LOST AND FOUND IN TRANSITION: HOW ALUMNI OF FOSTER CARE EXPERIENCE TRANSITIONS IN UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION

by

SARAH JONES
(Under the Direction of Laura A. Dean)

ABSTRACT

This phenomenological inquiry was designed to explore the ways in which students who experienced foster care (SEFC) transition into and through college; it is grounded in Tinto's (1988) Theory of Student Departure, Schlossberg's (1989) Theory of Marginality and Mattering, and Schlossberg's (2012) Transition Theory. Eight participants who were in their second year of college or beyond participated in one-on-one interviews. The following four main themes emerged via the phenomenological reduction process: "Ahead of Most": Consequences of Trauma; "Outsider": Peer Relationships; "I'm Not Here to Party": Integrating Social and Academic Experiences in School; and "Heavy Amount of Love." These themes capture the lived experiences of participants who used their resilience to matriculate into and progress through college. Though participants described feeling like outsiders in K-12 schools, most made meaningful connections as undergraduates. These connections with peers as well as the integration of social and academic experiences helped participants progress. Finally, participants described the love they found for themselves through their journeys in foster

care and college. Implications for professionals, including P-16 educators, school and mental health counselors, and social workers are organized by systemic domains that emphasize micro, meso, and macro-level advocacy.

INDEX WORDS: Foster care; K-12, P-16; Postsecondary; Transition; Departure; Progression; Marginality; Mattering; Phenomenology; Undergraduate; Ethic of care; ACA advocacy competencies

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DEDICATION

For Mark and Ishema

little prayer

let ruin end here

let him find honey
where there was once a slaughter

let him enter the lion's cage
& find a field of lilacs

let this be the healing
& if not let it be

--Danez Smith

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The dissertation process has been transformative, and though I spent many hours, alone, thinking about my experiences and the experiences of the participants, I received immeasurable understanding, support, and love from my community. At the beginning of the program, I spent at least two nights a week away from our home during the most hectic hours. Our oldest son, Aquay, stepped up and took care of our dynamic family. Thank you for preparing meals, holding babies, and reading books with your brothers and sisters. Our younger children think they are helpers like their brother; they are not. However, their eternal sense of hope and optimism anchored me to our family and my learning during the most difficult parts of this process.

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> His coach was creating an alternative scale on which [the player] could judge his performance. He might be an absolute D but on [the coach's] curve he felt like a B, and rising. . .[The coach] was helping him to fool himself, to make him feel better than he was, until he actually became better than he was.

Thank you, Dr. Dean, for making me feel like a B, and rising. I am better than I was four years ago and appreciate your part in that process.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In 2016 there were approximately 430,000 youth in the United States in the foster care system (FCS). Of this group, about 300,000 were school aged (between four and 20 years old) and could be served in the public K-12 education system or the postsecondary system (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). The trauma associated with transitioning into the FCS (and out of a parent or guardian's home) atop the trauma associated with the abuse and/or neglect that led to an out of home placement create a space where barriers to academic success increase; as a result, very few alumni of foster care matriculate and then graduate from college (Unrau, Font, & Rawls, 2012). Myriad barriers to success in schools, such as multiple home and school transitions, add layers of marginalization to an already vulnerable population (Unrau, Font, & Rawls, 2012; Wolanin, 2005). Despite their disproportionately low representation in higher education, more than 70% of students who have experienced foster care (SEFC) have postsecondary aspirations (McMillen, Asulander, Elze, White, & Thompson, 2002). This sense of hope and optimism from a group of students that has been historically underserved and overburdened is the foundation for this subsequent phenomenological inquiry into the educational transitions of SEFC.

Problem

Despite their aspirations, fewer than 10% of SEFC matriculate to college, and of those, fewer than 10% graduate with an associate's or bachelor's degree (Emerson, 2006;

Pecora et al., 2006; Wolanin, 2005). Like their peers from other marginalized groups or identities (e.g., students of color, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, first generation college students), SEFC have less social and educational capital, thus compounding the barriers to academic success. Furthermore, when compared to peers with similar demographic characteristics, SEFC trail in almost every category used to measure academic success. For example, SEFC have higher percentages of absenteeism and truancy, are more likely to transition to multiple schools throughout their K-12 career, and are placed in special education classes at higher rates than their peers not in the FCS (Davis, 2006; Unrau et al., 2011; Wolanin, 2005). Further, SEFC are less likely to be placed in college preparatory coursework and are more likely to be served by the least qualified educators (Unrau et al., 2012). Considering the trauma associated with childhood abuse and/or neglect, layered with inequitable K-12 school services, it is unsurprising that SEFC are less likely to graduate high school or earn a general equivalency diploma (GED) (Okpych & Courtney, 2014). Consequently, most SEFC do not matriculate to college, and if admitted, researchers suggest that up to 90% depart before receiving an associate's or bachelor's degree (Davis, 2006; Unrau et al., 2012; Wolanin, 2005). Therefore, no other group of students is more at risk of attrition than SEFC.

Public K-12 schools and postsecondary institutions have an opportunity to generate equity for a struggling population of youth by integrating critical pedagogical approaches (Giroux, 2016); however, instead of creating spaces where students who are most in need of social, emotional, and academic development can learn and progress, public schools have historically left SEFC to rely on their resiliency and interpersonal

skills to navigate the margins of K-12 or postsecondary education (Rios & Rocco, 2014). Though the educational experiences of other marginalized populations (e.g., Black men, women, LGBTQ students) have been researched, educational researchers have paid little attention to SEFC. As a result, students who believe in the promise of education experience the most educational inequity, while practicing educators are left with limited literature and resources needed to bridge the chasm between what students want to accomplish and what they are capable of achieving without parental support.

Purpose

The purpose of this phenomenological inquiry is to explore the educational and transitional experiences of students who were in the foster care system. The majority of extant literature regarding SEFC includes quantitative research published in social work and social science journals (e.g., Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Noonan et al., 2012; Rios & Rocco, 2014; Sim, Emerson, O'Brien, Pecora, & Silva, 2008). While this perspective provides great insights into the barriers students face, such research methods leave little room to include the voices of the students experiencing transitions in education. While this population of students has remained in the margins of P-16 schools, they have not been heard, and for a group who desires to be academically successful, "Having a voice and not being heard is often worse than having no voice at all" (Tinto, 1997, p. 616). To better understand the dynamic nature of educational transitions for SEFC, this phenomenological study includes interviews with current college students who are alumni of foster care. Their first-hand perspective of educational transitions adds voice and depth to existing literature.

Research Design

Though SEFC are likely enrolled in the majority of college campuses across the nation (Morton, 2015), they are a hidden population who can be difficult to identify (Sydor, 2013). In order to find a diverse group of participants who are currently enrolled in their second year or beyond of postsecondary school and were in the foster care system for at least eight months, this study was open to students throughout the United States. Since SEFC are difficult to identify and considered vulnerable (Sydor, 2013), I contacted third parties who either work with or are in a position to be aware of students who meet the aforementioned criteria. Via purposive sampling techniques, I corresponded with professionals via email (Appendix A), who subsequently contacted students who may have been interested in participating in the study.

Though many qualitative research paradigms create space for participant voice, phenomenology is a method of inquiry that emphasizes intentionality, depth, and a first-person point of view because phenomenologists study human experiences from the perspective of those being studied (Moustakas, 1994). Via phenomenological inquiry, I gleaned firsthand accounts of students' school experiences in order to increase knowledge regarding their educational transitions. During one-on-one interviews, participants shared their experiences regarding educational transitions as they relate to Schlossberg's Transition Theory, which will be described at more length below and in Chapter 2 (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012). Two questions guided this research:

1. How do students who have been in foster care experience transitions as they matriculate to college?

2. How do students who have been in foster care experience transitions as they progress through college?

Significance

The findings of this study include themes gleaned from first hand perspectives of the educational and transitional experiences of youth in the foster care system. Though literature describes SEFC as a group of students who desire to attend college, most do not because they lack the support necessary to be successful (Wolanin, 2005). Findings derived via phenomenological reduction offer insight into the ways various stakeholders (i.e., mental health counselors, school counselors, K-12 teachers and staff, and higher education administrators) can work with SEFC to support them in achieving their academic goals. Because current literature is available via social work fields and typically a result of quantitative methods (Day et al., 2013; Unaru et al., 2012), this qualitative study framed by educational theories offers a new perspective to enrich current literature by looking beyond the deficit perspective (through which most current literature is positioned) and into the strategies that students perceive to be the most beneficial to their academic progression.

Conceptual Framework

While research methods are guided by Moustakas' (1994) framework of transcendental phenomenology, which is described in Chapter 3, this research is undergirded by educational and counseling theories regarding student departure, marginality and mattering, and transitions. Vincent Tinto's (1988; 1994; 2014) extensive research regarding student persistence and departure, combined with Nancy

Schlossberg's (1988; 1989) two unique theories of transition and marginality and mattering, frame this research.

Tinto's (1988) stages of departure, though more detailed than the following summary, posited that students were more likely to persist in college when they experienced increased engagement, integration, and commitment to their academic and co-curricular activities. These experiences, in addition to outlying factors such as students' prior academic qualifications, family and individual attributes, and support in teaching, learning, and money management, impact student retention and departure (Tinto, 2012).

Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Anderson et al., 2012) is integral to the research because individuals in transition are more vulnerable than those that are not; furthermore, SEFC spend considerably more time in transition compared to their peers not in the foster care system. Schlossberg's (2012) theory, which emphasizes the role of transition in daily life, was used to frame students' experiences. Because SEFC experience multiple school and home transitions throughout their lives, this theory was used to explore the factors that influence their transitions, especially situation, self, support, and strategies (Anderson et al., 2012).

Literature regarding marginality and mattering links the concepts of departure, retention, and transition (Tovar, Simon, & Lee, 2009). From a retention and departure perspective, engagement can lead to feelings of mattering, a concept that lies at one end of the marginality and mattering continuum, explained by Schlossberg (1989). Schlossberg's (1989) Theory of Marginality and Mattering emphasizes the likelihood of student engagement based on their positions inside and outside of a group. Schlossberg

(1989) theorized that students experience episodes of marginality each time they are in transition; however, their ability to rely on others and belong to a group increases their feelings of mattering, thus increasing the likelihood of persistence in education. Through this theoretical frame, students' experiences in transition, foster care, and educational environments will be related to their feelings of inclusion and exclusion.

Definition of Terms

The *foster care system*, which is sometimes referred to as *foster care*, is a functional area of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (USDHHS) and falls in the realm of social services. It is run via state funds with oversight from the federal government. In the scope of this research the *foster care system* includes the web of providers and services for youth who have been removed from their homes (USDHHS, n.d.). The network includes case workers, foster parents, counselors, guardians ad litem, Chafee workers (who aid student transition), and court appointed special advocates (CASA volunteers) who collaborate to ensure that youth in foster care are safe in their temporary placements, have appropriate representation in court, and receive services necessary to meet their developmental and emotional needs (e.g., counseling, mentoring).

Youth enter foster care when they are removed from their parents' home because they were subjected to abuse and/or neglect. When social workers remove youth from their homes, they petition the family court system to award temporary custody to the foster care system. Most youth removed from their homes are placed with relatives or fictive kin (i.e., close friends of the family). If relative care is not an option, social workers look for placements with foster parents, or adults who are trained to act as temporary parents or guardians. Group homes, which are typically directed by social

workers or faith communities, are a third option for youth in foster care and include homes where six or more youth live communally with adult oversight (USDHHS, 2016).

The overarching goal of foster care is to reunify families (USDHHS, 2016). To achieve said goal, caseworkers, or social workers directly involved with family members, create a plan for parents. Though states have autonomy regarding the policies and practices within the foster care system, caseworkers typically develop plans for families that include goals and interventions necessary for reunification. For example, parents who struggle with addiction could be required to attend counseling sessions and parenting classes, while a parents in an abusive relationships might be expected to end the relationship with the abuser before reunification with their child. Case plans are time sensitive and monitored by caseworkers, foster care system administrators, and a judge in the family court system. Once their children are placed in foster care, parents can only be reunified upon successful completion of the case plan. If conditions for reunification are not met, parental rights may be terminated, thus making the child eligible for adoption or emancipation (National Adoption Center, n.d.).

Like the foster care system, the education system is primarily funded through state dollars with support and oversight from the federal government via the U.S. Department of Education (n.d.). The *education system, K-12 education,* and *P-16 education* are encompassing terms used to describe a range of public schools. *K-12 education* includes the primary, middle, and secondary system beginning with kindergarten and continuing through 12th grade, while *P-16* includes postsecondary education with students ranging in enrollment between prekindergarten and undergraduate college. *Higher education* and *postsecondary* education describe education

received after high school and can include community colleges, or two-year associate granting institutions, as well as four year colleges which grant bachelor's degrees and potentially master's and doctoral degrees, as well (Van de Water & Krueger, 2002). Though grants and scholarships are available for postsecondary education, some specifically earmarked for youth who have experienced foster care (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010), education beyond twelfth grade is not included in the free and public education guaranteed to U.S. citizens. Furthermore, while *K-12* signifies public schools or systems, *higher education* and *postsecondary education* include public and private institutions.

Persistence, progression, graduation, and *departure* are terms used to describe students' status in postsecondary education. Persistence, or continuous enrollment, is foundational to understanding college matriculation and movement. Persistence is the student narrative of institutional retention and can be measured in the number of semesters students are continuously enrolled. Though persistence measures continuous enrollment, it does not measure movement towards degree completion. In fact, students can persist without progressing. Student progression includes the number of credit hours earned towards graduation. Postsecondary schools typically classify progression via a structure similar to high school with students identifying as first, second, third, or fourth year students or as freshmen, sophomores, juniors, or seniors. *Completion* or *graduation* occurs when students earn the credits necessary to complete high school or college. *Departure* is the act of leaving college. While some students depart via graduation, others choose not to reenroll for various reasons, thus departing (Tinto, 1994).

Marginality and *mattering* are opposite constructs that impact student retention, persistence, progression, and graduation (Schlossberg, 1989). Marginality and mattering are related to an individual's self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-validation. *Mattering* begins as an external form of validation that implies connection and significance to another individual or group. As time passes and a sense of mattering increases, individuals can feel an internal sense of belonging and connection to others. Conversely, *marginality* includes internal feelings of inadequacy due to a lack of external validation (i.e., *mattering*) (Schlossberg, 1989). Finally, *transitions* are defined as "any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles" (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 33).

Summary

SEFC are a unique population of youth who, despite a desire to attend college, struggle to graduate from high school and matriculate to postsecondary education. The research described herein explored the educational transitions of youth in foster care. Chapter 2 begins with a review of relevant literature, including research that emphasizes academic successes and barriers to success for SEFC. To broaden the scope, research regarding persistence and departure, undergirded by Tinto's (1988) work on stages of departure, is included, then supplemented by Schlossberg's (1989) Theory of Marginality and Mattering. Chapter 2 concludes with a summary of Schlossberg's Transition Theory, which will be used to frame the way students navigate educational transitions.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Students who have experienced foster care (SEFC) include a population of youth who are consistently expected to engage in multiple transitions while navigating both the social service and education systems. Though most SEFC aspire to attend college, few matriculate to postsecondary education, and fewer still are retained through their second year (McMillen et al., 2005). Though federal policy for more than 30 years has supported educational attainment of students who have experienced foster care, this group continues to struggle to achieve academic milestones (i.e., high school diploma, GED, matriculation to post-secondary education) at rates similar to their peers who have not experienced foster care (Okpych & Courtney, 2014). The study sought to gain information regarding the transitional education experiences of SEFC who have matriculated to college. Therefore, Chapter 2 includes a review of literature that outlines the current educational landscape for SEFC, including academic achievements and barriers to success, as well as federal programs to support SEFC. This chapter continues with a review of seminal and current literature regarding student persistence and departure with particular emphasis on marginality and mattering, followed by a discussion of Schlossberg's (2012) Transition Theory (Anderson et al., 2012).

Educational Inequity

When Tinto (1977) researched the significance of education, he wrote, "Education has continued to function as a mechanism for occupational attainment. . . . All groups,

however, do not realize similar occupational status returns for their investment in schooling" (Tinto, 1977 p. 206). The benefits amassed from a higher education go beyond occupational accomplishment and include, but are not limited to, healthier lifestyles, civic involvement, personal development, and perceptions of self-worth (Mayhew et al., 2016). For diverse and numerous reasons, SEFC are one group whose educational achievements are consistently, disproportionately lower than those of their peers who have not experienced foster care (Unrau et al., 2012); as such, SEFC often experience inequitable hardship.

Collectively, SEFC experience educational inequity beginning with access to prekindergarten and throughout their high school years (Unrau et al., 2012; Wolanin, 2005). For example, SEFC are more likely to be identified for special education services, be suspended from school for behavioral reasons, and have the least qualified teachers (Day et al., 2012; Wolanin, 2005). Consequently, when compared to peers who have not experienced foster care, this group scores lower in multiple measures used to assess student success. By third grade, 80% of SEFC in California, for example, have repeated at least one year of school, and by 11th grade, only 20% are proficient in English (USDHHS, 2011). Further, SEFC are half as likely to enroll in college preparatory curriculum (i.e., Advanced Placement, Dual Enrollment, and International Baccalaureate) (Unrau et al., 2012) and twice as likely to be placed in remedial courses (Wolanin, 2005). As a result of these and other barriers (discussed below), about 50% of SEFC graduate with a high school diploma compared to 70% of their peers (Davis, 2006; Unrau et al., 2012). Moreover, those who complete high school typically do so with lower grade point

averages (GPA) and lower standardized test scores than their peers who have not experienced care (Unrau et al., 2012).

The consequences associated with limited education are more severe for youth in foster care compared to peers with similar backgrounds who did not experience foster care because SEFC often lack familial resources. Furthermore, SEFC are more likely to experience homelessness, the criminal justice system, and unemployment (Reilly, 2003). SEFC are also more likely to develop mental health concerns (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006), yet have decreased access to health insurance (Reilly, 2003). These bleak statistics, combined with the benefits amassed from a college education, help to explain why the majority of SEFC have post-secondary aspirations. In fact, 70% of SEFC planned to attend college (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; McMillen et al., 2005). Though SEFC who complete college are more likely to have stable, meaningful jobs and are less likely to experience homelessness or incarceration (Okpych & Courtney, 2014), their incomes and rates of employment are still lower than peers who did not experience care. In their research, Okpych and Courtney (2014) compared annual salaries and rates of employment for alumni and those that did not experience foster care. Results were organized based on the level of education completed, including some high school, GED, high school diploma some college, associate's degree, and bachelor's degree. As students increased their level of education, their rate of employment and their annual earnings also increased. Even though this is true for all students, a side-by-side comparison of students who were not in the FCS compared to SEFC reveals that youth in foster care are at a disadvantage at nearly every level. For example, individuals who have earned a GED average about $21,000 per year and are more likely than not to be employed, while youth

in foster care with a GED earn about $7000 annually, a rate about two-thirds lower than their peers. Further, youth in care with a GED are twice as likely to be unemployed as their peers outside the foster care system who have earned the same educational credentials (Okpych & Courtney, 2014). Similar patterns of decreased annual earnings and employment for SEFC are reported at nearly every level of degree achievement. Specifically, SEFC earn less compensation via salary and benefits despite equivalent educational credentials. However, the gap narrows as students earn degrees (Okpych & Courtney, 2014).

Beyond financial and employment consequences, students' developmental growth is impacted by their experiences in schools. SEFC have limited access to social support (e.g., family units, network of friends, institutional or community support) (Unrau et al., 2012). Because their transition between adolescence and young adulthood is less conducive to exploration, they have limited opportunities the form close relationships with like-minded peers. Consequently, while peers who have not experienced care have the time to explore their multiple identities with the support of family and friends, SEFC often experience delays or disruptions to their development (Batsche et al., 2014). This disruption is heightened by the onset of, or ongoing consequences associated with, mental illness and developmental delays (Unrau et al., 2012).

Upon high school departure (with or without a diploma), the majority of SEFC are old enough to disengage from the foster care system (Unrau, 2011); however, most are unprepared for life outside the system (Batsche & Reader, 2012; Iglehart, 1995). Though this population has practice with transition since they have typically experienced multiple school and placement changes, they also have the most limited resources of any group

departing high school (Unrau et al., 2012), thus creating an opportunity for this vulnerable group to become more disenfranchised. Furthermore, the majority will not matriculate to college, despite their desires to do so (McMillen et al., 2005).

Half of SEFC will not have an opportunity to matriculate to college because they did not graduate K-12 schools. As their peers who did not experience foster care progress through P-16 schools, it becomes increasingly difficult for SEFC to achieve milestones (e.g., high school graduation, college matriculation, college graduation) at similar rates. In fact, 84% of high school seniors not in the FCS graduate high school, while only 50% of SEFC do. Of those youth in foster care who earned a diploma, less than 10% matriculate to college, compared to 64% of their peers who were not in the FCS. Finally, of students who matriculate to college, less than 10% of SEFC graduate with a bachelor's degree, compared to 60% of students who did not experience foster care (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016; National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014; Unrau, 2011). Based on these statistics, for every 1,000 students not in the FCS, about 840 students graduate high school, 525 students matriculate to college, and about 315 students graduate with an associate's or bachelor's degree within six years. For every 1,000 SEFC, 100 will graduate high school; 10 will matriculate to college, and 1 will graduate college within six years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016; National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014; Unrau, 2011). The aforementioned statistics illustrate the vast educational inequity for youth who have experienced foster care.

Systemic Domains

Sociologists and social workers have long understood the barriers associated with the FCS and the inherent inequity youth in the system encounter (Courtney & Dworskly, 2006; McNaught, 2004; Percora et al., 2006). Research has also highlighted the characteristics and resources SEFC embrace and utilize to increase their opportunities for academic success (Unrau et al., 2012). The following paragraphs will summarize literature regarding resources and barriers for academic success using the structure and language from the American Counseling Association's (ACA) Advocacy Competencies (Toporek, Lewis, & Crethar, 2009) to organize the information. The ACA's advocacy competencies describe a process counselors use to promote systemic change. The model includes ways professional counselors act on behalf of or with clients (students) to promote change on micro, meso, and macro-levels.

Micro, meso, and macro-levels also describe the types of domains clients and students encounter. From micro-level or client/student level interventions, the emphasis is placed on the client or student. At this level, personal history, salient identity characteristics, and individual resources are key to the development of self-advocacy. Further, sociopolitical, systemic, and environmental factors impact personal experiences of clients and students. Meso-level or school and community levels highlight community collaboration and enlarge the micro-level domain to include community settings. This system's advocacy includes ways organizations help or hinder client/student navigation at the school level. Macro-level domains expand the purview to include the public arena. This large-scale perspective includes the ways social and political structures lead to oppression and marginalization of vulnerable populations (Toporek et al., 2009).

Micro-level domains. Micro-level advocacy competencies emphasize the experiences of the client or student. The individual is key in this small-scale perspective. Personal necessities including physiological needs (e.g., food and safety), psychological needs (e.g., connections to others and self-efficacy) (Maslow, 1943), and cognitive and/or developmental ability are included in micro-level domains.

The abuse and/or neglect SEFC endure create a faulty foundation upon which to build an academic career (Day, Riebschleger, Dworsky, Damashek, & Fogarty, 2012). When students do not have access to resources needed to fulfill their most basic needs, including food, undisturbed sleep in consistent and climate controlled housing, and a sense of safety, their attention and endurance deplete, and students are less likely to be successful in school (Day et al., 2012). Beyond the immediate consequences of an unstable home life, SEFC experience increased barriers because they lack a supportive family. When youth are expected to carry out adult responsibilities without support, they are at risk of experiencing premature transition to independence, which limits the development of healthy independent living skills (Wolanin, 2005).

Access to stable housing is the most consistent micro-level barrier to P-16 academic success for SEFC (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Nelson, Fox, & Zeanah, 2013). For K-12 students, each new home placement potentially leads to a school transition, as well. On average, SEFC make three more school transitions than their peers outside the system (Casey Family Programs, 2011), and each transition equates to a loss of six months of knowledge (Rios & Rocco, 2014). Students attending postsecondary institutions also encounter barriers regarding housing. Most SEFC require year-round housing, which few institutions offer (Nelson et al., 2013). In their qualitative inquiry regarding barriers to

postsecondary success for SEFC, Dworsky & Perez (2010) found that two-thirds of students needed additional resources to secure housing during semester and summer breaks. Further, while large institutions offer the most flexibility and choice in housing, community colleges and commuter campuses—schools where SEFC are more likely to be admitted—have the fewest housing options (Dworsky & Perez, 2010).

Psychological needs regarding personal identity, self-worth, and relationships with others are also micro-level areas that impact academic success. Most students want to leave behind the stigma associated with being a youth in foster care (Salazar, Jones, Emerson, & Mucha, 2016). When youth emancipate from the system, it becomes nearly impossible for postsecondary schools to identify these students then provide resources necessary for academic success. Consequently, SEFC have a difficult time in transition (Salazar et al., 2016) and report feelings of disempowerment, marginalization, and hopelessness that increase the likelihood of postsecondary attrition (Morton, 2015).

Multiple experiences of neglect, abuse, and trauma associated with their life circumstances not only increase negative self-perception, but also increase mental health concerns (Emerson, 2006). Bederian-Gardener and colleagues (2018) conducted a study to examine the link between instability, mental health, and attachment. When compared to their peers not in the foster care system, youth in foster care faced increased instances of posttraumatic stress because of their unstable youth. Students' experiences with depression and anxiety can be barriers to academic success. The symptoms of depression (e.g., lack of concentration, social isolation, suicidal ideation) are six times more likely to manifest in children and adolescents who experience social disruption (Berderian-Gardner etal., 2018; Jones, 2013). Because SEFC are in perpetual transition and have

experienced significant abuse and/or neglect, they are at greater risk of having depression and/or other mental health concerns that negatively impact their academic success (Casey Family Programs, 2011).

Though much of the current research emphasizes a deficit perspective regarding SEFC (Nelson et al., 2013; Rios & Rocco, 2014), there is also research that features positive, micro-level strategies for academic success (Chambers & Palmer, 2010; Kirk, Lewis, Nilsen, & Colvin, 2013). For example, SEFC often exhibit intrapersonal strength and resilience (Rios & Rocco, 2014). Rios and Rocco (2014) identified seven internal resiliency traits or "success strengths" (p. 332) that appeared on the phenomenological horizon during interviews with SEFC. They include *perseverance*, or endurance through difficulty while pursuing a goal; *responsibility*, or accountability for their academic success; *resourcefulness*, or the ability to ask for help when necessary; *diligence*, or focus and steady work on the necessary material; *motivation*, or the desire to complete specific academic goals; *goal orientation*, or the ability to move beyond short term vision to secure long term goals; and *self-efficacy*, or the belief in personal ability to be successful (Rios & Rocco, 2014).

SEFC can use postsecondary education as an opportunity to "redefine their identity" (Watt, Norton, & Jones, 2013, p. 1415). Instead of shedding their powerful traits of dedication, perseverance, and resilience (Salazar et al., 2016), SEFC have been successful in higher education when they transferred the life skills they accumulated over time to their experiences in college (Watt et al., 2013). As these students are affirmed, they experience increased hope, confidence, and direction (Nelson et al., 2013). As SEFC gain confidence, many are able to increase their leadership development (Dworsky &

Perez, 2010) and their social capital while they create connections, thus increasing the likelihood of academic success (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2011).

Meso-level domains. Meso-level advocacy competencies move beyond self to emphasize connections and collaborations between schools and communities (Toporek et al., 2009). As the focus shifts to include local systems, communication between systems is a critical element to consider. SEFC are active members in at least two separate yet equally confounding systems (i.e., education and social services) that sometimes, through limited cross systems communication, tighten the web of oppression and increase barriers to academic success instead of disentangling resources to serve a common goal (Noonnan et al., 2012).

Not only are SEFC more likely to attend low performing, underfunded, high poverty schools (Day et al., 2011), SEFC recalled multiple experiences where their abilities were underestimated or ignored because of their status as youth in FCS (Salazar et al., 2016; Watt et al., 2013). Foster parents, social workers, and teachers often have low academic expectations for SEFC (Wolanin, 2005). Their low expectations translate into meso-level barriers. As a result, SEFC are less likely to take college preparatory course work (Emerson, 2006) and more likely to enroll in remedial level courses in college (Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005; Nelson et al., 2013). K-12 schools further the barriers to academic success for SEFC by reacting poorly to a group of students who are working through mental health and behavioral concerns regarding trauma. SEFC are suspended, expelled, or placed in restrictive educational placements at much higher rates than their peers (Day et al., 2012; Nelson et al., 2013); as a result, they are absent from school twice as often as their peers who did not experience foster care

(Day et al., 2012). Aforementioned reasons make it difficult for students to do well in K-12 schools and matriculate to college; however, SEFC who do attend postsecondary schools are faced with similar problems. For reasons previously discussed in relation to micro-level barriers, colleges have difficulties identifying and reaching SEFC (Dworsky & Perez, 2010). However, even when administrators know which students experienced foster care, most postsecondary schools are unprepared to meet their unique needs (Salazar et al., 2016).

Based on the lack of collaboration between social services and education systems, SEFC are often left to navigate both systems independently, especially once they depart from high school. Though this transition to young adulthood is difficult for all individuals, SEFC face unique and additional systemic barriers that help maintain inequity (Rios & Rocco, 2014). For example, because SEFC lack financial capital, social networks (Watt et al., 2013), and healthy interpersonal relationships, they also lack the communication skills necessary to manage their poverty (Nelson et al., 2013). Most SEFC transition out of the FCS without a driver's license and with no savings, limited cash, and inadequate knowledge and skills necessary to navigate the systems that can offer assistance (Unrau, 2011).

Though systems of education and social services have historically had difficult times advocating and empowering SEFC, meso-level strategies including campus support programs, mentoring, and collaborations between systems are promising practices that have led to academic success for SEFC. Campus support programs for SEFC are increasing in popularity, particularly in the Midwestern and Western regions of the U.S. (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010; Kinarsky, 2017; Watt et al.,

2013). Campus support programs emphasize autonomy and create spaces where students have access to the scaffolded support necessary to meet the challenges of college (Watt et al., 2013).

Though the programs were structured differently depending on the type of institution and the needs of the students, each of the programs researched by Watt et al. (2013) was identified as helping students navigate their postsecondary schools and experiences. For example, many programs helped students find financial resources, while some offered scholarships for attendance (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010; Kinarsky, 2017). Other commonalities for support programs include mentoring, outreach, career preparation, and general campus orientation activities (Watt et al., 2013).

Rios and Rocco (2014) conducted a phenomenological inquiry into SEFC's perceptions of college. Their data analysis included themes regarding the significance of support from the schools, community, and FCS. According to their data, students also described themselves as crucial to their own academic success. Rios and Rocco's (2014) qualitative study included 24 participants; more than 25% said that caring teachers, helpful counselors, and academic rigor in high school were antecedents to later success in college. For example, several students found support in their school counselor who encouraged students to apply to college and helped them complete required forms and apply for fee waivers (Rios & Rocco, 2014). School stability was another important theme connected to academic success. Though SEFC have a higher likelihood of transferring to and from multiple schools (Noonan et al., 2012), students in this study experienced limited high school transitions. In fact, 23 of the 24 participants experienced zero or one school transition (Rios & Rocco, 2014). Stability in high school creates

opportunities for students to build the relationships necessary to be successful (Wolanin, 2005), thus increasing the likelihood for college matriculation.

There are multiple opportunities for SEFC to engage with adults in the community (Rios & Rocco, 2014), and this engagement was an important factor in students' academic success. Each participant named at least one person in their lives, outside of school, who encouraged and/or expected college matriculation, while also helping students navigate systemic and community barriers. Rios and Rocco (2014) highlighted the phrase "education-savvy mentors" (p. 232) to describe adults outside of the educational system who have the knowledge and skills necessary to help students navigate the transition from high school to college. Community mentors, caseworkers, and foster parents can offer substantial support for the academic success of SEFC (Syed, Azmitia, & Cooper, 2011).

Macro-level domains. Macro-level advocacy competencies encompass the public arena and frame barriers to and resources for academic success in a sociopolitical context (Toporek et al., 2009). SEFC have limited support from adults who believe they are capable of achieving academic success. The stigma associated with the FCS and the individuals who are placed in it leads to low societal expectations for SEFC (Kirk & Day, 2011; Nelson et al., 2013). Because of micro and meso-level barriers, SEFC form a "worldview that focused on deficits, dysfunction, and pathology" (Watt et al., 2013, p. 1410). As SEFC face greater barriers, it is up to the larger community to help shift perspective from "deficit, stigmas, and shame to one of strength, survival, and stamina" (Watt et al., 2013, p. 1415).

Advocates for youth who have experienced foster care have been successful generating policy regarding postsecondary education for SEFC. Federal programs that offset the cost of tuition for SEFC help to generate equity for a marginalized population. The John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (CFCIP) gave states discretionary funds for post-secondary education for SEFC. In 2009, the program distributed $45 million in educational and training vouchers (ETV). ETVs provide up to $5,000 per year to offset postsecondary expenses. Students who know about the program and have not transitioned out of the FCS are eligible for an ETV. Though this act made it easy for students to receive funds until they transitioned out of the FCS at 18, the Fostering Connection to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 made it easier for youth to stay in care and receive financial support until their 21st birthday (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). Additionally, many states and private organizations provide scholarships for college expenses. For example, Texas offers tuition exemption for SEFC, as well as those who were adopted. Casey Family Programs is a private organization that provides scholarships for SEFC (Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, n.d.). Though these programs offer substantial financial resources for youth in the foster care system, they are insufficient and inadequate when not accompanied by structural social and academic support efforts (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010).

Persistence and Departure

In higher education literature, Vincent Tinto is a prolific scholar whose work encompasses the movement of college students—particularly their matriculation, progression, departure, and graduation. When his Theory of Student Departure was first published, critics questioned the internal consistency related to the theory's constructs.

Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnston (1997) questioned the consistency and urged scholars to do more research since the theory needed empirical evidence to logically connect Tinto's propositions to the phenomenon of student persistence. Further, scholars "questioned the validity of the model to fully and appropriately capture the experiences of nonwhite students given that the model is based on an assimilation/acculturation framework" (Rednon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000, p. 128). Since then several scholars have tested Tinto's theories of persistence and departure and added differing perspectives to the literature.

Persistence and departure, constructs used to describe movement through and out of postsecondary education, are inversely related; persistence is the act of remaining in college and departure involves leaving college (Tinto, 2015). Though "we have yet to fully understand the educational character of persistence in higher education" (Tinto, 1997, p. 601), it is not for a lack of research from scholars and practitioners alike. In fact, persistence and departure in higher education have been studied for over four decades. During this time, scholars considered myriad aspects from micro, meso, and macro-level perspectives. For example, scholars researched the ways race, socioeconomic status, and sexual and/or gender orientation influence student persistence and departure (Clark, 2012; Strayhorn, 2008a; 2008b; Tinto, 2006). A micro-level perspective regarding student movement in postsecondary schools sheds light on meso and macro-level barriers (described below) that increase the likelihood that some students will depart postsecondary education before earning a degree (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Tinto, 2015). Though decades of research regarding persistence and departure have created a layered perspective that warrants more attention than the following summary, Tinto's (1975; 1997; 2015) foundational and more current research emphasized three themes that affect

student persistence and departure. They include students' ability to build supportive peer relationships, find and use their voice, and critically engage in learning.

While micro-level perspectives increase an awareness of external factors that act as barriers to success (Toporek et al., 2009), an emphasis on meso-level advocacy that encompasses school and community collaboration stresses the role postsecondary institutions have on student persistence and departure. In his research, Tinto (1997) found that institutions or communities representing meso-level spaces have a unique opportunity to engage students socially and academically. Not until students are nestled into a social system can they easily navigate academic spaces. More so than K-12 schools, postsecondary institutions are microcosms of the social world in which students constantly engage (Kaldis, 2009). Consequently, there are more opportunities for students to make connections between peer relationships and classroom learning. Students who are able to do so are more likely to persist than those that cannot integrate their academic and social schemas (Tinto, 1997). Furthermore, engagement in academic and social spaces, as well as the perceived connection between the two, impacts student voice. When students recognize similar themes in diverse settings, they engage in a depth of thinking and learning that ultimately increases their confidence and voice (Tinto, 2012). Regarding SEFC, social attachment and interpersonal connections are difficult (Rios & Rocco, 2014), thus making it more important for this marginalized group to learn the skills necessary for social connection—a prerequisite for academic engagement (Tinto, 1997).

The interconnection between social and academic systems is necessary for persistence in college (Tinto, 1997). Though the aforementioned themes can be described

separately, they are interconnected, and "the classroom is the crossroads where the social and academic meet" (Tinto, 1997, p. 599). Faculty who engage students with meaningful curriculum via pedagogically sound practices that emphasize collaborative learning create opportunities for students to develop and then use their voices to critically engage in the learning process, thus increasing student capital in both social and academic communities (Astin, 1987; Tinto, 1997; Tinto, 2015).

It is not unusual for college students to feel detached from their social environment, as well as their peer groups, while taking college courses; however, faculty can restructure their instruction to be more student-centered and integrated with other common coursework. When students engage in interdisciplinary pedagogy and cooperative learning, for example, they have opportunities to increase their interdependence, a skill most SEFC lack (Rios & Rocco, 2014) and that is crucial to success in college (Tinto, 1997). Further, students who engage in courses with integrative and authentic curriculum have significantly more positive perceptions of college compared to peers whose classes are more traditional (Tinto, 1997).

According to Tinto (2015), persistence in higher education equates to motivation, which is influenced by multiple factors including peer support, student voice, and perceptions of curriculum (Tinto, 1997; 2015). Compared to those without support, students who develop a network of peers manage their transition to college easier and are more likely to persist despite challenges. This is particularly important for students from historically marginalized communities who have little experiences navigating a college campus (Tinto, 1982). Increasing self-efficacy and student voice is a second characteristic of persistence. When students increase confidence and find a voice in the

construction of knowledge, they are more likely to make multiple meanings from their experiences and consider the impact diversity has on learning experiences (Tinto, 1997; 2015). Engaging in an active learning environment is a third characteristic of student persistence. As students engage in authentic learning, they have opportunities to create bonds to each other and their faculty, thus broadening their social community while creating intimate, authentic learning environments. Engagement in the learning community scaffolds students' experiences so they are more likely to take risks and further develop personal skills they previously did not know existed (Tinto, 1982; 2015).

Stages of Departure

Tinto (1988) described departure as a longitudinal process complementary to persistence. Whereas persistence is students' progression through college and can be used to describe the state of continuous enrollment, departure is used to describe the act of leaving college. Though Tinto's (1988) model of departure is complex and includes multiple factors, he highlights three stages of departure including *separation, transition,* and *incorporation.*

Separation occurs when students distance themselves from past groups of membership. Students begin spending less time with peers from high school, for example, and move away from home to live in residence halls. Though most students experience separation differently, those who separate themselves from one setting are leaving behind habits and behaviors associated with the space of departure. Furthermore, Tinto (1988) posited that students must be willing to disassociate themselves from their former communities. While students move through separation, they are engaging in a process of letting go of the known while transitioning into ambiguous territory. The

vulnerability required for such a transition can result "in feelings of weakness and isolation" (Tinto, 1988, p. 441).

Tinto (1988) described *transition* as a period of passage between old and new. As students spend less time with past associations, a period of transition provides space for students to begin engaging in their new environment as a way to increase skills necessary to be successful in their new role. The ambiguity associated with transitions can lead to tenuous experiences. Though students are no longer bound to the norms from their former communities, they are also not yet fully engaged in their new community. Therefore, students have limited responsibility and resources, thus decreasing engagement and prolonging the transition. Schlossberg's research, which emphasized the factors that influence transitions, suggested that at this point, a student's identity (self), financial capital (situation), coping skills (strategies), and relationships with others (support) impact their transition and persistence (Anderson et al., 2012).

After transitional stages, students enter *incorporation*, or a space where old norms have been replaced with new expectations for establishing membership. Though students are more secure in this stage than in the previous processes of separation and transition, during incorporation, students are challenged to make connections with peers and faculty in order to engage in social and academic groups. Students who incorporate themselves into community membership are more likely to successfully navigate postsecondary institutions, while those who cannot are at risk of departure because they are expected to "make their own way through the maze of institutional life" (Tinto, 1988, p. 446).

Marginality and Mattering

Marginality and mattering are opposing constructs deeply connected to student engagement and retention; they describe individuals' connection and position in relation to each other (Schlossberg, 1989; Tinto, 1997). Feelings of mutual relatedness and connection allow students to experience instances of mattering. Students who are involved in academic and co-curricular activities create a campus community for themselves and are more likely to persist in postsecondary education (Schlossberg, 1989). Though most everyone experiences instances of marginality and mattering, personal characteristics such as race, gender, and social class affect the degree to which they are impacted by such experiences (Schlossberg, 1989).

Marginality

Marginality is dynamic and universal, and though the length of time individuals spend in marginalized positions varies, everyone is marginalized at some point (Schlossberg, 1989). Feelings of marginality manifest differently in each person; individuals who experience marginality reported feeling isolated, disconnected, confused, and self-conscious. Because marginality can lead people to feel as if they do not matter, individuals living in the margins often focus their attention inward. Increased time spent thinking about disconnectedness and marginality creates a space for more negative thinking (Schlossberg, 1989). The cyclical nature of marginality, where feelings of inadequacy compound other negative emotions, can be an isolating experience where instances of mattering are nonexistent, thus increasing the likelihood that individuals will remain in a marginal status (Schlossberg, 1989). Individuals with practice creating relationships that matter are more likely to experience short periods of marginality before

finding environments where they become central members of a group (Schlossberg, 1989). Conversely, individuals with few or unstable experiences regarding mattering, such as SEFC, are more likely to spend extended time in the margins where they experience a lower quality of life (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981).

Mattering

Though not identical constructs, mattering is closely related to self-esteem and self-belonging in that mattering relates to identity (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). As individuals are validated and believe that they matter to others, they begin to see themselves as worthwhile, thus generating self-certainty regarding their identity (Josselson, 1998). Mattering is reciprocal to significance; feelings of connection to another increase a sense of social purpose and meaning (Tovar et al., 2009). As individuals feel significant to others, they increase their social network and are less likely to experience existential meaninglessness and depression (Schlossberg, 1989). Mattering can therefore be seen as a precursor to self-esteem; initial and ongoing acceptance of the group creates a space for individuals to love themselves and increase their internal validation of mattering (Schlossberg, 1989; Tovar et al., 2009).

The desire to matter to others increases as individuals mature. As adolescents begin to understand the importance of community (Erikson, 1968), a sense of belonging and mattering may increase as well (Tovar, Simon, & Lee, 2009). The following five constructs were identified in seminal research regarding mattering: *attention*, *importance*, *ego-extension*, *dependence*, and *appreciation* (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981; Schlossberg, 1989). *Attention* is the most basic form for mattering and builds the foundation for meaningful relationships. Attention occurs when individuals are noticed

by another; as a result of said attention, individuals are less lonely and more connected (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). *Importance* is the second identified construct in mattering and is identified as the belief that another person cares. Individuals experience importance when another cares about their thoughts, needs, and desires (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). *Ego-extension* relates to the connection of feelings about accomplishment and failure. When individuals believe that another person will be proud or disappointed in their work, they experience ego-extension, which reconfirms feelings of mattering (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). *Dependence* encompasses connectedness and reliance on another. As individuals realize that they need or are needed by someone else, they experience dependence (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). *Appreciation* occurs when individuals recognize the worth in others. When peoples' actions and presence are recognized and deemed worthy by others, they experience appreciation (Schlossberg, 1989). Because mattering is a socially learned construct that emphasizes external validation (Tovar et al., 2009), it is impacted not only by attention, importance, ego-extension, dependence, and appreciation but also by the type and number of interactions between people.

Early childhood attachment lays the foundation for future feelings of mattering; children typically experience immense feelings of connectedness and mattering via a bond with their parent(s) (Erikson, 1968). Furthermore, familial experiences can help individuals form close interpersonal relationships, thus increasing the likelihood that adolescents and young adults know how to identify feelings of mattering (Tovar et al., 2009). As they age, their desire to feel as if they matter increases (Rosenberg, 1965 as cited in Schlossberg, 1989). Because youth in foster care have experienced abuse or

neglect in their youth (Unrau et al., 2012), they have likely had fewer experiences that lead to feelings of mattering. A lack of attention, importance, ego-extension, dependence, and appreciation from parents leads to increased feelings of hostility, anxiety, and depression for SEFC (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981), thus decreasing their ability and desire to form close connections to others (Tovar et al., 2009). When SEFC fail to form relationships with others, they shift from feelings of mattering and into a more marginal space (Schlossberg, 1989).

Marginality and Mattering in Transition

Potential for marginality arises every time someone is in transition. The act of leaving an environment where norms are established to move into a space where norms are different or nonexistent challenges individuals' feelings of connectedness and mattering (Tovar, 2009). Though it is likely that everyone experiencing transition moves closer to marginalized status, the difference between the two roles (the one leaving and the one coming) is one factor that determines the amount of marginality individuals feel (Schlossberg, 1989). For example, all high school graduates who matriculate to college experience transition, thus increasing their likelihood of experiencing marginality. Students who commute to college, live at home, keep their same friends from high school, and remain at their current part-time job experience less ambiguity compared to their peers who matriculate to out of town or out of state colleges/universities. Being aware of the different expectations but not having an identified space in the new environment leads to marginality in transition.

The relationship between mattering, marginality, and transitions is influenced by identities held most salient, including race, gender, and social class (Schlossberg, 1989).

Schlossberg and colleagues (2012) identified the four S's as factors that influence transition. Situation, self, support, and strategies (which are described at length in the following section) are critical to the ways individuals experience transition, marginality, and mattering. For example, social class not only determines the amount of financial capital to which individuals have access but also relates to class privilege. Class privilege creates situations where individuals can move freely between multiple spaces, thus increasing the likelihood that students remain in touch with those who matter most (Crozier, 2015). For example, youth in foster care have less access to the resources necessary to travel (e.g., driver's license, personal vehicle, money for air travel) and most have less than $100 when they graduate high school (Unrau, 2011), thus making their situation more difficult than their peers who have access to more financial resources.

Race is another salient characteristic that influences students' experiences with marginality and mattering, particularly regarding postsecondary experiences. African American and Latino students, for example, are often described using critical terms such as lazy and at risk (Strayhorn, 2008a; 2008b). Though these students may feel connected to peers, they often lack the initial support of faculty and staff until they prove themselves worthy, thus decreasing the support necessary to build a strong self in their new environment (Strayhorn, Lo, Travers, & Tillman-Kelly, 2015). Decreased support increases difficulties in transition, therefore prolonging experiences of marginality for students of color. Students of color who also experience foster care can expect to encounter multiple barriers associated with their race and must work diligently to make interpersonal connections with faculty, staff, and peers in their new postsecondary environment.

Because SEFC are more likely to experience home and school transitions than their peers, they are also more likely to experience long-term feelings of marginality. As students begin to wonder about their place, value, and worth, they are often plagued by a lack of communication between the education and social services systems (Gil-Kashiwabara, Hogansen, Geenen, Powers, & Powers, 2007). This lack of communication increases the ambiguity in transition and the amount of time it will take for a student to feel like a central part of the group (Schlossberg, 1989). As a result, SEFC are more likely to face academic and social barriers to success.

Though research regarding the association between academic preparedness and marginality has not yet been conducted with SEFC, similar research into college experiences of racial minorities has been published, and the results indicated that supportive relationships with family members and faculty were positively associated with college satisfaction and retention (Strayhorn et al., 2015). Since SEFC may not have family to support their transition to college, youth in care must look to others to ease the transition to college and increase the likelihood of college retention, progression, and graduation. Positive relationships to others, particularly during transition, are linked to a greater sense of mattering. Further, students with the longest, most significant relationships are more likely to lean toward feelings of mattering than marginality when in transition (Tovar et al., 2009). However, students, like those in the foster care system, who have newer, less stable relationships with parents, guardians, or peers, possess fewer skills necessary to navigate transition and develop relationships that matter (Berzin, Singer, & Hokanson, 2014).

Transitions

Sometimes referred to as turning points and conceptualized as the period between two periods of stability, Schlossberg and colleagues (2012) defined transition as "any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles" (Anderson et al., 2012, p.33). Perception is key to life transforming experiences but type and context play a role as well. Therefore, in order to successfully navigate a transition, persons must first believe that they are in a state of transition and must acknowledge the major factors that influence their ability to cope. Although the context of a transition varies with each person and experience, Schlossberg identified three types of transitions, including anticipated transitions, unanticipated transitions, and non-events (Anderson et al., 2012).

Anticipated transitions, such as a high school graduate's transition to college, are foreseeable, while an unanticipated transition, such as youths' first removal from their home, is not predictable. Sharing characteristics of both anticipated and unanticipated transitions, non-events occur when anticipated transitions do not occur. For example, a child who expects to leave a group home for a foster family can describe the unanticipated stay as a delayed non-event. The transition may still occur, but nothing has yet changed (Anderson et al., 2012). In addition to typical anticipated transitions students encounter, such as graduating from high school or beginning a part-time job after school, transitions for SEFC include events such as moving from one school to another with each placement change, as well as nonevents such as staying in a group home after anticipating a move back to a family home (Salazar, 2013). Though they can be stressful, transitions are opportunities to reinvent oneself. During a transitional process, individuals

can discard or separate (Tinto, 1988) what is no longer necessary, which can create an opportunity for transformation and rebirth (Anderson et al., 2012). Meanings are made from transitions, and there are opportunities for psychological growth or decline.

Some students are unwilling to embrace the stress of a transition, especially when they are not committed to the institution or their educational goals. Transitions, though stressful, do not have to lead to student departure (Tinto, 1988). Students can respond in ways that allow them to cope with the stress of transition, while thriving personally and academically (Anderson et al., 2012; Tinto, 1988). Ambiguity in transition can impact lives negatively, increasing the amount of grief and anger individuals feel towards uncertainty (Anderson et al., 2012). Transitions require coping skills because individuals are simultaneously ending one aspect of their identity while grasping for a new one. Transitions include positive and negative consequence. As students graduate from high school and matriculate into postsecondary education they are in a phase some scholars identify as emerging adulthood, which is identified as a unique period between adolescence and young adulthood (Singer & Berzin, 2015). Throughout their late teens and early twenties, emerging adults have time to develop the cognitive skills and judgment necessary for successfully navigating young adulthood. Students with meaningful relationships with family, friends, and communities experience an ease of transition into emerging adulthood.

Perspective is a contributing factor to transitions—what one person considers an anticipated event may be unanticipated for another, or a nonevent for a third (Anderson et al., 2012). For example, youth in foster care who expect reunification with family experience an anticipated transition when they are placed in their parents' care, while

those who are moved from their parents' home into a relative's care without warning experience an unanticipated transition. Additionally, youth who stay in their current placement though they expected to be reunited with family experience nonevents. The perception and type of transition, as well as the coping resources available, impact the consequences (positive or negative) and meaning made for the individuals experiencing them (Anderson et al., 2012).

Factors that Influence Transition

The impact transitions have on individuals depends on multiple factors including Scholssberg's 4 S's: situation, self, support and strategies. Situation, self, support, and strategies are connected as each influences the other. Strengths and limitations of an individual experiencing transition are gleaned when examining the 4 S's while also understanding why and how people experience the same transitions differently. Using the 4 S's model as a guide, professionals have space to consider issues of diversity, including the ways marginalized populations, such as SEFC, experience transition. Because Anderson et al. (2012) emphasize situation, self, support, and strategies, individual's worldviews are included in analysis of transitions.

Situation. Situation includes the life events that occur simultaneously with the transition. When transitioning to college, for example, SEFC may be transitioning out of the foster care system or group home. Anderson et al. (2012) thoroughly outlined eight factors that influence situation. They include *triggers*, which are events that lead to transition; *timing*, which considers other events occurring simultaneously; *control*, or the complex process that includes internal and external forces that impact the situation; *role change*, or the different positions individuals realize when they transition to a new space;

duration, or the period of time individuals spend in transition; *previous experiences*, which consider the ways individuals have already experienced similar events; *concurrent stress* which includes the stressful events that occur at the same time as transition; and *assessment*, which includes an individual's perspective of transition (i.e., positive, negative, neutral). In summary, situation, which is one of Anderson et al.'s (2012) factors that influence transition, is a confluence of perception, circumstance, and duration that impacts the influence of transition.

Self. Self includes personal and psychological characteristics. Personal characteristics such as socioeconomic status, gender and sexual orientation, age and stage of life, health, and ethnicity influence the ways individuals experience transition as do psychological characteristics such as ego development, optimism and self-efficacy, commitment and values, spirituality and resilience (Anderson et al., 2012). An understanding of the influence of self encompasses the exponential nature of the effects of privilege and oppression. When facing similar transitions, such as a matriculating to college, healthy individuals with social and financial capital who identify as cisgender, heterosexual, and are situated in a racial majority will find it easier to benefit from the changes associated with transition, while those whose personal characteristics fall along the margins may be more impacted by setbacks. Development is also important when considering ways to negotiate and navigate transition. For example, a high achieving student who has experienced home transitions and educational success is in a better position to matriculate to college compared to peers who have struggled to learn in K-12 schools and exhibit limited self-efficacy skills.

Support. Though they will likely be disrupted throughout periods of transition, support systems play a critical role in an individual's ability to navigate transition (Anderson et al., 2012). Comparing the potentially limited resources of SEFC (Unrau, 2011) to the needs represented in Maslow's (1943) hierarchy, it is reasonable to expect SEFC to need support in multiple areas. These areas include, but are not limited to, support finding meals and housing, securing personal finances and medical insurance, and building self-efficacy and lasting friendships.

Strategies. Anderson et al. (2012) describe strategies as the approaches individuals use to cope and navigate transition. Their research posited that most individuals use one of the following strategies: *reframing, selective denial,* or *hope and optimism*. *Reframing* occurs when individuals focus or frame their attention on one aspect of a particular transition. During reframing individuals generalize, distort, and delete information in order to keep certain aspects of the transition in the frame. A SEFC transitioning to college, for example, might think of college as an opportunity to begin afresh and expect to meet new peers and engage in social events to help them do so, while another SEFC in a similar position frames their transition to college as the loss of a foster family and the support of a case worker and will delete notions of support to maintain their framed perspective. *Selective denial* occurs when individuals "forget" part of their situation. A SEFC, for example, may forget to realize that transitioning out of the FCS includes limited support from social services, a group that has supported them previously. Finally, individuals who understand the possibility of unfavorable outcomes, and choose to ignore them, rely on *hope and optimism* as a strategy in transition. A SEFC

who did not complete a housing contract, for example, can hope that a bed is available when she transitions to college.

Whether in their personal or academic lives, youth who have experienced foster care have engaged in more transitions than their peers who were not part of the FCS. Transitions, which are influenced by what Schlossberg labeled the 4 S's, situation, self, support, and strategies, result in changed relationships, routines, roles, and assumptions (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 33). The aforementioned factors, combined with an individual's perception, influence the consequences of transitions. For example, expected transitions that are perceived as positive impact students differently from positive or negative unexpected transitions or nonevents. Since students in transition are marginalized and vulnerable, they are at risk of attrition. Consequently, those that can navigate the ambiguity associated with transition are more likely to persist in postsecondary education (Tinto, 1994).

Summary

While myriad barriers to academic success on micro, meso, and macro-level domains overwhelm the majority of SEFC, a small percentage of youth in the FCS matriculate to college (Unrau et al., 2012). Though this group has experienced multiple home and school transitions throughout their youth, their transition to college creates another opportunity for this historically marginalized population to feel isolated and disengaged, thus increasing the likelihood of student attrition (Tinto, 2015). The current research was undergirded by theories of persistence and departure, marginality and mattering, and transitions. The proposed phenomenological inquiry into the transitional

educational experiences of SEFC (described in more detail in Chapter 3) was designed to add to current literature by capturing student voice and the essence of their experiences.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

College students who experienced foster care (SEFC) are an overlooked yet vulnerable population of young adults with limited access to the supports necessary to be successful (Wolanin, 2005). The combined impact of transitioning into a new educational system (higher education) and out of the foster care system (FCS) compounds the barriers to success for a group of students already at risk of attrition. Despite the barriers, some SEFC successfully navigate the multiple personal and educational transitions within the P-16 education and social services systems. The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to gain first-hand perspectives on the educational transitions of college students who have experienced foster care.

Research regarding transitions out of the FCS is plentiful (Collins, Spencer, & Ward, 2010); however, there is little research that considers the unique needs of students in foster care as they transition out of the FCS and into college and young adulthood. This research is undergirded by the tenets of Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Anderson et al., 2012) and Tinto's (1988) work regarding student persistence and departure. Marginality and mattering (Schlossberg, 1989) is also included as a theoretical frame. Further, this research encompasses but moves beyond retention after the first year of college. Research regarding transitions beyond the first year is necessary because students have reported feeling abandoned after their first year and can benefit from

scaffolded services well into their second and third years of postsecondary education (Hunter et al., 2010).

This phenomenological inquiry explored the following questions:

1. How do students who have been in foster care experience transitions as they matriculate to college?
2. How do students who have been in foster care experience transitions as they progress through college?

This chapter begins with a description of transcendental phenomenology, including important components of phenomenological research. After establishing the rationale for this phenomenological exploration, specific data collection procedures and design elements are included. The chapter continues with an analysis of the dependability, trustworthiness, and ethical research practices regarding this design, as well as an outline of data analysis and researcher subjectivity statement.

Phenomenological Framework

Phenomenology is the study of experiences and the ways individuals navigate specific phenomena. Husserl (1970) described phenomenology as an inductive and descriptive process where true meaning can only stem from participants' voices. Phenomenologists study human experiences from the perspective of those being studied (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, in order to understand the meaning and essence of SEFC's educational and transitional experiences, it is necessary to capture their first-hand perspective. Phenomenological methods and techniques (described below) allowed me to delve deeper into their lived experiences and move beyond my surface level assumptions. I used the phenomenological reduction process to emphasize student voice and

experience, thus peeling back the layers of language in order to glean the essence of the phenomenon.

Transcendental Phenomenology

This research utilized transcendental phenomenological methods, first outlined by Husserl (1970) as a way to explore the lived experiences of another by collecting and analyzing data regarding the educational transitions of SEFC. Intentionality and intuition are key concepts in transcendental phenomenology. Intentionality is complex and foundational. Husserl (1970) identified intentionality as a principal theme of phenomenology and defined it as the conscious awareness of objects or events. In this research, intentionality was placed on the object—educational transitions of SEFC. In order to create space where the participants and researcher (I) increased consciousness and awareness of the educational transitions of SEFC, I created and used a semi-structured interview that gave participants an opportunity to reflect on and share their experiences, matriculating into and progressing through college. This intentionality brings the students' experiences to the forefront, thus allowing participants to filter their educational and transitional experiences while thinking about the foster care system. While intentionality suggests conscious awareness, intuition (in this setting) is defined as the true understanding of self that rests at the core of knowledge gleaned from phenomenological inquiry. Husserl (1970) believed that all things become clear via intuition, which can be described as the stripping away of excess doubts, thoughts, perceptions, and judgments until a natural and uncovered presence exists. The intuitive-reflective process used during data analysis gave me an opportunity to reflect on multiple aspects of a participant's experience by placing the experience in and out of context.

Viewing the data thoroughly and from multiple perspectives—as a part of a whole life and as an individual account—gave me an opportunity to strip away perceptions until knowledge about the students' experiences became clear and evident (Moustakas, 1994).

Husserl's (1931) phenomenological methods emphasized four major processes including the Epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis. Husserl (1970) identified Epoche as the act of abstaining from presupposition or judgments about phenomena being studied. Sometimes called bracketing or bridling, engaging in Epoche allowed me to acknowledge then set aside biases in order to approach the object of phenomenological inquiry as if for the first time. Moustakas (1994) described the process as one that "precedes reflectiveness" (p. 86). Throughout data collection and analysis, students described scenarios and instances regarding their educational and transitional experiences that seemed unbelievable. One student, for example, was the valedictorian after attending 23 high schools. Outside of the phenomenological process I might question the logistics of the achievement; however, as I analyzed the data, I suspended my judgment on the reality of the participant's experience (earning high school valedictorian) and coded the data accordingly.

Though Husserl's (1970) concept of Epoche is an attempt to create trustworthiness in phenomenological research, it is not plausible for researchers to bracket their presuppositions or judgments entirely. As phenomenological methods have evolved since Husserl's time, researchers' understandings of bias and prejudice have moved away from the concept of bracketing and towards bridling (Dahlberg, 2006; Vagle, 2009). Bridling is a reflexive process during which researchers "take an open stance, [and] scrutinize" (Vagle, 2009, p. 585) their relationship with the phenomenon.

Since I am the instrument to understanding the students' perspective regarding educational transitions, I not only acknowledged my biases, I remained conscious of them throughout data collection and analysis. In order to bridle my expectations and open my mind to limitless possibilities, I kept a researcher's journal to document my reactions, feelings, and processes throughout data collection and analysis. To further suspend my beliefs about findings and focus on the students' experiences, I used their words via direct quotations to guide the phenomenological reduction process (Vagle, 2009).

Though bridling is a necessary initial step in coming to know things via phenomenological inquiry, phenomenological reduction also includes the act of examining, reflecting, and describing phenomena in textural language or adjectives (e.g., high and low; angry and calm; rough and smooth) (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological reduction occurs multiple times during inquiry and each shift in perspective creates opportunities for researchers to make new meaning by examining one reductive part then placing it back with the whole experience (Husserl, 1931). The process of phenomenological reduction helps to outline the textural experiences participants have of the phenomenon. For example, the semi-structured interview was designed as a tool to help participants articulate their experiences with clarity and describe their thoughts, feelings, and actions regarding the phenomenon (Moutakas, 1994). During the analysis process, I read and reread participants' transcripts from the interview, coding each theme and organizing participant quotations in different patterns in order to reexamine students' lived experiences from a new perspective until "only a stream of pure consciousness" (Husserl, 1931, p. 172) existed. For each participant, I used their language to create a

textural synthesis based on their experiences, via the phenomenological reduction process.

Imaginative variation is the third step in the phenomenological research process and is used to reveal possible meanings from the horizons previously reduced (Yuksel & Yildirim, 2015). Imaginative variation helps to describe the structure of the phenomenon by determining horizons. Horizons, which Moustakas (1944) described as unlimited and indefinite, are endless perceptions based on the researchers' experiences with and vantage to an object (Husserl, 1970). While reduction takes away to determine the essence, imaginative variation considers the essence from multiple perspectives as a way to make multiple meanings. In this process, I recognized and coded themes from participant interviews, interpreted the textural meaning in relation to societal expectations, and searched for exemplars of the themes throughout the original transcript (Moustakas, 1994).

Data Collection and Procedures

To capture the identified participants' experiences and undergird the research in transition and educational theory, I conducted semi-structured interviews. Each of the interviews was audio recorded, and I transcribed seven of the eight interviews. One of the recordings was lost when a device overheated, and therefore the interview was not transcribed. The semi-structured interview gave participants time and space to recall their educational transitions and me an opportunity to ask participants to expand on their answers when necessary. The interview questions (Appendix G) emphasized students' transitions into and through college, as well as their resources connected to situation, self, support, and strategies (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012). Students also had an

opportunity to share personal narratives regarding their educational and personal experiences in transition.

Participant Selection and Recruitment

Because this study was designed to gain knowledge about the experiences of a hard to reach population, SEFC as they transitioned through college, I utilized purposive sampling. Via a third-party, I recruited students in their second year of college or beyond who were also in the foster care system. Because more than half of SEFC do not matriculate to college (Unrau et al., 2012), and students often de-identify as being in foster care at 18 (Wolanin, 2005), this population of students is labeled hard to reach (Sydor, 2013), therefore making it difficult to identify participants who meet these characteristics. Further, the negative stigma associated with foster care creates a system where students are sensitive to their experiences, which may make it difficult for students to self-disclose their previous or current status (Sydor, 2013). However, because this population is often overlooked, it is not only necessary to capture their experiences, but to do so in safe spaces where participants realize the power they have in the research process (Sydor, 2013). Therefore, I recruited participants via a trusted third-party by disseminating a call for research participants via recruitment emails (Appendix A). Though the original list of groups to contact was organized into three tiers, initial lackluster responses encouraged me to increase the number of recruitment emails. A complete list of groups contacted is included in Appendix B.

After potential participants learned about the research study from communication via a third-party, those interested completed a Qualtrics survey (Appendix C), which not only captured demographic information but also notified me of a student's desire to

participate. I contacted interested participants via text or email (their preference) and discussed research logistics and timeframes. Though the Qualtrics survey included a copy of informed consent (Appendices D & E), I emailed every participant another copy before scheduling an interview.

Data Collection and Analysis

I conducted the semi-structured interview (Appendices F & G) with each eligible participant who agreed to participate in the research study. Though phenomenological inquiry suggests multiple points of contact between the researcher and participant (Moustakas, 1994), I interviewed participants once. The transient and hidden nature of participants combined with the length of the research project made it unrealistic to schedule multiple interviews. Immediately after each interview, I took notes in my researcher's notebook, and I transcribed the recording within a week.

Before engaging in the horizontalization process, I read the transcript at least twice. Because horizontalization is the act of categorizing endless relevant expressions (van Kaam, 1959), I read each thought out of context and created a label for it. In an excel spreadsheet, I copied and placed the participant's quotation into a cell under the appropriate label. I continued this process until each participant phrase or thought was labeled and categorized. Since this process does not build on previous processes, I did not keep a list of horizons already labeled, but instead looked at each participant phrase as a new thought and labeled it accordingly. Consequently, participants had hundreds of horizons to describe their experiences upon completion of this process.

Because horizontalization insists that every phrase be relevant and included, I was left with a long list of descriptive words to be pared down, thus beginning the *reduction*

and elimination process. During this phase of analysis, I considered unique qualities of the participants' experiences, which created invariant horizons (Moustakas, 1984). To do so I asked myself the following questions:

1. Does the labeled horizon contain a moment of the experience that is a necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding it?
2. Is it possible to abstract and label it? (Moustakas, 1994)

If the answer to either question was "no," the horizon was eliminated. By the end of this process, the remaining horizons included those with "exact descriptive terms" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121) and were now labeled invariant constituents, or the parts that do not change.

After I reduced the horizons to generate invariant constituents, I clustered or organized them by theme (van Kaam, 1959). As I clustered statements regarding transitional and educational transitions, central groups related to the students' experiences began to emerge, thus leading to the final identification of invariant constituents and themes (van Kaam, 1959). In this step, I looked for explicit examples of educational transitions, as well as compatibility of themes. I asked myself: Do the invariant constituents, which were taken out of context during the horizontalization process, make sense when added back into context? If invariant constituents were neither explicitly related to educational transitions or not compatible with students' experiences, I deemed the invariant constituents irrelevant to the participants' experience and eliminated them from further consideration and analysis.

Once created, I used the invariant constituents and themes to write an individual textural description of each participant's experience. To add to the essence of the overall

experience, I used participant statements via their transcripts verbatim (Moustakas, 1994). Individual textural descriptions aimed to capture the students' sensory experiences with transition and education, describing what they felt and thought; individual structural descriptions emphasized the themes related to how participants' feelings and thoughts undergirded their experiences. In this process too, I used direct quotations from transcripts to complete the individual structural description for each participant (van Kaam, 1959). Upon completion of the individual textural description and individual structural description, I analyzed both in order to construct a textural structural description for each participant, which contains the meanings and essence of their experiences by incorporating invariant constituents and themes (Moustakes, 1989: van Kaam, 1959).

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) described trustworthiness in qualitative research as a set of criteria used to judge the goodness or quality of the inquiry process. Unlike research grounded in positivism that considers internal and external validity (Ponterotto, Mathew, & Raughley, 2013), qualitative researchers consider both the design and implementation of the research when measuring overall trustworthiness. Though not specific to phenomenological inquiry, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework is appropriate to employ in this study because of its qualitative nature. Therefore, trustworthiness will be measured using the following criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and authenticity.

Credibility refers to the believability of the study and includes the accurate description and identification of the research participants' experiences (Lincoln & Guba,

1985). Since the purpose of the research was to glean knowledge of the educational transitions of SEFC within an interpretivist frame, students who participates in the study were in the best position to measure the credibility of the results. Therefore, I used member checking. After I transcribed the interview, I emailed a copy to the participant and asked each to check the document for accuracy. In one instance, when I was unable to transcribe an interview, I sent a copy of my detailed notes to the participant. Seven of the eight participants responded to my member check email. They thought the transcript (or notes) were accurate representations of what they said. One participant did not respond to my email.

Transferability is defined as the degree to which the data collected can be generalized or transferred to other SEFC as well as populations who share similar characteristics to SEFC. Research (Unrau et al., 2012) has suggested that SEFC experience similar barriers to success as other historically marginalized populations; however, their unique experiences regarding transition, as well as other aspects of their identity, make it difficult to transfer results of this study to other populations. Furthermore, though their experiences might be similar to other SEFC, scholars should consider the limited number of participants in this study when transferring information gleaned from this study to other groups of SEFC. Ultimately, it is up to the person(s) interested in the data to decide if the results are transferable to another situation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability is the third criteria used to measure the trustworthiness of qualitative research. Though the proposed research cannot be replicated, attention to the ever-changing environment regarding each part of the research process (i.e., interviews,

member checking, data analysis) can be noted. In determining the differences in environment, context can be considered throughout data collection and analysis (Elo et al. 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Because qualitative research varies based on the researcher, confirmability measures the extent to which knowledge collected from the study could be verified by others. Researcher bias is considered when measuring confirmability. To increase confirmability in this research project, I followed a well-documented set of instructions to obtain information, then analyze the data via phenomenological methods. I used Moustakas' (1994) text to frame each step of the process, thus increasing the confirmability and overall trustworthiness of this research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Research Ethics

Though youth are placed in the FCS for various reasons, most are survivors of repeated abuse and prolonged neglect. Compared to peers not in the FCS, youth who have experienced foster care have disproportionality higher rates of physical, developmental, and mental health problems (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). Throughout this process, I worked to maintain my knowledge of the particular needs of these students, the overarching needs of hidden populations, and my own power and privilege in the research process.

The project was conceived in ways that maximize benefits to participants while maintaining a space of minimal risk. Throughout the process I reminded students that participation was a choice and that their consent could be withdrawn at any time. To equalize perceptions of power, I reminded participants that they controlled the narrative and could choose not to answer at any time. As a researcher working with a hidden

population, I worked to gain participant trust and restructure the distribution of power so that the participant felt empowered to share their experiences.

Nonmaleficence, or the avoidance of harm for research participants, is often considered the most important ethical principal in research (Jones, Rivas, & Mancillas, 2009). Before conducting the study, I received IRB permission. The process of IRB approval allowed me to think about ways to minimize the potential for harm, and reflect on the privilege bestowed upon me, the researcher, to capture, then analyze participants' experiences.

To assure participant autonomy in research, I included informed consent that clearly stated participants' right to engage or disengage in the research at any time throughout the process. Informing SEFC of the research process and outlining the implications of participation were important steps in ethical research practices (Jones et al., 2009). Since justice encompasses representation and participant voice, I worked to include a diverse group of SEFC in the research study. While seven of the eight participants identified as female, participants were racially and geographically diverse and attended different types of institutions.

Fidelity is an honest approach to research. Throughout the process I built trust with participants by remaining transparent and honest about the process. This also helped to dismantle inherent power imbalances. In doing so, I incorporated veracity, or the authentic relationship that emphasizes truthfulness and transparency, and helped to create an ethically responsible research environment (Havercamp, 2005).

Subjectivity Statement

Throughout the research process I reflected on my emotions, paying attention to my feelings toward participants or themes. Through these instances of reflection, not only did I gain important knowledge of self, but I was also able to create a stronger product by leveraging my implicit and explicit biases with genuine introspection. My research was influenced by my experiences across the P-16 continuum, my role as foster parent, and my White racial identity.

While working as a classroom teacher then later in an office of first year experience, I realized the challenges and importance of transitions. While teaching in elementary classrooms, I acquired strategies to move my students from one subject, lesson, or activity to another, and as a student affairs professional, I studied and worked with students as they navigated expected, yet challenging transitions. As a practitioner, I not only learned how difficult it was to plan, prepare, and execute a transition, I also learned that students furthest in the margins experienced the most difficult times. For example, a fourth-grade student with ADHD and a donut for breakfast had a more difficult time lining up, walking quietly in the hall, then participating in a media center activity. Similarly, a high school senior with a mediocre GPA, minimum test scores, and limited study skills was less likely to progress in college than his peers. My experiences impacted my understanding and use of a major theory undergirding this research--Schlossberg's (1984) Transition Theory. As I continued to teach, I began to realize the vast inequity present in K-12 public schools. This research was shaped by my belief that education has the power to liberate or oppress (Freire, 2000), as well as my

disappointment because I believe the education system generates more inequity and oppression than freedom and fairness.

This research is also impacted by my experiences, biases, and emotions regarding race. While I understood the importance of my White identity status and the power that stems from being White, educated, female, and the primary researcher of this phenomenology, I also learned during this process that my racial worldview influences how I communicate and how I like for others to communicate with me. Though I have spent substantial time reflecting on the ways I build relationships with African American women, during this research I realized I thought about and reacted differently to Black female participants than others. As I examined my biases, I realized that I, because of my White, middle-class, college educated, Southern upbringing, was socialized to embody and prefer politeness, ease, and timely communication. When I realized this, I was able to read and analyze data from Black participants in ways that allowed their communication style to be different and not a deficit.

My research is impacted by my role as foster parent. Since becoming a foster parent six years ago, I have realized that while many people are quick to celebrate me for my sacrifice, they are also quick to perceive our children from a deficit perspective and their parents via a harsh lens. This perception not only increases the power differential between biological and foster parents, but it also helps to create the negative stigma SEFC end up believing about themselves. As a result, it was important to me, via this research, to celebrate student success. I know it is necessary to study the negative consequences and impacts of trauma, abuse, and neglect; however, my desire to embrace

possibility and hope guided this entire project from conceptualizing to data analysis to final edits.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Of the 300,000 plus school aged youth in foster care (USDHHS, 2016), fewer than 10% matriculate to college and even fewer graduate with an associate's or bachelor's degree. Though their educational struggle is greatly influenced by a childhood of abuse or neglect that led to a foster care placement, some students who have experienced foster care (SEFC) have enrolled, progressed, and graduated from postsecondary schools. This phenomenological inquiry sought to gain a first-person perspective of the transitional educational experiences of youth in foster care. Two research questions guided this study:

1. How do students who have been in foster care experience transitions as they matriculate to college?
2. How do students who have been in foster care experience transitions as they progress through college?

In Chapter 4, I will present the findings of this phenomenological inquiry. Because the research emphasizes the individual and collective experiences of SEFC, the three parts of this chapter organize data accordingly. Part one (participants) includes a demographic overview of all participants, as well as individual textural structural descriptions. To describe the most salient shared experiences of SEFC, part two (themes) organizes the data based on themes. Part three (collective experiences) includes the collective participants' textural, structural, and composite descriptions, which combine

individual occurrences across themes to emphasize the essence of students' educational experiences.

Participants

From the 23 individuals who completed the online survey, nine students met the proposed criteria for the study (i.e., currently enrolled in postsecondary school; second-year student or beyond; placed in foster care for at least eight months). I contacted each and scheduled interviews with eight of the nine students. Though seven of the eight participants are female, there are other areas where demographic characteristics are more diverse. Figure 1, below, organizes relevant characteristics; participant descriptions follow.

The phenomenological process, according to Moustakas (1994), includes an analysis of data that leads to textural, structural, and textural structural descriptions for each participant. Additionally, a textural structural synthesis and composite textural structural description describe the overall essence of the combined participants' experiences. The following section includes textural structural descriptions for Ariel, Ta'Leah, Cori, Kaylee, Tara, Cheyenne, and Awnan. Individual textural and individual structural descriptions for the aforementioned participants are included in Appendix H. Finally, a textural structural synthesis, summarizing the essence of the group's experience is included at the end of Chapter 4. Since her recording was lost and the data was analyzed differently, Madeline has only one description, which is the last individual description located in this section. A composite textural structural description, which summarizes the textural structural description of the group is included at the end of the participant section.

Figure 1. List of participants. *The list is an overview of study participants and includes salient identification information.*

Figure 1

Pseudonym	Transfer Student (Y/N)	Type of School/Location	Classification	Gender	Race
Ariel	N	Private; Catholic/New England	Senior	F	White
Ta'Leah	N	Public/ Midwest	Graduating Senior	F	Black
Cori	N	Public Research/ West Coast	Sophomore	F	Black
Kaylee	Y	Community College & Public Research/ West Coast	Graduating Senior	F	Asian
Madeline	N	Public Research/ West Coast	Junior	F	White
Tara	N	Private Liberal Arts/ West Coast	Junior	F	Black
Cheyenne	N	Public Research/ Rocky Mountain Region	Sophomore	F	White
Awnan	Y	Local Community College & Public Research/ Pacific Northwest	Junior	M	Asian

Ariel Textural Structural Description

At the time of the interview, Ariel was a rising senior at a small, private, Catholic college in New England. She spoke freely in her interview, providing personal insights into her experiences as a college student and alumna of foster care. Though her early childhood years were riddled with abuse and neglect, Ariel eventually found a safe home with her (adoptive) parents. The stability provided by her parents, who are biologically related to Ariel, meant that Ariel remained in the same school system throughout K-12.

Ariel liked learning and always wanted to attend college. She was encouraged by her parents to do well in school. In fact, her parents set high expectations, and Ariel said that they thought a B+ was a grade that could be improved. In her interview, Ariel revealed that she took solace in the structure and routine of school.

When it was time to transition to college, she chose the school that was most affordable. Ariel, who works in the campus library, described being engaged in campus life and has benefited from the small faculty to student ratio at her Catholic, liberal arts college. Throughout the interview, Ariel spoke of the ease with which she was able to make appointments with faculty, as well as the support she received from members of the nearby community. This sense of support from adults provided a space for Ariel to learn skills and acquire the tools necessary for her personal development. These positive interactions with adults, also helped counter the distance she felt between herself and peers.

Although comfortable in the role of learner and self-advocate, Ariel said she was less comfortable in relationships with peers. Though college offered her a space to be with people with similar experiences, via the on-campus program for alumni of foster care, Ariel described feelings of isolation, shame, and inferiority when interacting with peers. Though her feelings of inadequacy were sometimes directed at herself, Ariel also understood that her previous experiences meant she was more mature and resilient than her peers. Throughout the interview, Ariel juxtaposed her judgements regarding the immaturity of her classmates and their inability to deal with adult-like problems with her own inabilities to perform basic life skills, such as balancing a checkbook, talking to people her own age, and keeping her room tidy.

As a result of the abuse and neglect she experienced from the people who were supposed to keep her safe, Ariel learned to be self-reliant and is not easily disappointed by others; she explained that she has low expectations of the people in her life. However, her resourcefulness, maturity, independence, adaptive nature, and motivation come from an internal awareness and sense of purpose that have developed throughout her childhood and adolescence. Though it is sometimes difficult to believe in her own worth, especially when she feels disconnected from peers, Ariel described a variety of coping skills that increase her personal resilience.

Ariel was grounded in a sense of service and ultimately felt fortunate to have had the opportunity to attend college. Her parents instilled a strong sense of service in her at an early age; consequently, Ariel believed it was her purpose to help those not as lucky as she. Despite her childhood trauma and disconnection from peers, Ariel recognized that she was loved. She wanted to extend that love to others who have experienced abuse and neglect.

Ta'Leah Textural Structural Description

Before entering foster care during her middle school years, Ta'Leah did not think that she would attend college. In her biological family, Ta'Leah was the youngest of three children. Though kept together initially, Ta'Leah's brother moved out of the foster home before graduating high school and her sister got pregnant shortly after high school graduation. Ta'Leah, still in her foster parents' home after her siblings left, assumed she would not attend college either. She had not yet realized her resilience and self-advocacy skills that proved necessary as she navigated high school and higher education.

Ta'Leah's foster mother was a proponent of education. She had high expectations for Ta'Leah and offered support when necessary. The relationship between Ta'Leah and her foster mother was significant. Ta'Leah said her foster mother encouraged her to persevere in her second and third years of college, when things were very difficult. At that time, Taleah's best friends left college, a comprehensive state school. With her foster mother's support (via telephone), Ta'Leah worked through her loneliness and progressed through college.

In college, Ta'Leah's relationship with her birth mother disintegrated. Her birth mother did not support Ta'Leah and expected her to cut off relationships with her foster family. In fact, Ta'Leah's birth mother tried to sabotage Ta'Leah's relationship with her foster parents. She convinced Ta'Leah that her foster family would abandon her when she turned 18. Ta'Leah's foster family did not abandon her, but her biological mother did. She believed the support and love from her foster family carried her through the most difficult times of her childhood and ultimately helped her be successful in college.

As she progressed through college, Ta'Leah noticed the ways her peers interacted with each other and the ease with which they used drugs and alcohol. Not only did Ta'Leah feel socially awkward around her peers, but her previous experiences at the hands of individuals addicted to alcohol and drugs influenced her desire not to use substances in college. In fact, Ta'Leah was baffled by her peers' casual consumption of alcohol until she realized that most had a different perspective. She realized her peers drank to lose control and rebel; however, she understood the dangers of alcohol and drugs and did not want to participate. Ta'Leah also realized that many of her peers attended college just to get away from their parents. As a result, they did not take coursework

seriously, but Ta'Leah was a serious student who was motivated to do well. Ta'Leah has done well in school, and her time in college, away from her foster parent's home, has given her the skills necessary to be on her own—something she always wanted.

Cori Textural Structural Description

For Cori, who was adopted from foster care as a young child, college was always an option. With her (foster/adoptive) mother, Cori toured colleges when she was in middle school. Though she assumed she would attend a small liberal-arts college on the East Coast, Cori decided on a research university on the West Coast.

High school was difficult for Cori, but her resilience gave her the power to persevere, graduate, and matriculate to college. Cori was not prepared for the rigor of college. Though her adoptive mother tried to warn her, Cori did not believe college would be difficult. However, after her first year, Cori was on academic probation because of her low grade point average. While Cori experienced shame based on her performance, she felt supported by her adoptive mother who seemed prepared for Cori's first year stumble. Cori's mother was very supportive, so during the break they rethought her schedule, and created a system that gave Cori the necessary structure to keep her academics in order. Cori expected the academic work to be difficult but was surprised at how hard it was to meet her most basic, personal needs.

On campus, Cori felt very disconnected from her peers. Though she associated some of her disconnection with her status as a foster/adoptive youth, she struggled with overt and covert forms of racism on the predominately white campus. For example, Cori described instances of cultural appropriation and racial disharmony when she interacted with peers on campus. These experiences led to Cori's involvement in her campus' Black

Student Union (BSU). At the BSU, Cori felt connected to herself and her peers. The BSU offered Cori a safe haven where she focused on the similarities of peers instead of the inevitable differences.

Beyond social connections, Cori suffered from anxiety and depression that increased barriers to academic success. Cori described panic attacks that made it difficult for her to focus on academics. For example, when she was unable to control her surroundings, she daydreamed and stared into space. She paid little attention to the details of her academic experience. With the help of her counselor, Cori learned to find solace in nature and took long walks on the beach to curb her anxiety. The time alone gave her peace and the stamina necessary to progress through college. Cori said that when she walked on the beach, her feelings of seclusion, isolation, and disconnection yielded to a self-love and empowerment that gave her strength to continue.

Kaylee Textural Structural Description

Before entering the foster care system, Kaylee did not know that such a thing existed. She struggled in school and her home life was chaotic, but she believed most people lived similarly. Kaylee was confused, angry, and scared when she entered the foster care system but quickly realized she needed to make different choices if her sibling group was to stay together. Kaylee's transition to foster care had additional barriers since she and her siblings spoke English and her foster family spoke Spanish. Further, the transition to foster care brought Kaylee and her siblings outside of their school district and each was required to enroll in a different district.

Kaylee sought and received support from various individuals. Social workers, mentors, and her foster parents helped Kaylee navigate her new home and school. With

their help, Kaylee framed the move as a positive change and viewed the transition as an opportunity to begin again, making good choices along the way. Consequently, Kaylee graduated high school and had choices regarding her next steps. With the help of her transition team, Kaylee decided to enroll in a two-year community college.

At community college, Kaylee leaned the skills necessary to be successful in college while also dealing with her own anxiety and depression. Kaylee expected to transition to a four-year college after she completed two years at the community college. Though she did transition to a public state research institution, she was almost denied access due to academic dishonesty at the community college. When the rigor and pace overwhelmed Kaylee, she plagiarized her final paper so that she could keep her original timeline intact.

Beyond anxiety regarding her academic performance, Kaylee was preoccupied by the differences between Asian students and herself. When she decided to attend a four-year college, for example, she chose one that was not predominately Asian because she did not like the idea of competing with people that looked like her. She was afraid she would not live up to the expectations of Asian-American students. However, the desire to be with students who are similar was important, too; therefore, Kaylee joined a service fraternity whose primary membership was for Asian and Asian-American students.

Beyond experiences with Asian/Asian-American peers, it was difficult for Kaylee to maintain peer relationships. She described herself as an outsider and distanced herself from others. When she did interact with her peers, Kaylee noticed that she often felt isolated and different. For example, she did not use alcohol or drugs and was surprised at the casual way her peers consumed either/both. When Kaylee realized that alcohol and

drugs did little to make her feel connected to her peers or assuage her anxiety and depression, she chose to abstain from substances, and found solace via nature—which was abundant on campus. In fact, Kaylee's room overlooked the ocean, and when things were chaotic, she sat on her balcony or took a walk to recharge.

Though she experienced and accomplished many achievements since entering the foster care system, Kaylee realized that she did not do so alone. She gave credit to her foster family for taking in a sibling group and showing them a way of life that was that was full of love and free of pain. She believed her case workers, transition team, and advisors gave her the tools to find financial assistance and academic services necessary to be successful. She also realized that the abuse and neglect she faced created a space for her resiliency to flourish.

Tara Textural Structural Description

Tara's experiences in foster care contributed to frequent placement and school changes. She enrolled and attended over 20 K-12 schools. The constant transition between homes and schools was difficult, and she spent a lot of time in the wrong high school courses. Some were too advanced and others were repeated from another school and/or district. Either way, the multiple transitions led to problems that almost prevented Tara from graduating high school. However, she did graduate from high school and matriculated to college. Tara said that some of her success was due to her ability to tell which adults were allies and which would prefer not to be bothered by the troubles of others. She found mentorship and help from case workers and some teachers; however, most K-12 teachers were not helpful. Instead of advocating for her educational rights, they created additional barriers for Tara to overcome.

Tara knew she wanted to attend college from the time she was 10 and living in a group home. While playing board games with friends, Tara realized that college was a way to achieve her goal of helping youth in situations similar to her own. She applied to and enrolled in a small, private liberal arts college on the West Coast. With many curriculum options, Tara and her academic advisor created a major specific to Tara's career aspirations. Her personal program of study tailored her postsecondary education and was designed to give her the skills necessary to advocate for youth in foster care on a macro-level.

Tara believed that her resilience and strength got her through a very difficult childhood. She said that when things seemed hopeless—which was more often than not—she kept moving. Her persistence, derived from challenge, made her transition to college easier than some of her peers. Several factors made college difficult for Tara. She felt disconnected from her peers, who Tara believed lacked the perspective and drive necessary to care for themselves. An initial disconnection from peers made it difficult for Tara to feel welcome on campus; however, the coursework, faculty, and co-curricular activities meant that Tara was engaged all the time. For example, Tara described an introduction to career studies, where a dynamic faculty member got each student to fully participate. This academic engagement with faculty and peers kept Tara engaged in her coursework and on track to graduate.

Many of Tara's experiences were framed with a social justice lens. She acquired the language and tools to reflect on her educational experiences in terms of justice, equity, advocacy, and empowerment. Tara knew that self-advocacy was one of her strengths and explained that in her future work she wanted to empower youth in foster

care. Tara not only described creating and changing policies for youth in foster care but also said she wanted to support youth in care by helping them navigate difficult circumstances associated with abuse and neglect.

Cheyenne Textural Structural Description

Cheyenne is a second-year student at a comprehensive, public university in the Rocky Mountain region. The trauma associated with abuse and neglect undergirded Cheyenne's experiences. The instability of her childhood began long before she entered the foster care system and remained throughout her childhood and adolescence. For example, Cheyenne was placed and removed from several homes while in the foster care system and as a result, she built protective barriers that prevented her from loving and caring about people. Cheyenne described herself as an object who could be placed anywhere there was an extra mattress. These experiences made Cheyenne turn inward instead of engaging with peers. Consequently, Cheyenne had difficulties forming and maintaining relationships with peers in college. She did not trust others to treat her respectfully. Cheyenne's experiences with trauma also helped her develop multiple skills that allowed her to be successful in college. For example, she learned to live independently and persevere through challenging times. Cheyenne said she was self-aware and used her skills gleaned from counseling to advocate for herself and others in similar positions.

Though college was challenging for Cheyenne from a social perspective, she used this opportunity to experience catharsis and find her true self and purpose. At the time of our interview, Cheyenne was informed that she was awarded a large scholarship—enough to cover her experiences until she graduated with an undergraduate degree. The

financial security attached to the gift allowed Cheyenne to put aside her anxiety regarding finances and focus on her work as a student. She was excited because less than two years ago she did not think her dream of attending college would be actualized.

Awnan Textural Structural Description

Awnan arrived at his current college via a community college transfer. He decided to attend late, and he missed most deadlines; however, he enrolled in a local community college just after high school. While taking classes, Awnan researched four-year colleges and found one that offered his major—forensics. After one year in a community college, Awnan transitioned to a four-year university, where he worked diligently to make the most of the opportunity he had.

Awnan decided to attend college because he knew it was important for future success. His foster family encouraged him to enroll; however, Awnan was also aware that of the 100 children his family fostered, he was the only one to attend college. This made him realize the privilege of his education and created an understanding that it was his job to do well in school.

Awnan had several friends on campus and even had to eliminate one of his co-curricular activities when it interfered with his coursework. His connection and engagement to campus were important to his success. At the time of the interview, Awnan found out that he had been accepted into the college's ambassador program, where he would work with the admissions team to guide campus tours and help incoming students transition to college. Awnan applied for this position because he thought he had the skills necessary to help other students because he created his own support during his transition.

Madeline Description

Madeline spent four years in the foster care system and was adopted by relatives who had been a stable part of her life. Though her grades identified her as a high achieving student, Madeline did not like school or expect to go to college. In eighth grade, however, she was diagnosed with ADHD. The medication and management associated with the diagnosis opened up Madeline's options, and she suddenly realized that she liked to learn and participate in class activities and discussions. As school became less of a struggle to navigate, Madeline considered college. By the time she entered high school, Madeline knew that she would attend a four-year university for a postsecondary degree.

Madeline graduated from high school with a high GPA (above 4.0) and several AP credits. However, she often felt behind other high achieving students. Unlike her peers who had support from parents and teachers, Madeline believed that she had to figure things out for herself. Beyond the classroom, Madeline participated in athletics. She talked about her experiences on the rowing team, which she joined when she went to her university. Initially, rowing helped ease the transition to college because it occupied her time and created a support system; however, the increased hours of practice and the constant companionship and living arrangements with team mates made it difficult for Madeline to relax, recharge, and focus on her college coursework. Consequently, Madeline decided not to row competitively. Though Madeline lost peer connections when she left competitive rowing, she felt comfortable with her decision to leave the team because she transitioned to college with two of her best friends. Since her friends offered her support and a safe place to go when things were difficult, Madeline knew she would

have the support necessary to navigate college even if she was no longer on the rowing team.

In addition to her friends, Madeline was part of the university's center for youth who have been in foster care. She credited the director of the program as being one of the best supports on campus. The director not only helped students engage on campus but also connected students to the greater community. As a result, Madeline felt connected to campus and is active in the community. Madeline also described feeling connected to her faculty. She said that they were eager to give students opportunities to participate in research. Such participation allowed Madeline to make connections easily with faculty and other students.

Though Madeline felt she was adequately prepared to enter college, she said that she had a tendency to become disengaged and disconnected when things got hectic—typically towards the end of the semester. Madeline used resources on campus to help manage her time and stress levels. She said that the university's beach location helped her reconnect to nature and the important aspects of life.

Composite Textural Structural Description

Experiences of abuse and/or neglect are pervasive for youth in foster care, and each participant, except Awnan described the trauma that surrounded their placement in the foster care system. Beyond the trauma that led to an out of home placement, some participants described feelings of abandonment, discouragement, and disempowerment. Others reflected on feelings of lovelessness, vulnerability, and the stress associated with a lack of consistency. Furthermore, persistent ambiguity regarding their status in and outside their home increased participants' anxiety. In fact, each female participant

discussed issues regarding their mental health and each revealed feelings of depression and/or anxiety. One participant disclosed previous instances of suicide ideation that occurred when she believed she did not have the support or skills to actualize her goal of a college education.

Overall, participants described feelings of instability and inconsistency as a result of placement in the foster care system. Though the time in foster care and subsequent number of K-12 school transitions varied greatly within the participant pool, each participant described feelings of devastation, discouragement, and/or vulnerability throughout the college application and decision-making process. Further, the majority of participants described feelings of disempowerment when it felt as if they had less control of their future than their peers who had always lived in stable, nurturing environments.

Although the data included multiple horizons describing the barriers associated with trauma, data also included many positive consequences including persistence and resiliency. For example, all participants felt more mature than their peers not in the foster care system and all but Awnan believed they were better equipped to deal with life's inevitable disappointments. The majority of participants described feelings of independence and self-advocacy associated with living on their own. Participants were proud that they accomplished their goal of attending postsecondary school and humbled because they realized that most students in the foster care system did not have the same opportunity.

Although participants' experiences in foster care created a space for them to gain independence and self-advocacy skills, multiple transitions and previous trauma also led to feelings of disconnection and distance between participants and their peers.

Interpersonal relationships generated the most themes in the data. Within the theme, horizons such as isolation, disconnection, and normalcy arose several times. All participants, for example, described feelings of isolation and disconnection from peers who do not yet understand how difficult and unfair life could be. The vast differences in their childhood experiences led to disconnections, especially when participants understood how different their life circumstances are compared to peers.

Despite disconnections and feelings of inadequacy and imposter syndrome, which made students feel as if they did not belong in higher education, most participants were able to navigate their life and educational experiences with a strong sense of self and a self-love they believe their peers did not learn to possess. Students' ability to feel empowered and confident on their college campuses created opportunities for involvement and engagement. All participants were involved in at least one extracurricular activity. Their involvement and the connection to faculty created opportunities for students to be connected and/or engaged on campus.

Students who have been in foster care have experiences navigating multiple systems, and participants in this research study discussed their actions and roles in the social services, K-12, and postsecondary education systems. Several participants described experiences within one system that aided their ability to move more freely through another. For example, students who once struggled in K-12 schools began to thrive when their caseworkers found tutoring and mentoring services specifically designed for youth in foster care. Other participants described the ease of working within a postsecondary system compared to the social services system. They explained that learning how to engage with adults in social services gave them the skills necessary to

advocate for themselves and their own needs in college. All of the participants knew how to work within a system in order to meet their needs.

Though participants agreed that there are many barriers to success in postsecondary education, all but Ariel, who had difficulty keeping her room and finances in order, said that they were more prepared for semi-independent living than their peers who were not in the foster care system. Further, many also appreciated the freedom and structure college brought to their lives. Several participants described their transition to college as a positive event because it brought a stability that was missing from their previous lives. Before entering college, for example, five of the participants had moved homes at least twice since middle school.

Participants described instances of barriers and supports within each system. Most participants learned how to tell the difference between cooperative and uncooperative individuals. Often times, however, participants described individuals in supporting roles (i.e., parents, teacher, case worker, roommate, foster parent) who were anything but supportive. In fact, their thoughtlessness often created an extra barrier to success for participants who were already struggling. So much disappointment and experiences with carelessness meant that participants were often wary of groups claiming to be allies.

Each participant, except Tara described having at least one person who reminded them that their future was at stake. Participants knew the importance of graduating with a college degree and most were aware that it would be more difficult, but likely more important, for them (students who have experienced foster care) to graduate with a degree.

Themes

Throughout the phenomenological reduction process, which includes *horizontalization* to create a list of preliminary themes, *reduction and elimination* to determine the most salient themes, *clustering and thematizing* to combine themes, and *final identification* to determine the uniqueness and compatibility of the themes, four main themes emerged. "*Ahead of Most": Consequences of Trauma* is the first theme. Trauma played a significant role in many of the participants' childhood experiences and impacted their current situation positively and negatively. The findings below include students' first-hand experiences and aftermath of trauma. "*Outsider": Peer Relationships* is the second theme. Their unique experiences made it easier for participants to compare their lives with those of their peers, therefore keeping the concepts of normalcy and difference forefront. The findings below include participants' thoughts and feelings regarding their relationships with peers. *"I'm Not Here to Party": Integrating Social and Academic Experiences in School* is the third theme. The findings in this section include students' experiences across the P-16 continuum, including difficulty navigating K-12 and the support that increased their success as undergraduates. "*Heavy Amount of Love"* is the fourth theme. Despite their early experiences with abuse and neglect, participants described the ways hope and love influence their lives. This section includes participants' perspective on the love they have learned to embrace and share. Names include quotations from participant transcripts that summarize the theme.

"Ahead of Most": Consequences of Trauma

Though no interview question specifically asked about childhood trauma, many participants describe their feelings and memories regarding the neglect and/or abuse they

experienced before or during their time in the foster care system. This experience of trauma not only created a lens from which the participants made meaning of their experiences, it also shaped their personal and collective identities. The participants discussed the ways experiences with trauma impacted their maturity, social personality, and resilience. Ariel, for example, spoke about maturity. She said:

> Well for me when it comes to accelerating my maturity I had to take on a much more adult role earlier in my life. And then once I had the opportunity to finally be a kid I couldn't because now it's in a point in life where I have to stay that mature and [an] adult. So in a sense and it's very cliché way of putting it, [but] it feels almost as if you were robbed of your childhood and robbed of the opportunity to explore. [Robbed of the opportunity] to be immature. to make mistakes. You just had to put yourself in the role. For me, it was taking care of my siblings because my bio family wouldn't. They just didn't care about my siblings. Seeing as I'm not heartless, I didn't want them to die. I needed to take care of them. Um and whatever it took to make sure they survived I did. And then when I finally got out of the home I had to also be in a position where I was strong. I could be some sort of pillar to my siblings. Being able to be immature, that wasn't part of that pillar.

Tara described the juxtaposition of positive and negative consequences when she considered the totality of her educational experiences. She expressed the need to find her own balance in order to be successful. She said:

> I am a student who had to face a lot of adversity and it took a lot from me to get in this position. . . . I also believe I am driven, as well. So it kind of works against

> me in a way but then it also works for me because it makes me seek out whatever it is I want to seek out, [then] do it to the best of my ability.

Like Tara, Cheyenne also articulated the inverse effects of her trauma and the reasons she was grateful for the perseverance and resilience gained as a result. For each barrier she successfully navigated, she learned a new skill to help her in the future. She said:

> Every single part about foster care is very difficult, but I'm also kind of grateful for that. It's actually put me further ahead rather than behind. I would say, and I know it might sound strange at first, but um because we have been through so much and because we know how to handle things and make our way and be able to advocate for ourselves and to be able to know what our goals are and to put effort into reaching those. We really are ahead of most.

Participants were aware of the barriers they faced as youth in foster care and most articulated the effort they had to output in order to learn from their previous experiences with trauma. Their experiences that led to foster care were exhausting, degrading, and at times dehumanizing; nevertheless, they persisted.

Negative consequences. Several participants described the lingering effects of the abuse and neglect they experienced earlier in their lives. Participants described feelings of anxiety, depression, and ambiguity. Awnan described the anxiety he felt regarding academic performance. Since he had not a home to return to if unsuccessful, he knew he had to make college work. He said:

> I have like only one shot. It's not like I have something where if I miss one I can catch a later one. It's not like that with classes. If I fail it or I don't do well on this

> test, I can't retake it. If I don't turn in an assignment I won't have a second chance to turn it in.

The anxiety students felt was common to study participants. Not only did they know how difficult it was for SEFC to matriculate to college, but participants understood that graduating from college was challenging too. College provided many knowns in an ambiguous world for participants. If they did poorly, they had fewer options than their peers. Ta'Leah shared Awnan's do or die attitude. She said:

> To me this was my life. This was my token. This is my ticket to success. If I didn't make it here, I don't know what's in store for me. So this was do or die. To everybody else this is just fun. This is just like I said, to get away from your nagging parents and to kick it. But to me it was much more than that.

The pressure participants placed on themselves created more space for anxiety to manifest. Kaylee, who also felt the pressure to be successful in school, wanted to keep a four-year graduation plan and said she "did develop depression and anxiety." In the quote below she explains why she plagiarized a paper when the stress got to be too much. She said, "I need to pass these classes, so I developed anxiety and depression over worrying about transferring from my community college within two years. I needed to finish these courses and still maintain my social life. And be happy."

While Awnan, Ta'Leah, and Kaylee described anxiety regarding their academic achievement, Cori described overall feelings of anxiety and depression. She said, "I have been experiencing a lot of sadness; I have high anxiety." When I asked her to explain she continued, "[I underestimated] the severity of my mental health—like depression and anxiety. [I was] kind of telling myself that we all go through it instead of like focusing on

my own situation." Cori's own situation includes stress-induced anxiety and depression. She said:

> More or less [my anxiety and depression occur] now when I'm overwhelmed and my stress level is really high, like during finals week or like last quarter during winter quarter. During Christmas break my biological mom had passed and then we had I think I want to say two months or one month left before that quarter ended. So a lot of times I would have a lot of breakdowns late at night when I was like walking home from the library and they would be like random breakdowns. Or I would feel so overwhelmed and it would cause me to break down. . . . I would feel like I was so out of control of my school life or my personal life. I was overwhelmed with like funeral preparations and trying to balance between outside life and academics. [I was] traveling to um family members to get things prepared. It caused a lot of breakdowns and then I felt like everything was out of control.

Like Cori, Cheyenne struggled to remain in control of her surroundings, however the more chaotic her life became, the harder it was for her to maintain a façade of success. In high school she struggled to keep up with her peers academically and it frustrated her. She said, "I felt like I was behind. Like everyone was ahead of me like I wasn't as good as everyone else. I didn't have the same chances. It was less likely for me to succeed." As she continued, she described the ways trauma disempowered her and the ways ambiguity increased her level of vulnerability. She said:

> I finally hit this barrier of like thought. . . It's just disempowering and it's very sad. And then there's just so so many loose screws and unknowns that you just

> don't know. Is it even possible anymore? I mean like what is the possibility of me being homeless? It's probably pretty low but it was large enough that I did worry about it. That I was thinking of—the extreme because that's what I had to experience my whole life. . .So having that and thinking that that would never happen. . . I've always been like, I'm going to go to high school, go to college, go to graduate school. Get married and have kids and have a family. You know . . . the same plan that everyone else has. But then suddenly when it stopped [and I didn't know if I was going to] college I didn't know what I was going to do anymore. I didn't know how I was going to make it work. And it was very scary.

A few students talked about the struggle they felt to keep up with their peers. Though participants recognized the barriers to their success, they still felt behind their peers. For example, Tara described the exhausting process of catching up with her peers who have not been part of the foster care system. She said:

> [School has] definitely been difficult but I have been able to for the most part maneuver my way around it. And again that's taking energy elsewhere. A lot of people don't have to exert that energy so they can use their energy once they are in the job or once they are in the internship… I exert a lot of my energy [just] trying to get the job or trying to get the internship. Once I actually get there, I still perform well but it takes a lot more.

Students described the emotional toll and energy their experiences added to their lives. While they gained skills to help them navigate college, they did not experience secure attachment and were tired from trying to find love and acceptance where it did not

exist. Cheyenne expressed sadness at already being prepared to live alone for the first time. She said:

> I certainly am hurt by some of the people that abandoned me in foster care. Here I was trying to sabotage my relationship with my foster parents because I didn't want the goodbye to be so hard. And so that was particularly difficult. Preparing to say goodbye and preparing to be on my own is something that you don't really know how it's going to go. And of course I'm trying to get ahead of it. I'm trying to make it easier on myself but it was not easier because I really cared about these people. And I still do, so the hardest thing to prepare for was just being completely alone. But at the same time, I was super prepared for it because I had been alone my whole life, which is hard to say out loud.

Positive consequences/ personal characteristics. As a result of the trauma associated with abuse and neglect, participants developed various coping mechanisms that allowed them to be successful in school and life. Participants displayed high amounts of self and system awareness and described themselves as prepared, adaptable, and persistent. Furthermore, some participants described feelings of empowerment because of their ability to advocate for themselves.

Participants identified personal needs then found resources to help meet those needs. In our interview, Tara explicitly stated her ability to navigate systems. She believed it was an advantage that students who were not in the foster care system were less likely to have. She said:

> Since I have grown up a lot of things haven't gone my way so I'm accustomed. I know how to bounce back. I understand that if everything is going my way, shit is

> going to happen and it's not the end of the world. And I guess like having had to learn that at a young age has prepared me to like handle hardships in college. You know, things are difficult so I guess there's like self-advocating learning how to handle hardships and just maneuver and navigate various systems. I know how to navigate my way through the foster care system and so I know how to navigate my way through, in a sense through like higher education. I know if something's not right I know how to talk to somebody. I know how to, you know what I mean I'm not going to be easily persuaded to like not get my needs met just because it may cause a conflict with somebody else or it's not something they want to hear at the current moment.

Working with therapists and professionals early, youth in foster care have had opportunities to learn strategies and skills and also a sense of self-awareness that their peers do not have. Cheyenne articulated her experiences with her "good" therapist. She said:

> And you know I've had 20 terrible therapists but this one good one at the end really, really, really helped me and she she was hard. She really pushed me to see things in a different light that I used to not be able to see in and then I was like, oh wait, you are right. And so working with her was absolutely very hard because changing the way that you think is is very difficult to do but now I'm still so much happier because I'm able to check myself to be able to continue through and not put things out of proportion and she just taught me a lot of lasting skills. Um and having her be so supportive and consistent is very, very helpful. It was very, very helpful.

Cori expressed her thoughts regarding her positions in college and as an alumnus of foster care. She emphasized personal resilience when she said:

> For me it kind of means resilience and um I want to say makes me get out of the system in a way. Or proving that um there is hope or I guess the continuation more or less rather than like. You know there is a high rate of dropout for foster care students um through like middle school and high school area and um yeah mainly resilience in that aspect.

During her interview, Kaylee discussed her adaptability, which she learned when she entered the foster care system. She said:

> I am adaptive to any environment I'm placed in especially if it's like for the consideration that I am the older sibling and I have a lot of responsibilities on my shoulders to bare. Even though it is kind of rough I should do it because there are people that look up to me and I don't want to let them down.

Like the other participants who described positive outcomes as a result of the trauma they endured, Ariel describes the tension between a lost childhood and the skills she has gained that help her navigate life. She said:

> Yeah and it's kind of interesting in that respect because for however much I had to accelerate my maturity. For however much I had to be a grown up much earlier than I should have, I'm also in a way grateful towards this because I think it makes me more prepared to deal with the world in a way. Um for instance, would I still like to experience some childhood? Sure, I'd love to but given where I am now and given the way my life has been going, I think in a way an

> acceleration of maturation and my ability to be an adult and to take what life gives me, has served me reasonably well.

"Outsider": Peer Relationships

Throughout the interviews, participants discussed their interactions and relationships with peers. Overall, participants described disconnection between themselves and their peers. SEFC recognized that the differences in their childhood experiences created distance and differences that were very difficult to negotiate. Further, because foster care is not typically discussed by people outside the system, students did not know how to speak about that part of their lives with others. At times, participants described the impact of the stigma they internalized. Ariel described the ways she compared herself to others and the disconnect that ensued. She said:

> One thing that I found really interesting is just that the comparison between myself and some of the other students who go to [my school]. . . Some people just can't grasp the concept that events or things that happen in your childhood can affect your behavior.

She continued:

> I find it gets in my way. Just the fact that I do overthink things and I do constantly worry about people judging me based on how I look based on what they know about my past. . . Do they think I am less of a human being just because I have been through foster care? Do they think I am less than a human being just because I can't present myself as eloquently as they can?

Similarly, Cori related her social behavior to frequent placement changes while in the foster care system.

> I almost seem antisocial. I think that was caused mainly because when I was first put into the foster care system. . . I bounced from six different foster care homes by the time I think I was three weeks. And so when I was finally with my adopted mom [who's] had me since I was 3 weeks. . . I feel like that was more traumatic to me and [made me] less extroverted, when it comes to other people.

Like Cori, other participants described the ways their personality changed as a result of the foster care system. This change, they believed, impacted the ways they interacted with people, particularly their peers. Kaylee, for example, who described herself as outgoing and extroverted before she entered foster care, realized how difficult it was to make new friends. She said:

> Originally before my parents had that incident, like I'm pretty outgoing so I am very talkative with people. I can make friends pretty easily. But at the same time it was kind of hard just because I didn't have friends to start off with [when we were placed in a different home]. I was overwhelmed.

Later in the interview she continued:

> I originally was born in [a big city] and around that area, I had friends, like childhood friends. Because of my situation I moved around a couple times so like I didn't have like stable friends. Then so going back and forth between places, [was difficult]. Especially going to community college. I had to start all over again making friends.

Relationships with peers was complicated for myriad reasons. Participants experienced tension between their desire to connect and their reasons to stay separated from peers. Kaylee described this tension when she said, "I don't want to try and separate

myself [from my peers] even though I do separate myself sometimes." Ta'Leah had similar experiences and shared, "I ended up joining a few clubs on campus and that was really cool for a time being but in the same breath I still felt like I don't connect with these people." And Cheyenne, a second-year student said, "I'm still waiting around for the long-term friends and I have some but they don't go to the same university." Then later she added that she was struggling because, "I'm really bad at making friends. I'm really bad at trusting people and just being able to relate." Participants described feelings of insecurity and empowerment, and how lonely it was when they believed that no one else could empathize with them. For example, Ta'Leah said:

> I'm socially awkward. I'm unable to blend in. Definitely sometimes it's for me on the inside I feel like it's hard for me to connect because I never felt like I met someone on my level. As far as the things I have been through and the things that I achieved. But in the same breath um you know I have been able to like I said blend in to be in social settings to become successful to um do well in interviews and things like that. Um but as far as meeting somebody that's been in my shoes, I have yet to meet someone who has had the same outcome.

Several participants described what Ta'Leah emphasized in the previous quotation. Since few SEFC matriculate to college, students may not find peers with similar backgrounds in the FCS on their college campus, thus creating space for students to feel abnormal in comparison to their peers.

Normalcy. While discussing their relationships with peers, several participants discussed their feelings and perceptions regarding normalcy. Some students, like Cori, struggled to see the differences initially. Regarding her experiences with mental health,

she said, "[I thought] the severity of my mental health was normal." Other participants recalled specific examples of times they questioned the normalcy of their experiences. Ta'Leah remembered, for example, the first time she realized people's normal experiences were not the same as her own. She said:

> I think that hit me once I was in middle school, once I got to my foster family's house. That kind of hit me that the things that I went through and the things that I experienced you know this is not normal. But for others not in foster care you know like people who will eventually be your roommates or your friends and stuff you get to see that their lifestyle wasn't like mine. Maybe we didn't do family vacations like you did or maybe you know we didn't have family meetings, etc.

Cheyenne thought about normalcy as days that did not include pain. While discussing a culture of alcohol and drug consumption on campus, she described her best days as the normal ones. She said:

> I didn't know about this feeling until I went to college. I think it's another way that I feel ahead of everyone else. I mean this is going to be a generality but like people like have decent lives. They don't know how good their lives are. You know or then they go out and party to try to reach this high. For me every day that is just a normal day feels like the best day of my life because it's lacking pain. I'm so much happier than everybody else because I know that I have something really, really terrible to compare my happiness too.

Ariel described her experiences as abnormal because she lacked the skills she believed her peers had. When she compared herself to them she thought about her strengths and

weaknesses regarding what she deemed normal adult behavior. This frustrated her at times. She said:

> It's always been like basically a sense of shame associated with the things I can't do. I have to teach myself basic adult things that I should know by now. I should know by now how to put on lipstick. I should know by now how to balance a checkbook. I should know by now how to interact with somebody for the first time without making a complete and total fool of myself. . . . It's always been really stressful trying to be able to adapt to the situation and trying to be able to appear normal.

Later in the interview, she continued:

> So it's been difficult teaching myself how to be a normal adult woman, I guess, with normal adult skills. I find that to be pretty interesting because . . . for me to look at somebody and be like oh you are being immature because you can't grasp the concept of giving back or something. But at the same time they can look at me and go well you are pretty immature because you can't keep your room straight and your hair looks nappy as frack.

Though each participant had a different perception of normal, many used their definition as a rubric from which to measure their own lives. Some of their perceptions point out developmental differences between themselves and their peers (e.g., premature maturation), while others reflect societal expectations (e.g., how to put on lipstick). Internal and external factors influenced participants' perceptions and feelings towards normalcy.

Differences. Though a few participants did not perceive differences between themselves and others, like Awnan who said, "I feel there is no difference between me and others just that I was in foster care. And other than that I'm just the same as everyone else," several participants discussed perceived and actual differences between themselves and their peers—even their peers in the foster care system. For example, Kaylee, who entered foster care system as a junior in high school said:

> [Foster care] was kind of a new thing. Like I never knew about foster care. I had heard of like kids being abused by their parents but they were alcoholic parents that would abuse their kids. I didn't realize the different case scenarios for like foster care system kids.

Many participants perceived their differences as a result of the neglect, abuse, and/or experiences in the foster care system. The women of color who participated in this study also discussed feelings of difference based on race. Summarizing her overall experience, Cheyenne said:

> There are times when yeah I really do realize that people have a different life than me. They don't prioritize the same things they don't have the same values and that's perfectly fine it's sometimes hard when you are like I'm studying alone in my room again.

Like Cheyenne, who studied alone in her room because her values are different from her peers, Ariel experienced feelings of isolation that created barriers between herself and others. Ariel wondered how she and her peers could relate to each other. She said:

> [Abuse] puts you in an isolating state where the kids don't know how to relate to you. After all how are you in a public school who have been raised by two loving

> family [members] who never harm you, how are you going to be able to relate to and honestly talk to a person who has experienced sexual assault at the hands of their father?

Cheyenne and Ariel, both White women, experienced significant disconnection from their peers in high school and college. Study participants who are women of color described another dimension to their disconnection with peers. Cori and Kaylee both discussed the ways their race impacted their relationships with peers and created another layer of distance and isolation. Cori said, "I feel secluded to my black community. It's hard to like make connections between my black community and not even just white, but non-black [peers] in general." While Cori felt most connected to her Black peers, Kaylee experienced feelings of disconnect between herself and her Asian friends. She said, "I consider myself an outsider because I went through like so much and like I can't really connect with some of the Asian parents or Asian friends of mine because they all come off so well rounded." Kaylee, who joined an Asian service organization to meet peers, spoke of the tension that exists because she was raised differently from her Asian peers. She said:

> I guess because even though I tell myself that I didn't want to be surrounded by Asian people because I feel like I always have to compare with them I like my college service fraternity, which is predominately Asian…I'll always compare myself and distance myself from other people…It is hard for me to connect with a lot of people.

All of the participants in the study, except Awnan said they had a difficult time meeting peers and staying connected to them. Much of the disconnection stemmed from

the trauma they endured in their youth. Women of color who participated in the study said they experienced instances of racism and cultural appropriation which added to the distance they felt to their peers.

"I'm Not Here to Party": Integrating Social and Academic Experiences in Schools

All students who participated in the study had a desire to attend college, and for many, the decision was solidified in middle school. Several participants conveyed memories or thoughts regarding the importance of school—most were socialized to believe that a college education was necessary. When speaking of her decision-making process, Tara exemplified the pervasiveness of this thought process. She said:

> I decided I was going to attend college when I was about . . . 10ish or whatever. It came about from playing . . . the game Life and um it had the option to go straight to your careers or go to college and take out loans. And like at the end, and I used to play that game like relentlessly. We played it all the time. And at the end people who went to college made it further in life. They were more happy. They made more money and stuff like that. So pretty much by playing that game I kind of like instilled in myself that I wanted to go to college. And as life carried on um I guess that since I had it in my head at such a young age it never really left me.

Like Tara, Cori, Awnan, and Cheyenne also started thinking about a college education while they were in middle school. When reflecting on her decisions, Cori said:

> It was always it was always a thing for me. . . . Even in middle school, I think I started touring universities in like 8th grade. Um that was mainly a thing for like my mom. She was really like uh she was strict but she was also like yeah you are

> going to college. You are going to a four-year [college], so yeah it's always been in the back of my mind."

She went on to explain that college was important to her and her mother for different reasons. She said:

> I think I was more excited earlier on than I was as I like got closer. . . I would say it was important to both [mom and me], but I think it was important to us for different reasons. Like it was important to her for continuing education, moving on in life, being successful, getting a career. But it was important to me just in the excitement aspect of like a new school…Or like just doing something different than what I was doing then.

Awnan also thought about attending college and considered it a goal long before applying to postsecondary education. He said:

> Attending college has always been a thing for myself because I feel like I need college in order to be successful because there are not many people in the world who didn't go to college and are successful. So for me, I feel like it's necessary. So for me, I was always going to go to college.

Ta'Leah decided to attend college when she was a freshman in high school. During that time, she built a good relationship with her social worker and realized she would like to be a social worker, too. Then, Ta'Leah started to seriously consider attending college. She said:

> I had a social worker with being in foster care and that was kind of like the one thing I wanted to do. And I always wanted better for myself especially what I wanted to do as a child with my biological family. I just knew that I was going to

> be successful and I didn't want to be another statistic. And I was going to do anything necessary to make that happen so I definitely would say [I decided to attend college] my freshman year in high school.

Like the other participants, Cheyenne thought about attending college while she was a junior high student; however, as her situation at home became more unstable, she worried she would not actualize her dream. She said, "I've always loved learning and so I've had this goal for a long time but uh when I got into foster care and I was near graduation I kind of had that uh oh moment." She went on to explain:

> I was just ending my junior year [in high school] and I didn't have a home in the area to stay in the school which would totally mess me up with my transition to college but what ended up happening was my physics teacher realized I was missing a lot of school. He and his wife went through [foster parent] training and I ended up staying with them to finish high school.

Most of the participants in the study knew they wanted to attend college early in their K-12 school years. Many students were encouraged by their foster parents and case workers to think about a college education. Some students learned the importance of education on their own. Each of the participants described a belief that college would lead them to a better life than the one they had, and six out of eight students knew it was necessary to attend college in order to help students like themselves have better childhoods.

K-12. Before matriculating to college, students first had to finish high school, which was challenging at times. Though some students struggled with peer relationships, others had difficult K-12 experiences because of the instability in their home. Often,

school was not a priority when students' energy and time were needed in other aspects of their lives.

Ariel, for example, spoke about how difficult high school was for her when she believed other students were passing judgement. She said:

> One thing that was interesting about attending high school at least is that there is always this kind of feeling especially because high school is one of those times when the invisible audience syndrome really kicks in so everyone is constantly watching what they are doing and then immediately judging what other people are doing.

Kaylee also had a difficult time in high school, especially in 10th grade when things were hectic at her home. She said:

> When I was in 10th grade I was ditching school. . . . I lived in LA and the community kind of affected my like way of thinking especially in like 10th grade when everyone's mindset was kind of being like influenced by like the community and so I started becoming a rebellious kid.

Kaylee went on to explain that entering foster care created an opportunity for her to start over in high school. She said, "I was nearing my 11th grade year and I transferred to like several high schools and then when I got placed with my foster parents, um it was kind of a new [beginning] for me."

Tara, who enrolled in 23 different K-12 schools, always did well academically but found school to be tedious at times. She said, "Throughout like elementary and middle school, I didn't do that much because I didn't feel that there was a need to exert more energy than I was already exerting at the time." Tara went on to explain:

> In my K-12 experiences I went to over 23 different schools so obviously um it was difficult for me to like retain materials and it was difficult for me when I went to different schools for them to place me in the correct level of classes. Sometimes I would be placed in a class, but I already did the work and so I was literally sitting there bored. Other times I may have been placed in a class that was a bit too advanced for me because I didn't do the classwork before due to moving around a lot. And so um K-12 is definitely interesting to me. It was difficult but um at the end of the day I made sure that I made education my top priority. In my head I knew that was my only way that I was going to not become a statistic. So despite the fact with how challenging it was and how at times it seemed hopeless, I just kept in my mind and I managed to like reach out to an adult who I felt actually cared and maneuvered my way through the education system that way.

Tara believes that she did well in K-12 schools because it was not academically challenging; furthermore, though she graduated valedictorian, she did not feel prepared for postsecondary school. She said, "I wasn't adequately prepared to succeed in [college] and more so because that wasn't expected of people who grew up in the foster care system. . . . I felt like while I did well in high school, it wasn't really academically challenging."

The participants explained high school as a period of time that had to be endured. Though participants had different struggles, all but Awnan discussed a significant challenge that made high school more difficult for them than for their peers. During this time of maturation, participants described feel vulnerable, judged, and sometimes

invisible. For most participants, college was the antidote to the structure and social politics of high school.

Postsecondary. As exemplified in the previous section, most participants were excited about attending postsecondary school. Participants viewed higher education as a way to increase their capital and/or catalyze their passion. In her interview, Ariel said, "I know that I needed to get a college degree in order to be any kind of legitimate help for kids who have gone through what I have gone through." Although some participants believed college was an opportunity to build community, others struggled with campus dynamics. Each participant had a unique experience regarding matriculation and persistence, and two chose to attend community college to ease the transition. Several participants expect to continue their education in graduate school.

Tara discussed her thoughts regarding privilege and education. She said:

> Going to college is a privilege in itself. . . . Sometimes just going to an institution like you automatically like get the prestige of it. And you get like the benefit of going there. . . I've noticed that it's lot less footwork that I have to do just by saying that I go to [a private liberal arts college]. Or like I get access or privilege to information.

Ariel, who always enjoyed learning, found that she loved college because it gave her an opportunity to engage with students and faculty who shared similar interests. She describes the ways her classes allow her to think about mental illness differently. She said:

> Academically I found that I have the passion for psychology and I really enjoy learning. It was really interesting to notice how much I enjoyed learning about

> humans— about their behavior; about the different kinds of mental diseases and possible ways to treat them. Because one thing that has always kind of frustrated me whenever somebody has always talked about a mental illness they always talk about the problems with it and how much trouble it causes. Like take for instance schizophrenia. Like you never hear anything good about somebody who is schizophrenic, but it is interesting to then hear in college that there are ways in helping treat schizophrenia and that just because somebody has schizophrenia doesn't mean they are a bad person.

When it was time to transition to college, some students, like Ta'Leah, felt prepared to handle the worst, while other students wanted a slower matriculation process. Ta'Leah explains her thoughts regarding college by comparing them to her life before and during foster care. She said, "I just felt like I already experienced hell and whatever college throws at me, I will be ok. I think that a lot." Ta'Leah transitioned from high school to a four-year college, while Kaylee decided to move slower. She said, "At my community college, I transitioned a lot more slower into the [university] system." She continued:

> I decided that going to community college was helping me still continue to do my education or look for a better future. [I could get a] job right out of high school or like just [only] get my high school diploma and start working after that. I didn't want to do that because people, I hear a lot of people's experiencing that they . . . regret not like continuing [their education] and so I decided to go to community college.

As students persisted through college, they began to engage in curricular and co-curricular activities. Participants described their experiences engaging in both. Regarding the difficulty of her academic work, Tara said:

> First year of college was a breeze, it was fine it was great, blah, blah, blah. Second year of college was one of the most academically, emotionally challenging years of my life…Each year it gets a little harder as you go along.

Though Tara experienced difficulties in her academic work, she was excited about the opportunity to create a community. She said:

> I was excited to go to college. I was looking forward to going to a place to craft my own communities. Throughout my own times and um I was like really, really happy, like yay, I finally made it. And obviously only like 10% of foster youth go to college and only 3% of them graduate from college. So like all that I've been through I was able to go directly to a four-year [college] after graduating from high school as the valedictorian. That was pretty dope. So I was excited.

Cori, who like Tara is an African American female, discussed the tension she feels on campus regarding racial difference of students. She said:

> There's a lot of tension which is on the outer aspects. It's like you would think there was tension between organizations but internally it's more or less the view of racial tension and tensions between ideologies. . . . There's just. Oh I experience a lot of cultural appropriation on this campus which is very uncomfortable and frustrating so that's when I feel a lot of disconnection, um a lot of white privilege is present um those type of things, yeah.

Tara, who had the opportunity to create her own major, is considering graduate school once she completes her undergraduate degree. She said:

> So that way when I go to get my Master's in public policy and I learn about the policy aspect then I can change policy that um affects the foster care system to like ensure the next generation of foster youth don't encounter some of what I experienced during my time in the foster care system.

Financial. Though no interview question specifically asked about financial aid or the ways students expected to pay for college, several participants discussed the role finances played in their lives and in their college choices. Ariel said, for example:

> Growing up the way I did, I'm not the best with finances. Not that I like spend like a lot of money it's just that I don't know how to open a bank account or balance a check book. I mean now I do, but I didn't.

Like Ariel, many participants described their thanks for scholarship dollars. For example, Tara said she was, "Thankful enough to get a scholarship." Ta'Leah also expressed gratitude for her scholarships. She said, "I had a scholarship from Foster Care to Success. I also had a scholarship from [the university] and I also had a grant to help cover tuition." Cheyenne, who said, "I'm actually being paid to go to college because I am a foster kid," spoke a lot about her financial decisions and her desire to not withdraw student loans. She said she chose her school based on scholarship packages, "It really came down to the scholarship and like how I was going to pay for college." Cheyenne described her earned scholarships. She said:

> I actually have several different scholarships. Like I think five right now. It's a little complicated but all of them are for foster kids. I think that's what is so

> helpful because there are so few people who go to college who are in foster care so there's lots of school money for us. Which is amazing for me but is also really bad because you know less than 3% of college or foster kids go to college to get a degree. Um. So I feel like I am fortunate there because there's not a whole lot of competition and um so there's been a lot of support there and I found out about the majority of them from my Chafee worker.

Though scholarships make it easier to afford college, maintaining a high GPA and making timely progress can be difficult and stressful for some. Kaylee said she struggled to "Keep a good timeline of how I used my financial aid." However, as she continued her education she learned of resources available to her. She said:

> Because like as a former foster youth I qualify for Chafee grants and there's like a lot I also applied for scholarships. I guess as a former foster youth so those are the benefits that like help me especially 'cause it's community college. . . . I took a lot of advantage of it just because I didn't work at the time. I went to school so whatever I accumulated from financial aid or my scholarships I allocated it for like saving for like food rent or whatever needs I like needed.

Though most youth who have experienced foster care do not have the financial support from parents, federal grants and personal scholarships allow students to attend college without accumulating too much debt. Cheyenne described her feelings regarding her financial standing. She said:

> I know certainly most foster kids don't have this. But for me to be able to be going to college for free to be having my own room for free and to be getting an education and getting a degree for free and more. Being paid to do that puts me

> way, way ahead of everyone but I don't owe my parents. I don't owe loans. I don't owe anything. For me to be able to focus on me and my healing. I think college has been a healing experience. Um that is a positive too. I know a lot more about myself than most people know about themselves. I know who I am and what I want and that's more than what a lot of people can say.

Campus programs. Six of the eight participants matriculated to four-year colleges/universities that had a campus program specifically for youth in foster care. Though their experiences working in these organizations varied, most students spoke positively about the people they met through these campus organizations. In her interview, Madeline credited the director of her campus' foster youth support network as one the most influential people in her life. Awnan credits his campus' program with helping him feel connected to campus. He said, "I feel connected to campus pretty well. . . . We have a program on campus . . . that is for students who have experienced foster care, like me." Ariel spoke of the comfort she felt after meeting students with similar experiences. She said:

> In college you make like adult friendships. These are the people that are going to help you like move into your apartment once you get one. . . . These are the people if you break down in the middle of the night on in the road they will come and try and find you if they can. Um and it's been really interesting to be here in college and talk to kids who have had the same experience as I have in foster care with the [campus] program and knowing that I am not alone in my desire to make myself better. And I am not alone in that I am not going to let bad things that have happened to me happen ever again or bring me down or stop me from succeeding.

Kaylee also appreciated her campus's support program and explained that it helped ease her transition and make connections. She said:

> I went through [the program] and um from there like they helped me out so much . . . . I know a lot of kids prefer to be independent but I had no prior knowledge about living on my own—paying rent or doing anything that's like as an actual adult. I felt super scared about that because my parents we kind of have a language barrier and also because my mom [was] probably developing a mental disease. [The campus support program] really like helped me stay in college and get good grades.

Cori described the support her campus's program for youth in foster care offered her. When she began to struggle academically she found a mentor and tutoring services. She said:

> Well fall quarter I was on academic probation which is I guess was the slap in the face I was referring to earlier but it helped because when I went home, normally I would expect my mom to be upset because I've never been one to get grades that are that bad. But she was more or less understanding because I think she knew what was going to happen more than I did so um, like her support and I guess her calm reaction in a way was kind of like ok, now I understand. . . . Um I think through a lot of mentoring. Like I had a mentor who helped me with my classes. I went to tutoring um all those sorts of things, yeah I used a lot of resources [the program offered].

For the majority of participants college offered them the freedom and autonomy they desired. College also gave students an opportunity to meet people with similar

backgrounds, which had a cathartic effect on some participants. Unlike their experiences in high school, students found peers with similar experiences with whom they could connect. Furthermore, all students live on campus and therefore had stability in housing and a meal plan, thus helping them meet their basic needs.

"Heavy Amount of Love"

Participants described many feelings of love, hope, and optimism. Madeline spent the majority of her time discussing the love she believed encompasses foster care, while others discussed the ways they found self-love via counseling. At times, participants juxtaposed their negative experiences with those of love and optimism.

Ta'Leah and Kaylee both discussed the love their foster parents had for them, even when they did not expect to be loved. Ta'Leah said:

> My biological mom, she was just like you know once you know you age out of the system and once they stop getting money for you, quote, unquote, that they ain't going to want nothing to do with you. And it was the total opposite. So much that I didn't even expect it because at that point, I'm grown and you know they did what they needed to do. They went above and beyond in my opinion. Um so it was just great, you know having them in my life. They are still rooting for me. They are still having those high expectations and still wanting me to be successful. They love me.

Kaylee, who entered foster care as an older teenager, described feelings of love and gratitude regarding her foster family, who still supported her goals. She said, "I am so eternally grateful for them. We were kidding that like I'm probably going to get their

names tattooed with a heart." Ariel also describes the love she felt on campus, when she finally felt part of a community. She said:

> There's definitely a heavy amount of love. Like I wouldn't give up any of these people for anything in the world. Um there's also a feeling of comradery and there's the feeling of loyalty. I guess because one thing that I noticed is really interesting about foster care is that kids who are in foster care are very begrudging in having or even trying to attach themselves to people. It's a dangerous thing to try and care about somebody when you're in foster care. So like for instance you can't make too many friends at school because you don't know if you are going to be shipped out to another foster family. That sort of a deal so it's very hard to make connections and actually it's one of the best bits of being at [college] and finding basically that the family down here is that I can have a family away from home and I can have a support system away from the original home and that's really great. . . . I think if more foster youth had that ability or had the opportunity to actually have a group of people who really cared about them that they can go to no matter what. I think they'd do a lot better. And I think they'd be a lot more successful.

Cheyenne also discussed how difficult it is to love and trust others while placed in the foster care system. She explained:

> Coming to my fifth foster home which was the teacher and the principal they were amazing but I didn't trust them because of everything I have been through I could not trust them. I couldn't love them. I couldn't confide in them. I couldn't get close to anyone ever again and I regret that the most. . . . I still struggle with this. I

> still struggle to show affection and I don't know how to show affection properly. I recognize that about myself. Yeah like having these people like kind of take that ability from you is really tough and I let them do that. I let them hurt me. And I told myself that I would never trust again and I never did. And that's the regret I have. But yeah I think that's a barrier even now, in just trying to trust people. I'm trying to get close. I'm trying to get intimate like with my best friend. We are super close but like I can't touch people. I can't let people touch me. I can't let people hug me or poke me. Like I just can't do it. Because of all the people who have touched me. Like not sexually but like that have hurt me. Who were close to me. I see that affection and love as being really really harmful—[like a] weapon later on.

Though she experienced very difficult times, Cheyenne discussed her interactions with her counselor who taught her the importance of self-love. She said:

> My therapist has definitely taught me to love myself and that's I think probably one of the hardest things that anyone can do. It's really, really hard to love yourself but I do and I love who I am and what I am doing with my life and being able to trust myself sometimes and being ok with mistakes. Oh my gosh when I made mistakes I would go insane. I was like a perfectionist but really it was that I was scared of failure.

Cori, who described feelings of love from her adoptive mother early in her life, also found love via her campus's Black Student Union (BSU). She said:

> [I am] connected in my BSU. We have discussions on the topic of what other students think. We put on events that promote self-love and like black love and

um we have events we listen to speakers or sometimes we will have alumni come through and speak to us about their experiences.

Despite the trauma students experienced in their youth, they found ways to embrace the love that surrounded them. This love provided hope for students and supported them through the most difficult times. Though participants did not always expect to receive love from others, they worked their way through problems to find ways to accept and embrace love.

Collective Experience: Textural Structural Synthesis

A textural structural synthesis (TSS) is the last step in the phenomenological process and includes an overarching description of the feelings, thoughts, actions, and structures associated with the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994), the educational transitions of SEFC.

Though fewer than 10% of SEFC matriculate to college, the majority desire to attend (Wolanin, 2005). Like their peers, the eight participants in this study each wanted to attend college and spoke in the interview about the promise of education. Several participants articulated the belief that a college degree was necessary to be successful, especially because they were in the foster care system, a fact confirmed by literature (Salazar et al., 2016). Participants learned the importance of education from multiple sources including caseworkers, mentors, counselors, and foster and adoptive parents. One participant even figured out the value of a college education by continually playing Hasbro's Game of Life. Though two participants discussed the impact of a specific teacher, overall, participants did not include K-12 teachers in groups or lists of individuals who offered educational support. In fact, teachers seemed to do little to

promote the promise of education that is already sparked in SEFC. One participant said she was eventually able to tell the difference between the teachers that wanted to benefit students via education and the ones that only worked in education for personal benefit, but overall K-12 teachers were absent from the discussions about educational experiences of alumni of foster care.

Participants in the study described complementing personal characteristics that add to the essence of their experience. Seven of the eight participants described feeling like an imposter in their college environment. Not only did students believe they were academically inferior to their peers (a myth to which many undergraduate students subscribe) (Day et al., 2013), they also realized the inherent differences between themselves and their peers. The trauma associated with abuse and neglect not only increases their risk of mental illness, but it also creates a distance between SEFC and everyone else. For students of color, the chasm between self and peers was exponentially greater. Consistent with literature regarding SEFC, the majority of participants in this study recounted personal struggles with anxiety and/or depression (Day et al., 2011).

Though SEFC have a background of trauma and an increased likelihood of developing anxiety and/or depression, they are mature and have developed reliable coping mechanisms to support their self. In fact, overall, participants exhibited and described adaptive behaviors (i.e., forming relationships with college faculty, avoiding alcohol and drugs) that not only supported their academic success but also increased their resourcefulness, awareness, and self-assurance. Participants described themselves as independent, aware, resilient, persistent, strategic, resourceful, mature, motivated, and optimistic. College students who have experienced foster care have developed an

incredible array of personal characteristics, via self-preserving behaviors, that create balance with the barriers presented by previous experiences with trauma.

Participants perceive themselves as having more coping skills and perseverance than their peers not in the foster care system. Increased coping skills are necessary because unlike their peers, they are involved in multiple familial (i.e., biological family, foster family, group homes) and institutional systems (group homes, K-12 schools, postsecondary schools, social services) that create tensions within and between networks. This movement in systems and support throughout give SEFC the self-advocacy skills to find the resources necessary to reach their goals.

As previously mentioned, research participants articulated self-awareness, and some summarized statistics regarding the likelihood SEFC would matriculate to, progress through, and graduate from college. As they reflected on their college experiences, students described the impacts of institutional type, campus climate, and authentic engagement. Participants in this study enrolled in a variety of postsecondary schools including community colleges, comprehensive and/or research universities, and private liberal arts colleges. Participants made a choice that was best for themselves, and the following reasons were most salient: scholarship/affordability, expected rigor, size of institution, location, and program of study. One participant discussed the way her identity as a queer woman of color influenced the type of school she would attend, while another female participant of color discussed how race, racism, and expectations for the model minority influenced the type of institutions to which she applied. The degrees to which an already marginalized group (SEFC) is further oppressed based on identity characteristics is another element that relates the essence of their experiences.

Though no participant mentioned the existence of a program as a determining factor in institution choice, the majority of participants (six/eight) discussed the impact of a campus support program for alumni of foster care. These programs not only help students secure scholarships but they also create a space for students to meet others who had similar experiences. Students who have experienced foster care are likely enrolled in every college campus; however, they are not easily identified (Sydor, 2013), which not only makes it difficult for administrators to locate and offer services but also decreases the likelihood that such students will find each other and gain support from common experiences. Students who were involved in campus programs designed for SEFC were also involved in other areas of campus life by being active members in other campus organizations (e.g., Black student union, Asian American service fraternity, university ambassadors) or via campus jobs. Though cautious about attaching themselves to ephemeral connections, students used their intuition to guide them to safe spaces where belonging led to more belonging, thus impacting their emotional and academic needs.

Summary

The data from this study was derived from participant interviews. Though eight students participated, seven recordings were transcribed then analyzed via phenomenological methods. The eight participants made up a diverse group and included seven female and one male student. Two students identified as Asian-American, two as Black, and three as White. Though all eight participants were attending four-year colleges or universities at the time of the interview, two transitioned from community colleges. Most students were enrolled in public universities, but two attended private colleges. The colleges were located throughout the United States. Participants were at different points

in their college careers: two were graduating seniors, one was a rising senior, three students were juniors, and two were sophomores.

Beyond demographic diversity, students had vastly different experiences in the foster care system. Though all students were in the foster care system for at least eight months, some were adopted as babies and experienced little transition in K-12 schools. Other students spent the majority of their childhood and adolescence moving in and out of the foster care system, transitioning homes and schools each time. Still others stayed in abusive home environments for the majority of their early life, not entering foster care until the end of high school. The differences in participants' backgrounds and experiences add the richness, texture, and depth of this research.

The findings emphasized the consequences of trauma, the complex relationships participants have with peers, ideas regarding school, and love. Though each is described separately and in detail throughout this chapter, they work together to described the meaning and essence of participants' educational transitions. College students who were in the foster care system are a diverse group who are impacted by their childhood experiences with neglect and abuse. Though participants described anxiety, depression, and hopelessness that arose from their previous experiences, they also believed it is through perseverance that they developed the resilience and stamina to reach their educational goals, which were shaped by what they believed was the promise of education. Though wary of their peers, whom they label as immature, entitled, and naïve, participants developed loving relationships with mentors, faculty, and advocates who gave them the advocacy skills, support, and love necessary for self-empowerment.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

Despite their educational aspirations, less than 10% of high school students who have experienced foster care (SEFC) matriculate to college (Emerson, 2006; Wolanin, 2005). Furthermore, representations of the lived experiences of SEFC who do matriculate to and progress through college are limited in literature. This phenomenological inquiry sought to capture SEFC's undergraduate experiences to better understand their perspective, and in turn, improve stakeholders' (e.g., K-12 counselors, higher education administrators, mental health counselors) knowledge and practice. The two questions guiding the research asked:

1. How do students who have been in foster care experience transitions as they matriculate to college?
2. How do students who have been in foster care experience transitions as they progress through college?

Chapter 5 begins with a discussion of the study's findings, while highlighting the literature that framed the research. The discussion section concludes with explicit answers to the study's two research questions. Chapter 5 continues with implications for practice. This section emphasizes the ways counselors, K-12 personnel, and higher education administrators can modify their practices to best meet the needs of and advocate for SEFC. Promising practices include micro, meso, and macro-level interventions that impact the individual, system, and societal landscape for SEFC.

Finally, the chapter concludes with ideas for future research. This section outlines the ways scholars and practitioners can include the perspectives of SEFC in their research.

Discussion

This phenomenological inquiry was undergirded by literature and theories that help to explain the factors that influence student transition to college, including Tinto's (1993) Theory of Student Departure, Schlossberg's (1989) Theory of Marginality and Mattering, and Schlossberg's (1988) Transition Theory. Themes derived via data analysis of one-on-one, semi-structured participant interviews include: "Ahead of Most": Consequences of Trauma; "Outsider": Peer Relationships; "I'm Not Here to Party": Integrating Social and Academic Experiences in School; and "Heavy Amount of Love."

"Ahead of Most": Consequences of Trauma

The interview protocol did not include questions regarding the abuse/neglect that led participants into the foster care system; however, the majority of participants described the ways trauma shaped their personalities and impacted their transition to and through college. Participants' experiences of trauma not only created a lens from which they made meaning of their experiences, it also shaped their personal and collective identities. Throughout the interviews, participants discussed the ways experiences with trauma impacted their mental health, relationships with peers, maturity, social personality, and resilience. Although trauma had a range of negative effects for these students, it also contributed to their resilience and ability to persist.

Their early experiences with trauma increased students' susceptibly to anxiety, depression, and other mental health concerns (Berderian-Gardner et.al., 2018; Jones, 2013); further, the lack of attention from, attachment to, and dependence on parents move

SEFC deeper into the margins (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981; Schlossberg, 1989; Tovaar et al., 2009). Schlossberg (1989) theorized that this increases their self-consciousness, disconnection, and isolation. The movement and disconnection initiated by transitioning to college (an anticipated transition) moves SEFC further into the margins, thus making it more difficult to stay mentally and physically healthy (Salazar et al., 2016). Consequently, feelings of self-consciousness and anxiety can fester, potentially creating environments unconducive to college progression. Cori, for example, described the anxiety attacks she felt during many of her classes. Though she prepared for class, she was often unable to focus, could not participate in group discussions, and stared into space, thus missing all content covered. While SEFC are more vulnerable to mental illness (Berderian-Gardner et.al., 2018; Jones, 2013), they are also more likely than their peers to have relationships with counselors. Participants cited their counselors and social workers as sources of support across P-16 education.

Not all the consequences of trauma are negative. Participants who have progressed into at least their second year of college described themselves with many of the positive characteristics Rios and Rocco (2014) found, including perseverance, responsibility, resourcefulness, diligence, motivation, goal orientation, and self-efficacy. For example, several participants revealed that they were more motivated to succeed than their peers who came to college only because it was an expected next step or to appease their parents.

Though transitions, even anticipated ones, can and do lead to increased vulnerability for SEFC, they also lead to increased opportunities. Participants in this study knew and articulated the opportunities that result from a college education. Most

study participants knew that less than 10% of students in similar circumstances matriculate to college. Based partially on this reality, participants described themselves as goal oriented, fortunate, determined, and prepared. Furthermore, participants described several ways in which they were better situated to work through transitions because of the strengths gained via their early childhood experiences. For example, finding and completing an immunization form was easy for Tara because she spent years completing her own paperwork and requesting copies of her records, a task she believed other students' parents did for them.

Like Tara, Cheyenne knew she was more equipped for college than her peers. She described move-in day in her interview. Her foster parents as well as her biological mother accompanied her. She said that while she watched all her peers cry and embrace their parents, she was ready for the change. And though she was sad, she also felt freedom and hope. The participants' experiences navigating trauma and complex situations with independence and agency created a space for resilience and self-sufficiency to grow, thus putting them ahead of their peers in myriad ways.

"Outsider": Peer Relationships

Individuals learn what it feels like to matter during early childhood. Their attachment and relationships then lay the foundation for future feelings of connectedness and mattering (Erikson, 1968). Consequently, many of the study participants developed deficits in their feelings of mattering. Cori talked about this in her interview. She described being shy, even in elementary school, and related this experience to her early childhood abandonment. Students in foster care have already been moved to the margins,

thus increasing the difficulty and energy needed to move to a more secure position in mattering (Salazar et al., 2016).

Frequent home (re)placements also increase the distance between SEFC and others. Repeated home and school transitions increases students' risk of objectification (Rios & Rocco, 2014). In her interview, Cheyenne described being moved to a basement where discarded items were left. Tara said she had to learn which teachers she could trust and which did not care. Both of these participants, and others, described times when they stopped caring about others because others did not care for them. Further, individuals who experience decreased mattering and increased marginality in their early childhood are less likely to develop close relationships with peers (Schlossberg, 1984). Disconnection from peers was a major theme, and throughout their interviews, participants described the ways they were connected and disconnected from their peers. For example, Cheyenne described only being able to connect with people who also experienced trauma, and Ariel's friends were not peers, but older adults she visited frequently.

Extant literature includes several examples that describe the fractured relationships youth in foster care have with their peers (Nelson et al., 2013; Tovar et al., 2009). Since SEFC are more independent than interdependent (Rios & Rocco, 2014), it is unsurprising that study participants' experiences were contrary to the section of Tinto's (1993) theory where he posited that students need a social system or network of peers to achieve academic success. For example, study participants were able to progress to at least their second year in college (at the time of the interviews), even though they had few peer relationships and connections in the beginning. Since they entered college

without many friends and possibly lacking the skills to make friends, participants described the ways their independence and self-efficacy helped them navigate their campuses, especially when they first matriculated to college. While their independence kept students focused and engaged during their initial transition into college, many participants described the ways in which some college experiences (e.g., campus organizations) created avenues to connect in different, more meaningful, authentic ways.

"I'm Not Here to Party": Integrating Social and Academic Experiences in School

Participants discussed many reasons for attending college. Ariel, Cheyenne, and Tara described a love of learning that kept them interested in school, and Awnan believed that a college education was necessary to be successful. Furthermore, seven of the eight participants wanted to continue their education so that they would have the skills and degree necessary to help youth in foster care.

Students' previous experiences with neglect/trauma shaped their perspectives. Ta'Leah explained that the stakes were too high to spend time consuming alcohol and drugs like her peers. In the interview she said, "I'm not here to party. There is too much at stake to mess this up." The other participants had similar sentiments and avoided partying in order to engage academically. While this benefitted their GPAs, female participants in this study had a difficult time engaging with peers, thus decreasing the likelihood of progression in college (Tinto, 1988;1993; 1997; 2015).

While participants initially lacked a peer connection, each discussed strong relationships with faculty and/or staff at their colleges and universities. Often, the relationships and connections with staff and faculty were the first significant connections students made to their campus. This not only created a support system for SEFC as they

transitioned to college, it also acted as a foundation for success in an academically rigorous environment. Students described meaningful relationships and mentorships with faculty, program directors, and academic advisors. These early relationships with caring faculty and staff created a network of support for students that changed as students progressed through college. For example, Awnan talked about his advisor that he met with when he was first accepted into his college. Ariel discussed the relationship she had with faculty and the ways they helped her shift and accept new perspectives. Tara's faculty mentor helped her create a new major that was submitted and approved for study.

Though participants in this study struggled to integrate their social and academic lives in high school, postsecondary institutions made it easier for them to engage with peers. Campus organizations and affinity groups gave participants a safe space to find like-minded peers and facilitated the social and academic integration and engagement that is necessary for success in college. However, when their peers chose to "party," all of the participants in this study said that they would not engage, thus isolating them from their peers.

"Heavy Amount of Love"

While the previous three themes connected directly to the literature used to undergird this study, the fourth theme, *Heavy Amount of Love,* does not align closely with previously reviewed literature. However, the concept of love and the role of love and caring relationships in schools have been previously researched. Nel Noddings (1995), an educational theorist, promotes the inclusion of love and caring in K-12 curriculum and classroom practice. Inclusion of such themes not only increases student engagement and their sense of mattering in the classroom, but the inclusion of love and caring has the

potential to expand students' cultural literacy, connect/integrate standard subjects, guide students through existential questions (e.g., What is the meaning of life? How should I live?), generate interpersonal relationships, and increase their personal competence by loving others and being lovable.

Many participants in this study struggled with attachment, caring, and love. In some instances, participants wanted to protect themselves from pain by disengaging from loving relationships. Multiple participants discussed the ways their previous experiences with family members, foster parents, and teachers created a wariness of all acts of love. Cheyenne, for example, discussed the ways she physically and emotionally distanced herself from love that surrounded her. Not only would she not allow people to touch or hug her, she sabotaged relationships that offered the most support and love. For example, her displacement from several foster homes made it difficult for her to accept the hospitality and genuine regard, care, and love her last foster parents gave freely to her. For Cheyenne, vulnerability was too great a risk for inauthentic love. While disregarding love from others, Cheyenne worked diligently with her mental health counselor, whose use of ethical care, a term Noddings (1995) used to describe the care professionals give others, helped Cheyenne find and accept self-love. She described the process as the hardest thing she's done, but in learning to love herself, she also opened avenues to allow others to love and care for her.

Unlike Cheyenne who moved around to multiple placements, Kaylee was immediately loved and cared for by her first foster parents. In her interview, she described the feelings she had for her foster parents who supported her, not only through high school, but through an associate's and bachelor's degree. Though her birth mother

tried to convince her otherwise, Kaylee's foster parents visited her in college, made space for her during breaks and holidays, and planned to attend her graduation. Kaylee was so pleased with her foster parent's expression of natural caring, a term Noddings (1984) used to describe the love that someone *wants* to give another, she joked about tattooing their names within a heart, under the word love.

Madeline spent the majority of her interview discussing the ways love shaped her experiences as a youth in foster care and as a college student. She said that there were multiple people in her life who openly shared their love with her. Madeline recalled that she was at first, surprised at the love strangers were willing to share with her, but in receiving love from others, she learned how to love herself. Her love for others only grew as she progressed through college and joined campus organizations.

Like Madeline, Cori engaged in campus organizations. Through them, she learned to love herself and her black identity. Throughout her interview, Cori described the ways her college's Black Student Union increased her self-love and love she had for her Black brothers and sisters. By engaging in a campus organization that promoted love, Cori was able to engross herself on her university's campus and fully engage in curriculum.

Love surfaced multiple times in this research and as Ariel emphasized in her interview, there is "a heavy amount of love" in foster care. For some participants, foster and adoptive parents loved unconditionally, protected from abuse/neglect, and modeled healthy relationships. However, at other times the same participants were unable to engage in loving relationships because they were too fragile to withstand the disappointment associated with love. Finally, as participants learned to love themselves, they were better able to accept love and care from others.

Summary

"Ahead of Most": Consequences of Trauma; "Outsider": Peer Relationships; "I'm Not Here to Party": Integrating Social and Academic Experiences in School; and "Heavy Amount of Love" are the four themes that emerged from the phenomenological reduction process. These themes capture the lived experiences of participants who used their resilience, generated as a result of their childhood neglect/trauma, to help them progress in college. Though participants described feeling like outsiders in K-12 schools, most made meaningful connections as undergraduates. These connections with peers as well as the integration of social and academic experiences helped participants progress. Finally, participants described the love they found for themselves through their journeys in foster care and college. These themes help to answer the research questions, which emphasize students' transition into and progression through college.

Research Summary

Two research questions, listed below, guided the project and data analysis.

1. How do students who have been in foster care experience transitions as they matriculate into college?
2. How do students who have been in foster care experience transitions as they progress through college?

Despite the fact that 50% of SEFC do not graduate high school, and fewer than 10% matriculate to college (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016), participants in this study described their desire to attain an undergraduate degree. Since their middle school years, the majority of this study's participants had a dream or a goal of matriculating to college. Though support systems were different for participants, students

described individuals who helped them navigate K-12 school systems in order to meet the requirements for college transition. For example, Kaylee's foster parents and social worker helped her enroll into her community college. Later, her faculty at the two-year institution aided her transition to her four-year institution. Like Kaylee, Cheyenne had support from professionals working inside the FCS that allowed her to complete high school and transition to college; in her case—a guardian-ad-litem and high school physics teacher helped Cheyenne meet her academic needs when her family and other adults could not. Additional support from adults was crucial for participants' transition from high school to college.

Relating to the first research question, participants in this study described the confidence they possessed as they matriculated into college. Once accepted into college, SEFC found that they were more adept at anticipated transitions than their peers who had not been in the foster care system. Unlike many of their peers not in the foster care system, participants in this study said they were ready for college because they had already lived away from home and within the course of their childhood had navigated challenging situations.

Many participants in this study transitioned to college with limited support from peers, as well as the fear that their previous placements would abandon them when they aged out of the foster care system. Unlike their peers, many of whom (according to participant interviews) matriculated to college with friends or a support system at home, participants transitioned to college with few, if any, strong friendships. Furthermore, participants said they were initially burdened with the notion that their previous foster parents would no longer keep in contact with them since they were no longer receiving a

stipend for the students' care. Though the later fears proved unjustified, the fear participants felt regarding their family position outside of campus was ambiguous for many, thus increasing students' anxiety in their initial transition to college.

Regarding question two, once enrolled in college, study participants described various ways they increased their engagement on campus. As students transitioned beyond their first year in college, they met key faculty and staff who helped them make curricular decisions. Tara's advisor, for example, allowed her to create her own major, while Ariel's relationship with undergraduate faculty inspired her to study psychology. In addition to the support from faculty and staff that aided students as they transitioned through college, participants also described the ways campus organizations affirmed their individual identities and connected them to campus. Similar to what Tinto (1993) and Schlossberg (1989) posited, students in this study progressed through their undergraduate experience by integrating their academic and social lives.

Results from this study, framed by the literature, suggest a movement and countermovement as necessary for SEFC to transition into and then progress through college. For example, the barriers that impede progress and increase vulnerability, which SEFC are more likely to experience (i.e., anxiety, depression, disconnection with peers), also create opportunity for students to end the process stronger and more empowered than before, especially when participants engaged with counselors and social workers who were trained to recognize and treat symptoms of mental illness. These moments where students feel empowered, engaged, and connected are significant not only because they are perceived as personal victories, but because they were achieved despite overwhelming circumstances. The juxtaposition of a childhood wrought with trauma and

a present and future filled with hope, love, and promise is inspiring and offers insight into the resilience and reparative nature of the human spirit.

Implications

This study was a phenomenological inquiry into the educational and transitional experiences of alumni of foster care. It was guided by two research questions that asked how undergraduates experienced transition as they matriculated into and progressed through college. Eight students participated in a one-on-one interview; data from the interviews were analyzed via phenomenological methods. Implications for practice are described below and organized in systemic domains including implications for micro-level, meso-level, and macro-level support and advocacy.

Systemic Domains

Micro-level domains include the one-on-one relationships between clients/students and counselors/other professionals. In micro-level settings, professionals advocate on behalf of clients/students until students are empowered to advocate for themselves (Toporek et al., 2009). By working for and with individuals, professionals can influence the social, political, economic, and cultural factors of human development, while understanding and explaining the context of students' lives. In individual circumstances, SEFC benefit from consistent assistance with competent and loving professionals who care and know enough about the K-12, undergraduate, and social service systems to share the resources and knowledge necessary to help students navigate their web of services while in transition. Meso-level domains comprise the relationships between counselors/other professionals and a single system. In meso-level domains, counselors and other professionals collaborate to bring change to schools and

communities. When working with students in meso-level settings, professionals have an opportunity to care for SEFC by overseeing systemic changes in the K-12, social service, or higher education systems that provide resources and support to marginalized groups as a way to disrupt the status quo and generate equity (Toporek et al., 2009).

Macro-level domains encompass the ways counselors and other professionals work in the sociopolitical environment. Using macro-level advocacy competencies, counselors and other professionals consider large systems that include the public arena and frame barriers to and resources for academic success in a sociopolitical context (Toporek et al., 2009). Professionals in K-12, social services, and higher education systems have an opportunity to advocate, educate, and modify their practices in order to help one of the most vulnerable populations of students by engaging in professional development, sharing data, having conversations, and pooling resources.

Micro-level

To generate equity and diminish the well-documented educational deficit between youth in foster care and those who have never experienced foster care, SEFC deserve the most qualified educators and counselors, as well as the highest quality resources and services. However, while they deserve the best, they are often moved further to the margins. Professionals have opportunities to work with SEFC in ways that transition students from the margins into the center, where they are most likely to be academically and socially engaged. By engaging in ethical, empathetic, and inclusive practices, professionals working with SEFC (i.e., licensed professional counselors, school counselors, teachers, social workers, teachers, and school administrators) can improve the

overall experiences and potentially generate educational equity for a group of students who desire to attend college.

Though extant literature contains multiple examples of education savvy mentors in K-12 schools working with SEFC (Rios & Rocco, 2014; Syed, Azmitia, & Cooper, 2011), participants in this study described K-12 faculty and staff as generally exclusive and indifferent. Tara, for example, had to learn which teachers cared about their students, and which wanted to close their doors until summer break. Cheyenne had similar experiences with classroom teachers who appeared too busy "doing nothing" to reach out to a student who was "obviously suffering." This is unacceptable in K-12 environments where students need to feel safe, in order to be successful (Barrow, 2015). To counteract the experiences participants in this study recalled, K-12 teachers can implement an ethic of care in their classroom. Teachers who incorporate an ethic of care and model caring relationships not only make it easier for students to engage academically, but are modeling positive interpersonal behaviors (Barrow, 2015; Owens & Ennis, 2005), which SEFC desperately need.

Teachers and administrative staff in K-12 schools can incorporate the characteristics of caring educators, which include *engrossment*, *commitment*, and a *shift in motivation* (Barrow, 2015; Noddings, 1992). Engrossment occurs when caring teachers suspend their judgement regarding students' behaviors. By accepting students' feelings and unique experiences, caring professionals help students feel valued and connected, thus positively impacting their classroom experience. Commitment emphasizes the relationship between a caring teacher and student. Committed, caring professionals let students know that they are the most important aspect of the job. Teachers who are

committed to their students move beyond students' initial responses and superficial comments to form deeper connections, thus strengthening the relationship between teacher and student while motivating students to commit to and engage in their own education. Finally, caring teachers create space for a motivational shift, where the onus of classroom learning moves form the teachers to the students. To facilitate a motivational shift, teachers must see the world through the eyes of their students and modify their pedagogy and curriculum to increase potential impact (Noddings, 1992). If teachers embrace an ethic of care and incorporate engrossment, commitment, and motivational shift in their practice, SEFC will have an opportunity to feel less burdensome (as Cori recalled feeling in middle school) and more included and loved.

Love is a complex theme regarding SEFC. While participants in this study agreed that there was a heavy amount of love for them in the foster care system, on their college campuses, and in their adoptive families, many participants described instances of detachment from peers and a struggle to embrace themselves and their identities. Ariel, for example, wondered about her worth when she compared her life to her peers who did not experience trauma at the hands of a family member. Cheyenne described the multiple times she was hurt because the love she felt for a foster family was unrequited; later in the interview, however, she exclaimed the power of self-love which she embraced after years of mental health counseling.

Mental health counselors have a tremendous opportunity to empower SEFC. As students increase their sense of self and move to a place of self-advocacy, counselors can empower them by creating spaces where students can identify their own strengths and resources, while learning about themselves and their salient identities. During this

process, students not only consider the social, political, economic, and cultural factors of their development, but with guidance, can recognize the systemic and internalized oppression that impacts their daily lives (Berderian-Gardner et.al., 2018; Jones, 2013). In this study, students of color had a more difficult time navigating K-12 schools compared to White participants. Tara, who identified as a queer woman of color, spoke about the ways she struggled for acceptance and opportunity in high school and in college. School, college, and mental health counselors, as well as social workers, are in a position to help SEFC make sense of their multiple and intersecting identities in order to find place in the world, as well as a sense of self. Though students may enter a counseling session wanting to process their identities as a "foster kid," mental health counselors can use the opportunity to explore other salient identities with students.

Counselors who embrace postmodern identities and practices are highly qualified to work with students grappling with intersectional identities, since postmodern counseling emphasizes the deconstruction of common beliefs/assumptions (Hansen, 2015). Counselors employing this perspective create spaces for SEFC to provide their own context and culture to their narrative, search for solutions to their problems, and build collaborative relationships with others. In doing so students can reduce stress, counteract the impact of trauma, increase hope and optimism, resolve conflicts, and increase their self-perception (Hansen, 2015).

All participants described the ways they engaged with faculty, student affairs professionals (i.e., college counselors, academic advisors, financial aid counselors), and peers in campus organizations. Based on participant experiences, higher education is the exemplar in micro-level strategies. Since college campuses are microcosms of society

(Kaldis, 2009), much can be learned from the way they offer services. Not only do higher education professionals research and practice transitional skills, their graduate level curriculum emphasizes student identity development, retention, departure, and transitions. Further, most undergraduates have access to counseling services, academic support, and a variety of professional, social, and academic campus organizations.

Meso-level

SEFC are engaged in at least three separate, yet equally important systems, including the K-12 public education system, higher education, and social services. Individuals working at systems levels should plan for this population of students in order to reduce their home and academic transitions. By working strategically, employees and leaders in the aforementioned systems can create a graduated safety net of resources for a highly vulnerable population.

School districts need a plan to reduce the transitions of SEFC. Though some participants in this study attended as few as three K-12 schools (elementary, middle, and high), Tara attended 23 different schools. Consequently, she was often placed in incorrect courses, which slowed her progress. By working with educators throughout the district, educational leaders can develop a plan to lessen the impact of SEFC. For example, district pacing guides that keep schools within the same district on the same topics would benefit students in perpetual transition. Though the content and delivery may be different at schools, standardized objectives throughout the district will assure that students who are enrolled and attending school have access to the same curriculum.

While having standardized objectives is a good strategy, it does little to support students like Kaylee, who missed several weeks of school when she moved from one

district to another. Her school records were misplaced during her transition, thus elongating her time away from school. High school SEFC are good candidates for alternative high school settings, such as a state-level online public school offerings. If SEFC are enrolled in this type of setting, their records and progress will transfer with them, thus decreasing time away from K-12 curriculum. When alternative school settings are not an option and students must transition within or out of district, districts need a reliable record keeping system that can quickly transfer an accurate student profile, because no SEFC should have to wait to be enrolled or be enrolled in incorrect classes.

The social service system can reduce academic disruption by working strategically with volunteers and foster parents to provide a network of support for school-aged youth in foster care. Professionals in social services should train their foster parents on the need for school stability and offer incentives to foster parents for taking placements based on school settings. Furthermore, the department can use placement data to determine which school districts serve the most youth in foster care. In doing so, professionals can recruit foster parents from that area, build group housing, and train respite homes (short term foster family placement) to increase the likelihood students remain in their same school despite a home transition.

The social service system can also recruit and train teachers to become foster parents. This could not only increase the amount of empathy teachers have for SEFC, but can create another possible solution to minimize school transitions. When Cheyenne was removed from her foster home as a high school senior, she was out of options in her school's district. She expected to transfer to another school, thus jeopardizing her on-time

graduation. Just before she transferred, her teacher volunteered to become a foster parent so she could complete her high school education without a transfer.

Finally, there are many organizations that support youth in the foster care system as they navigate the court system. CASA volunteers, for example, form relationships with youth in foster care, their biological families, and their foster families. Before court, the trained volunteer meets with all stakeholders and writes a recommendation for the judge. Expanding the role of CASA volunteers into schools or creating a similar volunteer organization that utilizes trained volunteers to advocate for the educational needs and interests of SEFC could give students the capital necessary to navigate K-12 schools.

Colleges also have a unique opportunity to engage youth in foster care. The majority of participants in this study decided while in middle school to attend college. Via relationships with school counselors and administrators, college recruiters and admission counselors should hold sessions for SEFC. By creating avenues to disseminate information regarding college admission, SEFC can learn (in middle school) the steps necessary to matriculate to college. As these conversations continue, SEFC can consider other options, such as dual-enrollment.

Dual-enrollment is a program where students are simultaneously enrolled in high school and college (Amy & Bryan, 2008). Traditional high school students participating in dual- enrollment enroll in on-campus or online college courses and upon successful completion receive high school and college credit. Students participating in dual-enrollment not only have an opportunity to transition slowly to college (by taking one class at a time), they can earn credit without taking and having to pass advanced placement courses (often at their own expense). Furthermore, since campus-based dual-

enrollment classes are offered on college campuses that are accessible to multiple high schools, SEFC who must transition from their school have a greater opportunity to remain stable in their academics via dual-enrollment.

Participants in this study discussed the stability provided via their college campus. Ta'Leah for example found that she was able to meet all of her needs on campus. Though colleges have resources to help students meet their basic needs during the semester, holidays and breaks can be difficult for SEFC who may not have access to safe housing, nourishment, and medical care. While some of the participants in the study had to move out of their residence hall during semester breaks, others were able to stay in their room on campus. Colleges and universities can help SEFC by making it possible for them to stay in their assigned room year-round, including breaks. Doing so gives students a safe place to live, while avoiding unnecessary transitions.

Currently, about half of SEFC do not graduate high school. Since over 70% of SEFC desire to attend college, some students who at one point wanted to go to college did not even graduate from high school (Wolanin, 2005). The disproportionality between SEFC and their peers not in the foster care system is evidence of broken systems that continue to encourage traditional paths to graduation even when a students' situation is unconducive to traditional models of K-12 schools. For example, most states offer online public school options, where students are taught by state certified and licensed teachers. If SEFC are lost in multiple home and school transitions, they are losing instructional time and opportunities to meet graduation requirements. In these instances, a reasonable option is an online high school diploma program, certified by the state, where student progress and records travel with them no matter their physical location. Combining this

option with typical school enrollment might create a scaffolded experience where students can benefit from both the consistency of curriculum and the interpersonal relationship building with peers and teachers at school.

Macro-level

For sociopolitical or macro-level changes to occur, significant structural changes that allow for communication and interconnectedness between the K-12, higher education, and social services systems are necessary. There are multiple ways to integrate the best practices and theories that undergird each of the separate systems with which SEFC interact. Professionals in various settings can work to employ structural changes necessary to integrate systems.

Employing an ecological perspective of school counseling is one way for professionals in multiple systems to collaborate to meet the needs of SEFC. Professionals working from an ecological perspective are able to consider students as part of a larger sociopolitical environment (or ecosystem). Therefore, professionals "can better identify and understand the rich and complex patterns of interaction that occur within schools and between schools and their communities, and how they affect student achievement" (McMahon, Mason, Daluga-Guenther, & Ruiz, 2012, p. 462). By engaging in and promoting an ecological perspective, school counselors have an opportunity to guide a conversation and create interventions such as professional development regarding the educational barriers of SEFC. When multiple individuals gain a systems understanding of SEFC and collaborate to solve problems, there is potential to achieve academic equity for historically marginalized students, including SEFC. Integrating services and collaborating

with professionals who are working for students' best interests creates avenues to success while implementing practices that improve the system for current and future students.

The last decade has brought substantial changes and increases in state funding for SEFC who also attend college. The relief of a financial burden is significant for SEFC. Each of the eight participants received scholarship dollars or tuition waivers because of their status as a youth in foster care. For Cori, the scholarship allowed her to enroll in college without accruing student loan debt. Since SEFC have less wealth than their peers not in the foster care system (Unrau, 2011), tuition for college is significant. Currently, SEFC have multiple options regarding financial assistance for postsecondary education. The federally funded John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP), for example, offers up to $5,000 per semester for college students who were in the FCS. Furthermore, private organizations such as Together We Rise offer substantial college scholarships for alumni of foster care (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). The infusion of scholarship dollars for postsecondary education of SEFC is a necessary practice to generate equity.

CFCIP is an example of a policy that benefits SEFC; however, since the majority of youth in foster care do not matriculate to college, they do not directly benefit from the policy. Cheyenne, who received several scholarships to attend college, remarked that the money was available because most youth in her situation did not complete high school. Therefore, stakeholders, including lobbyists, politicians, and professionals working with SEFC, should consider drafting legislation similar to the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act of 2011 (McKinney-Vento, 1987), which was created to increase school stability for students experiencing homelessness. Collaboration

between professionals from each of the systems with which SEFC are engaged could lead to legislation that decreases school transitions and increases resources for SEFC.

Limitations

Best practice in phenomenological inquiry includes multiple points of contact with research participants. Since SEFC are a hard to reach population, this study was designed so that participants were interviewed only once. Though final transcripts and participant descriptions were member-checked, additional student interviews would have added depth to the findings. Further, though the sample was racially and geographically diverse, only one male participated in the study, thus limiting a male perspective. Despite limitations, however, the findings add a voice that has been missing in literature regarding the undergraduate experiences of SEFC.

Future Research

Current and seminal literature discuss the barriers to academic achievement and social integration for SEFC (McMillen et al., 2002; Okpych & Courtney, 2014; Unrau, et al., 2012). Their shifting families and frequent transitions create unique challenges for students and their educators across P-16. While literature regarding educational transitions exists, participants in this study described their teachers and other professionals as unaware of the way such experiences impact learning. Surveys designed to capture areas of knowledge regarding SEFC should be created, modified (by profession), and disseminated to multiple professionals who work with students in educational settings, including K-12 teachers, administrators, and school counselors, as well college faculty and staff, as a way to identify gaps in understanding. By designing

trainings that address these deficit areas, results from this inquiry could directly inform the ways professionals work with SEFC.

An exploration into the majors, career options, and initial working experiences after graduation may shed light on the motivations of SEFC, as well as the impact their jobs have on their mental and physical health. For example, participants in this study described majors and potential careers in helping fields, and all students but Awnan (who majored in forensics/criminal justice) described a desire to help youth who were in the same positions they once were. Participants' future plans included law school to become guardian ad litem, policy maker, or child advocate; graduate school in counseling to work as an art or music therapist for youth in foster care; and sociology/social work to work as a caseworker for DFACS. Students who have experienced trauma who reenter the field as professionals are at risk of secondary trauma and/or posttraumatic stress (Naturale, 2007). Therefore, understanding the career trends of this population has the potential to uncover students' process for determining a career, while assessing the risk for re-traumatization as a professional.

Summary

SEFC are a vulnerable yet resilient group. Currently half of the population do not graduate high school, and less than 2% of the 10% who transition to college stay to graduate. Major themes of this research reflect both their vulnerability and their resilience; they included "Ahead of Most": Consequences of Trauma, "Outsider": Peer Relationships, "I'm Not Here Just to Party": Integrating Social and Academic Experiences in School, and "Heavy Amount of Love." Alumni of foster care deserve the best, and educators across the P-16 continuum can help to generate equity by working in

micro, meso, and/or macro-level systems to educate, connect, advocate, and awaken stakeholders. If educators understand students' unique perspectives and work to make changes with systems, more SEFC have an opportunity to actualize their dreams of attending and succeeding in college.

EPILOGUE

Though this dissertation is a product of my academic commitment, writing it was a very personal process. While writing and thinking, I reflected on my professional roles and personal identities as a former classroom teacher teaching youth in foster care, a volunteer working to change policies regarding youth in foster care, a student affairs professional transitioning youth from foster care into college, and a foster parent serving as temporary guardian. This dissertation is a confluence of my professional and personal lives, thus creating multiple levels of meaning (for me) and sometimes making this challenging process very emotional, too.

While immersed in participant data I struggled when I realized that these seemingly successful students were wrought from their previous experiences with neglect and abuse. Because I set out to do anti-deficit research, interviewed students who were progressing through college, and did not include any questions about abuse/neglect in the semi-structured protocol, I did not expect to hear such harrowing narratives; they broke my heart over and over again. One day, after thinking about the participants' experiences with rape, incest, mistrust, and abandonment, I wondered aloud why I even wanted to conduct this research. Without pause or pity, my wife said, "Mark and Ishema." With the following poem as my little prayer for them and other youth in search of healing, I dedicated this dissertation to Mark and Ishema:

little prayer

let ruin end here

let him find honey
where there was once a slaughter

let him enter the lion's cage
& find a field of lilacs

let this be the healing
& if not let it be

--Danez Smith

Mark was a student in our 5th grade class when his mother was incarcerated. While his siblings found placements with relatives, Mark did not. Before he was sent to a group home, where he was first a victim then perpetrator of abuse, he asked me to adopt him. I did not. In my early 20s I could barely care for myself and believed he would be safe in the system. But he was not safe, and he did not have the agency to fight for himself or the advocates to fight for him. I threw up three times when I first learned of his experiences, and wept when I thought about him while reading the participants' transcripts. He walked into a lion's den when he entered foster care and did not find lilacs. I was not ready to be a foster parent then, but do so now because of him.

While I wrote this dissertation, my wife and I fostered 17 children. Most of the time they were amazing distractions; however, as I engaged in participants' accounts of the complex relationships between types of parents (i.e., biological, step, adoptive, foster), I began to consider the ways our children have and will have to navigate their fluid families. I realized that no matter the stability we provided the children in our care, there were factors outside my control and understanding. I worried that I would not be able to meet their unique needs and spent a lot of time questioning my role as a parent. Though actively questioning my role as a foster, adoptive, and step parent ultimately

resulted in a better understanding of these complex family dynamics, the participants, and myself, the emotional toll and feelings of inadequacy halted my dissertation progress. For weeks all I could do was cry, watch Netflix, and fold laundry. At the time, these breaks in writing frustrated me. I thought my product would be better if I worked more, but I realize now that these periods of questioning and ambiguity helped me internalize the participants' experiences while increasing my capacity for empathy for our children and their extended families, thus making this seemingly unproductive time, valuable after all.

While working on this dissertation two of our children experienced significant transitions in P-16 schools. Jasmine began pre-kindergarten and Aquay matriculated to college. Neither was successful. While professionals in Jasmine's university-run pre-kindergarten did not have the skills or desire to learn the skills necessary to educate students who experienced major trauma and separation anxiety, our oldest son was prepared to enter college. However, his inability to seek help for crippling depression/anxiety resulted in failing grades and early departure. I felt helpless in both these instances. I did not know how to approach administrators and teachers who were unwilling to learn about the unique needs of our daughter, and I was embarrassed that our son was an example of the students this study's participants talked about. He was not ready to be successful without parental oversight. These experiences made me question my authority and I resisted writing Chapter 5. Who was I to suggest promising practices for professionals when I struggled to find solutions in my personal life?

I struggled to overcome feelings of inadequacy, and eventually my desire to be competent pushed me to learn more about myself and the tasks in which I engage. As I wrote and worked I immersed myself in participant data again, this time focusing on their

resiliency. Emphasizing the strength and persistence of a group of youth who have been pushed to the margins inspired me. I found the light and love embedded in the participants' experiences, and I exhaled. While doing so I remembered Zayvion's smile when we read *Brown Bear, Brown Bear* the first time, the sparkle in Jasmine's eyes when we jumped in puddles after the rain, William's voice when he reached for me and said mama, and Ricky's laughter the day he finally felt comfortable in our home. I remembered why this work was important to me and said a little prayer for Ishema, another former student, who deserved healing but died at the hands of her abuser.

I know that as a teacher I offered Ishema solace in my classroom and created opportunities for her to experience life beyond the slaughterhouse of her existence. To do so I transformed myself from a young, naïve, White savior, into an advocate for students. In the beginning, all I could do was love the students that entered our classroom, but as I continued to engage in our learning community, I learned how to be an effective educator. Love was not enough, but its presence created the desire to generate change. Engaging in this research was another transformative process and though the dissertation symbolizes the end of my formal education, I have learned that it is also the beginning. As my roles shift and I begin to work outside of this doctoral program I will remember to start early, move slowly, and love deeply.

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APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Date

Dear

I hope you are doing well. I am contacting you because I am conducting a research study regarding the educational and transitional experiences of students who have experienced foster care. I need your help identifying participants for this important research. I hope you can put me in touch with current or former youth in foster care who are currently enrolled in their second year (or beyond) of postsecondary education. The Institutional Review Board at the University of Georgia has approved this study, which is under the direction of Dr. Laura Dean, faculty in the Department of Counseling and Human Development.

Current or former youth in foster care are rarely studied for their success; much of the research relates to why this population of students fail. My study emphasizes their success and persistence in higher education. The research emphasizes the participants' perspectives. I hope you will support me by identifying youth who have successfully moved beyond the first year of higher education. Those that choose to take part in the research will participate in a one-on-one interview. These finding may support your ongoing work.

Please consider forwarding the message below to anyone who meets the criteria and feel free to contact me, Sarah Jones, at 980-254-4743 or jonesej@uga.edu with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,
Sarah Jones

Hello,

I hope you are doing well. I am contacting you because I am doing a research study regarding the educational and transitional experiences of students who have experienced foster care. I am a graduate student under the direction of Dr. Laura Dean in the Department of Counseling and Human Development at the University of Georgia and this research is approved by the Institutional Review Board. I invite you to participate in a

research study entitled Lost and Found in Transition: How Alumni of Foster Care Experience Transitions in Undergraduate Education. The purpose of this study is to understand the ways students who are currently or have been part of the foster care system experienced transition, education, and the foster care system.

Not many students who have experienced foster care are as successful as you have been, so understanding how you were successful in school might give educators ideas about ways to help other students who experienced foster care. I am interested in hearing your opinion and your voice. You are the expert and I want to hear your perspective however you choose to express it.

The study will involve a short survey and participation in an in-depth interview. In order to participate, you need to be over 18 years of age, have spent at least 8 months in the foster care system, and be in your second year (or beyond) of postsecondary institution. Postsecondary education includes any public or private two or four-year institution. If you meet these requirements and would like to participate in the interview, please complete the following survey: https://ugeorgia.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_3BKuAL86prvUzAN. The survey will take about 5 minutes to complete and asks questions about your age, level of education completed, and the amount of time you spent in the foster care system. After you submit the survey, I will contact you to set up a time to talk further about participation. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Sarah Jones

APPENDIX B

RECRUITMENT LIST

Organization/Person	Description	Contact
Carroll County Department of Family and Children Services (DFCS)	Agency that investigates reports of child abuse; finds foster and adoptive homes for abused and neglected children and provides numerous support services and innovative programs to help families in need.	Libby Smith (County Director) ElizabethLibby.Smith@dhs.ga.gov Renee Huber (Supervisor—Permanency Unit) Renee.huber@dhs.ga.gov LaTasha Mosley (Supervisor—Permanency) Latasha.Mosley@dhs.ga.gov Lytisha Florence (Resource Development) Lytisha.Florence@dhs.ga.gov
Embark Georgia	Support network of campus and community supports who work to ensure that young people who have experienced foster care are successful at University of Georgia.	EMBARK@fanning.uga.edu David Meyers dmeyers@fanning.uga.edu
Bridging Success	Program at Arizona State University that connects foster youth to ASU and supports them until	bridgingsuccess@asu.edu Justine R. Cheung Justine.cheung@asu.edu Jeanne Hanrahan Jeanne.Hanrahan@asu.edu

	they graduate with a college degree from ASU.	Jennifer Morgan Jennifer.Morgan@asu.edu
College of St. Joseph—STEPS: Students Taking an Effective Path to Success	Full-time residential program in New England designed specifically to meet the needs of youth transitioning from years in foster care into college.	Mark Gagnon mark.gagnon@csj.edu
Riheem Jefferson	Second year student from Savannah State University; speaker at the National Youth at Risk Conference (2017; Savannah, GA).	Riheem Jefferson RiheemJefferson@gmail.com
Foster Care to Success	Largest provider of college funding and support services for foster youth in the nation.	Lynn Davis (Director of Scholarships and Grants) ldavis@fc2success.org
Foster Care Alumni of America	Community of individuals previously in foster care.	info@fostercarealumni.org
New Yorkers for Children	Advocacy group that works with children's services to improve the lives of youth in foster care through education, career development, the acquisition of life skills, and strengthening the	Amy Chou achou@newyorkersforchildren.org

Baker College—Living Independently Networking Knowledge (LINK)	child welfare system. Organization helping youth under 20 move to self- sufficiency in both campus and community environments by building working relationships with campus and community partners.	mherst01@baker.edu
Carroll County Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA)	Carroll County branch for CASA volunteers that works to provide every abused or neglected child a trained advocate to help negotiate the court system.	Amanda Camp (County Director) www.carrollcasa.org/index.php.email-us
Western Michigan University—Seita Scholars Program	Initiative to change the college going paradigm of youth in the foster care system.	LaToya McCants fyit-info@wmich.edu
University of Houston Urban Experience Program	Provider of opportunities for the university's diverse population by preventing minor obstacles from becoming major setbacks to degree achievement.	Dr. Raven Jones (Director) rljones@central.uh.edu
REACH—University of Alabama	Program working to empower current	jyhartley@aalan.ua.edu

	and former foster youth in a supportive environment that allows students the freedom to pursue higher education and successfully matriculate and graduate from college.	

APPENDIX C

QUALTRICS SURVEY

What is your full name?

What is your sex?

- Female
- Intersex
- Male

Choose one or more races that you consider yourself to be:

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- White
- Other

Choose one or more that describes your sexual orientation:

- Asexual
- Bisexual
- Heterosexual (straight)
- Gay
- Lesbian
- Queer
- Questioning
- Other

What is your date of birth? (mm/dd/yyyy)

How many years and/or months were you in the foster care system? (If you entered the system more than once, add the time together for a total.)

How many homes were you placed in while in foster care?

How many K-12 (elementary, middle, high) schools did you attend?

At which school are you currently enrolled and attending?

Do you have a major? If so, what major have you declared?

How many semesters of college have you completed?

How many credit hours have you earned?

What is your current grade point average (GPA)?

When do you expect to graduate?

What is the best way to contact you regarding participation (email, phone call, text message)? Please include an email address or phone number in the response.

What is your ZIP code?

APPENDIX D

CONSENT LETTER

Date

Dear :

I invite you to participate in a research study entitled Lost and Found in Transition: How Alumni of Foster Care Experience Transitions in Undergraduate Education. The purpose of this study is to understand the ways alumni of the foster care system, who have also experienced success in higher education, navigate educational transitions. I am a graduate student under the direction of Dr. Laura Dean in the Department of Counseling and Human Development at the University of Georgia.

Research participants must be over 18 years of age, have spent at least 20 months in the foster care system, and be at least second year students in a postsecondary institution.

Your participation will involve a one-on-one interview regarding your experiences in schools and in foster care and should only take about two hours of your time. Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate, not to answer specific questions, or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to withdraw from the study, the information that can be identified as yours will be kept as part of the study and may continue to be analyzed, unless you make a written request to remove, return, or destroy the information.

The data collected is confidential. I will have access to the digital recordings, which will be kept in a password protected electronic file. All identifiers will be removed during transcription, when you will be identified by a chosen pseudonym. After the recordings have been transcribed, they will be archived in a folder on a computer that requires a password to log into the system. The results of the research study may be published, but your name or any identifying information will not be used.

The findings from this project may provide information on effective strategies and supports K-12 schools and colleges can implement to help students in foster care, or those who are alumni of foster care, succeed academically. There are no known risks, but some potential discomforts are associated with this research. You will be asked to describe a time/times in your life when you entered foster care, transitioned within the system, or experienced school changes, and so this may elicit emotional reactions. I will provide referrals to counseling or other support services should you need or desire it.

If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to call me at 980-254-4743 or send an email to jonesej@uga.edu. This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Georgia. Questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant should be directed to The Chairperson, University of Georgia Institutional Review Board, 629 Boyd GSRC, Athens, Georgia 30602; telephone (706) 542-3199; email address irb@uga.edu.

By completing and returning this questionnaire in the envelope provided, you are agreeing to be contacted to participate in the above described research project.

Thank you for your consideration! Please keep this letter for your records.

Sincerely,

Sarah Jones

APPENDIX E

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
CONSENT FORM

LOST AND FOUND IN TRANSITION: HOW ALUMNI OF FOSTER CARE EXPERIENCE TRANSITIONS IN UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION

Researcher's Statement
I am asking you to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. This form is designed to give you the information about the study so you can decide whether to be in the study or not. Please take the timfe to read the following information carefully. Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called "informed consent." A copy of this form will be given to you.

Principal Investigator: Sarah Jones
Counseling and Human Development Services
980-254-4743; jonesej@uga.edu

Purpose of the Study
This study is designed to capture the dynamic nature of your experiences in transition. You have been asked to participate because you have spent time in the foster care system and have completed your second year of postsecondary school.

Study Procedures
If you agree to participate, you will be asked to …

- Participate in an interview where I will ask questions about your transitional and educational experiences in college, K-12 schools, and foster care.
- The interview will occur only one time and will last about two hours.
    - Some of the questions ask you to explain your experiences in foster care and in college. I will also ask you to consider your support systems and barriers to success during the interview, among other topics.
- The interview will be recorded, and after the recording, I will transcribe then analyze the data

Risks and Discomforts

- The interview may elicit feelings of stress, discomfort, or sadness, especially when we discuss feelings associated with being in the foster care system.
- There are no social, economic, legal, or physical risks associated with this research.

Benefits

- There are no expected benefits to you for participating in the interview.
- The results of this research may be published and therefore there may be some benefit to educators working with youth in foster care

Privacy and Confidentiality for Audio/Video Recording

The data collected is confidential. I will have access to the digital recordings, which will be kept in a password protected electronic file. All identifiers will be removed during transcription, when you will be identified by a chosen pseudonym. After the recordings have been transcribed, they will be archived in a folder on a computer that requires a password to log into the system. The results of the research study may be published, but your name or any identifying information will not be used. Researchers will not release identifiable results of the study to anyone other than individuals working on the project without your written consent unless required by law.

Taking Part Is Voluntary

Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to withdraw from the study, the information that can be identified as yours will be kept as part of the study and may continue to be analyzed, unless you make a written request to remove, return, or destroy the information.

If you have questions, please contact me at 980-254-4743 or jonesej@uga.edu.
The main researcher conducting this study is Sarah Jones, a graduate student at the University of Georgia. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Sarah Jones at jonesej@uga.edu or at 980-254-4743. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chairperson at 706.542.3199 or irb@uga.edu.

Research Subject's Consent to Participate in Research:

To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must sign on the line below. Your signature below indicates that you have read or had read to you this entire consent form and have had all of your questions answered.

_____	_____	_____
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date
_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Signature	Date

Please sign both copies, keep one and return one to the researcher.

APPENDIX F

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Introductions

Hello (participant).

In a few minutes our roles will reverse and you'll do most of the talking, but before then I want to tell you a little bit about myself, the research, and your rights as a participant.

Ok?

I am currently a student at the University of Georgia and because of that, I get to do research like this. Before full time graduate school, I was a classroom teacher for 10 years, then worked at a university with first-year students as they transitioned to college. I am also a foster parent and have spent about five years learning about the foster care system from a few perspectives. All of this leads me to this research. Thank you for agreeing to participate.

Explanation of study

This research is a phenomenological inquiry into the transitional educational experiences of SEFC. In other words, I'll ask you questions about school and what it was like to change schools, transition to college, and be successful. This research is important for many reasons. For example, not many students who experienced foster care are as successful as you have been, so understanding how you were successful in school might give educators ideas about ways to help other students who experienced foster care. I am interested in hearing your opinion and your voice—therefore everything you tell me is correct. You are the expert and I want to hear your perspective however you choose to express it.

Do you have any questions?

Review informed consent

Reviewing demographic information

- https://ugeorgia.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_3BKuAL86prvUzAN
- Name and Pseudonym
- Birthday/Age
- Number of months in FCS
- Number of placements in FCS
- Number of K-12 schools attended

  - Number of high schools
- Current postsecondary school
  - Did you transfer to this school from another postsecondary institution or enter this institution right after high school?
- Current major
- Number of semesters you have been enrolled
- Number of credit hours you have earned

What questions do you have before we begin the interview?

1. What's it like to be a student and in foster care who has transitioned to college?
2. Tell me about your experiences in K-12 schools.
   a. When did you feel most engaged? Most isolated?
   b. What strategies did you use to be successful in elementary, middle, and/or high school?
   c. When did you decide you would attend college?
      i. How did you decide where to apply?
      ii. How did you decide where to attend?
      iii. Do you remember how you felt or what you thought?
   d. What or who encouraged you to pursue higher education?
3. What about your transition to college?
   a. When did you finalize your decision to attend _____
   b. How did you prepare for college?
   c. What was the most difficult aspect of your first year?
   d. What was the best thing about being in college?
4. Since completing your first year of college describe your experiences.
   a. Where have you felt most engaged?
   b. Where do you feel most isolated?
   c. What people can you rely on for help?
   d. What strategies are most helpful?
   e. What and/or who has supported you the most?
      i. Tell me more about your support system.
      ii. How long have you had this support?
      iii. How did you first become engaged with this support?
      iv. How has support changed for you since your first year in college?
   f. What are the biggest barriers to success you have encountered?
      i. How do you feel when you encounter a barrier?
      ii. What do you think?
      iii. How have your barriers changed as you've progressed through college?
   g. In what ways are you more ready for college than your peers who were not in the FCS?
5. What could colleges do differently to better support students like you?
6. What advice do you have for students in foster care?
7. What else would you like to tell me about your experiences?

Closure

Thank you for participating in the interview. My next steps include interviewing more students and transcribing data regarding our conversation. Is it ok with you if I reach out later regarding questions with your interview? Thank you again for participating.

Appendix G

Interview Questions with Rationale

Interview Question	Rationale
1. What is it like to be a student and in foster care who has transitioned to college?	Overarching question used to glean participants' consciousness regarding the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).
2. Tell me about your experiences in K-12 schools.	Matriculation to college begins in K-12 schools. Like the first question, this question is used to glean the participants' consciousness regarding educational transitions (Moustakas, 1994).
3. When did you feel most engaged? Most isolated?	Engagement and isolation are closely related to marginality and mattering (Schlossberg, 1989) as well as Tinto's (1994) writings about departure and persistence.
4. What strategies did you use to be successful in elementary, middle, and/or high school?	Strategies is a factor that influences transition (Anderson et al., 2012).
5. When did you decide you would attend college? i. How did you decide where to apply? ii. How did you decide where to attend?	What is the decision process like for SEFC? Another way to explore the phenomenon. Considering a phenomenon from multiple perspectives helps to create depth and texture in phenomenological inquiry (Moustakas, 1994).
6. Do you remember how you felt or what you thought?	Consider this from a visceral perspective to better describe the phenomenon—engage participants in multiple ways to consider the event (Moustakas, 1994).
7. What or who encouraged you to pursue higher education?	Support—factor that influences transition (Anderson et al., 2012)

8. What about your transition to college?	Open question related to the research question—used to glean participants' consciousness regarding the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).
a. When did you finalize your decision to attend ____ b. How did you prepare for college?	These questions might give information about their support system or other factors that influenced why/how participants made their decisions.
c. What was the most difficult aspect of your first year?	Link to barriers and what is their description of their lived experiences regarding barriers.
d. What was the best thing about being in college?	Maybe this question will get back to the reasons 70% of students FCS want to go to college.
9. Since completing your first year of college describe your experiences?	Sharing lived experiences of college after first year.
a. Where have you felt most engaged? b. Where do you feel most isolated?	These questions related to experiences of marginality and mattering, as well as persistence and departure (Schlossberg, 1989; Tinto, 1994).
c. What people can you rely on for help? d. What strategies are most helpful? e. What and/or who has supported you the most? i. Tell me more about your support system. ii. How long have you had this support? iii. How did you first become engaged with this support? iv. How has support changed for you since your first year in college?	Support and strategies which are factors that influence transition (Anderson et al., 2012).

f. What are the biggest barriers to success you have encountered? i. How do you feel when you encounter a barrier? ii. What do you think? iii. How have your barriers changed as you've progressed through college? g. In what ways are you more ready for college than your peers who were not in the FCS?	Participants lived experiences regarding barriers to college.
10. What could colleges do differently to better support students like you?	Based on their lived experiences, what supports do students need?
11. What advice do you have for students in foster care?	Another way to ask students to share salient information regarding their transitional educational experiences in school and foster care.
12. What else would you like to tell me about your experiences?	An opportunity for participants to add information to the interview. Confirming the notion they are experts and providing an opportunity to begin closure of interview.

APPENDIX H

PARTICIPANT DESCRIPTIONS

Ariel Textural Description

Ariel's experiences and subsequent thoughts and feelings about the abuse she experienced penetrate her existence. She often felt isolated from others and/or bothered by her peers' immaturity and naïveté, luxuries she was not afforded. Consequently, interpersonal relationships can be tedious and unfulfilling. She said, "I feel like kids in foster care who've liked experienced abuse on any level view the kids in school who don't go through that as being extremely immature which creates another level of isolation." She continued:

> That puts you in an isolate[ed] state where the kids don't know how to relate to you. After all, how are you who has two loving family members . . . who never harm you, how are you going to be able to relate to and honestly talk to a person who has experienced sexual assault at the hands of their father?

Ariel asked a version of this question often and as a result was placed in the position to decide which people she should disclose her past to and which she should not. She described other's inquiries as exhausting. She said, "[People] try and find out [my] story and even just giving them basic facts on why [I was in] foster care and suddenly there is also that feeling of alienation." She wanted to say to them, "Don't' judge me!" Instead she wondered alone, "Do they think I am less of a human being just because I have been through foster care?"

Ariel's experiences in the foster care system created opportunities for anxiety, fear, stress, and shame to manifest. When she thought about her past, she described dread, awareness, and shame. When she thought about her childhood she said, "Basically it was kind of like you know when you get like kind of scared and you feel . . . either [an] ache or lump like in your chest but it feels cold." She continued, "Being in foster care is difficult in that [I am] constantly in a state of hyper awareness about [my] family." This awareness transcended Arial's experiences in foster care and seeped into her daily life, creating insecurities. She said:

> Well, I'm not going to lie. It feels pretty bad on the inside. There is always that ball of stress that like forms in your chest and stuff like that and always like the feeling of shame, like one of the more interesting things about the school or about interacting with a lot of people at the school is that they know how to physically present themselves. They know how to look polished and look reasonably nice. I know that for my part, somebody looks at [me] and [I] can tell they're judging [me]?

Ariel felt judged for many aspects of her life, but particularly for the ways she presented herself to others. Further, her sense of shame also permeated her experiences, especially related to all the things Ariel believed she can't do. She said:

> It's always been like basically a sense of shame associated with: I can't do things; I have to teach myself basic adult things that I should know by now. I should know by now how to I don't know, how to put on lipstick. I should know by now how to balance my checkbook. I should know by now how to interact with somebody for the first time without making a complete and total fool of myself

> and there's always then. It's always been really stressful trying to be able to adapt to the situation and trying to be able to appear normal. . . . So it's been difficult teaching myself how to be a normal adult woman, I guess, with normal adult skills um and I find that to be pretty interesting because it's always pretty interesting to like for me to look at somebody and be like oh you are being immature because you can't grasp the concept of giving back or something but at the same time they can look at me and go well you are pretty immature because you can't keep your room straight and your hair looks nappy as frack.

However, since beginning college, Ariel found a new confidence and instead of feeling shame she felt empowered to learn. She described learning about financial literacy by visiting the bank and asking for help. She said:

> Going to the bank and being like, hey I don't know what to do here can you please just you know help me and tell me how to do this they are very willing to help and I have a good relationship with one of the ladies in the bank in that I tell her is this a good idea to do with my money and she will honestly tell me yes or no and apparently I am a point of pride for her because she was like, you were the most inept person when it came to banking and now you know how to do things.

Ariel's college community created spaces for her to feel included, accepted, understood, and successful. She first found this in faculty. She said:

> I found that [teachers] are especially receptive towards me when I just want to know more and it's not for like extra points. It's not to like bring up my grade I just want to know more and I found it very interesting that they are so receptive on that end.

Recently, she was hired in the library. She spoke openly about the trust her employers placed in her. She talked about her thoughts when she realized she was hired at the library. She said:

> Trusting me enough to give me an actual position in the college and actually trusting me enough to be like we think you are competent enough and would be good enough at this job that we can pay you! That was a very nice moment.

Ariel always believed it was necessary to go to college in order to help other people. She said, "I knew that I needed to get a college degree in order to be any kind of help like any kind of legitimate help for kids who have gone through what I have gone through." When she got to college, Ariel studied psychology. She says:

Academically I found that I like again I have the passion for psychology and I really enjoy learning about it; it was really interesting to notice how much I enjoyed learning about human behavior and about the different kinds of mental diseases and possible ways to treat them. Because one thing that has always kind of frustrated me whenever somebody has always talked about a mental illness they always talk about the problems with it and how much trouble it causes. Like take for instance schizophrenia. Like you never hear anything good about somebody who is schizophrenic, but it is interesting to then hear in college that there are ways in helping treat schizophrenia and that just because somebody has schizophrenia doesn't mean they are a bad person.

College curriculum and this transition to college offered hope via learning. Ultimately Ariel felt fortunate to attend college. She said, "I think I am extremely lucky in that regard." Ariel's positive personal characteristics, defined by her early life experiences coupled with institutional fit, created a safe environment where she learned

and found multiple communities in which to engage. Knowing that there was an organization for students in foster care was very helpful. She said:

> It's been really interesting to be here in college and talk to kids who have had the same experience as I have in foster care with the program and knowing that I am not alone in my desire to make myself better and I am not alone in that I am not going to let bad things that have happened to me…bring me down or stop me from succeeding.

The campus program created a space where Ariel could interact with people who understood her past experiences. This experience, coupled with the college's community service projects, allowed Ariel to feel connected and engaged in times of her transition. She said, "Some of the times I felt most connected to [campus] has to be through some of the community service work I do." Being part of the human services club was one of Ariel's favorite activities. She said:

> It's nice to feel like we are actively trying to make these kids' lives better by helping them by mentoring them by doing fun activities by showing them that someone cares. I feel like it would be a tad more chivalrous to help people than to bemoan my situation and um try and take what I can from life.

Throughout the interview, Ariel described her feelings and thoughts about foster care and education. Though her early experiences included abuse and neglect, she was adopted into a home that valued education. In K-12 schools, she increased her resilience and coping skills and enrolled in college so that she could acquire the skills necessary to help youth in similar or more desperate circumstances than what she experienced as a youth in foster care.

Ariel Structural Description

Throughout the interview, Ariel spoke freely about the barriers that impeded her educational and transitional experiences. For example, she described was a result of interpersonal relationships. She said:

> One of the major barriers which I don't think people talk about often enough is due to the fact that I grew up poor and in a really odd family of sorts. I don't have the natural social skills that other people have. I'm not good at making that initial connection.

Being in the foster care system, she added, did not help the situation. She said foster care, "puts you in an isolating state where the kids don't know how to relate to you." Relatedness, in Ariel's case, was measured by the amount of trauma someone experienced in their past. Of her college peers, she said:

> I think some of them have grown up in a bubble where their parents have been incredibly nice or society has been reasonably nice towards them so on and so forth and they don't have to deal. They've never had to face the fact that human beings have the ability to be just down right despicable.

Although this was not always evident in her childhood, because most of the people with whom she interacted had been traumatized in one way or another, she said:

> Now in college there's always been there's some sort of culture that takes over that is like if you are not part of this culture you are an outsider and you are alien to it and you cannot enjoy the perks of being part of this culture.

Deciding whether or not to disclose her past experiences was complicated for Ariel. She said, "I prefer not to discuss this but that just elicits more curiosity from the kids around

you when they find out." Despite her difficulty making connections with others, Ariel knew that she was not alone in her feelings. She said:

> I mean, I think initially for anyone regardless of whether they are in foster care going into college and transitioning into college is a trying time. Or at least initially scary. Like for me it was a bit frightening because I'd never been out on my own before.

Ariel's desire to attend school was instilled in her from a young age. Her (adoptive) parents touted education as a way to a better life and she felt academically prepared to enter college and seek the necessary help. She explained:

> Another thing that I was more prepared for was academic wise for my adoptive family there was a very strong emphasis on academic and doing well in academics. Like you'd get in trouble if you got below like a B+. It was that sort of a deal so I've been very prepared academically for college and with some of the kids here, I think there has been more of an emphasis placed on doing well in sports and that sort of a deal and not so much emphasis on doing well academically.

Ariel said she felt fortunate to attend college, especially because the statistics regarding postsecondary success for youth in foster care are bleak. She said, "For me being lucky enough to attend college and do well in college is extremely important especially in comparison to a lot of foster youth who have a lot of difficulty in education because of where they're from."

Ariel's previous experiences increased her resilience, which she believed made her more prepared for college, compared to her peers who were not in foster care. She said:

> I think in a way I was prepared more for the fact that life can kick you in the teeth. I was prepared more for the fact that life isn't fair and that it never will be and that it is just up to you to decide how you are going to deal with it.

In addition to her resilience, Ariel had great support at her college. She said:

> I was initially thinking about attending uh a more art based college that way I can lean more towards art therapy but [this school] seemed to be the right fit in that it was cheap. It wouldn't cause too much financial strain and it specifically works to help people who have been through foster care.

The faculty at her college are supportive and make it easier for Ariel to be successful. She says:

> One of the best things about [college] is that it tries very hard to support everybody who goes here. It's a very small campus there's usually no more than 20 people to a classroom so you really get you really get the time to ask the teachers questions about the work and uh questions about whatever you are trying to learn for the day. . . . Teachers at the school form a fantastic support system as long as we honestly show that you want to learn and you are very interested in your learning and you are very interested in your grades they are purposefully willing to go hey, like um, you may need to adjust this, this, and this in order to make your paper more impactful so on and so forth um as far outside the school.

Finally, it is her past that makes her want to give back. She says:

Because I feel like however much of a hard life I had it would be incredibly unfair of me to go ok the world owes me everything because I have been through XYZ and I feel like it's up to me to try and make sure that I don't slip into that mindset. Ariel's worldview was shaped by her early experiences with abuse and neglect. The trauma she experienced as a child, coupled with her adoptive parents' emphasis of service created a space for Ariel to consider the ways she could most help people like her. In order to achieve her goals, Ariel enrolled in college and remained focused on her academic work.

Ta'Leah Textural Description

Until she entered foster care, Ta'Leah did not think she had a chance to go to college. However, when she moved out of her house her perspective changed. She realized she lived in a dysfunctional home and that things were better when she moved out. She said:

> I think that hit me once I was in middle school, once I got to my foster family's house. That kind of hit me that the things that I went through and the things that I experienced you know this is not normal.

As things stabilized for Ta'Leah she thought about her future. She said:

> College was my life. This was my token. This is my ticket to success. If I didn't make it here, I don't know what's in store for me. So this was do or die. . . .To everybody else this is just this is just fun this is just like I said to get away from your nagging parents and to kick it but to me it was much more than that.

Eventually, as she was about to transition to college she thought, "all the nights I wish for this you know when I thought this moment took forever. It's finally here."

When she enrolled in college, Ta'Leah was surprised at how difficult it was to feel at home. She said, "Nobody could have ever prepared me for the different lifestyle that college has to offer. I didn't realize how much time I would have on my hands." Though she used her extra time to study and prepare for class, classes were challenging for Ta'Leah. She described her feelings and thoughts regarding a particularly difficult semester. She said:

> I just wanted to explode. I just wanted to be done. And I was just frustrated and getting so hard on myself and [thinking] just like maybe this isn't for me. . . . I had that little voice in the back . . . go back home you know you not supposed to be here.

For Ta'Leah, the third year also brought a loneliness she did not expect. She says:

> I felt lonely and I think it was one of the loneliest times I ever felt on campus. And it's crazy. There's tons of people around and I just remember feeling lonely. I was just like, man, everybody went home and I just like you know I'm going to stick it out. I'm going to finish what I started but it was really tough.

At times, Ta'Leah did not want to stay in college; she wanted to go home to her foster parents. She said, "I'm done with this. . . . I want to come home. I want to be with you guys. And they said 'no.'" Ta'Leah credited her foster family for giving her the strength to continue college and for helping her believe in herself. She said that beyond the support, her desire to "be successful, too" kept her in college when things got frustrating. She said:

> I would say it wasn't fun anymore. I had there were a select few people from my home town that came to [college] with me and although we lived in different homes we did know of each other but around my, going to my junior year um a lot of them I would say all of them went back home either because they got pregnant or college was just too much only wanted to party the list goes on. All of them went back home. Um so it was really, really tough for me because we started this journey out together.

Not only did her friends go back home, but Ta'Leah had a difficult time making new friends at college. Part of this was due to a lack of normalcy Ta'Leah experienced in her childhood. She said:

> Sometimes you go to college and you think that you know your life is normal. Everything you experience is normal and then you meet somebody else and they're upbringing was totally different. And it just it just shocks you.

She said that her upbringing shocked others and created a disconnect between her and her peers. She acknowledged her awkwardness, "I'm socially awkward. I'm unable to blend in. But definitely sometimes it's for me on the inside I feel like it's hard for me to connect because I never felt like I met someone on my level." Ta'Leah felt more mature than her peers, many of whom did not understand why she couldn't just go to parties and have fun like everyone else. "A lot of people couldn't understand that. Just have one. It's just a drink. Well to me it was more than that." This disconnection was the most difficult aspect of Ta'Leah's time in college, however, she maintained her grades so that she would stay in college until she graduated. Though things were difficult for Ta'Leah she believed education was her only option. She said:

> I just felt like I already experienced hell and whatever college throws at me, I will be ok. Everybody has a story don't get me wrong. Everybody has a story but I just think a lot of people when they go to college want to get away from home and trust me I did too. Um but to me it was bigger than that.

Ta'Leah used her resilience and personal integrity to help progress through college. When things got difficult and she feared she would not do well, she called upon her foster parents to motivate and empower her. With their support and her desire, Ta'Leah has progressed to her final year of college.

Ta'Leah Structural Description

Ta'Leah, the youngest of three children was removed from her biological parents' home when she was 11. She has two siblings and she is the only one who matriculated to college. She said:

> I was the youngest. I came in I was 11 my oldest sister was . . . 16, my brother he was 15. So we just, we just had two different experiences although my brother was with me originally um but he you know he was a teenager he just wanted to do his own thing and he just wanted to get out so my brother didn't even graduate high school, my sister she graduated high school but she had my niece and she is living now from job to job um we just had two different experiences."

Ta'Leah said her foster mother was a significant support in her educational success. She said:

> [My foster mom didn't] expect anything lower than a B . . . and I think from that movement I knew, holy shit, [my foster mother] expects the best and her standards never drop—no matter how hard life got for me. No matter how many

> times my mom didn't come to my visits or if she relapsed. [My foster mom] still expected the best from me. Nothing less.

Ta'Leah wanted to be academically successful too and realized early in high school that she wanted more education. "I always wanted better for myself. . . . I didn't want to be another statistic and I was going to do anything necessary to make that happen."

Ta'Leah "really sensed that I always wanted to be on my own," and she thought she would go out of state to college. In fact, her biological mom almost convinced her to move far away from her foster family. Ta'Leah said her biological mom said, "That they ain't going want nothing to do with you." But for Ta'Leah, that wasn't true. She said:

> It was the total opposite so much that I didn't even expect it because at that point, I'm grown and you know they did what they needed to do they went above and beyond in my opinion. Um so it was just great, you know having them in my life. They are still rooting for me. They are still having those high expectations and still wanting to be successful.

When she realized the support her foster family had for her, her plans changed. She said:

> My plan was to originally go out of state. I definitely wanted to go out of state and not I chose [my college], because I went to the campus and absolutely loved it and it wasn't too far from home but far enough for me to gain my independence so it end up working out. I think my foster mom, her dad lives 20 minutes away and I have a good relationship with him so I'm like ok this is like a win win situation.

After several years in foster care Ta'Leah built a solid relationship with her foster parents who supported her educational goals. More than others, they helped her see the value in

education and in herself. With them, Ta'Leah learned how to persevere through the difficult times.

Cori Textural Description

Cori, a second year student at a large research university on the West Coast spoke about her resilience and the resilience necessary to matriculate to college as a student who has experienced foster care. When asked what it meant to her to be in college, she said:

> For me it kind of means resilience and [a way to] get out of the system. Or proving that um there is hope. . . . You know there is a high rate of dropout for foster care students um through like middle school and high school area and um yeah mainly resilience kept me [in school].

Though Cori's adoptive mother encouraged her to attend college and took her on college visits beginning in middle school, Cori's mother described how barriers to college matriculation and progression. Cori said her mother "was like preparing me, [saying] 'it's going to be harder.'" She said:

> In the back of my mind I'm just thinking classes, like oh my classes are going to be harder and I'm going to be doing more work. I got to have a higher work ethic. I wasn't thinking of everything like class, social life, time management. Balancing everything [was hard]. Um taking care of yourself, self-care, help, sleep, family life, things outside of college like job searching. You know all that stuff is hard.

All that "stuff" Cori spoke about added to the strain of college life. She said:

> In the fall quarter I was on academic probation which I guess was a slap in the face. But it helped because when I went home. Normally I would expect my mom

> to be upset because I never have been one to get grades that are that bad, but she was more or less understanding because I think she knew what was going to happen more than I did, so her support and I guess her calm reaction [helped].

With her mother's encouragement, Cori felt better. She said, "I got a better balance between self-care and studying . . . and through a lot of mentoring and tutoring got help with my academics." Consequently, her second year in college was easier than her first—from an academic perspective. She said:

> It's just I thought it would get harder, but it's gotten a little. . . I don't want to say easier but I think I'm more accustomed to like adjustments. I feel like my academics have gotten like a lot better. . . On the other spectrum, my personal life or like my um my mental health has been depleting rather than increasing as my academics get better.

Regarding her mental health, Cori said:

> I have been experiencing a lot of sadness. I have high anxiety, and have a couple deaths recently. One was during Christmas break. My biological mom had passed and then a couple months ago one of my childhood best friends had passed and so that was like a big distraction to my academics.

When felt sad, lonely, depressed, or anxious, Cori says that she experienced apathy and procrastination. Additionally, Cori experienced anxiety attacks. She said:

> I stare into space a lot. I daydream a lot and then it's like random. I don't know it just like comes. I've always been very quiet but it's like I'll be . . . in a small setting like my Spanish class. We are supposed to be doing group activities and I don't have a partner. Instead of doing my work, I'll just sit there and stare into

> space and think about. . . life or I don't know things that have like caused me to be depressed or things that get [me] anxious about um not having control of my surroundings.

Beyond Cori's self, the college campus is another source of anxiety. Though she had trouble articulating at first, Cori described her campus as a "toxic environment." She said, "I do not feel safe because of the racial tension." She explained that the tension present on campus "is more or less racial tension and tensions between ideologies." As was a member of the Black Student Union (BSU) and experienced "a lot of cultural appropriations which is very uncomfortable and frustrating. That's when I feel a lot of disconnection. A lot of white privilege is present, too." The tension she felt "is constant," and at times she felt secluded. Cori said, "I feel secluded to like my black community. It's hard to like make connections between my black community and not even just white, but non black [students] in general." She felt connected to her Black community because it had "a family sense" and emphasized similarities instead of differences. When Cori needed to feel connected, she walked around campus and gained perspective and solace via nature.

Cori Structural Description

Though Cori was aware of the statistics regarding youth in foster care attending college, she said she never doubted that she would attend. She said, "[going to college] was always a thing for me. Even in middle school, I think I started touring universities in 8th grade . . . so yeah, it's always been in the back of my mind." Cori chose to attend [college] for many reasons. She chose a "research driven university" that allowed students to "do more than just go to class and get grades. I am actually creating projects."

She also thought the school's setting, near a beach, was a positive reason to choose it. Of the physical environment and connection to nature she said:

> I feel the most connected to this campus when I am surrounded by the nature. [I feel best] when I'm by myself, sometimes walking to class, or walking back from the library after studying at night. Or going to the beach by myself. I have to be alone and I have to have self-thought.

Though Cori needs time alone due to her introverted nature, she is also engaged in campus life. She said:

> [During BSU meetings] we have discussions on the topic of what other students think. We put on events that promote self-love and like black love and we have events to listen to speakers or sometimes we will have alumni come through and speak to us about their experiences. We throw conferences. We go to conferences. Those different types of things really help [me feel] connected.

Cori felt fortunate to be a member of the BSU. It kept her connected to campus even when things were difficult. Though she knew college was going to be difficult, she also said she was not prepared for all that came along with the college experience. She said her mom was not "preparing me for failure but like [she was] preparing me to like expect different results. She knew I knew it was going to be hard, but I don't think I understood the level of difficulty." Cori said, "I had a checklist but I wasn't prepared when I got there and things started happening."

Support via mentors, tutors, campus organizations, and her adoptive parents gave Cori the structure necessary to graduate from high school, matriculate to college, and progress through higher education.

Kaylee Textural Description

Kaylee, who at the time of the interview was weeks away from college graduation spoke about differences in her interview. Race also emerged as significant themes in Kaylee's experiences. Further, she compared her experiences thinking about what changed after she entered the foster care system and after she transitioned from a two-year community college to a four year university. For example, before entering the system, Kaylee did not know foster care was for people like her. She said:

> Yeah to me it was kind of a new thing. Like I never knew about foster care and I had heard of kids being abused by their parents but they were alcoholic parents that would abuse their kids. I didn't realize that there are different case scenarios for foster care system kids.

She continued to make meaning and compared her family to others. She spoke fondly of her foster family, even though there were cultural and language barriers. She said:

> [They] opened my eyes to how a typical family role model would be because with my Asian parents we didn't do a lot of things that my Hispanic foster parents did like helped me [with homework] or taking me out to go [hiking].

Kaylee entered foster care as a teenager, just a few years before graduating high school. Before entering foster care, Kaylee was not a good student. However, she said:

> When I learned that our foster parents were able to take all four of us in, I realized that I needed to kind of change up my view on life. And start taking things more seriously as being the oldest sibling. I don't want what my parents did to affect me or my siblings or our future plans.

While in foster care she met other students in her situation who were an inspiration. She said, "going through foster care I guess I didn't realize there's so many kids who don't [even] have what I have but [they] made the right choices in life and look at where it led them."

With the help of her foster parents, case workers, and transition specialists, Kaylee decided to attend community college after high school. She said:

> I decided that going to community college was helping me still continue to do my education or look for a better future. . . . I hear a lot of people [say] that they . . . regret not continuing [their education] and so I decided to go to community college but it was pretty scary. . . .

As she began to think about her two years in community college, Kaylee says, "I felt like there were so many benefits that I don't think I could possibly name. At my [community college] I transitioned a lot slower into the [bigger state] system." Though the community college slowed the transition initially, Kaylee experienced anxiety and depression. Most of her anxiety stemmed from an expectation (from societal norms to financial aid policy) that it takes two years to graduate from a community college and transfer to a larger state school. She said:

> In two years I need to like pass these classes and so like I developed a lot of anxiety and depression over worrying about transferring over [from] the community college under that whole idea that like I need to transfer within two years. I need to like finish these courses and still maintain my social life. And be happy.

Reflecting on her time between community college and her junior year at a large state school, she said, “looking back it was a pretty scary process.”

When it was time to choose a four-year college to attend, she said, “I searched around and I didn’t know where I wanted to go . . . so I was just like open to getting my acceptance letters.” Kaylee decided on a school, and before moving into her residence hall on campus, she thought “I [have] to start all over again making friends.” She said, “If I wanted to survive college…I had to make friends.” Therefore, Kaylee “went out and joined clubs which helped.” Finding a club was not easy for Kaylee. She struggled with wanting to be connected to and isolated from Asian/Asian American students. She said:

> Even though I tell myself that I didn’t want to be surrounded by Asian people because I feel like I always have to compare with them. . . my college service fraternity is predominately Asian. Sometimes I’ll . . . compare myself and distance myself from other people. . . . Coming up how I was raised and I suffered a little bit from depression and anxiety; it made it hard for me to connect with a lot of people.

She continued:

> And so I guess that’s why I consider myself an outsider; because I went through so much and I can’t really like connect with my Asian parents or Asian friends of mine because um they all come off so well rounded.

Though felt insecure at times, Kaylee understood that she is an inspiration to others and therefore must push forward. She said, “Even though it is kind of rough like I should do it because there [are] people that look up to me. I don’t want to let them down.”

Some things Kaylee will not do—drugs or alcohol. Regarding drug and alcohol use, Kaylee said:

I don't like doing this. I don't know how people do it and I just realized that I could never do them. It's kind of a good thing that I did realize that like even though I try to fit in, like there are certain things I shouldn't push myself too much for.

The aforementioned is an example of the tension Kaylee felt when she interacted with her peers. She said, "I don't want to try and separate myself even though I do separate myself sometimes."

Although her relationship with her peers is complicated, her relationship with the many people and groups that supported her during her time in foster care was simple. Kaylee was filled with praise and positivity towards case workers, foster parents, and mentors. She was grateful for their role in her success and pleased that many stayed in contact. She said:

> I met the most amazing social workers, great former foster parents. . . . They are coming to my graduation. . . . I still keep in contact with [my foster parents] because they have helped me out so much—to the point of like I am so eternally grateful for them. We were kidding; I'm probably going to get their names tattooed with a heart.

Regarding her college achievement she said, "I've come so far. . . . I'm just ready to get out of school. . . . I don't see [my] achievements . . . until I tell other people and they are like, 'wow . . . there are so many foster youth that haven't graduated from college.'"

Kaylee Structural Description

During her 10th grade year in high school, Kaylee's world suddenly changed when she and her siblings were removed from their parents' home and placed into the foster care system. She said:

It took a while before the department of social services came in and separated us from our parents. . . . I was nearing my 11th grade year and I transferred to like several high schools. . . . Then when I got placed with my foster parents, um it was kind of new for me because I'm Asian American and my foster parents are Hispanic and we moved to a predominately Hispanic community and it was a really whole new outlook on the life we lived.

Though Kaylee thinks at times that "It would have been the same outcome [graduating from college] if I didn't go through everything I've been through," she felt grateful to the department of social services. She said:

> It was good they stepped in. [When the] social worker came . . . she had been through so many of these cases. She's so experienced in the field that when I didn't know what to expect, she helped me ease into the process of learning and helped [me find] resources.

As she reflected more on her situation, Kaylee wondered if she would have attended college if not for the department of social service's intervention. She said, "I messed up in my high school years and I was like looking back on it and I regret the decisions I made." As a result, Kaylee wanted to "make sure that I do not repeat the same mistakes I did in high school." She expanded on this idea later when she said:

> If I didn't go through [foster care] I'm pretty sure what the route I was going in high school I wouldn't have [come] to where I am today. I guess because in my coming off of 10th grade year, I was just ditching school because I was living in a ghetto community and I [thought] this is cool to be ditching. I'm fitting in with the popular crowd.

At the time she said, "I didn't realize my future was kind of at stake at the point where I was ditching school and my parents having all these issues. I probably would have ended up just dropping out of high school." And though she had to take "a couple extra courses in the summer to try and graduate on time. I did graduate on time."

Upon being given a second chance, Kaylee decided to enroll in a two-year community college, after high school. Based on her financial aid package, she knew she wanted to transfer to a larger state school after two years. Though the timeline made sense, she struggled to keep up. "I think it's the reason why I developed high anxiety." Kaylee said:

> I would transfer but if I failed one of [the courses] . . . I would be held back. . . . The whole transition [from community college to the state school] was kind of nerve-wracking just because I was taking on more units than . . . I could handle.

When the courses, particularly writing courses, became too challenging, Kaylee said:

> I began plagiarizing some of my papers and one of my professors knew that I was doing that and he said that it was not acceptable in the state school system. He gave me a chance to actually stop [plagiarizing] and I learned from my mistakes.

Choosing a state school was difficult for Kaylee, especially when she began to think about her options. She said:

More of my Asian friends recommended that I go to [a state school] just because it is an Asian community. It is prestigious . . . and really a great school to go to especially if you are trying to stay within the hometown area.

When Kaylee thought about attending [a state school] she said:

> It was just going to be so many Asian people I would have to compete with that I didn't know if I really wanted to compare myself with other Asian people. If they are smarter than me, if they are doing better than me. . . . Sometimes I feel like an outsider because I don't fit in.

With the help of her counselor, Kaylee chose another state school. She said:

> [The university] is right next to the beach. The water is just great over here, and the people are very chill so like it is a great environment to flourish in. . . . [I] have been through so much and I think I need to be away from home and all the stress. When [I] need anything [I] can always go out there to the beach and de-stress and enjoy going to college.

Kaylee did not celebrate her success often. She said, "I guess I'm slowly starting to see my achievements. Going through [foster care] has kind of helped me . . . take advantage of what [I] was given." However, as she reflected on her transition and progression through college, Kaylee began to notice her accomplishments and is proud of herself.

Tara Textural Description

Tara currently attends a small, liberal arts, women's college on the West Coast. Until attending college, Tara changed living placements and schools frequently. Though she attended over 20 K-12 schools, education was a constant for her. In her interview, she described the importance of attending college as well as the difficulties students in foster care faced regarding college matriculation. She said:

> I decided I was going to attend college when I was about like 10. . . . At one of my group homes we used to always play the game Life and um it had the option to go straight to your careers or go to college and take out loans. And like at the end, and I used to play that game like relentlessly. We played it all the time and at the end people who went to college made it further in life. They were more happy; they made more money and stuff like that and so it pretty much by playing that game I kind of like instilled in myself that I wanted to go to college . . . and it never really left me.

Tara's youth was not easy, but she remained focused on her education. She said:

> It was difficult but at the end of the day I made sure I made education my top priority because in my head I knew that was my only way that I was going to not become a statistic. Despite the fact with how challenging it was and how at times it seemed hopeless, I just kept moving.

When it was finally time to enroll in college Tara said:

> I was excited to go to college. I was looking forward to going to a place to craft my own communities. . . I was really, really, happy. I finally made it. Only 10% of foster youth go to college and only 3% of them graduated from college so like

> all that I've been through I was able to go directly to a four-year college after graduating from high school as the valedictorian. That was pretty dope. So I was like excited.

Throughout the interview, Tara reiterated the educational challenges she faced. She believed she was not as prepared as her peers and did not have an equal chance of succeeding. Tara said, "I feel like I am having to play catch up to make up for lost time and to make up for material that I [was], unfortunately not taught." Tara's personal characteristics carried her through the multiple barriers. She described herself as driven, which allowed her to "seek out and do [college] to the best of my ability," Her resilience and drive helped, too. She said:

> It was difficult. I felt like I wasn't adequately prepared to succeed in higher education and more so because that wasn't expected of people who grew up in the foster care system so I felt like while I did well in high school it wasn't really academically challenging.

When she struggled on campus she reached out for support. Tara said:

> Reaching out to people and then letting their resources kind of take me there but just making sure that I follow through, that I'm consistent. I keep my word so if there ever was the opportunity that was provided to me, I'm able to show up and take full advantage of it.

No matter her experiences and successes, however, Tara felt self-doubt. She asked herself questions often. She wondered, "Am I supposed to be here? Am I smart enough?" These insecurities, as well as her Black and lesbian identity status, made Tara feel as if

she is disconnected from her peers; however, her skills in "Time management, commitment, and learning how to talk to people" helped her navigate college. She said:

> Learning how to ask for help . . . [gaining] writing skills, learning how to research, and learning how to write persuasive and compelling papers for a particular assignment are the skills that I definitely lacked going in, but two years later I am able to do that and know how to like reach out and get helped if need be.

Though Tara does not feel connected to her peers, she was engaged "all the time." She felt most engaged in her classes. She said:

> [I like] my intro to career studies class. The professor was truly outstanding, the students were passionate about the subject and that was I think my second semester of my first year…that was a time when I could really say I was fully engaged. I read all the reading we went through, actively participated in class, felt knowledgeable about the material. . . . Looking back, I thoroughly enjoyed that class and that semester.

Compared to her peers, Tara believed it was more difficult for her to maneuver her way around college. She had to learn so much, and that process was exhausting. She said, "It is taking energy that I need to perform well." She believed that though she was less prepared than her peers, she learned the skills necessary to be successful in college from her previous experiences in foster care. Specifically, Tara believed that her ability to withstand adversity and difficult situations made her more prepared for college compared to her peers not in the foster care system. She said:

> Since I have grown up, a lot of things haven't gone my way. . . . I know how to bounce back. I understand that if everything is going my way, shit is going to happen and it's not the end of the world and I guess like having had to learn that at a young age has prepared me to like handle hardships in college. You know, things are difficult so I guess there's like self-advocating learning how to handle hardships and just maneuver and navigate various systems. I know how to navigate my way through the foster care system and so I know how to navigate my way through, in a sense through like higher education. I know if something's not right. I know how to talk to somebody. You know what I mean? I'm f not going to be easily persuaded to like not get my needs met just because it may cause a conflict with somebody else or it's not something they want to hear at the current moment.

Tara's early experiences gave her space to develop the perseverance and resilience necessary to navigate college. Further, education offered her the hope she needed to move through the times in her life that were most discouraging.

Tara Structural Description

Tara's youth was fraught with transition. She attended several K-12 schools. The movement she experienced made her think about school differently. She understood that because few teachers were invested in her education, she had to make up the difference. She said:

> Due to frequent changing placements . . . I had to change school. I always feel like in a sense that I had to make up for what I was missing. I missed a lot throughout K-12 education. . . . I went to over 23 different schools so obviously it

> was difficult for me to retain materials and it was difficult for me when I went to a different school. Sometimes I would be placed in a class, but I already did the work and so I was literally sitting there bored. Other times I may have been placed in a class that was a bit too advanced for me because I didn't do the classwork before.

She knew she was not "allotted the opportunities that certain people in society [are given]." She wondered about her ability to "go directly to a four-year university." Despite her multiple transitions and worries about her academic preparedness, she described her first year of college as "a breeze." Things got more difficult in the second year. She said, "Second year of college was one of the most academically, emotionally challenging years of my life." To navigate the difficulty, she made connections on campus. She said, "My ultimate purpose of going to this school, is obviously to learn a lot and to graduate in a timely fashion." To do so, Tara said, "I got connected with other students in the classroom to have study groups and not let self-doubt influence my performance in the classroom or it would derail me from my goal." When asked how she was more prepared than other students, Tara said she was a better self-advocate. She said, "I know how to advocate for myself . . . [other students] may not have been their own self advocate. They probably had some parental guidance." Tara's ability to set goals and advocate for herself made it possible for her to matriculate to college, even after attending over 20 K-12 schools.

Cheyenne Textural Description

The childhood trauma associated with abuse and neglect, as well as multiple transitions in the foster care system, undergirded Cheyenne's experiences. Much of what

she discussed in the interview was a consequence of trauma. For example, Cheyenne's inability to trust was a result of adults who continued to place her in unstable situations. However, each instance of instability added to her perseverance, perspective, and resilience. Cheyenne described the experience of moving as painful. She said:

> Moving was very very painful. . . . In the beginning of foster care, [I didn't] know what it [was]. [And I was] like oh there's a new family that cares about me. I'm going to love them. And I did. I absolutely loved them. I fell in love with my first two foster families. And the first one left me. They packed up my stuff and ditched me at a residential treatment facility within 24 hours after Christmas.

In another instance, Cheyenne described the moment she decided she was not going to trust another person. She said:

> And after a year and a half they kicked me out and replaced me with a puppy. So I was like no more. I was never going to trust a single person ever again. And I was probably right because the third foster home was terrible. [They were] not supporting me in any way. Not giving us food or just basic necessities and that was really hard.

During the worst times, Cheyenne described "Just being an object to people. Being something that you can just throw into a basement because that's where your unfurnished room was." Consequently, Cheyenne was unable to trust a family that wanted to help her realize her dreams of attending college. In the passage below she described the necessity of boundaries as well as the regret in her inability to let love into her life:

> Coming to my fifth foster home which was the teacher and the principal they were amazing but I didn't trust them because of everything I have been through. I could

> not trust them. I couldn't love them. I couldn't confide in them. I couldn't get close to anyone ever again and I regret that the most. . . . I still struggle with this. I still struggle to show affection and I don't know how to show affection properly. I recognize that about myself. Yeah like having these people like kind of take that ability from you is really tough and I let them do that. I let them hurt me. And I told myself that I would never trust again and I never did. And that's the regret I have. But yeah I think that's a barrier even now, in just trying to trust people. I'm trying to get close. I'm trying to get intimate like with my best friend. We are super close but like I can't touch people. I can't let people touch me. I can't let people hug me or poke me. Like I just can't do it. Because of all the people who have touched me. Like not sexually but like that have hurt me. Who were close to me. I see that affection as being really really harmful as a weapon later on.

When things were most difficult for Cheyenne, she said she would rely on her goals to help her move forward. Her first goal was to turn 18 and gain her independence from her parents and the foster care system. She described the origin of this goal; she said:

> I was the one that everyone hated in my family. I was the problem. But um my dad was kind of a support (but he was also gone all the time getting drunk to escape reality and himself). But when he was there he would always tell me every single time my mom hit me he would say, wait until your 18th birthday.

Cheyenne thought, I will "wait five years, wait four years, and wait three years just wait until [my]18th birthday and everything will be better." Cheyenne set another goal to attend college. She said:

> I decided when I was a kid I wanted to go to college. I heard about the way my parents talked about it [and] I thought it was amazing. I thought it was great way to learn what you want to learn and to gain skills that you want to have in a job. . . . I've always loved learning and so I've had this goal for a long time.

Cheyenne knew the goal of college was common for people her age. She said:

> [I had] the same plan that everyone else had. But then suddenly when it stopped I didn't know what I was going to do anymore. I didn't know how I was going to make it work. It was very scary.

She went on to say, "When I got into foster care and I was near graduation I kind of had that uh oh moment of oh wait that dream of mine is probably not so likely anymore." These moments of hopelessness were not new to Cheyenne. She said:

> Unfortunately, I feel [it] is very common when you have just. Ah. It's so hard to explain but you just finally hit this barrier of like thought [and] it's just disempowering and it's very sad and then there's just so so many loose screws and unknowns that you just don't know if it is even possible. . . . I was thinking of the extreme because that's what I had to experience my whole life. Was going to the extreme.

At these moments Cheyenne realized she was more susceptible to feeling like an imposter. She said, "I felt like I was behind, like everyone was ahead of me like I wasn't as good as everyone else. I didn't have the same chances. It was less likely for me to succeed."

Cheyenne's early experiences impacted her interpersonal skills. She had a difficult time relating to her peers, especially those who chose to drink alcohol. She said:

> It's pretty hard when other people are kind of living in a different world. I feel like they have different priorities than me. They care more about having fun and going out and getting drunk than they do going to school. And that's not who I am so there are times when I am like man, like I know not everyone parties, but it feels like it.

She went on to say, "I'm not a partier—that's not my way of um rebelling. My way of rebelling is just doing what I want and being successful." Cheyenne, who is "very proud to be in college," says that her childhood experiences give her the perspective necessary to find happiness at last. She said:

> I could not be happier and I didn't know about this feeling until I went to college. I think it's another way that I feel ahead [of my peers]. People have decent lives and they don't know how good their lives are. Then they go out and party to try to reach this high. . . . For me everyday that is just a normal day . . . feels like the best day of my life because it's lacking pain. I'm so much happier than everybody else because I know that I have something really, really terrible to compare my happiness too.

The lack of pain Cheyenne described was both physical and emotional. As a student in college, she felt empowered to live independently and persevere through even the most difficult times. When she turned 18 and graduated from high school around the same time, Cheyenne found the hope and guidance she needed to be successful in college. She described this empowering moment by juxtaposing it to one of her lowest.

She said:

> I definitely came very close to dying by my own hand, not my mom's. But . . . on my 18th birthday just being myself, with my supportive foster parents—you know the physics teacher and the principal and their nine year old kid. We were in the back yard at my party . . . a graduation and birthday party mixed together . . . Having everyone there and then realizing that oh my gosh [he was] right. My dad was actually right.

Cheyenne's goal to make it to 18 was realized. She not only earned her independence from her birth mother, but matriculated to college.

Cheyenne's Structural Description

When Cheyenne thought about foster care and her experiences, she believed that inconsistency was one of the biggest barriers she faced. The lack of structure made it difficult to navigate life, especially life in school. She said:

> I think inconsistency was definitely the hardest thing about foster care. You know, having different people change all the time you have all the six different case workers, three [guardian ad litem], so many therapists I can't count them all, five homes if you can call them homes, five places where they dropped you. Not being able to know where your support was. . . . That directly relates to inconsistency.

This inconsistency was in addition to a lack of support. Cheyenne felt little support from her birth parents and several foster parents. In fact, Cheyenne said that often, the families were unsupportive. Their actions made it more difficult to achieve her goal of earning an education. During this time Cheyenne believed she would not be able to matriculate to

college because of the lack of support and stability; however, she eventually found a group of people that continued to support her efforts to attend college. She said:

> I've had my GAL [guardian ad litem] for like five years. She has been amazing. My therapist has been amazing. My last foster home—they were amazing. It takes a while to find the good ones but once you do and once they stay there. Like it's so important that they stay in your life.

Cheyenne's support team gave her the skills necessary to find resources to help apply and finance college. She said:

> My GAL would say hey, I got sent this, just passing it on to see if you are interested in applying . . . [often] I've done my own research but a lot of it has been actually helpful and done by my Chafee worker. They really stepped up. It's great.

And of her "good" foster family, Cheyenne said:

> [They were] very supportive of my transition to college and made it so much easier with helping me write essays and letters of recommendation. It's just finding the resources I needed to be able to transition to college. That was the most important piece for me was having that support from my foster parents. Um. I also had support from my brother.

Financial support for college was a major theme in Cheyenne's experiences. She says:

> It really came down to the scholarships and like how I was going to pay for [college]. I don't know why but I was super against loans. . . . I just didn't want to

> touch it . . . if [I] graduate without loans [I am] better off than like 80% of students.

The financial freedom of attending college without taking out student loans assuaged much of Cheyenne's anxiety. A lack of anxiety helped her experience catharsis. She said:

> To be able to be going to college for free; to be having my own room for free and to be getting an education and getting a degree for free—and more…I don't owe my parents. I don't owe loans I don't owe anything. For me to be able to focus on me and my healing. I think college has been a healing experience. . . . I know a lot more about myself than most people know about themselves. I know who I am and what I want and that's more than what a lot of people can say.

Cheyenne described her feelings when she realized she was the recipient of a large donor based scholarship. She said:

> When they told us all that we got the scholarship. It was so great. I wish I could put it into words. They are all around very supportive; they provide financial support, emotional support, academic support, tutors they will help pay for it if we need help paying our phone bill they will help us out so I mean all around it was just an amazing, amazing [experience].

Though college provided Cheyenne the space to explore her identity, a series of counselors taught her to love herself. She said:

> I've been through lots, tons and tons and tons of years of therapy long before foster care um and my therapist has definitely taught me to love myself and that's I think probably one of the hardest things that anyone can do.

Cheyenne went on to describe a very supportive counselor who facilitated her growth. She said:

> I've had 20 terrible therapists but this one good one at the end really, really, really helped me and she, she was hard. She really pushed me to see things in a different light that I used to not be able to see in and then I was like, 'oh wait, you are right.' And so working with her was absolutely very hard because changing the way that you think is very difficult to do but now I'm still so much happier because I'm able to check myself to be able to continue through and not put things out of proportion and she just taught me a lot of lasting skills. Um and having her be so supportive and consistent is very, very helpful. It was very, very helpful.

Cheyenne knew that most students in her situation do not succeed academically. In fact, she mentioned that "less than 3% of college or foster kids go to college to get their degree." She is proud of her accomplishment and also realizes that compared to where she was, living independently while being paid to attend college is special. She said:

> I mean six years ago it was just staying alive. That was my only goal and I did it and I didn't think it was possible but somehow I did it and I think ever since that it was like reaching [college]. . . . I never thought was possible but I [just thought] 'keep it up. Good job. Let's make it a little better than just surviving.

Awnan Textural Description

Awnan, a goal oriented student, believed he needed college in order to be successful. Before attending a four year institution in the Pacific Northwest, Awnan

matriculated to community college after graduating from high school. He said, "It was important that I go to college in order to be successful because there are not many people in the world who didn't go to college and are successful." Awnan put a lot of pressure on himself to do well and believed that he had only one opportunity to do things well. He said:

> I have these classes and these things. I have like only one shot—only it's not like I have something where if I miss one I can catch a later one. It's not like that with classes. If I fail it or I don't do well on this test, I can't retake it. If I don't turn in an assignment I won't have a second chance to turn it in.

As a result of this attitude, Awnan chose to avoid parties, alcohol, and drugs. He acknowledged the temptation to party in college, but did not think it was necessary. He said, "If [a] person went to college and thought that it was all party they are probably not prepared. A lot of people portray college as only about partying, and that it's not about studying anymore."

Awnan described the ways he prepared for his transition from a two-year college to a four-year university. He says, "I [went] onto the . . . website for the college. [On] the website I go to my class schedule . . . [I saw] what I need to do for the first day, what we need for class, and what I need to be getting." He said he tried "getting a basic understanding of the class before it even started." By researching his environment, he was able to "get in touch with people" so that he would know his peers. To meet more friends, Awnan joined the tyco club. "Tyco is a Japanese drum and it was fun at first. I mean it was fun the whole time, but it just gets so busy in my club. It's so busy. They have more practice hours than we have [hours] in classes." This activity helped Awnan

feel connected to campus. Awnan said university faculty and students in the same major also help him stay connected to the university. He also made connections with former youth in foster care through his campus' organization. He said, "I see a lot of people and a lot of students here for school. We have a program on campus that is for students who have experienced foster care, like me." The university made it easy for Awnan to be connected with peers. He said, "I have a lot of friends in college."

Awnan Structural Description

Awnan had the same foster parents for several years, and that stability helped him be successful in school. He understands how fortunate he is. He said, "[My foster parents] have been taking foster kids for over 10 years and they have over 100 foster kids. They said I was the first foster kid to go to college." This and the endless possibilities of life keep him motivated. He said:

> To be unmotivated in life and in general [is strange] because there are so many things to do. You can't keep track of everything. Like we all have things in the way and you kind of end up at the results of your choices and your priorities.

Awnan remembers this to keep himself motivated.

When Awnan applied to colleges, he looked at many factors. He decided on a local community college "to kind of get a feeling of what college is like. To get myself ready for college and also to look for a school that may have my major." Currently, Awnan is a junior. He "transferred [into a four-year university] after one year in [community] college." In the year he went to community college, Awnan researched universities that had his major, criminal justice. He also wanted to attend a university that had a mentoring organization for youth in foster care. He felt comfortable transferring to

his four year university because of the school's Fostering Scholars program, which "is a program for students who have experienced foster care. Each year we have about four or five new scholars. . . . [Scholars] receive a scholarship for four years."

The Fostering Scholars program helped Awnan meet people around campus, and it also connected him with an academic advisor. He said, "We meet with an advisor on a weekly basis to see how we are adjusting to the environment. Also, if we need help we can always ask them. They are very helpful." Awnan spoke highly of his advisor and said that "they can be a person to talk to when we need something. They can also be a person we can go to when we need [someone] to talk to—someone kind of like a parent." Having, stable, parent like figure in his life made it easier for Awnan to navigate campus. As a result of his connections via his advisor, Awnan applied for "a student involvement ambassador [position] on campus." Regarding the position, Awnan said:

> The position was helping me with just being involved with the center for student involvement, so I'll be working there at the front desk like directing students where they should be. To get them what they need . . . . It will be 12-15 hours per week.

During the interview, Awnan said he believed that "there is a good side to everything. There's good and bad and we can't always look at the bad." His optimism and pragmatic views seemed to make it easier for him to navigate life after foster care and take help where given.