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COLLEGE-GOING EXPERIENCES OF MALE FOSTER YOUTH
ALUMNI WHO HAVE STOPPED-OUT OF COLLEGE

By

Felipe De Jesus Longoria

A THESIS

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College-Going Experiences of Male Foster Youth Alumni

Who Have Stopped-Out of College

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University of Nebraska, 2016

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This qualitative research study examined how foster care experiences and masculinities influenced male foster youth alumni's decision to go to college. The study also sought to understand the in-and-out-of-college factors that led participants to exit college prematurely. Five participants were each interviewed twice for data collection purposes. Findings from data analysis indicated that establishing and maintaining relationships in college were challenging and affected an already vulnerable population in their help-seeking behavior. Recommendations are offered for higher education professionals and areas for future research are noted.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to anybody who has ever faced traumatic experiences and systemic barriers, which they had no control over, yet dared to dream big by persisting and aiming to reach goals that were thought to be out of their reach.

To my mother Hermelinda Rios, who sacrificed more than I will ever know so my siblings and I could have brighter futures and without whom I would not be writing a graduate thesis.

Acknowledgements

To the participants of this study, many of whom I have known for years and have established great relationships with, I truly appreciate the trust you have placed in me to share your stories, and being vulnerable enough to think deeply of your experiences. You all have unbelievable talents and I hope this process encourages you to continue reaching your goals, regardless of your setbacks. Thinking back on the relationships I have established with youth in foster care through my work, I realized that their, and your ability to persevere through hardship and attempt the difficult process of going to college, gave me the inspiration to strive for more. I thank you and other foster youth for inadvertently motivating me to go to graduate school.

To Dr. Corey Rumann, you have been invaluable in helping me navigate a process in which I felt totally naive. You gave me the necessary space to learn independently and grow as a researcher and scholar, while offering me precious validating moments that resonated with me. Your support improved my confidence, even in my most difficult moments. Thank you so much for believing in me and encouraging me, not only during the thesis process, but also throughout my graduate school experience. Your commitment to an inclusive and innovative way of educating students is most appreciated.

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To my caring family, I do not think you all know how much you simply being you inspire and motivate me. Though you may not have fully known what I was studying or even getting myself into by enrolling into graduate school, you believed in my decisions. I know we do not often vocalize our appreciation and support for one another, but I know how much we each look up to each other and value the individual routes we have chosen to take in our lives. I love you all so very much for your continued support and love. I hope my graduating from graduate school will set a precedent for my nieces and nephews to know they too can reach any academic goal they set. Recognizing what our family has gone through and where we came from, I am confident in knowing that we can go anywhere in life we want.

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Chapter 1

“It is a curious reality that society’s most vulnerable youth, those who have suffered abuse or neglect and have never known consistent, permanent, nurturing adult relationships, are asked to be self-sufficient at a time when other youth are still receiving parental support in college”

By: Nathanael Okpych, 2012, (p. 1394)

Introduction

As the reader, consider this thought; think of a moment when you were upset, down on your luck, or simply needing someone to talk you through a difficult situation. Who would you reach out to and who would take the time to actively listen to you? Identify the individuals in your life whom you could reach out to in this hypothetical time of need. Envision yourself actually reaching out for their help. You might have been able to identify family members, friends, colleagues, and community members who you could reach out to. Think of the time it took, the vulnerability you bared, the consistency of the relationship, the emotional capacity exhibited by both parties for you to feel comfortable enough to reach out to those people and know they would be receptive to your needs. Those types of relationships are powerful and necessary in people’s lives. However, those types of relationships are not available to everybody in higher education, a time and place in students’ lives where they experience difficult and challenging situations requiring supportive relationships. As Nathanael Okpych’s above quote illustrates, youth coming out of foster care are some of the most vulnerable people in our society and have experienced many inconsistent relationships, yet need a lot of help and support. Ironically, those same individuals are told to be self-sufficient in college. Keeping this understanding in mind as you read through this thesis will allow you to grasp the paradox facing this population and the barriers they face in college that result in them stopping-out prematurely.

Men who have foster care experience are a population in higher education that is not well understood. Understanding who they are and their experiences in college will assist higher education professionals in being better equipped to support these students. While no child chooses to be in foster care, placement is intended to support children and to mitigate the negative

experiences the child has faced. Children in foster care have typically faced traumatic instances of abuse, neglect, abandonment, or even the death of their parents. The process of being in foster care typically results in the child being separated from their family in one way or another. Those experiences can be difficult for children and can have lasting effects that can alter their future. It takes resilience to overcome the experiences they have faced even after they have exited care and become foster youth alumni (FYA).

Additionally, there are societal expectations of men and the roles and behaviors they are expected to perform. However, the topic of the male gender role tends to be overlooked. Those ideas are so ingrained in the fabric of many men's lives that deviating from those roles result in being checked and corrected by others, which often results in men reverting back to the generally accepted and limiting male role.

Having experiences in foster care and being male have direct and indirect influences on individual's experiences and success rates in college, yet those two intersecting identities have not been critically researched. Both FYA and college men face challenges to being successful in college. FYA graduate college at a rate as low as 6% (Day, Dworsky, Fogarty, & Damashek, 2011), compared to the national average of roughly 30% (Drowsky & Perez, 2010). Additionally, women have surpassed men in overall college enrollment and degree attainment since 1998 (Case, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Research suggests that this gender gap may be greater among marginalized groups, including youth emerging from foster care (Day et al., 2011; Kirk et al., 2012). Various studies have differed in FYA's first-year completion rates between genders, stating that women's first year completion rates in college are between 29%-45% while men's first year completion rates are between 21%-33% (Courtney, et al., 2010; Courtney et al., 2011; Kirk, et al., 2012). Also, whereas 21% of FYA stop-out before the end of their first year compared with 13% of their non-foster care peers, men stop-out at a 5% higher rate than women do before degree completion (Day et al., 2011). Overall, female FYA reported

more than twice the likelihood of achieving a bachelor's or graduate degree than males (Kirk et al., 2012).

As the topic of men and masculinities as a field of study gains more attention and as the experiences of youth in foster care become better understood, it is important to recognize how intersecting identities (e.g., masculinity and FYA) and experiences can culminate in being better able to support this student population that seems to be struggling to persist in college. I was intrigued by the possibility that male gender roles may have an influence on FYA, as they are a vulnerable population and men are not often allowed to be vulnerable in our society.

Purpose Statement

This study sought to understand the college-going experiences of male FYA who have stopped-out of college. I investigated how the intersection of their experiences in foster care coupled with their male identity created factors that lead them to enroll in college and how those same experiences contributed to them stopping-out of college before earning their college degree. This study focused on the perspectives of participants who had enrolled in college and subsequently stopped-out in order to understand how participants' made meaning of their college-going experiences and their desire to eventually reenroll into college.

Significance of Study

FYA are described as one of the most vulnerable populations in our society (Okpych, 2012). That acknowledgement alone signifies the reason why understanding the factors that lead FYA to go to college and subsequently stop-out is so important. However, because male FYA complete college at lower rates than women, consideration of their male gender role seemed necessary to incorporate into this research study. While research has been conducted on both the college-going experiences of FYA as well as college men and masculinities independently, I did not find research incorporating both areas from my review of the literature.

In addition to understanding the identities of participants, the focal point of this research study was intended to understand the factors regarding college student persistence. The literature

I reviewed took perspectives from prospective college students with foster care experiences or current college students with foster care experience. None of the literature I reviewed was from the standpoint of FYA who have stopped-out, leaving out a unique perspective. It is important to have a better understanding of participants' decision to stop-out early and what can be done to intervene effectively before that occurs. Recognizing that college persistence can be enhanced through student involvement (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1993;) and validation by faculty, staff, and family (Rendon, 2011), theoretical frameworks addressing involvement and validation were used to help understand participants' meaning making process and why they stopped-out of college.

These young men are trying to overcome traumatic experiences and improve their lives by going to college, yet they face obstacles that are preventing them from being successful. It is important to recognize that responsibility should not be placed solely on students if they do not succeed in college. Therefore, it was important to listen to their stories in order to better understand what can be done to support this vulnerable population.

Research Questions

Three research questions guided this research study to understand participants' experiences in college and what led them to stop-out. The questions focused on the intersecting experiences of being in foster care and their male identity. Those questions were:

- What were the experiences of male FYA while in foster care and how did it influence their decision to pursue higher education?
- What were the in-college and out-of-college factors that caused them to stop-out of college?
- What role did masculinity play in their decisions, behaviors, and experiences related to higher education?

Research Design

My primary objective was to detail how participants made meaning of their experiences in college and to identify factors that led them to stop-out. This qualitative research study was

informed by a constructivist paradigm and used a narrative inquiry methodology. Allowing participants to freely describe how they constructed their own realities and share their thoughts using a narrative inquiry was most suitable in gaining insight into their experiences. Narrative inquiries allow stories to be told by participants, while incorporating their identities and how they make meaning of those experiences (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). Two semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather rich, meaningful data, while allowing authentic relationships to be established or reinforced with participants.

Researcher's Positionality

The constructivist paradigm places an emphasis on research being inseparable from the values of the researcher (Mertens, 2015, p. 17). Therefore, an understanding of my background, experiences, connections to the populations, and bias is necessary for the reader to understand my positionality in the research process.

There were many reasons I wanted to study this particular topic. I grew up in the same Midwestern region that the participants in this study are from and have lived in both rural and urban areas similar to their hometowns. That gives me a unique understanding of the culture that the participants experienced growing up. More importantly, I have spent a considerable amount of time interacting with youth in foster care who aspire to go to college and have seen many of them stop-out prematurely. I am in a role as an Independent Living Specialist whose main role is to help and support both young adults (16-24) aging out of foster care and those who are wards of the state transition out of care to support them in becoming independent. In that role, I spend a good portion of my time supporting their educational aspirations and getting them prepared and ready to enroll in college. As the research has shown, those youth do not have high success rates and I wanted to have a deeper and clearer understanding of their experiences in order to better support them to be successful.

I was also personally involved in foster care as a child and can understand the trauma and lasting effects that can arise from those experiences. It is not something I think about often, but

the lasting effects have likely created an internal feeling within me that drives my passion for working with foster youth. My work with this population has given me a valuable perspective of the difficulty this population faces in persisting in college.

I also possess many identities that seem common in the child welfare system and affect college-going experiences. I am Latino and grew up in an abusive family that ended in divorce and with my mother being the sole caregiver for my siblings and I. I came from a low-socioeconomic status family and was a first-generation student in college, which allows me to empathize with the lack of support in navigating the complicated endeavor of going to college that these youth face. I attended both a community college and a four-year university that I believe permits me to understand the experiences of participants who attend either type of institution. The challenges I faced in college created many instances that made me consider stopping-out prematurely. It was through my involvement in college sports, organizations, and instances of positive validation from others that increased my persistence and allowed me to complete my education.

I identify as male, an identity that has only recently become more salient to me as I started graduate school and spent time as a graduate assistant in the womens' center. Due to my time in that role, I learned about the complexities of how socially constructed ideas of my male gender have resounding effects in my daily living, behaviors, and deeply held ideas. This was made most evident when I realized that coming out as a gay man at the late age of 27 was largely due to my adoption of masculine norms and scripts that inhibited acceptance of anything presumed to be feminine, which to me included being gay. Because of my experience I understand that certain perceptions of manhood can have direct impact on how these young men make decisions whether it is apparent to them or not.

Definition of Terms

There are terms that will be used throughout this thesis that may not be familiar to the reader. Therefore, the following terms have been defined to give readers a better understanding of the language being used.

Foster youth alumni (FYA): This term is used to describe the group of individuals who have personal experiences being involved in, but have since exited, foster care.

State-ward/Ward of the state: This term is used to describe the process when a child is placed in the custody of the state, opposed to the custody of their biological parents. Children can become state wards for various reasons, primarily due to neglect and/or abuse or due to abandonment or death of parents.

Foster care: This term is used to describe the circumstance when caregivers, sanctioned and licensed by the state, provide holistic support for wards of state, particularly foster children, in place of biological parents, whose parental rights become administered through the state by legal order of the court.

Foster home: This term describes the residence in which foster care is provided.

Group home: The term describes a facility that houses multiple wards of state, regardless if they are foster children or juveniles, and which support their daily living in a structured setting.

Legal Guardian: This term is used to describe the legal authority an adult has over a child. This will be used to describe caseworker's authority over state wards and biological parent's authority over their children.

Caseworker: This term describes the title of an employee of the state that has acquired legal guardianship by the state to make legal, placement, and personal decisions for wards of state, regardless if foster children or juveniles.

Child welfare system: This term is used to describe the structural state system that encompasses services, resources, and professionals designed to support improving children's wellbeing.

Juvenile justice system: This term is used to describe the structural state system designed to reform and rehabilitate minors who have gotten in trouble with the legal system.

Service Provider: This term describes professionals within child welfare or juvenile justice systems who provide services for state wards in an effort to support or rehabilitate them.

Age out: This term describes the process when state-wards exit foster care at the legal age of majority.

Stop-out/Stopping-out: This term will be used in place of dropout or dropping-out to describe the occurrence when students, who begin a plan of study, leave college for a period, and then re-enroll to complete their plan of study (Hoyt & Winn, 2004).

Masculinities: This term acknowledges the various ways men and women embody masculinity based on gender roles that have been socially constructed and influenced by cultural beliefs about how men ought to behave (Mahalik, Good, Englar-Carlson, 2003).

Delimitations

Male participants, who were involved in foster care, and the child welfare system in general, up to and past the age of 16, confined the scope of this study. That age was important as it likely allowed their experience in foster care to factor into their experiences in college. Their age also likely allowed participants to recollect their experiences in foster care more clearly because had participants been younger recollecting experiences may have been more difficult. This study only observed students who attended a post-secondary institution, defined as institutions that offered Associate's and/or Bachelor's degrees and focused on participants who had stopped-out of college before earning a degree. Participants also needed to be age 19 or older to better ensure they were old enough to have had some experience of going to college and enough time to have stopped-out.

The geographic area confined this research study, as it was conducted in a Midwestern region. However, participants grew up in both urban and rural areas providing multiple

perspectives. The type of higher education institution attended by participants was not taken into consideration for this research study.

Limitations

This research study was qualitative in nature and so the five participant's experiences should not be generalized to the overall population of male FYAs. My positionality as a former and current service provider to four of the five participants could be seen as a limitation as they may have felt compelled to describe their experiences in foster care in more favorable terms, as opposed to if they had no prior relationship with me. However, my past working relationship with the four participants, and acquaintanceship with the fifth participant likely allowed them to open up and express themselves more as trust had already been established in our relationships. Also, as someone who intimately knew the experiences youth had in foster care, that let them know that I understood them and would not pity them which was something they shared concerned them about other peoples' perceptions.

I was limited in the access of this population due to lack of communication options with potential participants. This population does not often have stability so when I identified individuals who fit the criteria it was difficult to get ahold of them. They often change residence, phone numbers, and do not often use email. I thought it would be possible to use my relationships with other service providers to identify potential participants but that option resulted in only one participant volunteering for this study. I reverted to seeking out individuals I had relationships with through my work but was also limited by whose contact information I still had or by those whom I knew still resided in the same residence. That limited my potential pool of participants.

Conclusion

Male FYA who attend college have a high likelihood of stopping-out of college before earning a degree which if earned would likely improve their chances of success and stability. This research study focused on the experiences of five male FYA who had enrolled in college but stopped-out, in an effort to better understand how they made meaning of their college going

experiences. The findings of this study identified factors that lead to them stopping-out and help higher education professionals better understand how to support male FYA in college. Finally, recommendations for practice and future research are offered.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

Introduction to Persistence

Access to higher education has become increasingly important and has been seen as a relative success in the modern era. However, Blum and Jarret (2013) found that although there has been tremendous progress in improving college access in the United States since the end of the Second World War, the number of stop-outs has increased at roughly the same rate of 44%. This has caused the issue of student persistence, retention, and withdrawal in post-secondary education to become of considerable interest in the scholarly community to better understand how to offset attrition rates.

Language of student attrition.

Student attrition has been defined in various ways to describe students exiting college, but a clearer definition will allow for better understanding of student experiences. Tinto (1975) argued that the literature often failed in distinguishing dropping-out of college due to academic failure with those who withdrawal voluntarily. He went on to argue, in agreement with others (Hoyt and Winn, 2004), that too often students who leave college temporarily and intend to return to college, and those who transfer to another college institution are grouped with students who permanently exit college. Failure to acknowledge the differences may cause an overestimation of the dropout rates of institutions, fail to adequately identify retention programs, and cause questions of instructional policies related to attrition, enrollment, and success.

Ensuring proper definition of students' educational intentions can be helpful in better understanding their overall educational plan. Tinto's definition of dropping out refers to students who enroll in college but do not reenroll or do not complete their intended degree program or set of courses (Tinto, 1993). Additionally, dropping-out includes students who have no definite plans to return to college and those that do not transfer to another institution of higher education (Hoyt & Winn, 2004). Stopping-out, on the other hand, refers to those students who begin a plan of study, leave college for a period, and then reenroll to complete their plan of study (Hoyt & Winn,

2004). Recognizing the difference in student intentions can aid the intervention process that may support those who stop-out.

Student persistence.

While properly classifying terms affiliated with attrition is important, there remain real concerns of students not fulfilling their academic goals and dreams by exiting college in large numbers, particularly during their first year. National data consistently indicate that approximately one-fifth to one-quarter of college students drop out at the end of their first year (Ryan, 2004; Chen, 2012). Chen (2012) found that drop out risk is highest during the first year (17.7%) but extends throughout students' college tenure. The cumulative six-year dropout rate is about 56% (Chen, 2012). Looking beyond four-year colleges, it has become more evident that attrition rates are higher at community colleges. Astin (1984) reviewed the literature and consistently found that students' chances of exiting college are substantially greater at a two-year college than at a four-year college. The question then becomes, what factors are associated to these attrition rates?

Tinto (1975), one of the pioneers of persistence research, identified characteristics that have direct and indirect impacts on students' performance throughout college. Those factors include a variety of personal attributes (e.g., sex, race, ability), precollege experiences (e.g., grade-point averages, academic and social attainments), and family backgrounds (e.g., social status attributes, value climates, climate of expectations) (Tinto, 1975). Some factors can have positive impacts, while others may not. Students' socioeconomic status (SES) and their race/ethnicity have shown to have direct impact on their persistence in college (Chen, 2012). Chen (2012) found that students coming from a low-SES, those who are African-Americans, Hispanics, and other racial/ethnic groups (except Asians) have a higher likelihood of dropping-out during their first year in college. Fortunately, increased levels of support (emotionally, academically, and financially) for marginalized student populations can increase their persistence and offset their chances of exiting college, as described in the following paragraph.

Disadvantaged groups, such as low-SES groups and minorities with the exception of Asians tend to have lower dropout risks when awarded high financial aid, such as federal grants, subsidized loans, and merit aid (Chen, 2012; Ryan, 2004; Yorke, 2004; Astin, 1993). Additional support and interventions, initiated through the advising process, should be based on the individual students' pre-college characteristics and deficiencies (Veestra, 2009). It has been found that support for students is most effective when implemented during their most vulnerable time in college, which is typically a students' first year (Chen, 2012; Veestra, 2009). Therefore, it would be most advantageous for institutions to focus their student intervention programs during students' first semester or year. Veestra (2012) emphasizes this point by recommending early identification of students who may be at risk and offer early intensive assistance to increase levels of persistence.

Factors of attrition and persistence.

Though the subjects of attrition and persistence have become important, there continue to be discrepancies of the true factors that result in students exiting college. Various reasons are credited for students' lack of persistence. Yorke (2004) identified the following as the most frequently cited influences on college students' early departure from their academic programs: wrong choice of study, academic difficulties, financial problems, poor quality of the student experience, unhappiness with the social environment, and dissatisfaction with institution provision. Chen (2012) found other contributing factors affecting student attrition unrelated to Yorke's findings. Those factors included institutions with greater percentages of part-time faculty, having a larger percentage of minority students, and attending public institutions with less selective admission requirements as predictors of low retention rates. Additionally, a lower full-time faculty – student ratio, a smaller number of full-time enrolled students, and a lower level of expenditures on instruction, academic support and student service support, were all consistent factors across a six-year observation period that negatively affected retention rates (Chen 2012).

In order to concentrate data and focus of persistence, Tinto (1975) separated the factors related to student retention into academic and social domains. He suggested that students needed to be successfully integrated into both domains to ensure retention in college. Failure to gain integration into both domains, he argued, will negatively determine students' intent to persist. Integration into just one would not offset the lack of integration into the other domain and could likely result in exiting college (Tinto, 1975). Further research focused on the individual's personal motivation to complete college. Rovai (2003) found that students' thoughts and behaviors aimed at maintaining their intent to reach their goals, even when distracted, emphasized self-regulation in the context of persistence. That kind of motivation was seen as sufficient for students to enroll in educational programs. However, they acknowledged that students might encounter decreased motivation in more rigorous academic programs particularly in the face of adversity and may need additional support (Rovai, 2003). Therefore, accurate expectations of academic programs need to be expressed from both the institution and the student to generate better preparedness to overcome instances of decreased motivation that could lead to a student deciding to stop-out.

Cost of attrition.

No matter the level of students' perseverance in the face of adversity, or the efforts put forth by the institution, there will undoubtedly always be students who will exit college prematurely, which affects institutions. Blum and Jarret (2013) indicated that student attrition drives up the cost of each completed degree and creates a competitive disadvantage for the institutions' access to students and resources. Beyond financial and resource deficits, student attrition affects college atmospheres. Colleges see a loss of diverse ideas and cultural experiences due to student attrition, mainly from students who would be engaged in and out of the classroom (Veenstra, 2009). Veenstra (2009) noted that even though students may leave a particular institution, their impact on society might not suffer as long as a student transfers to another institution and earns their degree. Whereas, if a student downright dropouts, there would be a loss

to both the initial university's investment to students, and to society by loss of future tax revenue (Veenstra, 2009). As such, Veenstra (2009) acknowledged that higher education institutions do in fact have a social responsibility to ensure students persistence.

In the grand scope of things, colleges have limited control over student retention, but do have jurisdiction over the development of its educational processes and programs throughout students' first year of college (Veenstra, 2009; Rendón & Muñoz, 2011). To achieve a higher graduation rate at U.S. colleges and universities, it was suggested that there are financial tradeoffs between students' dropping-out of a college and the establishment of an effective student success program (Veenstra, 2009). Veenstra (2009) advised offsetting the cost of student support services, which would encourage first-year students to stay, by weighing it against the monetary value of the loss associated with the number of students who leave at the end of the freshman year. The monetary benefit to universities supporting a major student support effort is seen as positive, as long as the budget for student services is less than the loss associated with students leaving the university (Veenstra, 2009; Ryan, 2004).

Model of persistence.

Models of persistence have been created throughout the years to describe the process that students go through in their determination to persist in higher education. Through it all, Tinto's Student Integration Model, referenced by many (Chen, 2012; Yorke, 2004, Rovai, 2003; Hoyt & Winn, 2008; Barnett 2011), has continued to prove viable and effective in assessing and understanding student attrition.

Tinto's model emphasizes the inclusion of both individual student background characteristics (e.g., social status, high school experiences, community of residence, etc., and individual attributes such as sex, ability, race, and ethnicity) and individual student expectations and motivational attributes (e.g., level and intensity of educational expectations and levels of motivation for academic success) (Tinto, 1975). Tinto's model also emphasizes the importance of goal commitment and institutional commitment by students in relation to their persistence in

college (Tinto, 1975). Student's personal, financial, and time commitments help identify the intensity of a student's level of persistence in an institution (Tinto, 1975). Tinto argued that those personal characteristics, attributes, and expectations have direct and indirect impacts upon performance in college, and on whether or not individuals decide to drop out or transfer colleges

Rovai (2003) interpreted Tinto's Student Integration Model, and focused his work on the student-institutional "fit" by paying attention to three variables (e.g. student, institutional, and environmental) and specific themes which included students' social integration onto campus life. The origins of Tinto's efforts lie in a students' ability to identify with the institution, because as students identify with a college environment, it is easier for them to become more involved, which leads to higher persistence (Astin, 1984). If students feel more integrated in their institution, it is possible that their willingness and comfort in getting involved will increase, providing a higher likelihood of persisting in college.

Student involvement and its impact on persistence.

Student involvement is one area that has direct correlation to persistence in college according to the work by Alexander Astin (1984). According to Astin (1984) *Student Involvement* refers to:

The quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience. Such involvement takes many forms, such as absorption in academic work, participation in extracurricular activities, and interaction with faculty and other institutional personnel (p. 518).

Astin (1984) developed the theory of student involvement to better understand and identify factors in the college environment that significantly affected students' persistence. There are five basic assumptions that make up student involvement, according to Astin (1984):

- Involvement refers to investment of physical and psychological energy in either highly generalized (student experience) or highly specific objects (studying).

- Involvement occurs along a continuum; that is, different students manifest different degrees of involvement, and the same student manifests different degrees of involvement in different areas at different times.
- Involvement has both quantitative (numerical) and qualitative (subjective) features.
- Student learning and personal development in any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program.
- Educational policy or practice effectiveness is directly related to the capacity of said policy or practice to increase student involvement. (p. 519)

The theory of student involvement proclaims that in order for a student to gain the institution's desired learning and developmental outcomes, they must elicit sufficient effort and energy to a particular curriculum, activity, or organization (Astin, 1984). Virtually every significant effect in Astin's work could be rationalized in terms of the involvement concept. Astin (1984) found that being involved on campus had a direct contribution to persistence and that not being involved contributed to students' stopping-out.

Student involvement not only enhances persistence and student learning, it has been associated with other benefits for students as well. Students who are purposefully involved in college make positive gains in self-confidence and interpersonal skills, developmental skills; higher order thinking and problem-solving skills. Additionally, students experience growth in practical skills as they take their classroom education and apply it real-life contexts gained through involvement on campus (Case, 2011).

Factors affecting student involvement.

Though the benefits of getting involved are extensive for students, there are students who struggle or are inhibited from getting involved on campus. Findings from research on student involvement provide a strong rationale for institutions to allocate financial resources towards student services. Colleges that placed higher priority on student services found that they had lower instances of students exiting their institutions (Blum & Jarret, 2013; Chen, 2012).

Consistent with Astin's assumption, Chen (2012) found that funneling financial resources into student services rather than instruction is a more critical environmental factor in relation to persistence.

Having student services on campus for students does not necessarily equate to higher student involvement in college. Some environmental factors and individual student characteristics inhibit involvement. For example, Case (2011) cited the 2008 National Survey of Student Engagement and determined that first-generation students (FGS) to be considered among the "pockets of disengagement," which was described as groups of individuals that simply did not engage themselves on college campuses (p. 169). It is important for FGS to get involved, particularly in clubs and organizations, because it increases their chances to be successful as students. However, as Case (2011) noted, this group will often not get involved unless an intervention is enacted. Three reasons this may be the case for FGS's have been identified: FGS have a greater financial need, are more likely to live off campus, and tend to pursue majors focusing on applied majors, rather than theoretical majors (Lundberg, Schreiner, Hovaguimian, & Miller, 2007).

Another indicator that can affect a general student's willingness to get involved, and possibly the most important and pervasive indicator, is a student's residence (Astin, 1984). If students want to be more successful in college, regardless of institutional type, sex, race, ability, or family background, living on a campus residence increased students' involvement and was positively related to retention (Astin 1984). Also, holding a part-time job on campus was positively linked to retention, whereas working off-campus and full-time was not.

Other factors that potentially have a positive influence on student involvement include, having a sense of community, student-faculty interaction, and peer interaction (Case, 2011). Additionally, generating a stronger sense of community could be attributed to higher participation levels in campus organizations (Case, 2011; Tinto 1975; Barnett, 2011; Gildersleeve, 2011, Yorke, 2004).

Astin's (1984) student involvement theory was accurate in acknowledging the importance of students' involvement on campus and its connection with college success and persistence. However, his theory overlooked the nuances of non-dominant students' realities (Gildersleeve, 2011). Not all students had the capacity to get involved on campus, or at least not to the same degree as others, especially as colleges started enrolling more students with diverse backgrounds (Gildersleeve, 2011). Gildersleeve (2011) found that nontraditional students felt as though being involved on campus was not geared toward them.

Increasing students' capacity and willingness to get involved on campus is important, as doing so affects their college persistence. Astin (1984) concluded, "if we conceive of involvement as occurring along a continuum, the act of dropping out can be viewed as the ultimate form of noninvolvement, and dropping out anchors the involvement continuum at the lowest levels" (p. 524). Using that rationale, it is important to recognize what occurs when students are engaged and involved: they are building relationships and having others believe in them and their abilities. In essence, students generate validation from others when they get involved in college.

Validation.

Students involved in campus activities often experience feelings of acceptance, which can lead to increased perceptions of personal value by use of positive words and gestures conveyed by a student's support systems. Nora, Urick, and Cerecer (2011) stated that support by guardians, encouragement by instructors and staff, and a feeling of belonging on campus create an affirming sense of value that lead to students being able to contribute to the learning that takes place in the classroom and on campus. Unfortunately, levels of support can vary for many students, particularly non-traditional/marginalized students, who struggle to feel valued, have difficulty getting involved on campus, and doubt their ability to succeed in college (Yorke, 2004; Chen, 2012; Barnett, 2011).

In order to increase students' feelings of acceptance, Laura Rendón developed validation by theorizing its implications for student development and learning due to her interest in assessing the influence of students' out-of-class experiences on learning and retention (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011). She developed validation theory with particular applicability to low-income, FGS as an alternative to integration or involvement that may not be consistent with all student experiences from diverse backgrounds enrolled in higher education (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011; Gildersleeve, 2011). Validation theory pays attention to students' holistic college experiences and how validation can help non-traditional students find success in college (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011; Gildersleeve, 2011). Rendón stated:

Validation, as originally conceived for college students, refers to the intentional, proactive affirmation of students by in and out-of-class agents (i.e. faculty, student, and academic affairs staff, family members, peers) in order to: 1) validate students as creators of knowledge and as valuable members of the college learning community and 2) foster personal development and social adjustment (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011, p. 8).

Six elements make up validation theory.

- Responsibility for initiating contact with students lies with institutional agents such as faculty, advisers, coaches, lab assistants, and counselors.
- Validation causes students to feel capable of learning and have a sense of self-worth.
- Validation is likely a prerequisite for student development.
- Validation can occur in and out of class.
- Validation should not be viewed as an end, but rather as a developmental process, which begins early and can continue over time.
- Validation is most critical when administered early in the college experience, especially during the first few weeks of class and the first year of college. (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011, p. 17).

Validation theory is made up of two parts, academic validation and interpersonal validation. Both can be highly effective if used properly and regularly. Academic validation occurs when in- and out-of-class agents take action to assist students to “trust their innate capacity to learn and to acquire confidence in being a college student” (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011, p. 40). Interpersonal validation occurs when in and out-of-class agents take action to foster students’ personal development and social adjustment (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011). While validation theory was initially considered an alternative to integration or involvement, it can also be viewed as a precondition for integration by the relationships built with staff and/or faculty who validate students (Barnett, 2011).

While family and peers are important in validating students, Barnett (2011) found particular importance placed on the role of faculty. Faculty who affirm students as people, not just as students, and can increase a student’s confidence in their ability to persevere in higher education (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011). In addition to taking an active interest in individual students, structuring intentional activities and events that elicit non-traditional students’ full participation in learning was helpful (Barnett, 2011). This was especially true when students experienced validation by faculty and staff who had a deep understanding of the student’s cultural and social background (Barnett, 2011). This is helpful in students’ feelings of integration on campus, regardless of gender (Barnett, 2011). However, validation used as a method to increase persistence, has a more positive effect for women than men according to a study by Barnett (2011). The lowering rates of college persistence for men in college create a need to better understand what is affecting their persistence. In order to do that, understanding the male gender role becomes necessary, as explained in the following section.

College Men and Masculinities

Introduction to college men and masculinities.

Male gender roles have become helpful in understanding why men behave as they do, something that was taken for granted due to their dominant role in history. As college mens’

enrollment and completion rates have decreased, understanding masculinity has become helpful in creating interventions to help men succeed in higher education.

Development of gender.

To better understand masculinities, it is first important to understand where gender originates and how it is influenced. According to Brannon and David (1985), children are assigned their gender role of “male” or “female” at birth that will last one's entire lifetime and affects virtually everything one ever does. It is helpful to recognize that gender roles are socially constructed concepts that are influenced by cultural beliefs about how men ought to behave (Mahalik, Good, & Englar-Carlson, 2003). Multiple forces throughout a boy's life reinforce those concepts. Families (especially fathers), male peer groups, and socialization in school and sports are consistently cited as having the most significant and lasting effects on the development of masculine identities for boys (Harper, Harris, & Mmeger, 2005, Kimmel & Messner, 2007; Kimmel, Hearn, & Connell, 2005).

Male gender norms and ‘scripts.’

There are many behaviors that men are expected to exhibit to fulfill masculine norms, (Brannon & David, 1985). Brannon and David (1985) were one of the first to frame masculinities into a set of four socially constructed masculine norms, known as the *Male Code*:

- The avoidance of acting in a feminine way (“No Sissy Stuff”).
- Striving to be recognized for successful achievement (“The Big Wheel”).
- Never showing physical or emotional weakness (“The Sturdy Oak”).
- Willing to engage in risky or thrill seeking behavior, and even engage in violence if necessary (“Give ‘em Hell”).

The authors go on to state that when united, the four dimensions create an unattainable male image that cannot be fulfilled.

The work by Mahalik, Good, and Englar-Carlson (2003) builds on Brannon and David's work and categorizes seven masculine “scripts” that comprise the male gender role. The *Strong-*

and-Silent Script describes the emotionally restrictive and stoic male who is in control of his feelings. The *Tough-Guy Script* describes the invulnerable and fearless man. The “‘Give-'em-Hell’ Script” depicts the violent and aggressive male. The *Playboy Script* emphasizes sexual dominance while avoiding intimate relationships. The *Homophobic Script* urges the avoidance and restraint of characteristics associated with homosexuality, including intimate male friendships. The *Winner Script* describes the competitive, successful, and powerful male who should be the “breadwinner” of a family. Finally, the *Independent Script* describes the uncomfortable feeling men get with "attaching" to others or with needing assistance from others. Mahalik, et al. (2003) noted the importance that some scripts may be important for some men but not for others, individualizing the scripts to every man.

Reinforcing male gender roles.

For most men there is a conflict between the gender roles, or “scripts”, they feel obligated to fulfill and their actual behavior. Gender role conflict is defined as "a psychological state occurring when rigid, sexist, or restrictive gender roles that are learned through socialization, result in personal restriction, devaluation, or violation of others or self" (O’Neil, 1990, p. 25). Although men’s true self often conflicts with societal expectations of male gender roles, it is difficult to break free from the traditional male role due to the relentless monitoring and criticism that comes from deviating from those roles, primarily from other men. Harris and Harper (2010) find that men both police and validate the gender performance of other men through constant and careful scrutiny of each other. Men watch each other, rank each other, and grant their acceptance into the realm of manhood. Men are constantly parading the markers of manhood--wealth, power, status, sexy women--in front of other men, desperate for their approval (Kimmel, 1994) Being seen as unmanly is a fear that propels American men to deny manhood to others, as a way of proving the improvable – that one is fully manly (Kimmel, 1994). That behavior oftentimes leads men to exact a tremendous price from those deemed less than fully manly: women, gay men, non-native-born men, men of color (Kimmel, 1994). Additionally, the more men endorse traditional

masculine ideologies, the more they will likely personally experience a host of presenting issues including poorer self-esteem, problems with interpersonal intimacy, greater depression and anxiety, abuse of substances, problems with interpersonal violence, as well as greater overall psychological distress (Mahalik, Good, & Englar-Carlson, 2003).

Masculinities and college.

Adopting dominant masculine roles and scripts can also have negative effects for men in college. Recent studies on the gender identity development of college men have concluded that masculinities have noticeable influences on the ways in which men experience college – namely, in the decisions they make about friendships, how they choose to spend their time outside of class, the choices they make about careers and majors, and how they engage in sexual and romantic relationships (Harris III & Harper, 2010). Additionally, not only is it outside the traditional male role for an individual to express a need for help (Good & Wood, 1995), but educators may misunderstand this lack of expression as a lack of need, which may lead to lower academic support and outcomes for college men (Davis, 2002). Failing to recognize students' need for help may limit the opportunity for faculty and staff to establish relationships with male students. Those missed occasions take away validating opportunities, which have indicated a greater intent to persist in college (Gildersleeve, 2011).

Help seeking avoidance.

Seeking help through counseling, academic advising, and other forms of emotional expressiveness are inconsistent with the restricted emotionality that men tend to adopt. In college context, men who have “internalized restricted emotionality” can be overwhelmed by failure, setbacks and frustrations (Harris & Harper, 2008; O’Neil, 1981, p. 71). Instead of seeking necessary help those feelings of failure and the fear of exposing those feelings to others only reduces the willingness to seek help. Male students with lower academic self-efficacy were found to be more likely to avoid seeking academic help (Wilmer & Levant, 2011). Fears of failure and intense pressure to succeed are two consequences accompanying men’s “obsession” with

achievement and success (O'Neil, 1981, p. 71). College men who fall into this behavioral pattern are predisposed to physical and emotional stress and rely on food, alcohol, and drugs to soothe their anxieties (Harris & Harper, 2008). Those self-destructive behaviors likely affect other aspects of college men's lives.

In order to offset some of the negative behaviors addressed, which lead to destructive behavior, lower academic success, and disengagement, interventions need to be embraced by faculty and staff to support men. Newman (2002) suggested that teachers do three things to facilitate academic help seeking: involvement, support for autonomy, and support for competence. Those efforts are consistent with elements of Rendón's Validation Theory that are intended to help nontraditional students feel integrated on campus and persist when they experience active efforts by institutional faculty and staff to validate them (Nora et al., 2011; Rendón & Muñoz, 2011). This leads to nontraditional students, including men, to excel in college when members of the campus community reach out to them with genuine concern and reinforce their ability to be successful students (Barnett, 2011).

College men and involvement.

The stress imposed on men by society's pressure to succeed and achieve has direct negative consequences on their involvement on college campuses in comparison to women. As women have surpassed men in campus enrollment, they have also surpassed men in college engagement and involvement (Case, 2011). It has been found that involvement in high school is predictive of involvement in college, and research has found men to be less involved in high school and college (Case, 2011). Being uninvolved can lead men to boredom, which is likely to seep into the classroom. It was found that boredom in the classroom was the number one cited reason for men exiting college (Case, 2011), creating a direct link between disengagement to low persistence.

College men also face other pressures that inhibit their involvement on campus. Case (2011) reviewed the literature on college men and involvement on campus, and found men to be

more susceptible to pressures of drinking and partying than women. Men are more likely to make time for leisure activities centered on having fun, or “let loose”, while in college (Case, 2011). Consequently, as men spend more time engaging in partying behavior, they have less time devoting themselves to being involved in clubs and groups on college campuses (Case, 2011).

Men do get involved on college campuses and their willingness to get involved can be predicted by some common factors. Men have indicated their willingness to get involved if they have been involved in high school, if they anticipate being involved when they go to college, and by working on campus (Case, 2011). Mens’ level of involvement in college has shown to be positively influenced by having regular interactions with faculty. Student-faculty interaction has significantly predicted involvement in clubs and groups for both men and women, but the influence was stronger for men, (Case, 2011).

The restricted male gender role coupled with college students who have faced vulnerable experiences may affect their ability to get involved, seek help, and generally persist and succeed in college. One group of male students who might be at an even greater risk of attrition is foster youth men who have aged out of foster care and who have enrolled in college.

Foster Youth Alumni

Foster youth alumni introduction.

Rendón believed under the right conditions, “even the most vulnerable nontraditional students could be transformed into powerful learners through in-and out of class academic and/or interpersonal validation” (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011, p. 37). Foster youth alumni (FYA) – a group of individuals who have personal experiences being involved in foster care, and are now independent adults are described as one of the most vulnerable populations in in our society (Okpych, 2012). There are male FYA who demonstrate immense resilience and enroll in college to transform their lives. College persistence is a real concern for all students, and for men experiencing difficulty living up to society’s ideal male image may be inhibiting their ability to be successful in college. In order to better understand the experiences of male FYA in college, it

is important to understand their experiences in care and how it shapes their college going experiences.

Foster youth alumni experience overview.

FYA have experienced traumatic events in their lives that have generally, but not always, resulted in them being separated from their families often through no fault of their own. FYA are adults who were placed in foster care as children due to either the death of their parents, or more commonly, due to abuse, neglect, or abandonment by their parents. Pringle (1995) found that fathers are normally the perpetrators of those behaviors. These children, especially boys (Annie Casey Foundation, 2013), are placed in state's custody as "wards of the state" in an effort remove them from abusive environments (Davis, 2006). As a result, children are usually placed in kinship care, a foster home, or a group home that is financially supplemented by the state for the care of the child.

The move into foster care is intended to supplement the child's physical and emotional needs until a legal permanency plan such as reunification, guardianship or adoption is determined. When no viable option for permanency can be identified, and as young adults reach adulthood, living independently or emancipation is considered. In 2009, about 30,000 youth, or 38%, who aged out of care did so without achieving legal permanency (Pecora, 2012). Fortunately, legislation such as the Foster Care Independence Act (FICA) and Fostering Connections extend services, such as Independent Living Services, housing, and Medicaid, to youth until they reach age 21 in certain states (Okpych, 2012).

The foster care system is designed to ease trauma experienced by children and increase their well-being while in care, however that is not always the case. Ironically, children are reportedly experiencing additional trauma by what happens to them while "in care" (Pringle, 1995), increasing their vulnerability. A number of factors may contribute to that trauma, including high turnover rates of caseworkers (Davis, 2006; Villegas, Rosenthal, O'Brian, and Pecora, 2014), multiple placement changes (Pecora, 2012), and frequent changing of schools

(Pecora, 2012), which affects their stability and leads to lower academic achievement (Unrau, Font, & Rawls, 2012). Additionally, recognizing that family reunification is unlikely for many (Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005), and that for many boys in care, who are often “controlled” instead of “cared for” (Pringle, 1995, p. 39), they are likely to exhibit behavioral problems (Davis, 2006). It becomes clearer why instances of mental health, physical health (Vacca, 2007), and substance abuse issues (Davis, 2006) are common among foster youth. As a result, foster youth often require therapy and medication to counterbalance those issues (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007). Those experiences, along with the stigma associated with being in foster care, and lowered expectations by teachers may result in the need for special education services, according to Collins (2004). Further insight into the experiences of foster youth is needed to better understand the impacts their time in care has on their educational aspirations.

Foster youth experiences and effects.

The experiences and outcomes of foster youth are generally viewed as negative because of a number of contributing factors. It begins with the overworked social workers, specifically case managers, who are foster youth’s legal guardians. The packed caseloads of caseworkers causes 90% of agencies to have difficulty retaining workers, causing frequent changes in youth’s case workers (Davis, 2006). Villegas et al. (2014) found that foster youth on average have five caseworkers during their tenure in care, which can have negative effects on establishing relationships for youth. They went on to state that positive results, specifically in the educational outcomes for youth, arose when caseworkers were given manageable caseloads allowing ample time to build relationships with youth (Villegas et al., 2014). In addition to caseworker retention and lower caseloads, youth with better access to case manager assistance, lower turnover of foster parents, access to supportive educational activities, follow-up on treatment recommendations, and support services for youth and foster care were seen to contribute to youth’s educational outcomes (Kessler et al., 2008).

Pecora (2012) found that 65% of foster youth experienced seven or more school changes from elementary through high school and over a third of youth in foster care reported having had five or more school changes. Moving into different school systems not only requires youth to adjust socially but also requires them to adjust to the structural educational differences. These transitions can also inhibit involvement in extra-curricular activities. In addition to school changes, foster youth experience multiple placement changes while in care. Pecora (2012) noted that over four in ten youth (44%) in foster care have lived in more than three placement settings while in care, with an average of five placements (Villegas et al., 2014). Many are not able to be placed in foster care and are designated to other alternatives. Nearly four in ten (38%) reside in group homes, shelter care, or institutions, (Pecora, 2012). Consequently, the instability youth in foster care experience negatively affect their educational preparation for college, resulting in fewer foster youth enrolling in college than their non-foster care peers (Day, Dworsky, Fogarty & Damashek, 2011). Additionally, the instability these youth experience has additional negative consequences in their lives.

Foster youths' constant instability may preclude them from developing and maintaining stable relationships once they exit care. Many youth, 43% (Merdinger et al., 2005), do not reunify with family and tend to reject assistance from them once they age out (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). FYA do however maintain some level of connection with individuals they established relationships while in care. Nearly 60% reported that their current friends include people they knew in foster care and most still maintained contact with foster, group home, or kin-care parents (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). While simply having contact may be pleasant, it may not be the meaningful relationships FYA long for.

The effects of being in foster care seep into other aspects of youths' lives as they age out of the system. Vacca (2007) noted that when foster youth turn 18 (age of majority in most states) and receive a diploma, they lose their housing, professional support, and medical assistance as a reward that usually results in many youth (34%) utilizing welfare services. Youth transitioning

out of foster care have statistically lower success rates in education, while also facing a higher rate of entering the welfare system and dealing with unwanted pregnancy, as is often seen in statistics facing impoverished youth (Unrau et al., 2012). They are also unprepared for the job market and have little experience working when they leave foster care. Vacca (2007) found that 61% of emancipated foster children have no job experience when they leave foster care and head towards adulthood. Although many youth hope for improvements as they exit care, for some, circumstances only seem to worsen. Youth exiting foster care unfortunately experience bouts of homelessness, dependence on public assistance, substance abuse, increased psychological distress, and lack of educational success (Merdinger et al., 2005).

The underlying component that distinguishes the foster youth from their non-foster youth peers is trauma caused by the maltreatment they experienced. Trauma may linger on and negatively affect FYA's future (Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005) and result in their complete separation from family. Trauma, when left untreated, often manifests into mental health issues that require additional treatment. Vacca (2007) indicated that children in foster care tend to have more serious mental health care needs than other children that can have lasting consequences for leading a successful life. Successfully transitioning out of foster care can be overwhelming and foster youth face many challenges. However, through it all many FYAs demonstrate immense resilience and transition out of foster care successfully.

Resilience.

Youth in foster care have had to overcome much hardship in their lives but are remarkably seen as able to persevere more than other populations (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007). Resilience is one of the key words often associated with FYA as summed up by Samuels and Pryce (2008), who found that youth did not have pride in their foster care status but rather in their survival of it and of their childhoods. Resilience is not however a quality that is unilaterally shared by all youth in foster care, especially boys, though reason for that is not apparent. Having

support from friends and/or family, being a woman, and exiting care at a higher age were all variables that reflected positively in a youth's resilience (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007).

As stated previously, (Merdinger et al., 2005; Samuels & Pryce, 2008; Vacca, 2007), many youth exit care without much support which affects their well-being and transition. As a result, FYA often suffer from low-self esteem (Pringle, 1995) due to their experiences but still showcase intense resilience (Hines et al., 2005). As a result, FYA who transition into adulthood and who aspire to go to college navigate the process without the same level of support and guidance other young adults benefit from. Okpych (2012) noted:

It is a curious reality that society's most vulnerable youth, those who have suffered abuse or neglect and have never known consistent, permanent, nurturing adult relationships, are asked to be self-sufficient at a time when other youth are still receiving parental support in college or are experimenting with their first job from within the safe confines of a family (p. 1394).

FYA educational experiences.

FYAs' resilience in overcoming the traumatic events in their lives is highlighted in their willingness to access higher education despite the barriers they face. FYAs may have lower ACT scores, lack family support, demonstrate average coping skills (Unrau et al., 2012), and graduate high school at lower rates compared to the general population (Merdinger et al., 2005). Although FYA graduate high school at a lower rate than their non-foster care peers (Vacca, 2007), they have reported having college aspirations at rates as high as 70% (Merdinger et al., 2005; Davis, 2006) and 84% (Courtney et al., 2004), indicating their willingness to positively transform their lives through education.

A college degree has been credited to opening doors to higher paying jobs and more stable employment, helping end the cycle of poverty (Drowksy & Perez, 2010). This holds particular importance for youth aging-out of foster care who must attain self-sufficiency with little or no family support (Okpych, 2012). With a four-year degree, youth in foster care could

expect to earn approximately \$481,000 more, on average, over the course of their work-life than if they had only a high school diploma. Even if they did not graduate with a degree, completing any college would increase their work-life earnings, on average, by \$129,000 (Peters, Dworsky, Courtney, & Pollack, 2009), creating an argument that simply enrolling in college is beneficial for FYA.

Unfortunately, FYAs' desire to go to college does not manifest into actual enrollment numbers, nor does it translate into high college completion rates. In one study conducted in the Midwest only one-quarter of FYA indicated they were currently enrolled in college compared with 44% of their non-FYA peers (Courtney, et al., 2004). In a longitudinal study of FYA, less than one third (33%) of study participants had completed at least one year of college compared to 53% of the national average (Courtney, et al., 2010). Additionally, various studies have found that FYA graduate college at a rate between 6-10% (Courtney et al., 2011; Day et al., 2011; Villegas et al., 2014) compared to the national average of roughly 30% (Drowsky & Perez, 2010). It becomes apparent after reviewing the literature that FYA require additional support and guidance to be successful in college. Fortunately, some federal and institutional programs that support this population have emerged and have proven advantageous for FYAs' college access.

FYA federal education programs.

Social workers and secondary education personnel have identified barriers to higher education for FYA. In response to those concerns, federal legislation intended to address the needs of FYAs passed in 1985 (Collins, 2004). The Independent Living Initiative amended Title IV-E of the Social Security Act to develop independent living skills of adolescence in foster care by providing federal funds to states (Collins, 2004). However, it was not until 1999 that the Foster Care Independence Act was passed, which created the Chaffee Foster Independence Program, a government program designed to support youth in foster care. The program used a holistic approach by providing youth with enhanced programming in education, housing, life skills, and other needed support (Collins, 2004; Okpych, 2012.)

As part of the education piece of the legislation, the Chafee Education and Training Voucher (ETV) program was created. The program offers up to \$5,000 vouchers yearly for post-secondary training and education to youth aging out of foster care, or to youth adopted from public foster care after age 16 (Collins, 2004). Although this program is very helpful, college education costs often exceed \$5,000 (Okpych, 2012).

In addition to the ETV grants, FYA often qualify for additional need based federal, state/local, and institutional grants which during the 2008-09 academic year averaged \$3,300 for students attending a public institution (Mares & Jordan, 2012). The Federal Application for Student Aid (FAFSA), an application for federal funding offered to students with financial need, has been essential for this populations' educational access. It has been especially helpful that youth can now identify as "wards of the Court" on their FAFSA form, which automatically guarantees foster youth the maximum grant for higher education (Day et al., 2011).

In addition to financial support programs, academic and social supports for FYA are also necessary. Student Support Services' TRIO programs were established in the 1960's for first-generation students, students of color, and students with disabilities to provide increased educational opportunity and attainment at both the secondary and postsecondary levels among low-income youth (Mares & Jordan, 2012). Although many FYA are eligible to utilize TRIO, as they are usually first-generation students and fall into low-income guidelines, there is a need for program coordinators to have a deep understanding of FYAs' background and needs (Barnett, 2011). Collectively, these programs make clear that it is not solely access to higher education that prevents FYA from succeeding academically, it is likely less tangible reasons.

FYA college programs.

Dworsky and Perez (2010) reviewed ten support programs at various institutions designed to provide financial, academic, and other supports to FYA. What they found was that many FYA needed encouragement to participate in programs by other program participants and trusted adults, such as caseworkers. Additionally, when they did participate, they found the

programs provided a needed sense of community, which they deemed helpful (Dworsky & Perez, 2010).

Promising and effective programs, such as summer bridge programs have been implemented for first-generation students, who are also FYA. Bridge programs offer support during the summer before students' first year in college to build support networks and acclimate them to college to help "bridge" the gap for them (Dworsky & Perez, 2010). Davis (2006) found the programs proved to be very successful and recommended they be duplicated at other institutions because many FYA qualify for such programs. These types of programs, even though limited funding and a small staff bind them, continue to work to link foster care alumni with resources on campus, and provide them with emotional and financial assistance to support their academic success (Hernandez & Naccaratob, 2010).

With FYA being independent adults and often not having places to call home, they have unique housing needs during holiday and summer housing. To meet those needs, a Michigan institution created a program in honor of a former foster youth who struggled finding housing during the holiday break that has been successful providing housing and other supportive services during college breaks for FYA (Troop, 2012). The program provides trained student leaders and "campus coaches" who keep tabs on students' academic performance and behavior, and intervene as necessary. For college students who have yet to exit care, a representative from the Michigan Department of Human Services is housed on campus to coordinate state grant monies and to act as an in-house caseworker.

While there has been progress on college campuses' efforts of establishing supportive programs, the great majority of college campuses do not have special programs in place to provide the appropriate services for FYA and their unique social, emotional, health, housing, and academic needs (Davis, 2006). In addition, when observing the literature on FYAs' educational experiences more critically, an interesting disparity can be found among the data. Gender stands out as a factor for predicting educational attrition between male and female FYA.

FYA gender disparities in college.

Over the past three decades, in overall college enrollment, women have overtaken men in college attendance and degree attainment (US Department of Education, 2015). More specifically, the proportion of men enrolled in college in the U.S. dropped from 50 percent in the 1980s to 35 percent in the mid-1990s (Draves, 2002). Research suggests that this gender gap may be greater among marginalized groups, including youth emerging from foster care (Day et al., 2011; Kirk et al., 2012). Various studies have differed in FYAs' first-year completion rates between genders, stating that women's first year completion rates in college are between 29%-45% while men's first year completion rates are between 21%-33% (Courtney et al., 2010; Courtney et al., 2011, Kirk, et al., 2012). All of these studies consistently show a 10% or higher completion rates for women compared to men. Also, whereas 21% of FYA stop-out before the end of their first year compared with 13% of their non-foster care peers, men stop-out at a 5% higher rate than women do before degree completion (Day et al., 2011). Overall, female FYA reported more than twice the likelihood of achieving a Bachelor's or graduate degree than males (Kirk et al., 2012).

FYA college barriers.

College can be a difficult time for FYA regardless of gender, especially considering barriers they face while in college. Day, Riebschleger, Dworksy, Damashek, and Fogarty (2012) stated that the most frequently cited challenge for FYA was not having relationships with caring adults both in and out of college, who could be potential validating agents. Also, the need to be employed to offset housing costs and basic needs was cited as a potential barrier to college attendance (Jones, 2011). In addition to financial issues, time and transportation issues were noted as interfering with school attendance and in some cases with maintaining employment (Jones, 2011). Six major themes have been identified that indicate educational needs for FYA that are still unmet. They include academic preparation, housing, financial assistance, emergency assistance, youth's personal challenges, and advocacy (Hernandez & Naccaratob, 2010; Davis,

2006; Unrau et al., 2012). Additional areas of needed attention should be focused on retention of FYA (Davis, 2006; Day et al., 2011) and awareness of mental health issues for this particular student population by faculty and staff (Daining & DePanfilis, 2012; Hines et al., 2005).

Understanding the barriers students face as a whole is helpful when creating interventions to increase retention and success rates, especially with FYA. However, with the educational disparity between genders, it becomes evident that the issues facing FYA are not the same for men and women who are aging out of foster care. According to past research male FYA seem to be facing additional educational barriers in comparison to their female counterparts.

Conclusively, more men enter foster care than women (Annie Casey Foundation, 2013) yet of those with foster care experience, females enroll in college, retain their college enrollment, and graduate college at higher rates than men. Although college persistence is low for the overall FYA population, male FYA appear to be most susceptible for higher attrition rates in college. Additionally, of noticeable importance, all observed qualitative data appears to be from the perspective of prospective or current FYA college students. That leaves out a unique perspective from those who have started college and have stopped out – an area where, as previously noted, men's rates surpass women's.

Chapter 3-Methodology

Introduction

Research on FYA in higher education, persistence, and college men and masculinities are all growing areas of investigation and the literature on each sector has been expanding. That information allows those who work within each area to have a stronger framework for understanding the complexities of going to college. This research is useful in highlighting just how difficult it is for foster youth men to access, persist, and succeed in college. However, based on my review of the literature, the individual stories of college men who have foster care experience and have failed to persist has not been investigated in depth to offer a more comprehensive and complex understanding of their experiences.

Qualitative Research

It is essential to understand the personal experiences of these young men, the challenges they face and how they construct and make meaning of their realities. In essence, having this understanding can improve efforts made by those supporting these men, such as professionals in the foster care system or college faculty and staff, to be more successful by making them more aware of participants' lives and potential barriers they may face in college. As a result, a qualitative approach was chosen for this research study in order to give participants the opportunity to be heard, understood, and their unique stories valued. According to Perl and Noldon (2000), qualitative research "values individual voices and aims to understand individual cases" (p. 38). Furthermore, Mertens (2015) stated that in qualitative research, individual perspectives incorporate different "beliefs, values, intentions, and meanings, as well as social, cultural, and physical contextual factors that affect causal relationships" (p.238). This framework helped determine that in-depth interviews were necessary for the purpose of this research study in order to highlight individual differences and experiences of participants.

Study Rationale

FYA are among the most vulnerable populations in higher education (Okpych, 2012) and tend to have poor persistence rates in college (Courtney et al., 2011). College men also have poorer success rates than their female counterparts. Therefore, it is not surprising that male FYA are susceptible to stopping out of college. The literature that I have reviewed has not taken a gendered-lens perspective of FYA as they strive to reach their educational aspirations. Using a gendered-lens perspective allowed me to view how male gender roles influence persistence, involvement, help seeking, and overall college success.

The research on FYA that I reviewed has been primarily qualitative in nature and participants in those studies were either interested in going to college or currently in college. Based on my review of the literature, FYA who stopped-out of college have not been investigated to describe what led them to exit college prematurely. Those individual perspectives are vital to having a clearer picture as to what factors and barriers these students face in college that can be prevented to support future students from enduring similar issues and outcomes. An additional purpose of this study was to lessen the stigma attached to this population that create a misunderstanding of the reasons youth enter foster care. Furthermore, providing an understanding that responsibility should not be placed solely on FYA for seeking help and ultimately gaining a better understanding of FYAs' low college graduation rates provide rationale for this study. Therefore, getting to the core of those experiences through research and by narrating participant experiences, information will be offered to create more supportive and effective resources to encourage college success for this population.

Research Questions

Three research questions guided this study:

- What were the experiences of male FYA while in foster care and how did it influence their decision to pursue higher education?

- What were the in-college and out-of-college factors that caused them to stop-out of college?
- What role did masculinity play in their decisions, behaviors, and experiences related to higher education?

These questions incorporated the various factors that I decided were important in broadening the body of work already available on the subject. These questions guided this study by recognizing that participant's experiences in foster care were influential in their decision to attend college and had influential effects on their in-and-out-of-college experiences. Furthermore, male gender roles have deep-rooted impacts on how these young men behaved while in care, while in college, and potentially in why they decided to stop-out of college.

Validation theory (Rendon), the Male Code (Brannon & David, 1985) and masculine scripts (Mahalik, Good, & Englar-Carlson, 2003) were used to guide the design of this study and the data collection procedures. Validation theory created a lens in which I could better understand participant experiences in building relationships, seeking help, and their need to be reached out to. The framework allowed me to ask the proper questions regarding those experiences to generate meaningful data. The Male Code and masculine scripts allowed for better understanding of the male gender role and its influencers. I benefited from the framework as it allowed me to better explain the concept to participants, who had not previously critically examined their gender. Providing participants a better understanding of their gender allowed for more specific and descriptive experiences while in foster care and in college.

Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval

In order for any research study to be considered legitimate and ethical, certain standards and conditions need to be met in order to gain approval to begin research sanctioned by a research institution. I completed the Consortium for Institutional Review Board Training Initiative in Human Subjects Protection (CITI) to show I was aware of the standards that needed to be upheld when investigating and interviewing human subjects.

I then had to think about a topic that I would be passionate enough about to investigate and spend adequate amount of time and energy to complete a thesis. I picked my topic, based partly on my positionality, and submitted a detailed application describing who and what I planned to research, how I would go about it, and why it was important to study. I submitted it to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and was granted approval on November 2015 to commence my research (see Appendix A).

Methodology

When investigating this populations' experiences and the intersection of being a college male and a FYA, it was important to select a proper methodology to appropriately gather meaningful data and to analyze it effectively. Much of the quantitative data that has been observed is helpful in understanding the statistics, factors, and barriers FYA and men in college face that make it more difficult for them to become successful. Although that data is helpful in trying to make inferences on how the overall population experiences their realities, it does little to detail individual stories that are more complex. Many researchers investigating the lived experiences of FYA have collected data using interviews of prospective or current FYA college students rather than FYA who have stopped out of college. Hence, this research expands on current research to include collection of data from individuals who stopped out of college that potentially offers a different perspective of going to college for FYA.

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of the participants and how they made meaning of their college experiences and why they eventually stopped out. Therefore, a constructivist paradigm was used for this study. The constructivist paradigm has a basic assumption that, “reality is socially constructed by participants who are involved in research” (Mertens, 2015, p. 16). It was my intent to gain better understanding of how participants made meaning of their experiences in foster care and college. Therefore, I chose to use a qualitative methodology for this research study.

Qualitative methodologies are “predominant” choices in the constructivist paradigm (Mertens, 2015, p. 19). The qualitative method of using interactive interviews for correspondence between participants and I are best suited to bring out the reality that is socially constructed by the participants. Socially constructed ideas can best be gathered through interactive interviews and direct and open-ended responses (Mertens, 2015). Although this can result in multiple and conflicting ideas from respondents, it is an expected occurrence that offers more holistic data.

Generating holistic data requires that interview questions cannot be completely constructed before hand and must adapt to the interview as it progresses (Mertens, 2015). So, the choice to use semi-structured interviews as the primary data gathering method is clear. Additionally, participant background information should be included to help readers understand the context of how subjects came to their conclusions. In order to obtain the most comprehensive understanding of how this population makes meaning of their experiences that lead them to exit college prematurely, it was important to approach the study from a constructivist paradigm which allowed me to listen to participants’ stories in a more personal, interactive mode of data collection. (Mertens, 2015). Therefore using a narrative inquiry is the preferred method for gathering data for this study.

Narrative Inquiry.

Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2014) describe narrative inquiry as relying on the life experiences of participants as narrated by those who live them. Narrative inquiry incorporates the relationship between stories, identities, and meaning making, making it a prime fit for the way male FYA make meaning of their experiences in foster care and college. Narrative inquiry has three defining features: temporality, sociality, and place (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). *Temporality* refers to the continuity of experience as situated in time, meaning that experiences are not only grounded in the past, they are also grounded in the present and carried into future experiences. *Sociality* captures the integral relationship between the individual (e.g. feelings, hopes, values, and dispositions) and social context (e.g. environment, external forces, and other

people). *Place* focuses on the specific concrete, physical, and topological boundaries of place where the inquiry and events take place. The features of temporality, sociality, and place are all components that are evidenced in the narration of participant experiences while in foster care and while at their respective colleges (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014).

Collecting narratives by individual participants and condensing them into one research study requires the researcher to play narrator and “re-story” the narratives through analysis and interpretation (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014, p 85). For this to happen effectively and properly, there needs to be trust between participants and the researcher. My positionality, as described in Chapter 1, included an established trust through my professional role for two participants as their former and two participants as their current Independent Living Specialist. The remaining participant had an acquaintanceship with me that likely allowed for some level of trust to be developed. I used the narrative strategy of *supportive voice* in telling the stories of participants. Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2014) describe supportive voice as foregrounding the participant’s voices by making decisions about how to tell a participant’s story. The main goal is to bring the narrator’s story to the public.

At the most basic level, narrative inquiries emphasize the holistic stories of participants to understand their lived experiences through the stories told by those narrating them (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). This is broken down into four activities that were used during data analysis: (a) complete readings of each interview to being to ascertain general themes and then returning to individual parts of each transcript to develop meaning while connecting those individual parts to a meaningful understanding of the whole; (b) multiple readings of each transcript helps track differences at play within each and how these relates to one another; (c) with multiple readings, a story that captures both the whole and the patterns in the parts beings to emerge; (d) dialogue the themes with the theoretical literature to deepen the researcher’s understandings of the meanings and emerging stories (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). I will describe the data analysis process for this study further on in this chapter.

Using the narrative inquiry allows for participants to shape the way they tell their stories by sharing the relationship between their life stories and the quality of their life experiences (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). This is often done by emphasizing what their stories are about, including the plot of their stories, characters, and sometimes the structure or sequencing of their content (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). Mertens (2015) describes narrative inquiry as an approach that revolves around how individuals narrate their own life experiences. Personal narratives are subjective thoughts from the individual and how they make sense of their experiences as they see them (Merriam 2002). As explained by Bloom (1998), subjectivity refers to the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, their sense of self, and their understanding of their relation to the world.

Of the various narrative approaches used in narrative storytelling, a combination of the psychological and biographical approaches best suited this study. Merriam (2002) described the psychological approach as one that focuses on the cognitive, affective, and motivational dimensions in the meaning making process while acknowledging the biological and environmental influences on development. She goes on to describe the biographical approach as a story that is analyzed in regards to the importance and influence of gender and race, family of origin, life events and turning point experiences, and other persons in the participant's life (Merriam, 2002). Participants would be asked to describe their relationships, identities, and experiences in foster care and in college (biographical approach) and connect it to what motivated them to go to college, their thought process during their experiences, and reflect on their feelings regarding their environment, experiences, and decisions (psychological approach).

Research sites.

This research study was conducted in a Midwestern state that is predominantly White, Christian, politically conservative, and middle class, with a slightly higher female population. The state is made up mainly of rural towns with few middle to large cities. The study was based in one of the larger urban areas of the state and immediately surrounding rural areas. The state closely

reflects the overall United States' educational completion rates. Each participant attended a different college institution.

Participants.

This research study was observing a specific sector of the population and required specific criteria. Criteria for participation in this study was as follows:

- Must be Male
- Must be 19 years or older
- Must have had exited foster care after the age of 16
- Must have enrolled and attended an accredited 2 or 4-year college
- Must have stopped-out of college within the last 3 years

Those who fit these criteria are generally difficult to locate due to the invisible identity of being a FYA who no longer is in college. However, I am employed with an agency that works with the specific population and have colleagues in the field that could help identify potential participants who fit the criteria.

Once IRB approval was granted, I identified colleagues I knew from my role as an Independent Living Specialist through my employer Central Services for the Midwest, and my work with our Independent Living Program. I asked colleagues to share the flyer for the study (Appendix B) with potential participants and to share with their colleagues to have more expansive reach which. The flyer briefly explained the study and information on how to be selected for participation. Though colleagues were not able to offer many potential participants for me to consider, I was able to get one participant, whom I had not worked with previously to volunteer for this study. I also made contact with current and past youth that I had worked with who fit the criteria and sought them out to see if they were willing to participate in this study. I reached out to them through phone calls, text message, social media message, and even going to the home of one for whom I had no other contact information. That resulted in a better response rate since it was more personal and direct. Five participants were recruited for this study.

I was intentional in not influencing interested participants decisions, whom I had worked with, in participating in this study. The male FYA and I had established a strong level of trust and they respected me, which made it difficult to determine if they were truly interested in the study or if they felt indebted to participant due to our relationship. For example, with one potential participant who demonstrated interest, I had to stress the fact that he was not obligated to participate and I eventually decided not to include him in the study. That was due to him having much instability and other more serious issues to worry about and I felt that he might not be clear headed enough to focus on the interviews.

Participants chosen for this study included: Rico, Mack, Nate, Ethan, and Jay. Detailed participant profiles will be included in Chapter 4. Participants included a combination of those whom I personally know through my employment, and an acquaintance I know through my involvement with another community organization, Project Blast. He was involved in that organization and they felt he met the criteria and referred him to me. As a result, I took a slightly different approach with participants I had previously worked with and the participant I had only been acquainted with during interviews.

Data Collection

The participants I knew previously required little rapport building, making it simpler to seamlessly move into the interviewing process once I described what the study was about. For the two participants whom I had not seen in over a year, it was a pleasant experience for them and I to reconnect as we had built a strong relationship while working together. The participant I had no prior working relationship with required more rapport building, eliciting a fuller description of my role as an Independent Living Specialist with our Independent Living Program and as a researcher. Since we were acquainted, rapport building was not exhaustive. However, I wanted to make clear that I understood the backgrounds of those with foster care experience and could empathize with him as much as is possible as I had worked in the field for five years. I also shared my role as a college student to help him understand my ability to empathize with his

college-going experiences. I then explained to him the details of the research study in full as well as with all research study participants. I met with potential participants at a location mutually agreed upon to discuss the protocol in more detail. Before interviews could commence, I provided each participant with an informed consent document (see Appendix C) detailing the research study, its risk, and acknowledgement that participants could opt-out of participating at any time during participation.

This study aimed to describe participants' understanding of their experiences and the influences, conscious or unconscious that affected their experiences that led them to stop-out of college. So, data collection had to be conducive to the constructivist paradigm and narrative inquiry in order to allow participants to narrate/share their story and experiences in their own words. As a researcher, I strived to achieve this by using a semi-structured interview process with open-ended questions to help participants narrate how they made meaning of their experiences. In-person semi-structured interviews provide flexibility in participants' answers while providing some structure with an interview protocol to help guide the process (Mertens, 2015). Additionally, having two separate interviews allowed them time to process what they expressed in the first interview, and allowed for further reflection.

Conducting two interviews was important in order to establish rapport and signify my true interest in their experiences. Although an hour was the estimated time that would be needed for data collection, actual periods varied. The shortest interview lasted 29 minutes. The longest interview lasted almost 71 minutes. The remaining interviews lengths of time were between 43-67 minutes each. Two interviews allowed ample time to investigate the prior experiences in foster care and normative gender behaviors that shaped participants' experiences in college. Additionally, the second interview allowed me to clarify any unclear information. Semi-structured interviews, as stated by Mertens (2015), allowed me to explore relevant topics that arise during the course of an interview. Interview protocol can be found in Appendix D.

Participant privacy and anonymity was vital to receive IRB approval, so all recordings and documents aligned with this research study were filed and stored on password-protected devices that were accessible only to me. Participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity and offer anonymity. Interviews were held in private and public spaces, dependent on comfort of participant. Their comfort was important, as comfort likely put them at ease as they recollected memories, without feeling anxious or distracted. Participants chose public and private locations, so as the researcher I had to keep their privacy intact while in public spaces. When interviews were held in a public space deemed comfortable by the participant, my intent was to make it appear to any passerby that the participant and I were simply having a conversation by the semi-structured interview structure. The recording devices consisted of a laptop and cellphone, which are typical devices most individuals have with them in the spaces we chose.

All interviews were conducted during December of 2015 and January of 2016. I had intended to incorporate a variety of locations to offer options to participants, but participants only chose between their homes and coffee shops/cafes. The times that interviews were held in their home, we were often completely alone or with other people in separate rooms.

Interviews were audio recorded using two different sources that were both password protected. This was done in order to ensure no technical issues occurred on one device during interviews, and to have multiple sources to make sure recording was audible, as to not interfere with data collection. All interviews were conducted in person.

The interview questions used in this research included Merriam's (2009) suggestions in designing semi-structured interview questions by incorporating:

- Experience and behavior
- Opinion and values
- Feeling
- Demographic

The first set of interview questions were designed to learn about participants' experiences in foster care, what led them to enroll in college, their experiences in college, and what led them to stop-out. The second set of interview questions focused on their perceptions of masculinity and how being male affected their experiences in foster care and in college, if at all. I offered them an opportunity to offer advice to social work professionals who work with foster youth, and professionals in higher education. Demographic questions to ascertain appropriate identities that were important to their experiences were asked at the end of the second interview only if they were not discussed throughout either interview. Please see Appendix D for the interview protocol.

Data Analysis

The steps I took in analyzing the data used strategies explained by Mertens (2015):

Step 1: Preparing the Data for Analysis

Step 2: Data Exploration

Step 3: Data Reduction

For step 1, once all recordings were complete, they were uploaded to a password-protected server and filed into a folder for easy access. I then personally transcribed the 9.2 hours of data verbatim. Personally transcribing the audio recordings of the interviews was helpful in being better able to critically listen to participants' stories and interact with the intensive and intimate components of the data to get mentally primed for analysis. After transcribing the audio-recordings, I took time to write personal notes to reflect on the recordings to gain a better understanding of participants' stories and how they made meaning of their experiences as FYA who attended college and then stopped out. Having the audio recordings saved on password-protected devices allowed me to regularly review the recordings in case context could not be made clear through transcription. With over 240 pages of data, it was important to synthesize the information into a more manageable size, which leads to step 2.

In step 2, the secondary researcher advised me to first simply go through the data and pick out the information that was "interesting" with the understanding that I understood the

literature. All data were transferred from Word documents into a password protected online server that would ensure work would be saved regardless of possible technical issues with laptop memory or server. All “interesting” data were highlighted then moved into a separate document while still organized by participant names. I took notes on a variety of potential themes that began to emerge from the reduced data. Meetings with secondary researcher became more regular during this process, occurring weekly when time permitted. In those meetings, the secondary researcher would assist me in staying focused and attempt to prevent me from getting overwhelmed by the amount of data. Those meetings allowed me to work on reducing the data further, which leads to step 3.

In step 3, my notes were used to create codes/themes/categories to simplify the data that fit a narrative inquiry to be able to best share participant's story in an effective manner. “Coding is the process of organizing the material into chunks or segments of text before bringing meaning to information” (Creswell, 2009 p. 186). However, acknowledging the use of a narrative analysis and ensuring the “story remain the central focus,” as described by Johnson-Bailey (2002, p. 323), I analyzed the data using a procedure that allowed findings to emerge. That procedure termed the *principal identifiers of salience*, originated by Alexander (1998), uses omission, frequency, and emphasis to sort through the data.

When themes and subthemes were identified, highlighted colors were selected and used for each and I once again went through the data and highlighted accordingly. The highlighted data were then moved into a separate document that was then broken down by theme and subtheme. Data were no longer separated by participant names, and instead all participant data were grouped together by theme. Meetings continued with secondary researcher to continue to synthesize data more effectively. Themes and subthemes were reviewed regularly and either further grouped together, separated and reorganized, or determined to no longer be part of a thematic finding. Peers who understood the qualitative research data analysis were also consulted during this process to get further insight and clarification on the process of selected themes.

Trustworthiness

The work with research study participants is done in an attempt to better understand their experiences in higher education, and their experiences in general, and as a result was a rigorous process. So, in an effort to ensure the work is considered trustworthy and credible, precautions were taken. Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted that *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability*, and *confirmability* were all components that helped establish trustworthiness in qualitative research and I strived to incorporate them.

Credibility is meant to increase the probability that credible findings will be produced through three means: prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I was fortunate enough to have had years of established relationships and trust with four of the five participants that would constitute prolonged engagement. The fifth participant had known me in my professional role for roughly three years, so though there was not direct prolonged engagement, there was an established understanding of each other indirectly. Additionally, having two elongated interviews as part of the interview process allowed for relative prolonged engagement.

Persistent observation, which is intended to provide depth (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), was incorporated through the data analysis process of sorting through the data and sifting through extraneous information that would take away from their story (refer to data analysis section for detailed description of this process).

Triangulation is another component that increases credibility by incorporating sources, methods, investigators, and theories in the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Five different participants provided different sources of data. Two semi-structured interviews were the methods for how I generated the data. The scope of this research study allowed for only one investigator to be present when collecting data, however the secondary investigator provided support, guidance, and oversight of the research to ensure credibility. Lastly, the use of theories and frameworks, such as Validation Theory, the Theory of Student Involvement, and theories on

masculinities, were incorporated to provide a framework for this study. However, it should be noted that those theories were only used as frameworks and to notice similarities within theories, and not as establishing empirical meaningfulness of participants' experiences.

Other components that help establish credibility, and therefore trustworthiness, include peer debriefing, negative case analysis, referential adequacy, and member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Peer debriefing was provided by the secondary researcher through regular meetings that allowed for review of the data, renaming and organization of themes, and a general re-shifting of intentions once all data were organized, when necessary. Doing so, allowed for exceptional cases, as interesting as they were, to be removed, as they were not shared with other participants. That process allowed for negative case analysis. Referential adequacy is a means for establishing the adequacy of critiques for evaluation purposes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Maintaining full transcriptions of interviews allow for such a process to be conducted if an evaluation process is deemed necessary. Lastly, member-checking, which is considered the most crucial technique for establishing credibility (Lincoln, & Guba, 1985), was done by providing each participant with the findings of this research study to give them the opportunity to give feedback and/or correct any misrepresentations that might have arisen through data analysis.

Transferability is a method designed to take data from a certain sample population, and to know that the sample population that is being researched is representative of the overall population to which the generalization is to apply (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). That is generally the goal of quantitative research and as such is not the intention of this qualitative research study. However, Lincoln and Guba go on to say that in qualitative research, transferability can be gained through providing the widest possible range of information for inclusion by including a thick description of the population (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This researcher is confident that Chapter 2 and the data collection and data analysis portion of this research study will suffice that description for providing transferability.

Dependability is a method that uses “overlap methods” that act as a form of triangulation used in having more than one person provide “quality” in the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 317). I had the support and guidance of the secondary researcher who would read over and edit all portions of this study to ensure a quality product and therefore a more credible study.

Confirmability is the general capacity to produce evidence that confirm the research study was in fact conducted. The major technique for establishing confirmability is the confirmability audit, which requires providing a residue of records stemming from the inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). General forms that can suffice confirmability include raw data, data reduction and analysis products, data reconstruction and synthesis products, process notes, personal notes, and instrument development information (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I have electronically recorded raw materials on a password protected laptop and online server only accessible to the researcher. Also included in saved documents are notes from data, synthesized reduction and analysis notes, and data reconstruction information that allowed me to organize the abundance of data. I also kept personal and methodological notes that helped organize the research process and helped synthesize the writing process. As a qualitative research study, there were no data generating instruments. Only the questions included as part of the semi-structured interview protocol were used to generate data (Appendix D).

Researcher Reflexivity

The qualitative research process has allowed me, as the primary researcher, to reflect on my own experiences and the effects this process will have on various components of my life. Having the opportunity to delve into the available literature and conduct my own research on the topics of foster youth, masculinities, student involvement, and validation, all in the context of higher education, was invaluable for my own personal and professional development.

As a current employee of an organization that supports young adults aging out of the child welfare system, this research process has opened my eyes to the systemic issues facing foster youths’ academic success. As I have strived to support male FYA advancement by helping

them access and enroll into higher education, it has become clearer to me that additional work needs to be accomplished to improve their success rates in college.

Interviewing participants for this research study in a thorough and personal manner gave me a newfound respect for male FYA and the experiences they have persevered through. The adversity, resilience, and hard work these participants have faced has given me inspiration for my own life, while also reminding me to be more vocal in my acknowledgement of their accomplishments of assessing college, given the circumstances they have encountered in their lives. At the same time, it pained me to know that in the eyes of society, not earning a degree still generates a level of perceived failure imposed onto male FYA that will continue to leave them vulnerable to life's circumstances.

Through my own experiences in foster care as a child and in my current work with youth in foster care, I have felt as though I possess a good understanding of foster youths' experiences. However, going through this research process, I came to understand how little I knew, and how little my colleagues likely know about this population. As I strive to incorporate a true student affairs aspect to my current role, or any future role I may hold, my involvement in this research study has allowed me to grow as a professional and a scholar. My growth will enable me to help students and colleagues in the field by taking the knowledge gained through this process, sharing it with others, and applying it to my work to be a more effective and efficient professional.

I started this process with wanting to solely research the college-going experiences of youth in foster because I have experienced first-hand how difficult persistence in college can be for this population. However, working as a graduate assistant in the Women's Center of the local university in my role as the Men's Program Coordinator influenced my decision to include a gender perspective. I believe this decision has only enriched the depthless and reach of this research study. I have gained a more comprehensive understanding of masculinities and its effects on males (and other genders) through my involvement in this study. In a roundabout way, my deeper understanding of masculinities has given me a better perspective of misogyny's existence

and its effect on oppressing other genders. I am left with a sympathetic and empathetic understanding of the role of feminism and the female gender role. I am encouraged to learn more about systemic and socialized views of not only gender, but race and other socially constructed viewpoints, which allow a more critical lens in my understanding of human behavior. As I continue to work with youth in the community and students in higher education, these viewpoints will help me support and assist individuals in navigating the barriers to academic success.

This process has been challenging and rewarding as I have not previously conducted research and had anxiety about my ability to do the work. I have been proud of my overall personal, academic, and professional growth that will undoubtedly carry into my future. Although I have ruled out pursuing a doctorate degree, this process has encouraged me to potentially continue conducting research on behalf of the agency I work for, and possibly future employers, in order to generate meaningful data that can have direct impact on my work.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the researcher described the methodology and data collection methods implemented for this study. This study used a constructivist paradigm and was guided using a qualitative methodology. The chapter outlined how participants were recruited, how interviews were conducted, and data analyzed in order to collect rich and meaningful data while using a narrative inquiry. To demonstrate the legitimacy and bias of this study, description of how approval of this study was granted, and the background and bias of the researcher was explained. In the following chapter, findings generated from interviews with participants will be presented and will be based on prior research. Additionally, implications for practice and recommendations for future research will be identified.

Chapter 4 — Findings

Introduction

This qualitative research study aimed to gain a better understanding of the college-going experiences of male FYA and the factors that led to them stopping-out of college. This focus stems from acknowledging that while research on FYA and college men and masculinities has separately generated an abundance of research, I was not aware of any qualitative research that integrated both areas. This is a population that has likely faced trauma, which has attempted to be alleviated by a foster care system that has tried to better their lives, but has at points only increased the difficulty of them living normal lives. These are also young men who have been subjected to societal ideas that tell them, as part of their gender role, they must live up to certain standards and if unmet will result in them being perceived as not masculine. The research questions guiding this study were intended to recognize the intersection of participants' experiences of being in foster care and their identity of being male in relation to why they enrolled into college and then stopped-out. Those questions were:

- What were the experiences of male FYA while in foster care and how did it influence their decision to pursue higher education?
- What were the in-college and out-of-college factors that caused them to stop-out of college?
- What role did masculinity play in their decisions, behaviors, and experiences related to higher education?

Themes emerged from the data that highlighted the importance of understanding participants' backgrounds in foster care along with their prescribed gender roles and how that leads to difficulty building relationships. Those themes are: Relationships, Vulnerability, and Help Seeking Behavior.

According to participants, this study provided a rare opportunity for them to comprehensively reflect on their foster care experience and to give detailed attention to a part of

their identity – being male – they had rarely paid attention to. Additionally, it gave participants the opportunity to reflect on their experiences in college, which seemed to increase the desire to return to college for many of them. Data were collected through two semi-structured interviews that allowed for genuine conversation as participants shared their stories. The second interview also allowed me to clarify their responses from the first interview, as well as offering them an opportunity to add to their responses, if desired. This chapter will describe the themes that emerged during the data analysis process.

Introduction to Participants

There were some general similarities between participants. Four participants were wards of the state due to their involvement in the foster care system before exiting care, while the remaining participant was a state ward due solely to his involvement in the juvenile justice system. All remaining participants would eventually get involved with the juvenile justice system due to behavior issues. All but one had multiple caseworkers, with Nate having the most, recalling 10 or 11 during his time in care. All were removed from their family and placed in either a foster home or supervised facility in a town different from their hometown. This resulted in different school placements and curriculum changes for all participants. Surprisingly, even with those experiences, four of the five stated that had they not been state wards, they would not have gone to college. This was primarily due to someone affiliated with the foster care system establishing a relationship with them and encouraging them to attend college. All participants took advantage of federal financial aid programs and all but one utilized the Education and Training Voucher (ETV), in addition to other scholarships to help pay for their college expenses. Lastly, all participants are from the same Midwestern region.

Participants.

Pseudonyms were given to all participants. The following descriptions are based on information disclosed in the interviews but are also influenced by the length of time I have known some of these participants, which for some was as many as three years. A description of the

participants provides the reader with important context to better understand participants' stories and experiences shared during the data collection process.

Rico. Rico is currently 20 years old and had been out of college for roughly eight months at the time of our interviews. He attended his state's flagship university, with a student body of roughly 25,000 students. The university he attended is a large public land-grant research institution located 30 minutes from his high school. I have worked with Rico since he was 16 years old although our connection wavered slightly during his college tenure. At the time when our interviews were conducted, he showed strong interest in going back to college. I have since helped him re-enroll into the local community college. He started classes in the winter quarter of this year and completed the quarter with all A's. He identifies as a White male.

Rico is a friendly guy who communicates well. He has been involved with wrestling and football throughout his life. He was a popular kid in school and easily made friends. He was very involved in bodybuilding and even finished second in a regional competition while in college. In college, Rico initially joined a fraternity to maintain his social status. However, being in a fraternity was not the experience he had hoped for, so he decided to move into the residence halls instead after his first semester. He did well while living in the residence halls, earning a 2.9 GPA and passing all of his classes that semester. This raised his confidence, which led him to move off campus that summer. He would be enrolled in college for the majority of the following academic year, but the culmination of stress, financial issues, a significant other that took much of his time, and a reexamination of whether a college degree was necessary, resulted in him stopping-out that spring. When he exited college, he had all passing grades. He switched from nutrition to undecided as his selected major. He was on probation and going to regular court-mandated therapy during his first year of college. Since exiting college, he has held steady work, but has been involved in multiple legal issues, and has dealt with multiple housing transitions.

Rico has two siblings and still has connections with both parents, who separated when he was a child. Rico became state ward when teachers noticed bruises on his neck at the hands of his

mother at the age of 8. He has been placed in various foster homes and group homes, and has had various caseworkers that made placement, family visitation, and legal decisions on his behalf. Many of his placements caused him to move towns and school districts. As he grew older, he got involved with drugs and alcohol that caused him to enter the juvenile justice system. He was in care until he became a legal adult at the age of 19. All things considered, Rico stated that his time in care was relatively positive. This was mainly due to establishing good relationships with workers and being placed in a stable foster home while in high school and having a foster dad that he felt truly cared about him.

Mack. Mack is a 21-year-old White male who last attended college two years ago. He attended the local community college, which is considered a commuter campus with no residential living. The college collectively has small three campuses that serve over 11,000 students. He has plans to re-enroll into the same college he attended previously during the spring or summer quarter of this year. When he is ready, we will work together to get him re-enrolled. I worked with him when he was 18 years old but at the time he enrolled in college, he made the conscious decision to sever ties with me. We reconnected after his exit of a supportive program called Link to Independence that was available to him until age 21.

Mack went to college right after graduating high school. He lived off campus with an elderly family friend. Although he liked history courses, he did not declare an academic major. He had services available to him that would help him navigate the college process and provide support. However, his professed negative experience in foster care caused him to resist any support even slightly associated with the foster care system. He felt unprepared for college and was still struggling with anger management issues. He was enrolled for one quarter and exited college due to what he recalled as a combative relationship with one of his professors. Mack did not seek out any help while in college and was not involved with any organizations. Since exiting college, he has held steady work, has an updated and reliable vehicle, and has lived with his friend consistently for over a year in the same residence.

Mack lived with both of his parents and his brother up until the age of 15 when his mother suddenly passed away due to health issues. His father was not considered capable to care for him and his brother, resulting in his first placement change to his aunt's home. When his initial placement did not work due to a contentious relationship with his aunt, he dealt with various placement changes that ranged from psychiatric hospitals, foster homes, group homes, and juvenile detention centers. He had three or four caseworkers while in care, which was frustrating for him and gave him a negative view of the profession. Although Mack identified positive relationships, supportive placements, and one caseworker that he respected, overall, he considered his foster care experience as damaging and negative.

Nate. Nate is a 20-year-old Black male. He attended an out-of-state division-one large research institution in the Midwest that had a student body of roughly 13,000. He exited college roughly one year ago from the time our interviews were conducted. I worked with him when he was 18 years old and we worked primarily on getting into college. When he turned 19, I could no longer work with him, as he entered the Link to Independence program. Though he was financially supplemented from the program, he felt emotionally and structurally unsupported. Since concluding our interviews, he has sought my advice and support in enrolling in the local community college. He started classes in the spring quarter of this year.

Nate is a fit, good-looking, and confident guy. He states that he was always admired by others and was always considered "cool." He is very expressive and he broadly detailed his experiences during our interviews. The college he attended was roughly four hours away from his hometown. He majored in elementary special education, a major he was only slightly interested in. He went there with the expectation that if he demonstrated the appropriate skill level and improved his academic standing, he would be able to be a full-fledged member of the football team – something that never materialized. He participated in the university's Summer Bridge Program that had him come a few weeks earlier than other students to get better acclimated to campus life. He got caught up with partying, (unprotected) sex, and drugs, and ultimately was

(the only one) incarcerated for a felony possession of a gun while in Chicago with his other teammates. When he returned to campus he felt like an outsider and it was only a matter a time before he completely exited college and returned back home to live with his mother. He was enrolled in college for roughly 7-8 months (including his time in the Summer Bridge Program) and was passing some of his classes. He has since spent time in jail for his charges and has kept to himself, while trying to reflect and focus on his future.

Nate is the youngest of six boys in a family with a single mother. Since his mother had to work long hours to support her family, she was not able to be home often and care for them properly. The state got involved early on in his life as a small child. All members of his family are felons – something he seemed obligated to mention. Nate was naturally talented and only got involved with sports in high school, where he excelled. He was well liked growing up, which stemmed from his older brothers treating him like one of the older kids by exposing him to “older” things at a young age. Nate established good relationships with his Family Teacher at his group home named The Cottage, with his football coaches, and with his foster dad Tom. However, Nate felt pressured from his family and those he respected to be the first in his family to deviate from the negative trajectory that was paved for him (likely related to his entire family being felons). Although Nate credits going to college to being in foster care, he is not quick in designating his overall foster care experience positive.

Ethan. Ethan is a 21-year-old male and identifies as White. He attended a for-profit public commuter institution with a student population of less than 1,000 students. The college serves a much larger online student population from across the country. He left college roughly one year before participating in this study. He has since applied for admission at another institution. I never personally worked with Ethan, but knew of him through his involvement with Project Blast, a community agency I am associated with professionally.

Ethan is full of energy and has an opinion on everything, and is willing to share it. Ethan stated he “used to be bisexual,” but currently is dating a woman, which was something he

mentioned as a side-note. Ethan enrolled into college, mainly due to his mother being alum to that institution. He had two separate enrollment sessions while there, which were separated due to being incarcerated. He initially selected criminal justice as his major but when he returned the second time, he selected business administration as his major. However, more legal issues caused him to be incarcerated again, which caused administrators to deny his admission to re-enroll a third time. Ethan had built strong relationships with some professors and they tried to advocate for him, but to no avail. Ethan recalled enjoying college, stating that it was “easy,” and passed most of his classes. He lived with his mother during his college tenure. His college enrollment lasted roughly 9 months in total.

Ethan entered care at age 14 as a neglect case due to his single-mother working long hours and not being home to care for Ethan and his two younger siblings – a role that Ethan had taken on. Ethan had multiple placements in various towns but stated he has maintained relationships with some of his foster parents. He had a consistent caseworker for three years and he stated that it was “rare” for a caseworker to have lasted that long with the same case. Ethan attempted being involved in various clubs and organizations in high school, such as FFA (Future Farmers of America) and FCCLA (Family, Career, and Community Leaders of America), but his instability prevented him from doing so. He was, and continues to be, involved in Project Blast, which empowered him to talk about his foster care experiences to influential people in the community in efforts to improve the overall child welfare system. Ethan had mental health issues that led to behavior issues that resulted in him being placed in juvenile detention. He completed and graduated high school while he was in detention. He shared that his family, who were college educated, including his mother, who had multiple Associate’s Degrees, were the influential factors that led him to go to college. He was in foster care until the age of 19 when he aged-out.

Jay. Jay is a soon to be 21-year-old who identifies as a Black male. He attended a small public state college with a student body of 2,500. The college is located ninety minutes from where he lives. He last attended college roughly two years ago. Jay has been recently diagnosed

with a schizophrenic condition and as a result, he was reluctant to participate in this study fearing he would not be able to recollect his experiences and answer the questions. However, due to our previous strong relationship, he ultimately decided that he felt comfortable enough to participate and seemed able to recollect his memories well. He stated he is considering returning to college but has no specific plans as to when that would occur. We worked together when he was 18 years old and our main goal was to get him enrolled in college. Our relationship dissolved when he started college. Currently, Jay is receiving financial support through federal disability due to his mental health schizophrenic diagnosis.

The college he attended was about an hour and a half from where he lived. He went there primarily because one of his best friends attended that college and with the slight thought that he may be able to join the basketball team, something that he did little to attempt when he was in college. He ended up being roommates in the same residence hall as his best friend and did not make any significant connections outside of him. Jay is a soft-spoken person with a fun personality, when he feels comfortable showing it. Jay majored in criminal justice, but seemed to choose that major randomly, being unable to articulate why he chose that particular major. Jay went to many parties while in college with his best friend but would go home most weekends with him too, inhibiting his ability to make other connections. He was passing most of his classes but exited college simply because his best friend did, a decision he now calls “stupid.” He was in college for less than one semester. Since college, he has lived at home with his parents, has not worked, and has spent a significant amount of time in jail for what he cites as “alleged theft.”

Jay was not a traditional foster youth. He was involved in the juvenile justice system while in high school and became a state ward as a result. His mother and step-dad were supportive of him and his two siblings but they could not control his unruly behaviors. He stated that his issues with truancy and avoidance of rules were attributed to being unable to play on the basketball team due to having low grades. He said basketball was the only thing that motivated him. His issues resulted in him being placed on probation and subsequently placed in The Cottage

group home, which was an hour away from home. He resided at the group home for the entirety of his senior year. Although he did not initially like it, he credits being at The Cottage to graduating high school and ultimately going to college. He even had the opportunity to leave after 6 months but chose to stay to complete his classes. Though he had a good relationship with his caseworker and staff at the group home, he heard some disparaging comments about his ability to succeed. He was a state ward until he aged out at age 19.

Introduction to Themes

All participants had varying and diverse backgrounds and experiences in college but all shared similar experiences in college related to being male, having experiences being wards of the state, and stopping-out before earning a degree. Through the data analysis process, themes emerged that provide insight into participants' lived experiences. The *Relationships* theme focuses on the different types of relationships that participants had while in-and-out of foster care and how that may influence relationships they made in college. The *Vulnerability* theme illuminates how participants' traumatic experiences before and during foster care created instability and a lack of trust. Their instability and lack of trust were further reinforced by societal expectations that men should be in control of their emotions by not being emotionally expressive, being independent and successful simultaneously. A final theme of *Help Seeking Behavior of FYA* emerged. These mostly first-generation male college students felt pressure to understand an educational system and process they had never learned, were fearful of looking "dumb," had difficulty making connections on campus and thus did not seek help from those who could help them. The three themes will be discussed in detail in this chapter with supporting data and will be connected to research in chapter 5. These themes and the encompassing components highlight the complexities of these men's lived experiences and the subconscious expectations that society places upon them and creating a conundrum that influenced their pursuit of a college degree.

Theme I: Relationships.

Being in foster care by definition means that youth are separated from their families. Though not all participants were in a foster home, they were all part of the child welfare system, which will be referred to as foster care throughout this chapter. Jay was the only participant not in a foster home, but he was in a group home due to being involved in the juvenile justice system. So, they were all wards of the state and at one point in time were separated from their families. As foster youth were moved from their home, and oftentimes to another town, they had to build relationships with a barrage of professionals and/or foster parents associated with the child welfare system, and other peers (a factor that negatively affects maintaining friendships and building trust, which will be discussed in theme II). As a result, a prevalent theme emerged: the various relationships participants made while in care influenced their decision to go to college. Their experiences establishing relationships while in college also had a strong influence on their decision to exit college early. This theme addresses the first two research questions in this study.

Variations of relationships in care and their influence on participants.

Relationships participants had with their biological families and the relationships they formed as they entered foster care affected their decisions to attend college and eventually stopping-out early. Foster parents, caseworkers, group home staff, and other service workers entered their lives and made decisions on their behalves that affected the relationships they had already established with family and peers. The participants were able to recall positive and negative relationships.

Asking about their relationships with their father was not part of my semi-structured questioning, but a point that emerged nonetheless, making it substantial. Whereas Rico and Mack grew up knowing and living with their father at points in their lives, the other participants did not, and it affected them all in some way. Rico had the support of his foster parents and his mother, when she was available, in particular during his athletic events growing up, something he said he appreciated. But, Rico felt that since wrestling is a “masculine sport” his dad should have been

supporting him. When his dad was “not there to support” him, Rico said he felt discouraged and asked himself “why am I doing this?” He ended up quitting, citing his dad’s absence and lack of support, adding that it “kinda (negatively) affected me a bit,” but also noting, “I would like (our relationship) to get better, don’t get me wrong.” Nate had a more emotional reflection in discussing the absence of his father, and stated:

When I was younger, I used to hate him. I would say mean things about him. But honestly, I loved him because he’s my dad. But as I grew older, he never really tried to come into my life. It was always me trying to come into his life. He never even apologized for never being there.

The absence of their father created a yearning to have a relationship with him regardless if he had never been involved in their lives. Participants would create a fictional and positive image of their father’s lives to counter the negative reality they knew to be true. Ethan wanted to live with his dad, a man he has “never known,” despite a criminal record. Ethan stated:

I knew my father was in-and-out of prison for not paying child support, but I thought my dad was out there living a great life. You know, you have that dream - that fantasy. Like, “damn I bet my dad has to be wealthy, he must be doing well and just isn’t paying my mom because he just doesn’t like her,” who knows why? So, I deceived myself in believing that my father was someone that he would never be.

Simply having a relationship with their fathers would suffice, but that required time their fathers were not committing to them, or at least not enough time. Jay’s short exchange about his father’s absence in his life was more subdued, but just as nostalgic. He said his dad’s only downfall was “not being able to see me much.” He wanted his dad to communicate more with him and that although his father would occasionally speak with him during holidays, Jay maintained, “that’s not enough.”

Those broken relationships with their fathers created a hole in their lives that needed to be filled. Although participants had positive views of their mothers, they could not fill the role of

their fathers. Nate summed up participant's relationships with their mothers, in relation to their fathers not being present, by saying "A lot of families are out here like, they're trying to play – mom is trying to play dad, and there is a lot of things that mom can't talk to you (about)."

Although there were negative recollections about foster home experiences, there were multiple examples of positive relationships established while in care. Other adult males most participants met while in foster care fulfilled the father-figure role they were yearning for. Rico recalled that his foster dad "did a lot for me. Basically what my parents couldn't do, he did. He gave me an experience that I never would have had if it weren't for him." The relationships participants built with those adult men provided encouragement. Those men believed in participants' ability to go to college, something participants said they had rarely heard was possible for them prior to establishing those relationships.

While Mack's biological dad "wasn't around," he really felt like his foster dad "cared" about him. While that was important to him, he seemed to have placed a stronger emphasis on his caseworkers' role in his life. Participants' caseworkers were their legal guardians and had decision-making control over their lives. Mack viewed caseworkers as being "out there, they're just a person that's basically controlling your life. They're the ones that move you to group homes, put you in different foster homes. With a caseworker, I feel like you're a puppet in that regard."

For some participants, like Mack, their relationship with their caseworker was oftentimes tumultuous. Caseworkers had the power to change youth's placement and decide who was appropriate for them to surround themselves with. Although Ethan had a decent relationship with his caseworker, it was the decisions his caseworker made that often frustrated him. He complained that being moved around too often affected his ability to make friends, saying "I didn't really make that many friends in care. Every time you make a friend, it's like *snaps fingers* you'd be moved." Regular placement changes not only affected participants' ability to make friends, but it also affected the type of friends they made. Rico, as noted earlier, was a

likeable person and became popular later in high school when his placement was stable.

However, his previous regular placement changes seemed to attract negative friends toward him because they were “convenient and they always wanted to hang out,” he said. He added that friends like that were typically “the bad friends. They didn’t have stuff going on, sports or anything like that, they were dealing drugs, you know.” Surrounding themselves with bad influences that were not encouraging was a common response by participants, which will be discussed further in theme II.

Caseworkers had authoritative influence on participants’ lives. As a result, Mack said, “having a good caseworker...yeah it’s very important.” He recalled his frustration and appreciation with two separate caseworkers respectively [pseudonyms were used]:

When I would call my caseworker Ann and she wouldn’t answer, I would get so pissed off, It’s like they don’t really take time to care about you. When you’re a foster care child and you have a caseworker who finally answered her phone every time you call, and I mean Nancy answered the phone every time I called. That was big because I was always able to communicate with her. I had a relationship with her, and I knew that I could trust her when I called.

He said he “respected” Nancy, but as with many good caseworkers, he felt they often do not stick around long enough due to being overworked and underpaid. He added, “unfortunately, she was one of those caseworkers that moved to a different job, and the next caseworker I got was hell.”

Participants wanted to be encouraged and identified caseworkers as a reasonable person in their lives to offer them that. Unfortunately, for participants like Mack and Ethan, they generally had negative experiences with caseworkers. Regardless of the opinion participants had of caseworkers, participants tended to bestow a level of trust and respect for caseworkers, whose opinions seemed to matter to participants. Ethan did not get encouragement from his caseworker John, and said he “always heard the opposite” of positive feedback. While reflecting on this, his

positive energy stifled as he told me about how his caseworker's negative comments stuck with him. He said:

I mean you hear from family that you can do whatever you put your mind to. What I heard a lot of was "you're in care, you're a failure." I had a caseworker that would often degrade me. (He'd tell me) that I'll be in foster care and I'll always be either in jail or homeless. He wasn't wrong I'd be homeless, alright (laughing uneasily). He said it from 15-17, so two years of it. Words hurt and you think about it but I don't know. It's difficult because like – words hurt a lot. Their (caseworkers) words matter...it depends if you trust them. With [caseworker], I trusted him a lot because I thought he had what's best for me (in mind). He hurt me a lot...that mostly hurt because having PTSD kind of really, you know, being partly abused and knowing that everybody told you that you're going to be worth nothing.

Caseworkers were also responsible for putting in place services for participants while they were in care, and services once they aged out of foster care. When caseworkers failed in that role, it would make situations more difficult for participants. Ethan described how his caseworker did not put in place supportive services that would have allowed him to utilize help to access college resulting in him navigating the process on his own.

Opinions by other service providers were also important and hurtful when they made negative comments. Jay also heard discouraging comments specifically regarding college from particular staff at The Cottage. He recalled feeling angry when this happened:

Well my staff didn't think I was going to go to college because of how I was acting there. Mine (GPA) wasn't all that high, it was something like 2-something. They didn't really think that I was going to be able to go to college just by me not doing my work. My Family Teacher said something like "you're not going to – yeah I don't think you're going to go to college." I was mad; I don't know why he would say something like that.

Participants' descriptions of professionals who are intended to be in roles of authority and respect but do not merit those qualities can be hurtful for participants. Participants shared that they would feel demoralized and marginalized by some of the very people they were supposed to rely on for support and encouragement.

Despite those negative interactions, participants maintained their perseverance and resilience, and were able to take advantage of services available to them by building supportive relationships with others in care. Even though they faced difficult experiences while in foster care, all participants (with the exception of Ethan) credit their involvement of being a state ward to their ability and decision to go to college. Mack said he took advantage of programs designed to support college access to foster youth and also valued the workers in those particular programs, saying, "I feel that they're willing to do it because they want *me* to succeed." He added that their support was "one of the most amazing things" that a youth could have. Both Jay and Nate credited individual staff at The Cottage who ingrained in their heads that college was a possibility, which were messages they were not often receiving from their families then. Rico spoke in detail about his involvement with me, in my professional capacity as a service provider while he was in care, as being instrumental in his ability to go to college. He said:

Well, it (foster care) gave me help because if I was living with my mom, I wouldn't have known where to start. And if it weren't for [your Independent Living Program], if it wasn't for you coming into my life and helping me with all that stuff, I don't know if I would have been geared to going to a university. I really didn't feel like I had the tools or knowledge even from the guidance counselor or anything. I kind of felt lost when it came to college. I was a first-generation student. I didn't know who to turn to or who to ask.

The only person that really knew anything or could help me was honestly you or [your Independent Living Program] in general.

Rico went on to say that foster care was "pretty good. It kinda turned my life around a little bit."

These participants had complex relationships with their family, peers, foster parents and those professionally involved in care. Understanding those relationships helps understand how they established or did not establish connections and relationships in college. These participants faced trauma by being separated from their families, never truly knowing their fathers and being moved regularly. Those experiences affected participants' ability to create stable friendships, which coupled with their tumultuous relationships with some caseworkers and staff, who would strongly discourage them from reaching their goals, it instilled in them a mindset that some of them were going to fail. Through it all, participants were able to establish some healthy and supportive relationships while in care. Their experiences in building relationships in care influenced how they established relationships as they began their college experiences.

Various relationships in college and their influence on participants.

Participants identified a number of reasons and motivations for choosing to go to college: Ethan's family's expectation that he go, Nate wanting to better himself and "start a new cycle" different from his family's, Jay's objective of meeting pretty girls and following his best friend, Mack's desire to improve his job prospects so others would respect him, and as Rico put it, "doing something no one in my family had ever done...I wanted to make my parents proud and basically, letting everybody know that I'm not a fuck up." So, participants had a sincere desire to attend college and be successful but most of the relationships they developed in college did not seem to make a significant difference in order to maintain their motivation to persist in college.

Peers in college seemed influential in how participants experienced college. For example, Nate's peers had a significant influence on his experience in college due to his status and involvement with the football team on campus. His motivation was subdued by his efforts to maintain his social status, which negatively affected his academics. He stated:

Well, when I first got there, I was highly motivated. Like "man, I got this," I'm staying in my dorm room, I'm getting ready, I have everything going for me. And this is in the Summer Bridge Program. I mean I'm doing good. Then I get into the like the second

week and its like “um?” Being the popular guy, you make friends easily. So, I kind of came in and got some easy distractions. That’s kind of what set me back – was meeting friends and then we get on the same schedule as them, like when I skip class, they skip class, and when they skip class, I skip class.

Whereas Nate was being negatively influenced by many peers and falling into negative habits, for others it was making connections with just one or two individuals and not connecting with others that had unintended negative consequences on their engagement in college. Jay credited his best friend, who was already in college, for encouraging him to go to college. They roomed together and spent a lot of time together, but as a result, Jay did not reach out to others. So, when his friend decided to exit college, Jay followed him without question. He described his lack of connection to other peers in college as a barrier to him wanting to stay. He made the following statement in response to my question regarding other connections he made in college:

I didn’t really have none. Actually, I think I was an outsider, because I felt like – well my friend, he decided to leave and so I decided to leave, and I felt like if I would had stayed, I’d never been able to get along with a roommate that they put me with. I think I could’ve been able to stay (in college)...if we weren’t coming back (home). Because I think – that’s what happened, us coming back here every weekend was why we didn’t really want to go to school anymore.

He regrets leaving and felt that it would have been helpful if he had tutoring or a mentor to push him “into studying and getting my work done.” He also believes that if he had made more connections he would not have been so dependent on his roommate and those who he connected with could have talked him into staying.

Rico had a similar experience. He put too much of his energy into his relationship with his girlfriend, attributing his behavior to losing confidence in his academic ability, which resulted in him no longer making connections in college even when he knew doing so was beneficial for him. He described his experience by saying:

I would talk to people in class, I would go to study groups during my sophomore year, first semester. It was my best experience because I was talking to people. I put myself out there. I was doing good and had confidence. But I started losing confidence and keeping to myself...I was (still) going to classes everyday but I stopped making connections. I felt like a ghost, I felt like I was alone, you know. I didn't like that feeling because that's not me. I started losing myself, losing who I was.

Rico admitted that deep down he wanted to make connections but his girlfriend started taking up all of his attention and time, even insinuating that he not go to class and instead spend time with her, which he obliged. He adds, "That's why I say she was a big reason that I dropped out of college, because if I never met her, I would probably (still) be in college."

Although Nate, Rico, and Jay had complex and perhaps negative relationships with friends that had consequences to their academics, they all shared a desire for other sources of support. Nate said that even though faculty members were cordial with him, he was not receiving necessary support from them, which made it difficult to succeed. Jay recalled experiences similar to Nate's in which he had two professors reaching out to him who recognized his potential, but he was unable to fully connect with them when he needed help the most. Participants were not often establishing meaningful relationships with faculty and staff.

Deepening relationships with faculty and staff was possible and when accomplished those relationships provided important support for participants. Ethan had an easier time making connections with staff and professors due to his mother being alumni. Ethan was convinced that if he made connections with staff, he was going to succeed, adding, "If I was friends with anybody else [other than staff], I knew I was going to fail." Ethan established meaningful relationships with three college staff and faculty, which allowed him to get additional support while in college. He recalled the extent one teacher went to support him:

I don't think I ever had so much cooler professors because if you needed help they would give you their personal numbers. One time we went over to our teacher's house to do a

study session. She was really passionate about what she did. If you needed help, she would stay as long as she could.

Those folks even advocated on his behalf when he was facing resistance from administrators who did not want to reenroll him due to stopping-out twice due to being incarcerated. Those administrators did not have a relationship with Ethan and his relationships with faculty could not offset the decisions made by administrators to deny his admission back to the college a third time.

Generating a deeper understanding of participant's backgrounds could allow for a better understanding of who they are and that they are facing barriers that may not be common to traditional students. These participants are more vulnerable, less trusting, and perceivably more independent, while being less prepared than the traditional student. That creates a paradox of independent students who need guidance. That paradox is part of the reason participants agreed that it would be important for faculty, staff, and administrators to be aware of their foster care status, to better understand their backgrounds.

Understanding unique experiences of foster care alumni.

According to participants, they feel that faculty and staff in higher education should be aware of their unique experiences of FYA in relation to the traditional student. Doing so would allow participants to develop stronger relationships with faculty and staff. The participants in this study demonstrated they were able to build strong relationships with individuals who knew they were in foster care (e.g., foster parents, caseworkers who listen to them, and their peers). The capacity for building relationships is within male FYA, however, concerns over their foster care status generating negative responses, due to stigma associated with youth in foster care, may prevent male FYA from deepening relationships in college (discussed further in theme II).

Participants felt that college staff and faculty could better support them if they were aware of the limited support they received from their biological families and oftentimes their foster families which may be different than the amount of support other students receive. Rico recalled the difficulties he faced in college, compared it to other students, and outwardly said,

“Some of these kids need that extra drive” because they “do not have it from their parents or grandparents, like other students.” He went on to say that if someone goes out of their way to help students with foster care experiences and actually reaches out to them “it really does mean a lot” to them. The colleges participants attended did not have a procedural option for students to disclose their foster care status if they felt inclined to do so. Not providing an option for students to disclose that information limits the ability for faculty and staff to effectively reach out to participants and support them. Nate offers a suggestion to this issue in theme III.

By understanding FYA’s unique experiences, staff and faculty could be more aware as to why those students may have difficulty getting involved in extra-curricular activities and making friends while in college. Mack and Ethan both noted the tedious process requiring state wards to get background checks signed by those who they want to spend time with, which are then submitted and processed by their caseworkers. Mack vented as he said:

In foster care, you have to have background checks for everybody. I hate that. You don’t get to control where you go, you have to go by their (caseworker and foster parents) rules, if you want to see one of your friends you have to call the caseworker to get a background check.

Getting background checks affected some participants’ ability to get involved in extra-curricular activities while in high school. Ethan said, “extracurricular activities really put a hold on a lot of things because you had to have background checks,” that caused him to not get “super involved because I was in foster care.” He later depicted his experience in foster care as not being able to “really live a normal life.” Participants’ experiences in foster care have effects on their college going experiences. Both Mack and Ethan struggled being involved in high school due to background checks and limited themselves from making friendships because it was embarrassing for them to ask friends to sign a background check to spend time with them. Both Mack and Ethan did not get involved in college or make any legitimate friendships in college.

Rules for participants in a group home were even stricter, making life as a teenager even less traditional. Nate described his experience living at The Cottage, a reflection of most other group homes, by saying:

There, you can't have cellphones, cars, you can't have girlfriends – there's so much that you can't have. You're not a regular kid, and then when you get that freedom, that's all you want. I mean, I grew to love it. It's like I appreciated it. At first, I kind of hated it. You hate why you're there, but miss it when you're gone. Because you're used to so much structure that once I left the Cottage, I didn't (have structure).

Reasons for being placed in foster care are varied, should be better understood, and should be recognized by faculty and staff so that relationships that are more meaningful can be developed with male FYA. In Mack's experience, he was placed in foster care due to his mother dying unexpectedly, which differs vastly from the more common reason of neglect and abuse that many FYA experience. Ethan's experience puts in perspective the severity of the abuse some youth in foster care withstand. He recalls the abuse he endured, detailing that he was "being abused from ages 10 to age 13 about every day." To add to his traumatic experiences, "He (his abuser and mother's boyfriend) wanted to be a father figure, but none of us (his siblings) accepted him." Those experiences, led to him developing "anxiety and bipolar disorder," he states, which among other mental health illnesses, are common among FYA.

Participants felt as though their experiences in foster care should be taken into consideration by staff and faculty in college. Participants experienced high levels of instability, which affected their relationships with family members and professionals who work in the foster care system. The multiple school changes likely negatively affected their ability to make connections with teachers, which is evidenced in their hesitancy to establish relationships with faculty and staff in college. Additionally, the other nuances participants experienced in care have lasting effects on their experiences in college. More understanding of participants' experiences

could likely improve faculty and staff's effectiveness in establishing relationships with participants, as they would be better able to empathize with them.

Theme II: Vulnerability.

Vulnerability can manifest itself in a variety of ways and could be seen as a person's susceptibility to being harmed or hurt. It can be a feeling or an experience, making it difficult to define. For the purposes of this study and for the reader to better understand the theme of vulnerability, the context of this theme will refer to participants who are in need of individual care and/or support due to negative experiences in their lives and perceptions that obstruct progress. Vulnerability is a broad and expansive term, but as all participants' lives were diverse, this will be reflected in their vulnerabilities. The theme of vulnerability is difficult to separate from the theme of relationships, as vulnerability may stem from severed relationships with trusted adults. My intention is to make clear the differences between the themes, as I see them as separate but acknowledge the overlap that occurs between the two themes.

Participants grew up experiencing trauma often because of experiences with their family (which at times would manifest in unruly behavior as they were growing up). Participants also grew up identifying as men who received messages telling them that they needed to "suck it up," "be a man," and that they have to "be successful," "real men don't fail," among other ideas that prevented them from acknowledging and sharing their experiences openly. This led to a strong sense of vulnerability and a lack of trust in many of their relationships.

Instability and lack of trust.

These participants have encountered instability in their lives in various areas: placement changes, family, caseworker and service provider changes, school location, and peer changes. This instability is not typical for most young people and it influenced how open participants were with others in college.

When first entering foster care, the first placement change occurred when participants were removed from the home. Rico was initially moved between parents' homes before entering

his first foster home. He was given the option of going back home to either one of his parents after some time spent in foster care. He became distrustful of his parents and felt hurt. So, when asked which parent he would like to return to, his response to his caseworker at the time was, “I told them I don’t want to live with either of them [mom or dad’s place], I had bad experiences at both. I was like, ‘I really don’t [want to move with either of them].’”

Mack was placed at his aunt’s house initially when his mom passed away. Though he loved his aunt, he was moved to a group home because of his angry behavior with her and his brother, who also lived there with him. Being placed in a group home created feelings of pain and a feeling that his family would no longer care nor maintain a relationship with him. He recalls his situation by saying:

She (his aunt) says that she’s had enough and that she would visit me, but she didn’t want me to come back to her house. Yeah, that was a little difficult because she took me in and then she kind of just gave up. She says she’ll visit but she doesn’t visit.

The vulnerability created through severed relationships with family was only the first in a string of broken relationships that yielded a slow depreciation of adult’s trust. Their vulnerability can be attributed at least in part to the relationships participants had while in foster care, causing an overlapping of themes in this study. Mack previously stated that caseworkers often do not stick around due to various reasons. To say that regular changes in legal guardians who are supposed to protect and support these participants do not impact participants’ vulnerability would be inaccurate. Participants felt that caseworkers were supposed to be individuals they could trust, but unfortunately that was not always their experiences. Mack stressed that by stating:

I think that absolutely, when you’re in the foster care system you want to have somebody that you know you can absolutely trust and a caseworker as one of them should be an easy one. There are things we don’t want to tell the caseworker because they will end up calling the cops or whatever.

Low levels of trust by youth create a feeling that caseworkers become apathetic to their needs, which were reasonably viewed as problematic. Mack shared:

You know when you're becoming a caseworker, I honestly feel like they should feel for these kids. I don't feel some of them do. I feel like they look at it as a job and then they get mad because they don't get paid well. Like I said, in the system we're like puppets and I mean that. When one of those strings doesn't work, you're screwed. You won't be able to go out for the show. I don't know how to put it but that's basically how I felt.

Ethan echoed that sentiment and went further in connecting the severed relationship with parents to the severed relationships with caseworkers, by saying, "You feel like you have been abandoned by your family. You feel like the caseworkers are just doing their job when they're not really there to support you." The inability to trust caseworkers inhibited participants' willingness to open up and seek their help. When asked if he trusted his caseworkers, Nate responded by saying:

No, I could never keep it 100% real, like I could never tell them exactly what I felt and what I knew that was going on within my family, and actually, what I needed help with. Because I felt that whatever I tell them will just go back to the judge and they would take me out of The Cottage or something, so I was afraid that would happen.

The high turnaround rate is not only an issue with caseworkers; it is a problem with service providers in general. Those levels of instability experienced by participants from individuals they are told are worthy of their trust and vulnerability when their experiences tell them differently creates some noticeable disdain for adults by participants. When caseworkers and other service providers have high turnarounds, it becomes easy to understand why these participants found it difficult to trust adults in general. Nate alluded to that by saying:

There was just so many people in and out of the picture that it was just – that I didn't know who to trust. I knew that people would come and go, like caseworkers, foster parents, families in The Cottage – I was in a few different homes there. So, it was just there were a lot of people in and out of the picture that I couldn't really build that

relationship with, where they were so trustworthy with me, because they were there and then gone within a few months. I never really ever share my feelings with caseworkers or people like that because I felt that I wouldn't get as much privileges as if I would have lied. I mean if I actually told them what I was doing on my home visits I wouldn't be getting home visits anymore. You really can't trust nobody. You have to trust yourself. Trust became difficult to obtain for these participants in a general sense. Ethan confirmed, "Trust is very hard. I don't trust a lot of people. So, my trust is very little."

Those feelings carried over to their experiences in school in general because participants also had numerous school placement changes while in foster care. Participants were moved between towns, which had an impact on the relationships they made with peers and teachers. Mack felt the impact of moving schools and said, "moving school to school was very tough." Nate added, "Yeah, over time I felt like that affected me, just going to a lot of different schools. I wasn't able to really build a good relationship with my teachers or with friends." Participants learned to keep to themselves and do their best to only focus on their schoolwork.

The coping mechanisms they learned in high school continued into college. Mack stated, "It's not like I was there (in college) to meet anybody or have any friends, or have teachers who are like 'you're awesome; I'll give you an A because they like you,' I wasn't there for that." He felt that he was only there to go to school and not to develop any meaningful relationships in college. Participants had a level of anxiety and distrust developing any relationships. There was a feeling of vulnerability that caused them to question those around them.

As evidenced in this and the previous theme, establishing relationships does not come easy for these participants. They want them and need them to be successful, but due to the instability in placement and with individuals in their lives, they have learned that relationships are difficult to maintain, making participants feel vulnerable because they may feel unworthy of establishing meaningful relationships. That ideology carried through into college and affected relationships with peers, faculty, staff, and with those whom they knew before college. The lack

of trust they have produced will require strong efforts by others to undo in order for them to make meaningful relationships. Without stable and significant relationships, participants are left feeling vulnerable.

Vulnerability growing up.

Participants did not grow up experiencing consistent and stable homes. It was mainly due to their pervasively unstable home and family life that led to them entering foster care. This section will describe participant's experiences growing up in less than ideal circumstances, which will later be connected to their college-going experiences.

For Rico being raised in poverty caused anxiety that made him feel ashamed of who he was and what his family could afford. It caused him to learn early on to avoid showing certain aspects of his life with others. He details this by saying:

We lived in a very crappy place, like I always went to school smelling like smoke. It was embarrassing. I would do my best to put my clothes in the dryer, put something in there to – fabric softener, dryer sheets, to make my clothes smell better but honestly it never killed the smell. But it was stuff like that. I was embarrassed to have friends over. I was embarrassed to even have people pick me up at my house. And we just really didn't have very much money at that time. And all I did was basically isolate myself.

All participants grew up in poverty and shared similar experiences. Their experiences combined with the traumatic experiences that led to them being placed in foster care caused a tainted outlook on life itself for some of them. Ethan stated, "When you have little expectations because life hasn't given you those expectations to expect out of yourself, then when something bad happens you're not really going to – it's not going to affect you." It seemed he became numb to negative experiences and suppressed his emotions, which seemed like a common trait among participants. Rico suppressed his emotions, only expressing them while intoxicated. He recalled:

[I started] drinking some more and I started to get drunk. I started getting very emotional because of all that depression I was dealing with, it really started coming out and I really started thinking about things. And I started crying.

The suppression of emotion is not something participants personally wanted to do; it has been ingrained in them through their experiences with family and society. Nate's mother lacked the ability to emotionally express herself and it negatively affected him. He recollected and said, "My mom has never really been like an emotional type or a sentimental type of mom. So, she kind of hides her feelings, so you never really know how she is really actually feeling." That has always bothered him as he has continuously sought her love, something he knew he had but rarely saw expressed by her. He said, "It still does (bother me) because I just want her to love me. I'd do anything for her to love me and it's just like I just need her to show me, you know."

Suppression of emotions led to self-destructive behaviors for some participants. Rico's withholding of emotion was re-enforced by his father early in his life. Not only did his dad not support him in his extracurricular activities, he would not cooperate in mandated family therapy. Rico stated, "My dad never wanted to participate, always told the therapist 'I don't want to talk to you, get out of our house, blah blah blah'." Rico's inability to show how he was actually feeling led to a minor dependence on drinking, admitting he drank almost "every weekend." He added, "Much of it was out of the depression that I dealt with as to why I drank." The abundance of drinking, led to legal issues and him "racking up three or four MIPs (minor in possession) in a month." Participants have been taught to suppress their emotions, which often lead to unhealthy coping mechanisms that create situations that at times led to legal issues. Being involved with the legal system may cause participants to feel ashamed of what they did and stigmatize them as a troubled youth. As a result, participants may isolate themselves from positive individuals fearing that they may not want to associate with them. This experience in addition to their experiences with inconsistent caregivers and lack of supportive adult relationships creates a sense of vulnerability, of not wanting to be hurt again by losing another relationship. Therefore, it may be

easier for them to not establish relationships in the first place, which again provides another example of the intertwining of themes II and I.

Participants' coping mechanisms could at times turn into unruly behavior especially as they got older. Ethan recalled how the abuse he faced resulted in him getting in trouble. He said, "I was on that side of being abused and neglected to being the one that was causing the problems." Other participants took to using marijuana, stealing, being truant from school, fighting, and disobeying caseworker and judge's orders, which resulted in many of them getting involved in the juvenile justice system. For Ethan, being in a juvenile detention center "changed his life" and has caused him to become "very vulnerable." Like the other participants, he learned to hide his emotions. Hiding emotions aligns with participants' interpretation of what it means to be a man and is essentially their way of not wanting to appear vulnerable, which ironically only reinforces their vulnerability as they suppress how they truly feel.

Participants all considered themselves men and identified that way. However, they also shared that they have not seriously considered what being a man meant to them. Many participants expressed discomfort with answering questions about masculinity but were able to give descriptions that tended to be consistent with the theory-based definitions of hegemonic masculinity. They all defined a man as being "successful," "the breadwinner," "aggressive," "having (a lot of) sex," "being looked up to," among other attributes. In regards to vulnerability, participants described men suppressing their feelings and not letting others see them show "weakness" and/or cry as an expected male role. Nate expressed his opinion on what was acceptable emotional expression for men:

I'd say aggression...being tough and being able to shelter feelings, you know. Like if you see a guy always crying, when something goes wrong...you're like "uh, he's not as manly as I thought he was," you know. So, being able to shelter your feelings, definitely. So, not only did Nate think that of other men, he embodied it, adding that he would only cry in his own space but never in front of other people. He did that because he "never wanted to reveal

my own true feelings,” adding that he felt he needed to “shelter those and bundle those in” and not let people know how he was really feeling. He was practically adhering to masculine scripts when he stated, “I was good at hiding my feelings.” Although Jay believes that men should cry to “avoid stress,” he confessed he had not cried in over a year, and that was because he was in jail and missed his family. Beyond that, he said he would not and has never cried around his friends, fearing ridicule. Showing others, especially other men, their true feelings lead to vulnerability, Ethan shared:

No, like the only time I would show my emotions were around my family or my girlfriend. I don't care if you stub your toe and you're bleeding, you better suck it up, because, it just makes you feel like – like I hate to say it but a pussy or a wimp. And you don't want to look like a wimp, you don't want to look vulnerable. You're already vulnerable in the system; you're already vulnerable because you don't have your family. So, why would you be vulnerable around your guy friends? Because than that means other people can hurt you.

Men often get societal messages about which emotions are appropriate for men to express, likely limiting how they truly feel and who they truly are. Ethan went on to say that he had identified as “bisexual” but due to his religious background and living in conservative towns, he “hid it” because others “opposed it.” Being moved from town to town though, he was able to see that people in less conservative places accepted his “flamboyant” personality, but as soon as he would return to his conservative hometown, “no, it was all about being tough” there. He learned to adapt and hide who he was when he felt vulnerable. Other participants spoke about hiding aspects of their true selves, whether it was class, intelligence level, or foster care status. This behavior of hiding aspects of who they truly were in order to fit in is consistent with gender role conflict, which causes men to present a false image to others. This underlying feeling of not being “good enough” creates a vulnerable self, especially for participants who grew up in poverty and were in foster care. Being vulnerable and expressing feelings is not generally seen as a masculine trait

Participants' peers became individuals who could not be relied upon for deep and meaningful relationships, instead only allowing for surface level engagement. Mack talked about not sharing too much emotion with his male friends. He stated:

I don't really feel like my friends...talk about school. We're sports friends. We're videogame friends. We're on the same sports team, we don't really talk about school things. It's like when someone says to you at church "you should go talk to people about god." It's one of those things that some people are like – it's not going to work because it's going to look weird in front of my friends. I felt the same way about school.

The mindset of how participants, as men, are supposed to behave and express themselves persisted in college.

Vulnerability in college.

Participants' experiences growing up in foster care have a considerable influence on their thoughts and behavior that did not simply disappear upon enrolling in college. Although in some cases, there was an attempt to start with a clean slate. Nate, like the other participants, did not want his background to affect his experiences in college and attempted to hide it in an attempt to be seen as "normal." He elaborated by saying:

I feel that kids that come from poverty and who are kind of going into a new phase in their life, they want to be as regular and normal as possible. I wanted to be – I felt like "okay I'm normal now" so I was kinda scared and didn't want to ask for help, "I'm going to get this on my own first." Instead of actually reaching out to people who could help me, you know. I was so terrified, like the day before I left (for college), I cried. I'm like "man I don't know what I'm getting myself into."

Nate knew he needed help but felt embarrassed letting others know where he stood academically, a characteristic shared by many participants. Although he had a 3.0 GPA in high school, he scored a 13 on his ACT twice. He conceded by saying:

It made me feel stupid. I felt like I didn't want to talk about it and would lie about my ACT score when people would ask about it. I usually feel like I have to lie to kick it, you know. I can't keep it 100% real.

He did not allow himself to be vulnerable and instead masked his need for help with confidence by maintaining the image he felt compelled to live up to – the popular guy. He added:

The crazy fact is that, like you said, is that I knew what I should've been doing. But again, like, the peer pressure, the drugs, my roommate, it was just like it played a big role – the partying. I was so focused on those things than I was on my academics and trying to be successful and getting my degree under my belt.

Being looked up to, a common male quality desired by many participants, and being seen as confident was based in part on Nate's interpretation of what a man was supposed to be. Anything else would be seen as weakness, something he was not willing to show others, even those close to them. Nate explained his rationale for not calling his foster parents or his mother when he was struggling in college and needed help by saying:

I was very distracted trying to be a male, trying to be this "man." So, I wasn't focusing on like "I need to be sitting down and taking care of this homework." Instead, I'm like, "okay I'm going to put this off on the back burner." I still wanted them to have that image in their head like "Nate's in college, Nate's doing his thing, he's doing good," even if it was a false one. So, I couldn't reach out to them.

While Nate was not the only one who concealed his emotions, he simply articulated those particular experiences clearest. Ethan also described the difficulties he faced in college:

I wasn't doing okay financially. I wasn't doing mentally okay. There were a lot of things that weren't okay. I was totally depressed. Being suicidal, I was freaking out. I was just depressed all the way around. I was depressed when I went to college but when everything else hit I crashed hard.

Behaviors of masking feelings seemed consistent among these participants. While men in general are socialized to remain stoic and suppress the day-to-day adverse situations, youth in foster care have unique and traumatic experiences. As a result, the participants in this study wanted additional support in college but felt vulnerable seeking it out. Participants were ashamed to talk about their status of being in foster care. Ethan's experience of sharing his status was uniquely positive, but his core feelings were similar to the anxiety other participants felt when sharing their status. He was not necessarily ashamed of his experiences but did not want pity. He stated:

You want people to see that you got hurt but you don't want people to feel sorry for you. You're tired of being the victim, you want to be the survivor. I'm tired of feeling sorry for myself. Once I told one of my professors that, she really encouraged me to just slam dunk into it [my school work].

Nate had an experience more in line with the fear participants believed would occur if they shared their foster care status and the potential consequences of others knowing their history as FYA. For context, it is important to explain that Nate got in trouble with his teammates on a trip to Chicago where he was charged with possession of a gun (something he said he carried due to his understanding of how dangerous Chicago could be). Whereas his teammates had the connections and money to take care of their situations, Nate had to spend three weeks in jail, which clearly negatively affected his classes and his reputation. Nevertheless, he felt that his team and coaches would be supportive of him. He was wrong and attributed their negative perceptions of him to his coaches knowing about his foster care status. He recalled that situation, saying:

My coaches knew where I came from and I feel that also affected me as well. Like when I got in trouble. And they were just like "this is what he's used to. This is what he's prone to." It was really a mistake and I felt that me putting myself out there and letting them know that I was in foster care kind of affected their opinion of me. I felt like an outcast.

Others chose not to disclose their status because there was hesitation to do so under the presumption that negative reactions or simply inaction would result. Jay noted, "I don't think it

would change anything. They just going to do their job and go on about their business.” Rico felt that disclosing his foster care status to college staff and faculty would be “weird.” Rico also shared that it would be strange, and illicit feelings of awkwardness if faculty made an assumption about him being in foster care. Mack, like Ethan, felt it would result in unwanted “pity.” These participants’ perceptions (and reality) that their past experiences would yield opinions of weakness instead of resilience caused increased feelings of vulnerability when things in college got more difficult. There seemed to be similarities in the sting felt when professionals and staff in foster care (as noted earlier) would disparage these young men, and in the presumed reaction that they would receive from faculty and staff if they disclosed their foster care status. This instance relates to the previously noted lack of trust generated from being in foster care that carried over to participants’ college experiences.

Despite their uneasiness of sharing their foster care identity, participants indicated they would like to have faculty know their foster care status. Participants are displaying their willingness to be vulnerable by sharing their background, but are personally, or socially, constrained from doing so due to perceived stigma associated with being in foster care. Nate shares later on in theme III his idea for going about this effectively without creating an instance for participants to publicly “out” themselves as FYA. Nate disclosed his feelings of the role he felt faculty and staff should take in reaching out to students from disadvantaged backgrounds, “Kids who come from poverty backgrounds and stuff like that, I feel they (teachers) need to reach out to those kids that do come from those backgrounds a little bit more.” Participants want support because they have grown accustomed to incorrectly feeling as though they do not need others’ help, particularly from adults who have supposedly had their best interest in mind, as Ethan previously noted. While traditional students are perceived more capable of connecting with staff and faculty when they feel overwhelmed, participants shared their difficulty making connections. Rico went on to explain what happened after he would “spiral” by saying:

As far as later on, when things got hard for me in my own life, I just kind of isolated myself. I didn't really like asking for help or care to get to know anybody, like how I did previously. Like I said, isolation – when I isolated myself I made it difficult for myself and it stressed me out because I didn't really have any extra help when I truly needed it the most.

It is not as if these men are against sharing their feelings and opening up to others, it just requires more time and deeper connections. Responding to my question about whether he felt it would have been helpful to be more open about his feelings, Nate responded by saying:

Yes, it would have. I know that I would've been able to open up to get me the treatment or whatever I needed, instead of just "oh okay, Nate's doing really well." When actually I felt frustrated and wanted to run away. I feel like it did affect me, because I mean, I wasn't able to be myself and open up to the people to find out who actually cared for me. I was just, it was just me acting, you know. I was acting for everybody. I was just not being myself and instead trying to be someone I'm not. They only know the actor Nate.

These young men were masking their true selves in an effort to maintain their relationships, but also to embody society's definition that men should not show vulnerability, as it demonstrates weakness, which goes against the societal hegemonic definition of a man.

Societal expectations.

Participants shared stories that exemplified how societal expectations were being imposed on them as men which affected their decision-making. Society's expectations of what it means to be a man played a significant role in their lives.

"Being a man, I believe, is being successful, you know. I don't think you can call yourself a man if you aren't successful, or aren't on your way to becoming successful." Success was one of Rico's defining characteristics of a man. Jay echoed that sentiment by adding:

Well a man ain't going to let themselves fail. They're going to try everything – they're going to do everything they can to be productive and work hard, and strive hard for their dreams, and stuff like that.

Anything less than achieving success is seen as being less of a man by these participants, and being less of a man leaves them vulnerable and susceptible to ridicule. Rico felt compelled to go through college in his pursuit of success by himself. He felt that being a man meant not seeking help and if a man did seek help, it demonstrated weakness and would result in social ramifications that would question his masculinity. He explained this by stating:

I don't want to be called a pussy, you know. I think that has a lot to do with it, showing everybody that "hey, I am a man I can do this. I don't need your help." That was one thing that was big for me. I didn't like asking for help because I believe you shouldn't have to ask for help.

In essence, he felt seeking help went against his manhood. Mack shared a similar sentiment and believed that men should not need to rely on others to figure things out. He stated:

Guys aren't very good at asking questions. It's one thing that I feel guys are bad at. I'll admit to that and I feel that was one of my downfalls. I don't know if it's the fact that they just want to feel like they know everything or should know everything or whatever. So, they feel like "if I have to ask for directions," it's like a lot of guys feel that is something they shouldn't have to worry about.

Being successful and looked up to was important to these men. Nate reveled in it growing up and recalls being in high school and being admired by his peers. He recalled, "I was always the guy they would look up to and do the things that they could never do, like have sex with an older girl, you know." He admits that much of his behavior was "under peer pressure to impress" others and prove that he was a man. He started to piece together that his expectations of what it meant to be a man had been affecting his decision-making:

I'm sitting here trying to prove myself that I'm worthy of being a man, I'm worthy of being tough, I'm worthy of you know of having sex because I'm thinking that only the older guys are having sex, you know. Little boys followed the rules. I didn't realize how much me just trying to prove to people that I'm worthy of something, that I was normal, you know what I mean, of being a man. It did affect me a lot.

Ethan's involvement with Project Blast offered him a leadership role. His inherent desire to be a leader (something he said he was born with) led him to accept the role. However, his acceptance of the role, without previous leadership experience, created a lot of pressure for him to live up to his perceived ideal that men are effective leaders. He explains how not meeting those standards yielded adverse results:

I became, you know, a follower to becoming a leader. (As a man) you were expected to be a leader and not get into trouble. But I had to prove myself, but there was no time to prove myself. So, I just felt there was a time when you just gave up, and you just start doing whatever the hell you wanted to do.

Ethan's experiences highlight the impacts young men face when they are unable to meet societal expectations that are placed upon them. The loss of admiration from the position he left created a void within him that needed to be filled. Ethan would begin to succumb to peer-pressure and engage in drugs and alcohol at a young age in order to obtain his peers' approval, and to offset the lack of societal approval he lost with his failed leadership position. Ethan did what he needed to do to fit in, but he also wanted to fulfill his masculine duty of being a leader by having others look up to him. This was a common trait among participants. Jay not only wanted approval by his peers, but also wanted their respect, stating, "I wanted a whole bunch of people to look up to me." Rico adhered to similar self-destructive behaviors in order to gain his peers' admiration but also felt the need to be looked up to. He felt college was an avenue to gain that recognition from others and stated:

I wanted to be a role model, I wanted to be a male role model for other people. I wanted people to look up to me. That was important – having people look up to me. I didn't really want anyone to have something on me. I didn't want anybody to think they are better than me because they have a degree.

According to Nate, graduating from college made you successful, and thus made you a man:

Being educated, that's a manly trait because 'knowledge is power'. A man definitely knows what he's talking about. He's not just rambling on and not talking about a bunch of stuff he doesn't know, you know? A man's going to know what he's talking about. Men have to go and graduate college. Pretty much, you have to be successful.

Piecing those ideas together has led these men to conclude that being a man is synonymous with being successful, and being successful is synonymous with graduating from college. Nate admits that being successful was his "main motivator" to go to college. The pressure to succeed is so high that the adverse effects result in a rooted fear of failure. Nate sensed that and said:

I felt pressure the day before I kind of left for college because I was scared to fail. I had my mom looking up to me, I had all my brothers like "ok, alright, Nate is going to be the one. Nate's the golden child." (School) wasn't spectacular but I was definitely, kind of like an A+ student in their eyes. I felt like I had to break the cycle.

Fear of failing had a way of manifesting itself in less obvious ways, making it difficult to identify. Whereas students would be expected to seek help when they feared failure, seeking help indicated weakness, which was something participants avoided doing because they feared they would be viewed as less masculine.

In college, participants shared they typically did not seek help. Not seeking help will be fully discussed in theme III but needs to be addressed in this section as not seeking help has an overlapping connection to vulnerability. Participants' decision to not seek help could be attributed to the assumption made by Mack that men are "supposed to know" information even if they had never learned it. Ethan shared he would sometimes "make things up" to present a false image of

knowing. Consequently, they feared asking questions that would signal to others that they were “dumb,” so they resisted seeking out help. They falsely convinced themselves they could do it on their own. For example, Ethan recalled thinking, “I could do it myself” and “I’m not one for really asking for help much.” Mack characterized it by saying:

I feel that men don’t want to feel “dumb,” they don’t want to feel like “okay, I should know this but I don’t, so I need to go out and ask somebody.” They’re not going to want to do that. They’ll just forget the question at all and they’ll be like “whatever I’ll figure it out or forget about it, period.” I would just go home, which is what a man will probably do. He’ll just avoid it, so he goes home and tries to do his homework on his own.

Even though many of the participants had access to free tutoring, they did not utilize it. Nate said he felt like the “dumb dude” when he would attempt to go see a tutor. Mack did not utilize the service once, even though no matter how hard he tried, he could not figure out some of his homework. That resulted in him getting “frustrated,” which led to frustration in the classroom. His frustration, in addition to working 32 hours a week, proved too difficult. He recalls thinking, “I (didn’t) want pity, but I felt that all the things I had been through, I was just putting more and more pressure on myself.” Participants felt either too proud and/or embarrassed to seek help even when they knew seeking help would alleviate some of the pressure they placed on themselves.

These students faced a dilemma. They were not asking for help during stressful times in college but desperately wanted to be successful in a new environment. Even the word *success* was a mystery to some of them. They heard the term often throughout their lives but for these participants, it was a term that was not easy to define. Nate was frustrated trying to define what he so desperately wanted and said “It’s like I’m fighting so much for success and I want success so bad, but really I don’t know what success is.” For Jay, it was on his mind constantly:

I gotta be something and I don’t know what I want to be either. I think about (being successful) all the time, like what am I going to be when I grow up – I can’t work at

McDonald's for the rest of my life. Then disability, that ain't looking good. I want to make my own money.

Upon reflection, participants felt as though they were not adequately prepared to be successful in college, which they felt set them up for failure and lowered their confidence in their ability to persist during difficult times. Since failure went against the characteristics of their male identity, it created feelings of shame and vulnerability for some of them. Nate talked about feeling that way when he started college. He said:

Once I got to college, I had to do it all on my own, I was off on my own, I was like a lone wolf, like just winging it. I didn't have anybody, I didn't have any structure and coming from a lot of structure to no structure, it was definitely like "alright Nate, go ahead." I felt like it set me up for failure.

Mack shared his sentiments, wishing that he had done things differently because his expectations of college did not align with reality. He noted, "When I went to college I was wrong in my thoughts about what it was like. So, I basically felt like I set myself up to fail." Jay wished he had waited "until I was ready to go with a plan." Exiting college early made Jay "regret quitting," because he felt that not being in college meant he would not end up being "anything." Rico feared repeating the mistakes his family made due to him exiting college, and said:

I would say it kind of makes me feel like a loser in a way, like I'm just going to turn out to be, well not necessarily like my mom or dad, but I just feel like without that degree I won't have the skills necessarily to be successful, So when I dropped out of college it kind of made me depressed in a way.

Low levels of self-esteem, which caused vulnerability, were evident among many participants.

The incident in Chicago that Nate described earlier had a strong impact on his self-esteem:

I kind of feel like I let, not only them (his team) down – not only myself down, but also my foster family down. I embarrassed my team, I embarrassed myself, my family, I embarrassed a lot of people. It was like I was the outcast.

The embarrassment and isolation that followed his legal issues caused him to exit college early and to isolate himself even further. I asked how he felt about his decision, he responded by saying:

Um, well like a failure. I wanted to go back to my foster home because I knew it was probably the best place for me, but I was ashamed because I felt like, “Man, I just threw everything away.” I didn’t even want to associate with them. Like [foster dad] was reaching out to me and he’d be calling me.

Nate learned early on that sharing his feelings created turmoil in other’s relationships, causing him to internalize it and blame himself when other people were facing difficulties. His resolution of reaching out to his foster parents only when he could impress them was not an isolated incident. Mack shared similar sentiments in wanting to impress others by his motivation to go back to college. He stated:

I feel like if I went back to college, I would be able to prove a lot of people (wrong)– and them being able to say “I’m really glad we were able to help him because he went back to college and got it out of the way.”

Expectations from individuals they knew and from society influenced these participants’ ability to be successful in college. Having low trust of others due to their past experiences and their habit of hiding the fact they needed help caused them to only seek help occasionally, which would often not fulfill their academic and emotional needs. They did not reach out to the people with whom they established relationships with while in care, and felt they could only share positive experiences with them for fear of disappointing them if they shared their actual situations.

Theme III: Help-Seeking Behavior.

The previous theme of vulnerability blends right into help-seeking behavior. Participants’ turbulent relationships while in care likely created an expectation of relationships not being stable or trustworthy enough. Combine those feelings with the vulnerability amassed through those broken relationships, trauma before and during care, and masculine expectations to not appear

weak, and it leads to a negative influence on help-seeking behavior. Participants entered college with a sense of optimism about the progression of their lives as they were likely the first in their family to attend, and at that time, they were more open to seeking help. They were initially willing to move forward by letting their guard down and putting their negative experiences behind them. There may appear to be contradictions in this theme, in regards to participants seeking help versus the previous discussions regarding their avoidance of seeking help. However, it is important to note their willingness and attempts to seek help were made and to identify what caused them to stop seeking help and support. Additionally, as already noted, there is natural overlap between theme II and this theme.

Individualized help seeking.

Participants acknowledged they were not particularly good at seeking help, due to a fear of looking weak or unintelligent. That is not to say that they did not seek help or would not have accepted help if it had been offered to them. Their desire to succeed, whether to improve their lives or because they felt obligated to do so as men, offered a opportunity for them to let down their guard in order to succeed. Unfortunately, those efforts only seemed to occur when circumstances were manageable in their lives, not necessarily when life became difficult.

As first-year students, participants felt more comfortable seeking help up to a certain point, and would take it upon themselves to get the help they needed by utilizing available resources. Rico, who joined a fraternity, reflected on his experience of seeking help early on in college and said:

If I needed something, the fraternity brothers would help me. As far as study groups go and stuff like that, I was really good at getting into study groups when I needed to. I would be the one who would initiate a lot of the study groups or initiate getting people together, like “hey I need some extra help, you guys can benefit from it too.” Actually, I think I initiated all of the study groups I had. I never really processed that, but yeah, now that I think about that I was the person that initiated that.

However, it was not long before things became difficult and negative habits began emerging. There were good efforts being made, but there seemed to be a sense by participants that they did not belong. Participants redirected themselves to those they felt best understood them, who unfortunately were not always helpful. Nate explained this:

When I first got there, I would try to sit in the front of the class but it was kind of like, it was moving fast for me and it was hard to keep up. I tried to reach out for the kids who I knew would help me in school. When I first got there I was on top of it. I felt really good and motivated, but then over time you start being yourself. People start seeing who you are. I started hanging out with the kids who had the same interest as me, and my interest at the time when I was being lazy, was smoking. And a lot of those kids were the black youth who were coming from the same backgrounds that I was from, you know.

These participants were intelligent enough to understand that when the academic rigors of college became difficult they should seek help from faculty and staff. Rico said he understood this and explained that he would “usually talk to professors after class or email them,” even adding that he “would go to the office and ask the professors themselves. I noticed doing that, that professors are more apt to helping you.” He even utilized TRIO to help him pass his most difficult subject math.

Other participants felt less comfortable reaching out to faculty and staff, and would turn to their peers for support. Nate shared why doing so was not always the best solution. He stated:

I would seek help from the people that knew me, those who I hung out with from a day to day basis, which was my roommate. I was scared to ask for help from the people that could actually help me. Really, I was asking for help from those who were bringing me down and that was my roommate.

While not all participants felt comfortable seeking help from faculty, they appreciated it when faculty and staff would reach out to them. For example, Nate and Jay both recalled feeling good when particular faculty would encourage and motivate them. Some participants however, did feel

comfortable seeking help from faculty and staff. Ethan emphasized that he sought help from his “teachers and advisor because (his) advisor was awesome.”

It was particularly interesting to hear participants talk about instances of seeking help when they knew some of the material, while on the other hand, would avoid seeking help when they were unfamiliar with the homework material. The reason for that was not clear, but it seemed to originate from masculine tendencies of feeling obligated to know information (as Mack mentioned in theme II under Societal Expectations). Jay’s experience hints at the help-seeking paradox as he stated that he would not seek her help from faculty or that of a tutor. He said, “I don’t know. I really just don’t like asking for help because it’s going to make me look dumb. I guess me falling back made me want to quit too.” Ironically, he was more comfortable quitting than looking like a failure to others. Ethan stated that he felt comfortable seeking help from the professors he knew, but with others, he would purposely resist it, even when he knew getting help would yield positive results. He explained:

I did everything I could to not ask for help. I even like – my brain was fried, I was steaming out of my ears trying to figure it out. I failed the class by like a 2% difference. I probably would’ve passed with a 95% if I would’ve asked for help.

For other participants the coursework was not the issue, it was issues in their personal life that would create a cessation of seeking help. For example, Rico sought help in various forms when he was familiar with the coursework. However, once he began to feel challenged, he hesitated to seek help. He shared his experience:

In terms of my personal life, I really didn’t talk about it with anybody in school. I kind of kept that to myself. Math was the only thing that I was asking for help with and it was occasionally that I would skip out on my study groups when things were a little hard. I definitely - I should’ve sought help at that time. Not necessarily with my personal life – well that would have been nice.

Rico's sentiment illustrates participants' willingness to occasionally break from traditional gender roles to seek help, unless it revolved around being emotionally expressive, which seemed to cause them to shut down and isolate themselves. Moreover, participants' willingness to seek help seemed tenuous, as it would often only take difficulty in one subject to derail a student from persisting. For example, Jay expressed difficulty in English, saying it was the class he "wasn't doing too good in." That was particularly interesting because he shared earlier in the interview that his English professor was encouraging and cared about him. He did not feel comfortable asking a professor who was eager to help him because he was afraid of looking "dumb." For other participants, struggling in one class had a major influence on their decision to stop-out, as in Mack's situation. He recalled being frustrated and said:

I am pretty good at most – pretty good at most subjects, except I'm not good at writing.

I'm horrible. Never understood it. I don't care for it at all (in college), so I just gave up.

Sometimes relationships did not develop deep enough to establish a true connection. Nate depicts this in his experience with his advisor. He said:

I mean I had an academic advisor that I could go get help from but that only lasted for the first couple weeks then I got out of rhythm. We didn't have a real relationship but she was there and always used to try help me. I mean, I would go meet up with her the first couple of weeks and even when I got back from Chicago, (telling myself that) I'm going to get back on track and get this done, I'm gonna bounce back. That only lasted for so long as well, because I fell back into the same routine.

Again, the willingness to seek help was there for many students but there were missing components that prevented proper utilization of relationships and services. When support was utilized, it would sometimes be too late. Ethan recalled thinking about his desire to get help with assignments, and said, "most of the time when I ask for help it's a little too late." Another issue for students regarding help-seeking behavior was their uncertainty of knowing how to utilize help that would be offered to them, particular from faculty. That was probably a result of how theme I

and II (difficulty establishing relationships and vulnerability) caused them to doubt others. Rico's experience exemplified that:

When it came down to it, I would usually talk to professors after class or email them. I would go to their office and ask the professors themselves. I noticed that doing that, professors are more apt to helping you and helping you save your grade...and help in building a relationship. I started to open up with him a little bit and it definitely helped me out a lot.

However, despite participants initially reaching out to others for support, those relationships were not maintained nor utilized enough when things were difficult and they needed more support. For example, Nate recollected the positive feelings he felt towards professors that he started to build relationships with and how it was helpful for him, by saying:

My professor was the only one there that was actually able to help me. I felt that she was behind me, you know. No matter whether I failed a test or aced a test she was going to be there and help me; and give me some more good advice. She would even give me advice for other classes. So, I felt like she was there to help me, and I wanted a lot more of that. It motivated me to go to her class. I was happy to see her in the morning and she was always "how are you doing Nate?"

Nate appreciated his relationship with his professor but it was not developed enough for him to go to her when his issues with his gun charge and his feelings of isolation made his life in college unbearable. He made no mention of going to her before making his decision to stop-out.

Participants' help-seeking behavior in college was a bit of a mixed bag and did not prevent them from stopping out. Similarly, participants felt they could not reach out for help from individuals who knew them best when college became especially challenging: family, foster parents, and service providers.

Not utilizing relationships.

Participants did not consistently seek help from faculty and staff. There is reason to believe that might have been the case because they needed more time to establish those relationships and build needed trust. However, these participants had established relationships with family, foster parents, and service providers from their time as wards of the state, but again something within them prevented them from reaching out to them as well when they faced obstacles in college.

Jay said that he “didn’t really ask nobody anything” but when pressed as to why, all he could muster was “because I felt - well I don’t know why I didn’t, but I didn’t ask nobody anything.” I had wondered if that was solely for academic help, so I pressed again and asked if he sought emotional help, even from friends, to which he simply replied, “nope, nobody.” Participants consistently shared that they did not utilize the people in their lives even to just vent about the challenges they faced in a college environment. Mack reflected and said, “I’m not a person who wants to go up to someone, like I said earlier in the conversation, saying ‘hey I need help with this’ I was just never one of those persons.” His statement reflects a belief that not seeking help was inherent to some of participants, possibly as part of their male identity.

My professional role with participants was to support them in various ways, including accessing and enrolling into colleges and universities. During that time, relationships were established that incorporated levels of trust that I felt would have prompted them to seek me out as a supportive resource they could have utilized when they needed help. However, while some minimally utilized my help during college, my relationships with participants dwindled with all of them to the point where they only reconnected with me once it was too late to support them in college. Mack disconnected with me right before he enrolled in college and said he regretted not utilizing a person in my role to support him. He added:

The thing is before I started college I kind of let you go. My mind back when I was 19 was I don’t want anybody with the system and I want them out of my life. So, I kind of

felt like, let's get rid of you, if he's out of my life things would be alright. It didn't really turn out that way.

He detailed in hindsight what somebody in my role could have helped him in college:

I could've used your help and I feel like – when I started college I didn't have all this help. You could've helped explain all these things, like how things work, how many hours I should've work, how much I should take out in loans for expenses, all these things. I didn't have that as an advantage. I didn't really take the opportunity to use that resource and so I felt like that didn't help in college either. Because you would've been able to explain to me things about college.

Service providers were not the only under-utilized resource in college for these participants.

Some had built strong relationships with their foster parents but chose not to reach out to them when they needed help. Nate detailed how he wished he had connected with his foster parents in college more:

Like now I know I should ask for help, but I still struggle because I don't – like man I should've got ahold of my foster parents and let them know what was going on, but instead I'm so scared to ask for help and reveal what I'm really going through.

Participants wished others had reached out to them. They would often see other student's parents calling to check up on them and hold them accountable. Nate wanted to hear from his mom:

It wasn't like my mom was calling and checking in on me like other students whose parents call and asking them “okay, how are your grades?”

He wanted to make his mom proud and yearned for her approval but she was not demonstrating the supportive characteristics that he needed. He added, “Everything I do I'm kind of thinking of her sort of approval in a sense.”

Having the opportunity to recollect their experiences in college during this research process helped them realize that not seeking help while in college created levels of regret for

these participants. After recognizing that he did not seek help in college, Jay wondered how he should have acted differently, stating:

I think I should've asked somebody, maybe I would've still been there. Till this very day I would've still been there if I asked for help, because I really wasn't doing too bad at school. It's just some of it was harder than others. Some of the classes were hard.

I followed up and asked if he would have done better had he asked for more help, he replied, "Yeah, because I would've been able to actually have somebody to actually study with." Rico recognized that he should have placed more focus on his own needs by seeking the help the needed while in college instead of worrying so much about others. He said, "I should have been more selfish and driven to get what I want."

Being able to reflect on their college-going experiences provided participants the opportunity to offer recommendations to help other FYA succeed. Participants felt that building stronger relationships in foster care would have been helpful to them, which they felt needs to be a responsibility shared between them and the other individual, whether caseworker, family member, foster home, group home, or other service provider. Mack shared his thoughts on the simplicity of doing that. He suggested, "Just take the time to pick up your phone, talk to the kid to see what's going on, and I promise you you'll make their day better, and I promise you it will make your life a lot less stressful." In essence, participants felt that the burden to seek help should not be solely placed on them, and should be placed on those who worked with them. Rico believes that men are likely to be more difficult to connect with but urged those working with them to keep trying because it matters. He stated:

Some men, it takes a little bit more digging and scratching and trying to find out like "what is this guy's deal? Why isn't he answering my calls?" Let's just say "we were supposed to fill this out today and do that," just following up would be another thing. Sometimes it may take a few times to do that, but following through and doing all those things really means a lot to us.

The responsibility of support should also be on faculty and staff at colleges and universities. Nate thinks that having lunch with a student would be helpful, stating that staff and faculty should, “definitely try to reach out to them and see what they’re feeling, what their mindset is. Calling them in to have lunch with them, you know what I mean...reach out to students instead of having youth like having to find them.” That concept needs to extend out to administrators in order to influence staff and faculty’s efforts of reaching out to students, particularly FYA. Knowing FYA’s background and experiences could result in more established relationships that could yield higher success rates. Ethan explained:

I’d talk to my staff and say, talk to the ones struggling the most. Look at their grades, I mean. See if they’re coming to class late or stressed or something. Figure out why.

Because I think when you hear somebody’s story it’s when you’re really going to put the story to the face, and see like how can I help this person to accomplish more. It’s kind of like you’re fulfilling something that you can’t fulfill for yourself. I don’t know, maybe that’s kinda weird.

The difficulty in finding out who these students are, in order for faculty and staff to reach out to FYA, was difficult, due to the invisible identify of being a FYA. However, Nate suggests adding participants foster care status on a “student profile or admissions, anything really to give that alert to be able to know that this kid needs a little bit extra help than normal.”

These participants may have been conditioned to not seek help due to their experiences in foster care and due to societal male gender roles, which they often subscribe to. However, as they enrolled in college and started a new chapter in their lives, they have shown the willingness to break free from those mental blocks by reaching out to others they felt understood them and could effectively encourage them. Unfortunately, participants did not feel comfortable maintaining or deepening those relationships into lasting and meaningful bonds. While some faculty and staff did their part in reaching out to them, it was not a consistent and substantial effort. Ineffective outreach by faculty and staff diminish the opportunity to adequately validate participants as

valuable contributors to the college environment. Additionally, participants did not often reach out to those who have supported them when they were in foster care. Reasons ranged from not wanting anything to do with individuals involved with the foster care system to fearing that reaching out for help would expose their vulnerability and be mistaken for weakness. Ultimately, these participants felt that sole responsibility of reaching out for help should not be placed on them, but should instead be balanced with professionals, staff, and faculty doing their part in identifying and reaching out to these students.

Conclusion

Three themes emerged from the data: Relationships, Vulnerability, and Help-Seeking Behavior, along with each theme's subthemes. Participant profiles allow the reader to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their experiences and identities, which helped in the narration of their story. In the next chapter, the findings will be used to identify implications for practice. Recommendations for future research will also be offered.

Chapter 5—Discussion

Introduction

This chapter addresses the connection between the literature review in Chapter 2 and the three thematic findings that emerged during data analysis process. This research study generated data using a qualitative approach by incorporating a semi-structured interview protocol that enabled participants to narrate their own stories. Participants' explanation of how they made meaning of their experiences in foster care, in college, and what led them to decide to exit college before earning a degree emerged from their stories and reflections. Participants continued that process by critically examining their gender and its' influence on their experiences in foster care and subsequently in college; something most participants said was a difficult process as they had not considered their gender as an important factor in their lives.

The importance of this study stems from acknowledging that foster youth are one of the most vulnerable populations in our society (Okpych, 2012), which is made clear when their experiences and backgrounds are understood, as this research study has attempted to demonstrate. FYA have had to overcome much hardship in their lives but are remarkably seen as able to persevere more than other populations (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007). All participants in this study have shown resilience by overcoming their tumultuous lives and enrolling in college. In college however, male FYA faced additional challenges as they felt a disconnection between their vulnerable feelings and society's expectations of male behavior. The dissonance they faced was similar to the gender role conflict described by O'Neil (1990) that pitted men against gender roles or scripts they felt obligated to fulfill and their actual behavior.

Optimism for this population's success can be felt from Rendon and Munoz (2011) as they state that under the right conditions "even the most vulnerable nontraditional students could be transferred into powerful learners through in-and-out of class academic and/or interpersonal validation" (p. 37). Therefore, it is important for professionals who work with youth while they are in foster care, and faculty and staff on college campuses to find more effective and efficient

ways to ensure this population is supported in their efforts to transform their lives, as education has shown it can do for this population (Drowsky & Perez, 2010; Okpych, 2012; Peters, Dworsky, Courtney, & Pollack, 2009). This chapter's aim is to provide helpful recommendations.

Summary of Findings

The primary research questions of this study integrated the various components of this population's identities and experiences that affect them in college and led to them stopping-out. Incorporating aspects of college persistence, validation theory, Male Code and masculine scripts as theoretical frameworks helped shape the design of the research questions. The questions posed were:

- What were the experiences of male FYA while in foster care and how did it influence their decision to pursue higher education?
- What were the in-college and out-of-college factors that caused them to stop-out of college?
- What role did masculinity play in their decisions, behaviors, and experiences related to higher education?

In addition to being the lead researcher in this study, I have a professional role that allows me to work with this population. I anticipated interviewing a mixture of participants that I had previous relationships with and some with no prior relationships. I previously knew all of the research participants, which I thought would negatively influence the study, as they might have felt obligated to curtail their true feelings and aspects of their experiences to appease my work with them. However, my previous relationships turned out to be a valuable asset, as participants seemed more comfortable and expressive in recollecting their experiences. Participants went into pronounced detail of their experiences, much of which I had not known, though I had worked with some participants for up to three years. Participants appreciated having the opportunity to reflect on their overall experiences in foster care and college, as they collectively shared they had not had the opportunity to do. For some participants, it seemed almost therapeutic and provided

critical reflection as to how they might do things differently if they were to return to college which all participants expressed interest in doing. In fact, since interviews concluded, two have re-enrolled in college and two are actively in the process of re-enrolling. Additionally, Rico informed me of his impressive accomplishment of earning all A's in his first full quarter as a newly enrolled student at the local community college. His experience is a testament to the importance of using the term stopping-out.

The findings in this study, as described in Chapter 4, include the themes of *Relationships*, *Vulnerability*, and *Help-Seeking Behavior*. Those themes were so intertwined that it was difficult to separate them from one another. Coming into this research process, I anticipated participants talking about how multiple transitions in homes, schools, and with service providers, caused frustration in their relationships, which led to difficulty in establishing relationships while in college. However, participants' description of how their experiences correlated to a heightened level of vulnerability was less expected. Their experiences in foster care coupled with their conflicting ideas on how men are supposed to be independent, stoic, and not appear weak, compared to their true feelings of being hurt, afraid, and alone, created a masking of their true feelings. Their vulnerability, which in part resulted from their broken relationships in foster care created an unnerving hesitancy in establishing new relationships while in college. Those limited relationships seemingly created lower involvement and missed opportunities for validation which caused ineffective help-seeking behavior that ultimately led to them exiting college prematurely. As evidenced, there was clear overlapping between all three themes. Regardless, I felt it necessary to distinguish the themes to highlight the distinctive differences. The next section will further describe the connection between the thematic findings and the literature.

Summary of Themes and Connection to Past Research

Participants' experiences were generally consistent with the literature on foster youth who went to college. Participants' experiences also generally fell in line with the literature on college men and masculinities. All participants had experiences, behaviors, and thoughts that

could be connected to components of the Male Code, most specifically *The Big Wheel* (Striving to be recognized for successful achievement) and the *Sturdy Oak* (Never showing physical or emotional weakness) (Brannon & David, 1976). They subscribed to those codes because they aimed to be successful and were not willing to appear weak by showing their vulnerability, which led them to not seek help effectively. Participants also largely subscribed to the *Strong and Silent*, *Winner*, and *Independent* masculine scripts, as they felt compelled to think they could be successful without help (Mahalik, Good, & Englar-Carlson, 2003).

Components of persistence and student involvement theories were evident in participants' experiences. Tinto (1975) acknowledged that for students to persist, performance in college needed to consider student's personal attributes, precollege experiences, and family background as factors. Participants experienced trauma, instability in foster care, broken relationships, disavowed trust, and embracing socialized gender roles that inhibited expression of emotions and prevented help seeking. Those experiences had considerable effects on their academic performance in college and their involvement. Case's (2011) assumption that student-faculty interaction could predict involvement in clubs and groups, particularly for men, did not seem to apply to participants of this study. Jay, and especially Ethan, both had positive interaction with faculty and did not get involved in one student organization while in college. Nate was involved in sports and Rico joined a fraternity, but their level of involvement seemed to have less to do with having relationships with faculty and more to do with their history of being involved in high school, which supports Astin's (1984) claim that high school involvement predicts college involvement predicts college involvement. On the other hand, Mack was not involved at all in high school and was not involved in college, which may have contributed to him being in college the shortest, before stopping-out, three months.

Elements of Rendón's Validation Theory were consistent with participants' experiences in college as they were not well integrated on campus, were not altogether involved on campus,

were mostly first-generation and nontraditional students; and had diverse contextual backgrounds (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011).

As Validation Theory will be used throughout this section, it is described again here. Six elements make up Validation Theory (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011, p. 17).

- Responsibility for initiating contact with students lies with institutional agents such as faculty, advisers, coaches, lab assistants, and counselors.
- Validation causes students to feel capable of learning and have a sense of self-worth.
- Validation is likely a prerequisite for student development.
- Validation can occur in and out of class.
- Validation should not be viewed as an end, but rather as a developmental process, which begins early and can continue over time.
- Validation is most critical when administered early in the college experience, especially during the first few weeks of class and the first year of college.

While there were instances of faculty being intentional and proactive in reaching out, encouraging, and motivating participants, all consistent elements of validation theory; students seemed to feel as though those relationships were not meaningful enough. Participants did not personally feel like valuable members of the college learning community or as if they received personal development and social support (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011).

Participants also experienced invalidation by faculty. Both Mack and Nate noted particular faculty made them feel incapable. Ethan had positive relationships with faculty that mattered to him. He called some faculty and staff his “best friends” who treated him the “best.” Unfortunately, administrators make decisions regarding admittance policy and overriding those policies. Whereas making connections and understanding all student experiences is beneficial for administrators, it may be more important for them to learn about marginalized student experiences, particularly this population as their chances for success is limited.

Veenstra (2009) assigned social responsibility on institutions and their administrators to ensure students complete their academic goals, as doing so benefits the overall economy. The cost to have staff establish effective student success programs that offer instruction, advising, tutoring, and mentoring to increase the retention of students can be outweighed by the monetary loss associated with student departure during their first year (Veenstra, 2009; Ryan, 2004, Astin 1993), which is when first-year students are most vulnerable (Chen, 2012, Veenstra, 2009). Additionally, supportive programs that were engaging were found to provide a needed sense of community for participants (Case, 2011; Dworsky & Perez, 2010). However, getting FYA to participate in programs can be difficult due to their difficulty in establishing relationships and reaching out to others. To offset participants' hesitancy to get involved, Dworsky and Perez (2010), found that encouragement by other program participants and trusted adults, such as former service providers, to get involved in supportive programs increased participants' willingness to participate.

In the following sections specific themes will be summarized and connected to past research and theoretical frameworks,

Theme I: Relationships.

Day et al. (2012) found that the most frequently cited challenge for FYA was not having relationships with caring adults both in and out of college. That was consistent with participant experiences in this research study. Relationships were at the core of participants' meaning making process related to their college going experiences, as it was severed relationships with family that initially put most participants into foster care. Additionally, their difficulty in establishing relationships in foster care carried through into college, which negatively affected their ability to succeed. Instability of relationships while in care was a common occurrence. Four participants had placement changes consistent with Pecora (2012) and Villegas et al.'s (2014) finding that youth in foster care have lived in more than three placement settings while in care (44%), with an average of five placements. On the other hand, Pecora (2012) also found that positive

relationships with family members and foster families would result in foster youth graduating from high school at twice the rate than those that did not have positive relationships, causing youth to achieve further success.

Placement changes consequently resulted in participants facing multiple school changes. While the exact number of school changes was not identified through this research process, their experiences seemed to be consistent with Pecora's (2012) findings that a third of foster youth experienced five or more school changes. School changes negatively affected participant's relationships with peers as they had to try to maintain old friendships and make new ones at new schools, which was only made more difficult by caseworkers requiring background checks from anybody participants wanted to spend time with. Participants loathed that process, and as a result did not make meaningful peer relationships while in care. Additionally, school changes likely created unintended consequences on how participants established relationships with teachers in secondary education, which likely carried over to how they viewed staff and faculty in college. It is likely that participants assumed college would be a limited endeavor based from their regular instability. Those thoughts may have prevented them from establishing relationships with faculty and staff in college to avoid the pain ending another relationship. Participants' unstable backgrounds likely made the thought of consistency in college difficult to fathom even when conditions were in place for stability.

Caseworkers played an important role in participants' lives as legal guardians to participants while in foster care. But, participants had mixed feelings about their relationships and interactions with caseworkers. Jay and Rico seemingly had a good relationship with their caseworkers but they did not provide details on what effects those relationships had on them. When relationships with caseworkers were turbulent, participants were clear about their displeasure particularly due to the lack of trust for someone they felt should be trustworthy. Mack emphasized that point by stating, "I think that absolutely, when you're in the foster care system you want to have somebody that you know you can absolutely trust and a caseworker as one of

them should be an easy one (but they were not).” Trust was likely diminished due to the high turnaround rates of caseworkers for participants, which was consistent with the literature. Davis (2006) noted that 90% of agencies have difficulty retaining caseworkers, causing shifts in youth’s workers. Furthermore, participants had an influx of changes, particularly Nate who counted 10 or 11 caseworkers during his tenure in care, which was twice the average of five caseworkers, noted in the Villegas et al. study (2014).

While much of this may seem unrelated to the college going experiences of these participants, according to Tinto’s model of persistence (1975) student’s college performance is directly tied to the personal attributes, precollege experiences, and family background. Therefore, it is important to consider the relationships and experiences these participants had in foster care to better understand how they navigated college. Additionally, the underlying message from these participants was that even though they identified positive relationships while in foster care, mainly due to their resilience in moving past their experiences, their relationships were largely negative. As a result, it would be reasonable to say participants experienced damaging and distrusting relationships with others, particular adults in their family and adults they worked with through the foster care system. Therefore, it is not surprising that participants had difficulty establishing relationships in college that would have allowed for validating relationships to develop more readily.

Participants did acknowledge some faculty reached out to them, which they felt was helpful. However, what seemed to be missing was the interpersonal validation that requires action by validating agents to foster student personal development and social adjustment (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011). That can be interpreted as relationships not being well established enough to provide the depth necessary to make participants feel validated in a consistent manner.

Theme II: Vulnerability.

Men’s dominant role in the history of our society has generally elicited a level of privilege bestowed upon them (Brannon & David, 1976). As holders of what could be considered

the ultimate privilege of being male, there is a subconscious message delivered to men, and other genders that receive the same messages, that men are invulnerable. That is implicit in Mahalik, Good, and Englar-Carlson's (2003) *Tough-Guy* script that describes men as invulnerable and fearless. Though that script generally describes aggressive and violent men, it underlines the reasons men act in that manner which is to avoid looking vulnerable and weak. I describe participant's gender role because it helps explain the reality that participants are indeed vulnerable and feel incapable of showing their feelings because it is not seen as consistent with masculine characteristics. To provide further context, participants described their experiences in foster care as traumatic and undesirably unique. Participants' traumatic experiences led them to enter foster care, a system intended to provide support, but as Pringle (1995) explains, children are ironically exposed to additional trauma by what happens to them while in foster care which only increases their vulnerability and decreases their trust levels.

Their vulnerability is intertwined with the first theme as participants' broken relationships, regular instability, and lack of trust created a lowered self-esteem and feelings of being alone which led to what could be perceived as a devaluation of who they are in comparison to others. Therefore, it is reasonable for them to strive harder to feel like they mattered by living up to society's depiction of who they are as men. They did this by embodying the *Big Wheel* and the *Sturdy Oak* male codes defined by Brannan and David (1976) and masking their true selves and emotions to present a more confident persona. This masking created distance between themselves and others while in foster care and while in college. In their efforts to find approval from others, participants succumbed to peer-pressure that often led to self-destructive behaviors (Davis, 2006) by drinking, using marijuana, being truant from school, among other behaviors. With no intervention, those behaviors lead to susceptibility of them up on welfare, homelessness, substance abuse, increased psychological distress, and lack of educational achievement (Merdinger et al., 2005; Unrau et al., 2012; Vacca, 2007). All of those potential consequences

increase the social stigma attached with being a FYA and peoples' perception that youth coming out of foster care cannot be successful.

On the other hand, participants were resilient and decided to go to college in efforts to improve their lives and be successful. A college degree has been credited to opening doors to higher paying jobs and more stable employment, helping end the cycle of poverty (Drowksy & Perez, 2010). However, considering the stigma associated with being in and exiting foster care it becomes clearer why participants may avoid disclosing their foster care status in college. Foster-child is a time sensitive identity that is often times associated with being a problem child, likely attributed to low educational success by foster youth (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). A better understanding of FYA experiences has the potential to help faculty and staff in college to better support FYA. These participants had various reasons for being placed in the child welfare system that creates the circumstances they experience in foster care and in college. Those vulnerable experiences, including an understanding of why parents may not be as involved in their lives could be important for college faculty and staff to know if relationships are to be effectively established. Knowing male FYA's backgrounds would likely generate encouragement, empathy, and comfort for FYA by faculty and staff, while also giving them an understanding of male FYA's holistic circumstances and resilience, which is consistent with validation theory and the idea that validating agents need to recognize all experiences and abilities that students bring with them to college (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011).

Participants' hesitancy to disclose their foster youth identity and hide their experiences even though sharing it would only improve their outcomes in college is an ironic situation and only reinforces the vulnerability they faced. Many participants felt alone, even though they had people in their lives that were willing to support them. However, participants felt isolated due to feeling misunderstood in college, which made it difficult to build trust with others in order to properly express the challenges they were faced with in college. Add to that the false societal narrative that men are inherently confident and successful (Brannan & David, 1976; Mahalik,

Good, & Englar-Carlson's, 2003), which participants expressed were ideas they felt pressured to adopt. Participants exhibited confident behaviors despite their feelings of inadequacy, which created a false perception from others that participants were not in need of help. This misperception is consistent with Davis' (2002) assertion that educators may misunderstand participants' not requesting assistance as a lack of need, which may lead to lower academic support and outcomes for college men, which creates missed opportunities for validation.

Theme III: Help-Seeking Behaviors.

Good and Wood (1995) stated that it is outside the traditional male role for an individual to express a need for help. That seemed to ring true for participants in this study. Participants faced an internal gender role conflict that prevented them from seeking help even when they knew it was in their best interest to do so. Men's tendency to avoid asking for help stems from "internalized restricted emotionality" (O'Neil, 1981, p. 71). Participants' experiences included setbacks and frustrations that for many created a sense that they were set up to fail in college. Going into college unprepared for the academic rigors inherent in college can be difficult for most students, but it is even more difficult if students do not have the confidence or relationships to feel comfortable enough to seek help effectively.

Knowing participants' backgrounds allows others to better understand their unwillingness to seek help. Interestingly, participants' resilience and initial enthusiasm generated from starting college offered them an opportunity to let their guard down and occasionally seek help. Participants were willing to connect with advisors, ask help from faculty, and utilize resources on campus (like TRIO) - the traditional methods of seeking help while in college. They sought help early on when they entered college, but as the material got more complicated and difficult, participants' perceptions that their peers were not struggling academically like they were, created a sense that if they sought help they would in effect look unintelligent. Participant behavior was consistent with Wilmer and Levant (2011) assertion that students with lower academic self-efficacy were found to be more likely to avoid seeking academic help. O'Neil's (1981) findings

added that fears of failure and intense pressure to succeed are two consequences accompanying men's obsession with achievement and success. All participants in one way or another talked about having a fear of failure, which was directly associated with them not wanting to look weak or vulnerable, which led into the narrative that seeking help demonstrates weakness. Participants' conundrum of feeling shamed and looking like failures coupled with the idea that seeking help would make them look like failures created a lose-lose situation for them.

Participants did not establish meaningful enough relationships and connections in college with faculty and staff that would lead them to seek help from those individuals (academically or emotionally). While not all students make connections with staff and faculty, it is generally assumed that most students have family or other adults in their lives to reach out to when struggling in college. This was not the case for these participants. Most participants consistently said they did not reach out to folks they had connections with outside of college, despite having contact with others outside of college. Rendón and Muñoz (2011) stated that validation is a process that can come from family, faculty and staff, and peers. While participants did not reach out to family or college faculty and staff often or effectively when they needed help, some participants seemed to rely on peers which in some cases (e.g., Nate) contributed to stopping out of college. Other participants did not seek help from anybody, particularly Mack and Jay, who talked about their help-seeking behavior as though it was inherently part of who they were to not seek help, which follows traditional masculine roles (Good & Wood, 1995).

Implications for Practice

After interviews were completed, I asked participants what advice they had for both professionals who work with youth in foster care and higher education staff and faculty who work with male FYA. Collectively, they offered two main pieces of advice. For those involved in the child welfare system, participants advised creating more legitimate, consistent, and meaningful relationships that support foster youth as they transition out of care and into college. Their advice echoed Kessler et al.'s (2008) findings that improvements in case manager assistance, lower

turnover of foster parents, and service support for youth in foster care were seen to contribute to youth's educational outcomes.

For college staff and faculty, participants collectively said they wished staff were aware of their backgrounds, even though they did not feel comfortable sharing it themselves. Participants felt that if college staff and faculty knew of their backgrounds, it would elicit a better understanding as to why male FYA may struggle building strong relationships, getting involved, or seeking help. Understanding participants' backgrounds would also make clearer how inconsistent relationships in foster care severed trust between male FYA and others, which likely inhibits their ability to establish relationships in and out of college. Participants acknowledged their college institutions had no way of knowing if they had been in foster care. They also shared that most had not built relationships meaningful enough with faculty and staff to share their background, which participants felt would increase empathy of their performance in college. Nate made the suggestion of giving the option for students to indicate their foster care status on a "student profile or admissions, anything really to give that alert to be able to know that this kid needs a little bit extra help than normal."

In addition to what participants recommended, I am going to share what I think are the implications of this study for the practice of student affairs. While it could be said that students should take responsibility for the actions they take, such as not seeking help when they are struggling in class, Tinto's model of persistence (1975) shows that it is important to recognize student's experiences before making assumptions on their behaviors. Tinto's model should remind college faculty and staff that various components lead to male FYA stopping-out of college prematurely and that it is not simply students being lazy, too focused on partying, or unintelligent that may be attributed to students who stop-out. Therefore, college institutions need to step up their efforts in properly accommodating students that they admit to their institution to provide an environment that is supportive of their success. Every person is affected by their own experiences, which influences their decisions, behaviors and actions, including male FYA. Male

FYA should be offered intentional and focused support to provide a more equitable landscape for an already vulnerable and marginalized population. Taken into perspective, society places few restrictions on how women express vulnerable emotions, whereas men are expected to shelter those types of emotions. Male FYA feel vulnerable due to experiences with trauma and various severed relationships, therefore it is an unfair expectation for them to feel obligated to mask their feelings in an effort to maintain their gendered identity. Efforts by faculty and staff to understand male FYA's experiences would go a long way in effectively supporting them in college.

By understanding family dynamics for male FYAs, faculty and staff can be sensitive to their experiences and avoid the everyday questions about family or parent backgrounds that may trigger negative memories for male FYA. This is especially true considering that all participants did not have relationships with their fathers, something they expressed yearning for in their lives. Simple acts can make male FYA feel more welcomed on campus while creating willingness and desire to be more open and transparent. Feeling less stigmatized would allow for relationships that are more meaningful. The resilience male FYA exhibit is something worth recognizing, applauding, and strengthening instead of ignoring. Relatedly, validation is a theory that speaks to how supportive qualities can occur through relationships, as the theory focuses in honoring the pre-college and in-college experiences of non-traditional students to increase their likelihood of persistence in college.

Validation Theory's first element requires that responsibility for initiating contact with students lie with institutional agents (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011) which is consistent with participants' recommendations. Initiating contact with male FYA by staff could result in establishing relationships that are more meaningful. Those established relationships could lead to a clearer understanding of male FYA experiences. This deeper understanding supports Barnett's (2011) findings that validation is most effective when faculty and staff have a deep understanding of the student's cultural and social background.

Establishing meaningful relationships in college were hindered by participants' vulnerability and history of unstable relationships. Participants' difficulty developing relationships in college was reinforced by the *Independent* masculine script (Mahalik, Good, & Englar-Carlson, 2003), which sends the message that men should be capable of managing life's circumstances on their own. Being independent and not relying on others made it difficult for participants to be solely responsible for initiating contact with faculty and staff in college. Consistent with Astin's (1984) Theory of Student Involvement, the sixth element of Validation Theory indicates that validation is most crucial to be administered early on in students' college experiences, particularly the first few weeks. Being involved and building meaningful relationships with staff that validate them early on would likely increase male FYA's willingness to seek help. In addition, element four of Validation Theory indicates that validation is not something that is required to occur in class, it can be done out of class (e.g., by student affairs practitioners) (Rendon & Munoz, 2014). That means student affairs professionals and others have ample opportunity to connect with male FYA outside of class.

The socialized roles of men create an internalized need to be successful, which creates an innate fear of failure. Good and Wood (1995) found that one of the most evident depictions of masculinity emerged when participants asserted that it was outside the traditional male role for men to express a need for help. Participants in this study showed they were willing to seek help up to a certain point as long as they did not feel vulnerable. If faculty and staff are unaware of the social construction of gender roles, they may make the inaccurate assumption that male students only need minimal support or none at all. The assumption that men do not need help was contradictory to participants' reality that when they arrive at college they are often feel unprepared due to their experiences in foster care, and in fact need a lot of academic and emotional support. Unsupportive responses by faculty and staff can create a conditioning in men that teaches them that showing vulnerability and asking for help does not yield positive or helpful results, consistent with Davis' (2002) assertion that educators may misunderstand participant's

lack of expression as a lack of need, often times leading to lower academic support for college men. Whereas participants of this study received support and encouragement at times, their hesitancy to admit a desired need for help, potentially led faculty and staff to assume that they were fine and not in need of outreach and support. Those types of responses limit the opportunity for faculty and staff to establish relationships with male students which leads to overlooked opportunities to validate those students (Gildersleeve, 2011).

The high levels of attrition for this population call for a change in the narrative and associated stigma connected with male FYA and stopping-out. Some students simply are not ready for college, especially considering this populations' overly structured lives before enrolling in college. Male FYA's transition into college is an abrupt change that is likely to be difficult for them so stopping-out does not mean they cannot be successful in college. Additionally, the negative social stigma associated with foster care youth (Collins, 2004) may lead higher education professionals to assume foster youth are not capable of completing a college degree. So, maintaining contact with students who have stopped-out sends the message that institutions still value the relationships with students and are interested in their academic success. If an institution does not have the resources to maintain contact with students, then at minimum, it should consider conducting exit interviews or surveys to convey a message of support and appreciation for their efforts. Exit interviews have the potential to extend goodwill efforts to students in order to avoid unnecessary feelings of being abandoned once more in their lives. Exit interviews also allow for quicker adjustment in policies and practices, if necessary.

Recommendations for Student Affairs Professionals

Based on the findings of this study and implications for practice, the following recommendations are made:

- Provide methods for male FYA to voluntarily share their identity (e.g., admissions application) so faculty and staff can utilize that information in constructive ways (e.g., connecting staff with those students).

- Higher education professionals need to be informed and knowledgeable about the experiences of male FYA to know how to best communicate with and support them. This information could be provided through training workshops and/or through connecting with community agencies that work directly with foster youth.
- Use the elements of Validation Theory to help guide efforts to support and develop programming for male FYAs.
- Understand the impacts of socialized male gender roles and how to react effectively to male students who reach out for help. For example, institutions should consider programming on the deconstruction of masculinities and how societal expectations limit men in reaching their true potential.
- Address the stigma associated with foster youth and highlight male FYA's resilience. This could be addressed through programming that brings in experts knowledgeable in foster care experiences. Or, by creating opportunities for male foster youth to share their stories (e.g., panel discussions).
- Student affairs professionals should consider creating supportive programming specifically designed for FYA that allow for establishment of healthy and supportive relationships (e.g., support groups).

Recommendations for Future Research

This research study examined the intersection of foster care experiences and the male gender role. Future studies should examine how the female gender role intersects with foster care experiences and the affects it has on women's FYA's college-going experiences. Additionally, examining other non-binary gender experiences could be meaningful in understanding a full scope of gender influences on the experiences of FYA college students.

The findings of this study showed how the stigma associated with being in foster care affected the college-going experiences of these men. Stigma based on foster care youth who also

identify as being first-generation students, growing up in poverty, and/or having mental health issues are all areas worthy of future research.

Additionally, this study focused on gender and did not closely examine how other social identities such as race and sexuality affected participants' lived experiences in college. Therefore, additional research focusing on how other social identities and/or multiple identities may affect FYA in college is needed.

Finally, the absence of a father figure in participants' lives seemed to have an especially profound impact on them. While this study did not examine the absent father's role on FYA's lived experiences, it serves as an area that should be considered for further research in relation to FYA's college-going experiences.

Conclusion

This qualitative research study was conducted in order to better understand the experiences of male FYA in college and the factors that led participants to stop-out prematurely. Three themes emerged that provided insight into those experiences, which were *Relationships*, *Vulnerability*, and *Help-Seeking Behavior*. Respective sub-themes provided deeper understanding of the thematic findings. Connections to the findings and past research were made and recommendations for practice of student affairs professionals were offered. Lastly, I provided recommendations for future research.

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Appendix A

IRB Approval Letter



Official Approval Letter for IRB project #15529 - Change Request Form

January 20, 2016

Felipe Longoria
Department of Educational Administration
1932 S 48th St, Lincoln, NE 68506

Corey Rumann
Department of Educational Administration
TEAC 129, UNL, 68588-0360

IRB Number:
Project ID: 15529
Project Title: The college going experiences of male foster youth alumni who have stopped-out of college

Dear Felipe:

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects has completed its review of the Request for Change in Protocol submitted to the IRB.

1. It has been approved for you to contact potential participants directly in cases where your colleagues provide contact information for potential participants that they no longer have contact with. The revised phone script and email have been approved.

We wish to remind you that the principal investigator is responsible for reporting to this Board any of the following events within 48 hours of the event:

- * Any serious event (including on-site and off-site adverse events, injuries, side effects, deaths, or other problems) which in the opinion of the local investigator was unanticipated, involved risk to subjects or others, and was possibly related to the research procedures;
- * Any serious accidental or unintentional change to the IRB-approved protocol that involves risk or has the potential to recur;
- * Any publication in the literature, safety monitoring report, interim result or other finding that indicates an unexpected change to the risk/benefit ratio of the research;
- * Any breach in confidentiality or compromise in data privacy related to the subject or others; or
- * Any complaint of a subject that indicates an unanticipated risk or that cannot be resolved by the research staff.

This letter constitutes official notification of the approval of the protocol change. You are therefore authorized to implement this change accordingly.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office at 402-472-6965.

Sincerely,

Becky R. Freeman, CIP
for the IRB



Appendix B

Advertising Flyer

Research Participants Needed



Are you a male who aged out of foster care and enrolled into college?

Did you stop-out of college?

Would you like to share your story?

We are seeking individuals to participate in a research study that is looking to gain a better understanding of the college going experiences of male foster youth alumni who have stopped-out of college. The results of this study may be used to create more effective intervention strategies to increase retention and completion rates of youth with foster care experience.

Eligibility To Participant:

- **Must be Male**
- **Must be 19 years or older**
- **Must have had exited foster care after the age of 16**
- **Must have enrolled and attended an accredited 2 or 4-year college**
- **Must have stopped-out of college within the last 3 years**

For more information, please contact **Felipe Longoria**

Call: (970) 310-3025 or Email: longoriafd@gmail.com

*The University of Nebraska Institutional Review Board has approved this study.
 Information will be kept confidential!

Appendix C

Informed Consent Form


Participant Informed Consent Form

IRB#

Title: The college going experiences of male foster youth alumni who have stopped-out of college.

Purpose:

This research project will aim to gain a better understanding of your experiences in foster care, college, and what led to your decision to stop-out of college. You are invited to participate in this study because you are an alumni of foster care, male, have enrolled in higher education, and have stopped-out of college. You must be at least 19 years old to participate in this study.

Procedures:

You will be asked to participate in two semi-structured interviews at separate times and at private or public locations that are mutually agreed upon by participant and researcher. The interviews will last approximately one hour each and will be audio recorded.

Benefits:

There are no direct benefits to you as a research participant.

Risks and/or Discomforts:

There are no known risks associated with this research. There may however be discomforts associated with recollection of sensitive or troubling experiences during data collection.

Confidentiality:

Any information obtained during this study which could identify you will be kept strictly confidential. Digital data will be stored in a password-protected computer and physical data will be kept in a lock and key location that is not accessible to others. The investigators will be the only persons to see data during the study and identifying data will be shredded upon completion of research. The information obtained in this study may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings but the data will be reported as collected data.

Opportunity to Ask Questions:

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study. Or you may contact Felipe or Corey, the investigators, at the phone numbers below. Please contact the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review Board at (402) 472-6965 to voice concerns about the research or if you have any questions about your rights as a research participant.

Freedom to Withdraw:

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without harming your relationship with the researchers or the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, or in any other way receive a penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Consent, Right to Receive a Copy:

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that you have decided to participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

*Continued below

I agree to be audio recorded during the interviews for this study with the understanding that I can request that the audio recording be stopped at anytime.

Signature of Participant

Signature of Research Participant

Date

Name and Phone number of investigator(s)

Felipe Longoria, Principal Investigator
Corey Rumann, Ph.D., Secondary Investigator

Cell: (970) 310-3025
Office: (402) 472-8928

Email: longoriafd@gmail.com
Email: crumann2@unl.edu

Appendix D

Interview Protocol

First Interview Questions:

Can you tell me about your foster care experience?

How has being in foster care/state ward affected your decision to go to college?

Why did you decide to go to college?

Tell me about your experiences going to college?

-What did you do in your free time?

Who did you make connections with in college, if any?

How long ago did you stop attending college?

What factors led you to leave college?

Is there anything else you would like to share?

Second Interview Questions:

Was there anything in our last interview that you wanted to tell me more about?

What does being a man mean to you?

How do you think being a male affected you while in care?

How did being male affect your college going experiences?

Tell me your experiences of asking or seeking help from others while in college, or in general.

-Who did you seek help from the most while in college?

What would your advice be for professionals who work with youth in foster care who are interested in applying to college?

What would your advice be for college staff and faculty who interact with foster youth alumni enrolled in college?

Is there anything else you would like to share?