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Growing Up Fast: Implications for Foster Youth When Independence and Early Adulthood Collide

Brenda M. Morton

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Brenda M. Morton

College of Education at George Fox University, Newberg, OR 97132, United States.

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ABSTRACT

Foster care alumni face overwhelming challenges as they transition from care to independence. Torn between their desire to be independent, yet acknowledging they need support, they struggle to find their footing. Adopting a survivor self-reliance mind-set, they set out to earn a bachelor's degree on their own. As they struggle, they compare themselves to non-foster peers who, by enlarge, have a support system enabling them a prolonged entrance to adulthood, which provides a safety net. Without a safety net, and with a focus on independence, decisions youth from foster care make, result in few alumni earning a bachelor's degree.

A college education continues to be important for success in our society. Researchers have argued that college attendance and/or bachelor degree attainment is particularly critical for young people who have been in foster care (Watt, Norton, & Jones, 2013). However, for this particularly vulnerable population, it is out of reach (Salazar, 2013; Uesugi, 2009).

The primary responsibility of protective services is to ensure that children live in a safe environment. When this environment is deemed unsafe, the agency will step in and remove a child, placing them into foster care. Though the settings vary, from placement with relatives to secure lock-down facilities, children and youth who move through the foster care system have been found to have significant educational deficits, leaving them woefully unprepared for adulthood and independent living upon leaving the foster care system (Morton, 2016).

When seeking reasons for these educational deficits, researchers have pointed to consistent movement from one foster care placement to another (which typically also means a school change), over and underrepresentation in special education programs, high suspension and expulsion rates compared to non-foster peers, and inadequate preparation for independent living (Morton, 2016). Frequent disruptions in school enrollment have been noted as the most prominent barrier to post-secondary success (Pecora et al., 2005; Wolanin, 2005). Since safety is the first priority of the Department of Human Services, children and youth are moved when needed, not at the end of a grading period or semester. For high school students this often means a loss of credits, which puts them farther behind on the path to graduation. Approximately 50% of all foster children will graduate from high school (Bruskas, 2008). Of these who graduate, approximately 20% will go on to pursue post-secondary education at a community college, four-year college, or university compared to 60% of students outside of the foster care system (Wolanin, 2005). Yet, 63% reported plans to continue their education beyond high school (Merdinger, Hines, Lemon, & Wyatt, 2005). For those who do go on to pursue a bachelors' degree, they do so with significant academic challenges and a lack of social and family support (Geiger, Hanrahan, Cheung, & Leitz, 2016). It is not surprising that of those who do enroll in post-secondary education, only 2–4% complete a bachelor's degree (Courtney et al., 2011; Pecora et al., 2005).

The transition to adulthood is complex for foster youth. Developmentally, even more than the general population, they could benefit from an extended period to adulthood. Such an extension could help to offset their inadequate preparation for all that adulthood entails, including their inadequate experience in building relationships. This lack of preparation and experience forms a large part of the challenge foster youth face as they set out to earn a bachelor's degree.

1. Literature review

For youth in foster care, their discharge from care has significant meaning; it signals independence, whether or not they are prepared for it. For many, there is a desire to be independent. For others, their discharge date is met with significant anxiety. Goodkind, Schelbe, and Shook (2011) explained the complexity foster youth face as "two simultaneous transitions – one from the care, protection, and supervision of the child welfare system to a position of autonomy and responsibility, and the second from childhood to adulthood" (p. 1039).

Two specific ideologies can be invaluable in articulating the complexities foster youth face. The first, emerging adulthood, developed by

Arnett (2000), presents a developmental period, describing a transitional experience of young adults aged 18–25. The second, presented by Samuels and Pryce (2008), describes the idea of survivalist self-reliance. These two ideas, when considered together, can provide a framework for understanding the challenges, actions, and attitudes in the experiences of foster youth as they pursue post-secondary education.

Arnett (2000) defined emerging adulthood as "a time of life when many different directions remain possible, when little about the future has been decided for certain, when the scope of independent exploration of life's possibilities is greater for most people than it will be at any other period of the life course" (p. 469). He goes on to point out that suspending the transition to adulthood until late in a person's 20s provides freedom to explore potential life courses.

In emerging adulthood, young adults attending college will often switch majors as they attempt to determine the best fit for a career. Attendance in graduate programs also becomes attractive as it provides another opportunity to again switch course, consider a different field of study, and/or potential career choice. Emerging adulthood is a time of finding one's place in society, determining interests and career potential, but doing it all over a prolonged period of time. The move from emerging adulthood to adulthood is characterized by three specific criteria: accepting responsibility for one's self, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent.

While a large portion of the population will enjoy emerging adulthood, by enlarge, youth who have been in foster care will not have this same experience. Consider emerging adulthood in the context of youth exiting foster care. Upon leaving the foster care system, 40.5% of former foster youth felt they were somewhat prepared to live independently (Merdinger et al., 2005). Pecora et al. (2005) found 56.9% of alumni stated that upon aging-out of the foster care system they were prepared for independent living to some degree, with 33.3% having a valid driver's license, and 38.4% reporting they had $250 in cash. After living in a structured foster care system in which they had adults making decisions on their behalf, emancipation has appeal. However, former foster youth find that they are not prepared to make their way through a less structured, complex environment (Uesugi, 2009). If by the time they leave care they have not attended an Independent Living program, and if foster parents or caseworkers have not covered financial responsibility or money management adequately, the youth is unprepared for how to manage her/his own living expenses (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010).

The placement instability foster youth experience also affects their ability to prepare for independent living. With each new placement, time is needed to build rapport between the new foster parent and the youth. Each new placement brings new house rules, a new community, and a new school. Because the focus is on building rapport, and on helping a foster youth acclimate to a new placement, it is difficult for the foster parent to focus on teaching and modeling the skills necessary for that youth to be independent (Geenen et al., 2007). "Housing, transportation, health, legal matters, money management, and employment, are skills that virtually all youth need in order to have stable, happy and productive lives but that youth who have spent considerable time in foster care often struggle to master" (Salazar, 2011, p. 27).

Attending a post-secondary institution requires that students be able to make decisions and advocate for themselves. They must also be able to manage finances, health care, housing and transportation (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). These are all adult activities. Up to this point, the student has been a dependent, having been cared for and having had basic necessities provided by someone else (Wolanin, 2005).

Samuels and Pryce (2008) found foster youth struggling between two distinct identities: drive to be independent of others and dependent for help and support. Foster youth were found to live between these two competing realities. They coined this mindset "survivalist self-reliance" (p. 1202), identified by early adult status, pride in surviving one's past experience, and independence. In their study, Samuels and Pryce found that foster youth viewed dependence on others as a "risk to one's

independence and success" (p. 1205). They went on to explain that foster youth expressed pride in surviving their past experiences and the way they dealt with situations on their own and they continued to use their pain as a renewed commitment to self-reliance.

The very nature of foster care can create hesitancy to trust others. Foster youth often have difficulty creating and maintaining positive, trusting relationships with others. After moving from home to home they view people in their life as transitory beings, not as candidates for life-long relationships. Goodkind et al. (2011) noted the difficulty foster youth have in creating and maintaining positive, supportive relationships. Their findings mirrored those of Samuels and Pryce (2008), in that both groups of researchers found identification with survivalist self-reliance among youth with experience in the foster care system, and both found that a rush to independence hampered foster youth's ability to develop relationships with others. For many, the transition to independence is a tremendous obstacle, and is often compounded by loneliness as they struggle with creating and maintaining relationships.

The work of both Arnett (2000) and Samuels and Pryce (2008) is critical to understanding the profound challenges foster youth face as they transition from care to independence. These frameworks encapsulate the tension between support and independence for foster youth. While Arnett states, "Age is only the roughest marker of the subjective transition from emerging adulthood to young adulthood" (p. 471), the age of 18–21 marks the age of emancipation for youth aging out of care. They are expected to be able to accept responsibility for themselves, make independent decisions, and become financially independent as support comes to an end for them; they are from that moment classified as adults. Yet, the foster care system has not prepared them adequately to meet the responsibilities that come with adulthood. The inadequacy of preparation that the foster care system provides, the survivalist idea that one needs to be independent at eighteen, and the lack of support needed to enable a period of emerging adulthood, create significant barriers to academic success for foster youth.

2. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this research is to explore the perceptions of current and former foster youth who are enrolled in a public or private four-year university. This group represents a unique group in that they have thus far been academically successful. By exploring the experiences of individuals who are enrolled in a four-year institution, barriers to graduation can be identified, and the information gained can lead to the creation of support structures. Specifically, this research explored the following research question: What challenges/barriers did the student who had experienced foster care encounter as they pursued a bachelors' degree? Seeking answers to this question, phenomenological methodology was utilized, which allows the lived experiences to be shared, resulting in the sharing of individual stories and experiences, followed by specific recommendation for change.

3. Methodology

Researchers have only recently begun to explore why so few former foster youth who attend college graduate with a degree (Merdinger et al., 2005). To address the gap in the field, this longitudinal study was conducted in the Northwest, focusing on participants aged 18–24, who were current or former foster youth, currently enrolled in a four-year college or university. Specifically, the lived experiences of these youth were explored through in-depth interviews and surveys, seeking to gain understanding of their experiences as they pursued post-secondary education. A phenomenological study focuses on the meaning of the lived experience for individuals (Creswell, 2007). It is specifically defined as "a human science, which studies persons" (van Manen, 1990, p.6). The goal of this particular type of research design is to take the shared lived experience of individuals and provide a description of the

significance of this experience (Creswell, 2007). Van Manen (1990) describes phenomenology as a design that "attempts to describe and interpret these meanings to a certain degree of depth and richness" (p. 11). Phenomenological design uses retrospective reflection on the part of the individual who experienced the phenomenon. It is retrospective rather than introspective because in introspective reflection the individual is still in the midst of the phenomenon (van Manen, 1990). This specific design was appropriate in this context, as the students were being asked to reflect on prior experiences.

Once I received Institutional Review Board approval for this study, criterion sampling was used. This sampling technique requires that the potential pool of participants be narrowed so that those in the study have all experienced the phenomenon in question (Creswell, 2007). Participants were solicited with the help of the Department of Human Services (DHS) Independent Living Program (ILP) coordinators representing three specific geographic areas in the Northwest. The ILP coordinators contacted foster youth on their caseload, who were attending a college or university and passed along my contact information. Because DHS ILP coordinators made the contact, I was not privy to the number of foster youth that could have participated in this study. I have knowledge only of those who chose to contact me and participate and am therefore unable to determine the response rate.

From interested participants, 21 were purposely selected based on their enrollment in post-secondary education, foster care placement, and commitment to participate through the four-year grant funded study. The 21 students represent six colleges and universities in the state, including three public and three private institutions.

3.1. Data collection

I set individual appointments with each participant where I conducted open-ended, in-depth interviews. Each participant was asked the same questions with the average interview lasting 90 min. These questions included demographic information, including years in foster care, number of placements, etc., and then moved to open-ended questions, which allowed participants to tell their story. After the initial interview, participants also completed four surveys over the next two years. These surveys included questions on topics and themes that were identified during the initial interview and asked for participants to identify challenges they had or were encountering during their undergraduate experience. After I received and reviewed the surveys, follow up face-to-face interviews were conducted to gain additional understanding of the phenomenon they encountered. During each interview, participants were audio recorded, and field notes were used during the interviews after receiving their signed consent to participate. Member checking was also completed for the interviews and the four surveys. Once the data was collected, it was analyzed following Creswell (2007) six steps, outlined below.

3.2. Limitations

The study is limited in that it represents the experiences of 21 participants who all experienced foster care in the same Northwest state. Additionally, qualitative research is not meant to be generalizable. It is intended as an exploration of the experiences of foster youth pursuing a bachelor's degree in hope of shedding light on the challenges they encounter and what contributes to leaving the university prior to graduation. Therefore, this study is an exploration of the experiences of foster youth, not foster parents, nor others close to them. Therefore, the study is limited to the perceptions of youth who experienced foster care. Second, I was the only one conducting and analyzing the interviews and survey data. For this reason, member checking was used to check for any personal bias or assumptions in the way in which the data was interpreted.

4. Data analysis

Once the interview data was collected, the interviews were transcribed. Then, using Creswell (2007) data analysis protocol, each interview was reviewed and a list of important statements was created. Significance was attributed to those comments the participant made that included a change in tone, voice level, emotion displayed, or other changes in body language observed during the interview, as well as topics that the participant either brought up multiple times or continued to go back to throughout the interview. In addition, a description of the "what" or the "textural description" of the experience was created as well as a description of the "how" of the participant's journey (Creswell, 2007, p. 159). I then took the list of important statements and sorted those into themes. In addition, a scan of the transcribed information for similar words or terms used by the participants (in vivo) was identified. Each survey went through a similar process with significant statements identified. Once this was completed, a draft was emailed to each participant for feedback. The information received was then used to clarify, or correct the textural and structural descriptions. The findings in this manuscript represent the significant theme of independence/self-reliance, which emerged from the data. By using both face-to-face interviews, surveys, and follow-up interviews, data saturation was achieved.

5. Results

Both positive and negative, or supports and barriers were identified during this study. This manuscript presents the negative, or the barriers they encountered.

Twenty-one students, current or former foster youth, participated in this study. Each shared their story, from entering foster care to their journey to college and the challenges they encountered. What follows are participant demographics, in Table 1, and then identification of a

Table 1
Participant demographics.

Pseudonym	Race/ Ethnicity	Years in foster care	Public/ Private University	Major	Enrollment status
Paige	Biracial	9	Private	Nursing	Dropped out
Madison	White	16	Private	Engineering	Dropped out
Alyssa	Biracial	4	Private	Theatre	Graduated
Lexi	Asian	5	Private	Christian Ministries	Graduated
Cheyenne	White	5	Private	Communications	Graduated
Ann	White	1	Private	Communications	Enrolled
Lily	White	4	Private	Psychology	Dropped out
Aileen	White		Private	Nursing	Enrolled
Amaris	White	3	Private	Political Science	Enrolled
Murray	African-American	3	Public	Computer Science	Enrolled
Nicole	White	16	Private	Biology	Graduated
Lauren	White	2	Public	Political Science	Graduated
Ben	White	4	Public	Criminal Justice	Dropped out
Molly	White	13	Public	Criminal Justice	Graduated
Samantha	White	3	Public	Political Science	Graduated
Allison	White	3	Public	Psychology	Enrolled
Caitlin	White	5	Public	Psychology	Graduated
Paulina	White	5	Public	Biology	Dropped out
Rebecca	White	4	Public	Education	Dropped out
Clay	Biracial	10	Public	Exercise Science	Dropped out
John	White	5	Public	Criminal Justice	Enrolled

major theme that emerged.

A major theme that emerged, which describes a barrier to educational achievement, was a commitment to independence or self-reliance (Samuels & Pryce, 2008), resulting in an inability to ask others for help when needed. While survivalist self-reliance can be positive, propelling the victim to succeed despite a lack of support, it can also create paralysis when the victim desperately needs help but cannot ask for it from others (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). This phenomenon, for the 21 participants, presents in the classrooms as apathy, low self-confidence, and lack of motivation. The results, as experienced by the participants, are academic failure in one or more college classes and/or dropping courses without understanding the consequences, resulting in loss of financial aid and on campus housing.

5.1. The Struggle to ask for help

For the 21 participants, the inability to ask for help, motivated by a sense of pride and a desire to blend in, was expressed throughout their interviews and surveys. The rationale was that if others could do it, then so should they. Molly identified this as "the chameleon effect – they (foster youth) want to blend in with everything else, and they want to have that normalcy. Normalcy is a huge thing." This means that they compare themselves to their non-foster peers, even when it is not appropriate to do so. A sense of pride and never wanting to become a burden to anyone kept them from asking for help. Cheyenne said bluntly, "I hate asking for help. I won't ask for help. I feel like I don't want to feel like a burden or feel like I am not the same as all the other kids. I think I should be able to do everything they can, so if they don't need help then I don't need help." Lexi explained this further. She said:

A lot of people I know who have been in foster care or been abused or whatnot, they feel like they don't have a voice. They would rather suffer on their own than ask anyone for help. I don't let myself ask for help, which I probably should work on that. It is kind of just, I feel like a lot of times I could just do it on my own. But even if I did, I don't know if I would go, just because it is a feeling, just from being in a foster house, that I could go and ask them a math question, help on a math question or anything like that. It just carried over to here. I think that is a   big thing with foster kids, too, is that I always feel that I had so much help already that I was a burden on people, I guess. I don't know. I don't like being a burden. I think sometimes you have to be forced to get help. We have to accept it, too.

This inability to ask for help includes asking for financial assistance. Molly, who saw the importance of asking for financial help so she could stay in school, shared her continued internal struggle. She said:

I have panic attacks over money issues and things like that, and those are still things   that I'm struggling with. It is still difficult. It almost is a little bit more difficult now than it was with school, because with school I could be, OK, this is school-related. I ran out of money at the end of the term. Can I borrow money? I have done it. I don't like doing that. I don't like putting a strain on other people. Those things are prominent right now, being in my state of limbo. It is very prominent. I have money saved up, yes, but what happens when that money depletes? What happens when I don't have myself to rely on and I don't get a job? That is where my mind is at right now; what happens next?

Even in the midst of significant stress, and facing the reality of a dire financial situation, this sense of determination and pride to accomplish something on their own is overwhelming. Ann summed it up by saying, "And I'm going to own it in every sense of the word. I'm going to own my degree, in every sense of the word. I did that on my own." The reality however, is that academic success is at stake and they actually know they need help. Lily said, "Personally, I feel like not dumb, but I just don't think – when I was in the nursing program, I definitely should have asked for help a lot. I had the opportunity to, but I just feel like I

should have gotten it almost, or I felt like I'd be wasting their time to be asking for help, because almost I felt like, well, you should know this." Paige shared this same struggle. She said, "I don't know. It was kind of like they expected you to get everything. I kind of felt like I'd be dumb asking them for help almost, if that makes sense."

How is the struggle between pride and academic success resolved? What would actually cause foster youth to seek help? Clay shared:

Probably failing a class, being really close to failing. Then I would go, OK, stop being prideful and just go and ask for help. Personally, I think it would be better if I didn't wait that long but just knowing my personality, I probably would wait that long. I think it just stems from coming up in the foster care system and stuff. I think that comes just from my personality – I don't need help, I'm good.

Finally, the holidays were also presented as a significant challenge. Many college students look forward to the holiday break. For foster youth, this can mean facing homelessness. Ann explained:

Even now that the holidays are coming, people are talking about, I'm so excited to go home, I'm so excited to see my family and this and that. It is a huge trigger for me, a really, really, really bad trigger for me, because I don't know where I'm going. I have been worrying about it all year. That is a hard, hard reality for me. It makes me so sad. For them, they don't even know that it is something that really hurts me, but I can't take it, even just little Christmas things. Even if it doesn't relate to family, there is this really deep hole and sadness that comes up in my heart, just seeing a Christmas tree. It is, that's really pretty and then it hurts. The seasons changing going into Thanksgiving and Christmas and all that, that's hard. That is going to be really hard. It is already starting to have its affect on me, and we haven't even put up Christmas trees and stuff yet.

Foster youth face homelessness during the long breaks because universities close, with most requiring students to leave campus. Since the student is most often unable, or unwilling, to ask for help, faculty and administrators are unaware of this significant need. As Ann points out, this is something that many worry about all year.

The students' expressed difficulty in asking others for help illuminates the challenges foster youth face in creating deep, significant, and trusting relationships with others. Lily said, "I am the quiet kid who sits in class and doesn't always raise my hand or ask for help." The desire to succeed on their own can create barriers as foster youth pursue independence through success in college.

5.2. Connecting with others

Each participant acknowledged the desire for friends and deep connections. However, they also consistently acknowledged the challenges in becoming vulnerable to others; often their efforts in connecting with others are not reciprocated. Ann said, "I always put myself at the bottom of the line. I always give, give, give, give, but I can't receive. I give 110 percent of myself because, I guess, subconsciously I am wanting people to do the same for me, but it never happens." For youth from foster care, giving, rather than receiving, is much easier in relationships. They analyze the perceived needs of those around them and then compare and contrast to their own situation. This often leads to not asking for assistance if others around them do not appear to need that same level of help or support. Molly shared her struggle with this. She shared that when it comes to needing something for school "it seems a little bit more reasonable. But now that I'm out, OK, I should be able to do these things. I obviously made it through school and I should be able to accommodate for these things for myself. To a certain point, I am. To another extent, I'm not. I'm not okay at this point." Feelings of alienation can also come from the comparison with others, specifically roommates and classmates. Given the hardships they have overcome to be at a four-year institution, they shared difficulty sympathizing with those they believe came from "privileged" backgrounds. Madison

shared, "I remember one of my other cadre members was saying how we were supporting her in math and that she was falling behind in school and she really needed help. That threw me off. I'm, like, wow, that's rude. You should get hold of yourself, and you should be able to do this yourself to a point. Then I felt really bad. That is mean to say. It is just different."

5.3. Self-Confidence

For a few participants, the inability to seek assistance was tied to their self-confidence. There was an internal struggle between knowing they need help and how they believed those they approached would view them. Lexi said, "I feel like I already suck and I don't want to beg for help. I didn't want them to think I was stupid, and I didn't want to have to beg them for support or whatnot."

Like Madison, Ann shared a similar frustration with comments from classmates. She said, "There are a lot of triggers that people just don't even recognize. Just the little complaints – I am just so happy to be here. Oh, man, and I shouldn't minimize their feelings, but it just seems so tedious to me and so unthankful. There is such an entitlement issue." Ann concluded, "Maybe it is just because I lack my own sort of worth."

Whether it is a lack of self-worth, desire to be independent, or wanting to blend in, it is clear that the decision to not ask for help when needed has significant implications for students pursuing a bachelor degree.

5.4. Consequences of survivalist self-reliance

The majority of participants are moving rudderless through their education, without clear goals, without support, without guidance. Navigating higher education can be daunting, but for those without support, it can be paralyzing. For Lily, this began with the choice of major. She shared, "I definitely feel like I have to find myself and what's good for me. I felt so frustrated that I didn't have everything figured out. I didn't want to go into college undeclared, but now I wish I did, because I didn't have the opportunity to figure out what I wanted and what was good for me. I am just worried I'm wasting a ton of money by not knowing what I'm doing for the rest of my life." Choosing a major prematurely can cost students time and money. Lily chose nursing, but after finding the courses to be too academically rigorous, she decided to change her major; however, she chose the university because of the nursing program, leaving her confused. She said, "After I decided I was not to do nursing, I think I kind of lost my way. Then I thought if I was going to transfer, what is even the point."

Finding that they were academically unsuccessful, or not as successful as they hoped to be, several began questioning their choice of major, resulting in dropped courses. Molly shared, "When I first came to school, I did not know how to ask for help. My first term, failing all the classes and stuff – I think that is when my ILP worker was like, 'What are you doing?' Then I was like, 'I don't know. I don't know what I'm doing.'" Lexi had similar challenges. She struggled in her math class. Unable to earn a passing grade, she made a tough choice. Lexi said, "Right now I had to withdraw from my math class and take it again next semester. A lot of it was because I was so afraid to ask my teacher, Can I can some help after class?" Paige also chose to drop classes after earning failing grades. She said, "Yeah, and so I dropped that class, too. Now I am only taking 2 classes. Now it is easier, because I have writing and chemistry, so I have more time to spend on both, but I'm only taking 8 credits, I think. That is probably not good, because I was a straight 'A' kind of student, and now I am barely passing." Unfortunately for Paige, she was able to drop to only eight credits without meeting with an academic advisor and without understanding the implications of her decision. As a result, she did not know she fell below the required number of credits to keep her on-campus housing. She ended up dropping out of college and moving home. For others, their financial aid award was in jeopardy due to dropped courses.

6. Discussion

This study sought to understand the barriers to bachelor's degree attainment. As was shown, the drive for independence is creating barriers to academic achievement. The drive to be independent stands in the way of asking for help, help that in many cases is desperately needed. Foster youth will sit in a classroom, paralyzed, unable to ask for help, even when they know they need help. Professors, therefore, can become frustrated and come to conclusions about the student who is quietly failing, and not responding to offers of help. This can be incredibly frustrating for both the student and professor – for the professor who is reaching out, attempting to connect with the student to help them succeed, yet met with a student who does not respond, and for the student, who knows they need the help, but unable to ask for or accept what has been offered.

Foster youth believe reliance upon others is risky. Because they have experienced multiple placements, schools, new neighborhoods, and different foster parents with varying house rules, foster youth view others as transitory beings in their lives. They are unable to rely on others to be there or to meet their needs. Therefore, many articulate survivor self-reliance behavior and thought. While they may view their experience in the foster care system with pride – due to their ability to survive without as much support as other have had – they are often unable to see the barriers created when a survivalist self-sufficient attitude means they do not allow themselves to ask for help when needed. Additionally, this mind-set can make them unable to see that independence from the foster care system does not mean that they are prepared for all that comes with adult status.

Emerging adulthood is, therefore, a privileged status reserved for those with support networks. With financial support from parents, access to healthcare, and stable housing, youth are able to gradually take on adult responsibilities. Foster youth, however, experience these things at an accelerated rate, which can negatively impact their ability to complete their bachelor's degree and develop a personal identity (Singer & Berzin, 2015). This study illuminates the challenges foster youth experience by providing the experiences of foster youth in their own words, as well as highlights the need for child welfare policy and practices to include training and mentoring as foster youth transition to independence, and into college.

7. Recommendations

It is clear that foster youth transitioning to college need support. Additionally, transition programs need to be studied to identify effectiveness (Geiger et al., 2016; Salazar, Roe, Ullrich, & Haggerty, 2016). Without this key piece of information, it is unknown what impact specific supports have had on college retention, completion, and beyond (Geiger et al., 2016). Independent Living Programs (ILP) provide transitional services, but without studies on the programs they provide it is not clear how effective they are. What is known is that there are limited numbers of foster youth that can participate in the programs due to a lack of funding. In this study, 80% of the participants received ILP services. The majority credited their ILP provider for helping them gain admission to a college or university. Additionally, eight participants received ILP services on their university campus, in a group setting. This small group had an ILP coordinator on their campus each month that organized tutoring sessions, paired freshmen students with older foster youth at the university for mentorship, attended meeting with the student and Financial Aid office, and more. Yet, this has not resulted in an increase in bachelor degree attainment for those attending this particular university. Therefore, it is important that ILP campus support models are both created with foster youth and studied to determine effectiveness, including follow-up interviews with students who choose to dropout.

8. Conclusion

The conferral of adult status for foster youth marks a time of significant challenge. While independence will free foster youth from the foster care system, it also eliminates a safety net; a safety net that many of their non-foster peers have. Their peers, by enlarge, has a support structure that can offer advice, help them navigate through their four-year college experience. For this group, dropping a course or changing a major may not derail them from earning a bachelors' degree. These students have the benefit of the transition period with both economic and psychological support. For those who came from the foster care system, the majority do not have these same support systems in place. After experiencing and internalizing the lessons they learned through foster care, people in their life were transitory, resources were scarce, you can only rely on yourself, they developed survivor self-reliance. One consequence of this identity is high stakes decision-making at the university level. This leads to missteps, which cause discouragement, frustration, and helplessness, which can result in dropping out all together. In order to mitigate these responses, it is imperative that deeper and more significant support is provided by child welfare systems, including knowledge on barriers to successful transition to adulthood, and creation of support programs to eliminate those barriers.

In the state in which this research was conducted, free public college or university tuition is available to foster youth, who meet specific requirements. While this is a significant opportunity, very few will be able to successfully access this resource unless support programs, like ILP, are studied, changes made, programs added, and barriers eliminated. Only then can foster youth have access to the support systems they need to make a successful transition to adulthood.

Funding

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