FOSTERING THE SYSTEM: A STUDY ON THE BENEFITS OF FORMER FOSTER

YOUTH ATTENDING COLLEGE AND THE BARRIERS KEEPING THEM OUT

A Thesis

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by

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Abstract

of

FOSTERING THE SYSTEM: A STUDY ON THE BENEFITS OF FORMER FOSTER

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Brief Literature Review

The review of the literature is broken down to three subtopics. First,

understanding how the foster care system works to the benefit of foster youth; fully

understanding the barriers they face and resources available to them is important

information guiding the expansion and improvement of programs specifically supporting

the special needs of emancipated foster youth. The second subtopic is a discussion about

what support services are available for transitional foster youth. The last subtopic

focuses on recognizing the factors that move a foster youth toward and through college.

Several resources focused on the general public's view of foster youth and higher

education are identified and summarized regarding their roles in supporting the goal of

understanding the reason(s) influencing a former foster youth to enter and stay in college.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this research was to answer the following question: How well do

foster youth, and individuals working alongside them, know about the benefits received

from higher education enrollment? In this study, the limitations, as well as the benefits,

are explored to get a better understanding of how and why college is not a higher priority for foster youth.

Methodology

The researcher gathered qualitative data to gain more insight on foster youth going into higher education. Human subjects were accessed through the Guardian Scholars program at a public university, in the northern region of California. Established in 2006, the program currently serves 65 active, former foster youth students and provides job assistance, resume-building, and partnerships through the two large public school districts in northern California.

The researcher was assisted by the college advisor of the Guardian Scholars in administering a Survey Monkey$^©$ survey to all students, professionals, and volunteers involved in the program. The survey was sent to 119 potential respondents listed on the college advisors email contact list; 42 completed the survey. It consisted of 21 questions; 17 multiple choice and four short answer. One-on-one interviews were conducted with two of the Guardian Scholars. They both took place on the public university campus.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Foster youth face more adversity than their peers. Without continuing support from the community and stable, committed relationships with adults, children are not able to reach their full potential and, in fact, experience quite negative outcomes. Students who attend institutions of higher education obtain a wide range of personal, financial, and other lifelong benefits; likewise, taxpayers, and society as a whole, derive a multitude of

direct and indirect benefits when citizens have access to postsecondary education.

Education has many benefits; individuals with higher levels of education earn more and

are more likely than others to be employed and productive members of society.

_____, Committee Chair
Geni Cowan, Ph.D.

_____
Date

DEDICATION

I dedicate this to my mother for never losing faith in my dreams and to my father

and girlfriend for being my biggest cheerleaders throughout my educational journey.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Background

In California, over 4,000 foster youth are emancipated from the child welfare

system. About 250 of these youth are from the local area, where they find themselves

without adequate educational support (Foster Youth Education Fund, 2011). Youth in

foster care leave the foster care system when they graduate from high school or reach the

age of 18. The aftermath results in these youth losing their day-to-day housing, financial

assistance, and the supervision of a responsible adult. Many of these youth have shown

an interest in pursuing a college education but are hindered due to their daily struggles

and lack of overall support (Foster Youth Education Fund, 2011).

Education helps many people have a successful future. Parents inspire their

children to chase the dream of higher education. For children with family support and

encouragement, that dream can be realized. When children are removed from their

biological families due to abuse and/or neglect, the dream of pursuing a degree in higher

education is now at risk—much like foster youth (Foster Youth Education Fund, 2011).

Foster youth residing in group homes or Licensed Children's Institutions are more

likely to be at risk for failure. Education is an important factor for a successful transition

to self-sufficiency. Research (Bernstein, 2000) has suggested that the nation as a whole

is doing a poor job of prepping these youth for self-sufficiency. One major study showed

that "within two to four years after emancipation, 46% had not completed high school and 40% had been on public assistance or were incarcerated" (Bernstein, 2000, p. 67).

In California, fortunately, there are sparks of hope regarding educational reform for foster youth; these include the passage of Senate Bill 933, the approval to enlarge the Countywide Foster Youth Services Program statewide, and the formation of a stakeholder group to improve the entire child welfare system (California Department of Social Services, 2013). Foster Youth Services (FYS) programs are designed to assist displaced youth. They ensure the health and school records of the youth are acquired for the purposes of adequate placement. FYS programs also organize and provide counseling, instruction, mentoring, tutoring, emancipation services, vocational training, training for independent living, and other related services. The purpose of these programs is to raise the consistency of placements for this special population (California Department of Social Services, 2013).

FYS programs assist past and present foster youth as well as staff members of group homes, juvenile detention facilities, probation departments, schools, child welfare agencies, and community service agencies to inspire foster youth's everyday customs. FYS programs collaborate with other support services such as Title I; Neglected and Delinquent Youth (Public Law 103-382) program services; and Healthy Start Service, which is a service given by special education programs as well as independent living programs (California Department of Social Services, 2013). Chapter 862 of Assembly Bill 490 (2003) contains a provision requiring school districts to assign educational

liaisons with a set of duties to warrant fitting educational placement for foster youth. All FYS programs offer education and support services to foster youth living in authorized foster homes (California Department of Education, 2014).

Statement of the Problem

The benefits of higher education cannot be understated. As indicated above, foster youth experience these benefits at a much lower rate than do their non-foster youth counterparts. This study concerns the issues limiting foster and former foster youth from getting into higher education. Specifically, the study addressed the following research questions:

- How can foster youth get better access to information of and within higher education?

- What are some barriers facing foster youth and former foster youth in getting into higher education?

- What are some of the social services offered to support foster youth and former foster youth in getting into higher education?

The goal was to develop insight into, and recommendations for, the establishment of programs providing information to foster youth and their care providers.

Definition of Terms

BOG Fee Waiver

California residents may apply for the California Community Colleges Board of
Governors Fee Waiver (BOGFW), which waives the $46 per unit enrollment fee
(College Financial Resources, 2013).

Cal Grant

A grant through which students can get up to $12,192 per year to pay for college
expenditures at any accredited college, university, or career or technical school in
California and may be used for tuition, room and board, and even books and
supplies (California Student Aid Commission, 2013)

CalWorks

A living assistance program giving needed services to families living in California
(California Department of Social Services, 2013)

Certificate

A document distributed to a person finishing a course of study not leading to a
diploma that verifies one has fulfilled the requirements of and may practice in a
specific field (Certificate, 2004)

Chafee Grant

If a student is or was in foster care and has financial need, up to $5,000 per year
for career and technical training or college is available. The funds can be used to
help pay for child care, transportation, and rent while the student is in school at

any eligible California college, university, or career or technical school, as well as schools in other states (California Student Aid Commission, 2013).

Emancipation

The act of youth moving, or aging out, from foster care or out-of-home care, typically after 18 years of age (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2009)

Federal Financial Aid

Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) offers student economic support programs sanctioned under Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965. The programs provide funds to students attending college or career schools (College Financial Resources, 2013).

Foster Care

Putting an adolescent in the temporary care of a family, outside of their own, as the result of difficulties or trials taking place inside the biological family (Adoption.com, 2013a)

Foster Youth/Children

Children in the legal guardianship or supervision of a county, state, or private adoption or foster care agency, yet cared for by foster parents in their own homes under some sort of temporary or long-standing foster care agreement with the custodial organization. Such children commonly remain in foster care until they are reunified with their parents, unless the parents give consent for their children

to be adopted by a different family or the court unwillingly eliminates the parental

duties of the biological parents so they can be put in a position to be adopted by a

more stable family (Adoption.com, 2013b).

Group Homes/Licensed Children's Institutions (LCIs)

Residential facility licensed, by the state or other public agency given authority by

agreement with the state, to provide living assistance to children including, but

not limited to, individuals with unique needs (GAMUT online, 1998)

Section 8 Funding

Housing Choice Voucher Program funded through the Federal Government. Its

main function is designed to assist low-income families, the elderly, and the

disabled in obtaining decent, safe, and sterile housing in the private market

(Housing and Urban Development [HUD], 2013).

Significance of the Study

To understand why so many foster youth are not in college, it is important to

understand the foundation of the foster care system. The foundation of the foster care

system needs to be analyzed and reviewed to better understand the lack of enrollment

among former foster youth in higher education. Colleges are beginning to take notice of

foster youth as a misrepresented special population, and campus programs intended to

offer financial and academic support to foster youth have grown exponentially over the

past several years.

This study's approach was a combination of literature review from both nationwide and local perspectives, statistics on foster youth in general and those enrolled in college, and county and state information about current programs to support foster youth in their educational pursuits. The findings from this study provide current data and information from student surveys conducted at a local community college and through others' research in this area. While there are several programs for foster youth, there is much speculation about whether there is one prevailing service that works or if a combination of programs and services helps a foster youth succeed in college. The results of this study conclude with recommendations for improvements to existing college programs serving former foster youth, which may serve as models for others to replicate.

Organization of the Thesis

This thesis is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 offers an introduction with background for the study providing an overview of the topic, statement of the problem, significance of the study, and an explanation of how the thesis is organized. Chapter 2 follows with a review of related literature with three subtopics: (a) understanding how the foster care system works toward the benefit of foster youth, (b) knowing the support services available for transitional foster youth, and (c) recognizing factors moving a foster youth toward and through college. The chapter concludes with a rationale for the study based on findings from the literature review.

Chapter 3 explains the methodology used, setting of the study, research design and target population, and an explanation of the data collection process. A description of the data analysis process and the limitations of the study complete Chapter 3. In Chapter 4, data from the survey are presented with findings and interpretation of the data. Interpretations and perceptions are shared based on survey results and information gleaned from the literature review. Chapter 5 summarizes the study and provides conclusions and recommendations for further study.

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Researchers and scholars (Jackson, 2011; Mares, 2010) have conducted studies following foster youth from emancipation to college and tracking their progress or lack thereof. In this chapter, several resources—including scholarly, peer-reviewed articles, and a sampling of popular literature focused on the general public's view of foster youth and higher education—are identified and summarized regarding their roles in supporting the goal of understanding what may influence a former foster youth to enter and stay in college. Three subtopics were examined for this study: (a) understanding how the foster care system works to the benefit of foster youth, (b) knowing what support services are available for transitional foster youth, and (c) recognizing factors that move a foster youth toward and through college.

Understanding the Special Needs of Foster Youth

The following figures give a general representation of the number of youth in the foster care system during 2010, the most recent period for which data are available. In September 2010, there were an estimated 498,000 children in foster care. During 2010, 254,375 children entered foster care and 254,114 children departed from foster care. From 2000 to 2010, the numbers of children in foster care and the numbers of children who entered and exited care during the year decreased by nearly 8% (DHHS, 2009). The

foster care system acted as a revolving door during this time. The decrease could mean improvements were made in how social services programs assisted at-risk youth.

Every year, nearly 30,000 foster youth leave the foster care system in the United States (DHHS, 2009). They take on a number of tasks, including high school completion, managing mental illness and drug abuse, obtaining health coverage, finding work, receiving a living income, and obtaining and securing stable housing (Jackson, 2011; Mares, 2010). One effort, for example, assessed the independent living service needs of emancipating foster youth in Lucas County (Toledo), Ohio. Mares (2010) used a mixed-methods approach to study perceived needs of emancipating foster youth. Study subjects showed a lack of awareness of present independent living resources in the public and partial awareness of post-emancipation support programs.

Social Service Needs

Findings from the Mares (2010) independent living needs assessment study stressed that youth aging out of childhood into adulthood require healthy relationships with adults and access to basic housing and supportive programs typically offered to youth by birth or adoptive parents during their late teens and 20s. The needs ranged from help with job applications to finding reliable transportation. The level and type of assistance provided to meet the needs of emancipating foster youth differed in each community due, in large part, to variances in state, local, and regional public children services programs; private service suppliers; the accessibility of public and philanthropic funds; and other elements at the community level (Mares, 2010).

Foster Youth Mental Health Issues

According to Jackson (2011), not much is known about the frequency of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in exited foster youth and PTSD's demographic and background links. Jackson's study highlighted reports on racial and gender variances and the impact of foster care involvements correlated with PTSD. Gender disparities and the influence of childcare were seen in the findings on the connection between gender and PTSD.

The experiences of foster youth during the childhood phase can affect health, behavior, mental health, and maturation. Such issues can be true for people who go through any form of child abuse, such as emotional or physical abuse. For foster youth to achieve stability, they have to overcome the severe damage of the abuse and their strong feelings of defenselessness (Jackson, 2011).

Simmel (2007) addressed an important need for policymakers and service providers to recognize circumstantial and appropriate risk factors for PTSD among varied former foster youth. Simmel concluded that if the emotional and sexual abuse and victimization were addressed in youth at an earlier age, long-standing mental health effects of hostile juvenile experiences could be mitigated. Wide-ranging material on youth mistreatment, trauma, and foster care—coupled with information from natural parents, caregivers, foster parents, mentors, educationalists, and other service suppliers—could help ensure that each young person departs from foster care with an understanding of their earlier distressing experiences. Such awareness could include an understanding

of how to access services and means suitable to their necessities; a toolbox of healthy surviving abilities; and a solid, healthy connection with a compassionate and caring adult who is willing to understand their needs and histories and wants to see them prosper into adulthood. Absent in this conversation is a strong understanding of the particular subcategories of adopted youth who may have developed behavioral complications and the risk aspects linked with numerous special populations. In response to this phenomenon, Simmel (2007) studied psychological dysfunction in adopted youth compared with non-adopted youth. This longitudinal study followed former foster children as a subpopulation of adopted adolescents to regulate their direct and continuing functionality when compared with their adopted non-foster care peers regarding the prevalence of behavioral problems. There are a vast number of foster youth displaying behavioral problems; non-foster youth also displayed notable points of problematic conduct. The degrees of behavioral issues in both youth groups far surpassed those witnessed in the wide-ranging population of children (Simmel, 2007). To add to the enlarged probability of psychological disorders among foster children, Simmel (2007) showed that these children were more likely to develop criminal conducts, exhibit poorer overall school performance, marked learning disabilities, and show signs of deprived interactive skills with peers and relatives. Such problems appear to manifest due to lack of stability during their time in foster care (Simmel, 2007).

A common discovery in the exploration on all clusters of adopted youth is that male adolescents were known to exhibit more behavioral problems than female

adolescents, predominantly in the external realm, and were more likely to be the focus of clinical care. In the universal non-adopted population, successive mental health results for males showing visible behavioral problems at a young age were much less than among females. According to Simmel (2007), although being an adopted male may specify certain undesirable outcomes, it is still uncertain among examiners whether gender establishes an increased risk for these conclusions. Additionally, whether adopted foster females—who experience many of the same negative pre-adoption risk factors as males—are also at risk for harmful outcomes has not been explored (Simmel, 2007). Simmel detailed the significant questions from the study:

> A longitudinal data set was collected at three different points in the children's lives, measurements of and trajectories pertaining to the display of these symptoms were assessed....Additional questions included the following: Do adopted foster children's symptoms arise early in life but improve with time? Do they worsen over time? Are there gender differences within the groups in terms of how symptoms and other behavioral impairments are displayed? (p. 337)

Longitudinal studies of adopted foster youth and their mental health functioning are largely absent, and this study helped fill that void. The discoveries suggested adopted foster youth are more behaviorally diminished than their non-foster adoptive equals, even though the latter group was not free of problems. Furthermore, the degree of suppressing and expressing challenging behavior in these adolescences exceeded the amount in the general population of latency-aged children numerous times. The evidence of their

troubles appeared early in their settlements and continued during the adoptive settlement. Though the distinctive degrees of behavior deficiencies can perhaps be attributed to critical alterations in the pre-adoptive experiences of the two collections of adopted youth, the effect of these accounts on their psychosocial operations should be observed in a single study (Simmel, 2007).

Educational Attainment

Specific to the greater Sacramento, California region, the Sacramento County Children's Coalition (2012) stated, "Foster youth in Sacramento face more adversity than their peers around the state. Children facing adversity can develop the resiliency to rebound from traumatic experiences if there is one person in their life who supports and believes in them" (p. 4). As a whole, children are resilient, despite many challenges to their healthy development. Without continuing support from the community and without stable, committed relationships with adults, children are unable to reach their full potential and, in fact, experience quite negative outcomes. Key findings for Sacramento County included the following:

- Nearly 90% of youth report moderate to high access to supportive assets in school and community environments.

- The percentage of children reporting that they receive psychological or emotional counseling in Sacramento County is more than double the statewide average.

- Transition-age foster youth experience substantially lower rates of graduation and employment and substantially higher rates of juvenile justice involvement and homelessness than their peers.

- Children placed in foster care in Sacramento County are half as likely to be placed with kin, as reported in statewide averages (Sacramento County Children's Coalition, 2012).

Students attending establishments of higher education gain a widespread assortment of individual, monetary, and other lifelong aids. Similarly, taxpayers and the public offer a multitude of assistance and supports when residents have contact with postsecondary schooling (California College Pathways, 2011). Therefore, inconsistent levels of involvement in higher education through various parts of U.S. society should be a matter of pressing concern, not only to the people openly affected but also to community officials at the local, state, and federal levels.

Individuals with advanced levels of schooling earn more and are more likely than others to be employed. The average income of people with bachelor's degrees employed full time in 2008 was $55,700; that is $21,900 more than the average income of those with only a grade school education. People with limited college backgrounds, but no degrees, received 17% more than grade school alumni who worked full time. Their average after-tax incomes were 16% higher. Among young adults between the ages of 20 and 24, unemployment was 2.6 times higher for college alumni than grade school alumni in the fourth quarter of 2009 (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010).

According to Gustavsson and MacEachron (2012), youth in unstable living situations tend to struggle more educationally. As a result, foster youth were at higher risk for harmful educational effects such as low advancement rates and grade retention, special education registration, poor academic performance, school behavioral problems, developmental health encounters, and low school mobility. Foster youth were, regrettably, at a disadvantage in each of these areas.

The writings indicated that about 50% of foster youth completed grade school, compared to 70% of the general population, and General Equivalency Diploma (GED) achievement was greater for foster youth (Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2012). University attendance and achievement rates were even lower for foster youth. Twenty percent of foster youth who advanced from grade school also attended college, compared to 60% of non-foster youth (Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2012).

Foster youth are more likely to be enrolled in special education programs than non-foster youth (Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2012). Approximately 23% to 47% of grade schooled foster youth received special educational services at some point in their journey to adulthood; this was in comparison to the 12% annual rate for all school-aged youth. Foster youth were generally more likely to repeat a grade. Gustavsson and MacEachron (2012) found that the grade retention rate for foster youth was double the rate of non-foster youth. Foster youth may experience high degrees of suspensions, nonattendance, expulsions, and other school issues that could potentially delay their academic development. In a national sample, Gustavsson and MacEachron found that

former foster youth were about 4 times more likely to be expelled than were youth in general (16.5% versus 4.6%) and twice as likely to be suspended (66.8% versus 27.8%).

Barriers to Higher Education

The issue is not that foster youth have little to no desire to attend college. In actuality, Emerson (2007) stated that the majority of foster youth show a high interest in attending college. Unfortunately, there are a number of barriers hindering their dreams and aspirations of pursuing higher education. The blame has been put on the child welfare system for doing a subpar job of encouraging these youth to attend college (Emerson, 2007). Many foster youth have been given few chances to explore their options or are not provided with information regarding applying to schools. Foster parents and child welfare workers are not trained well enough because there is a belief that foster youth are not expected to accomplish much when it comes to education (Emerson, 2007).

Pecora (2006) addressed the educational achievements of former foster youth through the examination of interview transcripts and case records relating to educational accomplishments of 1,087 foster care alumni. In study follow-ups, it was easier to see the educational achievements of former foster youth since they were older than current foster care youth and had aged out of the system. College enrollment and high school graduation rates were similar to or even greater than those of the general population, but the rates of former foster youth not completing high school as well as of those dropping out of college were a problem. Recommendations—such as extracurricular activities,

fewer changes in placement, and independent living training—were made to assist in school completion for foster youth. Eleven percent indicated the presence of a physical or medical illness or chronic condition of some kind. Just more than half (50.6%) had been diagnosed with mental disorders at some time in their upbringing. Employment and mental health services were found to be the most commonly provided services to adolescents (Pecora, 2006).

By the time they aged out of the system, about 72.5% of the former foster youth had received a high school diploma or GED. At the follow-up, the high school completion rate was even higher: 86.1% (including those who obtained GEDs). If the population of former foster youth over the age of 25 is analyzed, the rate increases to 87.8%, which is significantly higher than the 80.4% achievement rate of the U.S. general population (Pecora, 2006).

A sample of first-generation undergraduate students was studied by the National Center on Education Statistics (as cited in Emerson, 2007) from the time they attended college in the fall of 1995 to the spring of 2001. Two-thirds of the foster youth reported they had not been properly prepared for college. Even with grade school diplomas, the youth may still not be academically prepared for the college level. Such lack of preparation can be due to unstable school and home placements (Emerson, 2007).

In addition, a majority of foster youth unfortunately cannot depend on their relatives to assist them financial or emotionally. They begin to feel overwhelmed due to the high demands in higher education and a lack of life and living skills (Emerson, 2007).

According to federal law, foster youth are considered financially independent, so the income of the legal guardian has no effect on the eligibility for financial aid (Emerson, 2007). Unfortunately, most foster youth do not know their financial aid eligibility (Emerson, 2007).

Children in foster care are more likely to display emotional and behavioral issues than non-foster youth. Such a difference seems to continue into early emancipation or adulthood. The mental health issues can interfere with student success in school. Such issues can also be problematic if the services they receive are terminated after these youth reach the age of 18 (Dworsky & Perez, 2010). Most student services employees in higher education are not properly trained to work with this special population. Even programs like Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS), which are designed to target low-income students, are unable to handle the disadvantages foster youth face (Dworsky & Perez, 2010).

Jones (2008) addressed the idea that all former foster youth, as adults, possess the desire to be gainfully employed, independent, and live harmoniously. They want to have relationships with peers and be productive citizens in their communities, but such accomplishments are more of a challenge for foster youth. Challenges linked with shelter stability in foster care include mistreatment, issues with connecting to domestic and public services, educational underachievement resulting from numerous shelter changes, and the probable sudden end of care at the age of 18. In addition to possibly losing state

support at the cutoff age of 18, foster youth are also at risk of losing financial and social support from the foster family when living independently.

U.S. Census Bureau (2013) data indicated adolescents in the general population were leaving their homes at the age of 23 and were frequently returning after failed attempts at independent living. Twenty-eight is the average age at which youth in the general population finally leave home. Youth leaving foster care, without sufficient life or educational skills, still want to progress as well-functioning adults. The discrepancy between their ability to be well-functioning adults and their lack of life and/or educational skills could be attributed to numerous changes in housing during middle to late childhood, creating disturbance in their psychological growth. The psychological hazard is mainly due to the lack of dependable guardians with whom youth are able to build solid connections (Jones, 2008).

According to Jones (2008), housing instability (and the subsequent frequent changes in schooling) can affect a child's educational growth in a negative way. The study suggested a rapid change in housing placement has a negative effect on the academic success of youth in foster care. Youth who experienced frequent changes in school enrollment were found to fall short of achievement goals. School changes also caused disruptions in the relationships the youth developed with instructors.

Support Services for Transitional Foster Youth

Zetlin, Weinberg, and Shea (2010) examined the foster care youth who make up a vast population of students in danger of failing academically. Zetlin et al. advocated that foster care agencies, living assistance programs, and schools must work collectively to make available the supports and services necessary to accomplish improved outcomes. A focus group was conducted involving each sector to discuss their views on the problems with foster youth's educational journeys and recommendations for fixing those problems. The authors detailed distinct characteristics recognized by school liaisons, agency advocates, and caregivers for understanding how each group performs independent from the others. The study concluded with suggestions for creating an ideal plan connecting each sector and providing a field for strategically addressing the road blocks to educational achievement.

About 500,000 children in this country are dealing with being apart from their birth families due to neglect or abuse. About a third of those children are under age 5. The stresses of unstable housing and schooling contribute to this epidemic. Even though 40% of the youth in foster care reunite with their biological parents within 12 months or less, the other 60% stay in the system until they reach the age of 18. The success rate for aged-out foster youth is low: 1 in 4 former foster youth face incarceration before reaching the age of 20 and 1 in 5 will face homelessness. Only 46% earn high school diplomas, 51% are able to obtain jobs, and just 3% earn college degrees (Zetlin et al., 2010).

Academic Struggles

Various accounts of this special population's educational experiences reveal children experiencing considerable difficulties in school (Zetlin et al., 2010). Foster youth are known to struggle in a number of areas (social, academic, and behavior) in school settings. Foster youth generally have higher rates of punitive referrals and nonattendance when compared to the rest of the school population. About three-fourths of the foster youth population performs below grade level and more than half have been held back at least one year. They perform considerably worse on standardized testing in mathematics and reading and receive poor grades in these particular subjects. They are also known to display additional suppressing and expressing behaviors. They exhibit higher degrees of depression, lower adaptive functioning, poor social skills, and more hostility (Zetlin et al., 2010).

When youth are taken from their biological families, it becomes the responsibility of child welfare agencies to tend to them. These special agencies have recently expanded their services to assist in the area of educational development. Unfortunately, this process cannot be taken on by the child welfare agencies alone without the benefit of collaboration (Zetlin et al., 2010).

Gustavsson and MacEachron (2012) stated that child welfare agencies are now required to address the educational state of foster youth based on new legislation. According to Gustavsson and MacEachron, schools are now held accountable for making sure all youth receive a quality education through the Obama Blueprint for Education

Reform and the No Child Left Behind Act; these pieces of legislation can facilitate collaboration at the micro and macro levels to decrease the historic obstructions to school achievement for foster youth. The education and child welfare legislation have suggested a plan of action for schools to help foster youth and their guardians improve the educational outcomes of these students. In the most current legislation, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 added new requirements for child welfare agencies to better assist the needs of foster youth. The focus is on the educational wellbeing of foster children from three perspectives:

1. The need as described by research evidence.

2. The new joint emphasis on meeting educational needs and accountability in child welfare legislation.

3. New national educational initiatives as they affect at-risk children and youth. We also suggest an educational action plan for school social workers. (Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2012, p. 71)

With a half million children in care, 71% of whom are in school, it is imperative that the educational outcomes of foster youth improve. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 assisted in creating new legislative opportunities to address the needs of at-risk youth who fall short of achievement goals. The possible downfall of the NCLB is that it neglects some of the unique vulnerabilities disadvantaging foster youth (Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2012).

Funding for Programs

In 1986, Congress approved the Title IV-E Independent Living Program, which provided states with funding to improve preparation of foster youth for the transition into adulthood. The title was changed to the John Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP) in 1999 as part of the Foster Care Independence Act (FCIA). It was designed to provide each state with a total of $140 million each year to go toward independent living services for foster youth and former foster youth. Another $60 million in federal funding was allocated in 2001 for college and training programs (Mares, 2010).

Gustavsson and MacEachron (2012) further examined youth in various states throughout the nation and found that youth exiting foster services in Alaska were reported to have spent about seven years in the system with about 13 different placements. In Washington, one-third of youth preparing to exit care had experienced more than 10 different placements; the rest went through more than four different placements. The overall goal of the new legislation is to break down the barriers for at-risk youth (Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2012).

Factors Moving Foster Youth Toward and Through College

Today, millions of youngsters worldwide are placed in out-of-home care by courts, social agencies, or through family referrals. Some are in family foster care and others are in residential schools or group settings. In all cases, if these youth are to prosper, three principles are notable:

1) Quality child and youth care: Those who stand in for parents are responsible for meeting developmental needs and building competence, regardless of the severity of problems. This cannot happen if children are shunted through a string of foster homes or placed in depersonalized, residential facilities. Front-line caregivers and teachers need practical, specialized training in how to connect with challenging kids and help them heal and grow.

2) Meaningful contact with families: Except in rare cases when parent contact is prohibited, the overarching goal is to maintain and strengthen family bonds. A classic study of children in care showed that ongoing family involvement is a powerful predictor of a child's positive adjustment. Researchers called for intensified efforts to involve parents in responsible visiting, carefully document all family contacts, and scrutinize these data as the best indicator of the long-term fate of these children.

3) Residential placement can provide a powerful environment for healing and growth when staff is attuned to the child's developmental needs. Otherwise, these placements can further traumatize children who are torn from their parents, subjecting them to defective surrogate parenting by staff that lacks competence or compassion. (Brendtro & Mitchell, 2011, p. 25)

Yet all programs were in perpetual conflict between the goals for change (care and re-education) versus custody (isolation and punishment) (Brendtro & Mitchell, 2011). Even so-called treatment settings were little more than segmented therapeutic

practices; this meant the piecemeal injection of counseling and treatment techniques into programs remained basically custodial. A key finding of this early research was that, regardless of stated organizational goals, those who are direct caregivers need a positive philosophy and practical skills to deal with very challenging behavior. In conflict situations, staff reverted to folk psychology and methods of punishment and intimidation. In actuality, they were creating more distress in the lives of the troubled youth (Brendtro & Mitchell, 2011).

Campus-Based Programs

College and university programs to support foster youth have grown exponentially over the past several years. According to Marklein (2012), a 2008 federal law made it less expensive for states to extend foster care services beyond the age of 18. It still leaves an achievement gap between foster youth and general population youth because even though the amount of youth using foster care services has dropped, the amount who leave care without being adopted increased to 11% in 2010 compared to 7.1% in 2001. If they leave the system without being adopted, they do not get the beneficial services when they enroll in college; hence, support for their academics is limited.

As of 2014, 79 college campuses nationwide offer student support programs specifically designed for former foster youth. In 2011, 2,870 campuses in the U.S. were 4-year colleges, indicating a mere 2.7% of 4-year colleges catering to former foster youth (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). Most states allow services to foster

youth only until age 18, undoubtedly a contributing factor in whether colleges offer services to the population. Federal law has allowed 18 states—including Michigan, Oregon, and Washington, D.C.—to extend their foster care services for youth up until the age of 21 (Marklein, 2012), which could increase the number of colleges offering services to former foster youth. There could be a noticeable improvement in the success of former foster youth if the country as a whole would continue to provide more student support programs and extend foster care services to age 21.

Supporters hope prolonged care will encourage more foster youth to complete college. According to National Working Group on Foster Care and Education (2011), about 70% of the youth exiting foster care have plans to extend their education at the college level. Unfortunately, only 3-5% will finish with a bachelor's degree if the trend described by Marklein (2012) continues. Of the nearly 80 college campuses across the nation offering support programs for foster youth, the following describes a sampling of institutions and their approach to supporting this population.

According to National Working Group on Foster Care and Education (2011), the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) is just one of the institutions of higher learning assisting former foster youth with special services. A pilot program administered by the University of Alaska will extend services for up to 18 former foster youth.

Amanda Metivier, a director of Facing Foster Youth in Alaska (a nonprofit created by former foster youth) stated, "When youth have their basic needs met like food,

clothing and a stable living situation then they can focus on their education. They aren't making the transition out of care and starting college all at once" (as cited in Marklein, 2012, para. 9).

According to the California State University (as cited in National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2011), there are two types of support on college campuses. Some offer full scholarships and other assistance to a special population of youth, such as foster youth. Other universities—such as UCLA—created a pipeline connecting former foster youth to current resources (University of California, Los Angeles [UCLA], 2013). There is not maximum foster youth participation in such programs. For example, only about 50 UCLA students who were formerly foster youth regularly participate in program events (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2011). Program staff help students navigate the campus bureaucracy and find resources—such as housing, transportation, academic counseling, mentoring, and financial aid—that make up some of the essentials of college living.

Specifically, the University of California, Davis (UC Davis; 2013) addresses the essentials of former foster youth, such as those previously listed, by providing services through the Guardian Scholars Program. According to UC Davis (2013), the Guardian Scholars program is a service dedicated to providing assistance to former foster youth to make the most out of their college educational experience. The staff and mentors of the program work alongside other on- and off-campus programs to address their academic and personal needs. The program goals are as follows:

- Providing a one-stop shop for all campus resources.

- Providing a reliable team of staff and faculty dedicated to constructing strong bonds with the former foster youth.

- Providing academic support for educational advancement leading to prosperous careers.

- Providing encouragement and support for housing, financial, and private matters to progress the general college experience.

- Providing leadership opportunities and social support encouraging involvement in community and university life and promoting individual progression (UC Davis, 2013).

The Guardian Scholars program of California State University, Fullerton (CSUF; 2013) is similar to that of UC Davis and touts itself on its website as a program committed to supporting former foster youth's sometimes overwhelming transition into higher education. Tough circumstances and upbringing leave some youth in foster care with major barriers to overcome. Many, with the help of the CSUF Guardian Scholars program, have been able to reduce or overcome these barriers. The lack of family or guardian support, which in turn makes the transition into adulthood difficult, is addressed by the program by offering full scholarships to former foster youth. CSUF's ultimate goal is to admit 50 scholars at one time (CSUF, 2013). The incoming scholars must not only maintain a 2.5 GPA to remain eligible for their scholarships, they must also meet the following requirements:

- Must be enrolled in at least 12 units of classes.

- Must be continuously enrolled unless granted a formal leave of absence.

- Must be a participant in all aspects of the program, i.e., events, mentoring, meetings, career services, etc.

- Must be open to staff observing academic and university progression.

- Must follow all university criteria for appropriate conduct and public behavior (CSUF, 2013).

CSUS also has its own Guardian Scholars Program. Their goals are similar to that of UC Davis and CSUF but emphasize outreach to the community. There are over 120 students signed up for the program; 65 are active participants. The program is designed to meet the following goals:

- To provide Guardian Scholars with financial advising and support allowing them to attend to their studies and complete their degrees in a reasonable time with no or minimum debt.

- To provide Guardian Scholars with academic assistance enabling them to develop academic competency and skills that lead to successful careers.

- To provide Guardian Scholars with social support by engaging them in the campus culture and building a community that supports their personal and professional growth. (California State University, Sacramento [CSUS], 2013)

Model Program

Unrau (2011) reported a model program making a positive difference in the successful pathway to college for foster youth. Unrau confirmed much of the data shared previously about foster youth in the nation, including that "fewer than 20% take college-prep courses" (p. 17) and "most youth leave foster care at 18 years old in unplanned ways" (p. 17). Even with federal financial assistance programs, fewer than 5% of those foster youth who attend college persist to degree attainment. "Many foster youth face practical or system barriers that make it difficult to access or stay in school after aging out of foster care" (Unrau, 2011 p. 18).

The special population of foster youth has a tough time trying to adapt to adulthood. Exiting foster care exposes youth to barriers such as shortage of living funds, limitations regarding gainful employment, and lack of transportation. On the plus side, institutions of higher education are beginning to take action to support former foster youth by administering college assistance programs. The Seita Scholars Program at Western Michigan University (Unrau, 2011) is just one of them. The program is named in honor of Dr. John Seita, an alumnus of Western Michigan University as well as Michigan's foster care system. He has committed his life to educating prospective social workers about the trials and tribulations of youth exiting the foster care system in hope of creating scholars from the realm of the foster care system (Unrau, 2011). One of Dr. Seita's primary goals is to make systemic change. He does this by working with social workers, allowing students to enter the program without having their case histories

reviewed, and encouraging students to give feedback regarding the program and assist with program decision making (Unrau, 2011).

Mentoring and Positive Adult Role Models

A great deal of literature addresses a foster youth's need for financial aid, test-taking skills development, and resources needed to fulfill basic living needs. However, one finds less information about a mentor's impact on the life of a foster youth who is considering higher education. A publication by Casey Family Programs (2006) provides resources on where youth can find mentors, such as the following:

- Youth's guardian

- Positive adult mentors with whom the youth has previously established a connection

- Education liaison

- Youth case manager

- School mentor or counselor

- Court-appointed special advocate worker (CASA)

Educators have stated that behavioral management among foster youth is the biggest issue educators face. Powell and Marshall (2011) highlighted research showing exceptional instructors can create healthy relationships with their students and apply well-developed schoolroom techniques. Schools, however, give limited consideration to increasing the abilities of instructors to bond with at-risk students. Instead, many would still adhere to a discredited way of thinking of zero tolerance in which "holding students

responsible for their actions" (Powell & Marshall, 2011, p. 2) meant penalties and exclusion of troublemaking students. The narrow focus on accountability and liability decreases the connection between student and teacher, thus decreasing possibilities for student success in school and life (Powell & Marshall, 2011). Punitive consequences often mean little to this population. Some foster care youth have trouble grasping the concept of punishment due to their current position. While it was necessary to set limits at times, students knew that adults would be firm with them, looking out for their best interests. Significantly, transition coordinators often took on roles as advocates for their students. One coordinator made the following statement:

> I think it helps for them to know that there is someone they can talk to who's not going to judge them, who's on their side. Almost like an advocate. I think they know me well enough now to where they know I'm going to be fair and I'm going to do what I think is best. (Powell & Marshall, 2011, p. 3)

Having positive relationships is especially important for students going back to their home schools because they need all the support they can get during this challenging transition. In fact, the interviewees only mentioned negative relationships when describing the harsh realities of students' return to their regular schools. There is often a poor relationship between the students returning to their schools and the faculty. Situations were bad when students left and, to the adults, nothing changed; this was particularly problematic with many teachers and staff at the home school who operated with a policing mentality rather than in support mode.

Adair (2009) argued that instructors dedicated to promoting societal and financial fairness through schooling should push themselves to understand how critical higher education is to low-income students, to identify this student population as progressively "at-risk," and to work in contrast to regulation that discourages or prohibits these students from going into, and effectively finishing, college degree programs. Adair stated that students with low incomes deal with dramatic and lasting benefits from completing college. Unfortunately, the opportunities and backing, such as financial and living skill support, necessary to do so are limited. Foster youth who are in the same situation as low-income students have a better chance of long-lasting stability with a college education, especially if instructors follow Adair's recommendations as mentioned above (Adair, 2009).

Redd, Brooks, and McGarvey (2002) studied programs that improved youths' academic achievement and found that mentoring programs, first-rate early childhood programs, and programs geared toward increasing educational outcomes definitely had positive effects: these programs swayed the amount of influences associated with teens' emotional changes, their triumphs in school, and the possibility of finishing high school and going to college. According to the Youth Mentoring Policy Brief (as cited in Cavell, DuBois, Karcher, Keller, & Rhodes, 2009), "young people who lack a strong relationship with a caring adult while growing up are much more vulnerable to difficulties, ranging from academic failure to involvement in serious at-risk behaviors" (p. 1). According to Points of Light Foundation (2013), without intervention within 2 years of emancipating

from foster care, over half the youth ages 18-20 will be homeless, victimized, incarcerated, or dead.

Independent Living Programs

According to Naccarato and DeLorenzo (2008), the government-financed Independent Living Program (ILP) was established to assist foster youth in the U.S. to make the shift from foster care to independent living. It is a residential service for youth exiting out of the foster care system (Bruce, 2014). The ILP program offers apartment-style living for former foster youth transitioning out of foster care homes or group homes. Traditionally, foster youth can stay in the program for up to 18 months, but extensions can be made based on the youth's cooperation with the program guidelines. Residents must be enrolled in school, work part time, and save portions of their income. Some also contribute to their rent. When individuals are able to move out on their own, ILP counselors help them find apartments and roommates and provide follow-up support to help them achieve stability (Bruce, 2014).

The ultimate goal of ILP is to provide assistance to current and former foster youth experiencing independent living for the first time. A foster youth can be eligible for the service at the age of 14, and the services can last until the age of 21. For foster youth to get the extension on ILP services, they must either complete high school or obtain a GED, be enrolled in college (community college or vocational school will do), participate in a job-readiness program, and work at least 80 hours a month, or have some sort of medical condition inhibiting the participant from performing any of the said

requirements. Social workers are assigned to each program participant for case

management purposes (Sacramento County Child Protective Services, 2014).

The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 was passed to increase resources for

foster youth as well as lower the age of eligibility to 14. To make the transition to

adulthood smoother, Independent Living Programs (ILPs) were created to assist current

and former foster youth with the supports required for simple subsistence. Unfortunately,

not much is known about how effective ILPs are for this special population.

Benefits Foster Youth Receive from Higher Education

High school graduation and progression to a 4-year college or university are two

symbols of effective achievement for a foster youth emancipating from the foster care

system. Even though more research is being directed at youth exiting the foster care

system, little is known about those presently enrolled in higher education. Research

(Merdinger, Hines, Lemon-Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005) on youth departing the foster care

system focuses on the negative effects of out-of-home care, such as homelessness, lack of

educational fulfillment, increased psychological suffering, dependency on public

assistance, and substance abuse. A limited amount of researchers (Merdinger et al.,

2005) have talked directly with former foster youth about living productive lives and the

contributing aspects that allowed them to be successful. Understanding the reasons

connected to the educational accomplishment of former foster youth can benefit program

and service distribution to both the youth currently in foster care and to those exiting the system (Merdinger et al., 2005).

Merdinger et al. (2005) presented initial descriptive outcomes from the Pathways to College study, a multi-method study of emancipated foster youth attending an institution of higher learning. The outcomes help paint a portrait of 216 youth who exited the foster care system and attained their educational goals by preparing for and signing up for college. For all young adults, postsecondary education has never been more important than it is currently. According to estimates from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (U.S. Department of Education [DOE], 2013), between the years of 1998 and 2008, the rate of college-level employment grew more quickly than the rate of employment for people with less than a college degree. Using data from the Pathways to College study (Merdinger et al., 2005), work is presently underway that will improve on results offered by Merdinger et al., such as the development of services and programs. Understanding factors related to the educational achievement of former foster youth is a serious step in efforts to advance program and service distribution to all youth whose lives have been affected by childhood mistreatment and its associated issues (Merdinger et al., 2005).

Hyucksun Shin (2003) covered the academic dilemmas of students in the foster care system. The literature review suggested using two major domains in examining variables influencing school success of adolescents in out-of-home care: the individual characteristics of older youth in foster care and roles of placement characteristics in understanding their educational outcomes (Hyucksun Shin, 2003). Hyucksun Shin's

(2003) literature review indicated educational effects of foster youth fall into three areas: (a) descriptions of educational performance while in care, (b) educational achievement at the time of discharge, and (c) educational attainments of foster youth who were in out-of-home care. Many foster youth are at risk of school failure based on special education needs and early experiences of mistreatment and abandonment. Foster youth are less likely to perform at or above grade level than their peers in the general population. Additionally, a large number of foster youth have less access than non-foster youth to special services in education. Even though most people agree educational achievement and employment are serious aspects of improving the odds that foster youth will effectively transition from foster care to independence, many youth exit foster care lacking high school diplomas or GEDs. It was found that approximately 55% of the sample failed to complete high school at the time of discharge. Only 32% of youth left care with a high school diploma or GED (Hyucksun Shin, 2003).

Foster care youth are less likely to be placed in college introductory courses than their non-foster peers with the same abilities. Even though the grades of youth in foster care were not considerably different from the grades of non-foster youth, foster youth were less likely to be enrolled in college introductory courses. Hyucksun Shin's (2003) results showed that only 15% of the foster youth were placed in college introductory courses, compared to 32% of the non-foster group. Hyucksun Shin (2003) designed the study to better understand the factors related with the educational achievement of older foster youth. Individual characteristics included ambition for higher education, mental

health issues, problem-solving skills, and antisocial actions; environmental characteristics consisted of birth family data, age when entering care, placement in care, placement in an independent living program, school involvement, mental wellbeing services, and employment. The study found foster youth were affected by numerous factors influencing educational achievement of youth in the general population. Placement in kinship care is the only factor in the placement-experience domain that predicted educational attainment of youth in foster care. The outcomes raise significant questions and concerns about the expectations rooted in preparation, investigation, and procedure with this population (Hyucksun Shin, 2003).

As with youth not in foster care, educational aspiration was one of the most significant predictors of educational attainment for youth in out-of-home care. Although it is not possible to determine from the study results whether educational aspirations are a cause or consequence of academics, the association between a student's academic achievement and educational aspiration has strong support in the literature (Hyucksun Shin, 2003). The literature suggested ethnicity, family achievement, parents, and school environment play major roles in formulating youths' expectations for their educational careers.

Rationale

The importance of this study cannot be underrated. As previously stated, every year nearly 30,000 foster youth exit foster care in the United States. These adolescents

take on a number of trials, including finishing high school, managing mental illness and substance abuse, acquiring health insurance, finding work and receiving a living wage, and securing stable housing (Mares, 2010). On average, only 7-13% of foster youth enroll in higher education and only 2% of former foster children in the nation earn college degrees (AZ Hope, 2012).

More fully understanding the reasons motivating and inspiring current and former foster youth to enter and, ultimately, succeed in higher education can serve as guidance for college faculty, high school administrators, and student services professionals regarding developing programs that support foster youth in their academic success. There are successful model programs (Unrau, 2011) and uncovering those and sharing them with others can cause a ripple effect that can raise the bar on foster youth college graduation rates.

<div align="center">**Summary**</div>

Creating stability for current and former foster youth is the key to a successful college career. Model programs assisting current and former foster youth have been proven to work. Programs such as Guardian Scholars and Seita Scholars have been successful in providing academic, financial, and mentoring support among foster youth. They even serve as a pipeline to high school administers, foster youth case managers, and student services professionals, which creates a better understanding of the needs of foster youth when it comes to educational attainment.

Unfortunately, not enough of these programs are available to assist all foster youth. More of these programs should be created to improve the higher education success rate among former foster youth. Collaboration and cooperation among the individuals working with current and former foster youth are essential. Educational assistance programs are necessary for foster youth retention in higher education.

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

With help and cooperation from former foster youth and employees at a public university in northern California, the researcher gathered qualitative data to gain more insight on foster youth going into higher education. Human subjects were accessed through the Guardian Scholars program at a public university in the Northern region of California. Established in 2006, the program currently serves 65 active, former foster youth students and provides job assistance, resume building, and partnerships through the two large urban public school districts.

The researcher was assisted by the college advisor of the Guardian Scholars in administering a Survey Monkey© survey to all students, professionals, and volunteers involved in the program. The survey was sent to 119 potential respondents listed on the college advisors email contact list; 42 completed the survey. The survey consisted of 21 questions: 17 multiple-choice questions and four short-answer questions.

One-on-one interviews were conducted with two of the Guardian Scholars. Both interviews took place on the university campus. Before the interviews were conducted, the interview protocol was distributed to potential respondents prior to selection.

The research was conducted using a series of interviews and a review of scholarly journals, online sources, peer-reviewed articles, and surveys. The subjects of the

interviews were former foster youth and employees in the nonprofit sector and in higher

education (e.g., CPS social workers, case managers, teachers/professors, college

enrollment counselors, etc.). The researcher used the data collected to analyze and

determine reasons behind the low numbers of success among former foster youth. Only

the researcher had access to each subject's responses on the thesis topic. The researcher

kept a confidential file on each subject containing interview transcripts and survey

results.

Population and Sample

Forty-four subjects were included in this study; 42 took a survey and the other

two participated in one-on-one interviews conducted by the researcher. The survey was

administered with the assistance of the advisor of the Guardian Scholars program, a

program specifically designed to assist former foster youth in college. The advisor

submitted the survey through their email list consisting of all former foster youth and

individuals who work alongside former foster youth. The researcher also submitted the

survey to case managers and special program educators. Subjects were recruited from

different sources such as the university, WIND Youth Services, and Loaves and Fishes

(private nonprofit). All subjects had to be over the age of 18 and could agree to

participate or decline to do so. The survey (see Appendix A) and interviews (see

Appendix B) consisted of questions about their experiences and the outcomes of their

experience either as foster youth or working with foster youth. The methodology posed

minimal to no risk of discomfort or harm. No physical procedures were involved in this

study, and no instruments or equipment were involved in this study. There were no

devices, drugs, or pharmaceuticals involved in this study. Each interviewee was required

to sign a consent form (see Appendix C) prior to taking part in the interview.

Chapter 4

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Introduction

Qualitative data were gathered from former foster youth and employees at CSUS to gain more insight into foster youth college enrollment rates. A total of 119 surveys were administered to students, professionals, and volunteers involved in the Guardian Scholars Program at a public university located in the northern region of California.

Of the 119 potential respondents, 42 completed the 21-question survey. Twenty (47.6%) responded affirmatively and 22 (52.4%) responded that they were not former foster youth but had experience working with foster youth. Twenty respondents were former foster youth. Each was enrolled in a college or university at the time of the survey. The 22 respondents who did not identify as former foster youth reported they currently worked with foster youth or former foster youth or worked with them in the past. Thirty-seven responded to a question regarding their histories of working directly with foster youth. Twenty-two (59.5%) responded that they had and 15 (40.5%) shared that they had not. The majority of the survey participants responded affirmatively when asked if they knew a former foster youth. Thirty-six (97.3%) shared they did know a former foster youth and only one (2.7%) responded that he or she did not. The survey was an attempt to gain insight into foster youth pursuing higher education.

Of the 42 survey respondents, 32 (78%) were female and 9 (22%) were male.

Table 1 displays the educational enrollment status of the respondents.

Table 1

Respondents' Educational Enrollment

	Graduate School	Undergraduate	2-year
Part-time	2.4% (1)	7.3% (3)	2.4% (1)
Full-time	2.4% (1)	39% (16)	0% (0)

The remaining 18 respondents reported not being currently enrolled as a student (43.9%).

Survey participants who were enrolled in higher education reported involvement in the

following fields of study:

- Child Development

- Sociology/Social Work

- Psychology

- Business Administration

- Criminal Justice

- Sciences (biochemistry, health sciences)

- Creative writing

Of the 42 respondents, 29 reported they were currently employed (72.5%), and 11

reported being unemployed (27.5%). Sixteen reported being currently enrolled in school

and simultaneously employed (40%), while 24 reported not being enrolled in school and

employed. A number of the former foster youth who participated in the survey were employed, but most were not. Such disparity may be indicative of the difficulties former foster youth may face well into their early adulthood, such as gaining and retaining employment.

There were similarities across the board when it came to familiarity with relevant terms (see Table 2). Thirty-five percent of the former foster youth, compared to 38% of the mentors, were familiar with the term AB12. There were also similarities in their the knowledge of emancipation: 85% of the former foster youth and 81% of the mentors were familiar with the term. Half (50%) the former foster youth were familiar with Section 8 compared to 48% of the mentors. Only 5% of former foster youth and 9.5% of the mentors had worked in a group home. Only 10% of the former foster youth and 4.8% of the mentors had ever worked in a homeless shelter.

Table 2

A Comparison Between Mentors and Former Foster Youth Regarding Responses

	Percent Former Foster Youth N= 20		Percent Mentor N= 21	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Familiar with AB12	35	55	38	52
Familiar with "emancipation"	85	5	81	9.5
Familiar with Section 8	50	35	48	43
Worked in a group home	5	85	9.5	81
Worked in homeless shelter	10	80	4.8	85.7

One participant did not answer whether he or she was a former foster youth, and that survey was not included in the tally. Two former foster youth (10%) did not answer any questions except whether or not they were former foster youth. A third former foster youth did not answer the question about Section 8.

Two mentors (9.5%) only responded that they were non-former foster youth and did not respond to any other question.

The primary differences between the mentors' and former foster youths' knowledge was related to higher education. Eighty-five percent of the former foster youth were familiar with the Chafee grant while only 19% of their mentors were familiar with the grant. More than half (55%) the former foster youth knew about the BOG waiver and only 29% of the mentors were aware of it. Many former foster youth knew more about the Chafee grant and BOG waiver than the mentors.

Table 3

Knowledge of BOG and Chafee: Mentors vs. Former Foster Youth

| | Percent Former Foster Youth | | Percent Mentor | |
| | N= 20 | | N= 21 | |
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Familiar with Chafee	85	5	19	71
Familiar with BOG	55	35	29	57

One participant did not answer whether he or she was a former foster youth, and that survey was not included in the tally.

Two former foster youth (10%) did not answer any questions except that they were former foster youth. Two mentors (9.5%) responded they were non-former foster youth and did not respond to any other question. A third mentor did not answer the question about familiarity with BOG.

To accomplish the goal of this study, the researcher included two of the interviews conducted. The first student interviewed, Interviewee 1, was a 25-year-old former foster youth who moved to the United States from the Fiji Islands when he was 15. When asked whether he thought foster youth were given enough access to knowledge of higher education, he offered the following response:

I think so, but the foster youth has to accept it [the knowledge]. It's out there, but you have to give yourself permission to take help from other people and accept the resources that are available to you. It may not come from parents or caregivers, but there are other people out there who genuinely care.

In terms of being given any educational resources before he turned 18, Interviewee stated, "I wasn't given anything besides living and job assistance. I had to search for these things on my own." The idea of going to school was a last resort. When asked how

foster youth can access information about higher education, he responded that foster

youth should be aware and ask for help, "You can check online and at your local college

campus." Interviewee 1 was asked why he thought there were fewer former foster youth

enrolled in higher education and he responded, "Because foster kids are scared of the

stigma of being former foster youth in higher education. They are afraid of being treated

differently because of their past." Interviewee 1 said some of the needs of foster youth

considering entering college include emotional support and encouragement to succeed.

Interviewee 1 shared that foster youth need someone caring who can motivate them

through challenging moments in the process. When asked what motivates foster youth to

go to college, Interviewee 1 responded that his past motivated him, "It's a reminder that I

came from a bad place. It gives me a choice to make better of it or dwell in it."

Interviewee 1 also shared that life skills, knowledge and skills that help further you, help

keep his priorities in order, "I am able to pay bills according to what is more important,

i.e., rent, food, entertainment.

The second student interviewed, Interviewee 2, was a 23-year-old guardian

scholar at CSUS. Interviewee 2 was a Ward of the Court from ages 10 to 18. When

asked if she thought foster youth were given enough access to knowledge of higher

education, Interviewee 2 responded, "No….Foster youth lack the ability to focus on

getting an education due to everything else that they have to focus on….mainly having a

place to stay." Interviewee 2 shared that foster youth are given no educational resources

before they turn 18, besides being sent to grade school, "If you were struggling in school,

they would provide tutoring at youth centers and after school programs but that was about it." When asked how foster youth can access information about higher education, Interviewee 2 felt successful academic performance in grade school helps, "When you perform well in school, foster youth advocates tend to push harder for the youth to get into higher education." Interviewee 2 was asked why she thought there were less former foster youth enrolled in higher education. Interviewee 2 offered the following response:

Multiple reasons: We can't fully focus on education in high school due to the systematic issues. The people working with foster youth aren't invested enough in foster youth going to college; it's not on the agenda. For me, it was trust issues. Why would this person want to help me? What do they want in return?

When asked what she thought motivates foster youth to go to college, Interviewee 2 said, "Someone…anyone who cares. Someone that can tell me that I can do this; being sincere with their words is very important." Interviewee 2 considered life skills to be the ability to take care of oneself, navigate on your own, and to budget money:

Life skills play a big role. Depending on how skillful you are in taking care of yourself, will depend on how you take care of yourself in college. Even with limited skills, if you know how to use them, it makes the transition easier.

There were some striking similarities and contrasts in the responses of both the former foster youth interviewed for this study. Neither interviewee felt foster youth were given sufficient educational resources about higher education before they turned 18 and graduated from high school. Interviewee 1 felt foster youth were given enough access to

the knowledge of higher education but may not have accepted that knowledge or been willing to accept help from other people who were not a parent or a caregiver. Interviewee 2 felt foster youth were not given enough access to knowledge of higher education because they typically lacked the ability to focus on anything other than having a place to stay. Interviewee 2 felt foster youth were only encouraged to focus on higher education when they performed well in school; otherwise, it was not on the agenda of the people tasked with helping foster youth. Because of this lack of offered support, Interviewee 1 felt foster youth have to be willing to ask for help. Even more, foster youth must be aware of what is available to them; they must do their own research and not be afraid to ask questions. Interviewee 1 felt that the reason there were less former foster youth enrolled in higher education was because they were afraid of the stigma attached to being a former foster youth enrolled in higher education. Interviewee 2 felt that the reason was due more to the systematic issues preventing foster youth from fully focusing on higher education. Both interviewees agreed that the major concerns of foster youth were basic survival needs such as shelter, food, and clothing. Both interviewees also agreed that someone who cares is the number one necessity in motivating a foster youth to enroll in college.

After interviewing both these former foster youth, both of whom were currently enrolled in college, the researcher was able to analyze each response to the interview questions and develop insight into the following issues: how foster youth can gain better access to the information of and within higher education, what barriers foster youth and

former foster youth face in getting into higher education, and what support services are available to assist foster youth and former foster youth getting into higher education.

Findings

From the results of the survey, there were similarities between the former foster youth and the mentors regarding the familiarity of the terms *AB12*, *emancipation*, and *Section 8*; these terms are more related to general knowledge of foster youth than to foster youth in higher education. Although it is good knowledge for former foster youth and the individuals working alongside them to possess, it is still not very helpful regarding college. It is important to understand that more former foster youth (85%) knew more about the Chafee grant, a special grant awarded to foster youth, than mentors (19%). More than half the former foster youth (55%) knew about the BOG waiver compared to only 29% of the mentors. Basically, former foster youth were more knowledgeable about their higher educational benefits than the people working alongside them; this is a problem because, in a sense, the students knew more than the teachers. If the mentors and everyone else working with current and former foster youth were better trained about the population with whom they were working, there would be a higher success rate among all former foster youth in higher education.

Regarding the interviews from the former foster youth, both participants felt they were not given sufficient educational resources about higher education before they emancipated or graduated high school. The number one thing on their agendas was

stable housing. Due to their circumstances, they tended to go into survival mode and did not think about long-term results. Thus, it is difficult for current and former foster youth to focus on higher education. Both interviewees felt the most important aspect of going to college was having someone who cared about their wellbeing. Having a supportive and knowledgeable mentor is a key aspect to successful educational attainment among former foster youth in college. They feel more comfortable with the right individuals assisting them with the college structure. The right individuals are those who have the right information for success in higher education.

The interviews also showed that former foster youth must have a desire to succeed in higher education. They can be given the right tools to succeed, but they must be willing to encourage themselves to succeed in college. It may be difficult for them at first, but if their will to succeed is strong enough, they will find the process to be easier in the long run. The resources are available for foster youth, but part of the battle is that these students have to search for those resources on their own.

Discussion

How can foster youth get better access to information of and within higher education?

Based on the interviews, the first thing foster youth need in order to get better access to higher education is self-motivation. The problem is that foster youth have a hard time getting self-motivated without a solid foundation. Basically they need a strong

support system. The individuals working with foster youth should be more knowledgeable about the benefits of college enrollment. It is important that foster youth are surrounded by adult mentors that can make a positive impact on their pursuit. Having educational liaisons is important to bridge the gap of the needs of foster youth and the education institutions.

What are some barriers facing foster youth and former foster youth in getting into higher education?

As far as the barriers go, the blame has been put on the child welfare system for their subpar job of encouraging these youth to attend college. The foster parents and child welfare workers are not trained well enough due to their unfortunate belief that foster youth are not expected to go far in education (Emerson, 2007). College enrollment and high school graduation rates were similar to, or even greater than, those of the general population, but the rates of former foster youth not completing high school as well as of those dropping out of college were a problem. Challenges linked with shelter stability in foster care include mistreatment, issues with connecting to domestic and public services. The domestic services can include cooking, cleaning and home child care. Public services can include school enrollment, medical and employment. the lack of these services can be defined as mistreatment (Jones, 2008).

What are some of the social services offered to support foster youth and former foster youth in getting into higher education?

Foster care agencies, living assistance programs and schools have collaborated to make available the supports and services (such as quality child and youth care, meaningful contact with families and residential placement that can provide a powerful environment for healing and growth) necessary to improve the success rate among foster youth. Schools are now held accountable for making sure all youth receive a quality education through the Obama Blueprint for Education Reform and the No Child Left Behind Act; these pieces of legislation can facilitate collaboration at the micro and macro levels to decrease the historic obstructions to school achievement for foster youth (Gustavsson and MacEachron, 2012). The education and child welfare legislation have suggested a plan of action for schools to help foster youth and their guardians improve the educational outcomes of these students. With the development of more student support programs designed specifically for former foster youth, the pipeline to educational resources for this special population has gotten stronger. These are just a few examples of the huge strides made in educational assistance for foster youth.

Chapter 5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

As stated before, the goal of this study was to develop insight into, and recommendations for, the establishment of programs providing information to foster youth and their care providers. In California alone, there are over 4,000 foster youth who emancipate from the child welfare system each year and find themselves without proper support to further their education. In California, when youth in foster care graduate from high school or reach the age of 18, they exit the child welfare system. For foster children removed from their families because of abuse and/or neglect, there is no family of origin to provide the necessary encouragement to pursue higher education and succeed.

The benefits of higher education are directly related to the overall success youth will experience in their lifetimes. The research conducted in this study showed that foster youth and former foster youth experience these benefits at a much lower rate than their non-foster youth counterparts. Many researchers and scholars have developed studies following foster youth from emancipation to college, tracking their progress or lack thereof. As mentioned before, research has identified the following three main areas to consider when attempting to address the reasons for the disparities that exist in the number of former foster youth who enroll in higher education: (a) understanding the barriers foster youth face in getting into higher education and the resources available to

them, (b) knowing what support services are available for transitional foster youth, and (c) recognizing the factors that move a foster youth toward and through college.

About 30,000 foster youth leave the foster care system in the United States each year. They take on quite a few challenges, including grade school completion, managing mental health illness, obtaining health coverage, searching for employment, receiving a living income, and acquiring stable housing (Jackson, 2011; Mares 2010).

Simmel (2007) studied psychological dysfunction in adopted youth compared with non-adopted youth. When compared with their adopted non-foster care peers regarding the prevalence of behavioral problems, a striking number of the foster youth displayed behavioral problems. The rates of behavioral problems in both groups far exceed what is observed in the general population of children. On top of being more at risk for psychological disorders, studies on foster children also specify that these youth are more likely to get caught up in delinquent behaviors, display weaker performance in school and noticeable learning disabilities, and show confirmation of poor interpersonal skills with their peers and siblings. Such problems could be the result of lack of housing stability during foster care.

Conclusion

Foster youth specifically face more diversity than their peers around the state. As a whole, children are resilient, despite many challenges to their healthy development. Without continuing support from the community and without stable, committed

relationships with adults, children are not able to reach their full potential and, in fact, experience quite negative outcomes. When students attend and complete college, they are given more access to a multitude of benefits such as financial, living, and personal stability (California College Pathways, 2011). Accordingly, irregular amounts of involvement in higher education through different elements of U.S. society should be of critical concern, not only to the youth directly affected but also to public policymakers at the local, state, and federal levels. Gustavsson and MacEachron (2012) further explained that youth in out-of-home care are more likely to struggle on an academic level. Foster youth are at a higher risk for a number of negative educational results including grade retention, low graduation rates, school behavioral problems, special education enrollment, and low academic performance. Foster youth continue to be at a disadvantage in all these areas.

Emerson (2007) revealed that a lack of desire of foster youth to attend college does not necessarily account for the disparities in the numbers of former foster youth enrolled in higher education compared to their non-foster youth counterparts. Instead, research suggests most youth in foster care have high aspirations of attending college but face several obstacles making it much more challenging for foster youth to reach their educational objectives. Emerson revealed that the child welfare system has had little to no luck in helping foster youth pursue higher education. Emerson also revealed that many foster youth have been either misinformed or not given enough information about how to attend an institution of higher education.

Recommendations

Jones (2008) addressed the concept that all former foster youth share a common need to be self-sufficient and become productive members in the community. Foster youth have more of a challenge in achieving these tasks, which leads to a negative effect on the educational achievement rates of former foster youth. Too often, foster youth exit the foster care system without the sufficient education needed to progress in adulthood. Research conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau (2013) suggested frequent placement changes, particularly in school, can lead to a poor level of social development. Jones confirmed that placement instability is a risk to a youth's educational progress. Youth who frequently change schools are at risk of falling behind due to delays in enrollment. Having a stable schooling environment can lead to better achievement rates for current and former foster youth.

Zetlin et al. (2010) examined foster youth who were at a high risk of failing school. To better assist their needs and make better recommendations for foster students, a focus group was conducted that included individuals from each sector that had contact with foster youth. They advocated that schools, child welfare agencies, and the individuals involved in their home life must collaborate so these youth can accomplish their educational goals.

Most programs examined were in perpetual conflict between the goals for care and education versus isolation and punishment. Most treatment changes were in favor of

care and education, which turned out to be positive (Brendtro & Mitchell, 2011). There

have also been changes in recent legislation; the Fostering Connections to Success and

Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 added on new policies for child welfare agencies to

provide more support of the needs of foster youth. The intent of these new pieces of

legislation was to address the barriers of disadvantaged children, specifically foster

youth.

   The importance of this study and its findings cannot go unrecognized. More fully

understanding the reasons that motivate and inspire current and former foster youth to

enter and ultimately succeed in college can serve as a guide for college faculty, high

school administrators, and student services professionals in developing programs

supporting foster youth in their academic success. Through this study's interviews with

college-enrolled foster youth and surveys of faculty in charge of special programs for

foster youth, much has been learned about what works and what does not work. There

are wildly successful model programs and uncovering and sharing those with others can

possibly cause a ripple effect that can increase the percentage of foster youth attending

higher education.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Survey

1. Are you male or female?
2. Are you currently enrolled as a student?
3. Are you currently employed?
4. Are you currently employed and a student?
5. If you are a student, what is your area of study? (short answer)
6. Do you currently reside in California?
7. In what city do you live? (short answer)
8. How long have you lived in this city? (short answer)
9. Are you a former foster child?
10. Did you ever live in a group home/licensed children's institution (LCI)?
11. Did you ever live in a homeless shelter?
12. Have you ever WORKED at a group home?
13. Have you ever WORKED at a homeless shelter?
14. Have you ever worked directly with foster youth?
15. Do you know a former foster youth?
16. Are you aware of the success rate of former foster youth?
17. Are you familiar with the term *emancipation*? (short answer)
18. What, if any, is your knowledge of Section 8 funding? (short answer)
19. Are you familiar with the term *AB12*?
20. Are you familiar with the BOG fee waiver?
21. Are you familiar with the Chafee Grant?

APPENDIX B

Interview Questions

1. Do you think foster youth are given enough access to knowledge of higher education?
2. What kinds of educational resources are foster youth given before they turn 18?
3. How do foster youth access information about higher education?
4. Why do you think there are less former foster youth enrolled in higher education?
5. What are the NEEDS of the foster youth who are considering going into college?
6. What is an ILS worker?
7. How well trained are ILS workers?
8. What do you think motivates foster youth to go to college?
9. What are considered "life skills"?
10. How do "life skills" play a part in foster youth's transition into college?

APPENDIX C

Consent Form

Dear Student,

The purpose of this research is to look into former foster care youth's knowledge

of higher education and the benefits that derive from it. This is a thesis being conducted

by Troy Marcus Bailey at California State University, Sacramento. You are invited to

participate in an interview because of your previous or current knowledge of the foster

care system in California.

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You may choose not to

participate. If you decide to participate in this research interview, you may withdraw at

any time prior to when you meet with the researcher. In addition, you may choose not to

answer a particular question without invalidating the rest of your responses during the

interview. If you decide not to participate in this study, you will not be penalized.

Your requested participation in this research involves an interview about your

personal experience in accessing and persisting through higher education; the interview

will take approximately 30-45 minutes. Your responses will be confidential and

anonymous. There is no risk to you in participating in this survey since no identifying

information will be collected such as name, email address, or IP address.

Your participation in the interview indicates you have read this introduction and

consent to have your interview responses included in this research. The results of this

study will be used for scholarly purposes and to assist future foster youth in their ability

to access and persist through higher education. The recording of the interview, notes, and

responses will be destroyed when the research is completed.

If you have any questions about the interview or research process, please feel free

to contact the researcher ███████████████████████████████. You may also

contact the Thesis Faculty Advisor, Dr. Geni Cowan, @ gcowan@csus.edu.

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