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## IDENTIFYING PERCEPTIONS AND FACTORS OF PURSUING HIGHER EDUCATION IN FORMER FOSTER YOUTH

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IDENTIFYING PERCEPTIONS AND FACTORS OF  
PURSUING HIGHER EDUCATION IN FORMER FOSTER YOUTH

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A Project  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Social Work

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by  
Karina Alicia Galindo &  
Julissa Arielle Gonzalez

May 2022

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores former foster youth's perceptions and factors in pursuing higher education. Twelve participants provided insight on their experiences when in the foster care system that had impacted their pursuance of higher education. Many participants elaborated on their lives after aging out of the system, and how they navigated life as former foster youth. This was done through a self-paced audio recorded interview along with questions regarding demographics and information pertaining to the amount of time each individual spent in the foster care system.

This study's findings were able to identify overarching themes on former foster youth, such as social supports, inclusion of foster youth integrating into society and institutions such as post-secondary education, the differences in foster youths' definition of success, and acknowledging the many known risk-factors of foster youth. In addition to this, our study also brings to light factors such as self-determination and undeniable resiliency in the stories of our participants. We found that social supports were a significant factor in former foster youth's pursuance of higher education and their ability to succeed by completing their degrees. We found that many individuals did not agree or could not agree or disagree when asked if they felt they could express their needs in relation to post-secondary education with their social worker

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Problem Formulation

A former foster youth is someone who at the time, is under the age of 21 and is removed from their home due to possible abuse or neglect by their parents and/or guardians. Once removed from their home, if it is decided that the child needs to be kept under the care of the court system for longer than 30 days, they are then placed in Out of Home Care. Out of Home Care is any placement in which a child is not residing with their parents/guardians and is under the custody of Children and Family Services. Out of Home Care consists of Group Homes, Shelter Care, Locked Facility, Kinship, and Foster Care. When it is decided that a child needs to be placed in Out of Home Care, the employees of Children and Family Services then work together to place the child in the least intrusive environment in the hopes that it has the least number of detrimental effects on the child's developmental and personal success later in life. If there are no family members that are deemed competent in caring for the child, the child is then placed under a Foster Family Agency (FFA) and Resource Family Homes (RFH) if it is seen as the best option for the child. The Foster Care system was designed to protect children who might be in danger from their own family or caregivers. Foster Family Agencies as well as Resource Family Homes, work hand in hand with the county offices and social workers in the hopes of creating the most beneficial and normal lives for the children. There are many children

who enter the system and many times, it is more than the county has resources to meet the needs of each individual child. “More than 23,000 children will age out of the US foster care system every year.” (Sorrell et al., 2020). It is apparent that there is a huge population of foster youth actively transiting out of the foster care system annually, as social workers who predominantly work with this vulnerable population, it is necessary we look at ways to actively assist this population within the systems we play a part of. Oftentimes, social workers are the only stable adult and contact of support within the system that foster youth primarily work with. There are resources and programs specifically geared towards helping foster youth success after care be possible but at times, it may not be enough, or the appropriate program needed for the children to succeed at the same rate or to the same extent as children who are non-foster youth.

“Central to the difficulty defining success in foster care from the perspective of foster youth is the difficulty in involving foster youth in research. While the importance of including youth in foster care research is well documented, the actualization of this practice is seldom achieved.” (Collins-Comargo & Miller, 2015). It has become apparent when looking at former foster youth’s outcomes, that there is a disconnect in the foster care system being able to successfully transition youth out of the system. The foster care system can focus expanding resources, programs, and opportunities for transitional age youth to reduce former foster youth’s risk for homelessness, barriers to accessing health care, and low post-secondary education enrollment and completion rates.

## Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to assess contributing factors and perceptions of obtaining higher education for foster youth who are currently part of the Extended Foster Care (EFC) Program in San Bernardino County and current students associated with the Renaissance Program at California State University, San Bernardino. The problem of foster youth success rates is not a new topic of research within the field of social work and child-welfare. For years former foster youth's perception of success has been a concern for the County, Foster Family Agencies, Resources Families, Biological Families, and Foster Youth themselves, in addition to social workers entering the field of child welfare services. "Knowledge of foster youth's perceptions about their own successful transitions to adulthood can advise foster family recruitment and training as well as future legislation..." (Anderson & Williams, 2018). Our study can produce information that can give insight on how current EFC social workers and California State University, San Bernardino's Renaissance Program employees can modify their approach to providing services to best support their clients in achieving higher education after aging out of foster care services based on the insight gained from completing this study.

Continued research on this issue is important. Being a part of a system that is concerned and involved in the welfare of a child means that we must actively seek ways to improve our services and outcomes of life for our clients. We believe that with the right opportunities, social support, and adequate

personalized resources geared towards former foster youths' goals, social workers in child welfare services can assist former and current foster youth in pursuing higher education. Through this specific research question, we hope to gain insight on similarities amongst former foster youth's perceptions and identify contributing factors and barriers in the pursuit of higher education within their own individual experiences. By concentrating programs within our local community, we hope to provide social workers currently assisting former foster youth and those who wish to work with this population with research-based information to assist them in providing the appropriate care

Research Question:

What factors impact former foster youths' decision to pursue higher education?

Significance of Project to Social Work

Looking into this topic would assist professional social workers as well as those who work with former foster youth in better understanding and assisting foster youth aging out of the child welfare system. As social workers, we will frequently deal with children who may be part of the foster care system. In doing this study, we will better be able to assist them as well as the agencies we will work with in the future. Although we are unable to fix every issue within the foster system, it is beneficial and essential to look further into this topic because it is our duty to ensure equity of services for clients, especially for our most at-risk

populations. Although we recognize that pursuing higher education is not on the agenda for many, we also recognize the opportunities that come with choosing to do so. In pursuing higher education many doors are capable of being opened for this population. “Individuals with experience in the foster care system are frequently the subjects of research surrounding the definition of success, but rarely are their unique perspectives of success considered.” (Anderson & Williams, 2018). Our hope in completing this research is to directly include former foster youth so their personal perspectives are included first and foremost. Personal experiences and interactions with systems such as foster care, directly impact individual perceptions and accessibility to higher education. As social workers, we should work through the lens of the clients we serve. “Given the changes in the transition to adulthood, it is imperative that researchers and policy makers understand and acknowledge barriers to receiving support among a more diverse group of young people who must navigate a range of disadvantages.” (Pryce, Napolitano, & Samules, 2017). We believe that the best way to achieve this successfully on a micro level is by asking former foster youth to provide feedback in relation to the services or lack thereof that contributed to their pursuit of higher education.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

This chapter includes an examination of various research surrounding former foster youth and foster youth within the United States. Specifically, we have created sub-headers to define various areas that are going to be explored through our research that are relevant to foster youths' perceptions and identify factors that impact the pursuit for higher education within this population. The subsections include the difficulty of defining 'successes for former foster youth and social systems.

#### Defining Success for Foster Youth and Former Foster Youth

Success is a concept that is defined clearly but differently to each person, and foster youth are no exception to this. "The difficulty in lucidly conceptualizing success, and the subsequent lack of a clear definition or meaning of success in foster care, is well documented in the literature. Napier (1972) described *success in foster care* as a subjective term that "has not been rigorously defined" (p. 187). (Collins-Comargo & Miller, 2015). Groups of people who work in specific fields know clearly what it means to be successful. Whether that means reaching a certain level of education, a specific amount of income, or maybe even reaching an individual goal. Foster youth often have difficulty defining success due to the lack of stability and uncertainty that comes with being part of the foster care system. For a group of children who spend

their life never knowing what may lie ahead and experiencing stability only if they are lucky, defining success is something that is simply more difficult. Success to a foster child could lie on a completely different standard than most individuals. This means that a foster child's means of success can be personalized to their own standards, defined by their individual experiences and be dependent on the amount or lack of resources they might have had. Many of the resources that are made available to foster youth are provided by government and local agencies. "There are a number of policies that have been influential in framing the way that federal, state, and local governments and social service programs have operationalized success." (Miller & Collins-Camargo, 2016). Although there is a way for governments and agencies to measure success on an operational level, there has not been a solid blueprint in place to effectively measure this in Foster Youth specifically. This shows that there is an ongoing need for researchers to be able to provide this.

### Social Supports for Foster Youth

Social support plays a huge role in the lives of everyone whether it is the lack of social support or the immense amount of social support an individual has, social support makes a difference in one's life. "Research suggests that social support influences a number of important young-adult outcomes, including physical, emotional, and psychological well-being, and socioeconomic status and employment." (Zin, Palmer, & Nam, 2017). It is important to acknowledge that social support systems play a significant role in not just all young-adult outcomes,

but specifically vulnerable populations such as foster-youth and former foster-youth. An individual's support system has a direct reflection in many of the bigger life decisions that youth make, pursuing higher education is one of them. In Zin, Palmer, and Nam's study *The predictors of perceived social support among former foster youth*, an important finding was that social support decreased as individuals transitioned into adulthood who had indicators of social connectedness (2017). Although this study was done on non-foster youth, these findings have been consistent with recent research, which shows that foster youth's perceived supports also decrease after aging out of the foster care system. This further pushes the importance of ensuring that foster-youth who are in the transitional stages of aging out of the foster care system are referred to social support systems and services that can continue to provide the necessary resources to successfully transition into adulthood. There are several suggestions for child welfare practice, policy, and funding's such as scholarships through current studies. The first finding was that foster youth acquire their support from a variety of social supports and that these social supports can provide additional benefits and connections for individual's. "Collectively the findings suggest that agencies could and should seek to help youth develop as many connections as possible across a variety of relationship types." (Zin, Palmer, & Nam, 2017). It is important that we as researchers continue to explore this topic to find what social support systems have the most positive impact on this population.

## Inclusion of Foster Youth

It is to no surprise that there are aspects of the child welfare system that need to be addressed. Although child welfare workers do the best that they can day in and day out, there are still some areas that can be improved. Foster Care and Foster Youth in particular, have become one of the areas that needs more attention but has failed to receive it. There are various programs and resources in place that are specifically geared for foster parents and foster youth, yet very little research has been completed on these programs with the inclusion of actual foster youth. There has been a great difficulty in defining the term 'successes for those within the foster care system, from the perspective of foster youth themselves in the realm of research. A study done by Miller and Collins-Camargo acknowledges this and states, "While the importance of including youth in foster care research is well documented, the actualization of this practice is seldom achieved" (2016). As much as foster youth and the foster care system have been the area of study in past research, they are rarely ever included in the study themselves due to ethical issues with the inclusion of children in any study. Foster youth continue to be a protected population, as they should be, so this becomes an issue alongside the initial issue of including minors in a study. It is extremely difficult to gain approval to survey foster youth or children in general because of ethical guidelines, although this study does not include individuals under the age of 18, the hope is that future studies can focus on the obtaining

their perspective to add to current research and understanding of foster youth's perspectives to provide more inclusive findings.

### Risk Factors & Resiliency of Transition Age Foster Youth

It is apparent that this foster youth as well as former foster youth often face countless barriers and are considered an at-risk population. Young people and transitional age youth within the foster care system experiences both long- and short-term obstacles throughout their lifetimes, one of the most notable being the gaining out of the foster care system and transitioning into the adult world on their own. (Greeno, Fedina, Lee, Farrell, & Harburger, 2019). With this knowledge, we must develop and implement resources geared towards keeping at risk youth safe and able to sustain a healthy life before, during, and after being a part of the child welfare system. Many studies have tackled the task of researching the well-being outcomes for older youth in child welfare systems, the research suggests that current foster youth are at a greater risk of experiencing educational difficulties such as low test scores, special educational accommodations, at risk for dropping out of high school, and are more likely to have frequent absences while attending school in comparison to their peers. (Greeno et al., 2019). Scholars have also suggested that former foster youth may experience higher rates of mental health and psychiatric disorders due to untreated problems (Greeson et al. [2012](#)). This is another example of how the resources a system provides, for a population like foster youth, can have incredibly strong impacts on the course of their overall health,

well-being, and life. There is limited knowledge that exists on the ways in which risk and resilience influence psychological well-being among current and former foster care youth. Greeno et al., suggests that additional research in this area could provide information to develop intervention and prevention strategies specifically for reduction of mental health symptoms and promotion of well-being (Greeno et al., 2019). Greeno et al., questions for transition age foster youth have given my partner and I some insight into how simple questions can interconnect with functioning after leaving the foster care system. “Current foster youth were asked about their preparation for independence. Specifically, youth responded yes or no to the question, “has anyone talked to you about the following areas as you transition to adulthood?”; seven domains related to independence functioning were assessed, including housing, social skills, education, mental health, work skills, managing your money, and living alone.” (Greeno et al., 2019). These seven domains encompass many of the areas we’d like to explore within the lives of former foster youth, specifically the factors which influenced the reported yes or no outcome of preparation and readiness for transitioning out of the system.

### Experiences with Higher Education

For many foster care youths transitioning into independent living, it is not an easy process to go through. Many experience difficulties when it comes to finding financial support, living accommodations, and job security. This is especially true for those that do not remain in homes with foster parents or get

adopted. One of the factors that directly affects the decision for those pursuing higher education is that foster alumni lack the social support that is greatly needed when going through a higher education journey. Tobolowsky, Scrannapieco, Aguiniga, & Madden further explained that because of the lack of support former foster youth "...must find other sources of support outside of these traditional spaces to gain college knowledge so they can successfully navigate the challenging path to a postsecondary degree" (2019).

Research has shown that most of the foster youth population indicate a desire to attend college or some sort of vocational training/education but that many fail to do so. This can be accounted for because of the various ongoing hurdles that those in the system face, such as poor preparation for transitioning into post-secondary education, financial stability, securing housing, and receiving support for pre-existing mental health struggles (Tobolowky et al, 2019). There is a definite want to pursue higher education but the preparation for pursuing it can create obstacles for this population that unfortunately they are not adequately prepared to deal with. In completing this research, we are hopeful that we will begin to create a clearer picture for what the system may be lacking. It is hoped that in doing so we can contribute to the programs provided to foster youth and former foster youth in addition to assisting future youth to not only pursue but obtain higher education.

## Theories Guiding Conceptualization

Two theories utilized and researched to conceptualize the ideas presented in this study include Systems Theory and Resilience Theory.

### Systems Theory

When deciding to focus on this complex and vulnerable population it was apparent that the theory which possibly played one of the most important roles is Systems Theory in the lives of former and current foster youth. It is evident that the outcome of Foster Youth is reliant on what is made readily available to each individual when receiving services from a system such as Child Welfare.

Systems Theory takes a closer look at how the role of systems, specifically child welfare and foster youth services, directly affect these children and the outcome of their lives. The Systems Theory, also referred to as the social systems theory, is the study of society as an arrangement of elements and beliefs that directly

affects an individual. *Striving and Dreaming: A Grounded Theory of the Transition to Adulthood for Cross-Systems Youth*, a study by Bowen, Ball, and Jones is a qualitative study which explores resilience during the transition to adulthood for cross-systems youth aged 18 to 24. (Bowen, Ball, & Jones, 2020).

The term *cross-systems youth* is utilized for young people whose lives are affected by multiple social problems and their involvement in different systems, which takes core concepts derived from The Systems Theory. This specific study was taken into consideration noting that many of foster youth, if not all, are a part of multiple systems and would provide insight on how we can take learn about

cross-system youth through our own study. The problems that affect cross-systems youth include, though are not limited to, homelessness, child maltreatment, and educational challenges.” (Bowen, Ball, & Jones, 2020). The “growing base of theoretical and empirical literature denotes emerging adulthood as a critical period of transition, in which young people are tasked with establishing adult identities and striving for stability in domains such as work, relationships, housing, and social life.” (Bowen, Ball, & Jones). This study will focus on gaining the perspectives of individuals who are currently experiencing or past their transition into adulthood that can provide information insight to the significance of this period of their lives. For this reason, we want to identify the various sub-systems, specifically how the foster care systems, within child welfare services, either contributed to the ‘successes or ‘failure’ of foster youth who are transitioning or have transitioned out of the system. Former foster youth have been identified as ‘at-risk’ for multiple social issues such as drug and alcohol abuse, homelessness, and low levels of education. Many former foster youths are also survivors of various types of abuse, trauma, and oftentimes have little to no genuine social support in their lives while they age through the system. We must acknowledge the undeniable *resilience* that resides within former foster youth, and how we can instead of justifying it to not improve existing services but in turn drive us to make the lives of these resilient young people easier.

## Resilience Theory

The second theoretical lens in which my partner and I also will be utilizing the Resilience Theory. “*Resiliency Theory* provides a conceptual framework for considering a strengths-based approach to understanding child and adolescent development and informing intervention design (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Zimmerman & Brenner, 2010). Resiliency theory supplies the conceptual scaffolding for studying and understanding why some youth grow up to be healthy adults despite risk exposure.” (Zimmerman, 2013). It is apparent that the participants within this study have their own personal experiences and examples of resiliency they can provide examples. This can allow researchers to gain insight on how current and former foster youth define resilience in addition to how the information they provide through questions about their experiences can show forms of resiliency they may not have been self-aware of. In Jones’ (2012) *Measuring Resiliency and Its Predictors in Recently Discharged Foster Youth*, resilience is defined as, “The ability to make positive adaptations to life’s circumstances despite exposure to severe adversity, and a multitude of risks...”. The first purpose was to identify psychosocial factors that contributed to resiliency among former foster youth. We believe this to be relevant and assistive in guiding our research because we believe that psychosocial factors such as social support, have major impacts on foster youth lives more than individuals within the field may be acknowledging. There have been various attempts to address the hardships former foster youth face, including the Independent Living

Initiative in 1968, that mandated state to develop serious that would assist and prepare transitional age youth who began to age out of foster care. (Jones, 2012). “However, funding for these services was never at levels that would have allowed for more than a fraction of eligible youth to receive services. There is some evidence to suggest that Independent Living Services (ILS) services, transition services, and a period of after-care might ease the transition to emancipation (Ingelhart and Becerra [2002](#)). Two systematic reviews of ILS programs suggest that these services could improve outcomes in the areas of education, employment, health, life skills, and housing.” (Jones, 2012). Through our research, we hope to attempt to have former foster youth self-identify services which can contribute to a successful transition into adulthood after the foster care system. Some interesting findings stated in the (Jones, 2012) study were that contact with former social workers was not a significant predictor. We hope to also identify the networks and people who positively impact former foster youth through our interview process.

### Summary

This study is intended to explore the personal perceptions of former foster youth during their time in the child welfare system. It is extremely important to take into consideration the experiences of former foster youth that received services through the child welfare system to gauge what is working and what is not. The foster care system is an organization that greatly needs attention to improve the lives of children involved in the system. Completing

this study in the hopes of adding former foster youths' perceptions to the literature is intended to better understand the needs of the children in care, while also improving the foster care system in its entirety.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODS

#### INTRODUCTION

This study will seek to understand the factors that contribute to the motivation of pursued education or the lack thereof and additionally, it will attempt to identify the perceived perception of success according to current and former foster youth. This chapter will contain the details and steps it will take to carry out this research. The sections discussed will be the study design, sampling, data collection, instruments, procedures, protection of human rights, and data analysis.

#### Study Design

The study will utilize a qualitative design for collecting data. Former foster youth recruited from a university program and county program, pending approval, will engage in an online survey consisting of open and closed ended questions in relation to factors contributing or hindered, creating difficulties and barriers, for former foster youth's pursuit of higher education. This exploratory qualitative design will be effective in allowing participants to express their views and perceptions of higher education and success individually and freely in their own words. This was decided due to the fact another approach may limit the responses and perspectives former foster youth are able to share. Participants will be able to explore and individually identify the reasons, needs, or barriers they faced while aging out of the foster care system and attending higher

education. A limitation to our study includes shorter responses to open ended questions due to an online survey format. Due to COVID-19 protocols, ability to conduct face to face interviews have been restricted. This may impact the quality and length of open-ended responses from participants. On the contrary, this may allow participants to think more thoroughly about their responses in addition to possibly obtaining more honest responses from former foster youth. The ability to record audio responses for open ended questions will be available to counteract this limitation. The population of former foster youth may not identify themselves in higher education, which can also add a limitation to participants attending a four-year university. The university program serves approximately half of the student population that is identified as former foster youth, which adds a limitation to the former foster youth participating in this research study as well.

### Sampling

This study will utilize a non-random purposive sampling of a combination of current and transitional aged foster youth residing in the Inland Empire area. A portion of the selected participants are students involved with a four-year university program. Approval was requested from the program coordinator and the director. Additionally, participants were recruited from the county program, pending county approval process. Inclusion criteria included that participant be at least 18 years of age, identify as former foster youth, and have received services, assistance, or interacted with Children and Family Services (CFS) during some period of their life. Participants who do not fit the above criteria were not be able

to participate in the study. Both groups of participants were receiving services or have been associated with Children and Family Services (CFS) during some period of their life. There was a total of 0 participants recruited from the Renaissance Program and a total of 12 participants recruited from Extended Foster Care that will receive the research survey.

#### Data Collection & Instruments

The study utilized an online survey consisting of 13 questions total, 6 of them open-ended questions developed by the researchers. Demographic information was collected on education level, age, gender, ethnicity, number of placements, and years in foster care. The demographic questions were given prior to the interview in an online survey format. Participants will be asked open-ended questions and encouraged to expand on their answers, to give their own perspective on their experience in areas such as: foster care, higher education, and past services that were offered while in the system. We sought to obtain data on two populations; current or former foster youth who have or have not pursued higher education. We obtained information on what factors the participants felt influenced them to pursue higher education and obtain information on what factors participants believed restrained them from pursuing higher education. We hope to explore and have participants expand on barriers that may have impacted them to pursue higher education and expand on areas that they believed helped them to pursue higher education.

## Procedures

A flier was created explaining the purpose, intended use, and goals of this study. The distribution of this flier will be via email and conducted by program coordinator, as well as from the director, the CSUSB program. Distribution of the survey through San Bernardino County's program was through email after obtaining verbal consent via phone call. Individuals within both programs who present an interest in participating in this study will then be sent an informed consent that will be required to be signed and sent to program coordinators who provided these forms to those conducting the study. After the researchers have received a signed informed consent, they then were sent the research questionnaire via email from Karina Galindo and Julissa Gonzalez. Participants of these programs who show interest will then be sent a link to complete an online survey. Once the completed questionnaire has been received; the participant will receive a debriefing statement via email.

## Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed through Phonic, a professional transcription and data collection site that provides automatic transcription of voice recorded interviews that were integrated into the survey links provided to participants. Authors of the research then reviewed the accuracy of transcriptions and made edits where necessary to ensure accurate transcription of participants' responses.

## Summary

This study analyzed the factors of current foster youth who are enrolled in higher education as well as youth that are currently receiving services from Children and Family Services. The participants actively invite the subjective and unique viewpoints of foster care involved youth. This study is intended to highlight the motivational factors that lead to the pursuit of higher education. Qualitative methods used in this study will best complete the study.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

#### Introduction

This study examined former foster youth's experiences and opinions on what factors contributed to each individual's pursuit of higher education, seeking to identify contributions and barriers to obtaining higher education. This study examined 15 individuals who are former foster youth's responses to interview-based questions to identify patterns in former foster youths' experiences of contributing factors and barriers to higher education through their own unique experiences.

#### Demographics

All of the respondents identified as former-foster youth. There are seven (58.3%) males and five (41.6%) females. The ages of the participants ranged from 21 to 50 with a mean age of 31.67. Out of the twelve former foster youth, three (25%) completed high school or received a GED, two (18.6%) completed some college, one (8.3%) completed an associate's degree, five (41.6%) completed a bachelor's degree, and one (8.3%) completed a master's degree. Years in foster care ranged from less than 1 year to 18 years, with the mean of foster care being 4.6 years for participants. Out of the twelve participants, seven (58.3%) are currently not enrolled in higher education, four (33.3%) are currently enrolled in higher education, and one (8.3%) is planning to enroll in higher education. Two questions were asked using a Likert scale, to gain

participants personal opinions on benefits of services and ability to express needs. When asked if participants felt if services, they received were beneficial in their relation to obtaining post-secondary education, five individuals agreed, 3 individuals neither agreed or disagreed, and 4 individuals disagreed. Each answer was given number value, 3 for agree, 2 for neither agree nor disagree, and 1 for disagree. When asked if participants if they felt they were able to express their needs in relation to post-secondary education, 4 participants neither agreed or disagreed, 3 strongly disagreed, 2 disagreed, 1 agreed, and 1 strongly agreed. It was apparent that most of the foster youth participants either disagreed or did not find that social workers contributed or did not contribute to their needs in relation to post-secondary education. Each answer was given number value, 5 for strongly agree, 4 for agree, 3 for neither agree nor disagree, 2 for disagree, and 1 for strongly disagree.

**Table 1**  
*Participant Characteristics*

Characteristics	%	n	M	SD
Gender				
Male	58.3	n = 7		
Female	41.6	n = 5		
Age		n = 12	31.67	10.27
Highest level of Education				
Highschool / GED				
Associates Degree	25%	n = 3		
Bachelor's degree	8.3%	n = 1		
Master's Degree	41.6%	n = 5		
Some College	8.3%	n = 1		
	16.6%	n = 2		
Years In Foster Care			4.6	4.75
College Enrollment Status				
Currently Enrolled	33.3%	n = 4		
Not Currently Enrolled	58.3%	n = 7		
Planning To Enroll	8.3%	n = 1		
Do you feel that the services you received were beneficial in relation to pursuing higher education?			2.08	0.9
Do you feel you were able to express your needs in relation to obtaining higher education with your social worker(s)?			2.58	1.24

## Presentation of Findings

Several themes were discovered from analyzing data from interview responses from participants. The data collected in interview portion of this survey identified multiple perceived barriers in pursuing higher education as a former foster youth produced useful information and insight onto ongoing obstacles for this population.

Some factors we found that participants identified as barriers, as seen in Table 2, in their pursuance of higher education included: Financial Means Social Supports and Supportive Individual, and Personal Struggles.

This study considered acknowledging that former foster youth, experience their own individual struggles and barriers that are unique to their experience and pursuance of obtaining higher education. Many of these struggles were highlighted in financial means and support, but also there were things brought to light such as lacking motivation, having no direction, feeling as if they were alone in navigating life after foster care, in addition to feelings of hopelessness and discouragement. Topics such as struggling with mental health and little to no assistance in transitioning out of foster care were also factors identified by participants in interviews.

**Table 2***Perceived Barriers in Pursuing Higher Education Among Former Foster Youth*

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Supporting Quote</i>
Financial Means (i.e., financial stability and assistance)	<p>“I was going to Chaffey College, but then I ended up having a second child and the need to work and make money outweigh the need to go to school. So I just changed, providing for my family and being able to provide medical insurance. So, to be able to provide medical insurance, I had to work full time. Between that and taking care of my kids, there just wasn't any time left for school.”</p> <p>“I also like was really poor, I didn't have money, I only worked at Del Taco part time, so my income was limited, and I didn't have a stable house ....”</p>
Former Foster Youth Programs & Resources	<p>“I had many obstacles to completing higher education. It took me decades after I left foster care because I ended up homeless after aging out. There weren't adequate supports in the 1980s in California. Basically, you pretty much aged out onto the street. Um, So... it took me years to kind of get stable enough to get back to where I could um go back to college...”</p>
Social Supports	<p>“I was required to leave at 18 and kicked out two weeks after I graduated high school And I actually had to fight to stay in for a nontraditional six months because I turned 18 in December &amp; didn't graduate until June and that was me personally fighting and requesting a judge to agree.”</p>
Supportive Individuals (i.e., friends, family, etc.)	<p>“Not having a strong emotional or physical bond with biological family, having to adjust to many schools.”</p> <p>“I didn't have the support of my mom, she actually kicked me out and that's like when I started kind of getting involved in foster care.”</p>

**Table 2** (cont.)

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Supporting Quote</i>
Personal Struggles	<p>“I felt discouraged to continue education when I felt like I couldn’t comprehend certain classes, for example when I would move to another school, they would be learning something I have never seen.”</p> <p>“For myself it was a lot going on with having to take care of my younger siblings as an adult, lack of motivation and no clear direction”</p> <p>“...Then had to go the route down the rabbit hole to figure out a lot of it on my own.”</p>

### Lacking the Financial Means

A common theme in individuals’ pursuit of higher education is having the financial means and stability to support their ability to enroll and continue their pursuit for education in college. For many former foster youths, and almost all the individuals who participated in this study shared how some form of financial instability and lack of means created obstacles for them in regard to pursuing higher education.

Participant 4, expressed “ I didn't have money to get a license or anything and it made it hard to get a license because I didn't have a car to get to like the DMV and stuff.”, sharing how lacking the financial means to support herself hindered her ability to meet necessities such as a license and car to commute to and from school.

Participant 9 stated, “When I was in College, I had to provide for myself financially. I was working full time while trying to balance going to school full time. I didn’t have housing assistance, so I did it on my own. It got to the point where I had to drop out of school because I could not keep up with school and work.” When financial means are limited, many individuals are faced with the tough decision to cut costs and expenses in order to survive. In this case, the participant shared that they had to drop out of school due to the hours and necessity to work to be financially stable, hindering their ability to dedicate the time and energy to higher education that is needed to succeed.

#### The Importance of Social Supports

In any individual's life, it is important to acknowledge the impact and importance of building, sustaining, and maintaining social support and meaningful relationships. Many former foster youths experienced a disconnect from biological and foster families, were unable to maintain social support from friends and peers due to frequent moves and had struggled trusting social service providers and the system in providing the support they needed.

Participant 6 shared how family knowledge along with support impacted their pursuance, stating, ““The biggest obstacles were not having like family helping you. Um, whether that be with like the application process or just you know being familiar with the process of applying. And then also just not ever being able to help like academic wise as well...”

Participant 10 reflected on their struggles with the system, stating, “I actually had to fight to stay in for a nontraditional six months [in foster care] because I turned 18 in December and didn't graduate [high school] until June and that was me personally fighting and requesting a judge to agree. Um, so, I know it's changed since, but it's still a very bad system.”. Reflecting on the system’s disregard on how ‘aging out’ could have severely impacted his ability to graduate high school and the need to advocate for himself to ensure his needs were met, against a system who is supposed to acknowledge and ensure those needs are fully met.

### Personal Struggles

During this transitional period in participants' lives, many shared the realization that they came to a point in which they were faced with reassessing their priorities. Many shared obtaining higher education as an aspiration of theirs but voiced that their needs had to come first. Other factors came into play when reassessing priorities and making changes as seen in the quotes below.

Participant 12 stated, “For myself it was a lot going on with having to take care of my younger siblings as an adult, lack of motivation and no clear direction.”.

Bringing light to the need to prioritize his new responsibilities as an adult looking after his minor sibling. In addition to factors such as no direction and lack of motivation contributing to what interfered with their ability to pursue higher education.

Participant 9 stated, “When I was in College, I had to provide for myself financially. I was working full time while trying to balance going to school full time. I didn’t have housing assistance, so I did it on my own. It got to the point where I had to drop out of school because I could not keep up with school and work.”.

Further supporting that many individuals who pursue higher education come to a point where necessity to stay afloat financially to support themselves took precedence over their desire to complete higher education once enrolled.

Several participants shared their personal experiences and struggles which impacted their pursuance of education, many of these individuals voiced factors such as mental health and being able to afford things such as health insurance became barriers.

Participant 3 stated, “So... it took me years to kind of get stable enough to get back to where I could um go back to college and I also struggled with, um, mental health issues like post-traumatic stress disorder. Um I have learning disabilities, so um and then the cost was prohibitive because there weren't any programs because I was in foster care so long ago, I didn't know about any scholarships or any kind of help.”

Participant 1 stated, “So I just changed [my plan], providing for my family and being able to provide medical insurance. To be able to provide medical insurance, I had to work full time. So, between that and taking care of my kids, there just wasn't any time left for school.”

Participants 1 and 3's statements provide insight on the need to prioritize the health and wellbeing of not just them as individuals but their families. Their quotes are windows for us to see that their necessity to prioritize mental, physical, and emotional health in order to survive or to continue pursuing higher education.

**Table 3**

*Perceived Supports in Pursuing Higher Education Among Former Foster Youth*

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Supporting Quote</i>
Financial Means	<p>“The biggest service that I qualified for being a former foster youth is the Chaffey Award, um, and it was kind of just like an extra financial aid that assisted me in college.</p> <p>“The only support I had was Free College, um and I had some help with books like to go to a community college, but this was in the late 1980's.”</p>
Social Services: (Social workers, counselors, case managers, etc.)	<p>“I got connected to [programs] from my case manager has been with me since I started community college and she's been helping me already get ready to like to try to transfer to university.”</p> <p>“I mainly had a case manager who helps me. She was really supportive emotionally. She helped me get therapy and she was really good academically. I actually graduated early, and she helped me make sure that I graduated on time, and she sent me um like she gave me all the information to make sure that I got into community college.”</p>
Former Foster Youth Programs & Resources	<p>“I got connected to programs at school and like a counselor for like former foster youth and homeless youth. They helped me get bus passes for college. They helped me get like, like food, food benefits and they also gave me school supplies.”</p>

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**Table 3 (cont.)**

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<i>Theme</i>	<i>Supporting Quote</i>
Supportive Individuals (i.e., friends, family, etc.)	<p>“I also had teachers that were really supportive when I was on independent study my last year of high school who encouraged me to keep going and finish school strong.”</p> <p>“The only kind of support that I really got was mostly just emotional support. First from my foster mother, she was very nice, sweet lady, whom I was able to talk to. So mostly she just, you know, let me hear her ear so I could vent some of my frustrations. And then at school I did have one teacher that I felt I was able to reach out to as far as any resources,</p> <p>“I would say the biggest support were counselors, like my guidance counselors, as well as coaches I had in high school.”</p>

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### Financial Means Creating Opportunity

A considerable factor for all individuals in pursuing higher education is having the financial means to do so. Taking into consideration costs of tuition, books, school supplies, housing, necessities such as food and clothing, in addition to other monthly related expenses most adults take on once transitioning into adulthood. Financial assistance such as stipends, grants, and programs have assisted millions of individuals pursuing higher education make their aspirations a reality. Having the financial means for former foster youth was a factor that came up often in interviews.

Participant stated, "...As far as school wise, yeah, they did provide some stipends, some type of money where I was able to get, um, things for school. Folders, pens and what not..."

Most former foster youth, as shared in the barriers section of this research, informed interviewers that their biological and foster families were unable or unwilling to provide financial assistance and support when obtaining higher education. This resulted in all participants relying on some form of financial assistance when applying to college and pursuing higher education.

Participant 5, who is quoted in Table 3, shared how the biggest service she qualified for was financial awards through her junior college. She continued to share that "... Even if you do qualify for financial aid its really to live off of, it isn't really realistic. So just having that extra financial support, I felt really, um, just made accessing college easier.", explaining that the award on top of her financial aid is what supported her the most during her pursuance of higher education.

#### Supportive Individuals: Friends, Family, & School Employee's

It is apparent that the support of adult individuals in children and transitional age youth, in this case, foster youth, serves a great purpose having influences the trajectory of an individual's life in obtaining their own goals and aspirations. Many participants who were able to go on to pursue higher education and complete their degree's voiced how the supportive individuals in their lives

made meaningful connections and assisted in supporting their pursuance of higher education.

Participant 7 stated, "... my teachers were there for me when it came to support whether it was emotional or social support. I was pretty young in the system, so I don't remember much. Also, I did have help from the school counselor."

Participant 11 stated, "I was receiving a lot of social support... a lot of emotional support from teachers, from people taking care of me from social workers. And the support was really needed. It was really important at that time... It was really big for me to be where I'm at, especially not having family around me, having those people to tell me that everything is okay, and everything was going to be fine. Really helped me to go through those times."

Social supports can be expanded to an array of individuals a former foster youth meets. It may be school staff, peers with the same interests, life-long friends, coaches, teachers, and even romantic partners. We are made to build relationships and connections with others. This comes as a challenge to many foster youths are at great risk of being taken away from their supports. Participants in this study brought to light how holding onto these connections and relationships made positive impacts on their lives.

## Social Services

Social services make up a huge support, sometimes the only support, for foster youth. The impact they have is unarguably the largest when looking at identified themes.

Participant 2 stated “The only kind of support that I really got was mostly just emotional support. First from my foster mother, she was very nice, sweet lady, whom I was able to talk to. I can thank my social worker for that, making sure I went somewhere, where... someone actually care about me.”. Although the social worker was not the direct support in which this participant was involved in, the social worker’s ability to make a safe placement for this participant supported her in her short time in foster care before she aged out at 18. Social workers have the ability and responsibility to place children in safe and nurturing environments.

Participant 9 shared that “The only support I received was therapy which was referred by my social worker.”, brings to light that although there may be many individuals, specifically adults within a foster child’s life, that social workers often may be the only one connecting a youth to support and resources which help them. Many social workers within the realm of social services specifically for foster youth understand the importance of acknowledging trauma and the difficulty being with the system. Connecting individuals to programs, resources, or other professionals that can work with foster youth to improve their quality of

life, empower them, and support them serves as a reminder that social services can be the biggest and sole support for foster care youth.

**Table 4.**

*Perceived Factors Contributing to Success in College*

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Supporting Quote</i>
Social Services:	"... maybe a counselor to help me understand all my options as a young mom."
Former Foster Youth Programs & Resources	"I got connected to programs at school and like a counselor for like former foster youth and like homeless youth. And they helped me get bus passes for college. They helped me get like, like food, food benefits and they also gave me school supplies  "I still keep in contact with my old case manager even though like I'm not her client anymore. She helps me get resources when I have emergencies like housing emergencies."
Supportive Individuals (i.e., family, friends, etc.)	"So, I do feel like if there had been more support counselors, support groups, more financial aid, I would have finished it a lot sooner and have been able to have been a more productive member of society sooner than I have been."
Financial Means (i.e., financial stability and assistance)	"...What kept me in college was being able to provide financially for my Children and not to repeat the cycle.  "Financial assistance and affordable childcare"
Self-Determination	"I've also been able to kind of figure out like how to work more and still get my stuff done... I have really good grades so I that kind of helps me want to stay because I've been doing good in school."

**Table 4** (cont.)

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Supporting Quote</i>
Self-Determination	<p>“For me, um you know, I've always set goals, so every time I reach another one, I just, that kind of keeps me going and motivates me and just knowing that like time passes no matter what, so being able to um just keep at it and you know that it's all going to be worth it at the end”.</p> <p>“Because I knew statistically, if I did not break that cycle, my Children would repeat the issues that I had and I wouldn't be able to ever provide for them. I'd be on welfare, and they wouldn't get an education. I knew that I had to break it. And I do understand that I am an outlier in the statistics of foster Children.”</p>

### Social Supports Contributing to Success in College

A big component in making the decision to pursue or not pursue higher education is linked back to the social support an individual may have. Receiving social services, access to financial means, building self-determination, and supportive family and friends all contribute to social support. Unfortunately, these factors are not as easily available to foster youth and many who participated in the survey explained their personal experience and how they utilized the support they did have.

Participant 4 shared, “What's helping me stay is that um even though things aren't very stable, I have more support. I have friends and I still keep in

contact with my old case manager even though, like, I'm not her client anymore.”. This participant revealed even while lacking the supports that could have aided in their stability, they were able to lean on their case manager for guidance and support. Further showing having access to a helpful network or case manager is crucial to advance in life for this population.

Participant 1 stated, “My partner, she is my motivation to continue my dreams of becoming a therapist.”. Participant 1 shared more about the ability to achieve and continue of their personal journey towards success through their partner. The access to emotional support, from their identified social support, plays a huge part in the longevity of their ability to keep at their personal aspirations. Emotional support around those around you can highly impact the decisions an individual makes. Especially if you aren't receiving support in other ways, the support from those around you can make up for it.

### Financial Means Contributing to Success in College

A major component of pursuing higher education is the access to financial assistance. For any person who shows interest in college, the financial toll it will take in their life is almost always a factor that is considered. Many of those in foster youth hold limited access to financial assistance due to their circumstances. There are various ways of receiving aid for this population but without a knowledgeable person to help guide access to these resources, it is almost impossible to obtain.

Participant 10 stated, “The only services that I had learned about then were from counselors and the financial aid department at Mount SAC, they helped connect me to scholarships, grants, and other free things to help with the cost of school since it was so expensive.” Participant 10 shared the only reason they were lucky enough to be aware of the resources they had access to was due to the guidance of their counselor, but without they may never have known. It is important that all those who work with foster youth be aware of the available resources.

Participant 12 stated “The Early Opportunity Program (EOP) , Guardian Scholars, and Fast Web for scholarships all helped me get connected to money and resources to help with my bills, books, and I got stuff like free scantrons, pencils, and notebooks for exams. It might not seem like much but it all added up. Anything free helps, it helped me the most I think.”. This individual shared they had access to many resources whose purpose was to help the foster youth population and they took the necessary steps to utilize each one. Regardless of the number of resources an individual uses, these programs are made to help and should be utilized by all.

### Personal Self-Determination Contributing to Success in College

One of the most important contributions to pursuing higher education is the personal will to do so. An individual can have access to everything they need to be successful in life but if they do not want to utilize it, they will remain right where they are.

Participant 4 stated, "I'm really close to transferring to the school I want to... And um I have really good grades so, I think that kind of helps me want to stay because I've been doing good in school." This individual is able to recognize their efforts so far and are beginning to see the benefits of continued dedication. Since they can see the rewards of how hard they have worked thus far, is the reason they are deciding to continue efforts to move forward.

Participant 12 stated, "My will to win and be successful. I know if I don't give up I will eventually get to where I want to be. It's me who has to do the work and put myself out there. I've always told myself that no matter how long it might take, I would keep going." Participant 6 clearly sees the only person who can push themselves forward is themselves and is working off self-produced and apparent desire to obtain the results in life they wish to see.

Many of those in foster care come from a cycle of life challenging circumstances, such as abuse and neglect. For a select few, they utilize these generational cycles as a means of purpose to succeed in life, which pours over into areas such as post-secondary education. Participants who come from cycles of failure are highly expected to continue the cycle. For those who recognize and are aware of the impacts of generational cycles of trauma, they may find the self-determination to be successful not only for themselves, but for their children as well.

Participant 9 stated, "I am not in college, but what kept me in college was being able to provide financially for my Children and not to repeat the cycle." This

individual indicated that being in college was not only for them but for their kids. It shows that for some, pursuing college holds a much deeper meaning. Showing their kids that they are not their circumstances, is reason enough to continue efforts in succeeding and breaking generational cycles.

Participant 6 stated “...So being able to um just keep at it and you know that it's all going to be worth it at the end. If not for me, then maybe for my kids. I just told myself that when I did have kids, they'd have it better than me. I'd be the mom I needed for them and for myself one day.” Participant 6 is an excellent example of working against odds. They emphasize they want to provide for their children, in ways they may not have been provided for as a child. This is reason enough for them to continue efforts in life.

### Summary

This chapter provides insight to demographics of the participants, data analysis, and general themes identified throughout the interview process and research. The interpretations of these findings were elaborated and discussed to provide information on perceived barriers and supports for former foster youth pursuing higher education. Themes found in both perspectives of barriers and supports were financial means and social supports, emphasizing the importance of these factors in former foster youths' pursuance in higher education. Additionally, the following themes were identified, self-determination, reevaluation of priorities, necessity of mental and physical well-being, childcare, resilience, and former foster youth programs and resources.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

#### Introduction

This chapter provides discussion of the results and findings of this study of former foster youth's perceptions and factors of pursuing higher education. Connecting themes identified in the literature position of this paper and researchers results and findings upon conclusion of the study are also presented in this chapter. Lastly, this chapter discusses recommendations for social work practice, policy and further research regarding foster youth's pursuance of higher education keeping in mind supports and barriers in addition to factors that were identified from participants that were deemed supportive in their ability to stay enrolled and complete their education at college institutions.

#### Discussion

The researchers found that social support was an incredibly important and significant factor in the pursuance and success of former foster youth in attending post-secondary education institutions and obtaining degrees. When asking participants to identify what would have assisted them during their time in college or would have assisted them in attending and finishing college, there was a mixture of factors in which were all identified in our study, including: financial stability/assistance, social support, connection to programs and resources

specifically for former foster youth, breaking generational cycles, in addition to a need for self-determination.

In addition to these findings, all participants were able to identify factors that were needed and point out flaws and issues within the foster care system as a whole regardless of their degree status. The researchers strongly believe that conducting interviews with current and former foster youth can provide a unique perspective and important insight along with information that can be utilized to shape practice, policies, programs, and the field of social work in its relation to providing services for foster youth. Social support is not limited to friends and family but extends into the realm of social services where social workers, therapists, case managers, intake workers, and an array of other professional work for and with the foster youth population. Reflecting back to Zin, Palmer, & Nam's findings on the social aspect of individuals' lives, it is important to remember that social support influences the outcomes of young adults in a multitude of areas that were identified within our research as factors and themes in former foster youth's lives (2017).

Participants who obtained college degrees from associates to masters all shared how significant relationships, connection to resources, and financial support were significant and important to their educational outcomes when speaking on what factors contributed to their ability to succeed in postsecondary education. This transitional period of early adulthood is critical across the board for individuals, but even more so foster youth who are already lacking necessities

and supports one would expect an individual to have. Bowen, Ball, & Jones took note of this transition period in their research, stating that individuals within this period are striving for stability in various aspects of their lives such as relationships, social settings, housing, and other areas (2020). Focusing on expanding on existing transitional age services and extended foster care programs can positively impact the trajectory of foster youths' lives not only in post-secondary education but in general. We must not forget that all foster youth, current and former, are worthy and deserving of services, support, and assistance whether they decide to pursue higher education or not.

Finally, a theme in which appeared that is worthy of discussion but was not given its own specific acknowledgement and a factor in which researchers hope to see discussed in future studies is the mental health and well-being of current and former foster youth. Specifically foster youth struggle with their mental health and well-being during the transitional period of their lives where they are working towards applying to and immersing themselves in post-secondary education. Greeson pointed out in his research how scholars have made suggestions about former foster youth being at risk for experiencing higher rates of sciatic disorder and mental health issues due to untreated problems in their lives (2012). This brings up two points, the first being that we must actively work with foster youth during their time in the system to problem solve and be solution-focused to ensure they are equipped with the necessary skills to sustain a healthy life. Secondly, we must take seriously the implications of what scholars

are implying when looking at the mental health epidemic that is occurring in our general population. Untreated and undiagnosed mental health and psychiatric disorder have an array of consequences, including increased risk of substance abuse, self-harm, and suicide. Focusing on the overall health, especially mental health, of foster youth, regardless of their current relationship to the system, needs to be made a priority. To expect a population of people who are not receiving the necessary treatment, medication, and resources they need to be mentally well is setting them up for failure when they pursue higher education.

#### Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy, & Research

Upon conclusion of this research, it is important for to discuss the findings, which can serve as a vessel for insight and direct suggestions that can be provided to the field of social work in relation to empowering current and former foster youth, in addition to reducing barriers and increasing supports for this population to succeed in obtaining higher education. In this next portion, we will be discussing recommendation for social work practice, policy, and research.

#### Social Work Practice

Social workers must continue to make efforts in making meaningful connections with foster youth at an early age within the system to ensure individuals are provided with support within the foster care system itself. Social workers may not be permanent with individuals throughout their duration of placement in the system, but ensuring all social workers make active efforts in

connecting foster youth with resources, information on programs and assistance, and educating them on their rights as they age through the system can make significantly positive impacts in foster youth's lives.

There is a great emphasis for this need for meaningful connection with foster youth within teens and transitional age youth, not only meaningful connections but ones with the knowledge or ability to connect these teens to services that will assist them in applying for higher education. This may include but is not limited to; FAFSA/Financial Aid workshops, informing teens of affordable housing options, ensuring they are aware of ways in which they can obtain free transportation to and from their college, assisting them in applying for things such as CalFresh to ensure they have necessities like food met. Social workers can connect these teens to programs, resources, refer them to EFC (Extended Foster Youth) programs, assist with housing programs through their local counties, etc. Assisting foster youth clients to transition out of foster care is a way social workers can do their part in ensuring that foster youth encounter less barriers, find safe environments to thrive in, and connect them to more additional professionals who can help them after leaving foster care all together.

### Policy Recommendations

Policy can have lifelong impacts on individuals' lives, especially in populations such as foster youth who are primarily relying on laws, policies, and procedures to provide standards, guidance, and expectations for minors who are essentially left without stable homes, parenting, and stability. With foster youth

being highly at-risk for homelessness post foster care, it is only apparent that the need for housing for this population can be met by expansion of policies, such as the current Transitional Housing Placement Program. Expansion of THPP and THP+FC along with similar programs is critical for the average 4,000 children who are out of foster care in California annually. Allocating more funding for programs such as these is essential to meeting the needs of the many foster youth who are at risk for homelessness each year. Possibly reviewing the qualifications for this program can be reconsidered, taking into consideration the lack of support and education some foster parents, families, and social workers have in connecting foster youth with all the programs and services that are available and individuals are required to be a part of to be eligible for THPP and THP+FC programs.

As a state, and country, we must take into consideration that within this population of at-risk youth, there are a sub-set of foster youth who need more specialized support, including those who struggle with mental health diagnoses, medical issues, and are disabled in one or more capacities to address specialized needs. These can include but are not limited to youth who are victims of crimes such as sex trafficking, gang-related violence, and crimes which result in mental health crises and exacerbate pre-existing mental health issues. Assembly Bill AB-226 known as Children's crisis psychiatric residential treatment facilities (Ramos & Stone, 2021) addresses the need to support foster youth and extended foster care youth until the age of 21, was introduced last year, and

despite much support, was ultimately vetoed. When policies like AB-226 are put on hold, individuals are impacted daily, and the needs continue to be acknowledged but not met by the state and agencies in which these minors and transitional age youth are the responsibility of. We must hold accountable the system which were built to take care of foster care children and set a higher standard for those within the system, which includes assessing and reassessing the system itself with the input of those whom it affects most, foster care youth.

#### Continuing & Expanding Research

Conducting research that focuses on former foster youth's pursuing and obtaining higher education is greatly needed on a larger scale to understand and pinpoint specific programs, supports, and assistance are linked with completion of higher education. Looking at factors such as age in which individuals were introduced to programs, supports, and resources which they identify as contributing factors to setting them up for success and completion of postsecondary education is vital. By being able to do research on the outcomes of individuals who participate in specific programs and services will allow guidance for policy makers, social workers, and those who work within the realm of social services know where they should focus time, resources, and funds to increase the number of college-educated former foster youth.

An additional area of research that can be looked at is post-secondary institutions current programs and their increased, or lack thereof, efforts in aiding current and former foster youth. It is apparent that we acknowledge the

percentage of youth that can enroll in higher education but fail to complete their degrees or experience barriers and setbacks which contribute to factors such as burn out, leaves of absence, and dropping out of post-secondary education. Assessing current programs and finding ways in which we can make improvements is needed. Development of programs to address identified gaps, needs, and resources needed to support those who are enrolled as former or current foster care youth is also important. One way this may be done is ensuring that those identified as former or current foster care are guided existing programs on campus for their former foster youth or other programs which address the needs of this population.

### Conclusion

Former foster youth are a high at-risk population who experience many hardships, struggles, barriers, and obstacles throughout their lifetimes. It is important to acknowledge, understand, and seek information from populations that need assistance such as former foster youth to ensure we can assist them in breaking down barriers and cycles in their lives, empowering them to achieve their goals and aspirations. It takes a village to raise an individual, as we continue to explore ways to assist in the success and pursuance of higher education for this population, society at large must be aware of their impacts on this community and commit to all do our part in supporting former foster youths' integration into the adulthood with the possibility to pursuing and succeeding in higher education.

APPENDIX A:  
INTERVIEW GUIDE

## Demographic questions

Current Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender

- a. Female
- b. Male
- c. non-binary
- d. Other: \_\_\_\_\_
- e. Prefer not to state

Highest level of education

- a. Less than a high school education
- b. High school degree or GED
- c. Associate degree
- d. Bachelor's degree
- e. Other (please specify):

Are you currently enrolled in college / higher education?

- a. Currently Enrolled
- b. Not Currently Enrolled
- c. Planning to Enroll in the Future

### Demographic Questions (cont.)

How many years were you in foster care?

Range: less than a year – 18 years

Do you feel that the services you received were beneficial in relation to pursuing higher education?

- a. Agree
- b. Neither Agree or Disagree
- c. Disagree

Do you feel you were able to express your needs in relation to obtaining higher education with your social worker(s)

- a. Strongly Agree
- b. Agree
- c. Disagree
- d. Strongly Disagree

## **Interview Questions:**

### Audio Submission or Text Submission Response

1. What types of supports were provided or available to you during your time in foster care? (ex. social support, emotional support, academic support, etc.) Who, if anyone, provided support? (ex. social workers, teachers, counselors, etc.) How was this support provided? (i.e., Resources, conversation, referrals, etc.)
2. What are some of the obstacles, if any, that have made it difficult to obtain higher education?
3. Are there any services that you have found helpful in obtaining access to college?
4. If you are in college, what is helping you stay in college?
5. If you are not in college, what do you feel would most help you obtain higher education?
6. What are your career goals / plans?

Survey Questions created by Karina Alicia Galindo & Julissa Arielle Gonzalez

APPENDIX B:  
CONSENT FORM

## **INFORMED CONSENT**

The study in which you are asked to participate is designed to learn more about the experiences of former foster youth. This study is being conducted by Master of Social Work students, Karina Galindo, and Julissa Gonzalez. The study will be supervised by Professor Yawen Li, Professor, School of Social Work, California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB). This study has been approved by the School of Social Work Sub-Committee of Institutional Review Board, California State University, San Bernardino.

**PURPOSE:** The purpose of this study is to examine what factors have assisted or hindered former foster youth to enroll in post-secondary education.

**DESCRIPTION:** Your participation would consist of completing an online survey which includes a pre-recorded and audio response interview. Audio recording collected within the online research study will be collected, transcribed, and analyzed to see how your responses are similar or differ from other participants. You will be asked questions centered on your experience in foster care and how it relates to participants pursuance of obtaining higher education. You have been identified to participate in this study because you are either currently receiving foster care services or have been in foster care in the past and identify as a former foster youth.

**PARTICIPATION:** Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you refuse to participate there will be no penalty or loss of benefits

**ANONYMITY:** All documentation will be recorded as anonymous. No identifying information will be obtained. Digital audio files, transcribed audio responses, and analysis will be kept on password protected memory devices and documents. These documents and devices will not contain any identifying information about you, in addition to any quotations utilized from pre-recorded audio responses. Upon completion of the study, all audio files, documents, and information on memory devices will be properly destroyed.

**DURATION:** The online survey is expected to take approximately 10 – 45 minutes depending on individual participants duration of audio responses to open-ended interview questions integrated into the online survey format. Open-ended interview questions will be pre-recorded for participants to watch prior to submitting audio responses.

**RISKS:** There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to those who choose to participate in this research. It is important to note that former foster youth are considered an 'at-risk' population and that some of the questions in this research may be considered of sensitive nature. This may result in emotional responses, at any time participants can choose not to answer questions or choose not to

participate in the study at any given time when completing the online survey. Participants will be notified of such risks and resources will be provided for individuals to utilize if needed.

**BENEFITS:** The findings of the research may assist in understanding what factors may help or hinder foster youth's pursuance of higher education

**VIDEO/AUDIO/PHOTOGRAPH:** The open-ended question portion of the online survey will be audio recorded to reduce risk of COVID-19 exposure in addition for purposes of clarity and to ensure accurate data collection. Audio recorded responses will be studied by the research team for us in the research project only.

I understand that this research includes portions that will be audio recorded and agree to be recorded for use by the research team only.  Yes  No

**CONTACT:** If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Yawen Li, Professor, School of Social Work, California State University, San Bernardino at 909-537-5584 or [Yawen.Li@csusb.edu](mailto:Yawen.Li@csusb.edu)

**RESULTS:** Results of the study can be obtained from the Pfau Library ScholarWorks database (<http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/>) at California State University, San Bernardino after July 2022.

**CONFIRMATION STATEMENT:**

I understand that I must be 18 years of age or older to participate in your study, have read and understand the consent document and agree to participate in your study.

**SIGNATURE:** Please sign and date below if you agree to the conditions of this study and volunteer to participate.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX C:  
IRB APPROVAL LETTER



Karina Galindo <004965853@coyote.csusb.edu>

**IRB-FY2022-112 - Initial: IRB Admin./Exempt Review Determination Letter**

**do-not-reply@cayuse.com** <do-not-reply@cayuse.com>

Wed, Jan 26, 2022 at 1:01 PM

To: galik302@coyote.csusb.edu, gonzj563@coyote.csusb.edu, yawen.li@csusb.edu

**CSUSB INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD**

Administrative/Exempt Review Determination

Status: Determined Exempt

IRB-FY2022-112

Yawen Li Julissa Gonzalez, Karina Galindo  
CSBS - Social Work  
California State University, San Bernardino  
5500 University Parkway  
[San Bernardino, California 92407](#)

Dear Yawen Li Julissa Gonzalez, Karina Galindo:

Your application to use human subjects, titled "IDENTIFYING PERCEPTIONS AND FACTORS OF PURSUING HIGHER EDUCATION FOR FORMER FOSTER YOUTH" has been reviewed and determined exempt by the Chair of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of CSU, San Bernardino. An exempt determination means your study had met the federal requirements for exempt status under 45 CFR 46.104. The CSUSB IRB has weighed the risks and benefits of the study to ensure the protection of human participants.

This approval notice does not replace any departmental or additional campus approvals which may be required including access to CSUSB campus facilities and affiliate campuses. Investigators should consider the changing COVID-19 circumstances based on current CDC, California Department of Public Health, and campus guidance and submit appropriate protocol modifications to the IRB as needed. CSUSB campus and affiliate health screenings should be completed for all campus human research related activities. Human research activities conducted at off-campus sites

should follow CDC, California Department of Public Health, and local guidance. See CSUSB's [COVID-19 Prevention Plan](#) for more information regarding campus requirements.

You are required to notify the IRB of the following as mandated by the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP) federal regulations 45 CFR 46 and CSUSB IRB policy. The forms (modification, renewal, unanticipated/adverse event, study closure) are located in the Cayuse IRB System with instructions provided on the IRB Applications, Forms, and Submission webpage. Failure to notify the IRB of the following requirements may result in disciplinary action. The Cayuse IRB system will notify you when your protocol is due for renewal. Ensure you file your protocol renewal and continuing review form through the Cayuse IRB system to keep your protocol current and active unless you have completed your study.

- **Ensure your CITI Human Subjects Training is kept up-to-date and current throughout the study.**
- **Submit a protocol modification (change) if any changes (no matter how minor) are proposed in your study for review and approval by the IRB before being implemented in your study.**
- **Notify the IRB within 5 days of any unanticipated or adverse events are experienced by subjects during your research.**
- **Submit a study closure through the Cayuse IRB submission system once your study has ended.**

If you have any questions regarding the IRB decision, please contact Michael Gillespie, the Research Compliance Officer. Mr. Michael Gillespie can be reached by phone at (909) 537-7588, by fax at (909) 537-7028, or by email at [mjillesp@csusb.edu](mailto:mjillesp@csusb.edu). Please include your application approval number IRB-FY2022-112 in all correspondence. Any complaints you receive from participants and/or others related to your research may be directed to Mr. Gillespie.

Best of luck with your research.

Sincerely,  
*Nicole Dabbs*

Nicole Dabbs, Ph.D., IRB Chair  
CSUSB Institutional Review Board

ND/MG

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## ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES

This research project was completed as a collaboration between two partners: Karina Galindo and Julissa Gonzalez. Most of the research and writing were evenly distributed between both partners. The following sections were completed as follows:

### Data Collection:

Assigned leader: Karina Galindo

Assisted by: Julissa Gonzalez

### Data Entry and Analysis:

Assigned leader: Karina Galindo

Assisted by: Julissa Gonzalez

### Writing Report and Presentation of Findings:

#### Introduction and Literature

Joint effort: Karina Galindo and Julissa Gonzalez

#### Methods

Joint effort: Karina Galindo and Julissa Gonzalez

#### Results

Joint effort: Karina Galindo and Julissa Gonzalez

#### Discussion

Joint effort: Karina Galindo and Julissa Gonzalez