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# Stories of the 3%: Foster Care Alumni Narratives of Resilience and Postsecondary Attainment

## Abstract

Although education continues to be a pathway for social mobility, disparities remain in post-secondary attainment for traditionally marginalized populations such as the half-million youth in foster care (Children's Bureau, 2016). Due to multiple personal, social, and system barriers, only 46% of foster youth will earn a high school or GED diploma, and less than 3% will enroll in postsecondary education (Naccarato, Brophy & Courtney, 2010; Sarubbi, Parker, & Sponsler, 2016). Barriers impacting foster care alumni (FCA) have been widely documented, yet their narratives of resilience receive less attention. This study employs a participatory action research design in which FCA participants become researchers and engage in all aspects of the research process in sharing their stories and the tools they utilized to achieve postsecondary success. Funds of Knowledge serves as the guiding conceptual framework to understand the diverse assets of this population. Study findings demonstrate five key tools FCA employ in their pursuit of education attainment. These findings fall within in two larger emergent categories of (1) Funds of Knowledge as Resiliency Strategies and (2) External Supports Mechanism. Implications of the study offer key strategies for student affairs practitioners, faculty, and policymakers to better support the resiliency and success of these students. This study offers methodological and theoretical significance, as well as embedded benefits for FCA and their advocates through policy and programming.

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Stories of the 3%: Foster Care Alumni Narratives of Resilience and Postsecondary  
Attainment

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A Dissertation  
Presented to  
the Faculty of the Morgridge College of Education  
University of Denver

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

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by  
Molly Sarubbi  
June 2019  
Advisor: Dr. Judy Marquez Kiyama

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Advisor: Dr. Judy Marquez Kiyama  
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### **Abstract**

Although education continues to be a pathway for social mobility, disparities remain in post-secondary attainment for traditionally marginalized populations such as the half-million youth in foster care (Children's Bureau, 2016). Due to multiple personal, social, and system barriers, only 46% of foster youth will earn a high school or GED diploma, and less than 3% will enroll in postsecondary education (Naccarato, Brophy & Courtney, 2010; Sarubbi, Parker, & Sponsler, 2016). Barriers impacting foster care alumni (FCA) have been widely documented, yet their narratives of resilience receive less attention. This study employs a participatory action research design in which FCA participants become researchers and engage in all aspects of the research process in sharing their stories and the tools they utilized to achieve postsecondary success. Funds of Knowledge serves as the guiding conceptual framework to understand the diverse assets of this population. Study findings demonstrate five key tools FCA employ in their pursuit of education attainment. These findings fall within in two larger emergent categories of (1) Funds of Knowledge as Resiliency Strategies and (2) External Supports Mechanism. Implications of the study offer key strategies for student affairs practitioners, faculty, and policymakers to better support the resiliency and success of these students. This study offers methodological and theoretical significance, as well as embedded benefits for FCA and their advocates through policy and programming.

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## Prologue

In addition to sharing stories of foster care alumni resilience and education attainment, it is my hope that this dissertation also offers an example of innovative and humanizing ways to do academic research. The intentionality toward advancing asset-based research began with the careful selection of terminology used to identify the population of focus in this study. Those with a history of time in foster care are often referred to in many deficit-based ways; former foster youth, ward of the state, and highly mobile individual, to name a few. I choose to refer to this population as foster care alumni as it positions them as resilient and successful in persisting through the system rather than identifying them by terms that reference the unfortunate experiences of their past. Further focus on humanizing approaches was given to the overall construction of the study. Traditional design and methodology, while sometimes done with good intention, has often been at the detriment of marginalized communities. In an effort to challenge our normative, and often colonizing ways of doing and presenting academic scholarship, in this dissertation I, together with the participants<sup>1</sup>, center the realities of those with a history of foster care whenever possible. As such, the manuscript opens not with a traditional covering of the research topic, but an initial chapter consisting of participant statements identifying what success means to them. This is meant to center the individuals' lived experiences and positionality as a guiding axis for understanding the

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the manuscript, 'I' or 'my' identifies the PI as speaking in the first person unless otherwise noted. 'Us' refers to the collective group of participants engaged in the study.

topic, literature, and tools that impact foster care alumni persistence. Following chapters two, three, and four, which outline the issue, extant literature, and methodology, is a positionality chapter whereby each participant shared their own lived story. In both the statements of success and the positionality narratives, participants' own words are privileged over traditional academic prose or formatting. These foster care alumni narratives are given to shed light on the duality of the tremendous barriers and successes that denote the magnitude of their success. While some of the information and personal testimonies shared in this manuscript may be difficult to read or understand, it is the goal of sharing these stories as to position them only as a backdrop to understanding foster care alumni resiliency and provide information on how to celebrate and support their success.

## Chapter One: Foster Care Alumni Statements of Success

“You try to plant something in the concrete.  
If it grows, and the rose petal got all kind of  
scratches and marks, you not gon' say, ‘Damn, look at  
all the scratches and marks on the rose that grew from concrete’  
You gon' be like, ‘Damn! A rose grew from the concrete?!’  
‘It did this? It grew out of that? It came out of that?’

All the trouble to survive and make good out of the dirty, nasty,  
unbelievable lifestyle it got.  
It’s just tryin’ to make something  
when no one even cared.  
The rose it grew from concrete.

Keepin’ all these dreams, provin’ nature's laws wrong,  
it learned how to walk without havin’ feet  
It came from concrete. It, learned to breathe fresh air  
Long live the rose that grew from concrete  
You see you wouldn't ask why the rose that grew from the concrete?  
Why it had damaged petals? On the contrary, we would all celebrate its tenacity.  
We would all love its will to reach the sun.

Well, we are the rose.” Adapted from: Shakur (1999).

This poem remains an anthem of sorts for the participants engaged in this study and serves as the introduction we chose to preface our foster care alumni reflections on what success means to us. We are the roses that grew from concrete. While the study at large focuses on education persistence and degree attainment as traditional benchmarks in measuring success, these narratives are included not only to center their voices, but to offer nontraditional understandings of success that should not be excised from the acknowledgments of academic or professional achievement.

## **Emma**

So how do I define success? I think there is a small part of me that defines success as not becoming my parents, not succumbing to something outside of my control. There can be daily successes in dealing with the weight of my experiences and trying to rise above them and reach my goals. Specifically, I try to avoid becoming like my mother, who is the delicious cocktail of borderline and bipolar disorder and sits around, blaming everybody else for her failures- Taking no accountability. Also success for me is being 100% authentically myself. That means not letting stigmas, my past, or present struggles define me, but allowing me to recreate myself however many times necessary. I want to be truly authentic to who I want to be and what I want to do regardless of what other people or society says. Breaking the mold is an important measure of success to me.

## **Ana**

How do I define success? I think success for a lot of foster youth like myself is a lot of things most people would take for granted. Sometimes it's basic needs like having a nice, safe place to stay. That often felt successful and even though the risk of instability has lessened, I am still proud to be able to have a nice apartment and nice things. It may seem materialistic but for someone who didn't always have those things, it means so much. It shows I've made it and am just like everyone else. I don't know if many people I know, coworkers and friends can really relate to what that type of personal success means. Success is also felt in deep, reciprocal relationships where I can be myself, we can trust each other, and hold each other up. I feel success when I find someone I can count on or when

I've made a positive impact on someone else's life. It's also when I am committed to doing meaningful work and making a mark on the world to say, I was here, kept going, and that all the things I've been through at least have been used for good. It feels successful to be excited about the future and have big plans and goals. I just keep checking them off my list and adding more, so for someone who didn't really look to the future often, that feels extremely successful. I reflect a lot on what I've been through and can now say yes, you've been through this, came full circle, and should consider yourself a success story.

### **Amber**

When I look back, I sometimes can't believe the things we've all been through. I've felt angry, cheated, targeted, and sad. But with time, I've felt motivated by my own experiences. I didn't always share easily and have had somewhat disjointed friend groups. I didn't know any adults that had been in foster care, so I didn't know what to expect for myself. Once I was in college, I started to feel more comfortable with myself and in sharing my story. There's still a lot of stigma around it but I can now recognize my own strength, resilience, and growth. I look at my work and I am very proud of the positive impacts I help build for my community every day. My greatest joy is my family, particularly our girls who are bright, happy, healthy, and have a childhood, I as a parent, can be proud to provide. My life today, and the personal self-growth I've felt in my relationships, self-acceptance, and outlook for the future is something I can hold up as an example of success. We are all living the lives we deserve, despite the odds, and I wear my story as a badge of honor.

## **Greg**

When I think of my own success, it's a complicated story for sure. I have always viewed my life as a series of chapters, both good and bad, and a story that's never really done being written. I still struggle as a result of my own past and the pressures of today. The anxieties never totally go away but I continue to push myself to rise above it. Each day I try to reflect on the distance I've traveled and the growth I've seen and felt. I've chosen to look forward but that doesn't mean it is always easy. There's been a lot that has happened, but I feel like it's made me a strong person and with all of these challenges, I think I've grown stronger and more resilient every year. I feel more confident in myself, and what I think my own potential is. I am proud of the work I do to help students that share a similar story. I continue to check my coping strategies and ask for help when I need to. Sometimes we expect people with a history of foster care to carry larger burdens than others. They can handle it because they always have, but sometimes it gets to be a lot so, having a supportive and loving network circle that I can rely on is a success to me. I enter a new year determined to work towards new goals and breaking the cycle of my family and my past. I am a good person, I'm excited about my future and happy with my life, and that is what I'm most proud of.

## **Maria**

Success has, and continues, to feel like an elusive concept at times. I used to think that it was this sort of finish line; that I'd reach a point where I felt successful, but that has changed over time. I feel like I've done a lot of reflection on the things I've been through; the impacts, and what I can do to turn them into something



positive. I sometimes struggle to say I've 'succeeded,' maybe because I still struggle with the internalized negativity I've faced, I don't want to jinx it, or because I have so much more I want to do. But when I step back, and can be honest and validating with myself, I can acknowledge that I have definitely achieved some markers of success I've hoped for. So how do I define success? It's 'normal' things I've always wanted like having a house, a nice car, a family, financial stability and adventure, but it's also a lot about the type of person I want to be. It is being a positive and self-reliant individual, who can acknowledge their weaknesses, and uses their opportunities to learn and grow. It is achieving things that were never promised, proving people and myself wrong, but mostly, to be a person who cares deeply and leaves a positive footprint. I look toward the future with excitement and believe it will continue to be filled with beautiful experiences and successful milestones.

## **Chapter Two: Background, Purpose, and Overview**

I remember, the five of us sitting around talking about the future. We were all living in the same group home, and we had all felt our share of hardships. I was the youngest of the group by a few years at age 14, and the others were 16 and 17. I looked up to them just as any pseudo little sister wanting to belong somewhere would. I distinctly remember us sitting on the stoop, talking about turning 18 and what that might be like. We had no idea what the next year would, let alone the future, but talked about reaching 18 as if it was the most elusive goal imaginable. We laughed as Kareem joked that he'd be rich when he got 4 jobs, and he'd have our back when he did. Someone wanted a car, another, new Jordan's. It was a happy conversation, dreaming and planning for the future - conversation we didn't often dare to indulge in. I remember so vividly, that all at once, the jokes and laughter were replaced with heaviness as the gravity of our current situations only reignited and reinforced our doubts for the future. I can hear the deafening silence and see the looks on our faces as we just stared at the ground, afraid to want too much because we all had already become familiar with disappointment. I reflect on that conversation often and can't help but reflect on how different our paths turned out. We were all full of life, funny, caring and yet, have ended up with such different realities. Of the 5 of us, 2 are incarcerated; 1 for a life sentence for gang-related and drug charges, 1 for 38 years on gun trafficking. One died from a

heroin overdose. It took 3 days for her friend to report it to the police, and the other died as a victim of domestic and gang violence. And then there's me. I'm the only one left with some sort of decent life to live. The gravity, responsibility, and guilt of that is something that never goes away. Things certainly have not always been easy, but I'm grateful to be here. But why me? Why did I persist, what helped me to get here, and does it even matter? (PI Researcher Memo)

This excerpt, taken from my personal, lifelong journal, depicts my ongoing reflections of my time spent in foster care. This inquiry serves as the basis of this study's interrogation of the systems, policies, and practices that further marginalize foster youth, and the salient factors foster care alumni use to persist despite the odds. The dichotomy this journal entry paints between the lived circumstances and hopes for the future is often so prevalent in the lives of foster care alumni, and the lingering questions are the driving force behind this research. The tremendous barriers foster youth face during childhood, and through the education pipeline have been well documented (Bass, Shields, & Berhman, 2004; Blome, 1997; Rios & Rocco, 2014), but there remains a gap in understanding of the positive influencing factors that impact foster youth success. Increasing the awareness about a group of students that has been rendered invisible and voiceless, is not only a moral imperative, but an educational one. With over 440,000 youth in care and less than 3% of them likely to enroll in college (Unrau, 2011), both policy and educational practice are ill-equipped to address the achievement gaps if the contexts of their experiences continued to be unheard, their agency stifled, and their successes uncelebrated.

In an era of increased scrutiny of higher education, specifically toward its mission and propensity for serving the public good, there continues to be assessment toward its equitable practice (Bok, 2015). Despite some correlations to social mobility, the benefits of higher education are often only afforded to some. Access and persistence continue to be stratified for historically underserved populations, even if unintentionally (Bok, 2015). With pressures for education accountability, attainment, and equity, it is imperative to understand the available pathways for marginalized groups of which cannot be fully understood without an acknowledgment of the sociopolitical climate in which they exist. Unrest within that climate has long been an impetus for historical policy and program reform, particularly for historically underserved populations (Cheong, Edwards, Goulbourne, & Solomos, 2007). Disenfranchised people have long galvanized their own social turmoil to increase pressure for political change. This has been demonstrated throughout history with expansion of civil liberties and representation (Fukuyama, 2001), and social policy reform in health care (Hart & Bond, 1995) housing (Clapham, Kemp, & Smith, 1990), immigration (Cheong, Edwards, Goulbourne, & Solomos, 2007). Social pressures can either further marginalize certain populations or serve as a catalyst for their self-agency. The women's and LGBTQ rights movements serve as historical reminders of how marginalized groups can harness their agency to result in more equitable conditions and representation (Bowen, Kurzweil, Tobin, & Pichler, 2006). This history of foster care in the United States also serves as an example in which unrest due to the unsatisfactory conditions of the socio-political climate sparked program and policy change.

The prevalence of foster care is not a new phenomenon in the United States and its development and subsequent reforms have occurred as a direct result of the

sociopolitical environment<sup>2</sup>. Yet, little is known about this complicated system to those who have not been intimately involved within it. Those involved in the child welfare system, the governing agent for foster care in the United States, are often confronted with a labyrinth of conflicting policies, an extremely over-burdened and under-resourced foster care system, and few pathways for communication between the multiple agencies tasked with supporting our nation's most vulnerable youth. While there has been a long history of policy and social program development aimed at supporting the nation's most vulnerable children (Collins, 2004), the experiences of former foster care youth have been largely absent from the education literature. A lack of broad awareness or engagement with the foster care by the majority of the population can perpetuate confusion around the terminology, policies, and systems that impact those in care. Understanding these linkages is integral in recognizing and supporting the resilience and persistence of foster care alumni.

### **Terminology**

Foster care is the systems of informal and formal custodial care of children that have removed from their own biological family who are incapable, unwilling or prohibited from providing adequate care (Unrau, 2011). The majority of cases are attributed to child maltreatment, while others result from delinquency, emotional, and behavioral issues outside of the parents' control (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). At minimum, foster youth are defined as minors who have been placed in "24-hour substitute care . . . away from their parents or guardians and for whom the State

---

<sup>2</sup> Federal and state budgets, political appetite for reform, coupled with social trends such as population change patterns, economic shifts, and community fracturing through violence, drugs, and poverty are all contributing sociopolitical environmental factors that shape policy development.

agency has placement care responsibility” (Public Welfare, 2000, p. 267). However, there remains some inconsistency in policy and program implementation, result in varying entrance in foster care (Isernhagen & Bulkin, 2011). Similarly ambiguous, the term ‘foster care alumni’ (FCA) can be used to represent individuals who are no longer in care as a result of reunification with their biological family, adoption, or aging out, and indiscriminate to the duration of time spent in care.

In a time of an increased need for educational attainment, it is imperative to understand the available pathways for marginalized groups. Included in this study is a historical snapshot of the foster care system, and the policies and personal characteristics that impact individuals in care. This review of personal, social, and environmental risk factors that contribute to persistently low attainment rates is integral to understanding both the policy landscape and lived experiences of foster care alumni. This nuanced perspective creates space to propose new areas of asset-based research that centers the resilient stories of foster care alumni educational persistence and serve as a catalyst for self-agency and increased support within educational spaces.

### **Research Problem**

There continues to be increased emphasis on the need for a postsecondary credential however, equity in higher education still remains elusive (Cahalan & Perna, 2015). Access and equity continue to be pressing issues in the field, as social and systemic factors create persistent barriers for certain groups to attaining post-secondary enrollment (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2015). Individuals with a history of time in foster care are among the most marginalized student groups and largely remain an invisible, but resilient population (Salazar, 2013; Sarubbi et al., 2016). The number of youth in care

continue to rise to epidemic levels while many individuals have little knowledge of the broad and lasting impacts (Blome, 1997; Huang, Ryan, & Rhoden, 2016; Spigel, 2004). There are hundreds of thousands of children taken from broken places, put into broken systems, and left to fend for themselves. They often face unimaginable obstacles that most people have no comprehension of (Blome, 1997). Education systems and practitioners have the responsibility not only to cultivate structural and policy pathways to attainment but also to help cultivate a positive sense of efficacy among underserved student populations. Because of the prolonged deficiencies in support and care, youth coming from the foster care system could likely benefit the most from intentional policy and practice that support enrollment and persistence.

While the experiences of foster care alumni are largely absent from the education literature there has been significant data collection by The Children's Bureau regarding the demographics and prevalence of youth in care over time. Similarly, there are robust bodies of knowledge surrounding the historical development of the foster care system (Chioda & Melinz, 2014; Monkkonene, 1990; Warren, 2004), inclusive of policy creation and reform (Angus, 2015; Cooke, 1995; Fernandez & Alcantara, 2012), and of the many contributing factors impacting overall foster care alumni (FCA) life trajectories (Henke, 2013; Naccarato, Brophy, & Courtney, 2010; Unrau, 2011). These contributing influences, also known as risk and protective factors can either impede or benefit the experiences of foster youth (Collins, 2004; Davies, 2010). Despite a long history of policy and social program development aimed at supporting the nation's most vulnerable children (Collins, 2004), that support has been framed largely through a deficit-based understanding of the impact of trauma and instability on the FCA lived experience. Within current bodies of

literature on the foster youth experience, education has also been labeled a risk factor as high academic mobility, poor transitions and systems infrastructure to support the needs of this transient population often attribute to dismal high school graduation and postsecondary enrollment rates.

### **Significance/ Rationale for Study**

Sociopolitical unrest helps to understand the historical development of both the foster care system and social policy development while, Psychology and Social Work disciplines offer copious accounts of the many risk factors influencing FCA child development and lived experiences. A great deal is known about the many personal and social barriers foster youth face, yet less in comparison has been uncovered about their achievements. The literature has been useful in understanding the many obstacles this population faces, however well-intentioned, it has greatly skewed the narrative of foster youth towards a narrow and negative one. As a result, foster youth voices and stories of persistence remain largely invisible. There is minimal asset-based literature examining the role these histories play in the pursuit of post-secondary enrollment, and what does exist, often defines foster youth only by the obstacles they face. Furthermore, what is written of foster care alumni experience is largely told by outsiders, silencing the voice of those most poised to tell their stories. I argue that this narrow lens not only leaves out the ramifications of marginality beyond the lived experiences of this population, but also begins to shape how we see the role of higher education in supporting these students. Despite the odds depicted within the literature, there are FCA that do persist and lead successful lives (Stewart, Kum, Barth, & Duncan, 2014; Whiting & Lee, 2003) and



understanding their lived experiences, could prove transformational for systems, policies, and practices of influence, and most especially for the FCA that must navigate them.

**Intended audiences.** Foster care alumni face a myriad of systems on their path towards healthy and stable adulthood. Child welfare, the Department of Human and Health Services, Medicare, education systems, and various social programs can serve as intersecting barriers for a population defined by a lack of support and stability. However insurmountable these barriers seem, there are FCA who thrive and enroll in postsecondary education. Although there is ample information on the barriers preventing foster youth from attending and completing college, little is known about the factors that help the 3% succeed in enrolling. Because of the multi-faceted risks that foster care students face, education practitioners should be aware of the best practices to create successful educational and adulthood pathways, particularly for marginalized student populations. Students from the foster care system are less likely to take traditional college-going pathways and will need additional supports while on campus. Because they remain an invisible population, institutions and practitioners are often unaware of these special support needs and students' persistence can suffer.

Youth involved within the foster care system continue to bear the burdens created by entangled policy initiatives and an inconsistent spectrum of support (Sarubbi, Parker, & Sponsler, 2016). Policymakers have the level of influence to begin to untangle these barriers, and craft more accessible educational pathways for foster youth (Heather & Zamani-Gallagher, 2018), yet many discussions still lack FCA voice in program design, implementation, and evaluation. If policymakers were aware of FCA stories of success, they may be more likely to develop education policies based on change levers that

support persistence rather than trying to solely address large-scale social barriers such as childhood abuse, drug use, and an overburdened child welfare system. Lastly, this research can serve as a transformational model to show FCA audiences that they are not invisible, that their agency is a powerful tool of resiliency, and that their stories of success are worth sharing. For a population that often lacks personal support and may struggle with low self-efficacy and worth, asset-based research can not only change the negative dominant discourse surrounding their experiences but help illuminate a positive pathway to follow.

### **Purpose Statement & Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to illuminate stories of foster youth postsecondary persistence, the sources of support that they attribute to their success, and in doing so, provide implications for transformative policy, program development, and research. To do so, this study centers foster care alumni voices through a participatory action research design. This approach engages their own narratives to recommend best practices for education professionals, policymakers, and community organizations to best support foster youth success. This study provides context not only of the foster care system since inception, but also the multiple factors that impact children in care, and ultimately their likelihood for success. A review of personal, social, and environmental risk factors that contribute to persistently low attainment rates points to the enduring impacts of disruptive social and policy systems and lived experiences of foster youth. This study was designed to capture the lived experiences and success of FCA and the tools that have been integral to their success. The research questions guiding this inquiry are as follows:

- How do foster care alumni define success for themselves?

- What salient tools- personal, social, and systemic- support foster care alumni postsecondary persistence?

The term tools was specifically selected to call attention to the utility of the factors FCA use to achieve success. Similar to the tools used to build a house, FCA use various assets, or tools, to build their own educational journey. They are often acquired, pass along among peers, and can serve multiple uses in various settings. Understanding their use can provide important examples on how additional pathways can be opened for FCA to persist. Toward that end, the following chapter offers a review of extant literature that outlines the tenure of foster care in the United States, and the policies and experiences that impact the life trajectories of those in care. Given the breadth of literature on this population, there is a deficit of work centering the voices of foster care alumni and their stories of education resilience and attainment. This persistent gap served as the rationale in designing this study as a participatory action research (PAR) inquiry utilizing funds of knowledge (FoK) as a grounding framework. These design choices, outlined further in chapter four, offer the field innovative pathways for sharing FCA stories of resilience through asset-based and humanizing methods. PAR re-centers the voice of research team members by having them serve as Co-PIs engaged in all aspects of the research endeavor. Chapter five offers an in-depth positionality narrative from each of the participants to provide context of their own lived experiences as it relates to the findings to follow in chapter six. FCA offered their personal reflections and expertise to develop findings and recommendations that directly relate to their stories of success. The implications and recommendations outlined in the final chapter are meant to provide

education policymakers and practitioners areas for continued responsibility, support, and future research.

### **Chapter Three: Review of the Literature**

There is a large existing body of work that catalogs many of the factors impacting the lives of youth in foster care and the frameworks utilized to understand them. The following chapter provides a review of that extensive portfolio, and reveals an opportunity for innovative and significant research. The review of the literature begins by offers a demographic snapshot of current youth in care. Next, follows a synopsis of the rise of foster care and child welfare in this country, the development of influential social policy development, and a detailing of the factors impacting foster youth education attainment. I then provide a robust review of the persona, social, and environmental factors that impact the lived experiences of youth in care. Lastly, this chapter provides an analysis of the bodies of knowledge used to represent foster youth broadly, and offers a reimagined conceptual framework for understanding the totality of their lived experiences.

#### **Foster Youth Prevalence and Identity**

To those with little knowledge of the foster care system, there can be lingering ambiguity regarding the terminology, policies, and practiced that contribute to the experiences and likelihood of persistence for FCA. As such, before moving into the remainder of this dissertation it is important to review additional key terminology and data to situate the needs of foster youth in their pursuit of postsecondary attainment.

While the definition of FCA can widely differ, the experiences of this population are just as diverse. Foster care cases are opened primarily with three goals in mind: reunification, adoption, and ‘another planned permanency living arrangement (APPLA),’ or often referred to in informal nomenclature as long-term foster care (Childwelfare, 2019; Unrau, 2011). Reunification is often the most likely goal for the majority of youth in care and refers to the process of returning the child back to their family of origin. Adoption and APPLA remain as concurrent secondary options placement options. In adoption cases, the parental rights of the biological family have either been surrendered or terminated, and the child is available to be placed within a new permanent family (Unrau, 2011). The term ‘aging out’ refers to those who have exited the foster care system without having a successful placement and are receiving Title IV funds at discharge (AFCARS, 2019; Isernhagen & Bulkin, 2011).

**Data tracking.** Much of the research on foster youth outlines the detrimental effects of length of time spent in care (Naccarato, Brophy, & Courtney, 2010; National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, 2006), and the number of transitions youth experience (Day, Dworsky, & Feng, 2013). Because of the large numbers, high mobility, and broad residency pathways for foster youth (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010; Fernandes, 2008), it is extremely difficult to aggregate the population by averages (Colton, Heath, & Aldgate, 1995; Isernhagen & Bulkin, 2011). The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) is the only Federal data set that aggregates case-level information from state, tribes, and territories that have agencies

who receive Social Security title IV funds, such as foster care<sup>3</sup> (Children’s Bureau, 2016; Courtney & Prophet, 2011; Shaw, 2010). Federal standards require that these agencies submit AFCARS data to the Children's Bureau, prompting annual reports detailing the current prevalence and descriptive statistics of national foster care practice (Shaw, 2010). This database captures demographic and placement trends of children in care, and biological, foster, adoptive family structures, and data tracking on placement frequencies and permanency plans (Children’s Bureau, 2016). Despite the broad scope of information gathered, administrators denote the continuing difficulty in tracking the demography of foster care (Ryan, Perron, Moore, Victor & Evangelist, 2016).

AFCARS data allows the Children’s Bureau, and the United States Department of Human and Health Services (USDHHS) to draw national statistics about the foster care populations, and the data is used to appropriate federal and state funding (Children’s Bureau, 2016; Shaw, 2010). While AFCARS is the predominant resource in understanding the landscape of foster care in the United States, its ability to illuminate the experiences of foster youth is limited primarily to descriptive data. The report does not account for the personal, social, or environmental factors related to foster youth experiences, in, and through foster care (Courtney & Prophet, 2011). Also, because of the transient nature of care, frequent informal arrangements, and variances in definition and practices there is sometimes significant inconsistency in the data reported across measures and agencies (Courtney & Prophet, 2011). In addition to the difficulty

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<sup>3</sup> Title IV-E of the Social Security Act provides funds for state agencies that include foster care, independent living programs, and adoption or guardianship aid.

AFCARS administrators face in collecting information on foster youth populations, there are other barriers to understanding the prevalence of foster care.

**Current snapshot.** The most recent AFCARS data estimates for 2016 suggest that there were 442, 995 children in out- of-home care in the United States at the end of the 2017 fiscal year (Children’s Bureau, 2018). Research estimates that between foster youth, their peers, and relatives, more than 700,000 people are affected by foster care annually (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2004). The average of age of entry into foster care is 7.3 years, yet youth can enter the system anytime between birth and age 18 (Administration on Children, Youth and Families, 2013; Children’s Bureau, 2018). It is estimated that approximately 32,000 infants alone enter the foster care system. Most recent AFCARS 2015 data shows the average age of youth in care in 2015 was 8.6 years old and males slightly outnumber females at 52% of all foster youth (Children’s Bureau, 2018). The average length of time a youth spends in foster care is about 2-3 years (Children’s Bureau, 2018) but in actuality, it can range between short term placements of a few weeks or months, to many years (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010; Isernhagen & Bulkin, 2011). The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act grants states the authority to extend foster care eligibility to age 21, expanding the possible length of stay and age range for youth (Sarubbi, Parker, & Sponsler, 2016) The diversity in foster youth identity is also present in the race/ethnicity of those in the system (Stewart, Kum, Barth, & Duncan, 2014). In the national sample, “43% identified as Caucasian, 24% African American, 21% Hispanic, 2% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 1% Asian, 7% two or more races, and 2% Unknown” (Children’s Bureau, 2018, para 3). The data show that communities of color are more highly present within the child welfare



system again, calling attention to the relationship between race and class within the foster care system (Whiting & Lee, 2003).

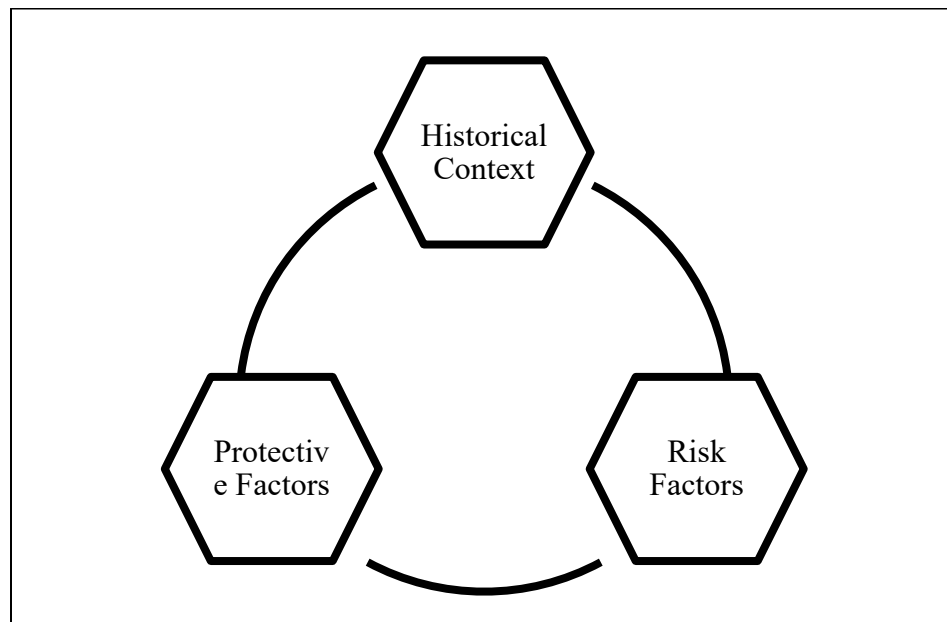
**Social class.** A closer examination of historical prevalence reveals an embedded stratification of class as low-income families are disproportionately over-represented in the foster care system (USDHHS, 2013; Wildeman & Emanuel, 2014). Class is defined as the stratified systems or societal norms of categorizing populations by social or economic status (Shavers, 2013). Involvement within the Child welfare system in the United States has always been associated with poor communities, a correlation that is relevant even today. As such, households with an annual income of less than \$15,000 are more likely to be involved with the system at rates six times higher compared to middle-class households (Whiting & Lee, 2003). Historically, low-income communities are subject to greater scrutiny from various professionals and authorities because of the social environments they may be exposed to (Shavers, 2013; Wildeman & Emanuel, 2014). While the relationship between income and maltreatment is not causal, some instances of maltreatment such as exposure to community violence in poor neighborhoods, malnourishment, and drug use have been found to be more prevalent in less affluent areas and possibly increase the likelihood of child removal (Jonson-Reid & Bivens, 1999; Shavers, 2013).

Historically, social class and race or ethnicity have been inextricably linked as a result of endemic racism and classism. Race is largely believe to be a social construct based on skin color and perceived distinct physical features. Racism and White supremacy often leads communities of color to have less access to equal standards of living, employment, transportation, and other traditional benchmarks of class definition.

Similarly, these social structures correlate to lower education levels, which has been shown to be an influencing factor in child-rearing practices and receipt of social services (Whiting & Lee, 2003) and ultimately point to the overrepresentation of communities in color in child welfare systems. While experiences of foster care can be found in all communities, the research and data show that those in care are more likely to low-income and non-White. These dynamics contribute to an ongoing discussion on how foster care is implemented and assessed, and what can be done proactively to reduce the number of open cases (Stewart et al., 2014). The conversation manifests further through a federal legislative agenda spanning more than 60 years addressing the foster care system (Angus, 2015; Fernandes, 2008).

In addition to the demographics of youth in care, what is known through the literature about the foster youth experience can be categorized into three general buckets of content: Historical context, personal risk factors, and protective factors.

**Figure 1:** Foster Care Alumni Impact Factors



Extant research on these experiences and the result of time in care have largely focused on risk factors that negatively impact FCA life trajectory, however protective factors have had much less focus. The following is a review of the extant literature detailing the sociopolitical climate and the resulting personal, social, and environmental factors that contributed to persistent dismal education attainment outcomes of foster care alumni. While much of what follows is void of foster care alumni voice, many of the influencing factors outlined in this literature review are validated in the participant narratives to come in chapter five; giving context of the lived experience that drive what is already known about the topic. Subsequently, identifying the relationship between educational attainment and the factors related to foster youth lived experience illustrates areas for continued research highlighting FCA persistence, narratives of success, and the resulting implications for policy making, and practices in higher education.

### **Historical Development**

Much like many movements in history, the development of the foster care system is tied to the turbulent social environment in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (Cook, 1995). The United States experienced its peak migration as westward expansion was fueled through the developing railway systems. This expansion correlated to a national economic boom and a rapidly increasing population. Simultaneously, congress also passed the first general immigration statute in 1882, offering refuge to more than six million families seeking new opportunities (Monkkonen, 1990). As these populations filtered through Ellis Island, many eastern cities soon found themselves inundated with a rapidly increasing population and not enough housing options. The landscape of U.S. states and cities changed as a result of quickly increasing population and migration. This

overcrowding pressured more affluent families to migrate to the open land in the west while cities continued to struggle with strained urban and economic development (Monkkonen, 1990; Warren, 2004). There was insufficient work leading many families into poverty. Without work, living in unsanitary and horribly crowded and insufficient residences, many families became fractured, leading of thousands of children into the streets. This period becomes the catalyst for the beginning of the foster care system (Warren, 2004).

The history of unaccompanied minors can be directly traced back the social strife of the mid-19th century and is largely defined by the orphan train movement (Warren, 2004). Orphan Trains were started by the Children's Village and the New York Children's Aid Society, and led by Charles Loring Brace. They remained in operation between 1854 and 1929. Brace aimed to reform urban crisis by utilizing the railway system to answer the social and political pressures of displaced children. The movement is responsible for relocating over 200,000 orphaned, abandoned, or homeless children from the overcrowded U.S. cities to Midwest rural communities (Chiodo & Melinza, 2014; Cook, 1995). The children were transported across the country, huddled in passenger cars on trains that were labeled "orphan trains" or "baby trains." The Children's Aid Society was responsible for preparing the children for the trip by providing a bath, clean outfit, coat and bible (Warren, 2004). Travel aides were designated as supervisors and coordinated the recruitment of children for the trains and the migration of them to towns where local organizers had generated interest in child acquisition (Chiodo & Melinza, 2014).

Notices were posted around town and in newspapers informing locals that available children would be arriving in their town, and their desirable characteristics, and

of the viewing location (Cook, 1995; Warren, 2004). At towns along the route, the children were assembled on the station platform on display or brought to community centers or locations for interested adopters to meet and observe them. Brace tried to push a 'family plan' agenda, encouraging children to be welcomed into the home as if they were biological children. Instead the orphan train movement was often likened to the indentured servant "baby slaves" trade as the demand for "little laborers" (Warren, 2004, p. 112) became the primary motivation for eager potential guardians needing workers (Cook, 1995; Holt, 2006). There was typically no cost or formalized paperwork involved to 'adopt' the children. Interested families were simply required to sign by the name of the child and take them home. However, because of their anticipated utility, certain youth such as coal miner children, and older, stronger boys earned the aides top dollars. Families with particular labor needs would often secretly pay aides to keep a lookout for children who were sturdy and fit enough for manual work (Chiodo & Melinza, 2004; Cook, 1995) or to get preferential pick of children once the train docked in their respective towns (Holt, 2006; Warren, 2004).

The first orphan train departed from The Children's Aid Society on September 20, 1854, bound for middle America with 46 ten-to-twelve-year-old boys and girls (Warren, 2004). It became the responsibility of the train aides to monitor the children's trip and subsequent placement. If the rehoming site was not a good fit, or the agent thought the child may be experience abuse or neglect, they would then remove the child from its new home and try to find another family (Warren, 2004). At that time, there was not a particularly organized case management system and the child aides were afforded much less training and oversight as the caseworkers of today. Many attribute this infancy stage

of the foster care to the beginning of national debate regarding parental rights, adoption proceedings, child abuse policy, and state jurisdictional law (Chiodo & Melinza, 2014). While the use of orphan trains dissipated in the late-1920s, its practices served as the operational framework of the foster care system to come (Angus, 2015; Chiodo & Melinza, 2014). Similarly, the establishment of the New York Children's Aid Society, an immediate result of Brace's work, was and continues to be the driving engine in foster care policy development and reform (Collins, 2004; Holt, 2006).

Sociopolitical pressure pushed for better support for the nation's most vulnerable youth, the system of foster care was formalized through the development of the child welfare movement and the establishment of Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (SPCC) (Angus, 2015; Holt, 2006). This would become the premise for the foster care system we see today. With this, voluntary SPCC agents were equipped with policing authority and often separated children from their biological homes, citing physical abuse or, more likely, neglect often as a result of poverty (Cook, 1995; Warren, 2004). This resulted in the number of orphanages tripling between 1865 and 1890 concurrently as orphan trains attempted to disperse unaccompanied youth across the country to willing homes (Chiodo & Melinza, 2014). Until the Great Depression, the federal government limited its role to the dissemination of information regarding best practices in caring for children, not the responsibility of providing adequate care and service (Chiodo & Melinza, 2014; Warren, 2004). For much of America's history of social services, oversight of child welfare occurred primarily at the local or community level. As the national population rose, and the numbers of children needing care grew too large for local intervention. The Social Security Act of 1935 established the Children's

Bureau which mandated states to develop child welfare programs, and gave the Brace broad oversight and funding authority to address the issue. States were designated as the primary stakeholders in addressing the needs of these children (Fernandes, 2008). States systems had greater financial resources to leverage policy and resources to unify systems. The Federal government held partial responsibility and involved itself in the child welfare issues by offering limited funds, some policy oversight and served as an often defunct accountability measure in mitigating inequities in state foster care (Angus, 2015; Cook, 1995; Fernandes-Alcantara, 2012). Once again, the sociopolitical climate forced program and policy development.

The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) of 1974 was the first in this long line of federal legislation offered states funding mechanisms to address assessment and prevention services (Angus, 2015). Over time, CAPTA become more instructive and restrictive in oversight, calling for additional policy interventions. Increased legislative attention and action, most relevantly the Federal Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, was the preminent legislation that was designed to assess and improve the administration of title IV-E child welfare programs in the United States (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2012). The new law, which amended the 1980 Child Welfare Act (P.L. 96-272), clarified best practices in policy development and administration, and that the health and safety of children served by child welfare agencies, particularly foster care, must be their paramount concern (Angus, 2015; Fernandes, 2008).

Foster care in the United States is governed by many interdisciplinary policies and laws at the federal, state, and local levels (Sarubbi et. al., 2016). Through multiple federal funding statutes since the mid-1970s, Congress has shaped the national legislative agenda

of the child welfare system. In most states, this network of organizations includes foster care, family support services, child protective services, dependency and termination determinations, and adoption proceedings (Angus, 2015; Fernandes-Alcantara, 2012). While federal law dictates much of the development of these programs, the majority of responsibility regarding the implementation of these policies is relegated to state control (Angus, 2015; Sarubbi et al., 2016). Debate about the role of the federal government in providing child welfare services remains an active discussion today (Pecora, Whittaker, Maluccio & Barth, 2012). While the support of foster youth support has long been a bipartisan issue, the given sociopolitical climate often has important leveraging of actual policy development and program support through legislation or funding (Haskins, 2017).

Much of the contemporary conversations around child welfare were characterized by differing ideological stances on which system held the responsibility of care for youth in the system (Chiodo & Melinza, 2014). Those who cite a worsening plight for children in state custody unsurprisingly encourage more federal oversight however, those who are concerned about an overreaching arm of governmental intervention resist increased in interference (Bass, Shields, & Behrman, 2004). These opposing perspective and cyclical debate continue to perpetuate a system of well-intentioned but entangled and inefficient policies and programs aimed to provide care to foster youth. Despite these barriers, there has been significant social policy and program development that has tried to improve foster care in the United States (Courtney, Pilavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001). There was increased federal supervision of policies that direct requirements and guidelines for foster care began in 1967 with major laws enacted by the U.S. Congress during the past 60 years, resulting in over 65 federal programs committed to providing



resources with the propensity to support education attainment among foster youth (Collins, 2004; Fernandes, 2008; Sarubbi et al., 2016). Many of these initiatives are created at the federal level but administered under state control creating entangled policies and practices that span a broad spectrum of support (Angus, 2015; Fernandes-Alcantara, 2012), with increasing pressure to hold state governments responsible (Chiodo & Melinza, 2014). This increased scrutiny of child welfare, and a call to action in addressing maltreatment, contributed to swift rise of youth in foster care, reaching its highest enrollment of 579,000 in 1999. Rates did plateau between 2000-2010 however, more contemporary figures show a foster youth population dramatically increasing in the last decade; reigniting the pressures for policy intervention (Children's Bureau, 2018; Huang, Ryan, & Rhoden, 2016).

### **Policy Development**

Federal regulation of policies outlining requirements and guidelines for foster care began in 1935 with the Social Security Act that established Aid To Dependent Children (ADC). Further safeguard for vulnerable populations were put into place with the 1967 expansion of the Social Security Act, which also renamed ADC to Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), and the impetus for formal foster care (Angus, 2015; Fernandes, 2008). While the Social Security Act was, and continues to be, the primary funding source for the foster care system, AFDC offered direct financial support to low-income, often single-parent households. Further influence is seen in subsequent major laws enacted by the U.S. Congress during the past 60 years, resulting in over 65 federal programs committed to providing resources and service to foster youth (Bass, Shields, & Behrman, 2004). Most of the policy agenda addresses one of three main areas of reform

(1) streamlining the administration of foster care, (2) increasing adoptions, and (3) targeting holistic support initiatives.

The foster care system has seen major development since its inception. Yet, the system continues to face iterative adjustments as policymakers gain greater understanding of the deficits within this system of entangled entities, policies, and intended outcomes (Dworsky & Havlicek, 2009). The following historical timeline of policy development shows a system in flux but moving toward more a more responsive, inclusive, and proactive perspective based on the pressures of the time (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2012). Following the AFDC, the primary goal was to evaluate the status of child welfare from a national perspective. The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) enacted in 1974 (Dworsky & Havlicek, 2009) provided federal support in the research and assessment of child maltreatment while directing states in two ways. The statute established financial support in states' efforts of prevention and intervention, and also provided grants to public agencies and nonprofit organizations for the further program and policy development (Bass, Shields, & Behrman, 2004; Dworsky & Havlicek, 2009; Stewart et al., 2014). Through these evaluative and collaborative efforts, the foster care system, along with other social welfare agencies began to address historical deficiencies and improper services around particular populations (Angus, 2015; Fernandes, 2008).

Historically large numbers of Native children were being separated from their tribal communities. The Indian Adoption project, a branch of the Child Welfare League of America, was responsible for placing Native children in adoption homes, often outside of their tribal communities (Cross, 2014b). In fact, research found that 25%–35% of all Native children were being rehomed, 85% of whom were placed in nontribal families

despite there being willing relatives available (Cross, 2014b). In response to this prolonged conflict and protest between American Indian and Alaska Native tribes and the US government, the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) was enacted in 1978. Opponents of the Native Adoption Project stated that separating Native children from tribal environments was not only an overreach of the Federal government into sovereign law, but also was systematically stripping the culture and whitewashing these communities (Luth, 2016). The ICWA recognized that tribal courts have jurisdiction in child welfare issues involving Native Americans and that placement with relatives or within tribal communities should be given preference (Cross, 2014a; Luth, 2016). This was the first time that the policy agenda began to question the authority of the federal government in the removal and transition of displaced youth. The ICWA, while honoring tribal rights, pushed for legislation that supported the individual (Angus, 2015; Cross, 2014b) and would be the model for youth-centered policies to come

The first iteration of the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act (1980) made the initial step in putting the interest of children and families at the forefront of policy development (Fernandes, 2008). As the numbers of youth entering the foster care system continued to increase, policymakers aimed to reassess removal practices. As a result, the new legislation specified that a child may enter foster care only after judicious efforts are made to avoid placement in care by preserving the family unite, while also requiring case and permanency planning for all children and youth in foster care that preference reunification (Collins, 2004; Fernandes-Alcantara, 2012). As such, the initiative established time limits on reunification and adoption subsidies, placing an emphasis on proactive intervention with families before removal. While this policy laid important

guidelines in promoting the rights of families there continues to be a lack of assessment about its lingering impact on youth in care. Many foster youth advocates have asserted that this policy allows for too much leniency, sometimes leaving vulnerable children in unfavorable environments while families struggle to raise the standard of care with little incentive or support to do so (Fernandes, 2008; Pecora et al, 2012). The debate continued while further policy development repositioned its focus on foster youth transitions and holding states accountable in making reasonable efforts in establishing permanency plans for children in care. In 1986, the Independent Living Initiative established funding mechanisms that created additional supports and opportunities for foster youth to prepare for life out of care and increase independent living success rates (Courtney et al., 2001; Pecora et al., 2006). This policy development served as a catalyst for broad initiatives to come that directly increased stability pathways for foster care alumni.

The following decade of statute development centered on increasing supports for the nuclear family (Collins, 2004). In 1993 legislators enacted the Family Preservation and Support Services Act which emphasized the need for proactive engagement with families in hopes of minimizing the number of removals, and also increased financial and programmatic support to preserve families following child welfare cases of investigation of abuse, reunification, or adoption (Chaffin, Bonner, & Hill, 2001). It denoted a more critical assessment and subsequent reform of the foster care system that directly impacted families; most specifically the rationale for removals and placements, and decisions made regarding parental rights (Chaffin, Bonner, & Hill, 2001; Fernandes-Alcantara, 2012). For instance, the Multiethnic Placement Act of 1994 (Jennings, 2006) as amended by the Interethnic Adoption Provisions of the Small Business Job Protection Act of 1996

asserted that both child welfare and adoption agencies receiving federal foster care reimbursements were not allowed to make adoption decisions on the basis of race, income, culture, and ethnicity (Chaffin, Bonner, & Hill, 2001; Jennings, 2006) As a result, a conversation was sparked about the role and significance of families' demography and their likelihood to be involved within the child welfare system (Brooks, Barth, Bussiere, & Patterson, 1999). The discussion continues today and is a high point of contention in ongoing policy and program development. The Independent Living Initiative (1986) was amended by the Adoption and Safe Families Act (1997) and newly established Federal guidelines regarding states' role in the termination of parental rights. States should seek pursue this option only when a youth has been in foster care for 15 months within a span of 22 consecutive months (Chaffin et al. 2001; Fernandes-Alcantara, 2012). The amended ASFA guidelines also ensures that the safety of the child in care be paramount when making placement arrangements (Brooks et al., 1999).

During the long history of public policy development and implementation regarding foster care, there has been significantly less attention directed toward measuring the impacts and outcomes of these initiatives (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2012). Extant literature cites this as a primary reason there has been relatively little change in the prevalence, and subsequent impacts of foster care cases since its inception (Courtney et al., 2001; Pecora et al., 2012). As the sociopolitical climate continues to contribute to increased numbers of youth in care, the foster care system is struggling to meet the needs of our most vulnerable citizens, and it is a national crisis, with significant social and educational implications. Despite the historic progression of public policies to support the expansion of the foster care system, inequities remain regarding its attention to

educational attainment. Foster care alumni continued to be confronted by a labyrinth of federal, state, and institutional policies that often fall short of their goals and responsibility to increase postsecondary enrollment, completion, and the pursuit of social mobility for foster youth.

### **Factors Impacting Education Attainment**

Of the more than 440,000 foster youth in the system each year, only 46% will earn a high school or GED diploma, and less than 3% will obtain a bachelor's degree<sup>4</sup>, an outcome with little data showing positive gains over the last two decades (Naccarato, Brophy, & Courtney, 2010; Sarubbi et. al, 2016). A longitudinal study conducted using data from 632 foster youth in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin found that by age 24, about 75% of the foster youth alumni in the study had not obtained a high school diploma or GED (Courtney et al., 2011). Courtney and colleagues (2010) found statistically significant discrepancies between graduation rates of the alumni sampled and their non-foster youth peers, such that alumni were three times less likely to complete high school. One study found that a sample of 100,000 foster youth graduated high school at significantly less rates than those without a history of care (Frerer, Sosenko, & Henke, 2013). They also found that placement type had even more negative impacts on educational experiences. Youth placed in group homes were even less likely to graduate from high school, 21% lower than those homed in kinship or foster family placements (Koh, 2010; Sullivan et al., 2010). These statistics are alarming when compared to those of the general population, in which the average high school graduation rate is between

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<sup>4</sup> Extant research does not distinguish if 3% of foster youth enroll in college or complete a college degree; a persistent and significant limitation of what is known about FCA education attainment.

86-90% and 49% of non-foster young adults ages 25–29 are college educated (Unrau, 2011). Much like the influence of placement type, other diverse, and comorbid factors of time spent in care create barriers to academic persistence. Understanding the multiple points of tensions and the sources of support that impact FCA is a social justice issue (Whitman, 2016).

**Educational mobility.** Through the Casey National Alumni Study, researchers observed a relationship between high school graduation rates and age of entrance to care, such that delaying entrance to care by five years resulted in a 150% increase in the likelihood of graduation from high school (Pecora, 2012). Proponents of family stabilization effort assert that sometimes the trauma of being separated from the home can be even more detrimental than the actual abusive environment itself (Marsh, Ryan, Choi, & Testa, 2006). Earlier entrance into care increased the frequency of exposure to negative components of care and extended the longevity of overall instability and a scarcity of sufficient support systems. Children placed in care are at risk of instability in their living and educational environments, and the transient life of foster youth inevitably lead to increased mobility within and across education districts creating additional barriers to success (Fisher et al., 2013). As such, some would believe that efforts should be directed toward improving home environments so as to avoid removal and increase the likelihood of educational success (Marsh et al., 2006). More contemporary conversation asserts that decisions regarding case goals and placements should be made on a case by case basis to account for the variability in foster youth experiences and voice (Unrau, 2011; Ryan et al., 2016).

Academic mobility is defined as “non-promotional school change” (Rumberger, Larson, Ream, & Palardy, 1999, p. vi) and refers to sequential changes in school settings excluding traditional grade progression. These disruptions, referred to as mobility, in placement can be major challenges in education and most likely intersect with difficulties in social functioning and positive mental health (Fisher et al., 2013; Isernhagen & Bulkin, 2011).

On average, foster youth will attend at least three different schools during their time in foster care (Sullivan et al., 2010). Increased transitions cause detrimental disruptions in that are highly correlated with lower persistence and success rates, with increased significance when occurring during high school years (Geis, 2015; Isernhagen & Bulkin, 2011).

**Barriers to achievement.** High mobility and other risk factors set up the foster youth population for academic challenges, and there continues to be static communication between child welfare and education systems in how best to support these students (Geis, 2015). For example, one study found that 42% of foster children did not start school promptly once they entered into care due insufficient records or extremely overprescribed caseworkers that cause students to fall through the cracks (Fisher et al., 2013). Foster youth suffer the most as a result of these complicated, interrelated but separate systems. This barrier increases foster youths’ odds of school enrollment delays by 6.5 times (AFCARS, 2015). Placement stability has also been shown to affect educational attainment, as measured by graduation from high school, such that a reduction by one placement per year tends to make graduation nearly twice as likely, and reduction by two placements per year makes graduation three times as likely (Isernhagen



& Bulkin, 2011; Pecora et al., 2006). The context of, and experiences within various placements can compound the impacts of transient mobility on academic achievement.

A recent report on Californian foster youth found that youth underperform on standardized assessments, with approximately one quarter of foster youth scoring far below basic achievement in comparison to peers in their grade (Conn, Calais, Szilagy, Baldwin, & Jee, 2014; Dorsey et. al., 2012; Frerer et al., 2013). These findings align with national trends in foster youth academic success, which places them at a greater risk for dropout (Dworsky & Pérez, 2009). Furthermore, high academic mobility is correlated to inadequate academic preparation as a result of missed school work, inconsistency in curriculum across schools, and overall persistent disruption in the lives of youth in foster care (Conn et al., 2014; Fong, Schwab & Armour, 2006; Isernhagen & Bulkin, 2011). Similarly, research indicates that experiences within the foster care system affect adolescents' engagement in school extracurricular activities that serve as salient protective factors, and highly correlated to academic success (Conn et al., 2014; Harder, Knorth, & Kalverboer, 2013; Wojciak, McWey, & Helfrich, 2013). The content, consistency, and continuity of these activities is positively related not only to improved well-being, but also to increased educational access and success (Fong et al 2006). When youth in foster care do not have sufficient opportunity to engage in these types of activities, they are more likely to internalize negative symptoms, including depression, as well as exhibit symptoms associated with conduct disorder, poor self-worth, and low achievement (Conn et al., 2014; Geis, 2015).

**Diminished self-efficacy.** Academic self-perception is defined as the way in which a student understands themselves and the type of student they are in the context of

educational spaces and opportunities (Kirk, Lewis, Brown, Nilsen, & Colvin, 2012). This factor has been found to be a significant predictor in academic aspirations and attainment. Aspirations are indicative of the dreams and goals an individual has self-defined while expectation references their perceived likelihood of achieving those aspirations (Isernhagen & Bulkin, 2011).

In a 2006 study, Chang and colleagues investigated the relationship between educational aspirations and expectations in traditionally underserved students. The results of the study demonstrated all students had self-defined aspirations across all student groups. Regardless of lived experiences, all of the students wanted to graduate high school, and have a stable, happy, and prosperous life. Most of the students articulated goals related to postsecondary enrollment and degree attainment. However, despite these shared objectives, there were significant differences between aspirations and expectations in marginalized groups. These students felt their likelihood to reach their dreams was less than their majority peers (Chang, et al., 2006). Kirk et al. (2012) expanded the study to assess this relationship among foster youth. They found that foster youth held lower levels of both aspirations and expectations in comparison to all other student groups. Their aspirations while positive, were largely related to their foster care experiences such as reunification with family, getting a new foster family, or finding a job. Alarming, 32% of the foster youth surveyed referenced reaching the age of 18 as a salient aspiration or goal, and their expectations of reaching that goal was mixed (Kirk et al., 2012). The reality for foster youth is that while their peers are thinking ahead of college and success, they are more focused on surviving their current situations and planning for stability, safe housing, and future education goals (Finkelstein, Wamsley, & Miranda, 2002). This

negative internalization of foster youths' expectations of success for themselves, while not surprising given their circumstances, is largely invisible in the larger discussion of college-going and choice.

**Insufficient college-going knowledge.** Academic mobility not only has negative impacts on academic performance but can often place highly transient students at a disadvantage when preparing for college. As a result of multiple school changes, foster youth lack the consistency in guidance counselor support that is shown to be instrumental in cultivating a college-going culture (Hallet & Westland, 2015; Hines, Merdigner, & Wyatt, 2005). They often miss out on traditional college experiences such as participating in recruitment activities, college tours, interviews or early preparation courses (Hines et al., 2005). As a result, and in concert with all of the other multiple barriers foster youth face, they have much lower postsecondary enrollment in comparison to their non-foster peers (Day, Dworsky, Fogerty, & Damashek, 2011; Hines et al., 2005)

Of the over 440,000 youth in foster care, less than 3% are expected to obtain a postsecondary degree (Barnow, Buck, O'brien, Pecora, Ellis, & Steiner, 2015). While lack of academic preparation and college-going behaviors contribute to these dismal projections again, it is not due to a lack of foster youth aspiration. Foster youth have high hopes but continue to be invisible to and disadvantaged by multiple education systems. The Midwest Evaluation of Functioning has been the predominant ongoing assessment of foster youth outcomes, including education attainment (Courtney, Hook, & Lee, 2012). Among the sample spanning three states, 84% of the youth participants disclosed aspirations of attending college, with 49% aspiring to graduate from college and 22.3% aspiring to complete education past college (Courtney et al., 2001). By the age of 23,

only 5% had graduated from either 2- or 4-year institutions (Courtney et al., 2012) compared to their non-alumni peers, who graduated at a rate of nearly 52.9% (Shapiro, Dunder, Wakhungu, Yuan, Nathan, & Hwang, 2015). Those sampled in the study graduated at a much lower rate from 4-year institutions (2.5%) as compared to their peers, who graduated at a rate of nearly 20%. Less than 1% of all foster youth will enroll in graduate education and it is unknown how many persist to graduate or terminal degree attainment (Barnow et al., 2015; Courtney et al., 2012). Indicative of the high mobility of students, and insufficient education and social service tracking processes, there continues to be variability in data regarding foster youth attainment, rendering both their barriers and success invisible. While education systems continue to struggle in creating systems that best support the needs of foster youth, public policy development has had more demonstrated success.

### **Impacts of Policy**

Higher education attainment has been associated with many positive life factors, including increased probability for employment, higher income, better health outcomes, and overall better quality of adult life (Unrau, 2011; Porter, 2002). According to national report conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, enrollment in higher education in the United States has drastically shifted in recent decades, with a 48% increase in college enrollment between 1990 and 2010 (Unrau, 2011). Along with the increase in college attendance comes an influx of college-educated workers in the employment pool, leading to more competition in the workforce and a greater need for credentials to fit higher-level jobs. Populations without a postsecondary degree are often left at a disadvantage when compared to those with higher education (Unrau, Font, & Rawls, 2012; Porter, 2002).

The importance of research in this area is made clear when observing foster youth education outcomes.

There has been varying levels of policy attention given to the broad issue of postsecondary attainment, and foster youth have benefitted from large scale federal efforts such as Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) and the College Cost Reductions Act, both of which were designed to provide financial support to all students (Courtney et al., 2012; Wolanin, 2005). Federal policies specifically targeting the needs of foster youth began in 1967 with major laws enacted by the U.S. Congress, and legislative development has continued over the past 60 years, resulting in over 65 federal programs committed to providing resources that directly or indirectly support education attainment among foster youth (Sarubbi et al., 2016; Wolanin, 2005). The two federal policies that most directly support foster youth postsecondary attainment are the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP), and the 2008 Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (FCA) (Courtney et al., 2012; Yates & Grey, 2012).

“The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 created the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP), which provides a broad range of support at both the federal and state level” (Child Welfare, 2018, para 6). Nationally, it offers foster youth aging out of the system living grants (Yates & Grey, 2012). It also allows states to provide financial resources for housing, career training, enrollment in a degree program, and other support benefits that equip youth for the shift from a foster care placement to independent living. These resources are integral to youth navigating the college transition process. Similarly, in 2008, the federal government passed the Fostering Connections to

Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, which allows for foster youth to remain in care until age 21 (Spigel, 2004). For states that adopt this federal initiative, foster youth are allowed to live in a foster home, group home, or a supervised independent living setting with the stipulation that they are furthering their education or employment through enrollment in a 2- or 4-year college program, training or vocation program, employment, or employment program (Sarubbi et al., 2016). This extension of care through age 21 affords them all the benefits, protections, and services of the foster care system that would traditionally cease on their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Further bolstering support, state child welfare agencies are also required to assist youth aging out of the system in developing a transition plan during the 90 days immediately before they exit care (Yates & Grey, 2012). This bill suggests a shift in the nation's goals for its foster youth, from becoming independent at age 18 to the acknowledgement of the need for continued support into adulthood. Extending foster youth's opportunity to remain in care longer offers them additional time to build life competency skills, but expands resources used to navigate education pathways (Spigel, 2004).

Many of these initiatives are federally funded, but state administered, creating variance in state-based support for foster youth education attainment. For example, California has been a leading force in redesigning child welfare policy and practice for foster youth. In 2004, the State Assembly passed Bill 490, Ensuring the Educational Rights and Stability for Foster Youth (Courtney, Hook, & Lee, 2012). The bill addressed issues of educational instability for foster youth across the P20 education pipeline in primary and secondary institutions by requiring the youth's current school, upon placement change, to allow the child to remain enrolled until the end of the school year

and immediately enroll in the new school upon transfer (Courtney, Hook, & Lee, 2012; Wolanin, 2005). It also created a school liaison position in each school district. Additionally, Assembly Bill 167 (2009) was passed, allowing foster youth transferring schools in either 11th or 12th grade to graduate after meeting the state educational requirements, rather than the district requirements, which may include additional coursework. Both bills address issues of mobility within the foster youth population (Wolanin, 2005; Yates & Grey, 2012). Another law passed in 2009, Assembly Bill 669, allowed higher educational institutions the ability to provide foster youth under the age of 19 with resident status when enrolling in the institution, regardless of the youth's state of origin. This act allows foster youth to pay the lower tuition rates of residents, regardless of their city of origin or placement. Assembly Bill 1393 (2009) provided foster youth with priority on-campus housing at community colleges and state-supported universities (Yates & Grey, 2012). It also allowed foster youth to stay in on-campus housing on a year-round basis, including during breaks, a significant barrier for former foster youth that is often overlooked by institutions. This law is significant for foster youth because often youth aging out have no available housing during school breaks (Courtney et al., 2010; Yates & Grey, 2012) and are at the highest risk of homelessness and food insecurity (Silva et al., 2017). Foster youth are less likely to be able to pay for off-campus housing or have external supports they can depend on (Unrau et al., 2012). Many youth who do not have external support must work more hours, which is a leading cause of college attrition in foster youth (Courtney et al., 2010; Spiegel, 2004).

## **Factors Affecting Foster Youth Enrolled in Higher Education**

There are multiple stakeholders in both the education and policy fields that have the ability to positively impact education attainment for foster youth (Heather & Zamani-Gallagher, 2018). As discussed, federal and state policy has a demonstrated history of social reform that indirectly support these efforts. With increased awareness, institutions and education professionals can also commit to leveraging their multiple resources to positively impact foster youth experiences while in college (Cutler White, 2018; Dworsky, 2018). Lasting internalization of unworthiness and the stigma of time spent in foster care contributes significantly to foster youth's inability or skepticism in reaching out for support and the impacts of care can persist into the collegiate experience (Courtney et al., 2010; Whitman, 2016). FCA may benefit from campus-wide initiatives but are most often in need of targeted and holistic support and unless they disclose their status, will likely resort to their own coping mechanism or decision-making strategies to adapt (Cutler White, 2018; Gamez, 2017; Thompson, 2018). While these individual behaviors indicate a high level of resiliency and independence exhibited by many foster youth, institutions can have significant impact on creating additional educational pathways for these students in the areas of funding opportunities, programming options, and intentional outreach and networking support.

**Financial aid.** The cost of a college education is a burden for many students, but foster youth may be at an additional disadvantage due to a persistent lack of support, and poor academic preparation that make them ineligible for merit scholarships (Courtney et al., 2010). Financial aid programs are integral to meeting these gaps and adequate aid to cover not only the cost of tuition, but housing and additional expenses are extremely



important for this population (Courtney et al., 2010; Salazar, 2011). The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) provides opportunities for financial support and has been redesigned to better support the likelihood of degree attainment for foster youth. The language of the application has been changed and now asks "At any time since you turned age 13, were both your parents deceased, were you in foster care or were you a dependent or ward of the court? (FAFSA, 2107, question 13)."

Because of the CFCIP, youth who have aged out of the system may be eligible for Chafee Grants up to \$5,000.00 (Cochrane & Szabo-Kubitz, 2009; Sarubbi et al., 2016). Historically, these resources have been underutilized. Although this grant was designed specifically for foster youth, only 9% of a sample of 35,664 former foster youth in higher education received the grant during the 2009–2010 school year (Davis, 2006). More often, foster care alumni received a Pell Grant, a federal need-based grant available to low-income families or single adults making less than \$15,000 per year (Conchrane & Szabo-Kubitz, 2009; Davis, 2006). Underutilization of aid is likely a result of application confusion and an aversion of foster youth to ask for help. Additionally, little has been written about the financial literacy of FCA, but one could presume that youth in the system are not getting the preparation and support in understanding the financial aid opportunities available to them. A recent study conducted by the Trellis Foundation surveyed institutions and collected financial literacy data from foster youth enrolled in postsecondary education. Preliminary findings show a significant disparity in resources offered for this population and their knowledge of what supports are available (Klepfer et al., 2018). With this application redesign, more foster youth are apt to disclose their

status, making them eligible for increased aid and ultimately higher chances for postsecondary success (Wolanin, 2005).

Additional financial support can be found through state-based tuition waivers that help supplement or remove many of the financial barriers for foster youth, but the eligibility criteria differ greatly from state to state (Davison & Burris, 2014; Sarubbi et al., 2016). In most states, the tuition waiver covers unmet tuition and fees, after all other sources of financial aid has been applied and the institution is responsible for absorbing the lack of revenue. Disjointed design and implementation of these programs contribute variance among the waiver programs in regards to student eligibility criterion, number of available awards, and inconsistent usage across states and institutions (Sarubbi et al., 2016).

**College outreach, engagement, and retention.** Additional support for foster youth can be seen in college outreach and access programs (Cutler White, 2018; Draeger, 2007; Lopez, 2017). Many of these programs are headquartered at public institutions or community colleges and offer foster care alumni extensive support networks (Day, Riebschleger, Dworsky, Damashek, & Fogarty, 2012; Lopez, 2017). Community colleges in particular are primed to serve this population due to their open admissions policies, free or reduced tuition for many students, and their commitment to the local communities in which they reside (Hallet, Westland, & Mo, 2018; Page, Scott-Clayton, 2016). Traditionally community colleges offer an array of academic pathways and diverse support services with some designed specifically for foster youth (Hallet, Westland, & Mo., 2018; Gamez, 2017; Lopez, 2017). Notable programs boast enrollment and FAFSA assistance, academic counseling, care packages, transitional housing, counseling services,

and ongoing mentorship and coalition building among the foster youth community (Draeger, 2007; Rhodes, Haight, & Briggs, 1999) that has been directly linked to student retention (Rolock & Perez, 2018). These programs make sure foster youth do not feel invisible on campuses and play an integral role in creating a sense of belonging for students who have likely not ever felt they were part of a group (Hallett & Westland, 2015). Further promoting inclusion and retention, extracurricular activities can be influential factors in a child or young adult's development of resilience (Drapeau et al., 2007). Engagement in activities that tender a sense of efficacy and support can forward the developmental process. According to Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, and Wyatt (2005), the majority (65%) of the former foster youth enrolled in a university with a foster youth-focused outreach program had participated in an extracurricular activity while enrolled and cited their engagement has a significant source of satisfaction and persistence.

College outreach and social engagement are salient factors related to the academic retention of all college students but can be particularly impactful in supporting postsecondary attainment for foster youth (Day et al., 2012, Dworsky, 2018; Robbins et al., 2004; Salazar, 2011; Unrau et al., 2017). This is particularly significant because outreach is not sufficient to Shepard FCA through the education pipeline but engagement is directly linked to persistence with ultimately affords these student the benefits of obtaining a college credential. Salazar (2011) defined social involvement for undergraduates as how much one feels connected to one's college, as measured through engagement in extracurricular activities, amount of non-required engagement with professors, and amount of participation in social activities. Past research has categorized streams of student support that are useful in identifying gaps in support for foster youth

enrolled in college (Malecki & Demaray, 2003; Singer, Berzin, & Hokanson, 2013). Through interviews with 20 foster youth, Singer and colleagues (2013) found a pattern of formal versus informal relational networks cultivated in such support programs. The research suggests that although 80% of the foster youth sampled reported having access to one type of support, only 39.8% reported having access to emotional/informational, tangible, affectionate supports, and positive social interaction (Salazar, Keller, Gowan, & Courtney, 2011). Findings of a study of predictors of academic success among foster youth supported the need for multiple types of support in college, particularly the need for tangible supports across the educational experience to increase the likelihood for retention and persistence (Finkelstein et al., 2002; Salazar, 2013; Rolock & Perez, 2018). Many FCA who pursue advanced degrees also struggle with lack of supports, yet the wraparound services offered at the undergraduate level are not typically available in graduate education. Graduate students are not often aware of campus resource programs or not given access to supplemental programs such as food insecurity resources, residential life, and student activities offered in outreach and retention programs (Unrau et al., 2017) which can negatively impact their retention in continuing degree programs (Rolock & Perez, 2018)

The experiences of FCA on college campus are largely unknown, but there is a growing contingent of researchers and practitioners working to highlight these narratives. Hallett and Westland (2015) highlighted experiences FCA have once enrolled in college by offering student vignettes demonstrating the perpetual financial, psychosocial, and academic barriers that persist even in the post-secondary environment. Foster care alumni may struggle with substantial financial and emotional support, academic deficiencies, and

as a result of prolonged isolation, find it difficult to reach out for assistance (Hallett & Westland, 2015). Additionally, there is growing literature around the role of student affairs practitioners in addressing the challenges of foster youth on campus (Cutler White, 2018; Hallet, Westland, & Mo, 2018). Institutional agents can be particularly helpful in supporting foster care alumni transitions onto campus (Gamez, 2017), or connect them to campus-based programs (Heather & Zamani-Gallagher, 2018; Whitman, 2018) that help mitigate lasting impact of time spent in care. These scholars take an important step in making FCA counternarratives visible and call on institutions and educators to be more intentional in support students' diverse needs (Day, Riebschleger, & Wen, 2018). More research is needed to understand how the diverse lived experiences of foster youth contribute to their overall educational success (Stewart et al., 2003).

### **Personal, Social, and Environmental Contributing Factors**

Because the foster care movement was initiated through social service and welfare reform, much of the extant literature has primarily resided within the field of social work and psychology. Unrau (2011) notes that historically, researchers' attention was focused on pathology and problems arising from trauma during child development, and the subsequent impacts on cognition (Davies, 2010; Taussig, 2002), psychosocial development (Kerker & Dore, 2006; McMillen et al, 2011), mental health (Dorsey, 2012; Taussig, 2002), and attachment (Davies, 2010; Salazar, Keller, Gowen, & Courtney, 2013). More recent literature has expanded the understanding of the impacts of care, contributing to deficit perspectives on the life-long trajectories of this population (Nacarrato, et al., 2010; Pecora, et al, 2006; Unrau, 2011). Additionally, the research has been primarily quantitative in nature, and has shown that time spent in foster care has

significant, negative implications for overall life trajectories, thus skewing the understanding towards a deficit perspective lacking interdisciplinary focus of the overlapping impacts of negative aspects or effects of time spent in the system (Blome, 1997; Colton, Heath, & Aldgate, 1995; Garrido, Culhane, Petrenko, & Taussig, 2011; Murphy, 2011). Emotional, physical, and sexual abuse are the primary and most pressing catalyst for removal (Dubner & Motta, 1999), however other causes such as malnourishment (Taussig, 2002), exposure to domestic or community violence (Garrido et al., 2011), and unsanitary living environments (Dorsey et al., 2008) also contribute to the prevalence of youth in foster care across the United States (Shaver, 2013). Regardless of the specific reason for removal, negative environment, physical, and emotional conditions likely overlap and intersect, impacting foster youth trajectories in significant ways (Laser & Nicotera, 2011).

**Personal risk factors.** As youth mature and acquire skills and competencies, there are numerous personal, social, and environmental variables that can significantly encourage or obstruct the developmental process. These variables are frequently referred to as protective and risk factors (MacKenzie, Kotch & Lee, 2011; Unrau, 2011). As a result of prolonged exposure to negative risk factors, foster youth are exceptionally vulnerable. A risk factor can be defined as “a characteristic at the biological, psychological, family, community, or cultural level that precedes and is associated with a higher likelihood of problem outcomes” (Masten & Wright, 1998, p. 10). Conversely, a protective factor is understood as “a characteristic at the biological, psychological, family, or community (including peers and culture) level that is associated with a lower likelihood of problem outcomes or that reduces the negative impact of a risk factor on

problem outcomes” (Masten & Wright, 1998, p. 9). While little about the protective factors of foster youth has been explored, there is a vast amount of literature that outlines the numerous individual, social, and environmental risk factors foster youth face.

***Child development.*** Child development is understood as the interacting biological and environmental processes that influence an individual's cognitive, physical, and social maturation across the entire lifecycle (Davies, 2010). Of the environmental influences, the family arguably has the most profound impact on development during the formative years of childhood (Davies, 2010; Dorsey et al., 2012). Defending and nurturing children is a presumed universal expectation of adults across human cultures, and an abundance of research from multiple fields confirms the importance of the family unit as the provider of safe, stable, and supporting lived experiences for children (Barth, 1990; Blome 1997; Davies, 2010). The experiences of an individual during childhood, particularly those related to family relations, have lasting and profound influence on all aspects of life moving forward and are considerably the most influential protective factor during development (Masten & Wright, 1998). Children exposed to positive environmental and personal experiences unquestionably have better short and long term development than children with exposure to erratic and harmful experiences (Barth, 1990). Moreover, research demonstrates that children exposed to violence, insecure and unstable home environments, and maltreatment are more likely to experience developmental difficulties related to cognitive, mental, and physical health, interpersonal relationships, academic achievement, adult skills competencies, and life transitions (Dorsey, et al., 2012; Geis, 2015; Jonson-Reid & Bivens, 1999). The impacts of these risk factors are significant and long-lasting. Because youth removed from their homes and placed into foster care have

likely been exposed to a variety of the above risk factors, they are particularly vulnerable to these detrimental outcomes.

***Residential instability and mobility.*** Foster youth enter formalized care at an average age of 7.6 years (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013), and undergo about four placement transitions. While that can widely differ, so can the type of placement a youth experiences while in care (Keller, Cusick, & Courtney, 2007). There are seven types of placements foster youth can experience while in care: non-relative foster family homes, kinship care, institutions, on-trial home visits, pre-adoptive homes, homelessness, and supervised independent living (Blome, 1997; Font, 2014; Winokur, Holtan, & Batchelder, 2014). Both foster family homes and kinship care provide foster youth the most residential living experience (Koh, 2010). Non-relative foster family homes are the most common form of placement, with 46% of foster youth in this type of care (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). This type of care is best understood as “traditional” foster care in which the child resides with an unknown individual or family in their private home (Winokur et al., 2014). Families receive financial stipends intended to cover the incurred costs of supporting the youth, and while they become the child's primary caregiver, the youth is still considered a ward of the state (Font, 2014; Koh, 2010). The guardianship of a child becomes more difficult to define for kinship care placements. This arrangement refers to the placement of children with relatives or close family friends, and accounts for approximately 30% of open foster care cases. Understanding the prevalence of kinship care, and ultimately the totality of youth in foster care can be difficult to ascertain because of informal kinship care agreements (Winokur et al., 2014). In an effort to avoid legal removal of the child, sometimes biological parents will



arrange for their child(ren) to stay with a chosen individual rather than being formally placed in the foster care system. In formalized kinships arrangements guardianship of the minor could reside with the state, the biological parent, or the relative caregiver leaving the designation of a child being 'a ward of the state' to differ widely across open child welfare cases (Font, 2014; Koh, 2010; Winokur, Holtan, & Batchelder, 2014

Placement in group homes or institutional facilities account for housing options for approximately 15% of youth in foster care. Group homes are typically run by state-based or federal agencies, offer housing to multiple foster youth at a given time, and consist of a broad range of supervisory support, program initiatives, and freedom (Day, Dworsky, & Feng, 2013; Blome, 1997). Each site likely has its unique program or curriculum that is intended to meet the diverse needs of youth perhaps ranging in age, gender, and social or behavioral issues of the youth in each facility (Euser, Alink, Tharner, van IJzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2014). While some are considered to offer shelter care, or short-term emergency placement for any child, most are designed to house teens. Teens with significant mental health or behavior issues are often placed in residential facilities in collaboration with juvenile detention (Clausen et al., 1998). This housing option is the most restrictive out-of-home placement option for teens in foster care, is likely to be court mandated and predominately involves probationary treatment and rehabilitation services (Clausen et al., 1998; Euser et al., 2014). With a significant disparity between the amount of available foster home placements and the increasing numbers of youth in care, these two housing options, although not optimal, provide a viable and necessary residential placement for vulnerable youth who are the most difficult to place elsewhere (Euser et al., 2014). While the figures account for the

majority of placement options, 4% are of youth are likely in pre-adoptive trial homestays, and at any given time 6% of foster youth are homeless (Murphy, 2011).

There are multiple placement options, yet only three main goals for youth in care: reunification, legal adoption, or long-term care (Stewart et al., 2014). Reunification is the process of returning children in foster care back to their biological families. Both the timeline and requirements for reunification can also widely vary. Often biological families are court ordered to participate in a variety of competency programs, rehabilitation, or perhaps jail time before the state will consider returning the child (Euser et al., 2014; Lister, Lieberman, & Sisson, 2016). Both colloquial and policy debate continues regarding issues of reunification and if it is the best possible option for the child (Ryan, Perron, Moor, Victor, & Evangelist, 2016). Reuniting youth in care with their families of origin remains both the primary goal, and most common outcome for the majority of cases (Lister, Lieberman, & Sisson, 2016). Of the 442,995 youth in foster care in 2017, 123,437 cases had adoption as the primary goal of care once their biological parental rights had been terminated (Rolock & White, 2016). There has been a historical push to increase incentives for families wishing to adopt. Federal policy developments such as the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (H.R. 6893) have allocated increased funds and wrap around services to support families interested in adopting domestically from the foster care (Rolock & White, 2016; White, 2016).

Youth who are not expecting reunification or adoption, and barring emancipation proceedings, will experience long term foster care (Batsche, Hart, Ort, Armstrong, Strozier, & Hummer; 2014; Okuma, 2014). Although this is not the ideal option for youth in care, it is often a reality of the increasingly displaced youth, and lack of available

adoptive parents or probable reunification opportunities (Batsche et al., 2014; Blome, 1997; Geiger & Schelbe, 2014). Each year, of the approximately half a million youth in foster care, about 28,000 will ‘age out’ of the system at age 18 (Children’s Bureau, 2018; Geiger & Shelbe, 2014; Hass, Allen, & Amoah, 2014). Extant literature on the life outcomes for foster youth focuses on these individuals as the prolonged time, and ultimately lack of permanent placement has exponential negative effects (Batsche et al., 2014; Hass, Allen, & Amoah, 2014). While there are positive experiences for those in care, the literature largely depicts a dismal picture of the life trajectory of foster youth (Blome, 1997; Day, Dworksy, & Feng, 2013). Understanding the negative impacts of time spent in care illuminates the extent to which foster youth overcome significant barriers to be successful.

*Interpersonal relationships.* Ongoing mobility and transitions within care contribute to a disjointed attachment within foster youth (Smyke, Zeanah, Fox, Nelson, & Guthrie, 2010). Because removal from home most likely occurs due to a lack of healthy and supportive care from a close adult, youth begin to distrust their environments (Davies, 2010; Dorsey et al., 2012; Kramer et al., 2013). During childhood, parent or familial relationships become the most significant marker on how to view the world, and can have lifelong effects (Davies, 2010). For many FCA, there is a strong need for connection but skepticism in its availability from others; resembling insecure-ambivalent attachment (Davies, 2010; Thompson, Greeson, & Brunsink, 2016). Studies of the mental health of youth in care show exorbitant levels of self-blame and feelings of unworthiness of generous and supportive relationships (Greeson, 2013). This varying level of attachment is similar to many FCA experiences (Smyke et al., 2010; Unrau, 2011) as they

begin to internalize negative messages about the world and themselves (Davies, 2010, Hallett & Westland, 2015). Habitus is a concept that explains how dynamics of society leave lasting dispositions and influence one's sense of self, behaviors, and their place in the world around them (Bourdieu, 1986). This habitus (Bourdieu, 1986), is shaped by past events and structures, and has significant influence in subsequent reactions, sometimes even unconsciously. As a result, these children sometimes exhibit aloofness, isolation, and independence (Greeson, 2013; Taussig, 2002; Thompson, Greeson, & Brunsink, 2016). While these behaviors may seem negative in nature, they often act as protective mechanisms to ward off feelings of rejection and failure (Davies, 2010; Greeson, 2013).

Relational barriers can extend into adult relationships as well. Foster youth are not predetermined to a life lacking meaningful relationships however, it can often be a long road in establishing reciprocal, deep relationships (Greeson, 2013; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014; Taussig, 2002, Unrau, 2011). Foster care alumni have expressed a direct correlation to their feelings of unworthiness as a child to their difficulties in trusting adult romantic and peer connections. Many adult former foster youth confess having frequent feelings of isolation, loneliness, and invisibility, even if others see them as positive or successful (Greeson, 2013). Reinforcing self-worth, reliance, and acceptance is an ongoing imperative for even the most well-adjusted individual (McMillen et al., 2005; Thompson et al., 2016). These efforts can be further convoluted by the comorbidity of multiple negative effects of time spent in foster care (Kerker & Dore, 2002; Murphy, 2011).

***Mental health.*** The status of mental health has been strongly correlated to lived experiences at even greater significance than genetic make-up (Dorsey, 2012; Taussig, 2002). Foster youth face a myriad of negative circumstances during the vital years of mental health development making them vulnerable to ongoing cognitive dissonance (Kerker & Dore, 2006; Taussig, 2002). As a result, 61% of youth in foster care system meet diagnostic standards for at least one mental health disorder across their lifetime, including varying levels of depression, separation anxiety disorder, and oppositional defiant disorder (Coleman, Cowger, Green, & Clark, 2011; McMillen et. al. 2005). As indicated by the literature, Baker and colleagues (2007) found that 51% of their sample of foster youth had at least one intervention or hospitalization, and 77% of the sample indicated having been prescribed at least one psychotropic medication. Additionally, foster youth in this study exhibited three times more diagnoses of disruptive behavioral, and depressive disorder disorders compared to non-foster care youth (Stevens, Brice, Ale & Morris, 2011). It is likely that exposure to abuse, high levels of stress and neglect, or familial history of mental health issues contributes to these trends (Baker et al., 2007; Coleman-Cowger, Green, & Clark, 2011; dosReis, Zito, Safer, & Soeken, 2001). The significant rates of youth in the system diagnosed with mental health disorders could indicate additional comorbid personal and social risks (Baker et. al., 2007). The system has repeatedly let down these children and then continues to blame for them for the effects of this maltreatment. Difficult children are more likely to be over medicated or misdiagnosed instead of being met with compassion (Stevens, Brice, Ale & Morris, 2011). Social stigmas of mental health, and a deep internalization of negative messaging,

and a lack of support services are often barriers to seeking help to these embedded, personal, and broad-reaching obstacles (Clausen et al., 1998).

*Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).* Individuals with a history of care are particularly at significant risk for lasting mental health issues, and PTSD in particular (Dorsey, 2012). PTSD is an anxiety disorder that develops as a result of one or more traumatic events and then can be easily triggered throughout the lifetime (American Psychological Association, 2013; Taussig, 2002), and as a result of prolonged exposure, youth with at least one year spent in foster care are diagnosed with PTSD at twice the rate of US war veterans (Valdez, Bailey, Santuzzi, & Lilly, 2014). In one study, 60% of foster youth who experienced sexual abuse had PTSD, and 42% of youth who had been physically abused were diagnosed as well (Salazar, Keller, Gowen, & Courtney, 2013). PTSD symptoms were also found in 18% of cases with no reported abuse because exposure to violence (Garrido et al., 2011), unstable and insufficient living arrangements (Unrau, 2011), and exposure to repeated mental abuse are also likely contributors to the high rate of PTSD diagnosis among foster youth (Dubner & Motta, 1999; Marsenich, 2002). Typically, foster youth are offered or mandated to undergo counseling as part of their open child welfare case, but the frequency and depth of health care services can be sporadic because of the transient and highly mobile nature of their lives (Riebschleger, Day, & Damashek, 2015; Valdez et al., 2014). As a result, inadequate care and intervention can lead to lasting effects. The PTSD recovery rate for former foster care youth is 28.2% as opposed to 47% in the general population (Salazar et al., 2013). Again, these symptoms can exhibit comorbidity and can exacerbate other issues or manifest in additional ways.

*Eating disorders.* Adolescents in the foster care system are also at increased risk for struggling with eating disorders (Laurent, Gilliam, Bruce, & Fisher, 2014). The research on eating disorders has shown that the illness is rooted in a search or urge to exhibit control in at least one area of a person's life, and because youth in foster care are subjected to countless changes outside of their control, they are particularly susceptible (Lehmann, Havik, Havik, & Heiervang, 2013). Food insecurity behaviors can manifest in a variety of ways ranging from eating disorders, food hoarding, or stress-induced digestive problems. Additionally, Food Maintenance Syndrome is characterized by a set of aberrant eating behaviors most often diagnosed in foster care youth (Lehmann, Havik, Havik, & Heiervang, 2013). It is hypothesized that this syndrome is triggered by the stress and maltreatment foster children and the feelings that contribute to eating disorders are also significant factors in other mental health contexts (Laurent, Gilliam, Bruce, & Fisher, 2014).

*Suicidality.* Foster youth are at a greater risk of suicide than their peers, and the increased risk remains even after leaving care, and into adulthood. Feelings of being thrown away, perpetually alone, and undeserving of positive relationships or success, along with the weight of their lived experiences and a lack of support systems, contribute to persistent depressive mindsets (Kerker & Dore, 2008; McMillen et. al. 2005; Riebschleger, Day, & Damashek, 2015, & Smyke, et al.). Foster youth are eight more times likely to have depression-related hospital visits in comparison to their non-foster peers and approximately 23% of foster care alumni have attempted suicide in adulthood (Kerker & Dore, 2008; Taussig, Harping, & Maguire, 2014). Often, because of their high mobility and lack of case oversight these instances go unnoticed, significantly impacting

the likelihood for treatment and rendering their pain invisible. The risk of suicide increases with length of time in care, number of transitions, and for youth who age out of the system are typically considered a high-risk group for continued low affect and self-harm (Narendorf, McMillen, & Matta Oshima, 2016; Riebschleger, Day, & Damashek, 2015). Former foster care adults remain susceptible to negative self-esteem and self-harm behaviors if not able to cultivate a strong support system (Kerker & Dore, 2008; Okuma, 2014).

**Social and environmental risk factors.** With the unveiling of foster youth lived experiences, it's easy to understand the interrelated and persistent personal factors of time in care. A history of trauma and resulting mental health issues have significant impacts on the development of a sense of self. Messaging of insignificance, invisibility, and unworthiness during the most formative time of a child's life has significant and lasting effects on how they move as an individual through the world around them. These personal risk factors are coupled with, and further exacerbated by additional social and environmental factors, and positively correlated with simultaneous risk-taking behaviors (Riebschleger, Day, & Damashek, 2015). Youth in foster care and foster care alumni are more likely to engage in behaviors that pose significant and long-lasting physical health risks, including drug use, and precarious sexual or criminal activity (Coleman-Cowger et al., 2011; Pilowsky & Wu, 2007).

**Drug use.** The widespread opioid epidemic in the United States and has been a significant catalyst in the quickly rising rates of splintered families and vulnerable children entering the foster care system (Newton et al., 2000), a trend that had been in prior decline. From 2012 to 2105, the foster care system experienced an 8% increase in



children needing care (AFCARS, 2015), a trend that closely mirrors the upward trend of opioid dependency (Stein & Bever, 2017). An estimated 11.8 million Americans are struggling with opioid addiction and approximately every 25 minutes a baby suffering from opioid withdrawal is born (Newton et al., 2000, 2017). Children born to those addicted are likely to be removed from their care and placed into the child welfare system, adding additional tens of thousands of vulnerable children into an already overburdened and inefficient system (Newton et al., 2000, 2017; Newton et al., 2000).

The United States Department of Health estimates that opioid epidemic has contributed to an additional 92,000 new cases of children entering foster care since 2016 (Newton et al., 2000, 2017). While the true effects have yet to be empirically measured, advocates in the field of child advocacy and welfare cite the increased drug dependency has led to increased cases of maltreatment, abandonment, and residential instability over the last decade (Newton et al., 2000). Child welfare officials cite this as the most prolific sociopolitical impact on foster youth experiences since the 1980s crack cocaine epidemic (Newton et al., 2000, 2017). Subsequently, not only is this climate adding to the number of youth removed from their home but also contributing to the prevalence of drug use in the foster youth population (Quast et al., 2018).

Analysis of foster youth outcomes predict that 50% of youth in or emancipated from foster care have a history of some drug use and that one-third would be likely diagnosed as having substance usage disorder at some point in their lives (Taussig et al., 2014; Stein & Bever, 2017). Specifically, youth in foster care are five times more likely to develop a dependence on illegal illicit narcotics or prescription medication (Coleman-Cowger, Green, & Clark, 2011; Pilowsky & Wu, 2007; Vaughn, Ollie, McMillen, Scott,

& Munson, 2006). As with the pronounced cultural narrative of drug-use, foster youth users are seen as dirty, irresponsible, and as a liability to society. Little is done to hold the system accountable for overmedicating youth while in the system and then pushing them into adulthood with no viable interventions, medical care coverage, or supports to address addictions or mental health needs (Colman-Cowger, Green, & Clark, 2011). Increased drug use has historically been correlated with significantly increased risk for other risky behaviors as well as higher prevalence of contracted disease (Auslander, Thompson, & Gerke, 2014; McDonald, Mariscal, Yan, & Brook, 2014).

***Hypersexualization.*** Adolescents, particularly females in the foster care system are highly vulnerable to risky sexual activity at greater rates than their non-foster care counterparts. Often as a result of hypersexualization from abuse, or a misguided search for love and attention (Elze, Auslander, McMillen, Edmont, & Thompson, 2001; Coleman-Cowger et al., 2011), youth in foster care voluntarily engage in more sexual risk-taking behaviors (Risley-Curtis, 1997). Untreated mental health issues and drug use are also highly correlated to attention-seeking behavior (Auslander, Thompson, & Gerke, 2014). Promiscuous foster youth women are often highly stigmatized as troublemakers and treated with punishment instead of socioemotional interventions and support (Menzel, 2013). In addition, foster youth are also more likely to experience increased prolonged, involuntary sexual experiences including sexual abuse, prostitution and human trafficking (Coleman-Cowger, Green, & Clark, 2011; Elze et al, 2001).

***Human trafficking and teen pregnancy.*** Human trafficking is another national epidemic that continues to plague the experiences of many foster care alumni. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) estimated that more than

90% of youth trafficking victims were engaged in child welfare services, and that one in fifteen girls in the foster care system have been forced into prostitution or trafficking at least once (Rutman et al., 2002; The Public Advocate for the City of New York, 2005). Child trafficking is both a national and international epidemic rendered invisible by the persistent deflection of responsibility by local, state, and federal systems (Kinney, 2006; Risley-Curtiss, 1997). Foster youth continue to be vulnerable as the sociopolitical discourse avoids this taboo and secretive trade (Rutman, Strega, Callahan, & Dominelli, 2002). Historically the justice system ignored their responsibility in preventing or intervening in this epidemic and most often, young girls found working the streets were charged with prostitution (Menzel, 2013). There has been continued law reform to stop this, but change is slow and the impact of sexualized foster youth women continues to be a perpetuated and puts them at risk. Their background of abuse and trauma, coupled with high mobility and deficit support systems can make them especially vulnerable to exploitation (Menzel, 2013). Predators utilize manipulation to capitalize on the fact that foster youth likely have unmet personal, relationship, financial and emotional needs (Innocence Lost Working Group, 2010). The true prevalence of these risk factors is largely underestimated due to the dangers, stigmas, and potential prosecution for youth reporting these experiences (Kinny, 2006). Insufficient awareness concerning human trafficking and difficulties in tracing the origins of trafficking rings are often used as excuses to justify programmatic and judicial inactivity in developing intervention (Kinney, 2006; Menzel, 2013). These voluntary and involuntary experiences have led to an increase in teen pregnancy among this population (Dworsky & DeCoursey, 2009; Coleman-Cowger, Green, & Clark, 2011; Leve, Kerr, & Harold 2013).

Although in a current decline, teen pregnancy has been an epidemic within the foster care system. Adolescent girls who become pregnant during their time in foster care, regardless of the circumstances in which the pregnancy happened, are both seen as troublemakers and treated like juvenile delinquents (Risley-Curtiss, 1997; Menzel, 2013). Including possible trauma, there continues to be high levels of shame and stigma around teen pregnancy and little has been done to acknowledge and address the rampant abuse of these young women in the foster care system (Elze et al., 2001; Menzel, 2013). As such, 39% of foster youth report being pregnant before the age of 17, and 53% become pregnant by age 19 in comparison to the national rate of 7% (Lee et al., 2013). Those aging out of foster care are almost three times more likely to become a young parent (Aparicio, Gioia, & Pecukonis, 2016). The result of engaging risky behaviors or forced sexual experiences have resulted in high rates of pregnancy, and some estimates project that 1 in 6 females with care history will become pregnant or mothers by age 21 (Aparicio, et al., 2016; The Public Advocate for the City of New York, 2005). Thirty-five percent of pregnant teen foster youth cite inadequate or nonexistent access to prenatal care and as such, many face at-risk complications during pregnancy and delivery, and only 51.7% of pregnant youth in foster care will carry to full-term (Leve et al., 2013; The Public Advocate for the City of New York, 2005).

Furthermore, lack of a strong support system and the likelihood of a tumultuous living situation, teen mothers in foster care are four times more likely to give their babies up for adoption (Aparicio et al., 2016). While this decision is legally a voluntary one, many youth cite being forced by reality of their circumstance or convinced by caseworkers (Menzel, 2013). The prevalence of teen pregnancy has sometimes been

thought to be an inevitable outcome, often placing the blame on young females that are assumed to be replicating the patterns of their communities. These misinterpretations are particularly impactful for foster youth because it removes the responsibility from the system to protect and serve these children, but also reinforces the class, race, and criminality stereotypes of the foster youth population (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010; Lee et al., 2013; Rutman et. al., 2002).

***Homelessness and financial insecurity.*** There is significant overlap between the homeless and foster youth populations. It is difficult to disaggregate the two populations, both of which share similar barriers and impacts as result of the instability in their lives (Murphy, 2011). Estimates show that in 2013 there were approximately 2.5 million homeless youth (Kushel, Yen, Gee, & Courtney, 2007), and 69% of all foster youth alumni express having experienced homelessness at some point during their time in care (Brown & Wilderson, 2010). Similarly, the rate of displacement is alarmingly persistent into adulthood for many former foster care youth. Of the approximate 28,000 youth who age out of the system at 18 (or later in some states that have adopted extended care legislation), 65% will need immediate housing, with 22% unable to find it (National Center for Child Welfare, 2013). Lack of preparedness, lower education attainment in comparison to their peers, and sustained mental health issues can jeopardize to the likelihood of future employment (Hook & Courtney, 2011). The social stigmas of mental health make it particularly difficult to get adequate care or intervention services. With 35% of former foster youth having a household income below the poverty line (Stewart et al., 2014), and an unemployment rate of 48% by age 21 (Hass et al., 2014; Stewart et al., 2014), they are four times more likely than the general population to struggle with

prolonged financial insecurity (Bender, Yang, Ferguson, & Thompson, 2015). These unfortunate circumstances can lead to increased propensity for engagement in criminal activity (Brown & Wilderson, 2010).

***Criminality.*** Social and personal factors have been linked to the prevalence of criminality among current and former foster youth. Of youth who age out of care, 42% will commit a crime at seven times greater than the general populations, and 25% are incarcerated within two years (Wylie, 2014). Foster youth are up to ten times more likely to enter the juvenile justice system than their non-foster peers and many incarcerated individuals have ties to the child welfare system (Doyle, 2008). Eighty percent of death row inmates are former foster youth (Nordberg et al., 2017; Wylie, 2014). While homelessness, unemployment, and drug use increase these risks greatly, many FCA cite a lack of caring interpersonal relationships as the most impactful component (Doyle, 2008; Hook & Courtney, 2011). This is particularly significant for youth who disclose a history of gang activity. Gangs offer displaced youth a group of individuals to belong to, who despite their negative influence, offer foster youth safety, guidance, and resources or tools for survival in, and through, adulthood (Kushel et al., 2007).

### **The Dominant Narrative**

The United States has long been neglecting orphaned, mistreated, and displaced youth. Understanding the shortcomings of our social service system is slow, and foster youth continue to pay the price. The dark period of orphan trains was replaced with rampant policy reform that institutionalized social service oversight and programmatic supports for children in foster care. Additional funding and resource streams were created to increase the prevalence of adoptions and increased efforts to center the interests of the

child in case analysis (Collins, 2004; Holt, 2006). Despite these initiatives, the number of displaced youth continues to steadily increase with little done to mitigate the negative, and lasting effects of removal from home. As a result, foster care youth carry the significant burdens of multiple personal, social, and environmental risk factors (Hook, & Courtney, 2011). Multiple transitions, unstable and abusive living environment often lead to negative self-worth, insecure relationships, and risky behavior. Each of these personal, social, and behavioral elements of foster youth history have been shown to have significant impacts on education attainment and potential life trajectory (Bass, Shields, & Behrman, 2004; Blome, 1997). Many of those who have experienced foster care cite a broken system, lacking inadequate resources to support youth, overloaded caseworkers, entangled social service programs, policies, and initiatives that exacerbate the litany of social and personal risks vulnerable youth already face (Riebschleger, Day, & Damashek, 2015). Complicating the impact of time spent in care further is that these many negative barriers coexist concurrently during a child's educational development (Davies, 2010), and significantly contribute to the lower educational success of foster youth (Day et al., 2013; Day et al., 2012). This is the dominant narrative of foster youth that remains largely invisible to those with little involvement in the social service system.

What is known, is rampant with accounts of vulnerability and maltreatment, discouraging statistics, and entangled systems crippled by surplus of need and a deficiency in resources. But despite the extraordinary amount of risk factors faced by foster youth, they are not destined to a life of failure. This is not the entire narrative. Surpassing seemingly insurmountable odds, there are foster youth who do persist. They rely on their inner strength while cultivating a network of resources for themselves,

creating protective factors to support their survival. While their struggles go largely unnoticed, their counternarratives of success and resilience are albeit invisible. Minimal research has begun to increase understanding of the protective factors but there is more work to do to understand how students from the foster care system cultivate and harness them throughout their educational journeys.

**Frameworks utilized to study foster youth.** Much of the extant research and theoretical frameworks used to understand the experiences of current and former foster care youth paints a negative picture. The foster care system endures as a result of the maltreatment of children, so it is not surprising that there are negative factors affecting youth in care. However, the sheer number, overlapping relationship between factors, and long-term impacts are particularly alarming. Both researchers and practitioners within the field have utilized socioemotional frameworks to better understand the impacts of care. Socioemotional frameworks build on the understanding that human personality is cultivated through multiple or significant experiences of adversity or crisis and the act of resolution (Chrisman & Holt, 2016). The frameworks attempt to understand the individual because of personal, social, and environmental factors with little responsibility given to broader systemic issues that have great influence in the lives of foster youth. Nevertheless, resiliency, posttraumatic growth, and grit theory are useful in understanding how and why some individuals respond to their circumstances in particular ways, and thus, can provide an explanation of educational persistence despite disparate expectations.

***Resiliency theory.*** Resiliency frameworks have been the dominant lens from which to understand the lived experiences of foster youth. In general, the term 'resilience'



refers to a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptations within the context of significant adversity (Davies, 2010; Perry & Szalavitz, 2006; Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, Kelly, & Quinn, 2009). Through social, emotional, cognitive and physical development, resiliency can exhibit traits of honesty, bravery, independence, adaptation and reflection, and increases the ability to overcome personal, social and structural oppressions across the lifetime (Davies, 2010; Laser & Nicotera, 2011).

Resiliency frameworks were developed as a response to deficit-focused models in developmental research, suggesting that children can overcome negative circumstances or events to become well-adjusted individuals (Luthar & Cicchetti, 1991; Masten, 2001). Luthar (1991) defined resilience as “remaining competent despite exposure to stressful life experiences” (p. 600). Luthar, and Cicchetti, and Becker (2000) explained that resilience is defined by two components: exposure to threat or severe adversity, and a resulting positive adaptation despite such exposure. Although past research has focused on a set of specific dispositional attributes present in individuals who display resilience, Masten (2001) and others posited that resilience is instead an ordinary trait, resulting from basic human adaptive systems (Hines et al., 2005; Luthar et al., 2000). Masten’s (2001) findings correlates the existence of individual resiliency solely as part of the developmental process and is not an innate personality trait that only some individuals persist. Essentially, Masten (2011) asserts that all individuals have the capacity to build resilience through emotional development during stressful environmental pressures.

Drapeau and colleagues (2007) further nuanced this understanding and identified a point of action in the development of resilience within the process of learning. Their study utilized findings from two-part interviews with 12 individuals in care in Canada.

The point of action was defined as a turning point in the child's development, which led to increased resilience, citing that resiliency would not be possible with the catalyst of adversity. Essentially, resiliency is not a common trait innately present within all individuals but exists and is cultivated in response to external forces (Drapeau et al., 2007). Several circumstances were identified as points of action, including the engagement in activities that offer a sense of accomplishment, forming a relationship with a significant, supportive adult, and engagement in self-reflection. Once these action points were met, the foster youth reported experiencing an increase in feelings of self-efficacy, a distancing from the risk factors in their lives, engagement in new opportunities, and an increase in positive outcomes in multiple areas of their lives (Drapeau et al., 2007).

One lasting critique of resilience theory is the usage of the concept to explain an extraordinarily broad range of development and success (Luthar et al., 2000). While theorists center their work on understanding the development of resiliency, some practitioners in social science fields have been known to overprescribe the trait of resilience to natural child development milestones such as learning to ride a bike or tying their shoes (Masten, 2001). It is dismissive to equate the personal fortitude, resourcefulness, and courage of foster youth to the completion of development tasks or activities. Learning is not synonymous with resiliency. Norming resilience in this way, undermines the recognition of foster youth success in the face of extreme adversity and dismisses the responsibility of systems to respond to their needs.

***Posttraumatic growth, and grit theory.*** Contemporary adaptations of resiliency theory have included posttraumatic growth (Lindstrom, Cann, Calhoun, & Tedeschi,

2013; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996), and grit theory (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007). Posttraumatic growth theory outlines that individuals can experience positive personal change after struggling through adversity, and that instances of growth far outnumber detrimental results (Lindstrom, Cann, Calhoun, & Tedeschi, 2013). The amount of growth is often attributed to the protective factors cultivated across their lifetime that help to mitigate the risks and adversities individuals face throughout their personal histories (Davies, 2010; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). They help to reduce or compensate for various vulnerabilities and include the availability of social support, healthy coping strategies and personal motivation. Duckworth et al (2007) expanded this understanding to deepen the role of motivation and goal setting as part of the resiliency and growth process.

Rooted in the study of human psychology, grit theory is defined by the behaviors and outcomes of individual persistence. "The gritty individual approaches achievement as a marathon; his or her advantage is stamina" (TED, 2009, 9:13). While researchers acknowledge that grit manifests differently between individuals, and as a result of diverse lived experiences, they outline five key characteristics: conscientiousness, courage, goal endurance, resilience, and excellence (Duckworth et al., 2007). Conscientiousness is understood as the self-discipline and singular determination to succeed, and courage is said to be significantly correlated to perseverance. According to Grit theory, managing one's fear of failure is imperative to achieving success (Duckworth et al., 2007).

Duckworth's characterization of grit involves perseverance towards extraordinary success and long-term time commitment, or goal endurance. "Achievement is the product of talent and effort, the latter a function of the intensity, direction, and duration of one's

exertions towards a long-term goal” (Duckworth et al., 2007, p. 1087). As mentioned, grit theory is inextricably linked to resiliency as previously understood, however this framework further defines it by the exhibited traits of optimism, confidence, and creativity. Environmental, social, and relational risk factors are often abundant in the lives of foster youth, most significantly during a child's most formative years of development. Grit theory posits that these characteristics are necessary in overcoming barriers in pursuit of success (Duckworth et al., 2007).

Traditional frameworks such as resiliency, posttraumatic growth, and grit help to inform the study. Yet, as described previously, these frameworks have largely been descriptive and lack a critical lens but do provide the beginning steps of meaning-making as outlined by critical theory (Davidson, 210). Only when the lived experiences and educational resiliency of foster youth are understood and celebrated, can we begin to critically examine and challenge the systems and policies constraining their success.

While these frameworks have been the preeminent ways in which to understand the foster youth experience, they have limitations. As with any theoretical concept, one limitation centers on the application of one idea to understand a diverse group of individuals. Foster care alumni possess varying identities, lived experiences, and personal attributes that render their life outcomes in different ways. Resiliency and growth may manifest very differently, even between individuals with similar experiences, and therefore cannot be generalized across an entire group or population. FCA likely have very unique ways of generating opportunities for gaining social mobility and each of these frameworks have historically lacked a critical examination of the role that race, socioeconomic status, and gender play in the success of the individual. Furthermore,

these theoretical concepts place sole responsibility for success on the individual and do little to interrogate the various systems that create or perpetuate barriers for foster youth (Davidson, 2010). By doing so not only further marginalizes this population but it diminishes the role and responsibility of policy and practice to mitigate the risk factors for foster youth and better support their overall success.

### **Guiding Frameworks for this Study**

As demonstrated by the literature, foster care alumni experiences are most often understood by the many negative social and personal barriers they face as a result of complicated life environments, but little is shared how they move through these social contexts. FCA employ multiple strategies to maneuver complex s Extant literature frames the foster youth narrative through the lens of socio/political history, policy development, and numerous personal, social, and environmental risk factors. This study aims to revise that dominant narrative by centering stories of success, as defined by the individual, taking into account the many possible contributing factors that influence FCA social mobility. Understanding the concepts of social reproduction such as field, and human, social, and cultural capital can help reimagine a framework that better demonstrates the tools FCA use to persist.

**Social reproduction and mobility.** The study of “field” within Bourdieu’s broader theory of power and social reproduction investigates the various spheres of life that individuals navigate based on the recognition of their own agency to leverage forms of capital. These fields serve as sometimes separate but interconnected arenas with their own rules, norms, and messaging pertaining to the benefits and challenges of membership (Wacquant, 2008). Individuals either work to preserve the field or to gain access and

dismantle it from the inside. Bourdieu argues that cultural and material factors influence achievement (Wacquant, 2008) and are interrelated with each type of capital; human, economic, social, and cultural (Wacquant, 2008). Rooted in economics, these forms of capital encompass the social and political currencies that can be accumulated and bartered to challenge sociopolitical standing (Bourdieu, 1999). To highlight the persistence of foster care alumni, this section will briefly review human, social, and cultural capital.

Human capital refers to the collective and individual capacity for skill and knowledge of human beings (Portes, 1998). These capacities manifest as diverse physical and social competencies, and personality attributes such as creativity, resilience, and reasoning. They are the direct tools and intellect people use to exist in the world. While the study of human capital is primarily linked to its impacts on economic value (Fitz-enz, 2000), some sociologies argue that one's human capital is also directly related to their ability to employ all other types of capital. It is indicative of their personal investment into social environments, and relational efficacy (Portes, 1998).

This relational efficacy then is translated into social capital or the aggregate resources and interrelated networks (Bourdieu, 1983). Social capital identifies the communal features of populations that include such things as interpersonal relationships, lived histories, and socially shared norms, values, and reciprocity. It consists of connection or relationships which afford individuals access to knowledge afforded by those relationships. The ability to leverage social capital for mobility is inherently based on the premise of reciprocity and that the assets traded are mutually beneficial to those participating in the network (Wacquant, 2008).

Cultural capital is comprised of the values, knowledges or historically reproduced cultural traits of a particular community (Rios-Aguilar, & Kiyama, 2012). Bourdieu's (1999) principle of cultural capital refers to the compilation of symbolic attributes of a population such as skills, tastes, posture, clothing, mannerisms, material belongings, credentials, etc. acquired through embedded membership of a particular community and social class. Sharing similar forms of cultural capital with others creates a sense of collective identity and group. This shared membership can also be a source of social inequality as not all cultural assets are valued equally (Rios-Aguilar, & Kiyama, 2012). Cultural capital can be acquired and accumulated depending on the period, the society, and the social class (Bourdieu, 1999). Attributes of cultural capital include collective knowledge, attitudes, values and group norms such as language and traditions. Bourdieu also argued that educational capital can be a form of cultural capital as it is based on the cultural norms cultivated and or transferred in academic spaces (Leech & Campos, 2003). Individuals or communities transmit cultural capital to help generate pathway for social mobility. According to Bourdieu (1999), cultural capital comes in three forms: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized.

Embodied cultural capital refers to form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body and implies a labor of adaptation through personal exposure or investment (Bourdieu, 1999; Leech & Campos, 2003). One important marker is the influence of habitus. Habitus refers to the physical embodiment of cultural capital as it pertains to the deeply ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions that we internalize as a result of our lived histories (Bourdieu, 1999). These messages are developed in connection to the messages of the field in which individuals navigate and then in turn, influence individual feelings,

behaviors, and thoughts about the world around them (Leech & Campos, 2003). As habitus is directly impacted by the social conditioning in the field, it can be malleable through individual resiliency and adds to the likelihood of social mobility (Wacquant, 2008). Additional individual promotion is also sometimes dependent on sources of objectified and institutionalized cultural capital. Objectified capital refers to the material belongings that signify one's cultural belonging. Individual or groups can then trade these objects to symbolize their membership and move through various networks (Rios-Aguilar, & Kiyama, 2012). Institutionalized capital references cultural assets that have been recognized and valued by institutions or groups, thus benefitting the holder of that asset (Leech & Campos, 2003).

The concepts of field, capital, and habitus are inherently linked to social reproduction or transformation dependent on how the relationship is recognized and leveraged (Leech & Campos, 2003). Social reproduction or mobility theory is vital to understand the relationship between individual characteristics and social forces that influence individuals' lived experiences. However useful, there remains a gap in the literature in demonstrating how these theories manifest in FCA experiences of resiliency and persistence. Funds of Knowledge theory begins to offer a broader discussion of the assets in historically marginalized communities and their leveraging of diverse knowledges to navigate complex histories and systems.

**Funds of knowledge.** Funds of knowledge (FoK) is a conceptual framework that exists on the fundamental premise that communities, particularly marginalized communities possess rich and diverse knowledges, skills, and experiences acquired through historical and everyday community and cultural interactions (Gonzalez, Neff,



Moll, & Amanti, 2006; Rios-Aguilar, & Kiyama, 2012). Drawn upon anthropological roots, the term ‘Funds of Knowledge’ attempts to define resources that marginalized communities or households manipulate to survive (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 2005). The framework was further developed and largely attributed to the work of Vélez Ibáñez and Greenberg (2005) when they utilized the framework to investigate the assets that exist in Mexican and Mexican-American families. In examining these often-migratory communities they found that communities shared their complex skills and knowledges to support each other under ever-changing social, political, and environmental contexts (Moll et al., 2005). These skills or ‘funds’ of the collective community included home maintenance, car and appliance repair, and other household activities of cooking, planting, and husbandry. Additional reciprocal engagement could also include hunting, childcare, and shared transportation (Moll et al., 2005; Rios-Aguilar, & Kiyama, 2012). The researchers also found that FoK were socially distributed and exchanged, by developing and sustaining exchange networks between cluster households (Moll et al., 2005). Funds of Knowledge as a conceptual framework is inextricably linked to the concepts of social reproduction theory but nuances our understanding of the assets possessed by marginalized communities. Funds of knowledge encompasses all of these tools and is most notably defined as the “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (Moll et al., 2005, p. 133). In their research, Moll et al. applied FoK to offer a deeper conceptual framework used to address K12 pedagogy and curriculum for diverse students. It is centered on the principle that the best way to learn about lives and backgrounds is through a focus on households’

everyday practices, by learning about “what people do and what they say about what they do” (Gonzalez et al., 2006, p.40).

The concept of funds of knowledge has also been used as a methodological means of conceptualizing bodies of knowledge’s and assets of marginalized communities and also as a roadmap for culturally relevant pedagogy within academic spaces (Gonzalez et al., 2006). Building on this asset-based perspective, the work of Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (2005) positioned teachers within households with the purpose of documenting communities’ funds of knowledge. As a methodological approach, the teachers and families engaged in home visits within the communities, and study groups among the researchers. This level of participation lead to deeper relationships of trust with families and allowed for the recognition of them as engaged, resourceful, resilient, and knowledgeable sources of strength. The immersion within these communities led to a deeper valuing of their knowledges and subsequently adapting curriculum to better recognized those assets (Boktyre, Kyle, & Rightmyer, 2005; Moll et al., 2005). Funds of Knowledge theory, while it has historically been primarily used in qualitative research to study the cultural assets of Latina/o community, more contemporary research has explored it through different methodologies, and to examine additional diverse populations in higher education.

Ramos (2018) citing the extensive deficit literature framing narratives including first-generation, low-income or students of color sought to quantify the funds of knowledges possessed, acquired, and transmitted in pursuit of degree attainment. The study utilized an innovative mixed-methods design to connect quantitative survey data regarding cultivation of specific knowledges with qualitative testimonies of participants’

lived experiences. Other researchers such as Mwangi (2015), Solorzano, Huerta, and Giraldo (2017), and Huerta and Rios-Aguilar (2018) expanded FoK to understand the assets of marginalized populations. Mwangi (2015) nuanced the understanding of the role kinship relationships in the cultivation of funds of knowledges that support college access. Students with a broader network of familial contacts were also more likely to internalize positive messaging and serve as role models to their communities. In her later research, Mwangi (2017) expanded the contextual understanding of the framework to illuminate college-going pathways for sub-Saharan African immigrants in the United States. The applicability of funds of knowledge as critical analysis framework to understand the collective cultural assets of marginalize groups also proved relevant for Solorzano, Huerta, and Giraldo (2017) as they advocate for traditionally stigmatized youth and students. Their research employed the theory to demonstrate the FoK gang members or incarcerated youth employ to navigate and survive juvenile and education systems.

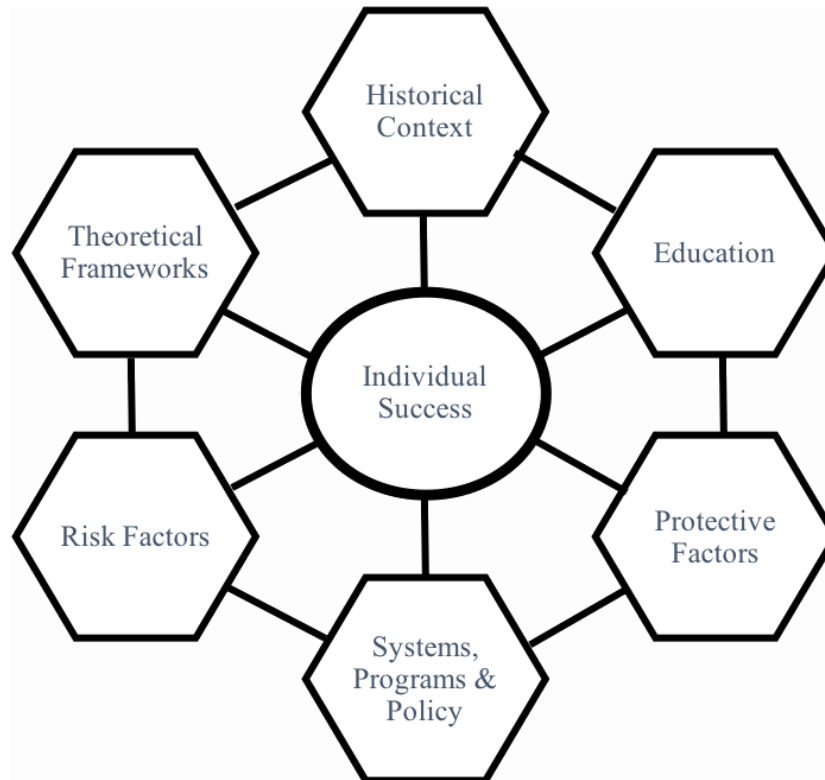
Each of these contemporary contributions to the utility of funds of knowledge as a framework are essential benchmarks in expanding it to understand the resiliency and educational persistence of foster care alumni. While they broadly expand the populations addressed by FoK, they offer greater nuance by elevating shared characteristics of this population. Foster Care alumni are likely to be low-income, first-generation and/or students of color, highly mobile, engaged in kinship care relationships, and stigmatized as at-risk youth engaged in gang activity. As demonstrated by this body of literature, FoK as a framework can serve as a helpful perspective to understand the tools of resiliency FCA employ toward success.

Funds of knowledge asserts that diverse populations have diverse and valuable knowledges as a result of their vibrant lived experiences despite not always recognized by dominant discourse or structures (Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2012). While this body of research highlight the ways in which communities share resources, services, and cultural attributes to support each other (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2006; Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2012), it is possible similar sources of strength are present as FCA navigate their own multiple pathways. Funds of knowledge as a conceptual framework and methodological approach has multiple benefits to studying the postsecondary persistence of FCA and is the guiding framework driving this participatory action research study. First, FoK innately recognizes both the assets of marginalized communities and acknowledges the social and political influences that contribute to persistent inequity (Rios-Aguilar, & Kiyama, 2012). While FoK has mostly been used to understand Latina/o families, I argue that it is a relevant and applicable framework to understand FCA. Foster care alumni exhibit similar migratory or mobile patterns to the initial families studied and demonstrations of resiliency points to commonalities in acquiring diverse knowledges and a means of survival and social reproduction. Lastly, the historical link to power structures and translated sources of capital to exhibit resiliency within the FoK framework likely aligns with FCA narratives. The methodological inputs from Moll et al., (2005) also helped to inform the PAR design. Similar to the foundational study, participant-researchers engaged in a deep level of participation with the study topic, narratives and artifacts, and find consensus and strength from an emerging peer network. Ultimately, the perhaps most crucial thread of the FoK framework its ability to reposition counternarratives that recognized the histories, voices, and success of FCA and use them

as assets to promote transformational change both for those engaged in the research and future audiences.

For the purposes of this study, I propose the following conceptual framework to highlight the lived experiences of FCA in pursuit of education attainment. As shown, this reconstructed conceptual framework repositions the individual's story as the prominent nexus of understanding with the contributing factors separate but linked both to each other and FCA success. The influencing factors included take into account the contributions from literature on historical context and risk factors but portrays them as part of the multiple components of FCA individual success rather than being the defining attributes of the foster youth narrative. Education, policy are extracted from risk factors as presented in the literature, and along with protective factors, become independent attributes to success and stories of persistence. Funds of knowledge and capital are represented by the connecting links between all of the interconnected parts to signify the assets and tools FCA cultivate or leverage to drive their own success.

**Figure 2:** Reconstructed Guiding Framework of Understanding of FCA Persistence



### **Conclusion and Moving the Conversation Forward**

Foster care alumni traverse many childhood and adolescent challenges that can deter their persistence and success. Most FCA have experienced multiple, overlapping negative experiences, and are often confronted with a reality of dismal expectations. The impact of these experiences on their development, transition into adulthood, and education attainment can be devastating. While the attainment statistics for FCA are dramatically lower than their peers, and in the face of unimaginable obstacles, foster care alumni often show incredible resilience toward degree attainment. This persistence receives little recognition. Foster youth attainment has mainly been left out of the higher education literature, and only in more contemporary research of the last decade or so has there been any recognition of this vulnerable, yet resilient population. Salazar, Haggerty,

and Roe (2016) suggest that literature examining foster youth in postsecondary education as nonexistent prior to 2003, and even contemporary inclusion is still centered on deficit perspectives. It is imperative to understand the struggles the 3% overcome to achieve this level of success. Foster Care Alumni have stories of persistence worth telling and doing so can serve as vehicles for individual motivation and change in education policy and practice.

The second journal excerpt included in the opening of chapter two is meant to share the nuanced experiences of the FCA experience and attitudes toward the future in success. Most prominently, it asks the question “why did I succeed and does it even matter?” This study was inherently developed in an attempt to answer that question both for myself, my FCA peers, and the individuals who have the ability to transform inequitable systems. I intentionally chose funds of knowledge and PAR design for this study because of their validating perspectives and utility for change. Both encouraged my own duality of researcher and FCA in the research process and calls for reflection on how those personal identities informed the findings, and the impact of doing such personal work. The following proposed study aims to center the resilient voices of foster care alumni, and in so doing, begin to challenge both the deficit dominant narrative surrounding their success, and the systems in place that continue to impede their journeys.

## **Chapter Four: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter I describe the research methodology and methods utilized in this study to examine the personal, social, and structural tools that support postsecondary persistence for foster care alumni. While graduation rates for FCA are projected to be significantly lower than their peers, there are individuals who defy the odds and persist. This study was informed by the Funds of Knowledge conceptual framework that repositions traditionally marginalized groups as resourceful, resilient, and empowered (Moll, et al., 1992; Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2012). In alignment with FOK, and to illuminate those assets within FCA, this qualitative study employed a participatory action (PAR) design. In the following sections, I detail both the rationale for qualitative research and PAR research methods, my researcher positionality and how it informs this work. Also included in this chapter is detailing of special considerations regarding PAR study design and IRB approval, the participant recruitment and selection process, and engagement with the research team across all stages of the study including data collection, analysis, and generation of the findings. Chapter 4 also offers a discussion on the validity, trustworthiness, and review of potential limitations of the methods.

### **Research Paradigm**

The basis of this inquiry rests on an interpretive and constructivist paradigm (Allen, 1994), meaning that I sought to understand the lived experiences of FCA within,



and often as a result of, complex world structures. Broadly, constructivism as an ontological stance asserts that reality is socially constructed and allows for multiple, subjective, and yet equally valid truths (Allen, 1994). Interpretivist or constructivist paradigms seek to reveal and understand the world of social agents and historical contexts (Schwandt, 1994). As such, research of this kind often involves the researcher a passionate participant, and methodologies typically consist of inductive, reflective, qualitative and critical design approaches (Fawcett & Hearn, 2004).

**Critical interpretivism.** While interpretivism assumes that meaning only exists as a result of interpretation by those impacted by the lived experience being studied, critical interpretivism takes on a more actionable stance in also addressing influence of power on those realities (Schwandt, 1994). Critical interpretivist theory is rooted in the pursuit of increased understanding of the personal, social, and historical forces that impact human freedom and the ideological justification or "interests"(p. 41) of those forces (Cohen, Lawrence & Morrison, 2000; Habermas, 1970, p.41). Primarily credited to Habermas (1970), critical theory is organized by these interests to categorize and generate knowledge by (1) understanding the meaning of situation, which generates historical knowledge, (2) prioritizing interest in the pursuit of collective and transformative advancement, which generates critical knowledge, and (3) interrogating oppressive systems and practices (Cohen et al., 2000). Critical theorists suggest two kinds of research methodologies: ideology critique and action research.

Ideology critique generally questions the dominant social ideologies, or the ‘whys’ that perpetuate oppression while action research expands that inquisition to interrogate both ideologies (why’s) and structures or the ‘hows,’ that contribute to

unequal power and privilege (Cohen et al., 2000). Both methodologies rely on in-depth critical analysis, but action research in particular is centered around dialogic methods; combining observation and interviewing with approaches that foster conversation and reflection (Habermas, 1970). This reflective dialogic of observation and interviewing allows the researcher and the participants to challenge dominant practices and reclaim the power of self-defined and co-constructed realities (Cohen, Louis, Lawrence, Manion, & Morrison, 2000; Habermas, 1970).

### **Rationale for Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research is a form of explorative inquiry that seeks to understand the how and why of a given phenomenon (Dey, 2002; Patton, 2003) and as such, aligns with interpretivist and constructivist perspectives. While it does not seek causality, it can help illuminate the relationships between aspects of environment, behaviors, perceptions, and experiences (Dey, 2003). Qualitative research allows me as the researcher, to not only involve myself with participants as we co-construct meaning of their lives and education trajectories, but value my own reflexivity as a FCA as well (Creswell, 2013; Seidman, 2013). This design builds upon a constructivist interpretive framework that posits that learning and meaning-making is a dynamic and iterative endeavor (Creswell 2013; Maxwell, 2012), while involving space for critical and actionable research. As such, new knowledge is often co-created, giving value to prior knowledge through subjective experience and environments (Patton, 2002).

Participatory action research (PAR) is a qualitative methodology that centers the participants as knowers and integral members of the research team in which their subjective experiences and perspectives are assets to the issue being studied (Creswell,

2013; Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2015; Yanow, & Schwartz-Shea, 2015). As such, PAR is the most appropriate choice to help elicit stories of foster youth stories of educational success and push for transformational change.

### **Participatory Action Research**

Participatory action research (PAR) methodology serves as an actionable framework to critique, understand, and improve the world (Selener, 1997). PAR stems from action research and is defined as a tactic to study social systems while driving reform efforts at the same time (Kendon, Pain, & Kesby, 2007). It emphasizes the importance of subject-oriented attempts at solving particular social problems (Gillis & Jackson, 2002) through the lens of their own experiences. PAR is considered a subset of action research, which is the “systematic collection and analysis of data for the purpose of taking action and making change” by generating practical knowledge (Gillis & Jackson, 2002, p.264). PAR also pulls from Paulo Freire and his theorizing of the role of critical reflection plays in transformative change (Maguire, 1987; McIntyre, 2007; Selener, 1997). Freire’s perspective to PAR was concerned with empowering marginalized populations about social issues that impacted their lives such as equities around literacy, and community development (Freire, 1970). As such, social change is inextricably linked to individual empowerment, and PAR provides the framework to support this relationship.

The ideological underpinnings of PAR align with critical interpretivism in that it embraces a dialectic of reflection and criticality, shifting understandings whereby “objectivity is impossible” and “multiple or shared realities exist” (Kelly, 2005, p.66). Truths are relative, and individuals, institutions, and systems can be malleable

under diverse pressures over time. By using PAR, participants become researchers and exhibit individual empowerment and can reshape their knowledge of political, social, economic, and familial contexts that have influenced their experiences (McIntyre, 2007). PAR challenges normative conventions of social or scientific research, as it moves social inquiry from a linear perspective, to an integrative and co-constructed asset-based research endeavor that considers the contexts of people's lives, and their agency to ignite reform. The process of employing a PAR research design arrests directly on an iterative process of inquiry, collaboration, action, reflection, all with the goal of being a tool for change. At its root, it is a collective, self-reflective inquiry that calls for PIs and PRs to understand and improve upon the experiences and structures that influence their lives (Bergold, 2007; Kelly, 2005). The reflexivity that is foundational to PAR is directly linked to social action, and is influenced by appreciation and acknowledgement of one's lived experiences, culture, community contexts, and social relationships. Engagement in PAR should be empowering and accentuate individual agency in having increased control over their lives (Bergold, 2007). Participatory research design consists of multiple research strategies and cannot be coupled into one single, unified approach.

There can be differing opinions of the meaning of PAR as "any literature search using the descriptors "participatory research", "action research", and "participatory action research" identifies a diversity of approaches to research" (McTaggart, 1991, p.169). As a result of a multiplicity of fields in which PAR has developed, the implemented study design and intention can manifest differently, and at time, even been contradictory across disciplines (Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2015). "PAR was developed as a means for improving and informing social, economic, and cultural practice" whereby individuals

with differing power, status, and influence, collaborate in groups in relation to a particular area in need of action (McTaggart, 1991, p.169).

Participatory action research is the best choice to help redesign the narrative of FCA resiliency and success in the pursuit of postsecondary attainment. By including participants as researchers, it challenges the privileged position of the researcher as holder or creator of knowledge and repositions power back to the participant and allows the often-silenced voices of FCA to become a central research tool. PAR methodology has been questioned regarding its propensity for rigor and utility (Campbell, 2002). Because PAR places substantial importance on the contribution of reflexivity, some would argue that this level of subjectivity could too heavily influence participants' narratives and ultimately, the study's findings (Campbell, 2002; Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2015). However, proponents for equity-minded research assert that not only can subjective inquiry be a useful tool, it is most often necessary for transformation (Bergold, 2007). Additionally, some of the discourse argues that research can never be wholly objective and that the 'insider' role of the researcher brings a deeper level of responsibility to the issue being studied because of the intimate knowledge and reflexivity the principal investigator offers (Weis & Fine, 2000). Because of the often-silenced voices of those who have traversed that pathway, this study argues that the researcher reflexivity is the best and likely most accurate approach in portraying FCA educational persistence in a nonexploitive and humanizing manner. My own experience as a FCA offered a nuanced understanding of the foster care alumni experience. Much of the literature cites FCA can struggle with trusting interpersonal relationships, particularly those that may seem voyeuristic (Geis, 2015), therefore sharing my own identity and

story of persistence helped to build rapport and trustworthiness among the participant-researchers and encouraged them to reflect and share their own experiences. Further, this rapport was integral in building buy-in from participants who committed to a deeper level of engagement while taking on the additional role as co-researchers.

**Participants as researchers.** Participatory research is conducted directly with the population intimately involved with the issue being studied, with the goal of illuminating their knowledges and abilities through a process of understanding and empowerment (Bergold, 2007). Often, co-researchers are from groups whose views and voices are likely to be marginalized by having few opportunities to articulate and justify their experiences and interests (Borda, 2001), and PAR provides a platform for "enlightenment and awakening of common peoples," towards driving actionable outcomes (Borda, 2001 p. 29). When research is conducted in collaboration with traditional researchers and communities, the methodological question arises around who should be involved, and how. This interrogation is particularly significant as the basic premise of both constructivists, PAR, and funds of knowledge theory is to access, validate, and harness the diverse co-constructed knowledges of marginalized communities. PAR strategies however, do not reside on the premise that all those involved are trained researchers. Therefore, it is important to carefully determine which knowledges are shared, and in what ways to create both a humanizing experience for the individual and support the objective of the research study. Only by so doing, can the co-constructed knowledges in PAR be a tool for actionable impact (Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Bruer & Reichertz, 2001). Once the ideal participant-research sample has been identified further clarifications must be made regarding the degrees of participation for each member of the

research team. The most well-known model of participation is the ‘ladder’ proposed by Arnstein (1969) and applied in various types of participatory research designs (Ungar, 2012). Determining roles and responsibilities, contributions, and ownership within a project is a foundational criterion and cyclical phase of conducting participatory research (Russo, Goeke, & Kubanski, 2012).

In traditional research, the relationship between researchers and participants are well-defined, and sometimes neutral or indiscernible to avoid threats to research internal validity (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Innovative community, action or participatory-based, research posits that relationship between all those engaged in the study can be a powerful and humanizing tool when involved in meaningful ways, and objectivity must be exchanged with reflective subjectivity (Russo, Goeke, & Kubanski, 2012). This calls for willingness on the part of the participant-researchers to enter into the research process and employ the necessary knowledge and capacities to participate productively. While participatory research aims, in particular, to “involve marginalized groups in the production of knowledge and, by so doing, to foster empowerment” (Bergold & Thomas, 2012, p. 197), the roles of the participant-researcher are often not static instead, are subject to continuous change throughout the length and scope of the project (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

For this study, participant-researchers played a necessary and integral role in multiple aspects of the work. Because their experiences as FCA who have persisted through postsecondary education, their involvement as researchers bared witness to counternarratives this study aimed to illuminate. As such, their reflections and opinions helped to drive the research design and implementation. Similar to the ‘ladder’ approach

detailed my Amstein (1969), the participant-researcher were involved in the conducting of interviews, emerging coding and analysis, and review of final findings for accuracy and consensus, all while being active ‘participants’ in sharing their own stories of FCA postsecondary persistence<sup>5</sup>. The principal investigator will have sole responsibility in final data analysis, and authorship of the dissertation. In the methods, findings, and discussions that follows, care has been taken to identify the role at hand when referring to each individual person. When identified as a participant, this refers to when the individual had been interviewed, and the acronym PR will be used when referring to when they were enacting their role as a researcher.

### **How I Came to This Work**

As a foster care alumni, I bring my own philosophies and biases to this research. My lived experiences, social class, race, and gender have influenced my educational persistence and have been the driving motivator for continued advocacy through research, policy, and practice. Additionally, I am deeply committed to community partnerships and the value of asset-based research, and education policy to address marginalized groups and social justice imperatives. I feel a deep sense of responsibility to illuminate the often-invisible persistence, and stories of foster youth, while carrying an intimate understanding of the personal and emotional toll it takes to do this important and sensitive work. As such, my lens largely informs my research paradigm to be critical and adheres to a social constructionist, interpretive framework (Maxwell, 2012) and humanizing methodologies for social justice transformation.

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<sup>5</sup> The specific procedural responsibilities of the participant-researchers are detailed further in each of the following methods sections.



While I served as the primary investigator in this study, I was also a participant; sharing and analyzing my own story of postsecondary resilience amongst a group of my FCA peers. PAR allows for scholarly research to benefit from these multiple identities, and it was both a place of privilege and transformation to serve in these two roles. While the role of principal investigator is new, my commitment to critical reflection and action for FCA started long before I even knew what scholarship and advocacy could like look.

Growing up in and out of the foster care system had an extremely formative impact on how I view myself within what was an often chaotic and fickle world. At an early age I remembered engaging in community service and now, with the wisdom of years of reflection and hindsight, I now recognize it both as a tool of engagement and survival. Working within communities gave me a place to belong, to be valued while providing me various support services at the same time. I volunteered in soup kitchens to get a meal and to avoid the loneliness both I and the patrons were inevitably feeling. This search for connectivity and refuge also spilled into my educational experiences.

School for me was a safe haven. Despite having attended over 15 schools and more than 35 academic transitions during my K12 education pathway, school always felt more accepting and stable than any residence I was staying in. Challenging myself to do well gave me purpose and offered me validation from teachers, a sense of belonging I wasn't getting from other adults. I was a quiet, but hardworking student and always did well academically. Despite these successes, I was always skeptical of any positive affirmations I received. I found it confusing that my teachers had this inherent expectation of my success and challenged me to excel, while seemingly ignoring blatant symptoms of a child in crisis. I often wore the same clothes an entire week, never had

lunch money, and was clearly suffering physical harm denoted by bruises and broken bones but their only interventions were directed towards my academic performance. Was genuine care conditional? I learned early that meeting benchmarks was a way to find any support, even if that support was often insufficient to nurture me as a whole person. In an effort to put my best face and foot forward, I tried to only focus on achievement, compartmentalized my troubles, and put on a false brave face. As such, I struggled to fit in with peers who looked different than me and had different family dynamics.

Additionally, I do believe that my laser focus on achievement alienated my peers because they didn't understand that it was the only positive outlet I had and at the same time, was a way to overcompensate for the tremendous inadequacies and feelings of unworthiness I felt. Teachers' validating treatment of me versus my peers, even though I was the one with no family or possession, was very apparent. With my adult perspective, I now understand that despite my hardships, my white privilege offered me different pathways than many of my classmates. Did teachers believe in me because I was the white student, and therefore conditioned to presume I was capable or conversely, did they know what I was going through and felt bad for me? Should I downplay my drive and achievements so as not to push my peers away? These plagues of questioning authentic support, the reasons and impacts of achievement, and the privileges I did or didn't have in comparisons to my peers persisted through all levels of education and arise periodically even still today. These experiences and deliberations have shaped how I think about equity in education and have been the foundation to much of my critical interrogation of inequitable systems and service alongside marginalized groups, and ultimately a lifetime of deep self-reflection.

Journaling has long been a useful tool for me to in navigating both my lived experiences and the intersecting roles I often play as a result of those histories. These lifelong journals served as part of my own researcher memos and artifacts that helped to shape the understanding of my own experiences (Travers, 2011) and inform my participant story of postsecondary persistence. Journaling has offered me a form of expression in the absence of true confidants. Because the need I felt to compartmentalize the traumatic parts of my childhood and adolescence, I almost never self-identified as a foster care alumni before entering my doctoral program. This journal anthology bears witness to my lifetime of fears, reflections, goals, successes, and apprehensions. Similarly, it in a way serves as a deposition of individual, familial, community, and systems history amidst selective memories, truths and admissions. As an adult, now with some figurative and literal distance from the chaotic environments of my past, the journal entries have become deeply personal benchmarks of resilience and self-growth. Until this endeavor, I have not shared their contents widely, and was admittedly both nervous and excited to use them in this study to inform a reimagined understanding of FCA postsecondary persistence and transformational change. As my fellow participants, I understood that this level of vulnerability was an important tool in this inquiry and ultimately benefitted from having this platform to share my experiences.

Conducting this study has been illuminating and deeply meaningful. Until recently, I had not experienced having a foster care alumni peer group, so it was particularly validating to identify so many FCA interested in participating in the study. The strength and resiliency of foster care alumni I always knew existed was literally materialized for me through the vocalizing of our stories that shared common struggles

and triumphs. I learned a lot about myself both in reflection to the strengths I found in my peers, and in their affirmations of the fortitude they saw in me. It was emotional for me to voice my own story, one I have not often opened up about for fear of oversharing, judgment, or simply lacking a platform to share. While our individual lived experiences differed in time, place, and circumstance, the common gravity of our FCA stories made it easier to tell my narrative. Sharing what would normally be shocking accounts to most audiences was uniquely validating and also sobering because we were connect through trauma and could relate to each other. After sharing with them, I already find it easier to share aspects of my personal and educational journey with others outside of our FCA peer group.

While the connection to pushing for equitable educational experiences and the validation of FCA narratives is the defining personal reason for this study, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the emotional toll it has also been to do this work. Much of the impetus for this study has been a lifetime of wondering why I've 'made' it and so many of my peers haven't. The path has been long and not without its difficult memories and reoccurring barriers and self-doubts. Funds of knowledge gives us a framework to utilize and value our lived experience, turning them into assets, but in reality, those experiences can also have enduring negative permeations into all aspects of our adult lives. Writing the literature review for this study was particularly difficult. While the excitement and passion for starting this study was a driving motivation in pursuing this scholarship, to be confronted with the expectation of recycling all the negative understandings of the FCA experiences was at times, paralyzing. Simultaneously, I felt angry and burdened at what the literature said even if it painted a realistic picture, often

of my own lived experiences. Writing about the obstacles FCA was a triggering process, bringing my own hurdles, past and present, into focus. Essentially, while I wanted to design this study to demonstrate the strength and resiliency of FCA, I was writing about the significant impacts of time in care while struggling with those same impacts. I felt anything but strong and resilient.

This [the comps process] is not going well. I'm just regurgitating the negative things everyone says, not to mention, my own insecurities. I can't help but go down the rabbit hole of remembering and feeling which is not conducive to writing - writing about what it means to be a FCA with all the self-doubt, isolation, and poor support systems, and here I am, all of that still a reality for me. None of that goes away and neither does the pressure to keep working. I'm writing about how 'I' will not persist while trying to persist against all the things I'm citing. This feels like a vicious mind trick. How do I write about FCA despair and argue for FCA undeniable resilience or success all at once, with each one having the same significance? The weight of the responsibility to get it right, and to show this topic justice is so overwhelming, at times and I worry if I'm succeeding? (PI Researcher Journal)

I've learned over time and through this process that our FCA stories of resilience, while strong and beautiful, are inextricably coupled with the struggles we've faced, and the odds articulated against us. That is what makes them harrowing and important to tell. Our lives, and educational histories are nuanced, and our resiliency intertwined with the tools we've found to define success for ourselves. Ultimately, this study served as a conduit to confront these dichotomous thoughts and identify the internal and external

support mechanisms to do so. In beginning this endeavor, I understood and acknowledged the importance of self-care in doing research such as this. I continue to learn how to both push myself beyond my insecurities while being kind to myself during what has been a difficult, and personal process. I was intentional to reserve time to reflect, write, and step away from the work when needed, and was able to reach out at times when I was struggling. Asking for help continues to be a difficult thing to do and being a witness to the accounts of my FCA peers highlighted other areas for my own continued growth around healing, efficacy, and confidence. However, their affirmations and permissions to share both my struggles and successes also became form of care during the research process and going forward.

There is so much vulnerability in sharing but also so much opportunity for growth and systems change. When I share, and it's received well, it positively impacts my forward trajectory exponentially. I am so grateful for those people and opportunities that make it possible for myself and my peers to find support. (PI Researcher Journal)

The support and belief in this project from my advisor and committee reinforced that these complicated counternarratives of resilience are worth elevating. The PAR design of the study provided an opportunity to share these reflections with other FCA who have also experienced these difficulties in doing their own work. This study intentionally manufactured a venue to give voice to FCA lived experiences, ultimately scaffolding our collective histories and strength to help illuminate how to help FCA persist. While sometimes doing this study felt self-serving, in hindsight I now know that it absolutely contributes to a greater understanding of the complexities of FCA lived

experiences and educational persistence. I believe in the perspective of multiple, equally validated realities and the assets to be highlighted within silenced communities. The opportunity to hold multiple roles in advocating for FCA as myself, researcher, and policy professional, is a true privilege and my life's work but has also brought with them a deep sense of responsibility. Throughout this study, I felt compelled to elevate the voices and achievements of my peers and be a driver for change. The pressure to do so was intense and I feel a great sense of gratitude and pride for the point of significance this study offers.

My fellow participants also expressed a deep sense of shared responsibility to doing this work, thus compounding the positive influences it offers the field. As the PI for the study, it is also deeply meaningful to be able to have played a role in bringing us together as a group and forge a supportive and reciprocal relationship. Our care for each other and the goal of the study was ever present and will likely be the connection for prolonged friendships and opportunities to collaborate. For each of us, doing the work cannot be separated from who we are and the fabric of our experiences. Their positionality and commitment to this work are both highlighted in the next chapter and as a significant tool noted in the study findings.

### **Research Questions**

The guiding research questions, designed to elicit stories of foster youth postsecondary persistence to degree attainment, are outlined below.

- How do foster care alumni define success for themselves?
- What salient tools; personal, social, and system, support foster care alumni postsecondary persistence?

## Methods

The intentionality and appropriateness of the methods to the research questions are particularly relevant for this study. One major advantage of PAR design is that the participant-researchers have first-hand knowledge of the field and therefore all methods of participant recruitment, data collection, data analysis, and findings dissemination build on the participants' everyday experiences as FCA. While their expertise of the content area is a significant benefit to the study, PAR research does ask for a deeper level of engagement than traditional research, and therefore ensures additional steps in the research process. The following details the phases of the study implementation inclusive of the extensive Institutional Review Board (IRB) documentation and steps of preparation made by the final participants selected.

Phases and Benchmark Dates of Study Implementation:

- I. Initial IRB Submission (*May 28, 2018*)
- II. IRB Study Approval (*June 5, 2018*)
- III. Pilot Study (*June 11-29, 2018*)
- IV. Participant Recruitment (*July 2-August 3, 2018*)
- V. IRB Amendment Submission: Individual Investigators (*October 24, 2018*)
- VI. Amendment and Final Study Approval (*December 5, 2018*)
- VII. Online Course Completion (*December 5-January 1, 2019*)
- VIII. Data Collection (*December 7-22, 2018*)
- IX. Data Analysis and Writing (*January 1-May 1, 2019*)

**Pilot study.** Often in research, a pilot study is conducted to pretest particular research questions or data collection instruments (Creswell, 2013). This small-scale



mirror study helps to identify participant sampling difficulties, usability and validity of the instruments such as participant recruitment surveys or interview protocols, and to provide overall feedback on the methodological choices of the research. Pilot studies can be particularly useful when engaging in innovative research and serve as a trial run to establish study focus and trustworthiness. Because of the deeply collaborative nature of PAR, pilot studies can be difficult to establish. Cultivating an additional group of participant-researchers to engage in the full process of the study procedures may be limiting to a sufficient sample to the actual study, particularly for very specific or nuanced participant samples. Despite these barriers, efforts should be made to cultivate external validation of methodology choices and study instruments.

For this study a group of three FCA researcher-practitioners served as external reviewers of various study design choices. These individuals have demonstrated careers serving the needs of students with a history of time in care, and two are FCA themselves. These reviewers gave up their opportunity to participate in the study but rather lend their invaluable expertise to help elevate the stories of their FCA peers and offered their knowledges of FCA to review the overall study focus, the participant recruitment survey, consent form, online modules, and focus group and interview protocols. Their personal understanding of the FCA postsecondary persistence experience and well as their engagement in higher education research allowed for nuanced and expert feedback on the clarity of design provided to potential participants, the focus of the protocols to elicit stories of persistence, as well as suggestions for information useful to include in the online modules designed to accustom future participants to the research process. Following their in-depth review, the panel did not suggest edits to the study design or

data collection instruments but did offer additional to supplement the online modules. Additionally, their broad networks were particularly useful in identifying additional avenues for national sample recruitment as well as leveraging of their own contacts to invite individuals to consider participating. Lastly, they offered recommendations for outlets that would support a broad dissemination of the findings. While the pilot study did not result in substantial revisions or additions to the proposed scope of work or study instruments, it served as vital tool in ensuring trustworthiness and validity of the study. Gathering feedback from FCA peers, despite the added time and energy to do so, reassured that the intentions and methods of the study would be beneficial to the FCA community and not only rooted in the individual goals and perspectives of the PI.

**Participant recruitment.** The study used a hybrid of convenient and purposeful sampling methods. Convenience sampling is a non-probability selection procedure where participants are selected because of their convenient accessibility and proximity to the researcher (MacBeth, 2001). While the intended participant sample was not meant to be representative of the entire population, there is an assumption that the participants share a common attribute that deem them as eligible for involvement in the study. Because this study examined the postsecondary persistence of foster care alumni, it was imperative that participants self-identify with that identity and experience to be considered (Creswell, 2013). Participants' FCA stories of persistence will lend toward a greater understanding of important support mechanisms but will not represent the totality of all FCA populations. Consistent with PAR design, this study recruited 5 final participant-researchers to be engaged through the duration of the study, including the PI of the project. The principal investigator's identification as FCA and cultivated networks

throughout the foster youth community offered multiple avenues for participant recruitment and provided a level of legitimacy and rapport with the potential study population. The initial participant recruitment survey [Appendix A] was distributed through multiple local and national listservs, and social media outlets of multiple foster agencies and organizations [Appendix B] to recruit the convenient sample. Additionally, the call for participants was shared through extensive personal and social peer groups across the country.

The survey was divided into three sections building upon each other toward a narrow sample of foster care alumni. Section one of the survey included information regarding the study purpose, and eligibility criterion required to participate. It captured general contact information and asked individuals to indicate whether they had spent time in foster care, had obtained a college degree, and asked individuals for an initial, informal agreement to also engage as a member of the research team in addition to the traditional study participant role. Once participants expressed an initial desire to be considered for the study, they were asked to complete section two of the recruitment survey that captured potential participants' aspects relevant to their identities and lived experiences as foster care alumni. Criterion for consideration at this stage were organized into three general content categories: personal information, foster care experience, and educational experience. While all components were useful in understanding the individual's personal contexts, particular criterion such as degree attainment, and sequencing and duration of time in foster care were more heavily weighted during final participant selection.

The survey was distributed across 20 national agencies and multiple social media posts for a two-week period in summer of 2018. The survey yielded 93 responses of

individuals who self-identified as foster care alumni. Additional data points gathered included age, gender, race and ethnicity, profession, dependent status, and additional markers for experiences in foster care such as age at entrance, total time in care, age exiting care, reason for departure, and multiple K12 and postsecondary education data points.

***Selection criteria.*** Due to the very nature of the study focusing on the tools that support foster care alumni postsecondary persistence, the defining participant selection criteria was a college credential. Four-year degree attainment has been shown to have a larger impact on overall adulthood success rates including financial, residential, and workforce stability (Kushel et al., 2007) and therefore prioritized in participant selection, but two-year degrees were not necessarily exclusion criteria. Purposeful sampling was utilized to characterize and select the final sample of participants that met the eligibility criteria. This method of non-probability sampling allowed for the PI to choose a subgroup of participants with a diverse set of characteristics across the broader participant selection criteria (Creswell, 2013). From the initial respondents, selected participants had to have obtained a college degree and had been in care at some point between grades 9-12.

The initial sample following the national survey responses narrowed the possible sample to 42 largely because most respondents indicated they had some college but no degree; a finding that aligns with the literature on foster care alumni education attainment rates. Of the 93 survey respondents, 38 individuals identified as a person of color, and 55 self-identified as Caucasian. Level of degree attainment differed across the initial sample. The data revealed that 13 individuals of color (34% of sub-sample) and 29 Caucasian

(52% of sub-sample) individuals had obtained some level of postsecondary credential, bringing the potential possible sample after the first cut to 42 individuals.

It may be important to note that while communities of color are over-represented in child welfare (Meyers et al., 2018), the majority of individuals that responded to the survey identified as White. Similarly, individuals with a college degree were more often White as well. While the study did not gather qualitative or anecdotal data on all 93 of the survey respondents, the literature helps us to speculate possible reasons for the disparities found in this sample of foster care alumni. First, as denoted in chapter three, there are numerous personal and social factors that negatively impact the persistence of youth in care. We also know, that education, and other systems, are inherently rooted in White supremacy, racist, and classists structures that can further marginalized foster youth of color (Meyers et al., 2018). This privileges Caucasian students, increasing the probability that they will earn a degree at higher rates than students of color and thus, skewing the possible sample for this study.

The second defining criterion was the duration and time point of when in care, specifically between grades 9-12. Prioritization was given for longer time spent in care during these formative schooling years. Length of time and window of engagement plays a significant role in education attainment, and therefore the longer and closer to graduation an individual is in care increases the likelihood of a stronger relationship to education attainment (Rumberger, 1999). Of the 42 individuals that had indicated some college credential, 31 were in care during high school, making them eligible for participation in the study.

Lastly, the third section of the recruitment survey ask for general availability parameters. Due to the deeper level of engagement prompted by the PAR design, Selected participants needed to be available for their own interviews, and reserve time to both serve as the secondary interview for at least one of their peers, and engage in data analysis. Based on the indicated availability potential participants shared in the survey, the potential final sample was further narrowed to 19. Many individuals cited heavy workloads including multiple jobs, and other responsibilities such as children and schooling that would greatly limit the level of commitment they could lend to the project at the given time.

From the remaining 19 eligible individuals, a sample of 4 participants were selected based on location, gender, race and ethnicity, and availability. The PI also served as a participant, bringing the study sample to 5 individuals.

While all 93 respondents did not meet the full criteria of potential selection into the study, all expressed support of the scope of work and a baseline interest level of being involved in some way. The data gathered from the national recruitment survey and this pool of individual-level data on foster care alumni across the country is significant and could be useful for future work and follow up.

**Table 1:** Selected Participant Characteristics

PR	Location <sup>6</sup>	Race	Gender	Entry Age	Total Time in Care <sup>7</sup>	No. of placements <sup>8</sup>	Degree(s) <sup>9</sup>
Emma	MI	Caucasian	Female	15-18 yrs	2 yrs	5	BA
Ana	CA	Latina/o	Female	6-14 yrs	6 yrs	3	AA, AA, BA, MA, (PhD)
Amber	CO	Caucasian	Female	1-5 yrs	3 yrs	3	BA, MA
Greg	CA	Caucasian	Male	Birth-1yr	5 yrs	4	BA, (MA)
Maria	CO	Caucasian	Female	1-5 yrs	7 yrs	9	BA, MA, (PhD)

Table 1 details some of the individual characteristics of each participant in the study. While the recruitment sample captured extensive data, the variables chosen to highlight here provide a snapshot of key indicators linked to influencing their time in care and subsequent education persistence.

**Adding individual investigators.** Because of the specificity and deep level of engagement essential to doing participatory action research (PAR), there were additional

<sup>6</sup> Location indicates current residence of the participant, not the location of where they were in foster care.

<sup>7</sup> Given the multiple transitions it can be difficult for many FCA to have an understanding of accurate time spent in care or number of transitions, so these figures are estimates self-identified by each participant.

<sup>8</sup> Number of placements refers to unique locations, not inclusive of familial home or repeat foster care placements

<sup>9</sup> Degree listed in parenthesis are in-progress

amendments required in adding participants to the study in comparison to more traditional research designs. Initial IRB approval for the study was obtained late-May, 2018. In addition to completing a consent form [Appendix C], participants also needed to be approved through IRB as an Individual Investigator [Appendix D] so as to be protected under the university's research liability coverage. To obtain approval, individuals were first required to complete the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) program to prepare them for ethical and legal obligations for doing human subjects research. Additionally, potential PRs had to submit a current resume, signed a detail memorandum of agreement [Appendix D] that outlined the expected nature of engagement throughout the study, and complete the Universities Individual Investigator Agreement form [Appendix E]. Once these documents were completed and submitted to IRB, only then could participants be considered PRs and the study commence. The entirety of the IRB approval process from initial approval, amendments, and final study approval took approximately 6.5 months.

**Technical skills and capacity building.** In an attempt to mitigate the power dynamics arising from differing levels of research experience, the PI created an online course that offered multiple modules around various capacities and knowledge that would support PRs' layer of participant engagement driven by the participatory action research design. The modules included information on foster care alumni education persistence, qualitative research, participatory action research, funds of knowledge, and interviewing and coding techniques. Each PR completed these modules, responded to corresponding discussion boards and reflection questions prior to beginning the research process. Additionally, this online course provided a platform for continued co-constructed



learning, collaboration, capacity building among the research team throughout the study. Periodic discussion questions were also designed and shared in an effort to promote individual reflection that also served as the content for their researcher journals and subsequent data analysis. The participants were made aware of the online course modules when consenting to participate in the study but had to wait until official IRB approval to start. Once that approval was received, participants were notified immediately and were able to begin. They were asked to review the sections on foster care youth, and research design prior to their first interview but then had approximately 3.5 weeks to complete the other section related to data collection and analysis.

#### **Data collection.**

*Procedures.* Data sources consisted of interview transcripts from research team focus groups (6), multiple semi-structured interviews with each participant-researcher (2), online course discussion posts (3) and PR journals<sup>10</sup>. These extensive data sources served as multiple units for holistic data triangulation and analysis to create an in-depth, contextual understanding of both individual and collective narratives regarding FCA postsecondary persistence (Creswell, 2013). In alignment with PAR researcher, the triangulated data sources and reoccurring points of engagement promoted the cyclical process of fact-finding, reflection, and action. Participants also kept personal journals to document their researcher notes and participant reflections across the duration of the study and offered them for analysis. The essential rapport (Pratt, 2007) between the

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<sup>10</sup> Each PR kept personal writing journal to document reflections, research memos, and arising thoughts about the study. There were no requirements or schedule assigned and entries were only reviewed by the PI and included in the manuscript with permission.

research team contributed to a collaborative, trusting, and reciprocal group environment which led to greater data collection, and ultimately deeper meaning-making of the FCA education success narrative.

***Study instruments.*** Research team meetings served as the first formal instrument used to not only orient participants to the study procedures, but also to double as focus groups around shared experiences, apprehensions of participation, and goals of engagement throughout the study. Focus groups are considered a socially orientated process and a “form of group interview that capitalizes on communication between the research participants in order to generate data” (Kitzinger, 1995, p.299) and thus, represent an integral research design component of PAR. It offers the group of participant-researchers and the principal investigator to build rapport and a sense of community through shared contexts. Focus groups cultivate a collaborative space by providing the opportunity for open communication about personal reflections and all components of the research process (Rath, 2012). Ideally, open and reciprocal dialogue becomes the focal point the research design and experience of all participants. These considerations are of relevance to participatory research because the presence of the participating community must always remain as a primary objective of the research endeavor (Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Rath, 2012). Focus groups, in addition to semi-structured interviews bolsters internal validity and ethical considerations by offering multiple data collection methods and providing safe spaces for free discourse (Kemmis, 2001). They serve as complementary efforts to collect necessary data, and help to build consensus about project design, shared reflection (Bergold & Thomas, 2012), and interpretations of findings (Rath, 2012). Additionally, focus groups can provide a support

network to individuals who may not have that support outside of the research study experience (Wicks & Reason, 2009).

Capacity-building during the research procedures is an important component of PAR as it is likely that some of the participant-researchers may have not been engaged in scholarly research prior to the study. The PI mentored the research team on the design and procedures throughout the duration of the study (von Unger, 2012). Capacity building of research partners should be a prominent goal and intention in constructing community-based participatory research (Rath, 2012). Doing so offers the PRs opportunities to develop potentially new competencies required in the research process (McCarten et al., 2012) and also lessens some power dynamics about who is the expert or teacher between the PI and PRs (Rath, 2012).

Over the course of the study, the entire research team held six official virtual focus groups and had multiple email communications around arising questions, next steps, and member checking. These research meetings or focus groups were intended to not only support the cyclical process of fact-finding, reflection, and action identified by PAR design, but to also provide a space for capacity and relationship building among the participants. While the focus groups were equally participatory in nature, the PI served as the primary facilitator. General guidelines and protocols for the first and last meetings were outlined prior to the study [Appendix G] however, the other meetings were structured by arising needs of the research team, including the timing, frequency, and goals for each meeting. Each focus group opened with a general check-in and life updates to reiterate a sense of community and rapport. The conversations during first few focus groups during data collection centered around three main reflection questions: What have

you found enlightening, what have you found troubling, and what do you still want to know? This allowed for us to collaboratively reflect on the personal impacts of being engaged in the research and begin to think of which points of significance were relevant to examine further for this study. It also offered an additional layer of self and group care and relationship building during the interview process as team members shared memories the interview brought up, or points of shared experiences or encouragement. During the data analysis and writing stage, these focus groups shifted toward building and sharing capacities related to research methodology portion of the collaboration. While we still engaged each other personally as peers, a greater portion of the time together was spent soliciting input regarding emerging codes, themes, and findings, as well as additional opportunities for member checking, and collaborative thinking around the design of the manuscript, future dissemination of the research. Each meeting was audio recorded to document any procedural components, reflections, and findings. The focus groups achieved the goals of creating a network of FCA, offering a community for participants both during the research process and after while also further elevating each member as critical and skillful scholars. For a population that may often feel invisible or excluded from non-foster communities, this group of individuals with shared lived experience became a source of identity-validating peers and ongoing professional colleagues which was clearly exhibited during these meetings and over the course of the study.

**Table 2:** The Role of Research Team Meetings

Meeting Session	Agenda & Action Items
Research Team Meeting #1	Study overview and expected level of engagement for PRs. Feedback on interview protocol, study design and support with IRB process
Research Team Meeting #2	Review online course modules covering foster care data, funds of knowledge conceptual framework, and qualitative methodologies such as interviewing and coding analysis
Research Team Meeting #3	Discuss reflections about the interview process and goals for highlighting insights shared. Revisit online discussion boards and researcher journals for points of significance
Research Team Meeting #4	Review analysis, generate initial list of codes and coalesce into themes
Research Team Meeting #5	Review analysis along identified themes and supporting quotes and data points. Brainstorm top-level findings and implications
Research Team Meeting #6	Final reflections, feedback, and discussion of future collaborations

Table 2 details the number of research team meetings held through the duration of the study and the goals for each meeting.

***Participant interviews.*** The second instrument used to highlight FCA success stories are participant interviews. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews are utilized extensively in participatory action research (McTaggart, 1991) and serve as the primary source of data collection for this study. Participatory action research interviews are generally conducted in pairs comprised of the PI and PR. The PI was responsible for scheduling all aspects of the data collection process including focus groups and interviews. This interval between meetings served as an important tool that provides

sufficient time for participants to review the interview transcripts for accurate representation and also allowed them to reflect on the conversation, likely eliciting deeper conversation and engagement (Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Creswell, 2013).

In alignment with traditional PAR design, this study employed two interviews with each participant with aim of eliciting stories of FCA resilience and success. The interviews were designed to build upon each other, chronicling participants' individual information, foster care experiences, and educational experience. Specific interview questions addressed relevant biographical information, educational histories, and personal reflection and representation of their own success [Appendix H]. Given the PRs geographic locations, all interviews were done virtually. All interviews were transcribed by the PI and were given to the participant and PR during the time between each interview to help foster reflection and a deeper sense of engagement and offer a chance for member-checking on the accuracy of the representation of the discussion.

**Table 3:** Interview Matrix

<b>Interview</b>	<b>Primary Interviewer</b>	<b>Secondary Interviewer</b>
Interview I: Emma	Maria	Amber
Interview I: Ana	Greg	Maria
Interview I: Amber	Maria	Ana
Interview I: Greg	Emma	Maria
Interview I: Maria	Greg	Amber
Interview II: Emma	Amber	Maria
Interview II: Ana	Maria	Greg
Interview II: Greg	Maria	Emma
Interview II: Amber	Ana	Maria
Interview II: Maria	Ana	Emma

Table 3 outlines the scheduled interview matrix that supported collaborative data collection process.

For each interview, there was a consistent participant-researcher joining the principle investigator with every interview per participant. Having the same participant-researcher across the interviews with one participant contributed to more in-depth relationship building and a greater understanding of the arch of their story of persistence. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by the PI. Because individuals' fellow participants were involved in the interview process the interviews were not confidential however, the interview data was de-identified once transcribed.

***Researcher reflections.*** Lastly, participant-researcher journals served as the third source of data for this study. Research journals are a central tool in qualitative research,

and for PAR in particular, as they serve as an ‘audit trail’ of ‘self-supervision’, reasoning, and reflexivity (MacBeth, 2001; Berger, 2015). Participatory research in particular, asks for participants to share a greater willingness on the part of participants to be vulnerable in sharing much of their feelings and experience in commitment and support to the goals of the study. Following Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of sociological self-reflection, the individual thoughts and behaviors of all the research team must be accounted for (Kemmis, 2001), understanding that each will inevitably have their own internal dialogue and understanding of the personal, social, and systemic contexts or conditions in which their lives and the research topic are embedded. This level of openness or vulnerability can sometimes be difficult for FCA (dio Rios, et al., 2001). Because participant-researchers exhibit a unique level of engagement by serving in both roles while studying a topic that directly related to their lived experiences, journaling can offer a safe, non-voyeuristic place to interrogate one’s own thoughts before imparting them with the broader research team. Individual and group reflection is essential for the co-creation knowledge while building a sense of community (Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Berger, 2015).

Research journals can take on many forms and often include either historical or current artifacts related to the topic of inquiry (Berger, 2015). All individuals engaged in the project were encouraged to keep a research journal to detail their personal thoughts, interpretations, and researcher memos. Additionally, any personal artifacts such as photos, awards, and letters participants wanted to share were used for discussion and context-building during the focus groups and interviews. I drew on my role as a FCA to build essential rapport (Pratt, 2007) with the participants and shared in the meaning-



making of the FCA education success narrative and the cyclical opportunities of engagement across the research team supported the deepening reciprocal relationship. While the researcher journals served as another data source, and excerpts are highlighted throughout the representation of the findings, the actual archives were only shared with the PI, providing varying levels of exposure among the research team.

**Data analysis.** Data was collected via focus groups, interviews, and researcher journals. Each source provided a rich understanding of the tools that support FCA postsecondary persistence. Analysis was informed by the research questions and Funds of Knowledge conceptual framework, and consisted of reviewing each data source and scaffolded stages of qualitative coding (Creswell, 2013). Data analysis includes identifying emerging patterns of co-constructed knowledge and themes, then represented through rich description of the findings (Creswell, 2013). All focus groups and interviews were transcribed by the principle investigator to support full immersion with the data, and analysis conducted through a process of qualitative coding by all research team members. Intentionality was given to denote the nonverbal cues and significance of discussions in the transcripts. The PI noted pauses, shared laughter, sighs, or changes in tone so as to address the different reactions and reflections occurring during interviews and focus groups. While these nuances didn't serve as data specifically, they did contribute to the broader reflections and implications of the our narratives and findings. This supported inter-coder reliability and co-constructed agreement of emerging points of significance (Creswell, 2007). Each PR read all of the interview transcripts and drafted a preliminary list of codes based on their initial readings of each transcript. After engaging in member checking and consensus building among the research team to ensure internal validity,

initial axial coding was utilized to uncover salient concepts across data sources and served as the platform for further analysis. In this stage of axial coding, the team coalesced the extensive list of 97 initial codes to 31 larger category groupings. After iterative discussions amongst all members of the research team, this group of codes was further reduced to 13 elements related to the narratives of FCA educational resilience. Lastly, selective coding was used to narrow these elements to the 5 themes and supporting data points within the findings. This level of collaborative data analysis supports the co-construction of knowledge around about the narratives of FCA educational resilience.

The analysis of researcher journals, and the final stage of transcript coding was completed solely by the principle investigator as the findings narrowed toward core categories so as to demonstrate personal mastery of the research and analysis process. The lens of participatory action research allowed the researcher positionality and reflexivity to be a viable source of data analysis and interpretation (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 2017). Continual rounds of iterative review aligned with PAR techniques of layering participant voice and contributions to the research project (Camarota, 2014), and once the final coding and initial draft of findings were drafted, the research team was given additional opportunity for review to ensure fair and accurate representation of their stories.

### **Representation of the Findings**

The representation of PAR findings also has a number of distinctive features. Above all, the multivocality of the research team must be preserved in the representation of the study results (Unger, 2012). Whenever possible, their subjective perspectives,

voices, and motivations should be an integral component of telling the larger story to spur transformation (Selener, 1997). This influence is paramount to goal of PAR to empower the marginalized members of society about issues pertaining to their civil liberties, lived histories, and the systems that influence those experiences. As such, the representation of the findings should be used toward that end (Camarota, 2016).

The information gathered in this study aimed to build upon the agency of FCA and to critique current systems, policies, and practices that negatively influence their success. Each member of the research team was involved in the multiple iterations of the findings present in chapter six. The PI was responsible for the first initial draft of the findings which was then shared with the team for review and editing. The PI would gather the feedback and make changes to the master document. Ultimately, the team worked collaboratively during the first 2 drafts of chapter six, leaving the PI responsible for the final representation of the findings put forth to the committee. Additionally, all PRs were engaged in one-on-one discussions and revisions with the PI while working on their success statements and personal narratives. Individual PRs drafted their own except on what success means to them and the PI only offered editorial feedback. While the personal narratives are not findings per se, it is essential to understand the collaborative and iterative nature of presenting this type of significant grounding background information. Because the positionality narratives were derived from a few data sources such as interview transcripts, discussion boards, focus groups, and personal artifacts, the PI made the initial attempt at coalescing the information into a broad timeline and synopsis. Each PR then used that first draft to revise their positionality statement to what is now included in chapter five.

Sharing of PAR research supporting information and findings is not limited solely to traditional texts as the goal of dissemination is to highlight marginalized voices, across diverse channels, representation, and audiences to push for increased awareness or change (O'Brien, 2001). The depiction of FCA success and positionality in this study are largely in their own words, void of traditional academic language or prose. This level of authenticity was imperative to staying true to the humanizing philosophies of PAR to pay homage to the voices of marginalized communities and re-center them as having agency and power. Doing so aligns with the study goals to increase awareness about FCA achievement and push for more supportive policies and programs. As such, the intent is that the results of the study be used to inform multiple audiences through formal academic journals, policy briefs, and community presentations. In addition to this manuscript, the research team has already shared their willingness to broaden the study's reach by drafting related op-eds, an executive summary of the findings, and present at a local foster youth advocacy organization. Additional goals are to expand our personal narratives for publication, and also draft a student affairs practitioner's guide to supporting FCA to, and through, college. Whenever possible, the participant-researchers will play a significant role in how their stories are shared and represented. Only with broader dissemination of these powerful stories of resiliency and persistence, can the stories of FCA be used to change normative practices.

### **Trustworthiness**

Because of the personal, collaborative and transformational goal of PAR, trustworthiness is particularly relevant. Winter (1987) outlined a number of research principles that researchers must consider when conducting PAR with trustworthiness as

an integral outcome of the study. In addition to piloting particular parts of the study, there are additional guideposts that must be considered. First, the PI must demonstrate heightened intentionality in ensuring that all carefully selected participants, committees, and review boards have reviewed the concepts and design guiding the work prior to commencing the research (Cammarota, 2016; O'Brien, 2001). PRs must be allowed to influence most, if not all, aspects of the PAR study both at the commencement of the study and throughout the research and finding dissemination process (Winter, 1987; Creswell & Miller, 2000). While topics of inquiry and subsequent findings differ from study to study, methods employed to demonstrate trustworthiness should remain consistent across cases of qualitative research. Approaches to do so consist of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Creswell, 2103). When accounted for and met, these components give validity and broader value to the study findings and to the researcher's integrity (Aguinaldo, 2003).

Credibility accounts for the researcher's relative confidence in the 'truth' of the findings. While qualitative research is not necessarily designed to identify universal truths, credibility can and should be achieved through representation of the participants' self-identified truths as they related to the study content (Aguinaldo, 2003). Qualitative researchers utilize triangulation to confirm findings of the study are credible as they relate to the topic and research questions (Creswell, 2013). Confirmability is the degree of which the researcher's axiology, or biases are present within the research study's findings (Shenton, 2003). Namely, this means that the findings are equally based on participants' responses and not solely on the personal motivations or interpretations of the principle researcher (Aguinaldo, 2003). Confirmability within PAR can be a sensitive

balance. While a strength of PAR is the researchers' personal history related to the study topic it is important that they represent their own ideas, finding commonality and rapport with the research team but mindful to not persuade or over assume data based on just their own perspective. Acknowledging my own positionality and how it 'shows up' across the research process has been an important tool for addressing confirmability (Shenton, 2003). For both credibility and confirmability, peer debriefing, researcher memoing, and member checking throughout the study was an important tool to understand how individuals' assumptions, feelings, and dynamic positionality relate to, and potentially influence study findings. The research team was provided multiple opportunities to review transcripts and data findings to ensure that the findings accurately portray participants' responses. Additionally, all members of the research team were encouraged to use the research journals to create an important audit trail of how their own positionality was influencing the study and any arising interpretations of the data or findings.

Transferability refer for the research technique used to demonstrate that the research findings are applicable to other contexts. Again, qualitative research is not designed for predictability or generalizability in that one set of findings cannot be wholly predictive of another case but themes and interpretations can be leveraged for co-constructed knowledge across similar situations, populations, and research questions. Particularly for PAR, these parallels are used to make arguments for social and political change while recognizing that learning and reality can be co-constructed and participant-researchers' will have their own diverse and valid truths. Dependability addresses to what extent that the study could be replicated with fairly similar findings (Shenton, 2003).

Having a detailed and well-articulated research method procedure including participant recruitment, data collection, analysis, and representation of the findings and clear articulations of the findings helps to establish dependability. Intentionality toward outlining ethical considerations of the project is an integral component of dependability and overall trustworthiness of the study.

This study was developed specifically with trustworthiness in mind along each component. And step of the process with particular intentionality given to the following study design choices:

- Using asset-based language to identify former foster youth as foster care alumni
- Recruitment and use of FCA perspectives in the pilot study
- Inclusion of FCA authors' scholarship in the literature review
- The choice of Participatory Action Research and Funds of Knowledge theory
- Deep engagement with FCA PRs during the entire duration of the project
- Data triangulation across multiple sources and opportunity for PR input
- Selection of the committee to include diverse, community-based scholar-practitioners, and FCA representation.

Each of these decisions were made with the direct goal of providing an asset-based and transformative contribution to the field. The research team played an integral role in ensuring that this deep level of intentionality was met at each stage of the study implementation as well as holding themselves, each other, and myself, accountable for sharing our authentic selves when integral to upholding the overall trustworthiness of the study. Moving forward, particular consideration will be given when pursuing avenues to

share these narratives of FCA postsecondary resilience. Favorable avenues will include traditional academic outlets, but will likely also include community presentations and publications, and include members of the research team when possible.

### **Ethical Considerations**

While there was great intentionality toward establish trustworthiness throughout each stage of the study, there were additional ethical considerations to address regarding study content, confidentiality, and use of the findings. The aim of this study was to understand the tools that support postsecondary persistence for FCA. Participants were asked to share personal information and their experiences both in foster care and educational experiences. Although the research questions were meant to elicit areas of resiliency, growth, and support, the process of reflection may have been triggering. There was great intentionality to confirm that participants felt engaged and supported across the arc of the research process, and were able to opt out at any point if the endeavor made them feel vulnerable past their level of comfort. The reoccurring research team meetings, PR journals, and online discussion threads provided both introspective and interpersonal opportunities for reflection and debrief around arising feelings or behaviors relate to engagement in the study. External guidance from the doctoral advisor, and added, direct communication with between the two participants was sought. Particular care and guidance was sought when both a PR and the PI expressed their emotional struggle or anxieties at one point during the study. The PI discussed concerns with the doctoral advisor and both participants kept in close communication in addition to the planned gatherings of the entire group. Given the shared lived experiences and rapport built through the multiple points of engagement in the design, the entire research team



expressed comfort in sharing their positive and uncomfortable feelings that arose as a result of their participation.

Another area for ethical consideration was how to maintain an adequate level of confidentiality, particularly when operating within the collaborative nature of PAR design. Because of the integrated engagement of individuals serving as both participant and researchers, there were variable levels of disclosure depending on the particular phase of the research study as outlined on the memorandum of agreement all participants signed before enrolling in the study. Research meetings and online discussion boards were not confidential as they were intentionally designed to be a forum for group exchange, however individuals' researcher journals were only seen by the PI so as to offer some level of privacy for more personal reflection and data collection. Individual interviews had partial confidentiality as they involved both the PI and one other PR in addition to the interviewee, however, once all focus groups and interviews are completed, all data was be de-identified to preserve participants' identities outside of the research team. All quotes and journal excerpts included in the findings were given pseudonyms in the final analysis and representation of the findings.

Lastly, ethical consideration should be given around the role of power in the research process. "PAR aims to dismantle traditional research power relationships whereby the researcher is the ultimate source of authority and promotes the participants' equal participation in the research process" (McIntyre, 2007, p. 121). While the efforts to secure trustworthiness have been outlined, consideration was also given to the broader academic context in which the study resides. Though the study was participatory in nature, it does serve a personal interest for me as the principle investigator. It allows me

to leverage the efforts and findings toward the completion of a doctoral degree and scholarly productivity. Acknowledging this vein of power was integral to maintaining the authenticity and value of the research process and content. PAR work conducted as part of a degree completion can be difficult because the academic nomenclature predispositions the dissertation to be a demonstration of expertise and research ownership of the student. Keeping this dynamic top of mind, the research team held ongoing conversations to discuss roles and responsibilities, ownership of data, and authorship of the findings.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) played an important role in ensuring the ethical considerations of the research were met and giving approval for participants to serve as researchers covered under the University of Denver's liability coverage. Upon successful proposal of this study, materials were submitted to IRB for social science research approval. Materials submitted included: all recruitment documents, consent forms, overview of the study and methods, and copies of any proposed data collection instruments. The IRB approved the scope and intention of study, and adherence to basic ethical principles, federal regulations, and campus policies (Aguinaldo, 2003).

### **Limitations and Benefits of the Methodology**

Despite particular attention given to developing the rationale and importance of this research topic, as well as clearly articulated methods, ethical considerations, and proposed implications, this study is not without its potential limitations. Given the specificity of research question and preferred sample population, participant recruitment could have proven to be a difficult and lengthy process, perhaps negatively impacting the desired sample size. Using multiple sampling methods helped mitigate some of those

difficulties. Additionally, while I believe PAR is the best choice to co-construct knowledge regarding FCA postsecondary resiliency and persistence, it did pose some unique challenges.

Because this research design required participants to take on a more significant responsibility than in other traditional research methodologies, PRs not only had to agree to a higher level of engagement in the research process, including going through the IRB approval process and preparation for the study, but because of their reflexivity to the topic, they also agreed to take on perhaps a nontraditional level of participant vulnerability and self-representation (MacBeth, 2001). Similarly, the collaborative and participatory nature made scheduling focus groups and interviews more difficult than if just the principle investigator was conducting the data collection. All PRs exhibited a significant amount of engagement throughout the majority of the study and likely spent more than 50 hours dedicated to the research process including, IRB certification, multiple interviews, focus groups, individual reflections, analysis, writing and countless correspondences. The PRs maintained frequent communications and a tight deadline in preparing for the study, data collection, analysis and revisions to the design of the manuscript.

Although each of these aspects of participant commitment, engagement, and research procedures could have negatively influenced the significance of the proposed study, the personal relationships established and commitment of the PRs to the goals of the study outweighed these potential limitations. Despite this limitations, or nontraditional encumbrances, the study did also offer multiple benefits to the entire research team. Research team meetings served as markers to check in with each other to

make sure all were supported during the study. Each team member agreed that the benefits to the engagement were worth the deep level of responsibility and commitment given. In particular, PAR offers participant-researchers benefits beyond the overall focus of the study. Particular intentionality was given to design the online modules that offered PRs technical skills and various research tools that may not have had access to. There was also opportunity for additional capacity-building in the opportunity to do joint academic writing and community presentations, while also simultaneously building a network of peers who share common experiences. Doing so not only allows them to feel supported in their own endeavors but to also find pathways to give back to the FCA peers coming up through the system behind them.

## **Chapter Five: Foster Care Alumni Narratives**

Owning our story can be hard but not nearly as difficult as spending our lives running from it. Embracing our vulnerability is risky but not nearly as dangerous as giving up on love and belonging and joy – the experiences that make us the most vulnerable. Only when we are brave enough to explore the darkness will we discover the inviting power of our light. (Brown, 2010, p. 22)

This chapter is dedicated as an intentional space to highlight our Foster care alumni narratives apart from the research questions, traditional academic findings or implications. This chapter is an invitation understand our testimonies regarding our lived histories. Additionally, we hope they also share a glimpse into how we've come to this work in advocating for the sharing of FCA stories of persistence and postsecondary attainment. The profiles that follow were compiled through our interview transcripts, researcher memos, personal journals, or shared artifacts, and continues to be iterative over time given arising memories and clarity. They are not written in traditional academic language or format, and all differ between us in scope and content; but all share the threads of resilience and transformation. However incomplete, vulnerable, honest, varying levels of personal detail included, hard to read or empowering, they are not meant to explain the identities or experiences of ourselves and FCA, in totality. Nor do we share them with the expectation of owning how they are received but do so with the goals of providing ourselves the growth that comes with sharing. We also hope they will help generate awareness of FCA lived experiences and the magnitude of our successes.

Emma

## **: Life is Complicated but I'm Stronger For It**

I'm privileged for having had a regular upbringing in my early and late childhood for the most part. It's the middle years that get complicated. My mom raised me by herself because my father was diagnosed with schizophrenia, the month after I was born. He wasn't in the picture, so it was just us, me and her, and no siblings. I don't ever remember having a relationship with other family members, no extended family except maybe a couple of my mom's acquaintances. I went to preschool, kindergarten, and half of first grade in a public school in my home state, and then the second half of first grade my mother pulled me out of public school because I was getting bullied and the school wasn't doing anything about it. So I was homeschooled for a long time. And then after that I started homeschooling. The first year or two my mother was really hands-on with lesson plans and trying to get me to follow an academic routine. The rest of it was basically independent study. I was really advanced in the things I wanted to learn about, so I was basically taking college-level history when I was in sixth or seventh grade. I read a lot and really enjoyed science. Because of homeschooling, my K12 experience was fairly untraditional and I do not have clear sense of what grades were covered or what I learned when. For me, it all just blurs together. Also, people are very vocal about how terrible middle-school was, and how they had great formative stories from middle-school and I just can't relate. From about second to seventh grade I really lacked a peer group or any other outside social networks. Once my life outside of education got more and more chaotic because of my mom's mental illness, I started to fall behind in school work. This caused

my academic records to be really incomplete because my mother failed to send in my homeschooling paperwork the final year I lived with her. It was hard for me. I had worked really hard during most of my schooling and all of the records or credit was gone. It was just one symptom of the dysfunction at home. We came from a pretty poor part of town and with my mom struggling with mental health, we caught a lot of negative attention from the community. We stood out and it didn't help when other kids noticed that I was homeschooled so ostracized me more. My mom wasn't in any condition to take care of us. Everything like dinner, cleaning, and laundry was all on me. But we at least had each other. I was happy to have it as us two against the world. Despite some of these experiences, I was relatively well-adjusted, thankfully. Other than that, things were fine for a long time but that would inevitably change. My mom started to be overcome by her own mental health issues, and then refused to work. Things were precarious at best. The bubble burst at home around age 14. Money became an issue and then really, in a short time, we were homeless. It was scary being on the streets, moving from place to place, while trying to take care of my mom and keep her stable. You see a lot out there. I worried about her when I'd go to school, so sometimes I just chose not to go. Eventually we needed to figure out another plan. My mother moved us from to another state. Things only got more complicated, neglect was apparent, and my mom was getting worse. That's when I went into foster care.

I don't know what is scarier, being on the streets or in some foster care placements. I am pretty sure people that aren't involved in the system, have no

idea how chaotic and sometimes dangerous it is. I only spent about eight months in care, but in that eight months I pretty much went through every stage of the foster system. Even if in care for a short time, the traumatic experience of simply being in it makes it feel like 10xs longer. Also, my experience is a little complicated by the fact that I moved to a different state and two days later I was in care. Not only was I having culture shock because where I come from is a lower-middle-class, working-class environment, and my new placement was a very poverty-stricken, largely African-American and Latino area. I also saw myself with other youth in care that come from a lot of different types of backgrounds and even though I truly appreciate the exposure to new communities, it was a difficult adjustment at first. During my first experience in my crisis shelter I was the only white girl, and I think that sometimes alienated me from the other kids. There were kids of all ages, but I was also older than a lot of them since I was almost 16 when I got into the foster care system. There was definitely a certain type of culture or social environment and I didn't fit in. Not having a clear peer group during such a transitional time was really hard. I felt that not having siblings further alienated me a little bit, because everybody else I encountered did. They appeared more distressed because they were pulled away frequent from family member, and they had to try to schedule visits to see them. I feel lucky that I didn't have to deal with all of that because that seemed like a bigger distress for them, yet it would have been nice to have someone to depend on while in care. I felt like my social development was stunted a bit by the experiences of taking care of my mom as opposed to hanging out with friends like



most kids my age. I grew up pretty fast. And not to mention, I was new to this place and foster care. I certainly didn't understand the context of the city and really, the complicated system of foster care. There were some turf wars going on in the group home. People would fight with kids from the other side of town. It could sometimes be a violent place with fighting, kids involved in gang activity, and really no adult supervision. I didn't really know how to handle myself. Most of the other kids were talking about, "I've been in the system six times, eight times. This was my 12th time here," and this was all different from my experience.

So, after the crisis shelter, I moved to a private group home which was a little less chaotic but also had its problems. There was a girl's unit, so it was across the basketball court, there was a boy's unit. There more diversity in gender, and kids with all sorts of different needs. At that point, that's where I really started to notice we were being treated differently, us foster girls. We're were being treated differently than the boys, and each other. There were people who were at different levels of developmental delay, some mental health or behavior concerns. There were people who were black, white and of mixed race, and their age difference was pretty wide. We had a nine-year-old to a 19-year-old. It was a lot bigger of an age range than I expected and that the staff could manage. People running the facility were totally overwhelmed and untrained. Some kids needed serious interventions and there were absolutely no oversight or resources. No one was getting caseworker visits, mandated counseling, or even really going to school. The little kids probably had it the hardest because no one was really

looking out for them. Those of us who were teenagers were really just doing whatever we wanted like sneaking out or skipping school. The group home really just felt like a holding pen. It certainly wasn't a nurturing or fair place.

Gender and race played a big role in how we each experienced time in foster care, or at least from my perspective. I noticed pretty quickly that the white girls were being treated more like victims and the black girls were being treated more like delinquents, or like they were partly to blame for their situation. It was really unfair and so damaging for everyone. We all were not treated well. At some point, there was a lawsuit challenging private foster care practices, and the center closed because it couldn't live up to the new standards, so without notice, all of us had to find someplace to go. I ended up going to a private foster home; a single middle-aged African-American woman who had two other foster daughters and they were both African-American, so that was also an adjustment to bridge the cultural gap between all of us.

Very soon after that I was taken into kinship care by my cousins and they would ultimately adopt me just before graduation. I went to high school with them so after some time, I started to feel acclimated to normal schooling and peer groups again. While that got a little more stable, I did have that other compounding stuff. I was conflicted because in one way I had stability but was still technically a foster kid. You always worry things will change, and there's a weird pull to the life you used to know. The relationship with my mom is kind of fuzzy honestly. I know initially all I wanted to do was go back there, go back to her. I did remember contacting her several times. Life with my mom got hard, but

it's what I knew. Eventually, I lost track of her while I was in care and even though I missed her, the more I was away the more I realized that she wasn't good for me. I started liking the feeling of independence and calm I felt after I was removed from her care and into a stable situation. You think with all the changes I had gone through that I'd be used to adapting, but it can still be hard. I was just trying to figure out what it all meant; being scooped up with my own family who I had never met, what it felt like to have two parents which I had never experienced, and what it meant to go to a traditional school. It all of that just kind of compounded once I ended up out of the system. It was a really tough transition for the next six or seven months.

When I got to high school I was supposed to be in 10th grade but they put me into ninth grade because I had incomplete records and testing from when homeschooled back home. They had no proof of intelligence level, or knowledge base or anything so they put me in remedial science as well as remedial math. I'm not sure I needed either as overall, I did well academically in high school. It was a social adjustment but after I got acclimated the first year I was there, I became a lot more comfortable and realized my senior year, "I'm kind of popular." I also felt super supported by my teachers, my friends and my adoptive parents. It was all really a supportive experience. I had the most connection with the people who looked over our extracurriculars and even ended up winning a staff recognition scholarship my senior year because I was that involved with the faculty. I made a good bond with all of my teachers for the most part. They validated me, and I felt

really supported but my peers, while we got along and I had a lot of friends, they didn't really get me and we just on totally different wavelengths.

Despite the chaos I felt as a kid and teenager, surprisingly my college entrance story isn't all that complicated. That is one place I feel more privileged than most foster youth because my a father has an engineering degree and my biological mother was pre-med, but she never got her degree. Even though I never knew my dad and my mom didn't finish, I knew about college and it was always on the table. Even though it wasn't accounted for on my transcripts, I had taken college level stuff as a child. College was always something I wanted to do and knew very early on I wanted to be a psychologist. I just didn't necessarily know what that pathway looked like. Because my other relatives that took me in did not go to college they were removed from the actual tactical steps of me pursuing college but supported my desire to go. I had defined a career path and I knew I wanted to go to college, but it was all of the logistical stuff that was a little bit out of my league. Because I was in kinship care while attending high school, and had more consistent and normal academic experiences as a result, there were supportive people who were around me when I was trying figure all of that out. Even though I wasn't really sure how to start the process of applying I did know enough to reach out to my school counselor. I now know about the impacts of being a first-generation student, and while I more self-identified as a former foster youth, I'm sure my lack of knowing what to do had some sort of influence. My mentor later told me, "It's more of who's around when you're trying to figure this out, and what level of information you have that makes the biggest impact." I

hadn't learned a lot about how to go to college but now had people around me that could help with that. She encouraged me to consider a few different schools but I knew where I wanted to go because my university was in the same city and had a great reputation. I grew up knowing of the programs there, the big sports teams so it seemed like a good and exciting place. I figured I'd be a psychology major but I didn't really know anything about the academic prestige or anything like that. I should have taken her advice to look other places, or go take a tour or do an interview, but I didn't. I loved my school but other perspectives may have been important too. I found the process of applying a little confusing, but counselor was helpful. She helped me fill out the FASFA, my parents helped me financially, and got me things to take to campus when I moved in. We didn't live too far away but I wanted to do the whole college experience. They came to orientation and it was nice to be able to go home on the weekends. Overall, life became so much more normal when I got to go to college.

Despite the support around me, the impacts of my early childhood and time spent in foster care definitely has had its lasting impacts. Trying to navigate 'normal' college transitions was hard enough but I was also thinking of the things that could come up. I think at that age the focus on mental health and the development of mental health concerns is really common because so many people develop it at the college level age. I remember being very nervous it's like, "Okay here we go. Here's our early 20s, let's hope nothing shows up." As far as the things I still struggle with, I do feel like sometimes feel like damaged goods. And sometimes I'm like, "Well, I'm just a little screwed up kid from a screwed-up

family.” I’ve been with my adoptive parents now for eight years, so the more I have that bond and feel that support I feel less like I’m super self-reliant and I’m super messed up. Also, I’ve always had anxiety my whole life, and through my experience with my biological parents before I ended up in care, I had a couple of diagnosis of PTSD. I still do have to work through that. One of things I’ve noticed the most especially in counseling is that I grew up very socially isolated. I’ve almost had to learn all of the social communication and all of that stuff, that most people learn when they’re five and enter school for the first time. I had to learn at 16, 18, 24. I still struggle with that especially I’ve just finished my practical experience and have had clients for the first time, and my supervisor and I had to talk about it a couple of times where my brain is, and how my thinking doesn’t necessarily match my behavior and that’s because I’m not understanding the social stuff around my behavior. I felt stunted because of that. I feel like I have to work twice as hard to the same things that people do naturally. It’s all a work in progress.

Ana

**: I Created a New Life, Reinvented Myself Entirely, and Persisted**

I grew up in rough neighborhoods and my family structure has always been disjointed. My parents had their own problems, and there was a lot of instances of abuse and neglect. We often went without electricity, heat, or food. There were crazy things going on the home so even the typical things like having clothes or a backpack for school weren’t happening. I had to shoplift shampoo and we would go inside and put it on our hands and then wipe it on the back of our neck and go

behind the store and use their hose and wash our hair. Then the teachers wouldn't yell at me for being smelly or unkept. So all of that shame on top of very extreme child abuse going on at home from both of my parents. Both had addiction and anger issues and took their emotions out on me much of the time. I really don't remember a time without mental or physical abuse. I've had so many injuries it's hard to keep track; broke leg, broken jaw, cracked ribs. It seems unimaginable now but it was just normal back then. My dad committed most of the physical abuse while my mom was extremely mentally abusive. I think she needed a scapegoat for what she was experiencing. She belittled me almost every day. I remember when I was 7 she made me stand in front of the mirror and repeat the things she was saying about me. Things like 'you are ugly,' 'you are worthless,' 'no one loves you', and a whole bunch of other horrible things. As a kid, or really at any age for that matter, it is so extremely damaging, especially when those messages come from the one person who is supposed to love you the most. You can't help but believe the things you hear and feel most often. My father died when I was about 13.

These traumatic times had such a huge impact and still do. The smallest of things can be triggering. Even recently, a few of us colleagues were driving to where I was going to talk about being a 'successful' foster youth, and I don't know something about the way like the sun was shining through and then my friend said oh, let me get that for you and he turned around and clicked my seatbelt in, and I suddenly remembered when I was very young and my mom was strapping my sister and I into the car and saying that she was going to drive us

into a wall. I panicked, and he thought I was nervous about the speech? It's hard to talk about when things come up if people don't know about your past, or can't relate, so you just try to keep your emotions on lock-down. Our experiences stay with us for better or worse. So anyway, there was no one really to step in. My sister is about nine years older, 10 years older and I have a very older brother. Both were making bad decisions so at a young age I knew that I was in an unsafe, unstable situation.

I entered care through a child's receiving home. I had been in the system previously as a young girl for a few days only, but then I stayed long term at around age 13 and throughout the rest of high school. I was there because it would remain to be seen what was going to happen with my mother who is or wasn't fit and went to jail for abusing my sister and me. So, I was in a receiving home so even more unstable than a traditional foster home, like I was never in something like that, and so it was a very, in the area where I was located is actually like the number one for sex trafficking and the receiving home I was at actually was shut down because of sex trafficking. Girls were going missing and no one did anything. We all knew what was happening. It's easier to ignore than address it. Children were being literally fed into the hands of predators, so the older girls had to band together to protect themselves. All of us in the group homes were messed up, how could we not be. We all were kind of embodying these like gang personas inside of the foster care. You have to be tough and find people to link up with otherwise you're a target. There were fights, some of the boys were pretty threatening to us girls, and it was very kind of a wild setting.



I remember arriving at the foster care for the first time and it was like 3 in the morning, you know, after like I had been processed and I entered in and the woman brought me to my room, it was about 4 in the morning and she said you need to be up in three hours, so if I were you, I would go to sleep now. I didn't sleep that night, and really never slept a decent night while I was in foster care, or at home for that matter. It is difficult to remain vigilant from threats when you are asleep. I was constantly trying to acclimate myself to new surroundings and people. The staff were very overwhelmed. I just remember as a child you don't really know what's really going on or normal, but as an adult now as I look back, I'm like shocked at to some of the things that happened that just were not right, you know, I remember telling them I had anxiety, that I was having a panic attack. I was thrown into this kind of very gang situation among other young teens and, and they were like oh well, it's all we have for you. There was no care given to gently integrate kids into the program and very little basic decency, personal rights, and certainly no nurturing. The next day in public I was completely traumatized, and the caseworker just said the other kids will show you the ropes. She then proceeded to get a nurse to give me a physical, lice and drug check. I asked them not to touch me and leave me alone, but I was a ward of the state, like a possession, and it didn't matter what I wanted, even for my own body. Staff would just say, I don't know what you want us to do about it, you just need to do what we say and not cause trouble. Even when a pretty scary fight broke out, 2 kids were stabbed, and it was chaos, I had a severe panic attack. The group home had something called the common closets and it was basically a closet where they

would put you in there until you've calmed down. So, they just put me in the dark closet alone.

There was no real care taken to ensure kids were emotionally or physically ok. A lot of careless things happened. I remember even sitting outside of the office when one woman like came in, when one woman was like debriefing another lady about me and she said oh, so wait, there's three kids in the family, oh but the first son isn't actually the same father and I didn't know that, I didn't know that my older brother wasn't my dad's real child, so I learned that from overhearing that from two women that worked there. There were some very nice people but sometimes it felt like double-edged sword. They wanted to care but acted surprised if you were smart or polite, like that had bought all the stereotypes of foster youth. There were always examples of subtle discrimination or people who were supposed to watch over you held to lower standards just because you were in care. Like it was your fault. There was one nice caseworker who seemed to like me and really cared. She said I could come stay with her for the day after a particularly crazy weekend at the group home. It was a great day. We went shopping, she did my hair, we painted nails and made dinner together. I had a cute little guest bedroom to stay in and in the morning, she made the most amazing breakfast. I was craving a little kindness and she was just so nice. She dropped me back off the next day which was a Friday. She only worked weekdays, so she said she'd see me on Monday. I couldn't wait to see her again because I felt we had just grown so much closer, and she just never came back. It was devastating but so common in my life. People enter and exit of your life without warning or

reason and you're just left wondering why and feeling invisible or unlovable. It's hard not to think that people truly care or will be in your life for an extended time. You search for connection but build a wall to keep it out as a defense mechanism.

As a kid in care you have to build up a tolerance to traumatic experiences and their impacts because there are so many triggering moments then, and now. We had an outside gate area where older guys not in the group home would come and like leave notes on the fence or smuggle cell phones and drugs to the girls. They'd offer money for food and clothes, or give us rides to school. I know now that they were just grooming us to take advantage of our vulnerability and hunger for attention. Hindsight is 20/20 but then I just wanted to belong. There was one particular guy who befriended me and of course the attention was exhilarating. I was drawn to his tough persona in the streets and the little luxuries he could provide. I was so proud to be his girl. He was 39 and I was 15. No one talked about statutory rape, or reported any inappropriate things happening in the group home. It is really messed up because no one would stand for this to happen to a girl that was not in foster care. It would be an outrage. For us, it was normal. When you are going through a trauma, you don't really realize it's a trauma until you look back like after because you are in survival mode.

The impacts of my time in the system and time immediately following will be lifelong. Aging out at 18 was just another chapter of a different kind of trauma. It was the morning of my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday and my girlfriends in the home made me a card and got me one of those hostess cupcakes. It was cute but kind of depressing. We all knew that I'd be leaving soon. About an hour later the casework came and

gave me a duffle bag for my stuff, a \$100 Walmart gift card, and a pamphlet about community college. And with that, I aged out and was on my own legally, even though I had really been on my own since the beginning. So my case manager sent some other random caseworker to the home and announced that they had gotten in touch with my sister and were dropping me off to her. I certainly had not seen or heard from her in years and little did they know that she was in no shape to help me. She had always had severe mental health problems with borderline and depression. She could not keep a job or anything, so she was staying at some shady flop place of this guy. She let me stay with her for few days until she signed up for army boot camp. Once again, I was on my own. I stayed on the streets for a few weeks which was pretty scary. It was hard to find a safe place and to be a young woman sleeping in a park or something is extremely risky. I was robbed and unfortunately, sexually assaulted once. It was a really low point, so I linked up with some of the girls I had known at the group home. I met up with them and couch surfed with them. I have an older brother but when I went into foster care we lost touch. It's been maybe 14 or 16 years since I've seen him. I did find one family member I thought I could count on, my older cousin. But like every other relationship in my life to that point, it didn't really work out. He was like the head kingpin of a gang in Stockton and got a felony conviction and he has lived in jail for 13 years. I took it hard because I wanted some family relationship, and I tried to help him. But he makes bad decisions and not because he is a bad person, but just because, you know, people do what they know. We all do because you just have to figure out how to survive the best you can. I've been

on my own self completely unattached to anyone who was, gave birth to me or is in my extended family. I don't know anything about what they are doing nor, have they ever showed interest in how my life as turned out. It can be really hard to feel that and not internalize the feelings of being abandoned or insignificant.

It was a rough go. So obviously at the centers and my own family were no support, and friends were hit or miss. Throughout school, I did, I was always very good in school, but I always had a lot of friends. It was like my, the home life was very terrible but my social life and my friendships were always very strong, so I did know that there were people who did care, you know, friends like me. Parents of those friends always really loved me and so I was just kind of like couch surfing. Sleeping over and then trying to find the next person to stay with. This would happen often, every several weeks and then when I didn't have a place, like I went to a 24-hour Target or Kmart the whole night. One time, I was able to connect with a friend's uncle who had a car that I was able to pay small amounts to stay in because I got a job immediately when I was in the receiving home. The job wasn't enough to pay rent somewhere, but I got me some small luxuries. I've always worked multiple gigs to support myself, even still today. It's really the only option in you're a foster youth and need to eat. Sometimes, that dynamic extends well past childhood.

My college-going pathway felt almost just as disjointed as everything else. Well, not traumatic, but certainly not stable or organized. I had never really thought much about college. I knew that it was obviously important but just didn't see it as something for myself really. No one I was hanging out with was talking

about it or going to look at schools. Looking back, the high school transition time was more about prioritizing other basic necessities. It's like the Maslow's hierarchy of needs is so relevant; You have to achieve physiological and safety needs before sense of belonging, self-esteem and success can even be considered. Simply, you're not scheduling campus tours if you have nowhere to sleep at night. Figuring out the college process can be hard for any person, but when you are in foster care, the lack of someone looking out for you, guiding you, always exacerbates the difficulty of even normal things. Who do you bounce ideas off of, share your anxiety and excitement with? So, I kind of just stumbled into it. There happened to be a flyer on a school bulletin board about pursuing your goals that got my attention. It was for one of those for-profit schools but it offered me flexible classes so I could still work nearby so that's what I choose. I just figured business meant I could get a job that paid decent so that is what I chose to study. No real thought about what I was good at or what I wanted to do. I just needed something that had the possibility to provide stability go forward.

My school didn't really prepare me well academically or professionally so I ended up wasting a lot of money and financial aid. I ended up transferring to a nearby school after that first semester. I had heard of the FAFSA so completed that and was able to get full Pell because of me aging out of the system. Because I didn't technically start as a Freshman, I missed orientation and the initial academic advising stuff so I was a bit all over the place. Changed my majors, took the wrong classes and such. I was quick to get involved in student activities but my I could have really used some guidance on picking the right school or

program, and throughout the enrollment and registration process. But I just figured it out by bouncing around and a little trial and error. Sometimes, and particularly for foster youth, you just have to do your best calculations alone and hope you make the right choices and then readjust.

So, while it wasn't traditional like many others, the most important thing is that I did it. Somehow I figured out where to go, what to do, and made the best of the opportunity. It wasn't strategic or stable, like the rest of my life leading up to college, but I just kept going. Going to college was really a life-changing event. I was a first-generation, low-income, Latina so yes, it fed all of those underserved identities, but it also impacted me as a person who felt incapable, invalidated, and invisible. I could get involved and excel. I reinvented myself and began to create a life I wanted and felt like I deserved. Commitment to those goals continue even today.

Amber

**: Rise Above It and Create Something Better for Yourself**

I was born in Las Vegas, Nevada and my family moved around a lot. So, we've lived in basically every single state in the west. So, I don't really consider myself from any those places because we never stayed anywhere for longer than a year and a half. Come to think of it, I hardly ever considered anywhere home, state, city, or even a house. For me and my family, foster care was inevitable. My parents struggled with drug addiction and mental health which was the root of most of our family dysfunction. My mom left school in 8<sup>th</sup> grade so she's about 12 years old emotionally and became pregnant with my two half siblings at a very

young age. Due to her long history of drug use, I was born addicted to meth as were my next three younger siblings. Surprisingly, or maybe not, the system never stepped in, but it wouldn't take long for things to escalate. My parent's relationship was never a healthy one and started to really break apart when I was about three. We witnessed a lot of domestic violence that would go on for years. I remember being about 5 and helping my mom clean up her blood lip after I hid my sisters in a closet during one of their fights. The abuse would unescapably spill over onto all of us kids. I've suffered numerous injuries and broken bones at the hands of my parents in a drug-induced fog. There were instances of sexual abuse and unfortunately, my two half-sisters probably got it a little worse since they were a little older but it was bad for all of us. I tried really hard to protect my little sisters. I used to have extreme anxiety as a kid and even today, really struggle with symptoms of PTSD during times of conflict. Both of my parents eventually ended up in jail with domestic violence, drug possession charges, and multiple DUI and child endangerment charges. Thus, began our first experience with the foster care system. The younger kids and I were picked up at daycare and brought to an orphanage with literally nothing except a stuffed animal and whatever we were wearing. I never saw my older siblings again until we reconnected when I became an adult. Only then did we find out that we were all in the same foster care compound, we were just separated by age. There was never any effort to keep us together or even in touch.

While my parents were away, I guess my older half-sister finally had the chance to disclose the physical and sexual abuse that had been happening to us.



Again, no one did anything, the system doesn't listen to children. They went and spoke to my parents about it but then dropped it or forgot, and no charges for that were ever filed. I can't remember exactly how long we were there but when my dad got out he was able to get custody of the three of us, his biological children. The older kids went to live with their paternal grandmother. My mom got out and just left town, never came for us, never asked for visitation or anything. The sense of abandonment and unworthiness is enduring. The family dysfunction continued too. We all moved into my grandmother's house but then she passed away unexpectedly so it was just us. At this point I think I was about seven or eight and things were just in a perpetual state of chaotic mess at home and an ongoing cycle of evading human services involvement. We would just pack up and leave that day like move to another state or move to another part of the city or different county whatever. And so, my dad was very abusive and neglectful, so we had food insecurity, the places we stayed were not fit for kids or even safe. The abuse started up again and since it was reported he was afraid of being charged so we kind of just hopped around evading foster care. While I hated our circumstances, I was also terrified to go into the system. We had the script down tight like we knew that if we talked about what was happening at home we would be taken, and we wouldn't see our siblings again and you know, we lived in fear of that because it happened to us. And so anytime there was any kind of involvement, we kind of skipped town, and the system is clearly broken so there's no way to track cases and files across state lines so there was no risk for my dad being caught by

authorities. So, the protection system is very flawed in that way, and so we stayed out of foster care for many years in my early life.

Things stayed pretty chaotic. My dad has always struggled with mental health, particularly schizophrenia, which he doesn't believe in so there were no interventions on the table for that either. I think he has a lot of other mental health issues at play, on top of heavy drug and alcohol use. We were homeless and living out of his car and he was using crack, so my sisters and I witness a lot of crazy things. The story I could tell, it's sometimes unbelievable, and really scary if you think about it. I don't know if many people understand how terrifying it is to be on the streets or in unsafe living situations. So many things are taken for granted. Experiencing these things just leaves you in a constant, and somewhat permanent underlying feelings of anxiety, guardedness, and in a fight or flight disposition. We were always waiting for the next crazy thing to happen.

Sometimes we'd just go off the grid for whatever reason. And I'm sure that he had loan sharks coming after him and stuff like that too so it really exacerbated his mental health and paranoia. He would remove the batteries out of our phones and lock the windows and like not allow us to leave the house for days, so I missed a lot of school. And sixth grade after having not gone to school for like seven months my dad registered my sisters in school but didn't register me so I could stay home and take care of him. I eventually got fed up, broke out of the basement we were staying in, and walked the 10 or so miles to register myself for school. We moved again at the end of that school year and in all, I probably only attended three months of sixth grade. These experiences are so

foundational in my memory. I actually wrote in my college application essay that my friends open their windows and jump out to go to parties and I had to jump out, so I can go to school in the morning. And so, I had to do that a lot when he was not allowing us to leave. I would cause a diversion, like turning off the electricity and then getting me and my siblings to escape out a window while he was messing with the fuse box. When we got a little older as preteens we were couch surfing with our friends whenever we could. School was a way to find a little bit of stability. We still were moving around a lot, getting evicted, and homeless so when I learned about open enrollment in eighth grade, I made sure we signed up so my siblings and I could stay at the same school as much as possible. In that sense, we got to experience a little normalcy like consistent friends and extracurricular activities. But stability was never a permanent fixture with my family situation.

And then when I was 16, my dad was using crack cocaine pretty heavily and was leaving for days at a time which had been pretty normal for us. I was taking care of the family really since 10 years old, and I even drove a car when I was 12 because we had to move out of our house. I packed everything in the car and drove to the next place I knew were where going to stay. Someone had to be the adult, he just was not capable or interested. And then right before we became homeless in his care for the last time, his mental illness mixed with high drug consumption made him incredibly unstable and paranoid and somehow he became convinced we were going to be killed. I remember one day something happened to trigger my dad. For some reason, I still don't know why, but he drove his car

through a city park trying to run down my sister. The police took my two sisters who were there at the park into protective custody, but they didn't know where I was because I was out with my friends. He showed up at my friend's house acting like a crazy person and I refused to go with him. So, he called the police and they forced me to go with my dad. And so, I stayed in the car with him that night – the same car right after he had just tried to run over my sister with it. I had no idea where my sisters were, if they were ok, and I will certainly never understand why on earth the police made me go with him. The next day at school I got pulled out of class and they told me I was going in to foster care. Apparently my sisters were already in a foster care placement at one of their friend's house but they couldn't take all of us so I was heading to the Family Crisis Center. Luckily, they changed their mind, the caseworker turned the car around, and I went and stayed at my sister's friend's house. They ended up becoming long term foster parents to take us and I still consider them my family and my daughter's grandparents.

My sisters on the other hand, had a harder transition and there was a lot of animosity towards me. I think because I was the oldest, and always had to be the person in charge, I carried a lot of the responsibility for and burden of our family dysfunction. Being in foster care lifted the weight off my shoulders in warding off the next crisis. It can be both comforting and unnerving when you go to a new place and no one is yelling, they don't hit their kids, and people care about the little things like, have you eaten today, are you cold or scared? As a late-teenager, for the first time I knew what a real family acts and feels like. The place that we're living at has food, people are driving me to school which no one has ever

driven me to school in my life. It's hard to trust real care and kindness when you haven't always had it. It was a flood of emotions, and a huge release of years and years of pain and anxiety. I was so tired of my life and all the awful experiences that we have been having, I never wanted this new reality to end. It took me a while to stop worrying that my dad could come any day and take us back. It turned out, my dad went to jail for about a year and a half for beating up his girlfriend. No one even told us. And so that kind of also solidified like this is where I'm going to be when I turn 18. There was no option for a reunification for me because I was older, and I didn't want it.

I never went to jail to see my dad, didn't write letters, and I refused to go to family visits when he got out. I definitely did not want anything to do with him because I had a new family, a new life, and new ideas of what my future could be. I didn't want to look back. My sisters on the other hand, they didn't even make it a couple of months with our foster family because they were doing drugs and getting drunk at school, getting expelled, and sneaking in people at all hours of the night. All of this was a normal occurrence in our own house, but they rebelled against the structure in our new family setting. I loved the structure because I had never had it! I was always afraid of turning into my parents or getting in trouble and not being able to take care of my siblings, so I never smoked, drank, or did drugs. I did struggle with relationships however. Prolonged exposure to unhealthy relationships impacted my own dating relationships as a young woman. I had a lot of boyfriends, I think looking for some sense of positive attention. That need caused me to accept attention wherever I could get it. I experienced a lot of really

abusive, unhealthy relationships and it took a long time to understand how I was just recreating the cycle of dysfunction that had been modeled for me. I decided I did not want or deserve to follow in my parents' footsteps. But my sisters almost seemed to emulate my dad's behaviors; they thought he was cool and fell into much of the same habits. So anyways they went on too many, many placements and then eventually reunified with our dad after he got out of jail and their dysfunctional family dynamic picked up right where it had left off. It's been a strained relationship. They all have a different memory and version of the past. My dad doesn't think he did anything wrong and my sisters feel like our family was unjustly targeted, so they all went back together and unfortunately are carrying out the same behaviors still today.

I made a conscious choice to start building a different life for myself. I was about two months from graduating, had been in foster care all of my teenage years, and hadn't really thought much about what my next steps would be. I was a good student so I guess I should have been told to prepare for the college process but that never happened. I hadn't taken super rigorous coursework, definitely didn't do the SAT at that point or any of those career interest assessments I now have my own students I mentor do. I applied pretty late, I think it was maybe a week before the deadline when I got my act together. There was not any guidance for doing program searches or campus tours, and so I just went to the school that was twenty minutes away. Even though I didn't have much personal support, the admission counselor on campus was really great in helping me navigate the application process. Applying for financial aid was very difficult however. I did

what I was supposed to on the form but had to reapply 3 different times because of insufficient paperwork. Pretty much, I had to prove to the Financial Aid office that I was actually in care. They asked for letters or other verification from caseworkers. This is very difficult to get and it's not like foster care gives you a certificate or proof of anything. I didn't even have my own birth certificate or a license. It was really embarrassing honestly. Luckily the admission counselor could advocate for me a little bit and we got it smoothed out finally. After that, it was fairly smooth sailing navigating the normal process-oriented things like registration and academic advising. I was able to acclimate pretty well on campus and create a peer group through different activities. I learned a lot from my own college-going process and is the main reason I work in college access for foster youth today. I want youth in care to know that there is a whole world of opportunities out there, that they deserve those opportunities, and there are people who care to help.

Greg

**: My Story and All the Chapters Make Me Who I Am Today**

I went to foster care pretty much from birth. My mother was a heavy drug user, so she lost me as I was born addicted to cocaine. I needed a lot of medical care and she was deemed unfit to care for me. I immediately went into care but then was quickly placed with my biological father who raised me until I was 10. He was a good man but struggled to take care of himself and me. There were periods of homelessness, me witnessing drug use and extreme behaviors as a result. I was in a pretty vulnerable state with a lot of seedy characters around. My dad would lash

out physically now and then, but mostly it was just a case of significant neglect. I remember always being hungry, cold, and dirty so I think a neighbor lady reported us. My dad tried to get things squared up but just couldn't seem to make it stick. Eventually I went to live with some distant family members that I hardly knew. Going there I really didn't have too much support. My aunt who was taking care of me got diagnosed with an illness and said she was no longer interested in having me, so I was put back in foster care. Once I went to the group home, it was very institutionalized; visitation was on Sundays, you had to have an approved list of visitors, and they could only come for couple hours. She would come visit periodically during the three and a half years I was there, but mostly at the beginning. Her interest or commitment to being involved in my life dwindled fairly quickly. It was hard enough experiencing yet another transition, but it was also another hard dose of reality that often for foster youth, people only care about you or stay in touch when it is good for them. Once the paycheck stops coming they leave you. You are no longer a benefit to them and therefore kind of useless. She slowly started to kind of back off and I haven't talked to her in years. That relationship really impacted me. I now know that I don't need conditional support in my life, but as a kid, it is a really hard message to feel. At that point, I had just turned 14 and felt totally on my own. I did remain close with my dad during that time, and while I know and love my mother, our relationship isn't as close as I never went to live with her. I was in a group home pretty much the rest of my teenage years until aging out at 18.



Group home life was oddly consistent and inconsistent at the same time. Even when you move around you start to learn to expect chaos. It is like different theatre, same crazy movie. Life in a group home is hard. There was always some level of drama or chaos going on; kids fighting or selling drugs. In one particular home, there was quite a bit of gang activity and a lot of violence. As a white, gay, nerdy kid, I was most definitely a target. I've been jumped while I was sleeping, cut during a fight, and most of my belonging – which weren't much- stolen. There were no interventions. Fights lasted until the attackers got tired or what they wanted, and if you told you either were asked by the caseworker to not stir the pot or the gang would get you worse for snitching. I had so much anxiety and depression, and really struggled with suicidality, as early as 11. There was seriously no help available and I could have certainly benefitted from counseling or something. At most, you just got a laundry list of medications because no one wanted to address the real issues kids were experiencing. I was scared all the time, so they diagnosed me with ADHD and was just given a litany of pills each morning. Then I remember getting pretty strong pain killers at 14 when a kid broke my leg in a fight. I became addicted pretty early and things just escalated. I used drugs as early as middle school; they were everywhere and it was the only outlet to forget what I had experienced and feel less anxious. Or maybe, there just wasn't enough help, but nonetheless, kids really suffer at the hand of the broken and mismanaged foster care system. Sometimes you'd find a good staff member that tried to care, but their hands were tied too. They'd try to help, set up field trips or outings, but the kids didn't really want to go anywhere. We always had

supervision in public and people always taking notes of us. It's like people only paid attention to us when they thought we'd act up and then they would document it. There was always a staff member with their notebook taking notes every five minutes, inevitably kids would argue or get hurt, and we would have to shut the outing down. It was also awkward to be out in public, traveling around in a van and people staring, like they thought we some sort of gang of delinquents. It's hard to have a normal childhood or teenage years. I missed out on so many teenage experiences that most would take for granted. There will always being lingering trauma of being in the group home and that can spill into academic experiences as well.

Early education was pretty ok despite everything else going on in my personal life. I was usually a quiet kid, tried to blend in, and had a very small group of friends. It's hard to have any longevity with peer groups as a foster kid so I am not connected with any of them anymore. There was more instability throughout high school because I moved around more, across states and in between schools a few times. This is particularly hard in high school when both developing a peer circle and consistent academics are so important. You don't get this when you're a kid in foster care. There are the changing environments in transitioning to new placements, the stigma of being in a group home, and really poor access to good educational opportunities.

I remember moving to a new home about 45 minutes away and had to transfer to an alternative school because all the other kids in the home were going there. There was no transportation option for me to stay where I was already

attending and often, foster kids are just assumed to be delinquents, so they automatically move us to special schools. This school was more like a day-time holding spot. We didn't really do normal high school curriculum, mainly hung out with monitors to enforce any disciplinary needs. There were sometimes a mix of students from 4 different grades, and some of the kids there were ones who got kicked out of other public schools because of criminal cases or fighting so it could sometimes be a contentious day in 'class.' And so it was a very crappy academic high school experience. Classroom monitors would just give you subject packets and maybe an accompanying textbook. Learning was pretty self-directed, so it was difficult to stay engaged or motivated. I've always been a very bright student and felt incredibly underserved and underprepared for college because of being in foster care throughout high school. I'll come back to that.

There were some positive things happening for me personally during this time. It's funny, it's always a balance, push and pull, of the different factors playing out in your life. Some good, some unbelievable, all make up this weird foster youth experience. While I was in the group homes, one of my relatives that knew about my situation with my dad's inability to take care of me and was talking about my lack of positive male role models to a coworker; she was just venting that I needed somewhere to go and some stability in my life. It just so happened that this coworker and his husband had been considering adoption and were the rare gems that were actually interested in bringing a teenager into their home. They decided that we all should at least get in touch. My life would change a little and it all started with a letter.

We exchanged letters, pictures, and phone calls, getting to know each other for two years. It felt like an immediate friendship or mentoring relationship and even though we had never met in person, we became pretty close. While I still stayed in touch with my biological dad, they filled a particular void in my life that is still hard to define. They were engaged, seemingly cared about my inherently, and wanted to do whatever they could to see me happy and thriving. They were actually the first people I ever came out of the closet to as gay. It was the scariest thing I had ever done, and they were like us too. There are so many LGBTQ youth in foster care because they aren't accepted by their families or communities, and then they have an even harder time fitting in with their peers in the system. I certainly had experienced this and to finally share my authentic self and get a positive response meant the whole world. It was amazing, they just accepted me as I am, and their support saved my life really. I think we were meant to be in each other's lives. It was a type of relationship that I had never quite felt, like I belonged somewhere and to someone even if not legally or in person. I will call them my 'adopted' fathers even though they didn't adopt me and I call them dad in real life. Despite being in foster care and for the most part not having a lot of meaningful adult relationships, this one has been the most influential relationship in my life to date and we consider each other family.

Other than them, there wasn't a whole lot of support while I was in foster care. My biological dad would come visit me fairly inconsistently and was never able to care for me. I did not have siblings or other biological family to lean on or see more than once or twice a year. My experiences have taught me that family

doesn't always have to be blood relatives. It's the people who see you, believe in you, and make an effort to be in your life through the victories and struggles. It's still hard though, to have family members that bring toxicity and drama into your life. You want them to be better, and to be reason enough to do better but you can't change people that are not ready or capable. The relationship with my mother was sporadic at best. She'd show up every couple of years, looking for money and what not. Never really interested in me as a person and certainly not to be a positive impact in my life. I will always love her but understand that I need to maintain some distance for my own self-preservation.

The time spent in foster care was differing levels of stability and confusion. After graduation I moved back in with my biological father who I had not lived with since I was about 10. I was anxious to see how it would all turn out, but it was actually really great. I came out to him, which was terrifying, but he was the one person in my family that made the smallest deal of it. He was supportive, but our personal relationship felt awkward. It was strained from the years apart and we just did not know each other, and the system certainly doesn't help you during the many transitions. I tried to regain the time we had lost but it was hard to bridge the divide, especially when I had found the nurturing and support elsewhere. During this time, I was finally able to meet my 'adoptive' fathers in person for the first time and while I love my biological father and he is an honorable man, I totally gravitated toward this newer but deeper familial dynamic. They stepped in where my dad couldn't relate or provide support. I consider myself extremely blessed to have all three of them in my life.

So again, as a kid in foster care you have to balance the different storylines happening in your life, good or bad, and figure out how to navigate them all at the same time. There were also environmental transitions, incremental self-growth, cultivating a network of supports, and preparing for a better future. My adoptive fathers really shepherded me through the college and career process. They were well-educated and had successful jobs so offered a lot of institutional knowledge on what to do. I did not apply for college enrollment directly out of high school, but they helped me the next year in researching majors, programs, and which colleges offered me the best opportunities. We went on a few different tours and I did some interviews with a couple of my top program choices. They knew all about financial aid so assisted me in not only completing the application but offered to cover whatever unmet cost remained after grants and scholarships. They were committed to be pursuing my path, whatever I decided, and did not want me to take on student loans to do so. I cannot explain what that means. To both personally and financially step up, especially when you're not even legally required to do so, so I could have a better future is more than any kid in foster care could dream of. After all the research, I decided I wanted to stay fairly close to home in California. It helped having people I knew nearby and so I could go home to my 'adoptive' fathers' house on weekends to do laundry, get a good meal etc. I felt like a normal undergrad student with a normal family dynamic. I was super involved on campus and started to really develop an amazing group of friends. I still worked part-time because even with support, I felt a deep

responsibility and pride to provide for myself to some extent. For the most part, life felt stable and promising.

Unfortunately, I would suffer a tremendous loss when one of my adoptive fathers passed away a couple of years ago. Not only was it heartbreaking to lose your best friend, an adoptive parent, but the loss and transition was very triggering. I've had tremendous anxiety and depression my entire life and this was a particularly hard time of mourning and trying to cope with the personal loss during the time of increased academic pressure. I felt cheated, like I found a family and didn't get them for that long. Thank God, me and my other adoptive father still have each other, but it's not always easy. As foster youth, I don't think we're given the environment or support to develop the best coping strategies. So even when life is going well old insecurities or fears creep in, especially in times of stress, loss, or transition. It's a weird juxtaposition of promise and paralysis. Even if you know there are people who care, you can't help but revert back to feeling like there's no one to comfort you and tell you it's going to be ok. You can either drown in the feelings or bury them deep because there's not a ton of productivity or healthiness in staying down there too long- you just must keep going and know you'll bounce back like you have so many times already. I was and am still learning how to process all the emotions and loss I've felt, and the impact of my time in care however, I have come a long way. I can recognize and be proud of the persistence I showed in each of the chapters of my life to now, and I look forward to continuing to add to the story of my life.

Maria

### **: I'm Proud to still be Standing And Have Turned Negatives Into Positives**

My time in foster care, and the reasons for my removal from home, have shaped much of my life. I was born into what many would think seemed like a typical, upper-middle-class family but I don't remember things ever really being normal. My parents split up when I was about 3, and my siblings and I moved to live primarily with my mom. The divorce was not amicable. My dad, who was struggling with his identity as a gay male, which we all wouldn't learn until I was a teenager, alienated my mom so she would choose to leave, and then he was in and out of the picture for a long time. In the meantime, the four of us moved into a small, rundown one bedroom on the other side of town. I remember us struggling with money and having a lot of inappropriate childcare options while my mom worked. Sometimes it'd be the old man landlord who lived underneath us and made us just sit outside on the stoop while she was gone, or the couple my extended family knew who would do and sell drugs out of their apartment while we were there. They had a dysfunctional relationship and I remember being terrified of them when they were fighting. The guy was not happy to have kids around and would always hit us and take away our snacks for the day. We went there on and off until I was about 7. During that time, I was happy when my mom got remarried, and we moved more to a rural area with my stepdad. While he didn't formally adopt us, things settled down a little at least when we were at home but then my mom started to change her attitude towards me. Just me, and not my siblings. At first, the abuse and neglect would be somewhat minor; hitting, withholding food, locking in the attic, but when I was about 5 things escalated



pretty quickly, and seemingly without reason. One Thanksgiving she became upset and threw me down the stairs. I was badly hurt, lots of scrapes, bruises, and a broken collar bone, dislocated shoulder, and 2 broken hips. I officially entered foster care later that evening when a caseworker met me at the hospital. I remember wondering why none of my family came to pick me up. Did they seriously just go back to their holiday meal? After a week in the hospital, there was still no available placements, so I stayed at the child welfare offices for the next 3 days before going to a group home. It's hard to remember everything during that first out-of-home placement, I just remember being really terrified. I was the youngest at the group home by far and it felt like a chaotic and dangerous environment.

The next couple of years are a blur as I would return home and then back out again. In all, between the ages of 4 and 17, I experienced 11 different residency transitions, ranging in length of stay from 6 weeks to 25 months. I'd show up to school with a broken arm and the nurse would call CPS or some other instance that would precipitate some intervention. It seemed as though every time I got back home my mom was angrier at me than when I left. It was a vicious cycle and things really went on like this for as long as I can remember. I missed a lot of elementary school because my mom wouldn't let me go, or if I was a group home or foster family that didn't really pay attention to making sure I got back to school. Because I was little, caseworker tried to send me to the same foster homes so that create some sense of stability. Most of the placements were still pretty bad. Foster parents would hit me or be really emotionally abusive and it was an all-

around traumatic, except one particular foster home. She and her husband were so warm and treated me like their own daughter. I remember feeling like part of a family really for the only time in my life. She would brush my hair, dress me up in cute little dresses, and her rich Mexican culture and maternal affections were always sources of comfort and belonging during turbulent times. I was always so sad to leave her but she would do her best to stay in touch. Her and my grandmother were really the only constant positive people in my life. My grandmother would come visit me periodically at group homes and what not but never really made an official effort to step in. It was really hard to trust relationships and predict any sort of genuine care or stability. While I felt lucky to have connection to family even when I was out of the home, it made me question if people only cared conditionally. It was extremely hard to trust anyone. It was also really confusing because I never really understood why my mom hated me, why I was different from my siblings, and why my extended family never intervened. Like they didn't care enough to really take my side.

It was really hard. Her poor treatment of me felt relentless and she would come up with the craziest ways to punish me for the little things like spilling something, or sometimes for no reason at all. I was a quiet, anxious kid, super polite and well-behaved because I was too scared to mess up but to no avail, she'd find a problem with me. She would do crazy things like withhold food, lock me outside in the middle of winter, tie me up in our scary unfinished basement, or make me drink cleaner if I wasn't doing chores fast enough. I must have been only 8 when these behaviors started and they went on for a long time. During this

time she was drinking a lot and I now know as an adult that she was an alcoholic, so she would act really unpredictable. She also made sure to alienate me from my siblings. They were not allowed to talk to me or even use my name at home. We certainly couldn't play or hang out together. It's particularly hurtful that she didn't allow me to have a relationship with my own sister. At the time I didn't blame my siblings for anything that happened to me, I was just happy they weren't getting the same treatment I did. But it's still hard to mend those relationships and it remains a lifelong process.

Foster care placements felt so frequent and chaotic almost every time. Group homes felt like warehouses with kids hurting for connection and very little help to offer them. Fights would break out all the time and so many of the kids were struggling with behavior or mental health issues. The system is so broken, and caseworkers seemed overwhelmed. Youth in care really suffer the biggest impacts of this. It was rare I saw a caseworker or had a consistent one for that matter. When I did meet with someone it was basically a 10-minute meeting where they asked me canned questions, checked off a box that they had checked up on me, and sent me back. Some didn't even know my name. It was just another example of expecting someone to care about you when in reality you were invisible to them too. Foster homes weren't necessarily a ton different. It was better, especially when I was younger, because there were less kids, so it felt a bit more stable and safe, but it was still difficult. Most of the people I stayed with showed little care or affection, and some were doing behaviors that could have me taken away if I were their own child. I remember one was selling drugs out of the

backroom and so there was all sorts of people in and out at all times of day. I just wanted to go home. It's a weird dynamic for kids in care. Sometimes it felt like being taken away was more traumatic than being at home. I always felt conflicted but was again reminded of the reality of my circumstances once I got back home. My mother held anger and resentment in having had caseworkers prying into her life and took it out on me every time I came home. I was naive to think things would get better but I really tried to remain hopeful.

Things would stay about the same at home but unfortunately the abuse wouldn't be limited to my mother or just stay at home. My family was close, odd enough since it wasn't something I ever felt. We spent a lot of time together as an extended family and I knew my aunts, uncles, cousins, and even second cousins pretty well. I loved seeing them and always had conflicting feelings about staying at their house. On one hand, it was fun to have a little more freedom and act like a normal kid when my mother wasn't around, but there was just another threat in her absence. My aunt would work overnights, or even out of town at times so we were left with my uncle. He started sexually abusing me at around age 10. He would also have his friends over and I would be handed off to them as well. I was terrified but also afraid to say anything. I didn't want the other kids, and particularly my aunt or my mother to find out. Eventually this abuse escalated to me having to go to these 'friends' houses sometimes for the entire weekend. It was unbearable and I couldn't understand how this went unnoticed or that no one intervened. Of course, I rarely saw any caseworkers so there was no interventions on that front. When other kids were playing outside, riding bikes, or taking dance

classes, it felt like I was just barely existing. I missed out on a lot of normal childhood experiences; having birthday parties, sleepovers, movies, sense of belonging, kindness, self-worth. There were some ok times. Some days nothing happened, or our family dynamic was seemingly normal. We'd go on family vacations once a year, or have a family BBQ. But then the next day, things could be totally different. I wasn't allowed to participate in family functions or my mother would be upset and be violent again. It was hard to establish any sense of predictability which the root cause of a lot of my anxieties as a kid, and probably is still true today. Not only would the cycle of removal continue over the next few years, the abuse at the hand of my uncle and his associates went on periodically as well until I became pregnant at 14. This obviously, and finally caught people's attention and formal charges were filed against a whole bunch of people. I was sent back to my previous foster mom who had shown me so much kindness and care and I stayed with her during the trial. I had always suffered from anxiety and what I know now as PTSD, so this period with a looming trial and pregnancy decision, was almost unbearable.

When I was 15 everything really came to a head as the trial started. Eleven adults were indicted in the abuse and trafficking case, so it felt like me against the world. I had little support in my corner while my family all banded together to support him, and it was the scariest thing to do. I had to be on the stand and look at everyone and recount whatever I could remember. I just remember trying to tell myself to be brave and not cry. You have to put up a strong front and just push forward because there's no other option. I hadn't given in yet and couldn't now. I

didn't want to give them the satisfaction of thinking they had broken me or had power over me anymore, but it was horrible. I would have daily panic attacks and consider suicide because it just felt like all too much to bear. In all the trial went on for about a year and a half and during this time I was faced with making the hardest decision of my life.

Deciding to give my baby up for adoption was, and will always be both the hardest, most gut-wrenching decision I ever made, and the one I'm most proud of. There was nothing I wanted more than to keep her, but what kind of life would she have had? I had nothing, so how could I be the type of mother she deserved, and I was so afraid of my family getting custody of her. I couldn't let them ruin her life too. Having to try and make this decision would be hard for anyone, let alone a child. It's hard to feel proud of my decision but I am grateful to have found the strength to do the selfless choice. Despite that, I am still ashamed, deeply regretful and wonder every day if I made the right decision. It's something you just never get over. But that's sometimes the reality for kids in foster care. You must simply figure out how to carry a bigger burden than most, and hopefully make it mean something positive in the end.

So, during all of this, the trial was still slowly moving forward. Luckily for me all the proceedings were fairly private, and all records were sealed so the things shared didn't follow me my entire life. In all, my uncle was convicted of 1 count of assault and 2 counts of endangering the welfare of a child and was subsequently sentenced to 3 years and only served 11 months. I don't remember what the others got but it all felt like a huge slap in the face. I had some trouble

with people harassing me for a long while after the sentencing and my mother retaliated when I returned back home. Everything up to this point was just too much. I didn't want to be home, nor did I want to go to another foster family or group home, so I'd often just stay on the streets for a couple days. That is its own kind of crazy but still felt a little more like freedom. I'd usually make my way to one of the shelters to get a bed or make friends with staff at various other open-door missions that could offer some nighttime services. Sometimes you're not sure where to go so you end up just walking around all night. For a young girl it's too risky to actually fall asleep outside so you have to get resourceful. All night stores, laundry mats, or gas stations provided some sort of cover having other people around and offered some warmth, a bathroom, and a place to sit. It's amazing to think how easily a person can disappear into a whole sea of other invisible people. And then sometimes, I would just walk in the dark, and I know it sounds crazy, but I've always just found it so peaceful, liberatory in the anonymity it provided. I, no way do I want to romanticize life on the streets because despite its freedoms, it was terrifying. I've seen people at their extreme lowest states, doing anything to survive. I've seen people lose their battles alone in an alley or fall victim to the dangers of desperate people. It really taught me a lot about humanity. Each time, I'd eventually make my way back to wherever I was supposed to like it was just any day. No one ever came looking for me, nor had a sigh of relief or enough interest to be angry when I came back. I'd just went back to the status quo of trying to make the best of things.

Despite the chaos I had experienced in my personal life, school and then also work, became my lifelines and sense of stability. I was a pretty good student all throughout school despite being in and out of foster care the entire time. The opportunity to prove myself capable was so enticing, and teachers usually provided encouragement toward my efforts and potential. I remember being skeptical why they seemed to care, but it didn't matter. I just wanted to learn everything and do well; not to mention that being in school gave me a break from whatever hell was happening elsewhere. During stable times I'd try to do normal things like join a club or play sports but that usually didn't pan out for long because I'd have to move and switch schools again. I'd stay after and help teachers do various things, or in middle school would help with the cleaning staff just to be around kind adults and not have to go home. In high school I'd get random jobs to support myself really. I've sold artwork, sang at sporting events, mowed lawns, and washed dishes. I've worked so many jobs, all at the same time, but thrived in balancing these things. It gave me purpose and even now as I write this, it is the first time ever in my life I've only had one job. Coworkers at my job became my second family. I finally saved enough money to buy a car before I even had my license. I was so proud, and never had to sleep at a shelter again when I left home or whatever placement. Things were looking up I guess. Even though I was a really good student, I never really thought about college. No one in my family had gone, and I don't even think anyone I knew when to college except I'm sure some of the teachers and caseworkers I had. I remember just once mentioning it to one of my high school counselors maybe in junior year and he



told me that I wasn't the type of kid that goes to college – I believed him. In reality, I had been to so many schools, I think something like 15 in all, different actual schools not just transition, so I had no idea if I was college material, academically speaking. I didn't pursue it and just kept working and living the cycle. In was living in a group home the spring before graduation and I was sent home so I didn't have to officially age out of the system – as if that'd be the worst thing that had happened to me! At that point I just decided I needed to turn the tide and engineer my own future, but I had no idea what to do. I had never researched anything, talked to anyone so I just applied to the school that was only just down the street from where I was working full time-- And I thought the campus was pretty. At that time, I was just barely 17 and hardly thriving so I figured it was a shot in the dark. I mean, I never really expected to 'make it' to age 18 so I thought anything past that is a bonus. I handed my application the same day it was due and miraculously got accepted. A new future was so close, and it was both exciting and really scary. I knew it'd be hard, and I'd do it alone, but I was used to that and I swore I'd persist -because that's just what you do when you're a kid from the system.

When I think back of the things I've been through, the things I've seen and felt and dealt with, it seems surreal - I would not believe it if I wasn't the one who lived it. All of it, the good and bad, plays on a continuous reel in my mind. The turbulent times in various residences, countless injuries, major health issues and surgeries, immense losses, fears, and isolation prepared me with strength and perspective for the future. Even as an adult it hasn't been easy; failed

relationships, a miscarriage, health issues or even normal stresses of financial security and unknowns of what the future holds. All of these experiences impact every part of my life but I think I've turned a lot of it into good. Of course I still struggle with change, self-acceptance, and trusting that people genuinely care, but that continues to get better over time. I've proven I can do hard things. I think what I've overcome has made me a resilient, compassionate, incurable optimist, and a driven person committed to impacting the spaces and people around me in positive ways. For that I am always grateful and proud.

The opening quote of this chapter highlights the significant opportunity for vulnerability and transformation that can come from sharing our truth. We felt exactly that in compiling our millions of memories and feelings into today's version of our stories. It can be a difficult, confusing, and sometimes even triggering task to do so, but it also is incredibly validating to be seen and heard in this way. It is particularly significant that in doing so, these stories may help drive increased awareness and action to support of FCA and youth still in care. Despite the different experiences each of the narratives detail, there are obvious shared threads of strength, beauty, despair, and tremendous resiliency. They serve as a backdrop to understanding their introductory statements of what success means to them. They identify the tremendous benchmarks in these FCA lives that are not always recognized by the majority of the population, and yet given their histories, may be even more poignant.

The narratives shared here also reinforce what the literature often depicts of foster youths' lived experiences and their odds for fulfilled lives. As detailed in chapter 3, there are many personal, social and environmental factors that contribute to the negative life

trajectories for this group, but the literature does not tell the entire story. These narratives demonstrate that and provide context to those barriers and negative odds for success. It humanizes the research and nuances the perceptions of FCA to include an understanding of their extreme resourcefulness, optimism, and persistence. Highlighting the harrowing accounts of these FCA to understand their tools for resilience and postsecondary attainment presented in the following chapter.

## **Chapter Six: Thematic Findings**

This study explored the tools foster care alumni attribute to their postsecondary persistence and success. The personal success narratives and individual positionality statements shared at the opening of the manuscript were offered to give context to participants' lived experiences in foster care and how they define success for themselves. They provide interrelated context to the goals of the study as driven by the following central research questions:

- How do foster care alumni define success for themselves?
- What salient attributes (personal, social, and systems) support foster care alumni postsecondary persistence?

Data collected through multiple interviews, focus groups, and personal memos were coupled with their personal entries to provide a holistic view of FCA persistence. The focus of the study was conducted from an asset-based perspective aiming to raise awareness of FCA success and offer recommendations regarding education policy and programs that best support them. Participants did also acknowledge the barriers they have faced in their educational pursuits only in concert with the tools that helped them navigate toward degree attainment so as to demonstrate the magnitude of FCA success and persistence despite defined obstacles. While each individual highlighted their own unique foster care alumni histories, there were common threads of influencing barriers and tools for success across each series of interviews, group reflections, and personal

memos. From the data, the team organized the codes into 5 themes and coalesced them into 2 emergent categories representative of the most salient tools of FCA resilience and postsecondary attainment, (a) Funds of Knowledge as Resilience Strategies and (b) External Support Mechanisms.

- Funds of Knowledge as Resiliency Strategies
  - Combatting Stereotypes
  - Compartmentalization
  - Employing Types of Capital
- External Support Mechanisms
  - Institutional Agents
  - Support Programs and Services

Funds of knowledge as resiliency strategies refer to the tools that exemplified personal attributes or behaviors of the individual that drove their own persistence. The theme of support mechanisms refers to either social influences or various systems that encouraged success and therefore become significant protective factors for FCA. The overarching themes, and the accompanying sub-categories are important to reimagine the narratives of FCA life trajectories as presented in the literature. It emphasizes the interrelated impacts of personal attributes and social factors or systems' impacts on FCA resilience and centralizes individual agency while also highlighting potential change levers for other diverse audiences.

### **Funds of Knowledge as Resiliency Strategies**

**Combatting stereotypes.** The deficit perspectives of individuals with a history of foster care described in the literature manifested in the daily lives of participants. They

expressed experiences of being told they would not succeed, assumptions of why they were in care, their presumed responsibility for being in that predicament, and the inevitable unfulfilling lives they would lead. While the literature would deem these types of external influences as negative, likely to derail FCA persistence, participants in this study assert that that serve both as a barrier, but also a source of motivation.

I've always heard that I wouldn't amount to anything. It was messaged through people's actions, reactions, and even just stated outright, by so many people. I both deeply internalized these messages as fact about who I was, while also simultaneously really worked hard to prove them wrong. I believed them and refuted them all at the same time. (PR interview, Maria 1)

For Maria, her sense of self was largely impacted by the many negative influences readily present in almost all of her relationships, experiences, and environments. Her habitus around her own identity and how others saw her was a dichotomous relationship centered on both the shame of her experiences and the resolute tenacity to rise above them. Despite feelings of despair, she could see more for herself and of what others assumed of her. Participants were each confronted with stereotypes of being juvenile delinquents, criminals, mentally unstable, and almost always considered 'at-risk' youth. They shared these stigmas and stereotypes manifested in all realms of their everyday life and relationships.

Adults either were afraid of me or looked at me with pity, or both, and kids my age avoided me because they assumed I was a troubled kid, when in reality I was a pretty good kid for the most part. I remember the look on people's face when they find out you're a foster youth. Like, surprised and then wanted to know what

you did to get there. It was really hurtful when that happened. (PR Interview, Ana 1)

While unfortunate that FCA experienced this constant and enduring barrage of negative stereotypes and accusations, all of the participants shared that this pressure only made them want to work harder to prove them wrong. Stereotype threat (Steele, 1998), or the risk of confirming these stereotypes was a heavy-weight for each participant to carry but made them work harder toward their goals. Living up to others' dismal expectations of them was not an option.

“As a kid, even now as an adult, I was always well-behaved and polite. On one hand I was afraid to be punished, but maybe more importantly, didn't want to be the bad kid people thought I'd be” (PR interview, Amber 2). For many, there was an intentionality in behaving in certain ways that made perceived as valuable and ultimately, led them through difficult pathways towards success.

I couldn't do normal mischievous teenager things because I didn't want to get in trouble and prove everyone's assumptions right. I guess it helped, because I never got in real trouble that would have jeopardized my success. I had to figure out how to act in certain spaces, and at certain times. In a sense, play the role folks expected 'normal' students to play. (PR interview, Greg 1)

Not only did participants express that they fought to combat stereotypes or assumptions about their personal character, they were diligent in addressing the anticipated levels of success for FCA. They were aware of the different paths their peers in care were taking and made targeted efforts to redirect their own trajectories. Success for FCA is not presumed and therefore, participants had to work even harder for each and

every benchmark of achievement. “I have a point to prove... I’m going to show them up. I’m going to show them I can do whatever I want to do and beat the statistics” (PR interview Emma 1). Proving this point was paramount to many of participants’ stories of resilience and became the sole goal for their forward progress. They cited taking on extra responsibilities, goals, and workloads to maintain this level of overachieving.

I feel like I have to work twice as hard to the same things that people do naturally, or to prove I’m more than what they thought I am or could be. I put a lot of my pressure on myself to do everything and hold it all together on my own. (PR interview, Maria 2)

These pressures lead to behaviors of overachieving in an effort to overcompensate for the stereotypes they faced. All five FCA identified as high achieving students, heavily involved in extracurriculars, volunteering, and hobbies where they could learn new skills, and yet many were not pushed to achieve or even consider college. “Showing success, having lots of skills, things to offer, and doing well proves I’m not what people thought of me and makes me feel more valuable” (PR interview, Greg 1). Overachieving via involvement and academics became both a mediating factor and a success strategy. This sense of striving and achieving has led to persistent self-imposed standards of excellence and many accomplishments among all of the participants. “It seems as though we’ve all taken on a lot over our lives, not just personally, but have set high professional or academic goals and standards for ourselves. I think that says a lot about our resilience and persistence” (Focus group 4, Greg). Because of this, it is not surprising that each of the participants is currently or has pursued high influence professional careers and advanced degrees despite being discouraged to do. “One time I only kind of mentioned college to



my counselor. The only thing they said was that I shouldn't pursue it. College was for the other kids. So I never brought it up to anyone again" (PR discussion board 2, Ana). Even with the persistent lack of reassurance from education professionals and stereotypes, the participants remained steadfast in their goals to achieve.

In particular, the benchmarks of academic accomplishment serve as internal and external benchmarks of resilience and legitimacy. "I need to have that Ph.D. like I am, otherwise I am delegitimized I have to show that I have passed through the, you know, like all the doors" (PR interview, Ana 2). External markers of success, such as the conferring of the degree becomes internalized for FCA as they seek acceptance and recognition of what they have overcome. For each of the participants, the drive to over-achieving in educational spaces was a daily pressure yet they wanted to be held to a high standard by their peers and faculty. It is not surprising then that this passion led each of the participants into graduate programs "I am trying to like do too much but I think for me it would be obviously to finish the Ph.D. because that I think that's the first time I will actually be proud of myself" (PR interview, Ana 2). This strategy is so instrumental to FCA resiliency and attainment because it turns the negative reality of stereotypes and poor presumed life trajectories into tools of motivation, and acknowledgment of the magnitude that success means to marginalized student populations.

Not many people choose to do this [graduate degree], or can persist, but I can.

That has to say something good about me, like, I'm valuable, and it's an extremely fulfilling reminder of my own strength. It's hard for everyone who does it, but in my case, the additional things I had to endure to get here, the odds that I

wouldn't, maybe it makes the accomplishment even greater. (PR discussion board 2, Maria)

Despite this commitment to combatting stereotypes and find both internal and external validity in their high achievement, each participant noted that it is not without its oppositions. Often their drive can be alienating to others, particularly to those who may not understand the magnitude of their efforts. "I've had classmates put off by how hard I work but they don't understand I'm just trying to overcome a lot and meet the high expectations I've set for myself" (PR memo, Amber). Foster care alumni must balance the duality of internalizing stereotypes and simultaneously overcoming them. Through these efforts the FCA started to combat at least some of the stereotypes and negative external commentary about their own lived experience, however the personal impacts of time in care can be incredibly powerful and enduring.

Greg: The internalized messaging, that's so deep and really hit me when we were talking. Like I knew it but never really took inventory of what that means.

Maria: It can be a struggle.

Ana: Yes! Like, you hear something enough it's almost impossible to not start to believe it and yet...

Greg: and yet, you want to show that it's wrong. That you're not that.

Amber: Mhmm, and you take on more to prove it, not show what you're dealing with but then if no one knows, the magnitude of your success isn't seen so then how do you change their opinions?

Greg: Right. And without validation, you revert back to the internalized negative messages.

Amber: it feels like a vicious cycle. Does it ever goes away? (PR focus group 2)

This conversation between participants demonstrate how it can be particularly difficult to rise above the personal impacts of traumatic lived experiences. Despite the ongoing struggle, FCA are extremely adept at employing multiple resilience strategies that promote their own persistence.

**Compartmentalization.** Foster care alumni learned how to maneuver complicated social settings and systems by compartmentalizing parts of their experiences and identities. This means at times, hiding one's lived histories or suppressing the lingering negative feelings or behaviors caused by those histories. Study participants exhibited a high level of control in balancing the multiple inputs and outcomes of their lives in a direct effort to persist. "We have to kind of divide things up, right? Personal life and whatever else remains separate because it's too hard to navigate it all, all the time. Nor would many people understand or maybe accept all we are carrying" (PR focus group 3, Emma). These behaviors manifested as strategic tools in concealing of their identity as foster care alumni or suppressing their enduring struggles related to being a FCA.

Given the stereotypes FCA face, they often felt that they needed to conceal their histories within the foster care system. This helped garner normal acceptance and interactions among the various populations or communities in which they had to navigate. While FCA utilized negative stereotypes to motivate them to work harder, there were lingering pressures to be strategic in how, and in what environments, they expressed their status. This hiding proved to be both a protective factor for the individual but also for their outward reputations. "In some arenas, it doesn't behoove me to talk about my

childhood experiences or that I am a former foster youth” (PR Interview, Greg 2). Each participant felt that academic spaces were harder to navigate once disclosing that they were a foster care alumni, so they often did not share regularly or widely. Additionally, concealing their FCA identity, compartmentalizing that part of their lived experiences, helped them focus on their goals.

I was fresh out of foster care and I wanted to pretend that that didn't happen, like completely forget and try to be a normal student and succeed. Even though I carry the impacts of my history with me every day, I really wanted to write a new, clean fresh chapter for myself. (PR interview, Ana 2)

Concealing their identity often proved as a useful tool to be able to blend into the collegiate environment and suppressing the negative impacts of their personal histories allowed them to focus on their academics.

All of the participants agreed that despite their demonstrated persistence, the impacts of their experiences of time in care continued to play a significant role in their lives even during college. “I still struggle with, I do feel like sometimes feel like damaged goods, but I need to separate that sometimes from my own pursuits.” (PR interview Emma 1). Emma expressed that she had to often suppress her feelings of unworthiness so as to be able to concentrate on her studies. Pushing down feelings of inadequacy and trauma helped FCA stay committed to their academic and professional pursuits. “As both an undergraduate and graduate student, I had a lot of serious personal issues going on. Most people probably couldn't have related so I just compartmentalize the barriers and move forward” (PR interview, Amber 2). A common connection between all of the participants was their ability to hold more on their shoulders than likely

expected of their peers. Each was struggling with tremendous personal barriers, while trying to combat stereotypes and find new pathways for thriving. “We [FCA] carry so much more than people expect, or quite frankly, can imagine. It’s a skills we’ve sadly had to hone over and over” (PR interview, Greg 2). They agreed that they had been conditioned to internalize all they were feeling both because of a history with few genuine relationships, and also because of the need to persist above all. “I expect myself to deal alone with much more than I’d ask any other student to do” (PR interview, Maria 2).

Foster care alumni disclosure of their ongoing personal struggles only differed slightly based on their concealment of identity. Even for those participants that did share their personal histories, they found they could not always share the entirety of the impacts. “It’s ok to share you were in care, but you always wonder just how much you can share of what happened and how it has, and still does, affect you” (PR memo, Maria). They utilized this bracketing to be able to navigate certain spaces.

You cannot have a break down in the middle of a class because someone says something triggering - even with all you are carrying. People don’t know your past, they likely won’t understand, and what happens if they then do not take you as a serious academic professional. (PR interview, Ana 2)

While it may seem like an unfair, and perhaps an unhealthy behavior to suppress all of what the FCA were feeling, but in actuality was a strategic and incredibly skillful resiliency strategy that offered them pathways to success.

The need for, and ways in which FCA utilize compartmentalization changes over time. Most of the FCA expressed that the increased opportunity for humanizing outlets to

share their struggles and complicate identities offered them chances for self-growth. “It’s empowering because grew to where I felt comfortable and can make a conscious choice to identify, explain my story, and ask for help when I need it” (PR interview Emma 2). Sharing their histories as youth in care became easier and ultimately, opened up additional avenues for them to talk about their personal stories and enduring struggles. Without these opportunities to share, many participants noted they would not have gotten the help they needed both personally and academically.

I had be so used to hiding parts of my story that to be in an academic space that asked me to share was a little unnerving but so emancipatory. What I shared was seen as a strength and that kind of recognition not only made it easier to share in other spaces, but really changed my entire academic or professional trajectory.

(PR interview, Maria 2)

Compartmentalization helps FCA persist and navigate the world around them, yet the reality is that they continue to be ensnared in complicated, and often marginalizing systems that limit their opportunities for success. Amongst these broken pathways, FCA display an incredible resilience figure out how to use their tremendous personal resources to persist.

**Employing types of capital.** Foster care alumni employ multiple types of capital to promote their own social mobility throughout their lifetime. From their personal narratives, we see how they are able to work the ‘system’ to their advantage and learn how to persist. Without necessarily being able to define it as such, they employ and leverage multiple sources of capital and funds of knowledge every day. Because both the foster care and education systems can be a convoluted pathway for foster care alumni,

they must figure out how to traverse conflicting policies and services. The powerful tools proved relevant in postsecondary pursuits as well. FCA demonstrated their skills in taking the assets acquired through their diverse lived experiences and leveraging them to move through academia. Employing types of capital manifested in a variety of ways including a strategy for continued survival, navigating diverse systems, and in giving back to their FCA communities.

*Survival tactics.* Given their independent status FCA likely must face these barriers without much guidance as caseworkers are overworked and their personal relationships are often fractured and insufficient. “I had to figure out how to survive. There wasn’t anyone who was going to make sure I was ok” (PR Interview, Greg 2). Because of this, FCA develop unique funds of knowledge they employ in diverse ways to better position themselves for success. These survival strategies not only helped to support personal stability but were often leveraged in academic or professional spaces to promote persistence. Maria describes the way she used volunteer opportunities for her own survival while on the streets or in between foster care placements. “I volunteered in the community so I would have somewhere warm to go and a meal to eat” (PR memo, Maria). Offering her services or talents was a way to barter for security. “Because I was a handy kid, I’d find ways to help around the shelter so I’d already be there when the deadline to show up for a bed came each day.” (PR interview, Maria 1). She developed personal relationships not only with the staff, but also the transient shelter residents to advance her own personal stability.

I got to know everyone who would come and I started to build a network. I knew the guy who good at panhandling money on the street, so I’d help him count it

and buy things for him because most stores didn't trust him, and in turn, he'd give me a cut. I used that to buy a bus ticket, shampoo or a new shirt for school. (PR interview, Maria 1)

Although FCA gained a bit more stability once enrolled in college, they each still struggled with residual problems related to their time in foster care. For many, they still needed to balance external pressures while trying to acclimate to the campus and academic field. "I chose classes like everyone else, but with two criteria to consider – which ones supported my major, and which ones were offered at times where I could still work my three part-time jobs" (PR interview, Greg 2). All of the participants worked multiple jobs during undergraduate and graduate school out of necessity to bridge the gaps of even their basic needs. Ana shared that she would translate for other families to help get them food stamps and other resources and in turn, she would be able to go there for dinner or borrow their car. Other FCA found ways to exchange goods or services for their own social mobility, even in academic spaces.

I volunteered with the cleaning staff on campus because they spoke Spanish and I felt more comfortable asking them for help like where to get food, where was safe to go and things like that. Then I could help them with English and paperwork and stuff. (PR interview, Ana 2)

*Navigating systems.* Foster care alumni also utilize their own personal knowledges and types of capital, to navigate the complicated child welfare system. The participants shared the expertise they developed in accessing public services such as food stamps, transportation, medical coverage, and social work policies. "You just figure out how to work the system to your advantage. I can figure out how to get what I need better



than most people because I had to do it to persist. There was no one to help” (PR focus group 3, Emma). For FCA academia served as a new system or field to figure out. This including the college-going process and learning the tactical skills such as applying for financial aid or registering for classes. This also consisted of learning how to talk the ‘academic talk’ and carry yourself as an emerging professional. Not only did leveraging different funds of knowledge help build a reputation of utility or expertise, but also offered them additive opportunities to interact with, and learn from the culture of academia.

I felt like I had a jump on other students because I would hear about events or services available on campus that I could take advantage. Or my relationships with teachers helped me cultivate unique opportunities to plan programs or work on projects. (PR interview, Amber 2)

This knowledge would prove useful in cultivating social capital within unfamiliar environments as they progressed through their respective education pathways. Cultivating these types of knowledges serves as an example of how funds of knowledge are mobilized and then converted into forms of capital used to navigate professional spaces. The academic and social capital garnered from these interactions proved to be particularly significant in postsecondary and graduate pursuits.

I would offer to help faculty prep for classes so I could get access to the materials and to hang around the department. I learned a lot about what it meant to be an academic professional. I gained some sort of membership because of the networks I was building (PR interview Amber 2).

In the discussion shared among the FCA during the study, each PR shared that no matter how much they achieved, it only mattered if they shared their success with others in intentional and meaningful ways. Each participant is deeply committed to cultivating and then leveraging diverse knowledges for their community of FCA peers following in their footsteps through foster care and education systems.

***Giving back.*** The foster care alumni engaged in this study expressed and demonstrated a deep sense of gratitude for the success they have achieved and acknowledge that it is not just for themselves. The level of reciprocity exhibited by FCA in this study is not only commendable, but is a central tenet of funds of knowledge theory. Once the participants learned how to harness their own resiliency strategies and access external supports, they were determined to share what they had learned. “When you are lucky enough to persist and beat the system, you have to share it with other kids coming through the system behind you. Pay it forward by passing it backward” (PR memo, Maria). In their mentoring of other foster youth and alumni through the various pathways they are redistributing the new funds of knowledge and sources of capital cultivated by their postsecondary enrollment. This diffusion of assets builds the collection of resources supports the social reproduction and success of those with a history of foster care experience.

If I can help other youth that are in care now understand the college-going process, or influence policy and programs that affect their chances of success, I not only turn my own struggles into positives, but start to change the system. Maybe it can be a trickle effect and foster youth can persist at greater rates (PR Interview, Ana 2).

Not only were FCA committed to helping their peers in the system, but their own success served as catalyst for professional and personal roles in advocacy.

All of the participants in the study acknowledged that with their own personal success came a deep responsibility to impact inequitable systems in positive ways. “I didn’t just do this [graduation] for me. I did this for the people that have cheered me on, and for those who will follow me” (PR interview, Ana 2). The pressure and responsibility to help other foster youth also served as motivators in FCA professional commitments and goals. Not surprisingly, each participant has pursued degrees and careers that advocate for equity for foster youth and other marginalized students. “I want to do foster youth advocacy and rip apart the system. It gives me reason to succeed and a chance to give back. I can’t imagine another profession more important to me or one that I’m more equipped for” (PR interview, Emma 1). As FCA have intimate understanding the myriad of barriers of being in the system, the commitment to impacting foster youth is not just centered on academic achievement.

I was literally ripped out of my parents’ arms, and while I didn’t want to stay, it was traumatic. Most people can’t even imagine what that feels like and have only seen it in movies. Being separated from my siblings was maybe even more damaging. So I want to help change those practices. In my internship in policy, the last piece of legislation I worked on was to get siblings the right to see each other on a regular basis and although that’s in law it’s not in practice. Essentially, I want help highlight both our [FCA] barriers and success in any way I can. (PR discussion board 2, Amber)

This reciprocity even emerged as the impetus for their engagement with this study “I was excited to participant because I want to keep finding more people with stories similar to ours. There is so many important stories to share. If people knew they’d be more likely to help” (PR interview, Greg 1). As FCA reflected on their participation throughout the course of the study, they commented on their self-imposed pressure to give back. While they all have made significant impacts on understanding, elevating, or impacting the experiences of their foster peers, they often feel like it is still not enough. For them, there is so much more work to do and this study offered a new platform to co-construct knowledge of FCA resilience and serve as influencers of change. This level of responsibility to, and nurturing of their community is reflective of the powerful funds of knowledge FCA gain across their lived experiences.

### **External Support Mechanisms**

The objective of this research inquiry was to reposition FCA narratives of agency and resilience as the driving tools for their educational persistence and attainment. However tremendous these strengths proved to be, the participants identified that they could not have achieved their successes without a scaffolding of external supports. These supports refer to the campus or community programs and education policies that either addressed barriers faced by FCA or cultivated their FOK that served as resiliency strategies. Understanding these external support mechanisms is important to identify areas of ownership and responsibility of systems, policy, and educational leaders to better support these students.

**Institutional agents as life-changing.** The most salient theme related to external support mechanism is the transformative impact of institutional agents (Stanton Salazar,

2011), or pivotal mentors that helped to drive FCA persistence. In each of the participants' narratives, they shared the extent various individuals served as institutional agents or not. In K12 spaces, they expressed significant gaps in support. Their varied college-going narratives begin to show the variability of guidance in the college-going process. One consistent trend is the tremendous positive impact institutional agents have when they are present and engaged in the pursuits of FCA. These individuals play an integral role, specifically in education spaces, in humanizing the experience, providing capital-building pathways, and offering intrapersonal coaching to assist the development of the study as a whole person. "It was so refreshing to find caring adults in college who I admired, and to have them believe me, support me. I rarely got that when I was in care" (PR discussion board 1, Amber). The impact of institutional agents is particularly significant for FCA because of the histories of insufficient nurturing relationships and streams of support. During their time in foster care, FCA struggled to identify institutional agents that were consistently or positively involved in their personal development or persistence. They cited numerous transitions between overburdened caseworkers, doctors, and foster parents. "It was a revolving door of seemingly caring adults, and the reality was that it is extremely easy to fall between the cracks" (PR memo, Greg). Many of the participants felt that there was more opportunity for intervention at school however their individual experiences among teachers, guidance counselors, and other school personnel were varied.

K12 education spaces proved harder to garner consistent support from teachers or other school personnel. "I had one teacher who always seems to really care, kept in touch, and would look out for me – like offer snacks or little gifts" (PR Interview Amber 1). The

cyclical high mobility FCA faced offered them weaker relationships and little intervention. “I felt like teachers cared about my academic performance, wanted to support me in that way, but never addressed the obvious personal issues that were going on” (PR Interview, Maria 1). Often, caseworkers had little contact with those at the schools so there was no opportunity for scaffolded support. Teachers seemingly wanted to help but were unsure or unmotivated to do so, either personally or because of limited policy allowance. “I do not know what a teacher could have done? Call my parents, the caseworker? They were already failing me, so she was just nice. It was more than anyone else cared to do” (PR memo, Ana). Enrollment in college not only provided new opportunities for learning but a new, potentially more stable environment to develop supportive relationships.

In college, relationships with institutional agents strengthened, a trend each of the participants cited as life-changing. The participants attributed this positive benefit to the structure of living on campus, the institutional climate and resource offices, and removal of many of the environmental risk factors they faced as youth in foster care. The strength and depth of these relationships, while all very impactful, was not always related to the disclosure of the students’ FCA identity.

The fear of disclosure or being found out was always present. I thought if people knew I was ‘that type of kid’ I would be ostracized or something. But then, I found teachers and staff on campus that cared about me even without knowing about my history. It felt like my FCA identity was only one part of my story rather than defining all of it. Only when it was all-encompassing, could I be fully me and have meaningful relationships. (PR interview, Maria 2)

FCA who lived on campus built close relationships with residential hall staff through daily proximity and student programming. One participant noted that they had the same on-campus roommate all four years in college and it was the first time they experienced what it felt like to not have a revolving door of housemates to get to know. “I remember how strange and simultaneously comforting it was to have just one roommate. There was no chaos or abrupt transitions” (PR interview, Greg 2). Consistency allowed for an opportunity to build deeper relationships. While many students create new, important relationships in college, the opportunity for stability proves to be particularly healing and motivating.

Additionally, institutional agents served as mentors. “My RA became my mentor pretty quickly. Someone I could confide in and also who helped me navigate this new environment” (PR interview, Greg 2). Similarly, other student life offices such as student activities, athletics, and workstudy opportunities offered new potential supporting relationships and additional sources of support.

I became super involved in college. My club advisors and some fellow students got to know me and I opened up about my past. They saw my story as a strength, supported me both as a student, and as a person. It was the first time I had a group of positive people in my corner. Many are still lifelong friends and mentors. (PR interview, Emma 2)

While in postsecondary education, FCA described that there was an inherently different relationships with faculty and staff on campus than in their K12 experiences. They felt as though they were almost automatically seen as independent, capable, young adults, who were often treated as peers among those they admired. FCA could blend in

with other students and just being there showed that they had attributed some level of success. “Teachers thought I was smart. It was liberating” (PR memo, Ana). College enrollment and coursework offer most students’ new ways of interacting with adults on campus and this is particularly significant for FCA who expressed having little experience with supportive adult relationships. “As cliché as it sounds, it felt like a rebirth. New things to study, new ways to prove my worthiness, new relationships” (PR memo, Greg). Additionally, deeper relationships with faculty afforded them new professional networks. FCA learned first-hand how to navigate academic environments and leverage their FOK to take advantage of new educational opportunities.

It was so cool. As I got to know faculty, I could ask to help them doing things in the office like set up for meetings and attend, or even help in the classroom. Just hanging around the offices I started to get to know other faculty and students, and then learn about what they were working on. I established myself as a peer or colleague and that lead to them telling me about job opportunities or additional funding. (PR interview, Ana 2)

Their resiliency strategies of combatting stereotypes and compartmentalizing proved to be more useful tools in concert with the support of their institutional agents. Some participants shared their histories at different times along their educational journeys, and about half waited until graduate school to share broadly. As described earlier, FCA make strategic decisions when, how, and to whom they share their traumatic personal histories. “I found teachers that believed in me, regardless if they knew about my background or not” (PR interview, Amber 2).



The positive impacts institutional agents had on FCA were particularly poignant during graduate school. Participants noted that they still struggled with inconsistent, supportive relationships in their personal lives throughout their entire education journey and interactions with institutional agents like these were integral in their persistence. Graduate education provided a greater opportunity to interact with faculty in more reciprocal ways through shared research projects, presentations, and diverse classroom environments and coursework. “I didn’t really disclose much about my foster youth status to anyone until my master’s program. My faculty member created a classroom that felt humanizing and validated all of our lived experiences, so I felt seen and empowered” (PR interview, Maria 2). Faculty in graduate school not only played an academic advisor role for foster care alumni, but also served as personal supporters. “Teachers that I developed relationships with also served as professional references, and mentors in all aspects of my life, not just academics” (PR interview, Emma 2). Participants shared that many of their faculty or advisors offered emotional support, celebrated success, offered meals, transportation, and general life advice and resources. This level of engagement reinforced FCA self-efficacy both as seen and valued people, but also as capable and promising professionals.

That fact my Advisor cared so much, was really the only one who said they believed in me, it was a life preserver of sorts. She can’t possibly understand the depth of the impact she’s had on my life. She gave me permission to recognize my own strengths and believe in myself. (PR interview, Maria)

Institutional agents are important conduits to success for foster care alumni but are not the only sources of support identified by participants. Barriers faced by FCA

persist the entirety of the educational journey, yet systems of education are not prepared or mindful to offer the same level of supports. Campus programs are instrumental in bridging the barriers for FCA and offering additional levels of supports through programming and policy.

**Support programs and services.** Student affairs departments on campus are often constructed of a diverse set of resources offices including, but not limited to, Residential Life, Counseling and Academic Advising, Career Services, Student Life, Financial Aid, and the Office of Multicultural Affairs. While these offices offer all students important wraparound services that help promote persistence, for FCA, they often were a place to find additional institutional agents and allies. The positive impacts of programs like these may be felt exponentially by FCA. Two particularly salient tools afforded to FCA on campus are residential life and foster youth outreach and retention programs. These supports offer a sense of community and additional resources that acknowledge diverse knowledges and bolster their chances of postsecondary attainment.

***Residential life.*** For individuals who have experienced high levels of mobility and residential instability, on-campus housing is tremendously beneficial. It not only offers a respite from transience but supports opportunities for FCA to immerse themselves in the collegiate experience. For many, living on campus was their first chance to engage in meaningful student activities, develop robust and stable peer groups, and maintain a consistent, nurturing housing environment.

For the first time in a long time, or maybe ever, I wasn't consumed by worry of what I would face at home. My room was clean, safe, and I could just be myself.

My heart and mind felt so much lighter and I believed I could start to thrive. (PR interview, Ana 2)

Residential life also afforded what FCA would label as luxuries that their non-foster peers took for granted such as secure buildings and rooms, cleaning services, dining services, and even their own bed. While the majority of participants shared difficulties around getting to campus with very few belongings, they expressed deep gratitude and relief for even the most basic of necessities.

Maria: I remember I got to campus, all of the old stuff I owned in 2 duffle bags, and orientation leaders were offering college sweatshirts at check-in, for free. It was surreal.

Emma: I can imagine. I had people to help me move in so I didn't feel that same traumatic transition.

Amber: Yeah, me too.

Greg: Same, but I still felt a sense of oddity, trying to figure out how or where I'd fit in. I intended to get super involved but wasn't sure when I first got to campus.

Maria: Me too. I was excited about all the clubs and what not. It didn't take me long to jump right in.

Amber: Ha ha yes, me too. Like, I had to do all the things. I think I was hungry for engagement and normal student things.

Ana: Me too

Greg: Yup

Emma: Definitely, me too. (PR focus group 4)

In addition to offering a new and meaningful sense of belonging and meeting basic human needs, residential life programs also offered multiple ways for FCA to leverage other FoK and capital that reinforced their own resiliency and persistence. “I applied to be an RA so I could get involved but most importantly have year-round housing” (PR memo, Maria). Much like during their adolescence FCA on campus learned how to navigate programs and policies to their benefit. All of the participants in the study worked in residential life at some point during their undergraduate education and cited that it was also beneficial to building relationships with educators on campus. Their engagement in housing established important networks that resulted in additional learning and professional opportunities, an added sense purpose, and repositioned them as leaders on campus. “It felt so good to be useful, recognized for my positive contributions instead of as the at-risk kid” (PR memo, Greg). Feeling as an integral part of campus increased their likelihood of persistence.

***Foster youth retention programs.*** Programs that outreach to potential FCA college students also offer deeper levels of engagement and retention strategies. Because individuals with a history of foster care have likely faced some unique barriers, a group of foster peers can be incredibly beneficial. All of the participants noted that they experience a lack of positive peer relationships and examples of FCA that were succeeding in life. Despite their efforts to persist beyond the stereotypes they faced, there was always lingering internalizations of the negative messaging they heard about the life trajectories of foster youth. This habitus was often reinforced by feelings of low self-efficacy, imposter syndrome, and isolation that also arose on campus. “I felt incredibly proud to have made it to college, and just as incredibly anxious that I wasn’t worthy or

couldn't cut it" (PR memo, Ana). For the majority of participants, Foster youth-specific outreach programs on campus were significantly important in supporting their acclimation to academia, their own personal development, and ultimately their overall retention and educational success. "I don't know if I would have done as well, or even persisted without my Guardian Scholars program on campus" (PR discussion board 2, Amber). These types of student affairs programs or departments serve as a vital tool in FCA postsecondary resilience and attainment.

Foster care alumni often struggle with the efficacy to ask for help and the college-going knowledge of where to turn for support. They are used to employing their diverse resiliency tools to persist on their own so outward recruitment from these programs are helpful in bridging these barriers. Four of the five participants were involved in undergraduate foster youth programs on campus. "I was found by a campus support program, and that was an invaluable experience that help to empower me as far as talking about what was going on and talking about where I've been and where I was going" (PR interview, Emma 1). Programs such as the Guardian Scholars, Renaissance Scholars, California College Pathways, or other foster youth-specific outreach programs provided general academic and collegiate support such as tutoring, career advisement, and traditional student programming opportunities. "It was so inspiring to be surrounded by peers who could understand some of my story and see the strength in it" (PR memo, Greg). The programs offered an important sense of academic and personal community, but also catered their services to the unique needs of FCA.

I didn't have the normal college information, so the outreach program was the only way to get important information about financial aid, advising, and

graduation. But they also made sure I had a holiday meal or year-round housing. They remembered my birthday, checked in during stressful finals week, and set me up with basic toiletries and supplies when I moved onto campus. (PR interview, Ana 2)

This nuanced support was integral into the participants' persistence and their personal growth and self-efficacy. "To be surrounded around other former foster youth was very affirming. It showed me that we matter, and my story is important to share" (PR interview, Amber 2). Each of the participants involved in the foster youth campus-based program shared that the engagement helped them harness their other resiliency tools. They felt more comfortable sharing their stories of resilience and furthered their passion for changing the systems and policies to better support their FCA peers.

*Policies that support persistence.* Foster care alumni are often ensnared within interrelated and conflicting set of systems and policies. The fields in which they must navigate: education child welfare, judicial, and medical, rarely understand each other's role or talk to each other. Youth often pay the biggest price for this disjointed spectrum of support. Indicative by the literature, there has been a long history of policy development that had made strides to benefit the lived experiences of youth in care. There are a few Federal, State, and institutional policies that FCA cite as having a direct positive correlation to their education persistence. Extended foster care and diverse funding streams are amongst the most impactful.

*Extended care.* States that have approved policies that extend the foster care eligibility age beyond 18 offer students additional and prolonged services that support degree attainment. Incentivizing states to promote postsecondary enrollment is one of the

key components to this policy initiative. Without this extension, those exiting the system at age 18 experience an often-jarring upheaval during formative college-going and transition time. “I knew I would be kicked out of my group home when I hit the limit. Happy birthday, and needed to figure out where to live so yeah, I wasn’t doing normal pre-college things” (PR interview, Ana 2). FCA that were in care after age 18 found their college transition to be much smoother. “I didn’t age out of the system, but I was in until I was 20 [their state had expanded care to age 21] so it was helpful to have a caseworker to help me with additional wrap around supports I needed” (PR interview, Greg 2). The most added education benefit was reserved for those who had extended care and aged out of the system at the eligibility cap.

For me, I aged out at age 21 so I had at least a little stability for almost all of my undergrad. Even if I didn’t really keep in touch with my caseworker or the group home staff, I was able to get some money for living expenses and school. That made a huge difference. (PR interview, Ana 2)

Extended care policy not only affords FCA extended personal or emotional supports, but offers them to take advantage of supplemental financial resources that increase the likelihood of persistence.

*Funding.* The financial pressures to pursue a postsecondary education can be hard on any student, but those stresses may be exacerbated particularly for those who struggle with insecure familial relationships or support networks.

I received close to zero aid for college. I didn’t know how to indicate my foster care status on the FAFSA, there was no help from my family so all I could depend on was loans and whatever I earned for myself. The extreme financial burden to

pursue my goals is still a reality, even now in graduate school. Despite my passion, I almost quit a few times because of it. (PR interview, Maria 2)

Maria's narrative about her struggle with lack of financial options and the potential impact on her postsecondary enrollment highlights the importance of funding supports for FCA. Foster care alumni often work particularly hard to overcome any financial gaps they face by supporting themselves and taking advantage of diverse funding opportunities. Participants in the study identified the multiple ways they cultivated economic capital to sustain their collegiate pathways. All five expressed having to support themselves financially at an early age and have worked multiple jobs as early as middle school and throughout high school, undergraduate, and graduate school. "I was working like 50 hours in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, under the table, in some really not great places, but it was the only way I could take care of myself. I've always had multiple jobs just to get by" (PR interview, Maria 1). While all participants had to largely provide for themselves, many did cite receiving some levels of funding support in college. Because of the pressures of self-reliance and financial need, policies and programs that take into account their unique level of need are significant tools for FCA educational resilience and attainment. For FCA that aged out of the system, funding granted by the Chaffee program played an integral role in providing additional residential stability during postsecondary enrollment. "I was lucky because I had a housing voucher so I was less worried about monthly expenses, work a little less, and really focus on my studies" (PR interview, Amber 2). Even a small amount of financial support offers FCA exponential freedom to focus on the many goals they had set for themselves. The positive impact on their overall success was exponentially significant when paired with other funding options.



Federal financial aid was an important tool to help fund each participants' education however, the traditional process can be particularly difficult for FCA to navigate because of insufficient institutional policies and understanding of the foster care system. This support came by way of lowered tuition as result of indicating their FCA status on the FASFA.

I had folks to help me pay for college but I was also able to file as an independent to cover tuition and it was invaluable. Leaving college with no loans and not owing any money really set me up for success. (PR interview Emma 2)

The FCA in this study mentioned not being aware of state-level funding programs specifically for foster youth but did reiterate that institution—level was extremely beneficial. Four of the five students received at least one additional need-based grant or scholarship offered on their campus. "I moved around a lot directly before college and couldn't get in-state resident tuition, so the additional grants and scholarships offered by my institution made it possible to enroll" (PR interview, Ana 2). All participants expressed that while their supplemental funding sources were not necessarily earmarked for foster youth, they felt recognized and supported because of the institutions' demonstrated responsibility in addressing the financial needs of high-needs students.

## **Summary**

Despite what seem like unimaginable barriers, foster care alumni exhibit tremendous resilience to persist. The funds of knowledge they possess; are just as diverse as their experiences, yet the magnitude of their success is common across all FCA narratives. In particular, their resiliency strategies of combatting stereotypes, compartmentalization, and employing multiple types of capital demonstrates the expanse

of their own growth success. This aligns with the premise of posttraumatic growth theory which states that in particularly traumatic experiences, personal triumphs can often be exponential in comparison to the negative impacts (Lindstrom, Cann, Calhoun, & Tedeschi, 2013). This study underscores not only FCA's ability to leverage their unique funds of knowledge in strategic ways to promote themselves, but also the role external support mechanisms play in the positive pathways for these students. By understanding these tools and areas of impact, education practitioners, leaders, and policymakers can use their resources to increase the likelihood of foster care alumni

## **Chapter Seven: Implications and Conclusion**

The goals of participatory action research are to privilege new, co-constructed knowledge that lead directly to individual transformation, increased awareness about societal inequities, and push for actionable change (Maguire, 1987; McIntyre, 2007; Selener, 1997). Using the success stories and narratives of foster care alumni as a canvas, this study asserted the same goals. This chapter discusses the multiple areas of significance of the study and its contributions to the field. First, I review the significance of the findings as they address both to the research questions and thus, challenge the dominant discourse of FCA presented in the previous literature. As a result, a review of a reimagined framework for understanding the lived experiences and resiliency of FCA. Beyond the significance of the findings, the study design itself offers noteworthy contributions to the field of education in regard to theory, methodology, policy, and practice. Following a review of possible study limitations, implications for educators and policy considerations are shared. Lastly, the chapter concludes by proposing areas of future research, and offers a final reflection.

### **Significance of the Findings**

The aim of this study was to address the gaps in the understanding of foster care alumni stories of success and identify the tools they employ to support their own resilience and postsecondary attainment. The extensive gaps in the literature regarding foster care alumni persistence precipitated the need for this study. As long as foster care

has had standing in the United States, vulnerable children have carried the burden of broken systems, yet their tremendous resolve goes unnoticed. There has been, and continues to be, policy development aimed at supporting families and youth entangled in the system. Foundational policies such as the Federal Adoption and Safe Families Act, and the Child Welfare Act of 1980 worked to establish basic rights of individuals (Pecora, Whittaker, Maluccio & Barth, 2012). More contemporary policy work such as the Every Student Success Act (ESSA), aims to address the implications of separation and mobility while in care (Clemens et al., 2017). Even still, policymakers and practitioners continue to struggle to identify the best ways to help. In 2018, the Family First Prevention Service Act was signed into law which many predicted would address long over-due reforms in child welfare and reduce the prevalence of youth entering care (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2019). However, the extent of its impacts is yet to be fully understood. While stakeholders work to address entangled and antiquated systems and policies, youth in care and foster care alumni continue to carry the burden across multiple social and educational experiences.

Children in the foster care system, due to no fault of their own, are at risk for potentially enduring negative effects from their time in care. Many have experienced multiple traumas as a result of environmental risk factors such as domestic and community violence, poverty, abuse, and neglect. Each of these lived experiences has the potential to derail education attainment, and ultimately, social mobility. Less than fifty percent of the almost half million youth in the foster care system can expect to graduate high school, and the college-going rates are even more dismal (Chang, et al., 2006; Kirk et al., 2012). The last robust national analysis estimates that only 3% of all foster youth

will enroll in college (Unrau, 2011). Clearly, the stakes are high not only for these individuals, but for the systems, policies, and practitioners charged with supporting their positive life trajectories (Heather & Zamani-Gallagher, 2018). As each continues to address issues of inequity, foster care alumni should be part of the discourse. Efforts to increase access pathways through inclusive policy and programs is good start but it is necessary to understand what foster youth find helpful, less those efforts could prove misguided or insufficient. This study aims to provide tangible recommendations on how to best support foster care alumni. Who better to identify the most beneficial support pathways than foster care alumni themselves? Toward that end the research questions that guided this study were:

- How do foster care alumni define success for themselves?
- What salient tools; personal, social, and systems, support foster care alumni postsecondary persistence?

The significance of these findings are in their ability to reframe both the narrative of FCA resilience and degree attainment, and the role of external supports to help reinforce that fortitude.

**Advancing nontraditional definitions of success.** While this study identified postsecondary degree attainment as a benchmark of success to examine FCA resilience, individuals with a history of time in foster care may often hold nontraditional definitions of success as demonstrated in the introductory statements at the beginning of this manuscript. The literature has largely projected the discourse that the future of youth coming from the foster care system only holds continued trauma an enduring deficiency of meaningful relationships (Doyle, 2008). While these partial realities do increase

FCAs' risk for potential homelessness (Winokur, Holtan, & Batchelder, 2014), financial instability (Hook & Courtney, 2011), and criminality (Wylie, 2014), it is not the entire story. What much of the literature often overlooks is both the context of these circumstances and how it drives FCA to rise above the ramifications of a history of care and define a path for themselves despite the odds.

The declarations of success shared offer an important and nuanced definition of success that contest both conventional measurements of achievement, and the policies and programs that are intended to impact attainment. While the FCA statements do make mention of what many education practitioners and policymakers would define as markers of success; earning a credential, workforce placement, and career mobility, for FCA, success is tied more closely to intrinsic personal goals and self-acknowledgment of growth. The foster care alumni in this study, despite them all having achieved significant postsecondary and career milestones, have a vision of success for themselves that is largely the cultivation of self-acceptance, reciprocal and authentic relationships, and a positive outlook for the future. These goals are deeply personal and take precedence over traditional honors. They are powerful because they directly challenge what much of the extent literature projects for FCA life trajectories.

FCA declarations give recognition to, and gratitude for, their own perseverance in overcoming the impacts of their foster youth histories. FCA statements of success privilege self-defined achievements above what society or academia says is most commendable. The triumphs of overcoming deeply embedded stereotypes and negative messaging (Lee et al., 2013), multiple traumas, and relentless circumstantial obstacles are just as laudable for FCA than any academic or professional accolades. Although personal

success is centered as the primary goal, FCA do acknowledge it also serves as a conduit to other types of individual fulfillment. As FCA are striving towards their own archetype of success, they leverage their funds of knowledge and external supports to achieve traditional milestones such as postsecondary degree attainment. These distinctions have implications for education practitioners as it calls for them to take a broader view of how student success should be defined, and to cultivate diverse pathways that take into account diverse, personal, and nontraditional accomplishments. Recommendations for actionable change are provided later in this chapter.

The findings demonstrate that FCA are particularly resourceful and resilient in spite of their often harrowing lived experiences as depicted in their individual positionality narratives. These narratives are often left out of dominant discussions of FCA yet offer a roadmap to understanding the complicated and interrelated influences they must navigate toward success. Thus, the narratives must be told. The promotion of FCA narratives and the tools they use to persist provides a blueprint for the development of additional external support mechanism. FCA employ their rich funds of knowledge as strategies to cultivate personal tools, and access social tools and various systems support to their own postsecondary attainment. Policies and program should be constructed around these proven tools to scaffold supports and more positively impact FCA attainment.

**Highlighting foster care alumni adaptability and fortitude.** Foster care alumni possess a deep well of unique funds of knowledge that manifest as resiliency strategies. They use these diverse assets to navigate the often complicated and interrelated factors that impact their lived experiences. Combatting stereotypes and compartmentalization

were identified as some of the personal tools, or funds of knowledge, FCA use to persist. Extant research has shown just how challenging perseverance can be for FCA. Their reality is that they are likely to experience long-term personal and social impacts from time spent in the system. FCA must carry the burdens of multiple traumas, frequent transitions (Day, Dworsky, & Feng, 2013), lack of resources, and unstable relationships (Geis, 2015; Jonson-Reid & Bivens, 1999). The results of others' poor behaviors, and numerous broken systems often lead FCA to deal with mental and physical health concerns (Dorsey, 2012), low self-image (Drapeau et al., 2007), and criminality. This literature has explored these impacts at length however often does not give credit to the resilience of FCA to persist. Coupled with the scars FCA hold as a result of their histories are the tools used to overcome. FCA activate their FoK help them translate those barriers into pathways for social mobility and success in unfamiliar environments. By shifting their external personas and bracketing the varied emotions or pressures in their lives, they were able to forge ahead academically and obtain those traditional markers of achievement. These personal tools are extremely powerful in the persistence of FCA and are demonstrated opportunities for external influences to make significant impact through inclusive policies and programming.

**Demonstrating the impacts of community.** Social tools presented as giving back to their foster youth peers and institutional agents. Each of these tools were significant because they lessened the personal barriers FCA felt. Funds of knowledge such as social tools are particularly poignant because of FCA's history of fractured relationships and support services. Much of the extant literature outlines that youth in care and FCA struggle with meaningful interpersonal relationships, and those



deficiencies have significant impacts on FCA futures (Greeson, 2013; Thompson, Greeson, & Brunsink, 2016). This study showed that FCA can and do establish meaningful and reciprocal relationships that are directly related to both how they define success for themselves, and postsecondary attainment. Foster care alumni exhibit deep levels of engagement with their peers and a commitment to giving back. Their accomplishments become new knowledges shared with other youth in care, ultimately impacting their community in mutually beneficial ways. Thus, they are both enacting and transferring funds of knowledge across multiple social memberships. Additionally, institutional agents proved to be an extremely significant tools for success for each of the participants. These individuals serve as a source of personal, academic, and professional social support system. Their level of engagement and commitment to leading FCA through the academic environment cultivated not only a clearer path toward traditional markers of success, but also helped FCA establish positive interpersonal relationships and believe in themselves. These personal and social tools FCA employ are immeasurable to their own success and provide a distinct opportunity for education practitioners to be vital sources of support through intentional mentoring programs and student engagement pathways.

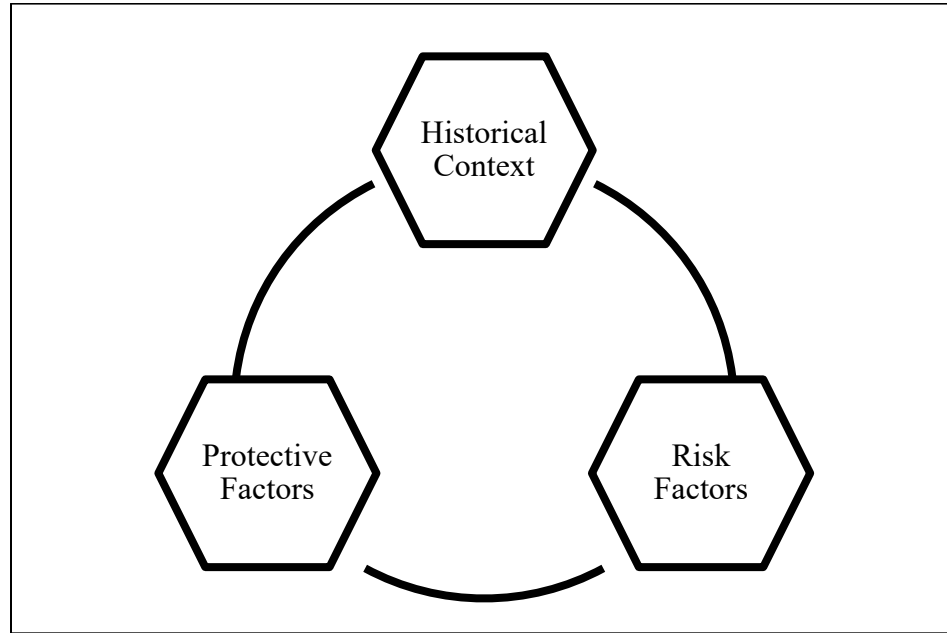
**Identifying opportunities for systems-level impact.** This study also offers significance to the field by underscoring the salient tools FCA use to persist, thus calling attention to the role and responsibility various systems should have in the success of foster care alumni. For FCA, these systems consisted of institutional programs and practices, and state or federal policies that related to access to support services and funding for postsecondary enrollment (Cutler White, 2018). Institutional policies such as

admissions criteria and enrollment processes have the potential either to divert or promote FCA educational pursuits. Narrow traditional measures of academic potential such as GPA, standardized test scores and rigorous academic transcripts may result in less equitable postsecondary access. Foster care alumni typically experience highly mobile K12 education experiences that contribute to lower high school completion rates, and strategic precollege planning that position them as less competitive for college enrollment (Geis, 2015; Isernhagen & Bulkin, 2011; Pecora et al., 2006). Even still, FCA show incredible fortitude to overcome barriers, complete high school, and gain acceptance into postsecondary institutions. Despite the magnitude of their resilience, they beat the odds only arrive to campuses that are often ill-prepared to assist them appropriately. Another point of significance of this study is that in sharing FCA stories to, and through, postsecondary education it sheds a spotlight on the role institutions and practitioners on campus can play in making their institutions more student-ready for FCA and other historically marginalized populations.

### **Reimagined Conceptual Framework**

Through the data and the significance of the findings, this study offers a reimagined body of knowledge around the lived experiences of FCA. Much of the previous literature focusing on those with a history of time in foster care centralize their analysis from a deficit perspective, often lacking FCA voice and missing their narratives of success. The previous model of what was shared or known about the FCA experience was primarily relegated to historical context, protective factors, and risk factors.

**Figure 3:** Reimagined conceptual framework to understand the lived experiences of foster care alumni

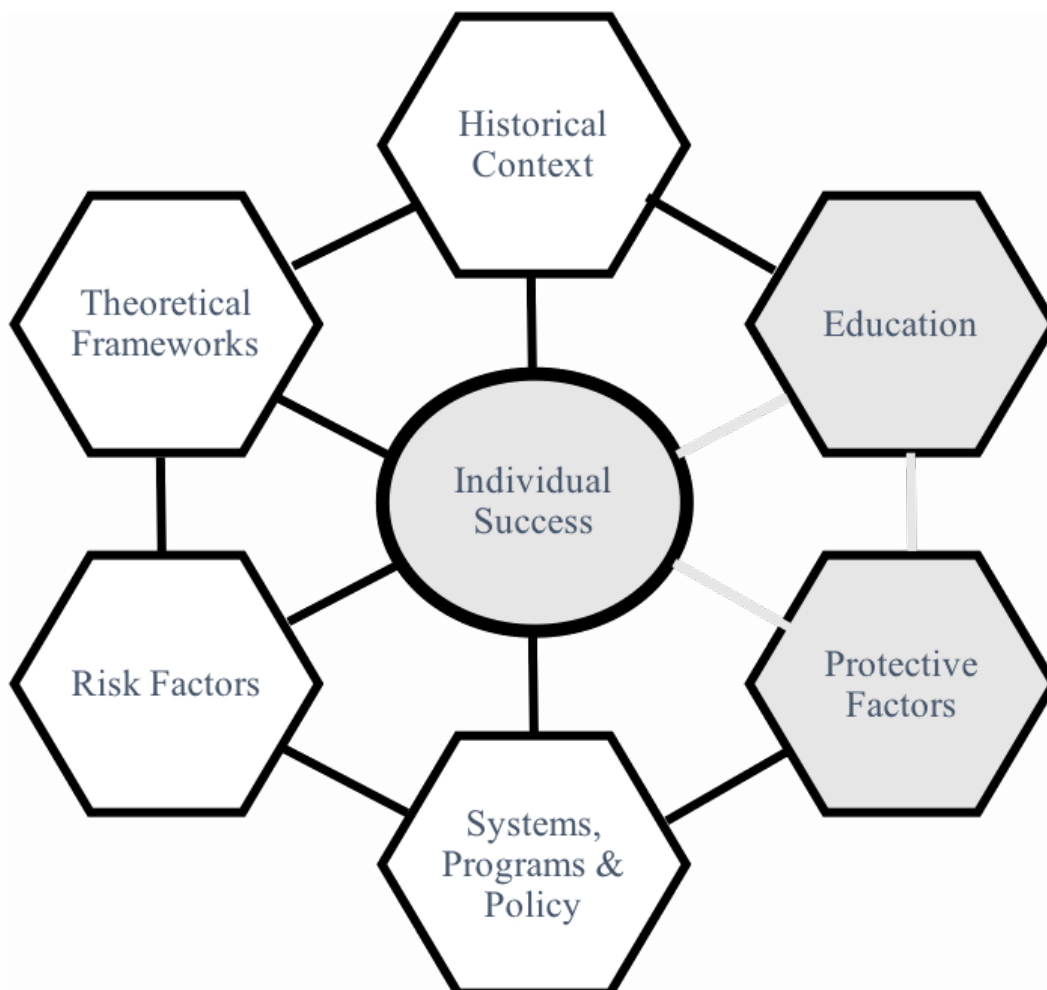


This narrow scope of knowledge helped to perpetuate negative assumptions about FCA and insufficient ideologies about how best to support them. Understanding the multiple personal, social, and system tools that FCA use to support their own resilience and postsecondary attainment illuminates pushes for new areas of actionable change in support of FCA success.

The reimagined narrative of FCA lived experiences offers space to identify the barriers they face but only in the same proportion to the successes they achieve. Similarly, the influencing factors such as systems, historical relevance, and education all serve as their own, but also proportional influences on FCA success. Furthermore, the redesigned conceptual model for understanding the FCA experience offers broadened awareness of the funds of knowledge that FCA use to connect their experiences and various tools to support their postsecondary or personal success, and therefore changes

the dominant narrative. The figure that follows portray a reimagined understanding and provides an example of how FCA leverage the FoK into capital to support their own success. The findings demonstrate that FCA utilize compartmentalization both as a protective factor, but also a tool to leverage that skill in educational spaces, leading to their success which is central to the overall narrative. While the interaction between these three factors may manifest as one instance or environment, the effects of that relationship are inextricably linked to the other factors present in the totality of their experiences.

**Figure 4:** Reimagined Conceptual Framework to Understand the Lived Experiences of Foster Care Alumni



In addition to elevating FCA stories of resilience and illuminating the tools they use to obtain postsecondary success; the study also offers broader methodological and theoretical significance to the field of higher education and personal significance for current or former foster youth.

### **Methodological Significance**

Participatory action research (PAR) is an innovative and powerful research approach that addresses broad inequities in research, practice, and policy, and calls for action to support transformational change (Kelly, 2005). Traditional research designs, methods, and academic outputs continue to rest on voyeuristic practices, that include entering underserved communities to extract data from ‘subjects’ only to serve academic prestige (Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2015). Privileging the training and presumed expertise of education scholars, and publications in formal journals have largely driven many of the design decisions and dissemination of the findings of the extant literature on marginalized communities (Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2015; San Pedro & Kinloch, 2017). As there continues to be a call to reimagine the field of higher education, researchers and scholars must not perpetuate the antiquated or oppressive study designs of the past. This PAR study challenges oppressive academic norms around creation of knowledge, power dynamics in research, and expectations around scholarly writing through multiple, targeted methodological choices. A significant contribution of this study is an understanding of why, and how to conduct PAR that challenges normative IRB review processes, develops genuine opportunity for reciprocal engagement, and revolutionizes how ‘academic’ work, such as dissertations, are written and presented. The archived

study documents and written description of each intentional design choices offers a blueprint for other scholars looking to do this work.

Conducting PAR work not only requires a deeper commitment from the researcher to address historically oppressive research methods, but asks that institutions, respective academic departments, and institutional review boards (IRB) adopt broader views on anticipated process and outcomes of scholarly research. PAR, by definition, is utilized to dismantle normative practices (Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2015) which challenges traditional IRB offices. The narrative of the lengthy process of IRB approval for this study not only highlights those challenges but can serve as an example of how to eschew roadblocks that deter future productivity. The engagement of participants and researchers raises multiple legal and confidentiality issues that many IRB offices may find problematic. This study details the stepwise process to consenting, certifying, and adding participants and individual investigators under institutional supervision. Additionally, this study can be used as an example in challenging the traditional ways we define vulnerable populations amongst review boards. PAR methodology broadly, and the rationale for the research included in this manuscript, communicates the personal benefits acquired when historically marginalized populations are able to participate in scholarly research in these ways (Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2007). Thus, it repositions the goals and the strengths of qualitative research as a vehicle for individual and social transformation.

**Privileging reciprocal research engagement.** Participatory Action Research and other community-based research designs are an important and critical methodological choice to answer the increased pressure for accountability and social justice imperatives

in higher education. Community-based research by design centers the community as sources of agency and knowledge, and employs participants as collaborators in the creation of new information that identify areas for sociopolitical or educational change (Maguire, 1987). PAR also incorporates these techniques but pushes for even greater transformation through opportunities for deeper engagement and addressing power dynamics. By having participants join as participant-researchers (PRs) involved in the majority of the study methods, PAR rebalances the responsibility across all members of the team rather than bestowing control of the study only to the principle investigator (PI). Both the PI and PRs have almost equal ownership and opportunity for contributions across the majority of the study's duration. Procedures, instruments, findings, and key takeaways are all jointly guided by the shared expertise of the entire team, bifurcating persistent 'scholar' dominance present in traditional research designs. It empowers marginalized populations to use their own reflexivity and lived experiences to interrogate and dismantle power structures (Borda, 2001). However, integrative or collaborative research methodologies such as PAR may be underutilized because of its complexities and procedural difficulties (Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2015). If we are to really attempt to dismantle inequities and persistent oppressive systems through scholarship, the field of higher education must adapt to more humanizing methodologies no matter how difficult. Utilizing the following technical tools could prove beneficial.

In addition to traditional participant consent forms, the study rested on the agreed terms outlined in a memorandum of agreement (MOU). To ensure shared responsibility of the study goals and findings, it was necessary to catalog each role, responsibility, and step of the research process in this expanded document. The MOU included language

detailing the step-by-step description of how to appropriately integrate participant-researchers into multiple aspects of the research procedures. Similarly, it outlines key principles of the collaborative endeavor such as agreed upon study goals, and intentionality of shared decision making and findings dissemination when possible. Each member of the research team review was required to review the MOU, propose edits if necessary, and sign; ultimately helping to create a transparent and cohesive assemblage of engaged team members. This document provides future PAR researchers the language and steps to begin to cultivate reciprocal research endeavors.

Further, the study provides a detailed description of additional ways to build rapport that support PAR. Each member of the research team engaged in ongoing focus groups, to the benefit of the work and each other broadly. Chapter four provides a detailed cadence and goal of the focus groups that allow other researchers to build upon in creating scaffolded community within future studies. Similar information is provided to support replication of both the dynamic interview management and scheduling, as well as the collaborative and iterative coding and writing process. Each of these strategic opportunities for reciprocal engagement not only helped to triangulate the findings, ultimately strengthen the significance of the findings, but offered a chance for more robust peer relationships across the entire research team. Each of these positive outcomes could not exist without the other and are foundational tools of conducting PAR (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). Sharing the schedule and goals for each focus group offers forthcoming researchers with a meeting cadence and goal setting template to establish with researcher-practitioners. Similarly, created a course to mitigate the power dynamics often present or perpetuated between ‘academic scholars’ and ‘lay-persons.’



Another methodological significance of this study is the contribution of the online course tools offered to the research team. This platform offered PRs the opportunity to build skills and capacities around various scholarly literature and research methodologies, while also generating additional pathways for engagement and reflection. In traditional study design, the PI is positioned as being both the knower of the content and of the steps that lead to academic rigor and study significance, but PAR aims to suppress those dynamics. This online platform consisting of multiple modules helped to equalize the benefits of formal academic training and set the team on more equal footing relating to research procedures. As a result, this study pushes future inquiries to consider what assets participants already possess, and what additional tools and opportunities are necessary to successfully center them as equal and skillful co-creators of the knowledge generated by research. Doing so at the study design level is the first step in urging the field at large to reexamine how and why it inflates the prestige of credential researchers versus those who may not have formal academic training.

**Challenging traditional representations of academic work.** Because of the innovative nature of PAR research, traditional academic writing or publications may not be sufficient. Research endeavors with the level of engagement, reflection, and innovative knowledge as offered in this study should be showcased or packaged with the same intentionality toward reciprocity, equity, and transformation as the research methodology. This manuscript provides an example of how to reconsider the format of conventional dissertations and how extant literature and academic prose is held as the standard. While there are necessities around standard setting, consistency, and demonstration of academic rigor and training, there are methods to do so in more

humanizing and action-oriented ways. Beginning this document with the personal declarations of participants, incorporation of ‘non-academic’ language or writing, and dedicating an entire chapter to participants’ positionalities serve as a contribution to the field not only in their content, but in the way they remind us of the goals of equity, asset-based research.

### **Theoretical Significance**

Replicating methodological tools is only both ethical and productive if coupled with humanizing theoretical frameworks. This study also offers theoretical significance in its innovative use of Funds of Knowledge (FoK). The theory of FoK was initially used to demonstrate the diverse assets of Mexican-American families. Through embedded community-based research, Gonzalez, Neff, Moll, & Amanti (2006) were able to highlight the shared cultural resources of the Latina/o population that often serve as useful tools in navigating boundaries of both migratory patterns and sociopolitical environments. They found that individual traded skills, labor, and services to benefit cluster household and their broader community (Moll et al., 2005; Rios-Aguilar, & Kiyama, 2012). The findings unveiled the tremendous resourcefulness and resilience of this largely marginalized community.

More recent applications of funds of knowledge has been used to quantify Fok (Ramos, 2018) present in other groups such as low-income families, immigrants, and refugees (Mwangi, 2015; Solorzano et al., 2017). While this seminal work has been instrumental in challenging dominant discourse about these populations, one critique has been that extant research has not yet adequately demonstrated how these funds of knowledge are utilized to promote individual or community social mobility broadly, and

through postsecondary education. The design and findings of this study contribute to the field by expanding the framework to include FCA narratives, demonstrates how they transform their FoK into sources of capital to promote educational advancement in postsecondary systems.

**Giving broader recognition.** Funds of Knowledge served as the lens to understanding the persistence of foster care alumni. Specifically, the philosophical underpinnings of asset-based inquiry, reciprocity, and social justice that Funds of Knowledge as a theory and methodological choice rests on makes it the best conceptual conduit to understanding similar strengths of FCA possess. Doing so expands the current use for funds of knowledge as a framework to identify the rich resources FCA possess as a result of their unique lived histories. Utilizing FoK as a framework to understand foster care alumni not only illuminated the diverse and valuable resources of foster care alumni, a population that has largely been perceived in negative connotations, but also serves as an example to understand the diverse knowledge and resiliency of other marginalized groups.

**Leveraging FoK as capital in higher education.** This study demonstrates the extensive FoK FCA possess such as combatting stereotypes, compartmentalization, giving back, and cultivating external support mechanism. These rich cultural tools are acquired through their lived experiences of time in care, engagement with multiple communities and systems. Each of these personal assets are employed to create supplemental social and academic pathways in academic spaces. While they are used largely as survival tactics and personal markers of success, the findings in chapter six illuminate just how adapt FCA are in leveraging these FoK into sources of multiple

sources of capital, and how they are utilized in higher education settings that drive their postsecondary attainment. Uncovering these narratives and tangible examples makes an important theoretical significance for the field of higher education. It calls attention not only to the diverse assets that non-traditional students leverage to persist in historically oppressive spaces, but identifies opportunities for practitioners, institutions and policymakers can take to offer additional pathways that recognized these diverse knowledges. By doing so, it repositions pillars of power and pushes the field to a more nuanced understandings of inequity across multiple dimensions.

**Foster youth significance.** Lastly, yet perhaps most importantly, the study is significant because it elevates the voices of a population that is often rendered invisible. The histories of youth in foster care and FCA are often filled with trauma and messages of being unwanted, unworthy and incapable (Greeson, 2013). These negative messages are internalized during the most formative years creating a negative self-narrative for many individuals. Fracture and unstable relationships only reinforce the negative habitus FCA carry and the comorbid impacts seen across interpersonal relationships, social behaviors (Auslander, Thompson, & Gerke, 2014; Stein & Beyer, 2017; Wylie, 2014); mental health (Dorsey, 2012; Taussig, 2002, and education attainment (Dworsky, 2018; Fisher et al., 2013) (Greeson, 2013; Thompson, Greeson, & Brunsink, 2016). Participants in the study often shared not seeing role models in their early lives they could reach out to or emulate. Another moving significance of this study is its ability to help change that reality for foster youth.

By sharing FCA declarations of success, their incredible personal narratives of resilience, and using their voice to identify tools that support their success serves as an

example to other youth in and out of care. Understanding other stories of FCA resilience and persistence help reinforce the participants' sense of agency, even when they had already achieved much of what people said or they believe themselves that they couldn't. The future efforts to share the results in wide formats and audience can offer those same realizations to a broader population of youth who feel invisible. This has tremendous positive impacts for a population that struggles to see themselves as having a promising future. The counternarratives highlighted in this study shows other FCA that they are not alone, they are incredibly resilient, resourceful, and that all of their benchmarks of success are worth of being acknowledge, celebrated, and replicated. It gives current youth in care an example to live up to and reinforces that they are important, they are not defined by their circumstances, and that they too can persist. This study also reinforces that external supports have a role and responsibility to FCA in not defining FCA by their difficult histories, but rather, making intentional efforts to support multiple pathways for success for this group of students.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

Raising awareness about foster care alumni, their stories, and tools for success would have been a sufficient goal of this study however, PAR calls us to actively interrogate systems that reinforce unequal distributions of power. The goal of transformation calls for change beyond simply raising awareness of those inequities. FCA display a significant amount of resourcefulness, resiliency, and persistence to have overcome the many barriers some would say are insurmountable. Understanding their lived experiences, could prove transformational for systems, policies, and practices of influence, and most especially for the FCA that must navigate them. While FCA show a

tremendous amount of self-reliance, there must be shared responsibility for developing educational pathways, programs, and policies that lessen those burdens. Education practitioners and policymakers have the ability to influence change to better support foster care alumni.

**Recommendations for education leaders and practitioners.** The reality is that there are foster care alumni on our campuses despite the odds and whether we know it or not. Increased awareness of the challenges faced by foster care alumni can help alleviate many barriers and redesign campuses as places of engagement, support, and success. Scaffolded supports related to foster care alumni unique needs not only positively impacts their own success but can serve as pathways of support for other marginalized student populations as well such as students of color, adult students, students experiencing homelessness, and first-generation college students. Leaders on campus, whether they are student affairs practitioners or high-level administrators, have a tremendous opportunity to positively impact the trajectory of these students. Foster care alumni challenge institutions and practitioners alike to rethink normative practices of academia that often marginalizes non-traditional student populations. Leaders across all departments and influence levels on campus need to redefine who they think the typical student is, the role of family privilege and redesign programs to be more inclusive of more students. This study offers a discussion of non-traditional measures of success that can be useful for practitioners in supporting the whole student. Student Affairs professionals in particular, are well-positioned to offer important streams of personal and academic support across multiple components of the collegiate experience including outreach, admissions, orientation, counseling, financial aid, housing, and campus life.

***Outreach, admissions, and orientation.*** The deficits of campus support for FCA begin even before they enroll or attend postsecondary campuses. Traditional academia policies and processes such as institution outreach, admissions and entrance eligibility criteria, and campus orientation programming often ignore the unique challenges faced by this population. Student affairs professionals, particularly those in academic outreach and admissions offices, should ensure that their student recruitment efforts are diverse enough to reach traditionally underserved populations. Programs should be holding interest and recruitment events at community centers and alternative high schools in addition to holding college fairs at high performing K12 districts. Similarly, outreach strategies should include a variety of communication outlets and targets.

Once potential students are aware of institution and degree program options, they need to be able to see themselves with a realistic possibility of acceptance. Admissions eligibility criteria should be broad enough to understand the diverse and valuable lived experiences of students pursuing postsecondary enrolment. In addition to traditional markers of potential success such as G.P.A, Advanced Placement coursework, and college test scores, institutions and student affairs professionals should consider a more holistic evaluation of academic promise. Admissions policies that allow for enrollment criteria such as community service, individual resilience, special talents, employment and leadership experience, nontraditional leadership, and personal passion for goal setting and learning could be particularly important when trying to support postsecondary attainment for foster care alumni. Prioritizing unique personal characteristics may also be useful as FCA are more likely to be first-generation, low- income, students of color, returning adults, or parents.

These unique characteristics may also call for more inclusive orientation programming once students are accepted and begin to join the campus environment. Frequently, orientation events offer FCA their first visit or introduction to the college environment and traditional formats can often be further marginalizing. Student affairs professionals should be mindful of the language, formats and assumptions that are traditionally common practice on campus. For example, holding parent and family orientations could inadvertently make foster care alumni feel excluded from activities. Consider using different language that is inclusive of nontraditional family units such as ‘support networks’ or acknowledging that some students may arrive to campus on their own and avoid assumptions about family involvement along the educational experience.

While it demonstrates great resiliency for foster care alumni to make it to our respective campuses, it does not mean that educational barriers cease to play a role in the likelihood of their academic persistence. Once students have navigated the application and enrollment process, student affairs professionals can play integral roles and supporting institutional agents bolstering support services, sense of belonging, and academic or personal success.

*Academic advising.* Academic affairs professionals play an integrative role across many aspects of college campuses. Their reach often includes developing complex institutional policy or strategies, supporting the various academic programs and departments, and offering guidelines around career and academic credential pathways. Additionally, the student affairs professionals in this campus unit can serve as a vital linkage between students and faculty to help scaffold academic support services or interventions (LePeau, 2018). Postsecondary institutions and staff should develop



multiple academic pathway options that include part-time enrollment, contingency plans for students who stop out, and extended allowances for time to degree completion.

Intrusive advising strategies and degree-focused apprenticeships have proven to help nontraditional students traverse the academic enrollment process and degree requirements so efforts and campus resources to be directed toward programs that offer those options.

*Counseling services.* Paired with more inclusive academic supports, many student affairs offices need to take a more holistic view of student mental health and counseling. Broadening communications about the services available and promoting self-care destigmatizes the utilization of counseling services and also allows students to self-select interventions when needed. Campus resources should be used to expand counseling services to add additional staff, broader training regarding trauma and socio-emotional health, and work collaboratively with students who may have caseworkers or other therapy interventions already as a result of time in care. Additionally, including opportunity for relationship building with peers, faculty, staff, and community partners helps to strengthen personal connections on campus which help to lessen emotional stress.

It is important to note that while academic advising and counseling services are most likely separate offices on college campuses, the effects of being of a FCA do not impact these areas separately for students. Student affairs practitioners in these respective areas should understand that often a lack of counseling supports can negatively impact academic progress and therefore efforts to interlace prevention and intervention strategies should be holistic and collaborative. Additionally, campuses typically have more robust systems of early warning alerts for academic troubles but given the stigma around mental

health and the structural barriers in maintaining student confidentiality, campus counseling services may be underutilized and leveraged to assist these students. Additional programming to broaden the knowledge of programs available could help bridge these gaps for FCA on campus.

***Financial aid.*** The price tag of pursuing a college education continues to be a burden for many students. While there is a handful of Federal financial aid programs, and even with states investing over \$12 billion dollars to support students' postsecondary pursuits, gaps remain (Pingel, 2018). Rising costs, potential disinvestment leads to higher rates of student debt, particularly for students with middle or low-income backgrounds. These alarming trends may be exacerbated even more so for historically underserved student populations such individuals with a history of time in foster care.

Given foster care alumni significant and persistent financial barriers, institutions have a distinct role in offering supports that lessen the burdens and increase pathways to success. Enrollment managers and financial aid administrators should make targeted efforts to be at least acquainted with the Federal and state, resources available to both, institutions and students. Increased awareness will support collaboration across campus to identify and package holistic financial packages. Additionally, financial aid administrators and other leadership on campus should do an in-depth review of their award granting procedures and funding options to ensure that no one student group are being held to different standards to apply and receive benefits. For example, foster care alumni should not have to provide additional documentation or supplemental applications loopholes to receive the access the same aid pathways as their peers.

Whether states have tuition waivers for foster youth or institutions have additional aid programs to supplement, it may be enough to fully support the financial needs of foster care alumni. Student populations with fewer support networks often face situations that bring compounding financial pressures that may not derail the persistence of other students with stronger family or financial relationships. Student affairs offices should develop emergency aid programs that lend intervention funds to high need students should circumstantial expenses occur such as rental assistance, health care needs, or car repairs. Financial struggles for foster care alumni can persist throughout the entirety of the education experience, including graduate schools. Graduate studies departments, or decentralized colleges on campuses should also ensure they are taking a broad and holistic view of aid offerings to high needs students. Many programs limit funding amounts or have term limits on the funding opportunities for masters and doctoral students, and there are less merit-based or discipline-specific scholarships and grants for graduate coursework. This truncated funding can greatly impede a student's forward progress toward degree attainment, particularly during more rigorous programs of study.

Lastly, much of the responsibility of finding enough assistance options has largely been left to the students. However, for a variety of reasons, foster care alumni can often struggle with reaching out to ask for assistance on campus. Not only have their lived experiences reinforced feelings of distrust or invisibility, but there can often be a stigma around identifying as former foster youth. These students have likely had to navigate many systems on their own, employing their own resiliency strategies to make up for any deficiencies in positive support networks. Additionally, many foster care alumni are likely to be first-generation student and may not have been offered traditional college-

going knowledge about enrollment and financing their education. Any outreach efforts student affairs practitioners and financial aid offices can do to broadly share the resources available can help bridge the communication and information divide for these students. Having well-publicized catalog of financial aid supports, key student support staff trained in diverse student needs, and inclusive funding policies will increase students on campus financial literacy, and the likelihood of them seeking out services without being stigmatized for doing so.

***Residential life.*** Residential Life opportunities on college campuses serve as a hub for cultivating students' sense of belonging and engagement. Coupled with academic coursework, housing programs that include programming around community and self-development create a rich postsecondary experience and lead to greater instances of success. These types of programs have proven especially significant for first-generation and other traditionally underrepresented student populations. As the demographics and needs of today's collegiate body continues to evolve, residential life departments must consider how they are adapting to offer the most inclusive and robust programming options to positively impact student enrollment and persistence.

Student affairs offices have multiple opportunities to support the postsecondary success of foster care alumni by instituting broader residential life and housing offerings. Departments need to consider both the financial cost and the services provided in their programs and work to create more well-rounded policies. Some states and institutions have instated residential life programs that offer year-round housing options but more students on more campuses could benefit from similar efforts. In addition to seeking housing stability, foster care alumni are also typically eager to get involved and give back

if possible. Increasing opportunity for these students to engage as Residential Life Advisors or other campus jobs promotes their retention on campus by providing an additional opportunity to supplement their financial and social networks. Additional considerations for diverse rooming options and such as fully furnished rooms, accommodation for students who may be parents or residence halls that offer special interest housing around student engagement interests. Lastly, student affairs staff should work collaboratively with both students and campus leadership to create innovative programs such as food pantries, and housing supplies donation campaigns that would also prove helpful in boosting success pathways for foster care alumni on campus.

*Campus life and engagement.* Practitioners dedicated to the academic and personal experiences of students on campus have long known the importance of engagement and a sense of belonging has on achievement and well-being. Student Affairs or Student Life offices are integral influencers on campus as they are largely responsible for student programming and support services on campus, but also play a vital role in assessing campus climate and student satisfaction. Similarly, given their deeply engaged roles across many departments or auxiliary programs, student affairs professionals often have the most frequent, and perhaps influential, impact on the day-to-day lives of college students. They become significant institutional agents (Stanton-Salazar, 2011) that can hold important personal significance for students, particularly those from nontraditional backgrounds (Strayhorn, 2011).

Colleges and universities already typically offer a diverse set of student life activities options that support students' persistence, and while foster youth-specific engagement programs are extremely beneficial, it may not be possible at every

institution. That being said, there are intentional steps student affairs practitioners can take to ensure foster care alumni are being well-supported on their campuses.. Increased awareness of the diverse student identities would add to the intentionality of creating broad, student-centered programs. Office of diversity and inclusion, or multicultural affairs are well-positioned to offer impactful mentorship and support services if programs are expanded to include nontraditional student groups, and programming around social class, family privilege, and socioemotional well-being of students. Given the search for reciprocal relationships and engagements, campuses should earmark additional resources to student life programs that offer opportunities for mentorship and peer networks. Campus programs and departments such as athletics, fraternity and sorority affairs, student government, interest clubs, and athletics could offer additional opportunities for relationship building if student affairs practitioners in these areas are well-informed of the needs of their students.

Lastly, many of the student life offices or programs on campus operate in silos however student success and satisfaction are deeply embedded and interconnected to all aspects of the collegiate experience. Student affairs staff have the role and the responsibility to connectors on campus and stimulate collaboration across all units to best support all students. The institutions should offer interdepartmental training on nontraditional students, and have ongoing assessments of the breadth, depth, and inclusivity of their policies and programs. Student affairs staff should be trained on multiple resources on campus so as to be a poignant first line of support for students needing additional guidance such as foster care alumni.

**Faculty.** The role of faculty as integral institutional agents was profound for each of the participants and thus identify the many ways in which they can impact the trajectories of FCA. Broadly faculty can better support FCA resilience and postsecondary attainment by having a broad awareness of students coming from the foster care system and the potential resounding implications of time in care and lack of supports. Efforts should be given to creating humanizing classroom environments, nontraditional assignment, and pathways for reciprocal relationship building. Funds of Knowledge, in particular, can be utilized and a pedagogical tool that creates opportunities in which students can share the context of their lived experiences that impact their educational barriers and successes. When leaders in the classroom are vulnerable in both sharing of themselves, and reimagining what academic learning and success can look. Faculty have a tremendous influence in cultivating the self-efficacy and professional development of students so any effort to establish mentoring or apprenticeship programs should be prioritized whenever possible.

**Institutional leaders.** While student affairs practitioners and faculty have the most direct touch points with students, they often do not have broad decision-making responsibility regarding program or campus-wide programs. Institutional leaders such as department heads, vice presidents, deans, provosts and have the leadership capability to assess, redesign, or develop student support initiatives and therefor should be well-versed in the needs of the diverse student populations on their campuses. With increased awareness, campus leaders may be better positioned to leverage institutional assets in strategic ways such as redirecting endowed or tuition dollars to build more well-rounded student programming, additional enrollment scholarships, or development of new and

integrative student support services. Institutional leaders should also be conducting in-depth campus climate surveys to assess their success in addressing the social and academic environments of their campus community. Lastly, understanding the vital role student affairs practitioners and faculty play in the persistence of FCA, and other historically marginalized student populations, campus leaders should recognize and incentivize these types of engagements whether it be through acknowledgement during the tenure process, eligibility for promotion or professional development opportunities.

**Recommendations for policy development.** Foster youth and FCA are a population ensnared amongst many related, yet uncollaborative policies and disciplines. Policymakers are well-positioned to influence systems change that undoes barriers FCA endure to, and through, postsecondary education. Simply increasing awareness about this population could create more intentional discussion and policy action around leveraging multiple support mechanisms to drive persistence and postsecondary degree attainment. This broader understanding would not only support FCA but could prove useful in addressing inequities across multiple populations and outcomes. With the breadth and depth of influence, there are potential policy impacts to be generated through child welfare reform, broader postsecondary considerations and financial aid policies, and increased coordination across policymaking silos.

***Youth-focused child welfare and foster care policies.*** As shared in the literature review, the welfare system in this country has a long history of inequity and lack of oversight and accountability. Even with a robust body of policy development aimed to support our most vulnerable children, the system is still largely broken. However, there are existing programs and promising practices that could help diminish some of the



impacts of a complicated system. State policymakers should take more proactive efforts to utilize federal funding opportunities to both extend foster care eligibility in their state. This would allow youth to have prolonged access to resources that assist in creating lifelong stability and positive transitions to postsecondary attainment. Similarly, additional states should work to pass more inclusive policies and laws that address the familial relationships that lead to youth entering foster care such as siblings' rights laws, inclusive adoption pathways, and intervention strategies for households in crisis.

Additionally, individuals working in the child welfare and foster care system are in need of additional professional support to carry out their important role of protecting children. Federal, state, and county dollars must be reallocated to better finance the operations of case and residential management. Increased accountability measures such as county liaisons, additional caseworkers, and court-appointed special advocates (CASA) are necessary to understand and address the dysfunction of these systems. Otherwise FCA are more likely to fall through the crack and not persist to postsecondary despite their tremendous resilience. Lastly, caseworkers and CASA advocates need college-going resources including information about college programs, financial aid, and campus supports so they can better guide foster youth toward positive life outcomes through education.

***P20 Education policy considerations.*** With the known benefits of education on social mobility and overall life satisfaction, policy considerations should work to establish better supports that increase attainment for FCA. These students experience several transitions and inadequate academic interventions while in care. Not only does this lessen their ability and likelihood of graduating high school, but can lead to other

negative social, professional and educational impacts. The passing of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) helps to address some of the mobility issues faced by FCA but states could benefit from more intentional review board that are holding districts accountable for addressing these concerns. Similarly, policymakers should consider the limitation of the disparities and variances in the academic offerings, rigor, and resources offered to competing districts. Developing accountability measures of curricular and teaching consistency across schools would likely help FCA, and other students, maintain their academic progress leading them with greater probability toward graduation.

Because FCA do persist, there are multiple levers policymakers should utilize to support college enrollment and degree attainment. As states continue to assess and address attainment rates they must reconsider who their respective education systems or policies are supporting. Increased awareness of diverse student pathways and appropriate funding programs are necessary to create equitable policy change. Buttressing programs such as TRiO, underserved student populations scholarships, and broader financial aid policies would undoubtedly positively impact the education trajectories for FCA, and other student groups. Additionally, strategies to reallocate financial resources to support state-level tuition waivers or other student support programs and increased institutional aid should be considered. Similarly, policymakers should continue to develop innovative transition policies that bridge various education systems and enforce evaluation and accountability measures to understand the impact of these policies. Financial aid policies should be grounded in inclusive application processes and awards that support the full needs of students. Merit-based scholarships should be inclusive enough to consider the diverse achievements of foster care high school graduates or face disinvestment. Aid

dollars should be reallocated to need-based programs and earmarked for the neediest students. Financial need of FCA can persist throughout the duration of their education journeys.

Lastly, policymakers should also continue to advance their awareness of the nontraditional student populations traversing the education system. No longer can traditional pathways support the increasing numbers of nontraditional students. Understanding the diverse experiences and needs of both K12 and postsecondary student populations is imperative to addressing the students being left out of existing programs, and can also help state policymakers address achievement gaps and equity goals for their constituents. Policymakers also need to be more intentional to understand the broad federal, state, and local policy context that influence policy development and implementation. Assets should be reallocate and leveraged to support policies and programs that scaffold broad supports at scale.

**Fostering interdisciplinary collaboration.** Lastly, by sharing the complicated experience of FCA and the multiple systems they must navigate to persist, this study can serve as a reminder to work toward collaboration and integrative programs and policies when possible. Decision makers across different silos have tremendous opportunity to effect change for FCA if they could work together. While child welfare and education policymakers often have well-intentioned efforts, real change is thwarted by competing policies or a lack of understanding of the impacts of siloed decision making. FCA pay the price for disjointed and entangled systems. Policymakers and practitioners should have an awareness both of the holistic needs FCA have both in child welfare and education

settings, and of each silo's responsibility in addressing them. Sharing case notes, data, and support resources could make an immeasurable difference.

### **Future Research**

While this study explicated new areas of understanding about the resilience and postsecondary attainment of foster care alumni, it also offers a foundation in which to explore further research. First the positioning of FCA narratives as strong and valuable is necessary. This not only provides examples of strength and agency for current foster youth and FCA but generates increased awareness about the population broadly. Once practitioners and policymakers know more about the lived experiences of FCA, we can have more productive conversations on how best to support them. Additional areas for future inquiry will focus on the FCA experiences on campus and assessment of existing policies that hinder or support FCA success.

For a population that has been largely ignored particularly in higher education research, it is important to understand more about their resilient pathways and the tools that helped them succeed. Additionally, while the social work field had made significant contributions to what is known about the social barriers FCA face, less has been investigated about how those barriers are perpetuated by academic spaces. While not all of the participants did not identify race as a tool of persistence we can speculate that the majority of the sample leveraged their White privilege, whether knowingly or not, to persist. The inquiry of this study was not to directly investigate the role of race in their stories unless self-identified however all participants did comment on the implications of class, family privilege, and sense of belonging on their educational success. Additional research should work to explore the role that racism and classism play in the experiences

of foster youth social versus academically, and also investigate more deeply how these intersectional identities and social constructs play out in higher education.

Also, the findings from this study call for additional research assessing the roles and impacts of student affairs and academic programs across campus. Lessons learned through this line of scholarship could be useful in offering targeted recommendations on how to make institution policy and programs more inclusive for diverse student populations, creating a student affairs resource guide on cultivating campus supports for FCA, as well as program and policy evaluation. The thorough review of the historical policy developments that impact FCA trajectories illuminated a need for continued policy tracking, analysis, and assessment of their long-term impacts. With an increasing awareness of sociopolitical impacts such as the opioid crisis, poverty, and violence on communities, policymakers are being urged to respond. Even during the course of this study, multiple child welfare policies have been signed into law that have the great propensity to impact FCA trajectories. Not enough analysis has been done to assess if previous policies such as adoption initiatives, tuition waivers, and ESSA have been helpful, and only time will tell with more recent decisions. Future research should include a critical analysis and program evaluation of the articulated and actual outcomes of existing policies and programs.

Lastly, it is the hopes of this research team that we are able to continue to working together to advance both our own narratives and the stories of resilience and persistence of our FCA peers. Currently, the research team has plans to come together to give a presentation at a foster youth community organization on the study findings and broaden FCA awareness and networking opportunities. Additionally, we have had preliminary

discussions about expanding our own positionality statements to include an even more nuanced perspective of our own stories and the intersections of race, gender, family privilege, and our experiences in academic and professional spaces. Each member of the team had made the initial commitment that our collaboration and support of this work was not finite with the completion of this study and share the expectation that the findings from this study be repackaged into briefs, webinars, and other dissemination strategies for broad and reciprocal impact.

### **Potential Study Limitations**

Despite the broad contributions and significance of the study, it is not without its limitations. As with any qualitative research, it is not meant to be generalizable. While the FCA and findings presented in this study represent the entirety of the foster youth population, there may be other assets or tools other individuals use to persist that are not captured in these particular narratives. Additionally, choosing degree attainment as the operational definition of success for this study may be limiting to understand all of the funds of knowledge FCA possess. As shared, FCA often have nontraditional definitions of success and therefore using an academic credential as a participant criterion leaves out many FCA who also undoubtedly have rich, personal knowledges they employ for success. This is particularly true given the estimated low percentage of FCA who do receive a postsecondary degree. Furthermore, the sample of participants was limited by inherent racial disparities in regards to degree attainment. Foster youth of color not only are impacted by the broader factors of time spent in care, but also must navigate complex histories and systemic racism that limit their chances to participate in the study, while the privilege of their White FCA peers afforded them more educational opportunities.

Despite these, the study illuminates stories of foster care alumni postsecondary persistence and the sources of support that they attribute to their success, and in doing so, offers recommendations for education professionals and policymakers on how to best support them.

## **Conclusion**

Funds of knowledge theory asserts that historically marginalized groups have a deep well of diverse assets that they utilize to navigate oppressive sociopolitical environment. Despite foster care alumni facing almost unbelievable circumstances that many could not imagine, they do persist. Even with little support, they are brave, strong, resourceful and incredibly resilient. Obtaining a postsecondary degree in only one measurable benchmark of this resiliency. And while only 3% while likely experience that type of achievement, those stories of persistent are important to share. The goal of this study was to center FCA resilience and understand the tools that to support their success. The need to document what I already knew to be true compelled this study forward. By utilizing participatory action research, FCA were empowered to be the conduits to increased awareness of their own stories. This methodological choice added a level of authenticity and validity to the study. The significance of the findings clearly shows that FCA clearly possess tremendous agency and fortitude to succeed, but also that there is a distinct responsibility for practitioners and policymakers to developed better-scaffolded supports mechanisms. The recommendations provided are based in the voices of FCA who know what is useful to bolstering postsecondary attainment.

The reality is that there remains a disappointingly high number of personal, social, and systems barriers that continue to derail the futures of so many FCA. These barriers

are well documents and despite efforts of deeply committed advocates, they persist. But so do FCA, despite everything. The needs and the significance of the tools identified in this study remain relevant across the education experience. These recommendations to education leaders and practitioners also apply to graduate programs. Inevitably, many FCA could, and will, persist relying on their own fortitude and perseverance but we owe it to them to not let that happen. Efforts to fix societal problems that cause youth to enter care may feel futile but creating policies and programs that are proven to work may begin to create transformative change.



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## Appendix A: Recruitment Survey

### Foster Care Alumni Participant Recruitment Survey

#### Section I:

The goal of this study is to share stories of foster youth persistence and the sources of support attributed to their success. Please complete this survey if you are interested in participating.

#### Section II: Participant Criterion

This section of the survey will ask about personal characteristics that are required to participate in the study.

Q1. Name

Q2. Phone number

Q3. Email address

Q4. I am a foster care alumni (spent time in formal foster care during childhood):

Yes

No

Q5. Current city and state of residence:

Q6. What is the highest level of education that you have completed?

Some high school, but no diploma

High school diploma (or GED)

Some college, but no degree

2-year college degree

4-year college degree

Graduate-level degree

None of the above

Q7. What is your age?

18 to 24

25 to 34

35 to

45 to 54

55 to 64

65 to 74

75 or older

Q8. Do you agree to engage in the study both as a participant and as a member of the research team?

Yes

No

#### Personal Information

Q9. What is your gender?

Female

Male

- Other
- Q10. Which race/ethnicity best describes you?  
American Indian or Alaskan Native  
Asian / Pacific Islander  
Black or African American  
Hispanic / Latina(o)  
White / Caucasian  
Multiple ethnicity / Other (please specify)
- Q11. What is your current profession?
- Q12. Are you a parent?  
Yes  
No

### **Foster Care Experiences**

- Q13. At what age did you first enter foster care?  
Birth - 1 year old  
1-5 years old  
6 -14 years old  
15-18 years old  
I don't remember
- Q14. Approximately how long in total did you spend in care throughout your childhood (total time)
- Q15. Were you in care between grades 9-12?  
Yes  
No  
If yes, approximately how long in total during these years?
- Q16. How old were you when you left foster care for the last time?
- Q17. What was the reason for leaving care the last time?  
Reunification with biological family  
Adopted (by family member or foster parent)  
Aged out of foster care
- Q18. How many foster care placements did you experience outside of your biological home?  
Answer Choices  
Non-biological foster home  
Kinship care (family member's house)  
Group home  
Juvenile detention facility / incarceration  
Hospital  
Homeless / shelter  
Other
- Q19. In what state(s) were you in foster care?

### **Education Experiences**

- Q20. How many schools did you attend grades K-12 (estimate if necessary)



- 4
- 5 to 8
- 9 to 14
- 15+

Q21. What type(s) of college/institution did you attend? Select all that apply.

- Technical school
- Community college
- 4-year public institution
- 4-year private institution

Q22. What degree(s) do you hold (Ex. AS, literature)?

Q23. Did you participate in a college outreach program (TRiO, Renaissance Scholars, etc)?

- Yes
- No
- If yes, which one(s)?

Q24. Are you a current student?

- Yes
- No
- If yes, for what degree?

### **Section III. Availability**

This final section of the survey will ask you a few questions regarding your availability to participate in the study. Once selected for the study, all engagement dates will be agreed upon by the entire research team, giving consideration for all members' availability and other responsibilities.

Q25. Do you have your own transportation?

- Yes
- No

Q26. Would you be willing/available to participate on nights and/or weekends?

- Yes
- No

Q27. Please indicate your relative availability (ex. 3-7pm):

- Mondays
- Tuesdays
- Wednesdays
- Thursdays
- Fridays
- Saturdays
- Sundays

## **Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Strategy**

### **Recruitment Agencies, Organizations, and Peer Groups**

#### **National Agencies and Organizations**

Foster Care Alumni of America\*<sup>11</sup>  
Fostering Care to Success  
National Court Appointed Special Advocate\*  
National Foster Care Youth and Alumni Policy Council  
National Foster Youth Institute\*  
National Foster Care Coalition\*  
Foster Club  
National Foster Parent Association  
Casey Family Programs  
The Foster Project  
Fostering Families Today  
The Chronicle of Social Change  
Project Foster Power  
Child Welfare Information Gateway

#### **National and Local Peer Groups**

Foster Care Recovery  
Higher Education Foster Alumni Scholars  
The Foster Care Alumni Movement\*  
SAPros Supporting Foster Youth  
Foster a Fresh Start Project  
Foster Leaders XChange

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<sup>11</sup> Asterix indicates the agency or group also had a Colorado chapter that was targeted for participant recruitment

## **Appendix C: Participant Consent Form**

### **University of Denver Consent Form for Participation in Research**

**Title of Research Study:** Stories of the 3%: Foster Care Alumni Narratives of Postsecondary Resilience and Attainment

**Researcher(s):** Molly Sarubbi, PhD Candidate, Higher Education, University of Denver  
Faculty Sponsor: Judy Marquez Kiyama, PhD, Associate Professor,  
Higher Education, University of Denver

**Study Site:** University of Denver campus and community-based interview sites

#### **Introduction**

This consent form describes a research study and what you may expect if you decide to participate. You are encouraged to read this consent form carefully and to ask the person who presents it any questions you may have before making your decision whether or not to participate. This study is being conducted by doctoral student, Molly Sarubbi, as fulfillment of the requirements for the PhD in Higher Education at the University of Denver.

Please read these materials to make sure that you are informed of the nature of this research study. You are being asked to be in this research study because of your involvement with the foster care system and persistence through a college degree.

#### **Purpose**

You are being asked to participate in a research study. The purpose of this research is to examine stories of foster youth postsecondary persistence, the sources of support that they attribute to their success, and in doing so, provide implications for transformative policy and program development.

#### **Procedures**

If you participate in this research study, you will be invited to participate in audio recorded focus groups interviews, lasting between 1 and 2 hours, and to discuss your experiences as a foster care alumni (FCA) that has persisted through college. As part of the study you will also be asked to engage as a member of the research team and participate in all aspect of the research process including conducting interviews with your peer-participants, keeping a researcher journal, analyzing transcripts, and offer recommendations on emerging findings. A total of 4-6 participant-researchers will be involved in this study. Your personal reflections and inputs will be integral to all phases of the study procedures.

### **Voluntary Participation**

Participating in this research study is completely voluntary. Even if you decide to participate now, you may change your mind and stop at any time, and for any reason without penalty or other benefits to which you are entitled.

You should receive a copy of this form for your records. Please sign the next page if you understand and agree to the above. If you do not understand any part of the above statement, please address any questions or concerns to the principle investigator.

### **Risks or Discomforts**

There is minimal risk to participating in this study. You might feel nervous about sharing information about your FCA experiences or apprehensive about engaging deeply within the research process. All efforts will be made to ensure that participants feel safe and supported throughout each of the research steps and will not be required to engage in any way that makes them feel uncomfortable past a reasonable level

### **Benefits**

Although there is no immediate and direct benefit to you for participating in this study, the interviews will provide you an opportunity to further network with other FCA who may have experienced similar foster care or educational histories. Information gathered in this study may serve as a model for valuing and supporting FCA voices of resilience, and future program and policy efforts to support success.

### **Incentives to participate**

Participant-researchers selected for the study will receive a minimum of \$150 Visa gift card for their engagement through the end of the project.

### **Study Costs**

You may be expected to pay for minimal travel costs such as gas or mileage to meetings or interviews.

### **Confidentiality**

The researcher will make every effort to maintain confidentiality, it cannot be absolutely guaranteed. Records which identify you and the consent form signed by you may be inspected by a regulatory agency and or the University of Denver. All data will be stored on a confidential, password protected computer used by only the researchers. Audio recordings and transcripts will be de-identified for analysis and all external representations of the data. The results of this research study may be presented at meetings or various publications; however, your name will be kept private. Whenever possible, the participant-researcher will play a significant role in how their stories are shared and represented both in the final document of this study and any future publications.

However, should any information contained in this study be the subject of a court order or lawful subpoena, the University of Denver might not be able to avoid compliance with the order or subpoena. The research information may be shared with federal agencies or local committees who are responsible for protecting research participants.

**Questions**

If you have any questions about this project or your participation, please feel free to ask questions now or contact the Principle Investigator, Molly Sarubbi, 585-261-8205; Molly.Sarubbi@du.edu. Additionally, Dr. Judy Marquez Kiyama will be serving as the Faculty Sponsor for this study and can be reached at 303-871-3753; Judy.Kiyama@du.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns about your research participation or rights as a participant, you may contact the DU Human Research Protections Program by emailing [IRBAdmin@du.edu](mailto:IRBAdmin@du.edu) or calling (303) 871-2121 to speak to someone other than the researchers.

**Agreement to be in this study**

Please initial showing your agreement to the following:

\_\_\_\_\_ I have read this paper about the study or it was read to me. I understand the possible risks and benefits of this study. I know that being in this study is voluntary.

\_\_\_\_\_ I agree to be audiorecorded for research purposes

\_\_\_\_\_ I agree to serve as an engaged member of the research team

By signing below, you are consenting to participate in this study:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Principle Investigator Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix D: Memorandum of Understanding

### Principles of Participatory Action Research Collaboration in: *Stories of the 3%: Foster Care Alumni Narratives of Postsecondary Resilience and Attainment*

Between  
Molly Sarubbi, PhD Candidate  
University of Denver  
&  
[Selected study participants]

#### Project Overview

- This study is being conducted as fulfillment of the requirements for the PhD in Higher Education at the Morgridge College of Education, University of Denver.
- The purpose of this study is to illuminate stories of foster care alumni (FCA) postsecondary persistence, the sources of support that they attribute to their success, and in doing so, provide implications for transformative policy, program development, and research
- This study will employ qualitative research methodologies and a participatory action research (PAR) design in an attempt answer the following guiding research questions:

How do foster care alumni define success for themselves?  
What tools (personal/social/systems) support FCA postsecondary persistence?

- The tentative study timeline\* is as follows:

June 2018	Study will commence (pending IRB approval)
July 2018	Participant recruitment
August – November 2018	Data collection
November 2018 to January 2019	Data analysis
January – May 2019	Writing and close out of study

*\* The PI reserves authority to amend the study timeline as necessary and will ensure all members of the research team agree with any significant changes.*

#### Rationale for MOU

The purpose of this MOU is to establish a set of principles for research collaboration (PRC) and expectations that guide the conduct of the research project and data dissemination. This form must be completed by all parties engaging in the research study and should accompany the signed participant consent form. Once all parties have signed the document, and electronic copy will be available via the study's online platform for reference.

## **Parties**

This document constitutes PRCs between the research team: Molly Sarubbi, PhD Candidate, University of Denver and the group of participants that have been selected to join the study. The document outlines the Principles for Research Collaboration for the following participatory action research dissertation study: *Stories of the 3%: Foster Care Alumni Narratives of Postsecondary Resilience and Attainment.*, in which Molly Sarubbi serves as the principal investigator (PI) and [selected participants] serve as participant-researchers (PRs).

## **The Roles of the Participant-Researchers**

In this study, PRs will become an integral part of the research team and engage with all phases of the study including; Research team meetings (in person and virtual), interview protocol development, data collection, ongoing reflection, and preliminary data analysis. PRs will also be invited to join in presentations of the work when allowed. Expected PR task-related duties are as follows:

- Required to complete the CITI human subjects protection training to ensure that all ethical research procedures are followed. The training is offered online and may take a few hours to complete but there is no cost to do so.
- Engage in the study online platform and complete modules regarding topic overview, qualitative research methods, funds of knowledge conceptual framework, and participatory action research design. PRs are also encouraged to participate in community discussion posts and team check-ins throughout the duration of the study.
- Attend (strong preference for in-person) first research team meeting. At this meeting the research team will go over the MOU, the overall study purpose and timeline, and begin a review of the interview protocol. Date & time are TBD.
- Engage as a participant in individual interviews. Interviews will be approximately 1 hour long, audio recorded, and conducted in a setting desirable to the participant.
- Join the PI and co-conduct at least 1 series of individual interviews with a peer PR.
- Maintain a research journal, detailing arising questions, concerns, and reflections
- Engage in initial reading of transcripts and subsequent analysis of themes.
- Participate in sharing of findings when desired and/or applicable.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical codes of conduct for research have been articulated by the University of Denver Institutional Research Board. Additionally, each member of the research team

collectively shares the responsibility for raising ethical concerns and issues, and maintaining confidentiality at all times.

The PI is responsible for maintaining the integrity of all data collected, such as storing participant consent forms. Per IRB regulations, de-identified data (i.e. transcript data without participant names) can be shared with all members of the research team. All identifying information relevant to research participants will be assigned pseudonyms. Any data that may compromise someone's privacy will be given special consideration.

Members of the research team may disclose information it considers confidential to the other team members to facilitate the research project. Each party will use all reasonable efforts to treat and keep confidential any information shared.

### **Amendments**

Any and all amendments made to the study design, instruments, findings, and this PRC must be shared with the entire research team.

### **Principles of Collaboration**

**Community Member Participation:** The research team will strive to include meaningful, respectful, and culturally responsive participation among all members.

**Benefits to Community:** The research questions and purpose of the study must not only reflect the academic interests and interests of the PI, but strive to ensure the research is relevant and beneficial to the PRs and community at large.

**Decision-Making:** The research team agrees that they will collectively make decisions on research questions, data collection, interpreting and analyzing results, drafting subsequent research projects, and the dissemination of findings.

**Sharing of Findings:** The research team will meet regularly (virtual or in-person) to share information and research findings. The meetings will serve as check-ins for the project and provide a space for ongoing reflection and analysis of data once data collection has been completed.

### **Dissemination of Findings & Authorship**

All members of the research team will be provided the opportunity to review and comment on initial findings prior to the completion and presentation of the dissertation paper. Parties shall be notified of any subsequent proposed publication relating to this research at least thirty (30) days in advance of presentation or publication. If parties do not offer feedback or object in writing to such disclosure within ten (10) days of receipt, the authoring party shall be free to proceed. In the event a written feedback or objection is made, the authoring party shall accommodate reasonable (i.e. edits, clarifications, additional literature) requests for changes to the presentation or publication.

Any one member of the research team may not, particularly once initial dissemination has occurred, further analyze, publish, or present findings resulting from the project without first informing the entire research team. Rather, the research team should be prepared to draft a plan for dissemination including multiple reports, presentations, and scholarly



publications. The research team has the ability to disseminate and publish findings in perpetuity. Specifically, the data and any reports or presentations generated remains within the research team, and all members will be invited to participate in all forms of dissemination (i.e. reports, publications, and/or presentations) with the exception of final analysis for the dissertation paper. The PI will have full authorship responsibility of the dissertation paper and presentation, with full acknowledgement of the PRs contributions.

Should research team members wish to be listed as a co-author on subsequent publications following the dissertation, the team will follow the standards listed below:

1. Any publications or presentations must not be published or shared before the completion and filing of the dissertation document.
2. All authors must make a substantial (i.e. involvement in each step) contribution to the conception, design, analysis, or interpretation of data.
3. Authors must be involved in writing and revising the manuscript for content.
4. Authors must approve the final draft of published work.
5. All publications using data or findings from this study must appropriately cite the completed dissertation.

In the event that research team members do not wish to be listed as a co-author, the remaining authoring parties agree to acknowledge the role of each research team member in the publication or presentation (i.e. name as a member of the research team).

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, the parties hereto have executed this memorandum of agreement:

\_\_\_\_\_  
(PI signature) (date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(PR1 signature) (date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(PR2 signature) (date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(PR3 signature) (date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(PR4 signature) (date)

**Sources:** This MOU has been adapted from: This agreement has been adapted from: Principles of Research Collaboration between Rise Colorado [parties] and Dr. Judy Marquez Kiyama for the community-based study: *Cultivating education aspirations in low-income families of color through education, engagement, and empowerment take from*, The Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network and [parties] and Collaborative Research Grant Agreement: The Governors of the University of Alberta.

Appendix E: Individual Investigator Approval Request Form

**Individual Investigator Agreement Approval Request Form**

This form should be completed by the DU Principal Investigator to petition the DU IRB to serve as IRB of Record for Individual/Unaffiliated Investigators who are engaged in human subjects research with DU in accordance with [OHRP Guidance](#) on the Extension of an FWA to cover Collaborating Independent/Institutional Investigators.

**This request applies only to the single research protocol referenced below:**

Principal Investigator:  
Study Title:  
IRBNet Study ID #:

In one paragraph, briefly describe the purpose of the study:  
\_\_\_\_\_

Provide justification for the need to engage outside investigators in the conduct of the study:  
\_\_\_\_\_

Briefly describe the procedures that will be conducted by Individual Investigators. Note: all procedures must be fully described in the IRB submission.  
\_\_\_\_\_

How will Individual Investigators be identified and chosen for engagement in study activities? For example, describe salient characteristics (such as collaborating institutional affiliation, position, qualifications, etc.) of those who will be asked to assist in conducting the study.  
\_\_\_\_\_

How many Individual Investigators will you require in the conduct of this study?  
\_\_\_\_\_

Describe how you will direct and appropriately supervise all of the research activities to be performed by the collaborating Individual Investigator(s).  
\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
DU Principal Investigator Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Faculty Sponsor Signature (if applicable)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix F: Individual Investigator Agreement Form

# Individual Investigator Agreement Form

The Individual Investigator Agreement (IIA) is to be executed after the DU IRB has reviewed the [Appendix Q: Individual/Unaffiliated Investigator Agreement Approval Form](#) and has agreed to serve as the IRB of Record for an Unaffiliated Investigator (UI). The UI may not engage in the conduct of Human Subject Research until a signed copy of this agreement is returned to the DU Principal Investigator.

**DU FWA #: 00004520**

**FWA Expiration Date: April 21, 2020**

**Unaffiliated Individual Investigator's Name:**

**Individual Investigator's Institutional/Organizational Affiliation (if applicable):**

**This agreement applies only to the single research protocol referenced below:**

DU Principal Investigator:

Study Title:

IRBNet Study ID #:

---

(1) The above-named Individual Investigator has reviewed: 1) *The Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research* (or other internationally recognized equivalent; see section B.1. of the Terms of the Federalwide Assurance (FWA) for International (Non-U.S.) Institutions); 2) the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) regulations for the protection of human subjects at 45 CFR part 46 (or other procedural standards; see section B.3. of the Terms of the FWA for International (Non-U.S.) Institutions); 3) the FWA and applicable Terms of the FWA for the institution referenced above; and 4) the relevant institutional policies and procedures for the protection of human subjects.

(2) The Investigator understands and hereby accepts the responsibility to comply with the standards and requirements stipulated in the above documents and to protect the rights and welfare of human subjects involved in research conducted under this Agreement.

(3) The Investigator will comply with all other applicable federal, international, state, and local laws, regulations, and policies that may provide additional protection for human subjects participating in research conducted under this agreement.

(4) The Investigator will abide by all determinations of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) designated under the above FWA and will accept the final authority and decisions of the IRB, including but not limited to directives to terminate participation in designated research activities.

(5) The Investigator will complete any educational training required by the Institution and/or the IRB prior to initiating research covered under this Agreement.

(6) The Investigator will report promptly to the IRB any proposed changes in the research conducted under this Agreement. The investigator will not initiate changes in the research without prior IRB review and approval, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to subjects.

(7) The Investigator will report immediately to the IRB any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others in research covered under this Agreement.

(8) The Investigator, when responsible for enrolling subjects, will obtain, document, and maintain records of informed consent for each such subject or each subject's legally authorized representative as required under HHS regulations at 45 CFR part 46 (or any other international or national procedural standards selected on the FWA for the institution referenced above) and stipulated by the IRB.

(9) The Investigator acknowledges and agrees to cooperate in the IRB's responsibility for initial and continuing review, record keeping, reporting, and certification for the research referenced above. The Investigator will provide all information requested by the IRB in a timely fashion.

(10) The Investigator will not enroll subjects in research under this Agreement prior to its review and approval by the IRB.

(11) Emergency medical care may be delivered without IRB review and approval to the extent permitted under applicable federal regulations and state law.

(12) This Agreement does not preclude the Investigator from taking part in research not covered by this Agreement.

(13) The Investigator acknowledges that he/she is primarily responsible for safeguarding the rights and welfare of each research subject, and that the subject's rights and welfare must take precedence over the goals and requirements of the research.

**Your signature indicates that you have read and agree to the above terms of this agreement. Please retain a copy for your records.**

**Individual Investigator Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Degree(s):** \_\_\_\_\_  
(Last) (First) (Middle Initial)

**Institution/University (if applicable):** \_\_\_\_\_

**Address:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Phone:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ **Email:** \_\_\_\_\_  
(City) (State/Province) (Zip/Country)

### **DU Principal Investigator Responsibility**

As Primary Investigator, I have ultimate responsibility for the performance of this study, the protection of the rights and welfare of the human subjects, and strict adherence by all co-investigators and research personnel to all Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements, federal regulations, and state statutes for human subjects research.

**DU Principal Investigator Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix G: Focus Group Procedures

Focus groups are considered a socially orientated process and a “form of group interview that capitalizes on communication between the research participants in order to generate data” (Kitzinger, 1995, p.299) and thus, represent an integral research design component of this study. Each of the meeting will be audio recorded and serve as an additional source of data.

**Focus Group 1:** The goal of this gathering is to serve as both an introduction to the study and the research team. The principle investigator will begin with an overview of the project and then lead the research team through a guiding discussion.

### Project Overview

- Introductions
- Rationale and goals for the study
- Researcher positionality
- Research process and procedures
  - Study design
  - Participant-researcher and research team expectations

### Guided Discussion

- Please tell us a little about yourself and why you wanted to be part of this study?
- Have you participated in a study like this before?
- What are you most looking forward to in participating in this study?
- What apprehensions or concerns do you have about the topic and/or process?
  - What barriers might prevent your full engagement?
- How would you like to see the findings from this study used?
- What else should we discuss regarding next steps?

**Focus Group 2:** This two-hour meeting is designed to serve as a debriefing meeting following the data analysis period and will be used to build consensus about emerging findings and to reflect on the study engagement experience. The principle investigator will give a brief status update and then all will participate in a guided discussion.

### Guiding Questions

- How are you feeling about engagement in the study thus far?
- What was it like to be both a researcher and a participant?
  - How has the dual-role experience aligned with your expectations?
  - How was the data analysis process?
  - What emerging themes did you notice?
  - How are you feeling about the next stages of the process?

## Appendix H: Interview Protocol

**R1:** How do foster care alumni define success for themselves?

**R2:** What salient tools; personal, social, and system, support foster care alumni postsecondary persistence?

### Interview Questions

#### Biographical Information

- Can you tell me a little about yourself?
- Where are you from?
- What are you doing now?
- What does it mean to you to be a FCA?
- What were your experiences in the system like?
- How has your FC history impacted how you see the world?
- What are your strengths/assets?
- How do you define success?
- Would you consider yourself a success story?
- What have your K-12 educational experiences been like?
- What type of student were you (academics, involvement, outgoing)?
- How many schools did you attend?
- What types of relationships did you have in K-12?
- Are there any experiences that are most memorable?
- How did you feel supported or not?
- What organizations or social programs were you involved in?
- How has your FC history impacted your k-12 experiences?

#### Educational History

- How would you describe your college aspirations?
- What support did you have in seeking out or enrolling in college?
- What kind of college-going knowledge do you feel you had (FA, housing, programs etc.)?
- Where did you go to college?
- How and why did you choose that school?
- What did you study?
- What was it like for you there (academic, social, etc.)?
- What kind of student were you?
- What barriers did you find there?
- What helped you overcome those barriers (personal, social, environmental)?
- What HED experiences/memories stand out most?
- How do you define persistence?
- Do you consider yourself resilient?
- What impacts did being a FCA have on your HED experience?
- How would you represent your own successes?

## Collective Understanding

Can you share with me how it felt to write your positionality statement?

Have you ever been asked to share/represent your story of persistence?

How/why/when?

What was it like trying to represent your success in this way?

What has it felt like to participate in this study?

How have your feelings about your own persistence/success changed, if at all?

How would you describe your story of persistence?

What do you think HED professionals/policymakers should know about FCA persistence?

What do you want people to take away from your story?

What advice would you give to current foster youth in the system or HED?