at a local community college before transferring to SU.

Ana Sofia Smith

Ana Sofia knew since they were little that they wanted to be a teacher. This longitudinal connection to their professional aspirations was a defining characteristic of Ana Sofia. They

knew to achieve their professional dream that post-secondary education was a must. The idea of not going to college was never an option for them. Ana Sofia is a first-generation college student, in a sense. Their family unit is vastly different than any other participant from this study, which connected to their pathway of higher education and barriers. Ana Sofia was in foster care as a very young child with their two biological sisters, one older and one younger. They had a foster to adoption story. A few years after being placed with their foster parents, who were older in life, Ana Sofia and their biological siblings were adopted. Their adoptive parents never went to college and already had grown children by the time Ana Sofia's adoption. About ten years after the adoption, Ana Sofia's parents passed away.

Ana Sofia and their younger sister were faced with the decision of where they want to live. Ana Sofia knew that their younger sister wanted to live with their older adoptive sister, whom they were closer to. Ana Sofia being others-minded did not want to burden their sister with having to take in two children. Therefore, Ana Sofia opted to go under the guardianship of their adoptive brother and his wife. It is relevant to note that due to his profession, Ana Sofia "knew" their brother; however, they were both emotionally and physically distanced from him and his family due to his military background. The passing of their parents not only affected their personal life but also had a pervasive impact on Ana Sofia's professional aspirations. Ana Sofia's state school offered a scholarship package for in-state students who were either in foster care or adopted, so they had always planned to pay for college through that program, knowing it would be difficult for their parents to afford college.

Ana Sofia's new guardians lived in another state, which required them to move, losing their ability to receive the in-state scholarship packaged they had been planning on. Ana Sofia

had to reimagine how to reach their dream of becoming a teacher. Their sister-in-law not only worked in higher education but was a SU alum. Together, Ana Sofia and their sister-in-law found financial support that allowed Ana Sofia to attend SU and continue their path of becoming a teacher.

Ruby Mendoza

Ruby's personal experience within foster care affected her personal aspirations of advocacy-based work within the foster care system. Ruby and their seven siblings lived with their mother; their father returned to Mexico earlier within Ruby's life. At around the age of fourteen, Ruby and their half/full siblings were placed in foster care.

Once being placed within the custody of the Department of Children Services, Ruby was temporarily placed with a foster family before being replaced with their guardian. Their guardian solely fostered older children, saying that everyone wants the babies putting the older kids in placement deficit. Ruby gained more independence while with their guardian due to them trusting Ruby giving them in lots of leeway in their actions. Their guardian gave Ruby a job at their law firm. Ruby worked there for over five years. Their guardian displayed care and acted in ways that were in Ruby's best interest. According to Ruby, the best lesson their guardian taught them was how to use voice to advocate for others, channeling confidence or at least "faking it until you make it". A significant memory of their experience within foster care was when Ruby had to advocate to their guardian and case worker about the foster care placement of their younger siblings. The foster home of four of their younger siblings was not suitable and they needed to be relocated to another foster placement immediately. A guiding principle for Ruby was that when you see something, then you should say something.

Around two years later, Ruby's mother started to have visitation to initiate the reunification process. Ruby had to utilize their voice once again when their mother had completed the reunification process and paperwork, but no reunification actions had occurred. After advocating to the judge for reunification, Ruby was given a trial reunification period with their mother. This led to Ruby and their siblings being removed from the foster care system and fully reunified as Ruby graduated high school.

This experience and the parental push to keep going since their mother had not been able to attend college, heavily influenced Ruby's fervor to attend college. Their older sister and their guardian also served as two motivations for them to pursue higher education; however, Ruby noted that over time the motivation changed to become intrinsically anchored. Even with this self-motivation, Ruby highlighted the pressure that they felt entering college due to their first-generation identity and the associated pressure to do succeed. As Ruby entered SU, they were fearful of what to expect due to being new at SU. Nevertheless, as Ruby reflected on their experience at SU, they shared that they feel immensely supported by their family, previous guardian from foster care, and social circle they have created while at SU.

Zachary Myers

Zachary Myers personal connection to higher education was familial rooted carried complex nuisances of legacy and newness. Before entering foster care Zachary, his mother, and her family all lived together. Due to retaliation and distrust, someone reported that their home was unsuitable for children. Upon the complaint to the Department of Children Services (DCS) and their investigation, DCS removed Zachary and their brother from their home and placed them with a new foster family across town.

The custody change happened within the summer months; therefore, Zachary and his brother were forced to change schools and enter not only a new school, but also a new school district which came with new curriculum achievement metrics. Zachary's current school had transitioned away from teaching cursive due to the technical boom within primary education. He still accounted for his inability to write in cursive to this change. Towards the middle of the next year, Zachary and his brother were released from the foster care system and returned home under the legal guardianship of their grandparents. This resulted in yet another school change for them.

Shortly after returning home, Zachary's mother passed away. Zachary remembered his mother trying to go back to school to get her college degree. While attempting to finish her degree, she would tell Zachary that she had to drop out of school when she was younger because she got caught up in the wrong things, prioritizing her social life over her academic life. Zachary contributes this and their own intrinsic motivation to wanting to attend college and persist. Zachary's collegiate experience was very academically motivated. His social circle was intimate to those who already understand who is. He shared that most of his friends are those from high school and his interactions with his classmates at SU were traditionally limited to group projects or other academic requirements. His academic advancement and mindset on "the right college experience" was heavily influenced by their mother.

Zachary disclosed that he did not spend any money on college but rather was paid to attend Summit University. Zachary's financial aid packaged, by previously being a ward of the state in addition with the discount that they received due to their guardian, their grandfather, being a professor at SU, allowed for him to not feel fiscally pressured by their higher education aspirations. Zachary mentioned that the process of "validating" his experience in foster care to

SU was multifaceted and exhausting due interaction with SU. The university needed multiple forms and continued to go back and forth with him but ultimately, he was able to get his FFC status verified receiving the accompanying financial aid.

Donna Smith

Donna described their upbringing as traditional until they were thirteen and their mother started to date a new man. A year later, Donna's mother had a baby resulting in her experiencing postpartum and an unexpected breakup from Donna's newborn sister's father. Donna and their mother started having extreme conflict during this time, so Donna started staying with friends. Subsequently, Donna moved in with their biological father. Once Donna's mother discovered this, she threatened to take Donna's father to court for custody. Donna's father did not have the means to go through a custody battle, so he urged Donna to return to their mother. Upon Donna's return, they noticed that their mother's home had changed drastically. Donna's old home had become more disorderly, and they realized that their mother was severely behind on payments. Shortly after, Donna and their family were evicted from their current residence facing housing insecurity. Donna recalled nights staying in homeless shelters; eventually, they moved in with family friends of their grandparents.

Donna's mother would wake Donna and their siblings up for school. On "that day," Donna woke themselves up and got ready for school. Donna asked the family friends where their mother was and they said she did not come home, but that Donna and their siblings should go to school. Later within the school day, Donna's grandmother and their uncle came to the school. They told them that their mother and 10-month baby sister were found naked on the side of the road that morning. The family friends that they had been staying with were granted emergency

custody of Donna and their siblings and they would have visitation with their mother at their grandmother's house. The family friends were also raising their grandson, but after the emergency custody placement, the grandson started saying and behaving strangely towards Donna's younger siblings, resulting in Donna telling their case worker that they no longer wanted to stay with that family.

Donna called their youth pastor and asked if they and their siblings could stay with them for a little. The youth pastor and his wife agreed to this new temporary placement. A few days later, the youth pastor and his wife told Donna and their siblings, except for the baby, who was already placed with another family in the church, that they could stay with them until their case worker has viable options. This was a dream come true to Donna. When recounting the lifestyle change of this new placement, Donna said "I had the freedom to be a child." Eventually, the opportunity for reunification was presented to Donna and their two younger siblings. At this time, they were still living with their youth pastor's family. Donna's two younger siblings were reunified with their mother, but Donna opted to stay with the youth pastor's family.

Donna's tumultuous relationship with their mom was their source of motivation to attend and succeed in college. That mentality has guided Donna's belief is you (any parent) should "figure it out for your kids." Through Donna's high school experience, they were unsure if they were going to go to college. It was unknown. Donna's internal confidence was propelled by their academic success in high school, especially once being in a stable home with youth pastor's family. After taking the ACT and scoring well, Donna knew that they had options and could go to college. Donna was very excited to attend SU because not only their boyfriend was an active student there, but also it is the "next step" in the "normal progression" of an eighteen-year-old.

Examination of Participants Narrative

Participants' narratives revealed the profound impact of their foster care experiences on their educational journeys. Each participant's story was first coded individually, followed by a holistic coding process for the entire dataset. Codes were categorized based on their relevance to the research questions, labeled as R1 (research question one, the influence of self-determination on persistence), or R2 (research question two, persistence barrier within higher education. The open and axial coding as well as the research question alignment can be referenced in **Table 3**. Thematic analysis ensured that the richness of participants' narratives was preserved throughout the coding process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). These stories highlight resilience, self-determination, and the exclusive challenges faced in pursuing postsecondary education.

Biological Generations

For many FFC students, the presence or absence of biological parents served as more than a backdrop to their stories; it became a driving force in how they define success, resilience, and self-worth. In their narratives, participants revealed how complicated, often painful parental relationships shaped their educational motivation and sense of identity. While paternal figures were frequently absent or emotionally distant, relationships with biological mothers carried deeper emotional impact, sometimes as inspiration, and other times as cautionary reminders. These parental dynamics not only influenced how students saw their pasts, but also how they envisioned their futures.

Table 3 *Open and Axial Code Map with Research Question Alignment*

Open	Axial	RQ1	RQ2
Breaking biological generational cycles	Biological impacts through the generations	Yes	Yes
Conflicts between biological father and mother			
Defining maternal relationship			
Differences between self and biological parents			
Declining health of biological mother			
Deportation of biological mother			
Differing of educational achievement			
ESL Biological mother			
Grief and death of a parent			
Father in Mexico: no connection			
"I will not be like my mother"			
Multi-faceted father relationship			
No desire for contact with biological mom			
Perception of biological parents during time in custody			
Questions for biological mom			
Reunification Option			
Reunification with biological mom			
Unwanted connection to biological mom			

Table 3 (Continued)

"Good Adults"	Power of positive community	Yes	No
Two diverse friend groups			
Influential People- professors			
Influential people: Older Sister and Guardian			
Influential People: Youth pastor and wife			
Satisfaction with friends from high school			
Social capital in community during time in foster care			
Diversified clubs/ friend groups			
Found/ Created Family			
Positive Community			
Power of community			
Satisfaction with friends from high school			
Small friend circle			
Two best friends			
Special person: Sister-in-law			

Table 3 (Continued)

	Self-discovery through and post foster care	Yes	No
Advocacy for self			
"Most myself that I have ever been"			
Autonomous over physical			
Authentic self: connection to Latina identity			
Do not want to be stupid so value second perspective			
Emotional support			
Empathy, compassion, and understanding for others			
Freedom to be "child" while in foster care			
"I can do hard things"			
Importance of confidence			
Indecisive decision-making			
Intersecting Identities			
Intrinsic motivation			
Perceptions of "Normalcy"			
Working through the hard			
Personal growth with self-discipline			
Reassurance on the "Right" way			
Resilience through the unexpected			
Spanish language impact on identity and experience			
"Bad" People			
Care's experience on their professional future			
Decrease in socialness after foster care			
Changing schools frequently			
Cruelty in the world			
I am not trusting to new adults			
Pride in FFC status			
Take Care of Vs. Raise			
Not disclosing due to not wanting pity from other			
Vitality of trust			

Table 3 (Continued)

Financial Consideration of College	FFC's higher education	Yes	Yes
Fresh Start	priorities and experiences		
Future involvement in foster care as an adult			
Futuristically focused			
Professional advancement			
Professional belief			
Professional Networking			
Academics as a vehicle			
Belief in self within college			
Proof of foster care experience to college			
Resource awareness shift			
Resources for FFC in comparison to 1G			
Mental health resources			

Table 3 (Continued)

Appeasing case workers to avoid DCS	Specialized foster care	Yes	Yes
Care and medication upkeep	situations		
Difficult police encounters			
Guardianship challenges			
Unalignment between self-labels and actions, especially with adults			
Independence within foster care			
Independent under new guardianship			
Medical overlook within foster care			
Micro-community of foster youth			
Mom and dad to new mom and dad			
Negative interaction with DCS			
New guardianship			
Passing of adoptive parents			
Reconnection to foster family			
Religious foster family			
Religious impact on care			
Time in foster care as stolen time			
Traumatic entrance into care			
Triggers to expected noise			
Triggers to noise			
Unsafe activity to get basic needs met			
Adverse post-care experiences			
Influence of Authority			

Table 3 (Continued)

	Relational Strength and Stability	No	Yes
Impact of foster care on siblings			
Impact of one's actions on siblings			
Relational closeness			
Sacrificing for others (siblings)			
Actions for the betterment of self and siblings			
Advocacy for siblings			
Desire for stability			
Avoidant of social interaction with strangers			
Minimal want of a peer-based social circle			
Housing insecurity			
Mental health concerns			
Basic needs anxiety			
Basic survival focus			

Note. This table contains the open and axial code of the findings in relation to the research questions. R1 examines the influence of self-determination on persistence for FFC college students. R2 focuses on persistence barriers within higher education for FFC college students.

All participants referenced their biological parents in their narratives, but the role and influence of those parents varied especially between fathers and mothers. A striking theme was the minimal presence of biological fathers. While Zachary and Donna mentioned their fathers, both described distant relationships. Zachary shared that his father was unaware of major life events until long after they occurred. Other participants, such as Simon, Ruby, Ana Sofia, and Feather, either did not mention their fathers or shared that they were absent or no longer in the U.S.

In contrast, relationships with biological mothers carried more emotional weight and complexity. A powerful and recurring motivator for collegiate success was a desire not to become like their mothers. Donna and Simon both explicitly voiced this. Simon recalled nearly dropping out until someone warned, “You’ll end up just like your mom.” This statement became a turning point in their collegiate persistence. Donna chose a career path centered on financial stability, directly shaped by her experiences growing up. Ana Sofia declined the opportunity to reconnect with her mother to avoid emotional disruption. Zachary’s academic journey was described as the opposite of his mother’s, and Ruby saw college completion as fulfilling an opportunity her mother never had. Across narratives, maternal relationships shaped students’ goals, values, and determination often serving as both a point of contrast and a source of motivation for personal transformation.

Power of Positive Community

For FFC students, positive community serves as a lifeline offering belonging, validation, and stability in a world that has often been marked by disruption. Across participants' narratives,

trusted communities, whether built through identity-based organizations, friendships, or intimate relationships, emerged as key contributors to their emotional wellbeing and collegiate success.

Ana Sofia found connection through campus organizations focused on leadership and her Latina identity, offering spaces where she could contribute, explore her heritage, and grow her language skills. Ruby felt fully supported by a tight-knit group of friends, her guardian, and her family, highlighting that even a small, trusted circle can meet both emotional and academic needs. For Simon, Donna, and Ana Sofia, romantic partners emerged as key pillars of support. Their partners helped them navigate decision-making, form social networks, and maintain emotional balance. These relationships were more than companionship; they were trusted communities in themselves.

While the nature of these communities varied, the impact was consistent: positive relationships fostered a sense of safety, confidence, and purpose. For FFC students who have often had to rely on themselves, the presence of a caring and affirming community whether through peers, partners, or cultural spaces proves transformative. These networks not only support their persistence in higher education but also help shape who they are becoming. Across all experiences, community, however defined, provided FFC students with a sense of grounding, belonging, and resilience that was essential to their success in higher education.

Self-Discovery Through and Post Foster Care

For FFC students, the college experience was more than a pursuit of academic success; it was a journey of self-discovery shaped by past trauma, evolving values, and a desire to rewrite their futures. The participants in this study disclosed how navigating systems of care and higher

education prompted deep reflection about who they are, what they stand for, and who they want to become.

Simon's path illustrated how moments of adversity can become catalysts for personal clarity. Denied access to medication by a foster family due to conflicting beliefs, Simon was forced to make difficult choices to advocate for their own wellbeing. That early experience, along with ongoing housing challenges in college, sparked a powerful sense of autonomy and voice. Simon now embraces difficult conversations and confidently sets boundaries when others act in ways that conflict with their ethics. Their willingness to end relationships that compromise their values demonstrated a deep commitment to authenticity. As they reflected, "I can do hard s**t," a phrase that captured both their resilience and growing sense of self.

Together, these stories showcased how FFC students use higher education as a space to explore identity, reaffirm values, and envision futures defined by agency rather than circumstance. Across these narratives, FFC students revealed that self-discovery was not a linear journey, but one shaped by adversity, reflection, and a desire to live with intention. Their journeys were not just about surviving systems but about discovering selfhood through and beyond them.

Formerly in Foster Care Higher Education Priorities and Experiences

The academic experiences of FFC students in this study were shaped by both resilience and structural barriers. Participants described their educational journeys as marked by determination yet often complicated by the lingering effects of instability and the need to adapt quickly to rigorous academic environments. Zachary and Donna, both enrolled in the College of Engineering, detailed the intense pressure of their first semester, which they referred to as a

"weed-out" experience. The academic demands not only tested their content knowledge but also challenged their confidence and stamina. Donna emphasized how collaborative learning with other engineering students helped her persist. These academic relationships have evolved into some of her strongest social connections, illustrating how peer support played a crucial role in her educational success. For Zachary, while he built initial connections with classmates, those relationships did not transform into lasting friendships, suggesting that academic support does not always develop to broader social belonging.

Ruby, in contrast, focused heavily on leadership and professional development, using her academic setting as a platform to expand her career readiness. Her involvement in student organizations reflected a commitment to learning that extended beyond the classroom and aligned with long-term career goals, a priority shared by many FFC students who feel a strong sense of purpose in their educational pursuits.

Zachary also used his academic experience to advocate for institutional change. He critiqued existing disability accommodation policies, particularly the lack of partial credit for late assignments. For him, such rigid policies failed to consider the complex realities many students, especially those with FFC backgrounds, face. His feedback reflected a broader theme in the study, which was that FFC students were not only navigating academic systems but actively questioning and reshaping them in pursuit of fairness and inclusion.

Overall, FFC students' academic experiences were defined by perseverance, adaptation, and a drive to succeed despite systemic challenges. Their stories illustrated that academic success for this population requires more than individual effort, but demands supportive, equitable, and flexible institutional structures.

Specialized Foster Care Situations

Participants' early experiences with the foster care system revealed inconsistencies, mistrust, and structural instability that shaped how they engaged with institutions later in life. Several students questioned the legitimacy or fairness of how they entered care, reinforcing a broader theme of systemic distrust. These early experiences often yielded long-term emotional and psychological weight that followed them into their college journeys.

Zachary described his entrance into foster care as "suspicious." He believed he should never have been removed from his home and suspected that a personal vendetta played a role in triggering the state's involvement. He recalled a family conflict where his uncle's ex-girlfriend, angry over a custody decision, filed a child safety complaint that ultimately led to his and his brother's removal. Zachary believed that evidence found in the home may have been planted and noted that his eventual reunification with his grandparents involved no formal legal process further fueling his belief that foul play had influenced his placement. His story reflected a larger theme of institutional mistrust and highlights how unclear processes can leave lasting confusion and disbelief.

Donna, by contrast, shared that having a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) supported her during her time in care, suggesting that access to structured, reliable advocacy can significantly impact the foster experience. Meanwhile, Feather reflected on the educational disruptions caused by frequent moves in and out of care, illustrating another critical theme that the instability foster care often brings to foundational aspects of a child's development, such as schooling. Collectively, these stories pointed to a broader pattern of disruption, and the long-term consequences of unclear or inconsistent foster care processes. This easily created mistrust

underscores the need for more transparent, youth-centered approaches to placement, advocacy, and transition.

Relational Strength and Stability

Family emerged as a powerful force in the narratives of FFC students, shaping their values, responsibilities, and sense of purpose. While many participants experienced instability in their biological families, two forms of familial connection that stood out as deeply influential were relationships with grandparents and roles as protective siblings. These relationships offered a sense of continuity and direction that helped participants navigate both foster care and college life. Biological grandparents often served as stable and supportive figures, providing emotional grounding and, in some cases, financial support. Participants like Zachary, Donna, and Feather described their grandparents as consistent presences throughout their lives, filling gaps left by other family members and offering a sense of belonging and care. Simultaneously, many participants took on protective roles for their younger siblings. This was not described as a burden, but rather as a moral responsibility and source of pride. Their advocacy, sacrifices, and bold decisions were often motivated by a desire to protect and uplift their siblings, even while managing their own transitions into adulthood. These intergenerational and sibling relationships highlight a recurring theme of relational strength, reinforcing how love, loyalty, and duty can drive resilience and persistence for FFC students in higher education.

Participants Experience with the Literature's Unique Characteristics

In the literature review, five unique characteristics of FFC college were listed. These characteristics impact FFC student experience and retention within higher education. These five

areas were re-examined looking at the data from this study with mental health concerns and financial support and policies being perpetuated.

Housing Instability

The concept of home and having a safe space was a recurring theme within this study. Zachary, Ruby, and Olivia all classified home as being reunified with their biological parents. Donna and Ana Sofia defined home as the abode of their foster care guardians prior to their arrival to SU. Simon conveyed that home is being with their partners and pets. Considering these varied contexts of “home,” housing instability was not a prominent finding within this study.

Simon and Donna both experienced severe housing insecurity with their biological family prior to entering the foster care system. After increased conflicts with her biological mom, Donna was kicked out of her home and forced to stay with community members. Shortly after moving back in with her mom, Donna and her family were staying at homeless shelter due to not having a home. Simon’s housing insecurity was based upon concern of their physical safety. Their mother’s house had various activity occurring that made Simon feel uncomfortable, so being mindful of their well-being, they would find alternate places to stay. The contradicting definition and lived experience of “home” influenced their ideology of housing stability, especially for Donna during her time at SU.

SU had a first-year student live-on requirement for those students living 50 miles away from the university. In their current enrollment increase, SU admitted more first-year and transfer students than beds available on-campus, making on-campus housing for upper-year students nearly impossible unless they were an athlete or had a special accommodation. A FFC student status did not classify as approved accommodation reasoning.

The shortage of on-campus residence made upper-year students go to extremes to secure housing. Donna emphasized housing security/accommodation as a key action item for how SU could better support FFC college students. She was concerned on if she would find a place to live due to the competitive nature of securing an apartment within their college town. Once the unit was secured, the pricing would be inflated due to the high consumer need. Donna advocated for institutional intervention to help mitigate the housing concern for students who have noted housing insecurity, with a specific focus FFC students due to their lack of family privilege.

Mental Health Concerns

Simon, Feather, and Zachary mentioned some form of mental health concern, active triggers, academic accommodations or considerable support from mental health counselors or disability specialist within the interview. Simon and Feather could connect their mental health concerns with a traumatic experience within their foster care story. Simon shared waking up in their home with a gun to their head and Feather recalled being surrounding by police forcibly entering their home. These adverse experiences have lasting impacts that Feather and Simon have admittedly worked to heal from. Simon, Zachary, and Ana Sofia all navigated parental loss. Zachary biological mother passed away shortly after being reunified with her, naming that his time in foster felt like “stolen time.” Ana Sofia adoptive parents both passed away while she was in middle and high school. Simon’s mother was deported while they were navigating their experience in foster care. From the collective of the participants, mental health services and student disability services on SU’s campuses were the most prominently referred to when participants were asked which campus resources, they wish they would have known about sooner within their time at SU.

Lack of Support

This characteristic was not supported by the findings of this study. Each participant had a group of people, whether it be family, friends, or classmates, that they felt supported by. Their communities included key people and narratives that exemplified that support. This section will highlight those findings that contradict the literature of FFC students having a lack of support

Ruby detailed in her narrative that she had the support of not only her biological family but also her guardian. When describing her motivation, she mentioned her mother, sisters, and guardian. Her guardian served as a professional mentor after she was reunified with her mother and their relationship remained active while Ruby was at SU. Feather shared that their biological mother is their go-to person. They had very consistent communication with their mother and whenever Feather need help deciding their mother is their first call. Ana Sofia spoke with high respect and fondness when describing their relationship with her sister-in-law. Ana Sofia described her sister-in-law as someone who is always wanting the best for her, checking in on her, and helping her with her next step. One of Ana Sofia's core memories was that when she moved in with them, her sister-in-law went above and beyond to ensure that Ana Sofia felt at home, and they were able to co-design Ana Sofia's new room. When describing the evolution of their relationship, Ana Sofia said, "our relationship grew because of how much we're like." Ana Sofia shared that she refers to her sister-in-law as mom because "over the years, that that's what it's turned into."

Financial Support and Policies

This theme was reinforced by the findings of this study more than any other "prescribed" theme from the literature review. In the literature review, the research focused on the complexity

around financial documentation such as the FAFSA. However, in this study, financial support of the participants was examined from a myriad of angles, including school documentation, familial support, institution comparison and socioeconomic shift within foster care. From the stories shared, the confusion started with the institutions. Institutions were unaware of which documents they need or once receiving the correct documents, they were unable to validate them accordingly.

Simon, originally from North Carolina, said “I did not exist in North Carolina” when applying to state schools within the state. The stated funded financial aid that came with the FFC status, did not apply to Simon. When being accepted to North Carolina institutions, Simon was only granted an out of state financial aid package. Upon acceptance to various institutions, Simon contacted their financial office to get their status confirmed and financial changed; Nevertheless, all the institutions were unable to verify their FFC status prompting Simon to choose an out of state school experience. Ana Sofia had selected their college decision based upon a school that offered scholarships for in-state students that were either adopted or in foster care. However, upon the death of her adoptive parents and the relocation based upon her new guardianship, she had to reimagine her collegiate experience, restarting the search process. Zachary also mentioned having to submit multiple forms to SU to verify his FFC status for additional financial aid. Socioeconomic status plays a large factor in the college decision process for all students, but there is an increased fiscal comparison and analysis for FFC students

For most of the participants within this study, there was a heightened understanding of the financial security due to their foster family/guardians have a higher socioeconomic status than their biological parents. Simon mentioned how they went from couch surfing and showering

at friends' houses to moving in with their guardian and dining out for meals each multiple days a week. Simon described their guardian family as "having money." This change of fiscal priorities was shocking to some of the participants but gave them a larger perspective as they entered higher education.

Unique Lived Experiences

Their experiences in and tangential to being in the foster care system were extremely unique. The three unique yet intersection lived experiences were SU connection, biological parental relationship, and most prominent intersecting identities with FFC status. Five out of the six participants had a very strong connection to SU prior to enrolling. Feather was the only participant that did not have a pre-existing relationship with SU before their enrollment. The connections of the other participants included growing up in the same college town as SU or having mentors, siblings, or partners attend the university.

The larger data set emphasized the variance between each participant's previous experience within care such as guardianship, reunification, and aging out. A unique takeaway of this study was the relationship that each participant had with their biological parents. Ruby, Feather, and Zachary were reunified with either their biological parents or family members. When being reunified reunification with biological parents, it was only the mothers and the father not mentioned by the participants during this process. Zachary's experience was slightly more nuisance due to his grandparents legally receiving custody and his father's involvement post reunification. While Ana Sofia, Simon, and Donna decided to not be reunified or reconnected with their biological parents, becoming either solely independent or finding "good adults" in their life. Donna has periodically visited her biological mother, which is highly

influenced by her younger siblings being fully reunified with her; however, she said “that is not her home.” Ana Sofia and her siblings were placed in foster care as young toddlers and then adopted by her foster parents. After their death, Ana Sofia’s siblings started connecting with their biological mother. Her siblings asked her if she wants to be introduced but she is not interested in pursuing that relationship at the moment.

While being FFC college students, participants also reflected on how their other intersecting identities, such as being first generation, bilingual, ethnicity, and siblings, concurrently impacted their previous lived experience of being in the foster care system. Ana Sofia discussed the role that foster care played on Latina identity. During her experience in foster care, adoption, and within her guardianship, Ana Sofia was living with a white family. She shared how she was not deeply educated on her culture within her upbringing. Within higher education, she was able to begin her Latina identity self-exploration. Ruby narrated how language intersected with FFC experiences. The reunification process and its jargon created barriers for those who were not native English speakers, which caused for inequities to occur for Ruby’s family as they were seeking to be reunited. Donna’s story highlighted how being the eldest sibling impacted how they navigated the foster care system. After moving back in with their mother, Donna was a pseudo-caretaker for her younger siblings. This role only intensified as Donna and their siblings were placed in emergency custody of their family friends. Ana Sofia’s experience in foster care was also underscored by her being an older sibling. The foster care experience does not live in a vacuum but is interwoven into the participants’ encompassing identity.

Discussion

When examining the research questions of this study, which were how FFC students' self-determination influence their persistence in higher education and how do FFC students describe persistence barriers within higher education, persistence and its intersection with self-determination theory continued to outline the FFC collegiate experience.

Persistence as a Non-Negotiable

For the participants in this study, persistence in higher education was a non-negotiable aspect of their lives. Graduation was viewed as an inevitable goal, driven by a combination of intrinsic motivation and resilience. One participant, who briefly considered dropping out, recalled a hurtful comment "I always knew you would turnout like your mother" from a peer comparing them to their mother. This remark strengthened their resolve to succeed, highlighting the role of intrinsic motivation in overcoming barriers. Participants consistently framed higher education as a system to navigate rather than a purely academic experience. Having already navigated the complexities of the foster care system, they viewed college as another structure to master. Success was tied not only to academic performance but also to the ability to manage institutional challenges, such as housing, financial aid, and social integration. This study underscores the need for specialized support models for FFC students in higher education. While similar initiatives exist for first-generation students and historically excluded populations, programs tailored to FFC students remain rare. The findings emphasize the importance of institutional, community, and self-driven support in fostering persistence.

Self-Determination Theory in the FFC Context

Competence

FFC college students often hesitated when making significant decisions, fearing they might be seen as "stupid" or make the wrong choice. This doubt typically emerged in situations involving impactful decisions, while lower-stakes choices seemed to empower their self-confidence. For these students, decision-making was deeply tied to safety; they needed safe spaces and trusted people to make mistakes with. Having often experienced heightened independence in foster care or after reunification with biological families, their sense of security was fragile, and they recognized the heavy effect that poor choices could have on their future stability. Despite this, FFC students demonstrated confidence in their professional aspirations, often shaped by a clear understanding of what they did not want for their futures. They were articulate about the paths they wish to avoid and have typically been planning for adulthood since a young age. These students were aware of what they want to be part of their future and don't require additional opinions to solidify their goals. FFC students often knew exactly what they wanted from their post-secondary education and what success should look like at the end of their journey, and the persistence to reach that goal ultimately came from within.

One notable trait of FFC students was their high competency in actions that benefit others. A recurring sentiment from the study was, "You never know what someone is going through." This awareness of others' struggles drove a strong sense of right and wrong, especially when it came to sacrifice and advocacy, particularly for their biological siblings. FFC students saw themselves as role models for their younger siblings, and this motivated them to succeed in college as a demonstration of what their siblings can achieve. Advocacy was intrinsic and deeply

tied to their values. For FFC students, there was a delicate balance between selflessness and intrinsic motivation. These qualities of selflessness, advocacy, and intrinsic motivation are intertwined within the framework of self-determination theory (SDT). The students in the study used these principles to create a "bubble of care" for those they were advocating for, most notably their biological siblings who were also in foster care.

Selflessness, for FFC students, was the ability to prioritize the well-being of others over their own needs or desires. This selflessness often transformed into advocacy, turning their sacrifices into meaningful narratives. Acting in service of others came naturally to FFC students, but advocacy introduced complexity because it involves the use of one's voice, which can be both internally and externally focused. While selflessness was almost always externally directed, with no tangible benefit to the individual beyond the satisfaction of helping others, advocacy required students to engage in self-advocacy, both within their own lives and in larger contexts.

Throughout the study, selflessness emerged as a natural starting point for the students. From this foundation, stories of personal efficacy, acts of service, and sacrifice for others helped cultivate an intrinsic sense of competence. This enabled students to advocate for themselves. The journey from external care of others to internal motivation was a key theme for FFC students. While selflessness and advocacy begin externally motivated by the needs or beliefs of others, this shifted internally as they gain confidence in their own abilities. As they worked to protect and support others, they gradually learned to extend that care to themselves, becoming a driving force behind their academic persistence and personal accountability.

Social Relatedness

FFC students relied heavily on secure attachments, such as biological and foster families, close friends, and mentors. Their social circles often included individuals from past networks, like friends from church or high school. Support networks were critical to the FFC collegiate experience, and trust was a foundational element. Many students enter college with strong, pre-existing relationships built on trust, which helps sustain their persistence. These relationships were not only with family and friends but also with mentors who provide guidance and encouragement. For most FFC students, there was a preference for "no new friends" due to being satisfied with their current circle. These friends understood their lived experiences, specifically their time within the foster care system. There was no judgment or pity from these friends; rather, their experience in foster care was seen as just one part of who they are, and that was exactly what FFC students desire.

Trust played a central role when FFC students are developing relationships. FFC students were selective about revealing their foster care histories, often choosing not to share this information or utilizing significant discernment to disclose this with only those they trust. This trusted circle accepted their foster care background as part of their story. Only one participant in the study openly shared this part of their history with others. For the rest, non-disclosure was not driven by shame but by a desire to avoid misunderstanding or pity. FFC college students wanted to be understood in their entirety, not just by their past, but by who they are becoming. Trust within these networks, therefore, was not only essential for emotional support but also critical to their ongoing success and persistence in college. Their college journey was often seen as a step toward creating a new generational path, with success measured by achieving their professional

aspirations. Consequently, their approach to building relationships could be strategically focused on connecting with people who can help them succeed academically and/or professionally. This mindset was not insincere but is driven by a desire to align social engagement with their career aspirations.

Autonomy

Participants expressed a strong desire for independence and self-sufficiency. While some sought guidance from foster parents or guardians, they primarily viewed their educational journeys as self-driven. Institutional resources, such as financial aid and mental health services, were critical to fostering autonomy, but participants noted that navigating these systems was often challenging and time-consuming. These students valued their independence but also recognized the importance of support systems that could help them achieve their goals.

University resources were also a significant theme throughout the study. Participants emphasized the importance of support in areas such as financial aid, housing, health services, mental health resources, and student disability services. While participants varied in terms of classifications, transfer student status, field of study, and commuting status, they all expressed a need for stronger connections to available student resources. The application processes for these services were generally straightforward, which was seen as an advantage, as complexity in FFC student admissions and financial paperwork has been a recurring challenge. Two participants found the process of securing FFC status to be particularly arduous and time-consuming, but ultimately, their efforts were successful.

Most participants' biological parents did not have a college education, but their knowledge on varying educational experiences shifted upon transitioning into foster care. Many

were able to connect with foster parents or guardians for academic support, with some participants crediting their foster families as crucial to their persistence in higher education. The concept of "becoming" was central to their college journey. Although none of the participants felt stigmatized by their foster care backgrounds, they were determined not to let those experiences determine who they were. While their past influenced their personal and academic goals, they were committed to ensuring it did not limit their future potential.

Conclusion

This study provides critical insights into the postsecondary experiences of FFC students, emphasizing the role of self-determination in fostering persistence and acknowledging its barriers within higher education. By amplifying their voices through narrative inquiry, the study highlights the systemic barriers these students face and the resources relevant to support their success. Higher education institutions should critically examine how they support students with intersecting and unique lived experiences, ensuring these students are empowered towards their future rather than defined by their past. The findings underscore the importance of challenging assumptions about FFC students and fostering equitable support systems. For practitioners and policymakers, this prompts intentionality in designing programs and policies that address the distinct needs of FFC students. There is a sparse number of schools that offer tailored support for this student demographic; therefore, having a framework can create pathways of equitable support for FFC students. This model can serve as both an audit and an action plan for institutions that desire to become “foster-friendly.”

One pressing question for higher education professionals is how students with unique experiences are, such as those formerly in foster care, being supported in ways that recognize

and honor their identities on a systematic level within higher education. Institutions should move beyond superficial acknowledgments of diversity to implement meaningful, evidence-based practices that promote persistence and success for all students, even those that have minimal visibility and allyship like FFC students.

Future Research

Future research in this field should focus on understanding how FFC students develop trust in institutional systems and staff members, as this could reveal effective strategies for building stronger connections and improving retention. Additionally, exploring how colleges and universities assess their readiness to support FFC students, through staff training, resource allocation, and policy development, could uncover best practices for fostering inclusion. Longitudinal studies tracking FFC students throughout their college journeys would provide valuable insights into how barriers and support needs evolve over time, allowing institutions to adapt their strategies accordingly.

It is also essential to examine how intersecting identities, such as being first-generation, LGBTQ+, or bilingual, influence FFC students' experiences in higher education. By considering these factors, researchers can better understand the complexities of their journeys and develop more tailored support systems. Furthermore, co-designing research with FFC students themselves could not only deepen our understanding but also foster trust, empowering participants to contribute actively to the study.

The findings from this research emphasize the importance of fostering trust, autonomy, and relatedness within higher education systems to support FFC students effectively. To create lasting impact, institutions must adopt a holistic approach that integrates self-determination

theory principles into every aspect of student support. As this field evolves, future research should continue amplifying FFC student voices, driving systemic change, and ensuring that postsecondary education becomes more accessible, inclusive, and supportive for FFC college students.

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CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

The U.S. higher education and the foster care system are two government-backed initiatives that have statistical evidence of forecasting the trajectory of adulthood success (Bowman & Denson, 2021; Jha & Wharton, 2023; Salazar & Schelbe, 2021; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services et al., 2023). Yet, their results could not be more disparate. Both systems support many young people, yet the overlap is miniscule (Dworsky, 2018; “Foster Care Facts”). In the United States, with approximately 400,000 youth aging out of foster care and four million students graduating from college/university per year, only around 12,000 people in the United States have experienced both being in foster care but and graduating from a higher education institution (“Foster Care Facts”). There is a critical gap in the higher education literature from the lack of research on FFC students’ persistence and support. While a limited number of specialized programs exist to support FFC students within higher education, those without assistance are left with unspecialized institutional support for FFC students, leading to them being overlooked (Dworsky, 2018; Pecora et al., 2006). While many FFC students are resilient, their path to success in higher education is complicated by the inconsistency of adult supports typically found within traditional family structures (Cheung et al., 2021; Franco & Durdella, 2018). By amplifying FFC student voices, this study provided institutions with a more nuanced understanding of the barriers these students face and offers a roadmap for developing more intentional and effective support efforts.

The purpose of this study was to examine the collegiate experience on formerly in foster care students through their self-determination. The focal points were their social relationships with peers, faculty, and/or staff, their agency within choice, and finally their capability and

resolve to succeed. Grounded in Deci and Ryan's (2012) self-determination theory, this research explored the role of autonomy, competence, and social relatedness in shaping FFC students' educational experiences and their ability to persist in academic settings. This study was investigated the following research questions:

1. How do FFC students describe their experience in higher education?
2. How do FFC students' self-determination influence their persistence in higher education?

The findings from this study were presented in a three-article dissertation that used Deci & Ryan's (2012) self-determination theory as the theoretical framework and narrative inquiry as the methodology. The article dissertation format provided a multidimensional platform through which the lived experiences of FFC students could be examined, offering not only varied analytical perspectives but also further illuminating the complexity and richness of their educational journeys. Article one examined the themes and trends within the literature pertaining to FFC students within the U.S. Article two addressed the lack of visibility and awareness for FFC students within higher education. Finally, article three used storytelling to pinpoint the barriers to persistence these FFC students faced. Findings for article one were deduced from the literature published after 2001 about FFC students who attended U.S. higher education institutions. For articles two and three, the findings were based upon interviews with six FFC college students attending Summitt University who had completed one semester of classes and were in non-familial placement while in the foster care system.

Narrative Discovery

Biological Generations

Consistent with Seita (2014), family privilege impacted both the navigation and progression through higher education for these participants. All participants referenced their biological parents within their narratives. A significant discovery was the lack of biological father involvement. Donna and Zachary referenced their relationship with their father, but those relationships were distant. Zachary shared that during two of his most impactful life experiences, entering foster care and grieving the loss of a family member, his father was unaware until Zachary told him. Donna shared how her paternal family was a pillar for her but was not very detailed when describing her father's impact in her life. Simon never mentioned their father when sharing their story. Ruby and Ana Sofia shared that their biological fathers were no longer in the United States. After reuniting with their mother, Feather's father was no longer present. Participants described minimal paternal involvement; however, their maternal relationships are more nuanced.

When describing motivation for collegiate success, a desire to not want to be like their mothers was resounding. Simon and Donna were both adamant about not wanting to be like their mothers. Simon considered withdrawing from college, but someone told them, "They knew that they would end up just like their mom." That statement changed Simon's trajectory and motivated them to persist. Donna chose a major based on her experiences with her mother. She chose a major that give her a career where she could provide for her family, unlike how she was raised. When the participants specifically focused on "turning-point events" such as entering

college it was believed to be “a change in the quality and direction of one’s life trajectory” (Hass et al., 2014, p. 387).

Power of Positive Community

Ana Sofia was involved in two organizations on campus. One was a student leadership board focused on developing campus-wide events. Within that organization Ana Sofia had a large connection with their peers because they have a shared interest in creating events that better the student body. She is also involved in a student organization that centers Latina identity. Within the space, she could learn more about her ethnicity but also grow her knowledge and proficiency of the Spanish.

Ruby was able to form and maintain friendships with two of her close friends within the college of business. She expressed satisfaction with her current friendships and feeling well-supported by her peers, family, and guardian, indicating no desire to seek new connections. However, she remained open to forming new relationships that could support her professional growth. Ruby was an avid believer of the power of networking within the professional field.

Donna shared a similar sentiment of their partner being their confidant. They mentioned that several of their friendships at SU started because they were introduced by their partner. Donna ultimately decided upon attending SU instead of another elite institution in the state because their partner was enrolled at SU so they knew they would have a “built in community.” Ana Sofia also mentioned how influential their partner had been in their collegiate experience. Their partner was one of their most trusted people. They enjoyed seeking their opinion on larger life actions. Ana Sofia described themselves as being naturally indecisive, and that their partner had assisted them within that process.

The other three participants did not disclose having partners. However, for those who did disclose within their narration that they were in a relationship, the partner was mentioned consistently as a support metric for them as they navigated being an FFC collegiate student. Whether that is through assisting them in forming community, empowering, and supporting them through decision-making, or just being present and showing genuine care, the partners served as that one special person to these three participants.

Self-Discovery through and post Foster Care

Simon's experience with foster care showcased their resiliency. Due to contradicting beliefs, Simon lived with a foster family that would not allow them to take their medication resulting in Simon having to make adverse decisions about their health to get the attention of their social worker. After an extended amount of time in care, Simon identified that if you are sick on the day of your social worker visit, then they are required to take you to the doctor. This foster family highlighted for Simon the incongruences between stated values and substantive action, especially as it pertains to displaying care and earning trust. Through this experience, Simon discovered that they are not timid to facilitate conversations especially when others are behaving in ways contradictory to shared principles. When they did not condone a contradictory behavior, they had to make the difficult decisions on if they wanted to maintain a relationship with that person. Simon shared stories of ending a relationship due to these ethical differences and not supporting the behavior of their friend due to the pain it caused others. Upon reflection, they described their personal development by saying "I can do hard s**t."

When asked about life goals, Donna shared that she ultimately wants to become a mother. Her career choice and partial motivation for succeeding in her college program was to develop a

career path that would allow for her to financial provide for her family. She reflected on her experience as a child and how it has thoroughly informed her ideology of motherhood. After their experience in foster care, Ruby developed a passion for supporting youth who has that shared identity. Ruby had a passion to foster older children that are not commonly desired by foster families, mimicking the philosophy of her guardian.

Formerly in Foster Care Higher Education Priorities and Experiences

Ruby was very active in expanding their professional network. They took advantage of opportunities that expanded and grew their professional involvement and connection. As president of their organization at SU, they valued making sure those within their organization felt heard and collaborated dissatisfied members to make changes to the organization that were beneficial to the unit.

Zachary and Donna were both part of the engineering college on campus. Within their narratives, they both disclosed the academic challenge that comes within the first semester of being an engineering student. They described their first year within the college of engineering as one that thoroughly stretched and challenged them. Often, they referred to it as a “weed out” experience. After that first semester, they mentioned that they are more academically solid within their classes. FFC students often demonstrate higher academic achievement than first-generation students but are not retained at the same intensity (Salazar et al., 2016). Donna shared how she was able to form closer relationships with her classmates. Therefore, some of her classmates for group projects or joint study groups became some of her closest friends due to the survival tactic of working together to persist through that first semester. Zachary made

connections during his first semester of engineering; however, they did not transform into close friendships.

When thinking about access to campus resources, Zachary shared that he believes some of the disability service processes should be changed not just for FFC students but for all students. He discussed that he believes he should have an accommodation to turn in materials late for partial credit. He shared that he does not believe that late work should not be worth any credit. This punitive process does not allow for individualized understanding, which he viewed as collegiate necessity.

Specialized Foster Care Situations

Zachary's entrance into foster care was self-labeled as suspicious. He shared that he did not think that he should have been taken into state custody. Zachary's family lived in one home together. His uncle had an ex-girlfriend who was vengeful towards the family due to the custody of Zachary's cousin going to the father, Zachary's uncle, over her. Shortly after this, a case worker came to Zachary's family house stating that there had been a child safety complaint. Zachary shared that it was later discovered that it was his uncle's ex-girlfriend. This complaint led to something being found in the child playroom which resulted in Zachary and his brother being placed in state custody and eventually foster care. According to Zachary, he disclosed that he believed that the items found in the playroom had been planted by his cousin's mother. When describing his transition from foster care to reunification, Zachary fortified this rationale of items being planted. Zachary said that there was no legal or court involvement upon their reunification but rather they just transitioned back to their grandparents' house. Due to these assumed unusual

circumstances, Zachary shared that he believed that some form of foul play was involved with his foster care situation.

Donna's experience was unique due to her mother and baby sister being found on the side of the road, resulting in an emergency custody change. Donna essentially became the caregiver for her younger siblings including her ten-month old baby sister. Moving through the placement process Donna mentioned a CASA, court appointed special advocate, to support her as she navigated her experience with the state and foster care system.

Relational Strength and Stability

A consistent finding within the study was the impact that biological grandparents have for FFC students. Zachary, Donna, and Feather all noted that they had caring relationships with their grandparents. Donna shared that she was able to connect with her paternal grandparents throughout her childhood and even currently. Her step-grandmother was one of her go-to people. After being reunified with their mother, Feather lived with their mother and grandmother. Even as Feather and their family moved, their grandmother remained with them. Zachary's grandparents raised him and even participated in fiscally supporting him while at SU. Zachary stated that his grandparents meet all his needs.

Siblings were consistent characters within participants' narratives. Apart from Simon and Feather, all the other participants, Zachary, Ruby, Donna, and Ana Sofia, had siblings, specifically younger siblings. With this identity marker, the participants illustrated stories of acting in the best interest of their siblings. There was recurring theme of sacrificing for their siblings; however, the participants never phrased it as a sacrifice or burden but rather a duty and a calling. This was avidly demonstrated through Ana Sofia's decision to move in with her

distanced brother and his family rather than her older sister. In addition to Ana Sofia, Ruby and Donna also advocated for their siblings, but instead of through actions, they utilized their voice. Ruby and Donna knew a placement change was needed for their siblings and shared this sentiment with the adults who held the power to make this change. Across all narratives, when referring to the safety and care of their siblings, a new form of boldness and bravery was highlighted within the participants.

Additions to the Literature

The Nesting of Trust, Sacrifice, and Advocacy

Trust, sacrifice and advocacy were consistently referred to within the participants' narratives and can be best conceptualized as three nesting cups. Entering higher education, trust was a foundation for FFC students. However, it was not just being trusting of others but included trusting themselves. Their internal self-trust aided them in navigating interpersonal connections, deciding with whom they were going to form authentic relationships and even disclosing their FFC status. When sharing with whom they disclosed their FFC status, the participants all said that their perceived ability to trust the other person influenced their decision. For FFC students, trust was a lifeline to connection and that connection was a factor in persistence. If trust was absent, then their hesitancy to new people and systems remained. Forming authentic relationships within the institution helped these FFC students feel further connected to SU and its campus.

For FFC students, sacrifice for the betterment of others was evident for those with whom they have a trusting relationship. The pre-establishment of trust enabled FFC students to act in a way that displayed this trust. There was willingness to show up for others. This was underscored

by the participants' relationships with their siblings, by putting their personal desires to the side for the betterment of their younger sibling. As they transitioned to higher education, the appearance of sacrifice was transformed. The sacrifice that FFC students learned through sacrificing for others was internally applied through the sacrifice of their time. Most participants sacrificed time to their professional development organizations or to their community at SU. Those organizations and people who had garnered the trust of the FFC students had their dedication and involvement through both time and actions.

From sacrifice came advocacy. Sacrifice yielded a conception of relevancy. For FFC students, most participants labeled themselves as shy, quiet, or timid; however, through their adverse childhood experience they had an increased knowledge on labeling the importance of things. Prior to entering higher education, a few participants gave stories of when they felt it necessary to advocate for themselves or others, yet most of these moments of advocacy impacted those with whom they had trusting relationships. Upon entering higher education, FFC students' sense of self and accomplishment was enhanced, resulting in them labeling themselves as important. Through this ego-extension, there was an increased presence of self-advocacy. The ability and confidence to advocate for oneself highlights their developed sense of mattering and belonging on their collegiate campus.

Connecting Campus Engagement to Confidence and Determination

The intersection of visibility and institutional support played a pivotal role in shaping the collegiate experiences of FFC students. Recognition from their university as students and individuals with unique lived experience contributed significantly to their sense of belonging increasing their motivation to persist. Institutions that proactively supported FFC students by

acknowledging their challenges and providing dedicated resources can dismantle long-standing systemic barriers while fostering new pathways for success (Dworsky & Perez, 2010). These supports, tangible, like financial aid, academic advising, and intangible, like feeling seen, heard, and valued, contributed to participants' increased sense of agency and self-efficacy.

Campus engagement emerged as a critical initiator for cultivating this confidence. FFC college students who were active in organizations, student leadership, or major-related opportunities, often described a clearer vision for their future with a determined approach to achieving their goals. Their involvement wasn't just social; it aligned with their long-term professional aspirations, serving as a testing ground for real-world competencies. Continuously, participants who felt institutionally supported sought out more engagement opportunities, reinforcing a virtuous cycle of confidence, connection, and determination. Their prior experiences in the foster care system equipped them with unique skills to manage institutional challenges (Cheung et al., 2021).

Holistic institutional support encompassing mental health services, financial literacy programs, peer mentorship, and cultural belonging, was identified as essential collegiate success resources (Dworsky, 2018; Sim et al., 2008; Uranu et al., 2018). Participants who accessed a range of supports described a deeper connection to the campus community, stronger academic persistence, and an ability to envision themselves thriving beyond graduation. Within the higher education scope, institutions that centered the needs of FFC students in their policies and practices not only promote equitable access to resources but also cultivate inclusive environments where confidence and determination can flourish for FFC students.

Exploration through Storytelling

Storytelling served as a transformative tool for FFC students in this study, providing a space to reflect on their identities, reframe their challenges, and embrace their resilience. This narrative-based approach shifted the discourse away from deficit-framed assumptions such as brokenness or lack thereof and reframed it towards one of recognition of strength, perseverance, and growth. The narrative inquiry methodology allowed participants to articulate how their lived experiences shaped their sense of self and how those experiences fueled their academic and personal goals (Creswell, 2012).

Through storytelling, participants reclaimed ownership of their narratives. Many expressed that being asked to tell their stories in a research setting was a validating experience that affirmed their voices as credible and worthy of scholarly attention. This act of sharing allowed them to process past trauma, acknowledge growth, and identify how specific institutional practices either supported or hindered their journey (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). For all the participants, it was the first time they had been invited to reflect deeply on their experiences in foster care within the context of higher education.

This reflective process benefited the students and offered critical insight into how institutions can better serve FFC populations. When students are empowered to co-construct the design of support services, those services become more responsive, relevant, and impactful for that specific student population. Participants advocated for greater FFC representation in campus decision-making processes, particularly in areas like financial aid policy, mental health support, and programming designed to foster belonging.

Ultimately, the study amplified that storytelling is not just a research method, but a practice of empowerment. By centering FFC students' voices and experiences, institutions can move beyond generic approaches to student support and build systems that truly reflect the diverse needs and strengths of this often-overlooked population.

FFC Self-Determination for Success

Navigating college is challenging for many students, but for those who have experienced the foster care system, higher education often represented both an opportunity and a battleground. The journey toward a degree was not only academic but deeply personal, shaped by past trauma, resilience, and the urgent desire for self-reliance. For these students, success in college is not merely about passing classes; it's about reclaiming control over their lives. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) offers a powerful lens through which to understand this pursuit. By exploring the roles of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, SDT helps illuminate how former foster care (FFC) students persist in the face of adversity and advocate for their visibility in a system that often overlooks them.

This study examined how Self-Determination Theory (SDT) informs the advocacy of personal narratives and the creation of visibility for former foster care (FFC) students within higher education. Grounded in SDT, the research explored the roles of competence, autonomy, and relatedness in fostering persistence among FFC students (Deci & Ryan, 2012). The theoretical framework of SDT enabled a deeper investigation into the lived experiences of these students.

Among the three SDT components, autonomy emerged as the most prominent theme. Participants emphasized the importance of self-advocacy and supportive relationships (Niemiec

et al., 2006). Key findings included the critical role of fostering autonomy, building trust within social networks, and acknowledging the skills FFC students develop through adversity (Cheung et al., 2021; Niemiec, 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The interconnectedness of autonomy, relatedness, and competence proved essential in shaping FFC students' success in higher education. These components surfaced strongly in participant narratives, illustrating how they navigate their educational journeys and confront unique challenges.

Within the theme of autonomy, participants expressed a strong desire for independence and control over their lives (Niemiec, 2006). This desire was evident in both academic pursuits and personal growth (Hess et al., 2014; Niemiec, 2006; Pecora, 2012). One participant described how a supportive foster family enabled her transition from caregiver to high school student, highlighting the significance of a secure environment in fostering autonomy.

Social relatedness was equally vital. Participants often spoke about the need for trust and connection in their relationships. Many were cautious about disclosing their FFC status due to the stigma attached to it (Horn, 2020). Nevertheless, some participants actively advocated for their experiences, demonstrating how social relatedness can foster empowerment and a sense of belonging. Their foster care experiences not only shaped their identities but also helped develop resilience and life skills, being a key aspect of competence (Cheung et al., 2021). These competencies contributed significantly to their academic persistence and ability to overcome the challenges of higher education (Pecora, 2012).

For FFC students, persistence was not optional; it was a necessity, driven by intrinsic motivation and resilience. Participants viewed graduation as a non-negotiable goal, fueled by a desire to rise above past hardships and create a better future for themselves and often their

siblings (Field & Hoffman, 2012; Geisel, 2014). This motivation was frequently reinforced by negative stereotypes or assumptions from peers, which only strengthened their determination to succeed (Horn, 2020). Participants described higher education as a complex system, one that demanded far more than academic engagement.

Through the lens of SDT, this study revealed how competence, relatedness, and autonomy were woven into FFC students' experiences. For example, while participants sometimes hesitated to make major decisions due to fear of judgment or failure, they often showed strong clarity about their professional aspirations, which were goals shaped by lived experience (Field & Hoffman, 2012; Geisel, 2014). This self-awareness and vision for the future motivated their continued academic efforts.

Social relatedness appeared in the form of close, trusting relationships. Participants described maintaining small, supportive circles, ranging from significant others to family members, where they could safely share their identities. Every participant named at least one trusted individual who offered consistent support. These relationships played a critical role in emotional well-being and persistence in college. Trust became foundational, as participants carefully chose to disclose their FFC background only to those who would see them as whole individuals, not just through the lens of their past.

Autonomy remained central throughout. While students welcomed guidance from mentors or caregivers, they largely considered their educational journeys to be self-directed (Niemic et al., 2006). Navigating complex systems such as financial aid or mental health services, they often encountered institutional challenges (Dworsky & Perez, 2010). Their stories reflected a strong desire to manage their academic paths independently, underscoring the need

for institutions to create empowering frameworks that allow students to make informed decisions.

Narrative Visualization

The visual below presents a graphic interpretation of the study's narrative findings. As Creswell (2012) notes, one of the core strengths of narrative inquiry is that the narratives themselves serve as both "data and method" (p. 12). This dual role allows for a nuanced understanding of participants' lived experiences and the meaning they ascribe to those experiences. This visual synthesizes the analysis of two guiding research questions: (1) How do college students formerly in foster care (FFC) explain their collegiate experience? and (2) What barriers do FFC students encounter in higher education? The resulting representation captures both the shared and individual aspects of FFC student experiences, reflecting a complex interplay between structural consistency and narrative uniqueness.

The interplay between structure and subjectivity reveals a layered understanding of the FFC experience. Structural consistency points to the shared systemic conditions under which FFC students attempt to succeed such as navigating financial aid, housing insecurity, or access to mentoring. Yet narrative uniqueness emerged through participants' individual pathways, influenced by their personal histories, agency, and context-specific interactions with those systems. In some cases, institutional structures functioned as barriers; in others, they became sources of support and empowerment, depending on how students were able to access or challenge them.

In this way, the visual emphasizes that while certain dimensions of the FFC collegiate experience are common across participants, the meanings derived from those experiences and the

strategies employed to persist remain deeply individualized. Understanding this tension between shared structure and personal variation are essential to developing responsive, equity-oriented policies and practices in higher education.

The three central pillars, student, institution, and community, represent foundational structures that appeared consistently across participants' narratives. These structures served as scaffolds around which students' educational trajectories were shaped. For instance, all participants referenced the impact of institutional policy, academic expectations, and the presence or absence of community support in shaping their persistence. However, while these structures were uniformly present, how students encountered, interpreted, and responded to them varied significantly. See the narrative visualization in **Figure 2**.

This graphic details the lived experiences of FFC students. It is important to know that the life experience of each FFC college student varies, meaning that the way they perceive advocacy and support can also differ. The data was visualized as a three-legged stool. Each leg of the stool symbolizes a crucial pillar that contributes to a student's ability to persist and succeed in college. The three legs are the student, the institution, and the community. These pillars work together to provide a stable foundation for students navigating higher education. The institution should seek to be proactive in understanding and addressing the needs of FFC students. The community serves to provide safety and support through giving FFC students the ability to trust others and show up authentically. The student's responsibility is to develop and mobilize their self-belief to allow them to advocate for their future.

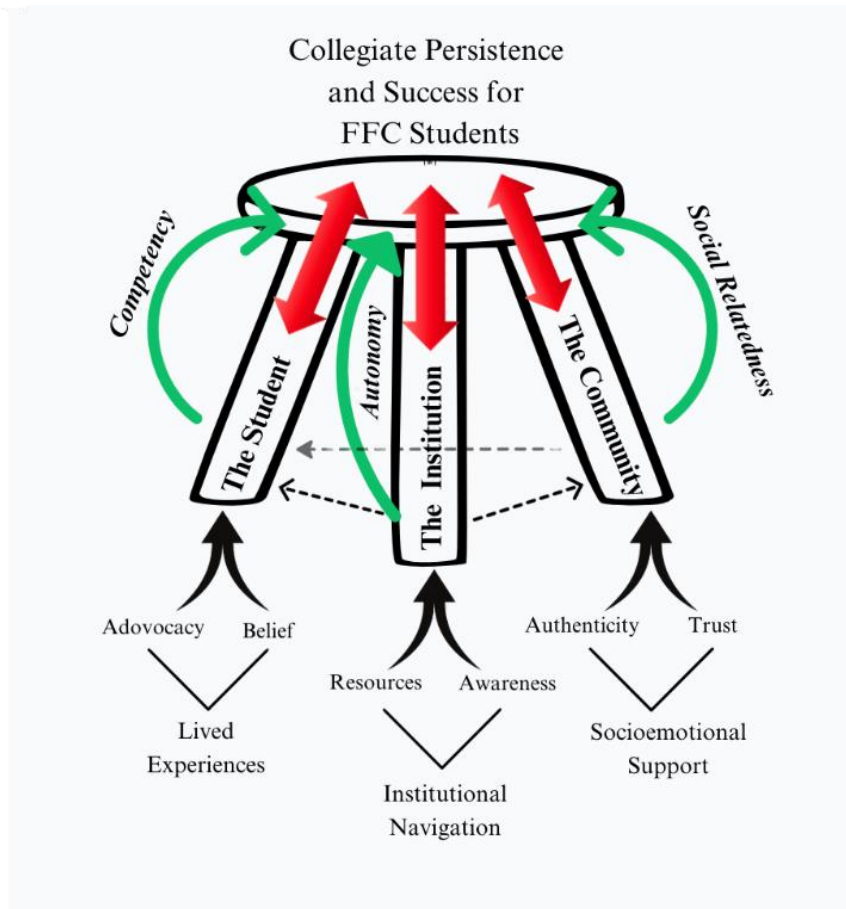


Figure 2.
Visual Synthesis of Key Findings

The first pillar, "The Student," represents the personal agency and unique lived experiences that FFC students bring to their educational journey. Competency has a key role in this pillar, as students must develop the skills and confidence needed to endure academic and social challenges. Two essential factors contributing to this competency are advocacy and belief. Advocacy refers to the ability of students to seek support and resources when needed, while belief relates to their self-efficacy and confidence to solve challenges. These elements are deeply rooted in students' lived experiences shaping their perceptions of higher education and influence their persistence.

The second pillar, "The Institution," reflects the structural and academic framework that supports student success. This pillar emphasizes autonomy, meaning FFC students must have the ability to make independent academic and career decisions, facilitated by institutional support. The institution contributes to student persistence by providing resources and fostering awareness of available opportunities, such as financial aid, academic advising, and mentorship programs. Institutional navigation is critical, as students must understand and access these resources to effectively manage their college experience. The institution allows for FFC students to have a safe space to explore the actions associated with their decision making. For FFC students, their actions or the actions of those closest to them often have a large impact, so having a space where making the wrong the decision does not change their life can demystify the power of choice and the fear of decision fatigue

The third pillar, "The Community," highlights the social and emotional support systems that surround FFC students, including family, peers, and faculty. This pillar is centered on social relatedness, which reflects the sense of belonging and connection students feel in their academic

and social environments. Two critical components of this pillar are authenticity and trust. Authenticity refers to the ability of students to engage in genuine relationships within their community, while trust signifies the confidence, they place in these relationships to provide guidance and safety. This socioemotional support is essential in helping students overcome challenges and persist in their academic journey.

The green curved arrows in the visual illustrate the interdependent relationship between competency, autonomy, and social relatedness, showing the necessity of balance between these factors. The red downward arrows indicate how each pillar either fortifies or hinders the foundation of collegiate persistence. Additionally, the dashed arrows showcase the interactions between these pillars, reinforcing the idea that student success is not the result of a single factor but rather a combination of personal, institutional, and community influences.

The visualization centers upon the finding that student success depends on a holistic support system that balances personal agency, institutional support, and social belonging. These three pillars must work in tandem; the absence or failure of any one element can threaten a student's persistence, much like a stool collapsing without one of its legs. Competency, autonomy, and social relatedness must be cultivated equally to ensure that FFC students can successfully navigate and complete their college journeys.

When visually interpreting the narratives, it is important to acknowledge that no two students share the same lived experiences. Lived experiences, emotional needs, and approaches to navigating institutions vary widely. For FFC students, these differences are often shaped by the intersections of identity, including cultural background, immigration status, language, and family history. One recurring theme was the country of origin of biological parents. Several

participants had parents who were deported or voluntarily returned to their home countries. This context deeply influenced how they understood and engaged in advocacy, particularly when shaped by the broader political climate.

Language also surfaced as a significant factor. One participant noted that she and her mother spoke English as a second language. The reunification process, already emotionally complex, became even more difficult due to the legal paperwork presented in advanced English, increasing stress and delays. This experience added another layer to her understanding of advocacy and highlighted how systemic barriers can compound over time. Another participant reflected on their Latina identity and the role of Spanish in her college journey. Adopted and later raised by White guardians, she had little connection to her Mexican heritage until college. For her, learning Spanish became both a cultural and emotional form of self-discovery. Affinity spaces where Spanish was spoken offered a newfound sense of authenticity and belonging. Her experience underscores the importance of culturally relevant spaces for FFC students, especially those whose foster placements were culturally disconnected from their own identities (Patton, 2010).

Grief and trauma were consistent threads across all narratives. Participants shared a range of losses from separation from biological family to the death of loved ones and ongoing feelings of abandonment. One participant powerfully stated, “Young kids don’t want a stuffed animal to feel better; they want their family.” Another recalled the devastating loss of time with his biological mother while in care, describing it as “stolen time.” These reflections illuminate the emotional toll of foster care and how it complicates students’ ability to trust adults, including those within college support systems.

FFC students enter higher education shaped by a system that was meant to protect them, but too often caused harm (Lane, 2017; Salazar et al., 2016). The trauma of displacement, loss, and systemic disruption creates lasting challenges that extend into postsecondary education. As such, this model not only centers FFC student success but also recognizes their resilience, complexity, and cultural capital that affirm their full humanity (Yosso, 2005). When implemented thoughtfully, the FFC Tripod Model can help institutions move from reactive support to proactive, implementing practices that uplift both the individual student and the broader community of FFC learners.

Implications for Professional Practice

Higher education professionals have a pivotal role in shaping the success of students from foster care backgrounds, yet their experiences often go unnoticed or misunderstood. This study unveils obscured dynamics on the nuanced experiences of FFC students. There are not only the barriers they face but also the values, motivations, and aspirations that guide them. The findings call for a shift in practice to one that moves beyond assumptions and centers the lived truths of these students. By understanding how trust, moral conviction, and future-oriented thinking shape their educational journeys, institutions can create environments where FFC students are supported by awareness of resources and empowered to thrive through the authenticity of lived experiences.

This study highlighted the complex ways FFC students experience and conceptualize family, biological and chosen. The presence, or absence, of biological family members had a significant role in students' emotional well-being as they transitioned to postsecondary education. The absence of harmonious relationships at home affected FFC students' ability to

create healthy social relationships with friends and instructors while in higher education (“Foster Care Facts, n.d.”). Without a support system or authentic connections with others, FFC students may continue experiencing isolation and loneliness throughout their collegiate experience (Horn, 2020; Lane, 2017; Strayhorn, 2012). Legal reunification was available for three participants. While some advocated for reunification, others chose to remain with their current guardians. In cases where participants were not legally or emotionally reunited, sibling ties often remained strong, rooted in connections to their biological families. Many students held idealized visions of family and parenthood, shaped by a desire to avoid repeating the behaviors of their biological parents and to create something better for themselves.

Participants also expressed apprehension about disclosing their foster care status. They feared being reduced to a label defined by their past, rather than recognized for their capabilities and aspirations. This concern has implications for how student affairs professionals engage with FFC students highlighting the need for environments that center students’ whole identities rather than their trauma narratives.

Career clarity was another key theme. Many participants had long-held career goals that were shaped by their life experiences, and they entered college with strong professional direction. However, uncertainty about achieving these goals persisted, often stemming from barriers related to their foster care backgrounds. Professionals in higher education should recognize this early career focus and provide mentorship, internships, and professional development that aligns with students’ aspirations.

While FFC students deeply valued the “fresh start” offered by college, the transition to higher education was described as both exciting and intimidating. Their enthusiasm was often

tempered by nervousness due to unfamiliarity with the college system. Despite this, the promise of a new beginning remained a dominant source of motivation.

Interestingly, participants reported minimal socio-emotional support needs from their institution. Most had existing support systems in place, such as trusted individuals or peer groups from high school. Instead, they expressed a desire for practical resources, specifically financial aid and connections to campus services. Institutional support should focus on reducing bureaucratic burdens and increasing access to helpful resources, rather than assuming all FFC students require emotional counseling.

In terms of co-curricular involvement, most participants were engaged in activities related to their academic or professional interests. Only one participant was involved in extracurriculars outside of this scope. Many viewed additional involvement as a potential asset to professional development, though they were often uninterested in campus-wide traditions, such as sporting events, due to a misalignment with their values or comfort levels.

Mentorship emerged as a deeply complex issue. While participants were open to adult guidance, they held an inherent distrust of authority figures, often based on past experiences. Effective mentorship requires time, consistency, and genuine care; qualities that are demonstrated through repeated, ethical engagement. Trust needs to be earned through action, not assumed through position. Their strong moral code shaped how they interacted with institutions and made decisions about their futures. Overall, FFC students emphasized the importance of space for dialogue, reflection, and values-based engagement.

Policy Implementation

Behind the data points and statistics on FFC college students is a complex, deeply personal story, often marked by resilience, ambition, and systemic challenge. This study sheds light on those stories and reveals critical areas where policy evolves to meet the needs of FFC students. Participant insights reveal critical systemic gaps in areas such as legal reunification processes, equitable financial access, and sustained mentorship. Collectively, these findings offer a compelling call for the development of more responsive, student-centered policies and practices that reflect the lived realities and nuanced needs of FFC students.

Researchers have discovered that if FFC youth had better support once leaving the foster care system, including easier access to higher education and housing stability, it would decrease the amount of government funding that is currently used to support youth once they have aged out of the foster care system (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011; Geiger et al., 2017; Jackson & Cameron, 2012; Pecora, 2012; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). Effective policy should center the lived experiences of FFC students, recognizing that their needs often diverge from traditional institutional support. Interventions that are responsive to their unique pathways, identities, and cultural wealth offer a more equitable foundation for collegiate success (Yosso, 2005).

The experiences shared by FFC students in this study point to several policy-level considerations for improving their access to and persistence in higher education (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011; Casey Family Programs, 2023). First, the issue of legal reunification highlights the importance of flexible and student-centered guardianship policies (Children and Family Research Center, 2024). Some students benefit from reunification with biological

families, while others thrive with alternative guardians or independent living (Children and Family Research Center, 2024). Policies should avoid a one-size-fits-all approach and instead empower youth to choose the path that best supports their development, including maintaining sibling connections when full reunification is not desired (Casey Family Programs, 2023; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018).

Second, there is a critical need to address the stigma and labeling of foster youth. FFC students report being categorized more by their past than by their potential. Specialized college programs are a growing endeavor within higher education that help destigmatize being a FFC student (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Miller et al., 2017). The comradery within these programs allows for students to find support from their peers, and by having peers with similar experiences, they can navigate collegiate life with both empathy and understanding (Dworsky & Perez, 2010). Supplementary to peer support, the FFC specialized college programs intentionally hire staff that are familiar or alumni of the foster care system (Uranu, et.al, 2017). Centering the lived experiences of FFC students allows institutions to tailor transition support by addressing housing insecurity, facilitating connections with siblings still in care, and increasing awareness of resources such as Educational Training Vouchers (ETV) (Uranu et al., 2017).

Third, the study revealed gaps in institutional support particularly in financial aid access and navigation. While participants did not seek out socio-emotional support, they did express a strong need for more comprehensive and user-friendly access to financial resources that could positively impact their social mobility. “Foster care to 21: Doing it right,” a policy brief by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2011) examines federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (FCA of 2008). This federal policy gives states the ability to

increase the age limit from eighteen to twenty-one for children in foster care (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011). When examining statistics, the policy-writers detailed the estimated benefits for youth in foster care if the age was moved to twenty-one noting societal cost would be decreased and these students could add over \$100,000 to their lifetime earnings (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011). This civic duty of support FFC youth is further illustrated through the Education and Training Voucher (ETV) Program, which offers financial support specifically for FFC college students. The ETV provides eligible students with up to \$5,000 annually for postsecondary education or training in accredited programs, along with other forms of support, such as housing stipends, transportation assistance, and monthly stipends of \$250 or \$500 to eligible youth. As a federal initiative, the ETV underscores the expectation that the government remains a financial and developmental partner in the educational trajectories of FFC youth.

The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) includes questions to determine whether a student was a ward of the state. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2023), a ward of the state is defined as a child under the legal custody of a public agency or authority, typically placed through the dependency court system. FAFSA policy specifies that if a student was a ward of the state at age thirteen or older, regardless of whether they were later reunified with family or aged out of care, they meet the criteria for independent student status. This classification allows eligible FFC students to receive federal financial aid without requiring parental financial information, reinforcing the federal government's role in providing postsecondary support based on past system involvement.

The federal government has systemic strategies to support FFC students as they seek higher education and learning. The state government has increased variance in their initiatives.

Pertaining to FFC college students, the state of California has remained elite in their practices and protocol of post-secondary support. California's Guardian Scholars Programs serve as a statewide model for supporting students formerly in foster care (FFC) in higher education. These programs are established across many Universities of California (UC) and California State University campuses, with designated offices and staff dedicated to enhancing the academic and personal success of FFC students. The Guardian Scholars Programs across several University of California campuses provide targeted support for current and former foster youth in higher education. At the University of California, Los Angeles, the program operates through the Bruin Resource Center, offering workshops, financial assistance, and peer support ("Guardian Scholars Program"; "Bruin Resource Center"). The University of California, Santa Barbara serves approximately 180 students and is guided by a cross-functional advisory board comprising professionals from housing, counseling, health services, and career development, ensuring wraparound support that reflects student needs ("Guardian Scholars"). The University of California, Riverside's Office of Foster Youth Support Services emphasizes cross-departmental coordination and offers paid internships during academic breaks ("Office of Foster Youth Support Services"). The University of California, Davis reports an 80% graduation rate and includes graduate-level preparation through its Guardian Professional Program ("Graduate Studies: Guardian Professional Program"). Collectively, these programs represent institutional best practices for supporting foster youth in higher education.

The Embark Georgia program strives to increase college access and persistence for FFC youth (Embark Georgia, n.d.). In the process of advancing their program, fifty institutions within the state of Georgia are a part of the Embark Georgia program and offer over 30 scholarship

opportunities (Embark Georgia, n.d.). While structures vary slightly by institution, the programs consistently offer high-impact services tailored to the distinct needs of FFC college students, providing a robust foundation for understanding institutional best practices FFC students. Through these initiatives, Georgia and California have signified an educational investment for the postsecondary retention and success of FFC college students showcasing how state-level government can impact the educational trajectory of FFC youth.

Fourth, involvement in co-curricular activities remains limited for many FFC students, in part due to a lack of perceived benefit from FFC students. This reasoning was supported by this study's participants. Only one participant, Ana Sofia, was in a co-curricular activity that did not align with her professional aspiration while the other participants were involved with organization that advanced their professional portfolio. With FFC college students showcasing their aspiration capital, federal or state grant programs should consider how they can encourage colleges to create co-curricular opportunities that directly connect to professional and career development (Yosso, 2005). By attending to these policy gaps guardianship flexibility, stigma reduction, financial access, co-curricular engagement, and quality mentorship, government agencies can significantly impact the educational trajectory of students from foster care backgrounds.

Recommendations

Implementation of Practice

Institutional support for the FFC collegiate experience remains an area of ongoing development within both research and practice. Limited engagement with campus systems such as advising, support services, and policy has contributed to a persistent lack of understanding and

visibility for this student population in higher education (Salazar & Schelbe, 2021; Sim et al., 2008). FFC college students did not want to be singled out for their FFC status; however, they would like a specialized onboarding process that acknowledges this lived experience.

An important dimension of support for FFC college students is the nuanced relationship between identity, visibility, and disclosure. Unlike some historically excluded populations, such as racial minorities, whose identities may carry visible markers, FFC students often do not outwardly present characteristics that signify their lived experience in the foster care system. This absence of visible identity can complicate institutional efforts to offer targeted support and may also challenge peer understanding or solidarity that is often fostered through shared, visible experience. Many FFC students expressed concern about being “outed” by institutions or programs, emphasizing that disclosure should be a personal decision rooted in trust, not a condition of accessing resources. This need for discretion places institutions in a difficult position: how to provide specialized, meaningful support without compromising students’ privacy or autonomy.

This desire for support without forced disclosure parallels findings in literature on LGBTQ+ college students, who similarly face the challenge of accessing affirming resources while maintaining control over the disclosure of their identities (Garvey & Ranking, 2015; Mousavi et al., 2024). Studies have documented that queer students often experience institutional programs and services as double-edged, offering support but also carrying the risk of involuntary outing when participation signals an assumed identity to peers or faculty (Vaccaro, 2012; Garvey & Rankin, 2015). This dynamic resonates with FFC students, who may hesitate to attend foster care support groups, apply for specialized scholarships, or respond to outreach efforts for fear

that doing so could publicly identify them as formerly in care. Both groups seek environments that are affirming but not presumptive where they can access tailored support without being essentialized or exposed.

FFC students in this study articulated a clear preference for support systems that prioritize privacy and autonomy. They advocated for institutions to build pathways of support that are intentionally discreet, with clear communication about confidentiality and opportunities to engage without publicly affiliating with a stigmatized identity. For some, this meant access to individual mentorship or academic support through broader student success offices rather than dedicated foster care programs. Others emphasized the importance of relationship-building and trust, suggesting that support is most effective when it emerges organically from staff who demonstrate authentic care and understanding. As with LGBTQ+ students, the key insight is that meaningful support must be structured to honor students' self-determination in how and when they reveal aspects of their identity (Garvey & Rankin, 2015). FFC students shared a strong desire for their experiences to be understood within the institutional context. They do not wish to be solely defined by their histories in care, but they do want institutions to recognize the specific barriers and circumstances that have shaped their educational journeys. This tension between invisibility and the need for recognition illustrates a central paradox in supporting FFC students that is effective support must be both individualized and identity-conscious, responsive without being intrusive.

Institutions should consider how they can create a joint onboarding experience for students that are new to higher education that highlight different stakeholders that are relevant to FFC such as housing, financial aid, counseling center, and health center. The University of

California, Santa Barbara's Guardian Scholars Program emphasizes holistic support through an institutional advisory board composed of campus partners from housing, health, counseling, and career services ("Guardian Scholars"). Research demonstrates that early arrival and transition programs can facilitate stronger academic adjustment for historically excluded student populations, including FFC students (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Geiger & Beltran, 2017). These initiatives create structured pathways to campus resources, such as academic advising, financial aid, mental health services, and student support personnel, while also cultivating familiarity with institutional systems. Early engagement in such programs has been associated with a greater sense of belonging, which has been linked to increased persistence and degree attainment (Strayhorn, 2012).

Housing insecurity was briefly addressed within this study. The ask from participants was to develop a streamlined housing process for FFC students that gave them the agency to select where they want to live. These students should have housing preferences, priority, and accommodations yearlong while not being forced to live in a Living Learning Communities (LLC) that solely sees them for their identity. Choset (2021) highlights that Living-Learning Communities (LLCs) can inadvertently marginalize historically excluded student groups, fostering social isolation and stigma rather than providing peer support and belonging. Housing instability during campus breaks presents acute challenges for FFC students, often prompting distress as they urgently seek alternative accommodations (Geiger et al., 2017; Pecora et al., 2006; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021).

Providing FFC students with housing privileges ensures a stable yet flexible collegiate living experience (Skobba et al., 2023). As FFC students persist, housing stability for upper-year

students should be considered. Several institutions in the SU region require their first-year students to live on-campus with upper-year students being a secondary consideration. Participants entering their second year at SU mentioned this concern. With the increased enrollment of first-year and transfer students at SU, upper-year students are being told to find off-campus accommodation, which are robustly more expensive and much more difficult to acquire without a financially reliable cosigner. The literature repeatedly identified that having stable housing can have one of the largest positive effects on FFC students (Geiger et al., 2017; Pecora et al., 2012; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). Increasing visibility in this arena is prioritizing FFC students, no matter of academic classification, to ensure they are aware of their housing availability.

This study recommends establishing an FFC Youth Council to enhance institutional awareness and guide the development of FFC-specific resources. The establishment of an FFC Youth Council constitutes both a developmental opportunity and a mechanism for equitable compensation, affirming the value of FFC students' contributions to institutional inclusion efforts. The higher education system is flawed with the idea that students will do labor for the price of leadership experience. Crain (2016) details how unpaid internships or leadership opportunities can restrict access to professional development for students with financial need, reinforcing inequities and impacting long-term career outcomes.

Considering the financial burden that most FFC students navigate within college, leadership experience that does not further them in their financial needs or professional aspiration has minor payoff for FFC students (Crain, 2016). Since 2008, The University of California, Riverside's Office of Foster Youth Support Services maintains a cross-departmental

steering committee and that provides paid internship opportunities during institutional breaks, recognizing these periods as particularly vulnerable times for FFC students (“Office of Foster Youth Support Services”). Reflecting on this established practice, other institutions seeking to become more “foster-friendly” should think about how they can utilize their FFC population to help develop meaningful and systematic change while supporting the financial burden that FFC students commonly experience within higher education (Cheung et al., 2021; Mountz et al., 2020).

The relational component of support is grounded within the literature on transformation FFC collegiate experiences. Studies emphasize the significance of at least one consistent, trusted adult in fostering student connection and navigation of campus life (Day et al., 2012; Franco & Durdella, 2018; Geiger et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2017; Pecora et al., 2006; Salazar et al., 2016; Sim et al., 2008). Effective efforts to support FFC students appear to benefit from centering student voice, amplifying lived experience, and fostering inclusive campus environments that model care and consistency. Current postsecondary realities highlight a growing need for institutions to move beyond reactive, enrollment driven retention models in favor of proactive, equity-oriented strategies. This shift holds relevance for FFC students, whose complex educational trajectories often intersect with systemic inequities and inconsistent support structures (Okpych et al., 2020). Addressing these disparities not only aligns with ethical considerations but also contributes to long term institutional sustainability in terms of retention, engagement, and student success.

Future Research

Insightful future research would include a longitudinal study examining the self-determination of FFC college students during and after their collegiate experience. The idea of a fresh start, deviating from the path of their biological parents, was such a significant motivator for these participants. Therefore, conducting a study that can examine their fresh start post-college fresh start while showcasing which collegiate experiences were most valuable in the execution of this new chapter within their lived experiences. Another motivator for collegiate success was the desire to have a different adulthood experience than their biological parents, so developing research opportunities that investigate the perceived similarities and difference between FFC student who graduate college, and their parents would aid in the literature surrounding narrative inquiry for FFC students.

The graphic representation informed by the experiences of FFC college students, from this study, including how FFC students navigate systems of support, self-identification, and persistence across the interconnected pillars of student, institution, and community. The relationships depicted in the visual are uniquely situated within the college context, where institutional structures play a formative role in shaping community norms and student outcomes. A potential area for future research involves exploring whether this data visualization might be adapted for use with FFC students in K–12 educational settings. While there are shared themes of belonging and support across educational contexts, my initial interpretation suggests that the visual may not translate seamlessly to the K–12 environment. This position is due to the nature of the interconnectedness within the higher education setting, where the institution has a more direct and visible influence on community formation and student agency. In this visual

framework, the institution is both upheld by and responsible for fostering resources and awareness about the lived educational experiences of FFC students. In turn, the campus community, shaped through authenticity and trust, can respond with increased understanding, empathy, and support. This direct connection may manifest differently in K–12 contexts, where institutional authority, community structures, and student autonomy are configured in distinct ways that center the student as a child rather than an autonomous adult like in the collegiate setting. Future studies could examine how these relational dynamics operate in earlier educational stages and whether similar data visualization could be developed or modified to reflect the needs of FFC youth in primary and secondary schools.

Conclusion

Within the higher education landscape, FFC students are a neglected student group that have much to offer to better the higher education system. FFC college students showcase their resounding resiliency considering experiencing adverse childhood experiences that have rippling effect impact their collegiate chapter. This study investigated how FFC navigate higher education and its systematically inequitable barriers for this student population through a narrative inquiry methodology and three article organization. By theoretically framing the study with Deci & Ryan's (2012) self-determination theory, its three pillars of autonomy, competency, and social relatedness were examined as both motivation and persistence factors for FFC college students.

This study unveiled that the motivation to access and persistence through college is self-driven. However, that catalyst does not mitigate the relational and psychological concerns that FFC students confront. There are opportunities for institutions to enhance and streamline their support for FFC students, specifically through housing, orientation, and resource onboarding.

Nevertheless, institutions should stay privy to not becoming complacent toward their support for historically excluded student groups such as FFC students. This mindset can develop systematic roadblocks during their collegiate experience causing additional harm and stress rather than relief and support.

To center FFC students' retention and advancement within the higher education setting, data visualization was created. When considering the experiences of previously being college student who was previously in the foster care system, this graphic assist interpreting factors influential to FFC persistence and success. The subcomponents within the create a unique story for each student, allowing for both the researcher and the student to better understand how gender, race, sexual orientation, religion, and other identities influence their story. The individual, outside of their FFC status, must be considered in their totality not only for their story to be accurately embodied but also to provide appropriate support. FFC college students when describing themselves within their college experience have a multitude of other identities that they reach for before FFC college students. FFC students contain an enlightened perspective when considering their previous experience. There is not any shame about the hardship and challenges they have endured but rather learning. Through the story-telling process, participants were able to narrate their experiences and discern the significant moments building a path from the past to the future.

In conclusion, this study amplifies the resiliency and self-determination of (FFC) students as they navigate higher education. The narratives of FFC students reveal not just their struggles but their resolve, learning, and transformation. Despite facing systemic inequities and psychological challenges, their motivation to persist is deeply intrinsic. Through storytelling,

FFC students can offer valuable insights to institutions, practitioners, researchers, and educational policymakers committed to fostering equity and inclusion.

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APPENDIX

Interview Protocol

1. Please explain what or who motivated you to attend college? What or who has motivated you to stay?
2. Tell me about your experiences when you first entered college after spending time in foster care.
 - a. Can you explain your feelings and fears when starting college?
 - b. What life lesson have you carried with you now from your time in foster care?
3. Tell me a story about your time in college, either positive or negative.
4. How have you taken ownership over your actions and decisions, since coming to UTK?
 - a. How has your previous experience in foster care impacted your autonomy and independence?
 - b. Do you disclose formerly being in the foster care systems? Why or why not?
5. Can you provide an example of when your peers and/or student support staff made you feel like you belonged to at UTK?
6. Can you describe your inner circle at UTK?
 - a. Explain to me how this group was developed
 - b. If you do not have an inner circle, why don't you?
 - c. Would you describe how your experience in the foster care system has affected your ability to make meaningful connections with other students?
7. Tell me a story about when you felt most accomplished while in foster care?
 - a. How has that impacted your experience at UTK?
8. What are your long-term career goals, and how are you working towards them while at UTK?
9. How has the university helped or hindered you in your time here as a student formerly in foster care?

Recruitment Email

Subject: Paid Research Opportunity

Hi <Name>,

My name is Toni Jackson, and I am conducting a research study for my program as a doctoral student at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

I am requesting your participation in one 60-minute interview and one 90-minute post-interview meeting. All interviews and meetings will take place virtually via Zoom.

As an incentive for your participation, you will be provided with **\$70 of Amazon e-gift cards** at the conclusion of the study. You will receive one \$35 Amazon e-gift card at the end of your interview and another \$35 Amazon e-gift card after the post-interview meeting. You will also have my gratitude for assisting with my study and further expanding the literature on college students who were formerly in foster care.

The purpose of the research study is to examine how formerly in foster care students' overall collegiate experience, specifically their self-determination, including social relationships (with peers, faculty, and staff), autonomy, and competence influences their persistence in higher education.

You are being recruited to participate in this research study due to education status of having completed at least one semester of classes at UTK and being a college student who was formerly in foster care. Your insight will be beneficial to my study; however, you are under no obligation to participate. Your responses will be used solely for research purposes and will remain confidential. Your participation **will not be shared** with anyone at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please email tjackson@utk.edu and complete the participant screening questionnaire that is below, to receive information regarding next steps. Also see the attached Informed Consent Document for more information.

<https://forms.office.com/r/LrhbV32UnL?origin=lprLink>

If you have questions or concerns about this study, contact the researchers, Toni Jackson, tjackson@utk.edu, 901-496-6205 or Pamela Angelle, pangelle@utk.edu. For questions or concerns about your rights or to speak with someone other than the research team about the study, please contact:

Institutional Review Board

Phone: 865-974-7697

Email: utkirb@utk.edu

Thank you!

Consent for Research Participation

Research Study Title: The power in their stories: Using student voice and determination to address the experiences of college student formerly in foster care

Researcher(s): Toni Jackson, University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Pamela Angelle, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Why am I being asked to be in this research study?

We are asking you to be in this research study because of experience as a college student who completed at least one semester of courses at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville and your lived experience as student was formerly in the Foster Care system in the United States.

What is this research study about?

The purpose of the research study is to examine how formerly in foster care students' overall collegiate experience, specifically their self-determination, including social relationships (with peers, faculty, and staff), autonomy, and competence influences their persistence in higher education.

How long will I be in the research study?

If you agree to be in the study, we will ask that your participation will last for no longer than three months. This study has the minimum of two virtual meetings. The length of duration in the research study is 60 minutes for the interview and 90 minutes for the member checking meeting. We estimate that the duration of this time will be around one month but a total comprehensive time of 2 hours and 30 minutes.

What will happen if I say “Yes, I want to be in this research study”?

If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to participate in one interview and one post-interview meeting. The one interview will occur no longer than 60 minutes and the post-interview meeting will be no longer than 90 minutes. Both will be transcribed, visually, and audibly recorded via Zoom. The interview and post-interview meeting will occur over zoom, be recorded, and stored in the researcher's UT OneDrive monitored by UT OIT where you and researchers have access to it. At minimum, 7 days after the interview, we will notify you about scheduling a post-interview meeting. Based upon the findings from your first interview, the post-interview meeting may entail gathering additional information for clarification. During the post-interview meetings, we will collaborate and negotiate with you on what information is appropriate to share based upon the findings. This process will take place within 90 minutes, at maximum. Once we have finished deciding on what information is applicable, your involvement in the study will be complete.

What happens if I say “No, I do not want to be in this research study”?

Being in this study is up to you. You can say no now or leave the study later. Either way, your decision won't affect your grades, your relationship with your instructors, or standing with the University of Tennessee.

What happens if I say “Yes” but change my mind later?

Even if you decide to be in the study now, you can change your mind and stop at any time. If you decide to stop before the study is completed, please contact Toni Jackson (tjackson@utk.edu). If you have participated in any interviews, we will ask you if you feel comfortable allowing that data to be utilized within the study. If you are uncomfortable with your data being utilized with the study, then we will destroy all your information and the data that has already been collected. If you choose to remove yourself from the study after the data become de-identifiable, then you will be disclosed of that information once contacting Toni Jackson. Since you will be compensated by participating in this study, exiting the study before completing the one interview and post-interview meeting will yield a reduced compensation.

Are there any possible risks to me?

It is possible that someone could find out you were in this study or see your study information, but we believe this risk is small because of the procedures we use to protect your information. These procedures are described later in this form.

Possible risks include minimal emotional risk to the participants since you will be asked to retell stories on your experiences in foster care and that potentially being a personally sensitive topic. To ensure that minimal risk is met, we will inform you of safety measures within the interview and member check process. An example of this is a reminder at the beginning of the interview that if you become uncomfortable then the interview will be stopped without any consequences to you. We will share our role as mandatory reporters, review the use of pseudonyms of the study, and connect you to university resources like 974-HELP and the counseling center upon your request.

Are there any benefits to being in this research study?

We do not expect you to benefit from being in this study. Your participation may help us to learn more about the experience of students formerly in foster care and how higher education can work to better support this demographic of student. We hope the knowledge gained from this study will benefit others in the future. Through participation in this study, you will receive a monetary benefit. Additional information on monetary compensation can be located at the bottom of page 3.

Who can see or use the information collected for this research study?

We will protect the confidentiality of your information by the following actions. We will be the only individuals who have access to the study information. We will contact you through your UTK email. UTK OneDrive form will be used to screen participants. UTK zoom account will be the host site for all interviews and meetings. All audio and video recording of zoom interviews will be saved on the researcher's UTK OneDrive. You will both access to the recordings until the end of the study at which time the recording will be destroyed. We will give you access to your private folder in the researcher's UT OneDrive, which will contain your signed informed

consent form, all interview/meeting recordings, and the transcripts from those meetings until the end of the data collection process. We will ask you to select a pseudonym as you complete the UTK OneDrive Participant Screening Questionnaire. We will have a private code key that connect you to pseudonym. Once data collection is complete, the code key will be destroyed.

If information from this study is published or presented at scientific meetings, your name and other personal information will not be used.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information or what information came from you. Although it is unlikely, there are times when others may need to see the information, we collect about you. These include:

- People at the University of Tennessee, who oversee research to make sure it is conducted properly.
- Government agencies (such as the Office for Human Research Protections in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), and others responsible for watching over the safety, effectiveness, and conduct of the research.
- If a law or court requires us to share the information, we would have to follow that law or final court ruling.

What will happen to my information after this study is over?

We will not keep your information to use for future research or other purpose. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be deleted from your research data collected as part of the study.

Will I be paid for being in this research study?

Compensation will be given to those who participate in this study. We will compensate you with two \$35 Amazon gift cards. There is one interview meeting and one post-interview meeting. We compensate you with one \$35 Amazon gift card after your interview meeting and another \$35 Amazon gift card after your post-interview meeting. At least 3 business days after we meet with you, we will send the \$35 Amazon gift card to your UTK email. If you do not complete the study, you will not be fully compensated. You are compensated based upon how many of the interview meetings you attend. If you complete one interview meeting, we will compensate you with one \$35 Amazon gift card. If you complete two interview meetings, we will compensate you with two \$35 Amazon gift card.

What else do I need to know?

About 5-15 people will take part in this study. Due to the small number of participants in this study, it is possible that someone could identify you based on the information we collected from you.

Who can answer my questions about this research study?

If you have questions or concerns about this study, or have experienced a research related problem or injury, contact the researchers, Toni Jackson, tjackson@utk.edu, 901-496-6205 and Pamela Angelle, pangelle@utk.edu, 865-974-4139

For questions or concerns about your rights or to speak with someone other than the research team about the study, please contact:

Institutional Review Board

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Phone: 865-974-7697

Email: utkirb@utk.edu

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the chance to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have more questions, I have been told who to contact. By signing this document, I am agreeing to be in this study. I will receive a copy of this document after I sign it.

_____	_____	_____
Name of Adult Participant	Signature of Adult Participant	Date

Researcher Signature (to be completed at time of informed consent)

I have explained the study to the participant and answered all of their questions. I believe that they understands the information described in this consent form and freely consents to be in the study.

_____	_____	_____
Name of Research Team Member	Signature of Research Team Member	Date

VITA

Toni Jackson received her B.A. in Psychology from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville in 2016. She then completed her Master of Education in Higher Education Administration from Auburn University. Jackson is currently pursuing her doctorate in Higher Education Administration from the University of Tennessee.

Jackson is a student affairs educator focusing on creating opportunity for historically excluded students through systematically addressing inequities through the development of new initiatives and processes. Within her career, she has worked to establish the first living and learning community (LLC) for Muslim Students and currently oversees one of the few LLCs dedicated to black women within the United States. Jackson's experience with affinity-based students groups transcends into the academic sector through mentorship, academic coaching, and strengths development. Jackson has highlighted this work through national and regional level presentation across the United States. Her research interests include collegiate students formerly in foster care, specialized college programs for foster youth, and influential mentorship for collegiate students.