

2016

# Postsecondary Strengths, Challenges, and Supports Experienced by Foster Care Alumni College Graduates

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## Citation: Pilot Scholars Version (Modified MLA Style)

Salazar, Amy M.; Jones, Kevin R.; Emerson, John C.; and Mucha, Lauren, "Postsecondary Strengths, Challenges, and Supports Experienced by Foster Care Alumni College Graduates" (2016). *Sociology and Social Work Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 19. [http://pilotscholars.up.edu/soc\\_facpubs/19](http://pilotscholars.up.edu/soc_facpubs/19)

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Journal of College Student Development, Volume 57, Number 3, April 2016,  
pp. 263-279 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2016.0029>



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# Postsecondary Strengths, Challenges, and Supports Experienced by Foster Care Alumni College Graduates

Amy M. Salazar   Kevin R. Jones   John C. Emerson   Lauren Mucha

*Young people transitioning from foster care to college experience unique identities and circumstances that make being successful in college especially challenging. We used qualitative survey data from 248 college graduates who were formerly in foster care to explore the strengths, challenges, and supports they experienced while in college that affected their success. A qualitative content analysis of responses to 3 open-ended survey questions revealed 7 global themes related to participants' college experiences: positive self, overcoming, interpersonal relationships, finances and logistics, academic orientation, physical and mental health, and independent living skills. Subordinate themes are identified and participant quotes are provided to help illuminate participants' postsecondary experiences. A primary goal for this study is to increase awareness of this hidden population on college campuses and provide a better understanding of their unique circumstances and needs. This information can be used by colleges and advocates to improve support services for these youth.*

On any given day there are approximately 100,000 older adolescents in the foster care system, while each year a quarter of these age out of foster care and into adulthood (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). While estimates vary, approximately one third of foster care alumni enroll in postsecondary education during young

adulthood (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010). College dropout rates for foster care alumni are higher than those of the general population and other populations of at-risk youth (Davis, 2006; Day, Dworsky, Fogarty, & Damashek, 2011; Wolanin, 2005). Foster care alumni are present on most college campuses. They are a hidden population—partly by choice due to the stigma often attached to this identity, and partly due to the fact that being a ward of the court is legally protected information. Either way, college-attending foster care alumni are a vulnerable group of students with unique strengths, supports, and challenges that affect their experiences in higher education. This study provides a qualitative exploration of these experiences.

Foster care alumni disproportionately experience many identities the field of education has deemed underserved and worthy of specialized supports, including overrepresentation of racial minorities (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2004), those experiencing disabilities (Burley & Halpern, 2001; Smithgall, Gladden, Howard, Goerge, & Courtney, 2004), individuals having mental health challenges (Keller, Salazar, & Courtney, 2010; McMillen et al., 2005), and coming primarily from low-income backgrounds (Davis, 2006; Wolanin, 2005). In addition, the situations of foster care alumni are further complicated by a variety of circumstances more unique to this population.

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One involves commonly lacking even the most basic supports that families traditionally offer, such as an emergency place to live, financial support, or someone to cosign a loan or apartment lease (Courtney et al., 2010; Wolanin, 2005). Students transitioning from foster care to college move from intense system dependency while in foster care to an abrupt independence when starting college life—a level of independence that American society does not expect from young adults who were not in foster care (Courtney, 2009). Another difficulty involves having complex maltreatment histories and subsequent trauma-related behavioral and mental health challenges (McMillen et al., 2005; Pecora et al., 2003). These challenges often continue into college, and include lack of access to appropriate mental health services (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010; Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005; Lovitt & Emerson, 2008; Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005; Salazar, 2012). Finally, the identity of “foster care alumni,” which often translates to lowered expectations (Martin & Jackson, 2002), may cause additional challenges for some youth. Stigma associated with the foster care label, or a desire to leave the foster care identity behind as they embark on their postsecondary careers, may prevent students from self-disclosing and thus prohibit access to needed and available resources.

The intersection of various identities, characteristics, and life experiences among this population can make moving through and being successful in college extremely, and uniquely, challenging. Despite this,

foster youth have yet to follow the path of low-income persons, racial and ethnic minorities, women, and students with disabilities in having their need for higher education recognized and having concentrated and effective efforts made on their behalf to ensure their access to higher education and their success in higher education. (Wolanin, 2005, p. v).

The Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 explicitly identifies youth in foster care as intended targets of postsecondary support programming (Law Center for Foster Care & Education, 2008), meaning the education community has a legislated responsibility to help improve the outcomes of this vulnerable population. To address the needs of this population, an increasing number of college campuses are developing campus support programs and other specialized resources that target these youths’ unique needs and experiences.

### COLLEGE SUPPORTS AVAILABLE TO FOSTER CARE ALUMNI

Some supports have been made available from the federal government to foster care alumni to help ameliorate some obstacles to higher education. The primary federal resource is the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program. This program provides funding to states to offer transition services to youth aging out of the foster care system. While states are free to determine what services they will provide with this funding, many offer postsecondary supports such as assistance with filling out financial aid and application forms and securing housing and transportation for the school year as well as during school breaks. The Education and Training Voucher (ETV) is another component of the Chafee program. This voucher provides up to \$5,000 per year toward postsecondary expenses for foster care alumni. Unfortunately, while the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program is available in every state, many youth are either not aware that these supports exist, fail to meet eligibility criteria, are still in college when they age out of eligibility, or have specialized needs that go beyond the scope of these programs.

In order to better address the needs of this population and offer campus-focused

support, a growing number of 2-year and 4-year colleges are also beginning to develop targeted support systems for their students coming from foster care. Common supports offered by campus support programs, some of which are reviewed by Dworsky and Pérez (2010) and Hernandez and Naccarato (2010), include scholarships, priority access to housing and course registration, tailored academic services, mentoring, and referrals to off-campus services, among others.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The literature on resilience and social capital provided the theoretical framework for this qualitative examination of student strengths, challenges, and supports. *Resilience* is “a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity” (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000, p. 543). The resilience lens provides a strengths-based look at the lives of youth who have experienced difficulties, providing an opportunity to understand how healthy development happens in the context of significant risk exposure (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Resilience is not a discrete personal characteristic, but rather a “state of being” that develops from the interaction between people and their environments (Hunter & Chandler, 1999; Jones, 2012). Resilience theory is particularly relevant to this study due to the very high levels of risk experienced by youth with foster care experience and the relative success and high achievement of the study sample. There are a number of personal skills and characteristics that play a role in the development of resilience, including social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, and a sense of purpose and a bright future (Benard, 1997). These attributes include a number of specific skills that may be particularly important for youth transitioning from foster care to college, including the ability

to be flexible and use good communication skills. They also include competence and confidence in planning for the future, critically assessing one’s situation, and locating and effectively using resources. Having a sense of purpose and a bright future indicates that a person is goal-directed, achievement-motivated, and possesses the persistence and optimism that facilitates finding and acting on meaning in one’s life (Benard, 1997). Environmental factors affect resilience as well, with lower levels of environmental stress providing protection from a range of negative outcomes (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007).

Resilience in young people is often measured by success in education, employment, self-sufficiency, relationships and support systems, and positive participation and contribution to the larger community (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Jones, 2013). Resilience in education can be supported by facilitating the development of self-authorship in young people, a process of self-discovery through which one comes to understand oneself, one’s relationships, and one’s ability to take charge of the “story” of their lives and relationships (Baxter Magolda, 2008; Pizzolato, 2003). Pizzolato (2003) suggests that for high-risk students, processing difficult personal experiences is an integral part of the self-authorship process, which has particular relevance for foster care alumni who continue to struggle with the long-term effects of maltreatment, separation from family, and other experiences over which they had no control.

*Social capital*, which refers to the resources and support available through relationships with others (Coleman, 1988), is a significant factor “in a successful adaptation to early adulthood” (Jones, 2013, p. 27). The three main components of social capital are the quantity of a person’s relationships, the quality of those relationships, and the value of the

resources that are available through those relationships (Astone, Constance, Schoen, & Kim, 1999). Social capital can come in the form of emotional, psychological, physical, informational, instrumental, and material assistance, and has been shown to mediate the ability to cope with stress (Metzger, 2008). Sources of social capital are varied, but generally include family, school, peers, and the neighborhood or community (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2012).

For youth transitioning out of foster care, the development of social capital provides an opportunity to build or rebuild critical connections and support that may have been lost or compromised by traumatic experiences, separation from family, and restrictive or misguided child welfare policies (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2012). The value of certain relationships may differ for foster care alumni compared to other youth, as several studies have found that closer relationships with biological families after aging out are associated with lower levels of resilience, possibly because these family systems may still have significant challenges with poverty, mental health, substance abuse, or violence (Jones, 2012, 2013). This makes the presence of positive, nonfamilial relationships particularly important for foster care alumni.

Even for those youth who exit the foster care system with valuable social connections, relationships with important adults tend to fade over time, with fewer than 1 in 5 young adults discharged from foster care reporting the presence of an important nonfamilial adult in their life 2 years after aging out (Jones, 2013). Perry (2006) found that a disruption to the social network of youth in foster care increased the risk of depression more than sixfold, while the presence of multiple strong social networks (e.g., peers, foster families) was associated with reduced psychological stress. There is strong evidence to suggest the

presence and development of social capital from a range of sources is an important aspect of resilience for youth who have experienced life challenges, and especially for youth with foster care experience (Jones, 2013).

## PURPOSE AND IMPORTANCE OF THIS STUDY

Despite the variety of challenges that foster care alumni face, many combine their strengths and resources to overcome personal, economic, and academic obstacles and are successful in attending and graduating from college. However, little is known about how this population experiences college life or what factors may play a role in facilitating postsecondary success. Approaches to improving the postsecondary outcomes of foster care alumni are typically framed in terms of building on strengths, making supports available, and reducing barriers. Thus this exploratory study used inductive qualitative content analysis of three open-ended survey questions to identify the strengths, challenges, and supports related to college success from the perspective of a large sample of foster care alumni college graduates.

The specific research questions addressed in this study are:

1. What strengths and supports do foster care alumni draw upon to succeed in college?
2. What challenges do foster care alumni face during college?
3. What are some of the keys to overcoming these challenges?

A primary purpose of the study was to gain insight directly from the population of interest and to explore aspects of their experiences that were helpful and important in addition to those that were challenging and difficult to overcome. Other studies have qualitatively

explored college access (Day, Reibschleger, Dworky, Damashek, & Fogarty, 2012) and the college experiences and life circumstances of small samples of students from foster care at 4-year universities (Lovitt & Emerson, 2008; Hines et al., 2005). However, previous studies have been limited by lack of peer review or by very small sample sizes and little range in terms of geography and type of postsecondary institution. This study expands on these studies to include the perspectives of a much larger and more diverse sample of young people who experienced a wide variety of child welfare systems and successfully graduated from universities, community colleges, and graduate schools all across the United States. In addition, this qualitative study gives context to a quantitative study of factors associated with college retention for this sample of young people (see Salazar, 2012).

An additional purpose of this study was to inform college personnel who are not familiar with the higher education challenges that these youth face and to encourage the improvement of supports, both formal and informal, made available to them. Many college campuses are largely unprepared to provide the kinds of support that foster care alumni require, in part because the needs of former foster youth on college campuses are often not adequately understood. This study begins to address these issues, providing practical information for college personnel, parents and foster parents, child welfare case workers, and counselors who wish to make the college experiences of foster care alumni more successful.

## METHOD

### Procedures

We examined a subset of data collected between July 2010 and September 2010 as part of a larger study exploring the experiences of foster care alumni before and during

college, in addition to the life circumstances of participants after college (see Salazar, 2011, 2012, for information about the larger study). Data were collected through an online survey, which was developed by the authors and consisted of a variety of closed- and open-ended questions. We explored the responses to 3 author-developed, open-ended questions included in the online survey: What are some of your strengths/skills that helped you be successful in higher education? What barriers or unmet needs did you have that made it difficult to make progress in college? and What would you say are factors that are critical to success in college and what advice would you give to other foster youth? The “Foster Care and College” study was approved by the Portland State University Institutional Review Board.

Potential participants were invited to participate in the study by e-mails sent from Foster Care to Success scholarship program staff. The e-mails contained a link to the online survey, which led to an electronic informed consent form. Those who agreed to participate were then given access to the Foster Care and College online survey. Of 764 potential participants, 646 were sent e-mails that were deliverable (i.e., did not bounce back) and 329 responded to the survey link included in the e-mail; of these, 248 had graduated from college and provided responses to the open-ended questions examined in this study.

### Sample

Study participants were recipients of college scholarships from the Casey Family Scholarship Program and/or the Foster Care to Success (formerly Orphan Foundation of America) nationwide scholarship program between 2001 and 2009. All scholarship recipients received foster care services from their state child welfare system before entering college. Participants' ages ranged from 20 to 37 years, with the mean age being 25.7 years ( $SD = 2.6$ ).

Three fourths (77.4%) of participants were female. The mean age of foster care entry was 11.4 years ( $SD = 5.0$ ), and participants spent an average of 8.5 years in the system ( $SD = 5.1$ ). The average number of foster care placements was 4.9 ( $SD = 4.9$ ). A bachelor's degree was the highest degree obtained by 74.4% of participants, while an associate's degree was the highest obtained by 7.7% of participants. Almost one fifth (17.9%) of participants had earned a graduate degree.

### Qualitative Content Analysis

Qualitative content analysis is a common approach to analyzing text data (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009), including responses to open-ended survey questions (Buntine & Read, 2007; Porter, van Teijlingen, Yip, & Bhattacharya, 2007). A conventional inductive approach to qualitative content analysis "is usually appropriate when existing theory or research literature on a phenomenon is limited" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1277). Due to the exploratory nature of the research questions and the limited information available about the college experiences of foster care alumni, inductive qualitative content analysis provided an effective approach to understanding the range of characteristics and experiences that affected participants during their college years. As an inductive technique, qualitative content analysis does not test hypotheses or subscribe to predetermined frameworks; rather, key ideas and concepts that emerge from the data shape the analysis and determine the findings.

Qualitative content analysis procedures include open coding, grouping codes conceptually to create superordinate categories, and organizing categories into more general themes (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). Participant responses to the three open-ended questions were entered into a spreadsheet and coded line by line by one researcher to identify "lowest-order premises evident in the text"

(Attride-Stirling, 2001, p. 388). To check for coding reliability, 306 randomly selected responses (20% of total coded responses) were also coded by a second researcher. Intercoder reliability was calculated, using Cohen's kappa as the index of comparison. The reliability check yielded a 93.1% rate of agreement and a Cohen's kappa of .85 (95% CI: [0.79, 0.91]), indicating an "almost perfect" level of agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977).

As connections between codes became apparent, coded segments of text were grouped into categories that described more general principles or characteristics present in participants' responses. These higher-level thematic categories were then organized into "meaningful clusters" (Patton, 2002), comprising global themes that provide a general description of major concepts derived from the data. Quotes that exemplify each theme were then chosen to better illustrate their meanings (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Finally, consistent with conventional qualitative content analysis, the findings of this study were considered in light of existing research with implications presented in the discussion section (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

In addition to checking for intercoder reliability, a variety of strategies were used to increase the trustworthiness of the findings. First, 3 foster care alumni who were preparing to graduate from college were consulted during survey development to review survey items and ensure item appropriateness. Second, during data collection participants typed their own responses to the survey due to the survey being online: this prevented transcription interpretation error because no such phase was needed. Finally, because member checking was impossible due to the anonymous nature of the survey, the themes emerging from analysis were shared with 4 foster care experts: 1 foster care alumnus who had graduated from college, 2 independent living case workers who work



directly with foster youth attending college, and 1 educational advocate for youth in foster care. The full findings section including participant quotes was then reviewed by an additional foster care alumnus college graduate who also has experience working with youth aging out of foster care. This review process did not result in any changes to categories or themes as each reviewer indicated that the findings as presented resonated strongly with their personal and professional experiences.

## FINDINGS

Analysis of participant responses yielded 7 global themes that describe characteristics and circumstances that played an important role—as strengths, challenges, or critical factors—in the postsecondary experiences of the foster care alumni surveyed. The themes are: (a) positive self, (b) overcoming, (c) interpersonal relationships, (d) finances and logistics, (e) academic orientation and skills, (f) physical and mental health, and (g) independent living skills. Although there was a close relationship between the positive and negative aspects of each theme (e.g., healthy interpersonal relationships were identified as strengths and unhealthy interpersonal relationships were challenges), the findings are presented in two sections in order to highlight the unique qualities that each type of strength, support, or challenge represented for participants. The first section describes significant strengths and supports participants identified in their college experiences, and the second section addresses major barriers and challenges reported. A number of participant quotes are included to better illustrate the themes, and in those quotes we have kept the grammar and spelling as the participants wrote them (e.g., “I went thru 14 years of abuse . . .”) except in cases where there was an obvious mistake (e.g., “there” instead of “their”).

## Strengths and Supports

*Positive Self.* One theme that emerged from participant responses related to college success was possessing a positive attitude and outlook. Organizing themes included inner strength, self-determination, open-mindedness, and finding opportunity in adversity. Participants referred to characteristics such as “being open-minded, caring, and outgoing, as well as friendly and personable,” having “emotional intelligence,” being optimistic, making healthy decisions, and working hard. Many participants maintained strength through self-determination. For some participants, being self-determined meant avoiding drugs and alcohol or maintaining a healthy distance from biological family members that hindered them in reaching their goals. These and other decisions required courage, another characteristic that several participants identified as a valuable asset in their college journeys.

Participants also described tapping into positive thoughts and emotions as a key source of resilience. Participants recommended using negative experiences to create positive futures. One participant stated, “Others will have us to believe that we are inadequate because of our experiences, but it’s quite the opposite. We are stronger individuals than most because of what we’ve endured in our lives.” Another participant said her experience in the child welfare system taught her how to reach out to people. Participants said they believe it is necessary to be proactive in order to feel “self-empowered” and develop skills of self-advocacy.

*Overcoming.* The desire and strength to overcome adversity was also important for success in college. While overcoming may be considered an aspect of positive self, this particular characteristic was expressed by participants in a way that elevated its meaning beyond other attitudes and beliefs. Participants

described how others' expectations influenced their desire to improve their life situation. Some found strength through wanting to prove wrong those who did not believe they could be successful. One participant stated, "I used everything negative from my past, prior to foster care, and turned that into my strength to succeed." Others found strength through a desire to feel normal. Several participants wanted to achieve things that their parents or others around them had not been able to achieve. One participant said she didn't want the life her mom had, but instead wanted a college degree or two in order to be self-sufficient. Many participants expressed that strength to succeed in college came from a more general spirit to overcome: "I went thru 14 years of abuse . . . 4 years of college was a sign that I made it!"

Participants described using a variety of characteristics that can inhibit success to actually work in their favor. For example, several participants explained how they used stubbornness as strength. Fear of failure and perfectionism were other characteristics that some participants used to their advantage. One successful college graduate explained that he "feared failure more than I did death," which he felt ultimately contributed to his success. Another participant said she used people's negative energy "as a spring board to success."

*Interpersonal Relationships.* The presence of strong, positive interpersonal relationships was reported by participants as being critical to postsecondary success. Organizing themes included developing strong on- and off-campus relationships, maintaining open communication, and taking risks. Participants described a variety of types of supportive relationships that were beneficial, from on-campus connections with teachers and dorm mates to continued support from previous healthy connections. One participant explained, "What kept me successful was not

my intelligence, but my ability to connect with people on my journey from foster care to college student." In addition to the importance of receiving support, some participants also described the desire to be a role model for others, including younger siblings, as a significant strength.

Many participants described the importance of developing supportive relationships in the college community. Developing friendships was a common theme. Participants said having a positive peer group was important for warding off depression and negativity. One participant said it was important to "risk part of yourself to make that human connection—I do believe it is vital to success. I don't care WHO you are, no one makes it on this earth alone." Connecting and talking with others who have struggled and can offer good advice was a common recommendation, as was participation in clubs, organizations, and extracurricular activities.

Several participants also emphasized the importance of living on campus in order to be surrounded by an academically supportive community and with other students with similar goals. For some participants, living on campus meant fewer distractions while ensuring their basic needs were met, including housing, transportation, food, and access to advisors. Some participants said it helped to identify themselves as foster care alumni in order to be connected with people on campus who could help. The importance of maintaining contact with case workers and counselors was also discussed. One participant said, "If they don't know they can't help, and if you don't ask the questions, you won't get your answers."

Participants also expressed the importance of finding academic supports on their campuses. Many students discussed the benefits of connecting with professors and other college staff. One participant advised, "Seek

out mentorships with faculty and professors with whom you share interests.” Participants also discussed the importance of connecting with advisors and tutors to maintain the kind of “studious atmosphere” that is necessary for success.

*Finances and Logistics.* Financial resources and skills were described as critical for college success, although the vast majority of responses regarding finances related to challenges. Learning to access financial resources, especially funding sources specifically for youth in foster care, and how to manage money were top suggestions. One participant said that being “very good at saving money” was a major strength, and another advised using the college counseling center to become educated on finances and budgeting. Some participants recommended avoiding student loans, while others encouraged youth to seek out resources they would not have to pay back, like scholarships and grants. Keeping close track of finances was also discussed.

*Academic Orientation and Skills.* The next major theme involved having an academic orientation or strong academic skills. Organizing themes included personal characteristics, such as IQ, academic curiosity, enjoyment of learning, ability to focus, and love of reading, as well as specific academic skills such as computer skills and being a fast learner. One participant summarized her strengths as relating to teachers, being naturally good in school, and making school always come first. Participants also discussed the importance of setting academic goals and staying focused: “Keep your eye on the prize, dream about it, think about it, talk about it. Focus, focus, focus.” Other participants discussed the importance of having a clear postsecondary plan, and working with advisors to put the plan into action.

Many participants also discussed the importance of assuming academic respon-

sibility. Some spoke of this in abstract terms such as being organized, planning ahead, and putting school first. Others, however, discussed concrete actions such as going to class, completing coursework, and practicing time management techniques. One participant’s list of actions for academic responsibility included, “Don’t skip class, get to know your teacher, use your resources on campus (tutoring, scholarships, counseling, etc.).” Another student explained the importance of study groups and understanding one’s learning style. Additional practical advice included using a planner, setting aside time for daily studying, and keeping up with readings and assignments.

*Physical and Mental Health.* Some participants addressed the importance of developing and maintaining good mental health. One participant said, “I would encourage foster care youth currently pursuing their degrees to seek emotional support if they don’t yet have it. It’s integral to success.” Other participants advised youth to seek professional help to deal with family issues, difficult past experiences, and to help with the transition from foster care to independent living.

Some participants emphasized the importance of maintaining physical health by exercising and eating well. Others stressed the importance of learning to cook healthy foods on a budget and getting enough sleep. One participant said, “Your health is the most important thing: if you do not have that, then you cannot succeed, so take care of yourself.” Finally, participants addressed the importance of self-care in achieving college success, offering a number of specific recommendations such as finding a healthy balance between school, work, and social life.

*Independent Living Skills.* Participants described a variety of independent living skills that served as strengths contributing to college success, including budgeting, critical thinking skills, leadership skills, organization, problem-

solving skills, time-management skills, and professionalism. Participants suggested that other youth entering college from foster care should find and use the resources available to them to make the transition to independence more successful. One participant said the most important factors for success were, “Time management, not being afraid to ask for help, utilizing all of your available resources . . . Ask if you don’t know!!!” Others were more specific in their advice, urging foster youth to learn to cook, use a planner, and stay focused, with “not too much hanging out or partying.”

## Barriers and Challenges

*Negative Attitudes of Self.* Participants who were not able to tap into positive thoughts often found negative beliefs to be a barrier to success. Low self-confidence and low self-esteem made academic progress difficult. “Sometimes I didn’t believe in myself,” one participant shared. “In these times, I needed my friends and faculty to encourage me to continue.” Others stated that they felt abandoned, lonely, and afraid of the unknown. Some contemplated giving up. One participant said he felt like quitting often because he thought he’d never make it anyway. Some participants feared failing and having nothing to fall back on, while others worried about family members, especially siblings, that they were leaving behind.

*Discouragement.* Some participants felt discouraged and struggled to find the strength to overcome the challenges they faced in college. In some cases it was a matter of, “too much work, too much homework, the daily pressure of life.” Others felt discouraged by lack of direction once they started a postsecondary program, or an inability to see the value or meaning of their efforts. Sometimes the desire to overcome was mixed with doubts, and one participant said the high expectations of others “both made me push hard to succeed, but also made me feel like all the people who never

thought I’d make it could be right.”

*Lack of or Unhealthy Interpersonal Relationships.* Many participants described the challenge of attending college without the benefit of a supportive family or other connections. Being disconnected from others made some participants feel that no one was on their side to provide comfort, help, or encouragement. Others avoided contacting significant adults because they felt guilty or didn’t want to be a burden. Another common challenge was dealing with difficult, time-consuming, and sometimes abusive relationship events. Participants described death, divorce, and other losses as particularly difficult. One participant was negatively affected by his brother going to jail. A number of participants worried about siblings that were still in foster care, while others felt anxiety about absent or newly present biological parents. In some cases, participants found that distancing themselves from negative family relationships was key.

Intimate relationships also caused challenges for some participants. One participant explained, “I was in an abusive relationship for 5 years while in college. . . . I did not have any family support and had very few friends.” Participants explained that difficult relationships compounded the significant daily challenges they were already facing.

*Finances and Logistics.* Financial and other logistical challenges presented many difficulties for participants in this study. One participant summed it up with one word: “Funding. Every single year, I was extremely worried that I would not have funding to attend school the following year.” Other participants described the stress and anxiety caused by having to wait for financial aid. Funding delays caused holds in registration and presented difficulties in buying books, paying rent, getting transportation, getting medical care, and taking care of many other

needs. Participants described many instances of going without important material items due to lack of money. One participant could not afford a computer, cell phone, or work clothes. Participants also missed out on social events because of lack of funds, causing them to feel excluded from social life on campus. Many participants had to work a lot, some at three or four different jobs, which created additional problems with academics and stress.

Other life circumstances, such as parenting, pregnancy, and military service, presented logistical challenges. Some participants were caring for young children while in college. One participant described falling behind in classes when her son got sick, and another struggled due to spending time caring for her younger brother while he changed foster care placements.

*Academic Skills and Supports.* Academic-related challenges posed significant difficulty for some participants. Some challenges involved specific academic skills, such as reading, writing, and studying. One participant said he “lacked skills that I missed during foster care transitions in high school. Can’t do well in college without knowing how to write.” Participants attributed these deficits to school transitions, absences, and poor preparation in high school.

Participants explained how the college environment exacerbated these deficits by having a culture of “weeding out” rather than one of support. Some participants did not ask for help because they did not want professors to feel sorry for them or give them special treatment. Participants also reported a lack of knowledge that would have contributed to improved academics. For example, several participants described a lack of clear goals as an obstacle to success. One participant reported, “I was so uneducated about taking the right courses and financing them in a smart way.” Many students also referred to struggles

with learning disabilities and the challenge of finding appropriate supports. Finally, the transition to the college environment itself proved challenging to some. One participant was intimidated going from a world of having no friends to one full of people and new ideas.

*Physical and Mental Health.* Both physical and mental health challenges were difficult for participants. Mental health challenges were most commonly expressed. Many of the challenges shared by participants were clinical in nature, with depression, anxiety, and PTSD mentioned often. One participant identified traumatic memories as the most significant barrier to success. Others struggled with eating disorders as well as feelings of abandonment and shame. Some participants avoided seeking help in order to escape the stigma associated with mental illness, while others did not have access to treatment. Participants’ mental health challenges caused feelings of alienation even in environments that would have felt supportive otherwise.

While many participants identified clinical mental health challenges, others expressed a more general sense of fear or stress during their time in college. One participant hid his fear so others would think he was okay. Another participant explained the fear of stigma related to being in foster care, and expressed regret for not coming out of the “foster care closet.” Others described a general sense of being overwhelmed by the workload and the stresses of daily life in college.

Participants also experienced challenges related to physical health. Health challenges included accidents, illnesses, physical disabilities, poor diet, and lack of access to health care. One participant described the aftermath of a severe accident that forced her out of school, while another mentioned the health impacts of “my very unbalanced diet.” Several participants were affected by a lack of health insurance or access to basic medical care.

### *Independent Living Skills and Needs.*

Participants expressed a variety of independent living needs, which often arose from lack of available funding. A common need expressed by participants was housing. One participant spent a full semester in college sleeping in a van. Another participant explained the challenges of obtaining housing without having a cosigner.

Some participants expressed difficulty with managing finances, while others struggled with managing time and staying organized. One participant said, "I was just immature. A better adult support system would have been helpful. I needed better money management skills." Other participants reported difficulty with locating resources in a new and unfamiliar environment.

## DISCUSSION

### Summary and Interpretation of Findings

The findings yielded many themes that were consistent across the 3 dimensions of strengths, supports, and challenges addressed by the study's research questions. For example, having positive beliefs and good mental health were identified as important strengths related to college success, while negative attitudes of self and poor mental health posed challenges for participants. Participants likewise suggested that maintaining relationships that support positivity and seeking mental health services when needed were critical for success. Another example of consistency in the findings is the identification of strong study skills as a strength, poor study skills as a challenge, and seeking support with study skills as a key piece of advice from foster care alumni to other youth in foster care. The consistency across domains supports the integrity of the identified themes and suggests that the issues highlighted in the findings of the study may be of particular interest to

professionals, policy-makers, and researchers.

This study highlights a variety of unique challenges experienced by foster care alumni, such as some students playing parenting roles for younger siblings still in foster care, having to learn how to participate in nonabusive relationships, navigating complex family issues still occurring such as dealing with biological parents asking them for support, catching up on academic skills they fell behind on while in foster care, lacking basic skills such as cooking and budgeting finances, and feelings of alienation and abandonment due to past traumas, among others. In addition to highlighting the unique body of challenges that foster care alumni face while in college, the findings also illuminate the resilience and determination that many of these students demonstrate to overcome adversities that are not part of the college experience of most young adults. Participants' dual focus on individual factors (e.g., internal strength, focus, determination) and contextual factors (e.g., strong interpersonal relationships, an academically focused environment) contributing to their ability to persevere was consistent with the resilience literature (Benard, 1997; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007). The combination of challenging experiences, early independence, and stigmatizing identities mentioned by students created significant challenges but also helped many students develop the drive and tools to overcome, often through self-advocacy. This perseverance among participants despite obstacles supports the contention of Pizzolato (2003) that an empowering sense of self-authorship may be promoted for high-risk youth through adverse experiences as well as through interpersonal relationships.

The findings also reflect the primary components of social capital theory discussed earlier, in particular, the quality of relationships and the value of the resources available through them. Students discussed supports

that provided a wide array of resources, both college-focused and more general. Students' social networks expanded as they reached college to include individuals that provided college-specific knowledge and supports, such as teachers and fellow students, while also continuing to access and benefit from network connections that were present before college. Participants reported significant difficulties dealing with biological families, a finding that supports the conclusion of Jones (2012) that for youth in foster care, regular contact with biological families during college can be both a curse and a blessing. The types of resources participants accessed were also quite varied, ranging from emotional support and encouragement to tutoring and financial education. The findings suggest that successful social capital building was crucial in overcoming a variety of postsecondary challenges and achieving college success.

Many of the sentiments these youth expressed coincided with the at-risk identities discussed earlier. For example, financial hardship was one of the biggest obstacles identified by youth, supporting the findings by Courtney et al. (2010) and Hernandez and Naccarato (2010) regarding the hardships of needing to work and having difficulty paying for college. An additional theme supporting the findings of previous research with foster youth (Hines et al., 2005; Lovitt & Emerson, 2008) was the importance of stable mental health during the college process. Some participants referred to complex clinical problems, such as depression, anxiety, and lack of access to mental health supports. Participants also discussed experiences of alienation and abandonment resulting from mental health challenges, which impacted their college performance. Other participants explained the value of positive mental health in less clinical terms, such as self-empowerment and engagement in the world around them.

## Implications

It is encouraging to find that many of the obstacles identified by youth are similar to those being addressed by campus support programs designed for foster care alumni; however, only 16 of the 248 participants attended colleges that offered campus support services aimed at foster care alumni. Thus an important next step is encouraging more colleges and universities to become aware of the presence and unique needs of this population on their campuses. Even when a full support program is not warranted or possible, there are a variety of steps colleges can take to bolster students' social capital and promote resilience. One popular low-to-no-cost approach is assigning a faculty or student support staff member as the foster care alumni "expert" who can be a knowledgeable and accessible resource for students. Campus experts develop knowledge about the unique college-related issues that foster care alumni face, such as the need for year-round housing (foster care alumni often have nowhere to go during school breaks when the dorms close, and have no one to cosign an apartment lease), how to apply for financial aid as an "independent student," and funding streams available to foster care alumni so they can more effectively help students work through accessing these resources. Campus experts can be an especially beneficial addition to students' social capital, as they are prosocial connections that often have the knowledge to access a wide variety of resources and connections that can be valuable to students.

Colleges can also support students in getting firmly tied into the academic environment (e.g., connecting with professors), which can lead to stronger academic networks that can pay off educationally as well as in relation to future career opportunities. These academic connections also provide a positive experience of prosocial connections that are key to

TABLE 1.  
Recommendations for Colleges Based on Study Themes

Theme	Recommendations
Positive Self and Overcoming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be encouraging, refrain from judgment, and acknowledge resilience</li> <li>• Be proactive in terms of identifying and offering resources</li> <li>• Be aware young people may still be experiencing chaotic circumstances</li> </ul>
Interpersonal Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assign a faculty/student support staff member as foster care alumni “expert”</li> <li>• Start a college-focused mentoring program with faculty and staff as mentors</li> <li>• Provide supports that other students receive from parents, such as help moving in and out of dorms, care packages, etc.</li> <li>• Facilitate students’ campus integration by informing them of clubs/ activities</li> </ul>
Finances and Logistics, Independent Living Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure financial aid staff can navigate funding streams specifically for foster youth</li> <li>• Provide temporary support for students to cover essentials such as books, food, and rent if financial aid is not released to students in a timely manner</li> <li>• Provide child care for students who are parents</li> <li>• Offer flexible housing options including year-round housing for students who have no apartment cosigner or nowhere to go during summers or holidays</li> <li>• Develop local partnerships that allow students to borrow, be given, or buy at reduced cost necessities such as laptops, books, clothes, and food</li> </ul>
Academic Orientation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide diverse and intensive academic and skill development services (including tutoring) for students who are not fully prepared for college</li> <li>• Offer comprehensive advising and academic planning support for students</li> </ul>
Physical and Mental Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve and expand campus mental health services, including adopting a trauma-informed framework and offering foster care alumni support groups</li> </ul>

building social capital. Another suggestion for promoting resilience is providing foster care alumni with the opportunity to participate in leadership roles. These could be general campus leadership positions or, if students are interested, focusing on helping colleges brainstorm solutions for better reaching and serving foster care alumni on campus. This could be mutually beneficial, as schools could learn to improve their services for this population while students benefit from developing characteristics and connections associated with resilience. Faculty mentoring programs on college campuses can positively affect academic performance and student

retention (Campbell & Campbell, 1997), and peer mentoring programs have the potential to address social support, campus community involvement, and other factors that are demonstrated indicators of resilience (Crisp, 2010). Additional recommendations for how colleges may go about improving foster youth-focused supports that parallel the themes found in this study are listed in Table 1.

In addition to providing foster youth-focused services, colleges and universities must also figure out a means for identifying these young people. Students’ FAFSA applications allow them to identify as wards of the court; however, this information can sometimes



be challenging for campus programs to obtain. Other means for identifying students with foster care experience include asking the admissions department to add a self-identifying question on the admissions application, connecting with local independent living and ETV programs, doing outreach to campus departments and programs that may come into contact with foster care alumni and asking them to provide referrals, and actively advertising programming specific to foster youth so that young people can self-identify (M. Raap, University of Washington Campus Champions program, personal communication, July 3, 2014).

Furthermore, some of the needs expressed by the participants in this study are likely to become more common on college campuses as disadvantaged students of all backgrounds are attending college at increasing rates (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010). For example, while many campuses offer counseling services, they are sometimes insufficient to meet the needs of students coming from backgrounds of abuse, neglect, or community violence. Dworsky and Pérez (2010) explain that some campus programs to support foster youth have either expanded the cap on the yearly number of counseling sessions available to students or begun providing referrals and treatment funding for their foster care alumni students who cannot get the mental health support they need on campus. Campus counseling services may be the only access to mental health services for many students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and an investment in improving these services, such as by increasing availability and adopting a trauma-informed counseling framework, could be beneficial not only to students but to the school itself in terms of improved student performance.

Finally, a crucial next step is advancing the research in terms of what works to support the postsecondary goals of foster care alumni in

light of their strengths and challenges. While campus support programs have received positive feedback from the youth they serve (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010) and other approaches, such as mentoring and independent living programs, show at least some promise in relation to improving college outcomes (Burley, 2009; Montgomery, Donkoh, & Underhill, 2006), there are currently no rigorously evaluated approaches that are known to improve the higher education outcomes of these youth. Clarifying and testing program theory, with the themes identified in this study as potential intervention targets, would be an invaluable step in an area of work severely lacking in evidence of impact.

## Conclusion

This study offers an in-depth perspective into the college experiences of a unique and hidden population: young adults who were previously in foster care. Their insights and recommendations about succeeding in higher education present important information that can be used by college support personnel and advocates to guide the improvement of support systems to help bolster persistence and graduation rates for these underrepresented students. Many experts have compiled guidelines and recommendations for how colleges, child welfare professionals, and other caring adults can support the postsecondary success of foster care alumni (e.g., Casey Family Programs, 2010, 2011; Davis, 2006; Dworsky & Pérez, 2010; Wolanin, 2005). When colleges understand the obstacles these students face and intentionally explore how they might play a role in ameliorating these obstacles, they help pave the way for students to be able to realize the lifelong benefits that higher education offers.

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