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Perspectives of Foster Parents and Former Foster Children Surrounding Emancipation and College Supports and Barriers

Ashlyn Maize Kincaid

University of Montana, Missoula

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Perspectives of Foster Parents and Former Foster Children Surrounding Emancipation and College Supports and Barriers

Ashlyn Maize Kincaid

Department of Psychology, University of Montana
PERSPECTIVES OF FOSTER PARENTS AND FORMER FOSTER CHILDREN
SURROUNDING EMANCIPATION AND COLLEGE SUPPORTS AND BARRIERS

By
ASHLYN MAIZE KINCAID

M.A., University of Montana, Missoula, MT, 2021
B.A., Montana State University, Bozeman, MT, 2017

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Approved by:

Ashby Kinch,
Graduate School Dean

Jacqueline Brown, Ph.D., Chair
Psychology

Greg Machek, Ph.D.
Psychology

Chris Fiore, Ph.D.
Psychology

Anisa Goforth, Ph.D.
Psychology

Sarah Reese, Ph.D.
Social Work
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Perspectives of Foster Parents and Former Foster Children Surrounding Emancipation and College Supports and Barriers

Chapter I: Introduction

Montana has experienced a significant increase in the utilization of the foster care system during the last decade. There were only 191 children in foster care in Montana in 2010, whereas according to the Child and Family Services Division (CFSD) of the state Department of Health and Human Services, there were 2,600 children in foster care in Montana as of December 2022. Overall, there are just under 400,000 children in foster care in the United States (U.S Department of Health and Human Services, 2022). The nature of foster care involves children being removed from their homes for reasons that are immediate safety risks such as abuse, neglect, substance use exposure, or exposure to violence (Lohr & Johes, 2016). For these reasons, foster children often experience multiple traumatic or adverse childhood events. Fifty one percent of children in the foster care who have completed the adverse childhood experiences questionnaire report four or more adverse experiences, comparatively, only thirteen percent of non-foster children report four or more adverse childhood experiences (Clarkson Freeman, 2014). Research has shown that multiple traumatic events in childhood put individuals at risk for a host of negative outcomes academically, environmentally, physically, and mentally as they age (Agorastos, et al., 2014; Felliti et al., 1998; Moss et al., 2020; Zlotnick et. al., 2012).

When foster youth transition to adulthood, they undergo an emancipation process. Foster youth who are emancipated often report being unprepared and unsupported (Tyell & Yates, 2018). It has been theorized that the problem lies in the foster care system, in which a foster youth’s life is heavily dictated by adults such as caseworks, foster parents, and the court systems, with foster youth having little to no control over their futures. This leaves foster youth
unprepared for future emancipation when all decisions are solely their own responsibility (Morton, 2018). Foster parent perspectives about emancipation are largely unreported, but it is highly possible that this group could be helpful in preparing foster youth for their transition into adulthood. One study that examined foster parent perspectives on the emancipation process found that factors such as practical knowledge, educational attainment, and housing were the biggest concerns for foster parents when thinking about the youth in their care transitioning out of foster care (Lalayants et al., 2018). There appears to be a need for a streamlined approach to helping foster parents support their foster youth through the emancipation process.

The types of services foster parents reported to be beneficial for foster youth have been provided to college students with foster care histories on some college campuses with considerable success (Gillum et al., 2018). Students have benefited from spring break housing, financial aid support, stipends for materials, food baskets, academic and career counseling, and social support groups. However, college barriers for this at-risk group still exist. In 2022, the National Foster Care Institute reported that only half of all foster children graduate from high school, ten percent enroll in college, and approximately three to four percent of foster children complete a four year college degree. Perceived barriers to academic achievement include non-empathetic teachers, uninformed caseworkers, and uninvolved foster parents.

This project integrates and compares former foster youth and foster parent perspectives on emancipation, as well as assesses the current level of support available to aid in this transition. Throughout this process, the goal has been to identify what is missing and what can be done to better assist both foster parents and youth as they prepare for emancipation. Additionally, students with foster care histories currently in college will be asked to share their experiences related to the transition to college from foster care. This information will be helpful, not only to
inform future interventions for college campuses, but also to inform emancipation interventions, making it more feasible to determine factors that made it possible for students to be successful in getting accepted to and enrolling in college.
Chapter II: Literature Review

Long-Term Effects of Maltreatment in Childhood

The World Health Organization defines child maltreatment as abuse or neglect that occurs when an individual is under the age of 18. This includes physical, sexual, and emotional ill-treatment, as well as negligence and exploitation of children that results in actual or potential harm to their health, survival, development, or dignity (World Health Organization, 2020). Experiences of childhood maltreatment are associated with a wide variety of physical and mental health problems, both immediately following the maltreatment and as the individual ages. Individuals who have childhood maltreatment histories experience higher rates of depression, anxiety, substance abuse, suicidality, eating disorders, and personality disorders (Choi et al., 2020; Felitti et al., 1998; Teicher & Samson, 2013). Childhood maltreatment has also been shown to impair cognitive functioning. Studies comparing children with and without a history of maltreatment have found that there are considerable differences in brain anatomy and cognitive functioning (De Bellis et al., 1999; Yingying et al., 2019). The neuroanatomy injuries that occur as a result of childhood maltreatment can have negative effects on the lives of these individuals as they mature to adulthood, as they often have poorer educational outcomes, diminished life skills development, and decreased self-regulation abilities. These deficiencies have been linked to some of the societal dysfunctions that occur today, including homelessness, low socioeconomic status, substance abuse problems, and uncontrolled mental health problems (Delima & Vimpani, 2011; Yingying et al., 2019). Negative physical, psychological, and social outcomes due to childhood maltreatment have been widely examined in the literature. Some researchers have said that childhood trauma is particularly harmful due to the developmental
processes that are occurring and the potential for these processes to be disrupted, which can contribute to lifelong problems (DeBellis et al., 2005; Strathearn et al., 2020).

Foster children have a particularly high probability of reporting childhood maltreatment due to the fact that children are frequently placed in foster care because of instances of abuse or neglect (Morton, 2018). One study examined maltreatment in a cohort of 801 youth who turned 18 while in foster care in 2008 (Havlicek, 2014). Youth were asked to report the types of maltreatment they had experienced, such as sexual abuse, physical abuse, neglect by lack of supervision, neglect by failure to provide, environmental neglect, substance exposure in infancy, emotional abuse, and risk of harm. To analyze the data, researchers used latent class analysis and found that in the largest class (37% of the sample), participants reported experiencing five or more distinct types of maltreatment, with neglect being the most predominate type. It was also found that maltreatment occurred across their lifespan; meaning, that they reported maltreatment events in at least three developmental periods. In the second largest class (26% of the sample), the predominant type of maltreatment was sexual and physical abuse. This class reported three to four types of maltreatment. The two largest classes made up over half of the sample. These findings indicate that over half of the sample of 801 former foster youth experienced at least three types of maltreatment throughout their lives (Havlicek, 2014). It is known that adults with multiple experiences of childhood adversity, including maltreatment, trauma, abuse, and neglect, are more likely to suffer from depression and other mental health problems, physical ailments such as heart disease and cancer, and substance abuse (Choi et al., 2020; Felliti et al., 1998; Moss et al., 2020), than adults with less exposure to adverse childhood events. An individual who experiences childhood maltreatment is at greater risk for detrimental physical, mental, and social
health outcomes. Without proper intervention and support, the risks these individuals face may result in diminished potential in adulthood.

Foster Care Outcomes

In 2019, the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System reported that 423,997 children were in foster care. Of those children, about half had been in foster care for more than one year (U.S Department of Health and Human Services, 2020). Children in foster care are at an elevated risk for many negative outcomes, including maltreatment, abuse, loss of family connections, disrupted education, and multiple moves (Morton, 2018). Foster children suffer from increased rates of social problems, cognitive declines, substance abuse, mental health problems, teen pregnancy, and arrests (Moss et al., 2020; Yingying et al., 2019; Zoltnick et al., 2012). In a large sample of emancipated foster youth, about one third of 18-year-olds reported a pregnancy occurrence, and by the age of 19, about half of all respondents reported a pregnancy occurrence (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010). Additionally, the act of being separated from family is considered a trauma event. The American Academy of Pediatrics has stated that the forcible separations of children from families is a social determinant of mental health disorders (AAP, 2018; AAP, 2017). Research has shown that a child who is separated from their parents has an equally high chance of developing depression compared to a child who has experienced the death of a parent (Agid et al., 2000).

One study compared the prevalence of mental and physical health problems of adults with and without foster care histories (Zoltnick et al., 2012). Researchers analyzed comprehensive health survey interviews of 70456 Californians to find that 3.4 percent reported a history of foster care. In terms of physical health, the percent of respondents with foster care histories reported significantly higher rates of morbidity than the comparison group. Examples of
morbidities included asthma, diabetes, hypertension, seizure disorders, and smoking. Respondents with a history of foster care were also more likely to report having both a physical and mental health problem that interfered with their daily functioning at least one day within the past thirty days. Additionally, respondents with foster care histories were more likely to be receiving social security or disability insurance and were also more likely to report being unable to work due to mental or physical health problems. Lastly, the respondents with foster care histories were far more likely to report lower socioeconomic statuses. The researchers concluded that there may be a lack of critically important physical health, mental health, and social services available during and after foster care, which may be contributing to negative life outcomes for foster children as they become adults (Zoltnick et al., 2012).

A similar study examined life outcomes for individuals with foster care histories while considering their length of stay within the foster care system (Fallesen, 2013). When examining a cohort of individuals in the foster care system from 1982 to 1987, findings indicated that the length of time spent in the foster care system affected their income and labor market participation. More specifically, it was found that income rose, and unemployment decreased for young adults who spent more time in foster care. This study supports the idea that being in foster care sometimes be less aversive than spending time in the parental home from which the children were originally removed (Fallesen, 2013). However, a limitation of this study noted by the researchers is that they did not examine the number of placement changes between foster homes, which could have stratified the duration sample and revealed a different pattern. Previous research has shown that placement changes while in foster care are a significant predictor of psychiatric hospitalization and the use of crisis services (Fawley-King & Snowden, 2012). In other words, the act of changing placements during foster care may be related to the use of
emergency mental health services. This could be in part due to the fact that increased placement changes have also been found to be associated with a decrease in resilience for foster care youth (Shpiegel, 2016).

In another study, the prevalence of youth with foster care histories involved in the criminal justice system was examined (Yang et al., 2017), with data being collected on participants between 12 and 23 years of age. It was found that 53% of a sample consisting of 364 incarcerated individuals had a history of at least one stay in the foster care system. The individuals with foster care history were more likely than those without foster care history to have more criminal offences over their lifespan, engage in more serious crimes, and commit criminal offences at an earlier age. The researchers concluded that current tools for supporting criminal offenders are largely reactive in nature. Since this population has been identified as being over-representative in the justice system, it may be worth exploring alternative tools for prevention (Yang et al., 2017). Youth prevention programs, in combination with supports for resilience and building life skills, are appropriate and needed for youth with foster care histories.

Finally, another study consisting of 19 recently emancipated foster youth between the ages of 18 and 21 were interviewed monthly to examine their lived experiences during their first year out of foster care (Harris & Raskin, 2017). The researchers collected information in the domains of housing, employment, education, and supportive relationships. Approximately 55 to 60 percent of the former foster youth were enrolled in some kind of formal education. However, about 28 percent were never enrolled in an education program and 28 percent dropped out during the course of the study. It was found that employment was the most challenging domain for the foster youth. Approximately two thirds of the youth experienced unemployment at least once during the study and one third experienced unemployment that lasted three months or longer.
About a sixth of the youth were unemployed for an entire year. Problems with the employment search were often reported as focusing on finances and transportation. Several participants reported wanting to apply for a job but not having the money to fix their existing transportation. A lack of public transportation was also noted as a barrier to applying for jobs that were far from home. In terms of housing, it was reported that most of the youth had housing arrangements; however, these arrangements were often fickle. The first living arrangement following emancipation lasted less than three months for almost 40 percent of the youth. The most commonly noted reason for housing instability was conflicts with household members. Supportive relationships were also examined, and it was found that about two thirds of the youth found their relationships with biological siblings to be a source of support. The researchers concluded by emphasizing that emancipated foster youth are a unique population with specific profiles and needs (Harris & Raskin, 2017). Future programs that aim to help foster youth achieve better life outcomes should attempt to be flexible and adaptable to the needs of specific individuals, especially during the first year out of the foster care system, since it is a time of great instability.

**Foster Care Academic Outcomes**

Research has shown that experiencing childhood trauma or maltreatment leads to decreased academic functioning (Daignault & Hebert, 2009). Mathews and colleagues (2009) found that elevated stress levels, increased alertness, and unwanted thoughts made it difficult for students to focus on their studies. Foster children and specifically those in group homes or institutional settings have been found to suffer from decreased executive functioning as well (Wade et al., 2019; Zeytinoglu et al., 2022). Additionally, trauma symptoms have also been shown to affect cognitive abilities, which in turn have led to a decrease in academic achievement.
(Ogata, 2017). Lastly, foster children are at elevated risk for developing mental health disorders, and many mental health disorders have been shown to also decrease academic functioning (Abu Ruz et al., 2018).

Disrupted education is a common problem that foster youth face. When entering foster care, children are often placed with a foster family, which may lead to a change in school placement and disruption in their education. Some have theorized that a high failure rate for former foster children in college could be due to placement changes during secondary school, which may affect graduation credits (Morton, 2018; Ward, 2009). According to the National Foster Care Institute, only about half of foster children graduate from high school, and less than 3% graduate from a 4-year college. Additionally, only about 20% of former foster children enroll in college compared to 60% of youth who have never been in foster care.

In a qualitative study examining the academic achievement of young people in foster care, several perceived supports and barriers to academic achievement were identified (Rios, 2008). School-related barriers included non-empathetic teachers and administrators, as well as a lack of academic rigor. School-related supports included caring teachers, helpful counselors, challenging academic environments, and stability of school placements. Foster care-related barriers included uninformed caseworkers and uninvolved foster parents. Foster care-related supports included education-promoting caseworkers, education-minded foster parents, and stable foster care placements (Rios, 2008).

These research findings are similar to other studies that have identified comparable supports and barriers to successful life outcomes for foster youth (Sciaraffa et al., 2018; Shpiegel, 2016; Turner et al., 2012). In a qualitative study of African American former foster children currently enrolled in college, a critical theme emerged with regard to why participants
chose to enroll in college: “Rising above their conditions to avoid repeating the cycle of family
detriment.” Overall, the study’s results showed that participants’ past unfortunate circumstances
and adverse experiences encouraged them to desire a better life for themselves. Attending college
was seen as a stepping-stone towards achieving success (Lane, 2017).

Once enrolled in college, studies have shown that many positive and negative factors
influence success. Salazar (2013) found that college graduates who had been in foster care were
achieving similar amounts of income and employment rates to college graduates who were not in
foster care. However, a difference appeared in the area of mental health. Former foster children
who graduated from college reported significantly more days of negative mood and unhappiness
than those who were never in foster care. Similarly, Morton (2018) asked former foster students
who were currently enrolled in college about the barriers they faced while pursuing their degrees.
Overall, former foster children enrolled in college reported that mental health, self-regulation,
and lack of a traditional support system were significant challenges.

Furthermore, in a 10-year longitudinal study of 329 college students formerly in foster
care, researchers examined degree completion, as well as specific barriers to degree completion
and success in college (Okpych & Courtney, 2018). Less than half of the participants were likely
to have completed their second year of college. Additionally, the students formerly in foster care
were less than half as likely as the comparison group of non-foster care students to have
completed their degree six years after enrolling. The biggest barrier to degree completion were
life circumstances that occurred during the time that youth were enrolled in college. These were
described as non-academic challenges and related to family dysfunction and finances. The
researchers recommended that colleges add two questions to their application packet, asking
about foster care involvement and the age at which an individual was last in foster care (Okpych
& Courtney, 2018). These questions would help colleges better identify students with foster care histories so that information about supports and resources on campus can be better distributed and targeted to this at-risk group.

Some colleges have put together entire support programs for students coming from foster care. In two studies, eleven different campus support programs designed for students formerly in foster care were evaluated by the students and administrators themselves (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Gillum et al., 2018). The students were asked to report their opinions about each of the support elements provided within the program. The campus support programs were described as attempting to provide direct student support for matters of financial aid, academics, career services, and mental health services. The programs offered food baskets, advising, scholarships, break housing (such as spring break), mentors, housing assistance, stipends for class materials, and laptops for the students involved. Results showed that well over half of the students had strong positive ratings about the financial aid assistance and rated it as very important to their success (Dworsky & Perez, 2010).

One program offered an orientation meeting about financial aid and lessons on how to resolve financial issues, which 70 percent of students rated positively (Gillum et al., 2018). Additionally, 90 percent of students who utilized break housing, food baskets, class material stipends, and laptops rated these supports as being either “very helpful” or “extremely helpful” in overcoming financial struggles (Gillum et al., 2018). For academic and career service supports, around 80 percent of students had strongly positive ratings about their programs. Lastly, of the students who utilized the counseling services, over half reported that they moderately or strongly agree that it was helpful during their transition to college. Students also offered areas of improvement for the program. The most resounding answer was surrounding social support and
ideas of having more social activities and events for students in the program to connect with one another (Gillum et al., 2018).

Similarly, one study found that when students with foster care histories were asked about the biggest challenges they have faced in college, 60 percent of participants reported challenges related to social difficulty (Kincaid, 2021). Participants indicated that “fitting-in,” “getting to know people,” and “feeling alienated” were major challenges they faced in college. Participants also reported on the factors that contributed to their success in life and college. Forty percent of the participants indicated that family support, personal resilience, and determination were major contributors to their success. When asked what supports would have been useful to them that were not available, one participant stated that they wish there were more scholarships for people with no family support, as well as student support groups that could facilitate making connections with others who come from foster care (Kincaid, 2021). The study concluded by emphasizing the importance of having emotional and academic supports available on college campuses specifically designed to benefit at-risk students, such as those with foster care and childhood trauma or maltreatment histories. Overall, college students with foster care histories are at risk of being unsuccessful in college due to many factors. Campus supports and specific programs, such as the ones discussed above, seem to be a positive asset for college students with foster care histories to assist in increasing their academic achievement.

**Foster Care and Resilience**

Resilience is commonly defined as “the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten system function, viability, or development” (Masten, 2014). Resilience is made up of individual qualities a person possesses, as well as the actions they take in the process of becoming resilient. Resilience has many facets, including protective
and risk factors, adaptive and maladaptive coping, and the ways in which these factors relate to each other to achieve positive or negative outcomes (Olsson et al., 2003). In other words, the ways in which an individual responds to an adverse event can be adaptive or maladaptive.

Coping has been said to be adaptive when an individual’s actions reduce distress and promote wellbeing (Zeidner & Saklofske, 1996). Maladaptive coping can be thought of as the opposite of adaptive coping, where an individual fails to reduce their distress or take steps toward wellbeing.

Protective factors increase the chance that an individual will behave in an adaptive way, whereas risk factors increase the chance that an individual’s behavior will be maladaptive (Meng et al., 2018). Together, adaptive coping and protective factors increase an individual’s resilience and chances of positive life outcomes, whereas maladaptive coping and risk factors can decrease an individual’s resilience and increase the potential for negative life outcomes. Adverse or traumatic events in childhood can result in significant challenges, but individuals can also survive and become more resilient as a result of their trauma (Harvey et al., 2007). Some individuals are more capable of recovering from trauma or adversity due to their resilience. Resilience is often increased due to certain protective factors such as social support, family cohesion, adaptive coping, and emotional regulation. These protective factors can aid in decreasing the negative effects of trauma exposure (Meng et al., 2018).

Leve and colleagues (2012) identified placement changes as a specific risk factor for foster children. Placement changes often happen when foster families are not a good fit for the personality of their foster children or when they are unable to meet their foster child’s specific health or behavioral needs. Many studies have shown that placement changes usually have a negative effect on foster children’s emotional health and behavior (Rubin et al., 2007). Additionally, a change in placement for a foster child often means a change in school, which can
disrupt their learning, academic, progress, and social connections (Morton, 2018). To address the risk factor of placement changes for foster children, the researchers suggest interventions that target behavior problems in children. With fewer demanding behavioral problems, there is a decreased risk of placement changes, since the foster family will likely struggle less to support the child. The researchers also suggest that interventions that target foster family attachment and boost feelings of belongingness for the foster child be implemented to facilitate building resilience.

In another study, researchers examined the risk and protective qualities of the factor of ‘self-reliance’ for a group of former foster children (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). The participants were 44 young adults who were about to enter the process of emancipation from foster care or had already been emancipated. The participants were interviewed at an average age of 22 years old. The researchers extracted themes from the recorded interviews with participants surrounding the topics of independence and dependence. The researchers noticed that many of the participants reported competing tensions between independence and dependence when speaking about their experiences in the foster care system and their emancipation from it. Participants reported factors pertaining to their over-dependence on the foster care system and having no control over the distress in their lives. However, participants also reported feeling like they were not supported enough while in the system, as well as being forced to grow up too fast and be independent before they were ready. Additionally, the participant interviews revealed themes related to premature adult status and independence, learning to take care of oneself throughout life, and making meaning of loss and hardship. Overall, the researchers indicated that the themes extrapolated throughout the interviews focus on self-reliance. They described self-reliance as being both a protective and risk factor for this population. Self-reliance was seen as being
protective in that these individuals have developed a mindset where they are determined to provide for and look after themselves, which protects them from many negative life outcomes. On the other hand, self-reliance was described as being a risk factor because many participants spoke about their refusal to accept support or help from others, as well as their reluctance to build connections or supportive relationships (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Past research has shown that strong and supportive relationships are a protective factor against negative outcomes (Meng et al., 2018), so by being extremely self-reliant, these individuals are missing out on this important opportunity that contributes to resilience.

Another study investigated the risk and protective factors that are associated with youth in foster care enrolled in college. The study found that encouragement from school personnel, the amount of help foster youth received preparing for college, participation in extended foster care, high reading ability, and high school grades were positively associated with college enrollment. Identified risk factors included repeating a grade, special education placements, and parent death (Okpych & Courtney, 2017). In a similar study, through the lens of the ecological systems model, 23 former foster youth were interviewed with the goal of understanding the factors that foster youth believe contributed to or hindered their choices to enroll in college and navigate the college environment (Avant et al., 2021). Findings indicated that the former foster youth credited much of their decision to prepare for and attend college to their caregivers, high school counselors, social workers, and child welfare staff. They also reported that while in college, they relied on campus resources such as extracurricular activities and supportive faculty to navigate the college environment. Challenges to college success included lingering family problems, lack of traditional family support, and racial stereotyping on campus. To manage the stress brought on by the challenges, the former foster children reported seeking campus mental health services and
getting more involved in on-campus activities, thereby increasing social support (Avant et al., 2021). Overall, the likelihood of foster youth enrolling in college, and succeeding once there, increases when youth have supportive relationships with adults, and more specifically, with adults who are able to provide relevant information and resources pertaining to enrolling in and being successful at college. Foster children who graduate from high school and enroll in college can be considered to be resilient because they were able to overcome high amounts of adversity and negative risk factors to achieve something society deems to be a success (college enrollment).

**Emancipation**

In 2019, 20,445 children were emancipated from foster care, meaning that they reached the legal age of majority and were exited from the foster care system. When emancipated from foster care, a former foster child is cut off from the financial support the state previously provided their family and is expected to be a fully functional adult in society by paying their own bills and finding housing (Courtney & the Society for Research in Child Development, 2009). Morton (2018) has suggested that foster youth reaching the age of emancipation are not adequately prepared to live independently, since the foster care world is heavily dominated and structured by adults such as caseworkers, foster parents, and judges. This does not provide the foster youth with opportunities to make independent decisions and can lead to multiple risks once they are emancipated. A related issue to the over structuring of foster care, is the high turnover rates of social workers, which directly impacts relationship building with foster children, as well as burnout for the social workers who stay in the field. One study found that an on-going retention problem within the child welfare field is directly related to poor service
quality (Cho & Song, 2017). Both over-structuring and high turnover rates affect the quality of foster care and the system’s ability to properly prepare foster children for emancipation.

One study used the Adverse Childhood Experiences questionnaire with emancipated foster youth to determine patterns of adversity that yield different life outcomes (Rebbe et al., 2017). Emancipated foster youth who had experienced multiple adverse events and traumas were significantly more at risk for negative outcomes such as substance abuse, unemployment, and homelessness as adults. Katz and Courtney (2015) found that in a sample of over 700 emancipated foster youth, 35.5% reported an unmet need at that age of 23, with the largest reported unmet need being in the area of finances. Without sufficient finances to support oneself, it makes sense that homelessness would be an issue for emancipated foster youth. Dworsky and colleagues (2013) examined data from a 3-year longitudinal evaluation of adult functioning of former foster youth, with the goal of estimating the percentage of youth who become homeless when transitioning out of foster care and into adulthood. The results showed that by the age of 26, between 31% and 46% of participants had been homeless one or more times. The researchers identified having a mental health disorder as being a risk factor for becoming homeless. Because current and previous foster youth have an elevated risk of developing mental health issues, their chances of experiencing homelessness after emancipation from foster care also increases.

Other research has examined similar problems and drawn conclusions about ways to mitigate homelessness for this population. Curry and Abrams (2014) conducted a literature review focusing on housing issues, social support, and individuals aging out of foster care. They concluded that the high prevalence and risk of homelessness for emancipated foster youth may be due to a tension that has been frequently reported by the emancipated youth between the factors of self-sufficiency and fear of dependence. Many emancipated foster youth may have
survived through extreme hardship, and develop deep pride in their self-sufficiency skills and vow to rely only on themselves. This may prevent these individuals from seeking necessary support systems or accepting resources that may be desperately needed, such as housing assistance or financial aid.

This effect was also highlighted by Samuel and Pryce (2008), with participants approaching the age of emancipation having reported feeling a desire to be more independent because their lives had been controlled by the foster care system, while also reporting that they were not getting the necessary help to be prepared for their transition to adulthood. Foster care agency staff, foster parents, and emancipation and transitional support program developers should be knowledgeable about the risk of homelessness for emancipated foster youth and make sure a plan is in place for secure housing. Additionally, individuals who serve foster youth of the transitional age or those who are emancipated should attempt to redirect the sentiment that self-sufficiency is the only goal of emancipation. A goal of interdependence should also be included, because establishing a strong support system may be equally important to achieving success in adulthood for this population.

In a qualitative study consisting of 28 Hispanic and African American former foster care youth, researchers attempted to further highlight their participants’ individual stories pertaining to emancipation and their quests toward self-sufficiency (Iglehart, 2002). The participants were interviewed, and their interviews were transcribed to uncover themes across participant responses to interview topics. For the theme of social support, all participants named at least one individual in their lives they considered to be part of their support system. However, almost all participants reported some sort of family conflict that was on-going and distressing. With respect to living arrangements, it was found that almost half the participants lived with a relative
immediately after emancipation. However, later, at the time of the interviews, almost half were living in transitional housing programs. Participants reported learning about the transitional housing programs through supportive social workers, or homeless shelter staff members. When examining the topic “thoughts of the past and of the future,” the theme of “regrets, fears, and lessons” was uncovered. Participants expressed regrets about not starting college immediately after high school, fear around their future financial stability, and lessons learned in the areas of being able to accept help from others when needed. Researchers concluded by stating that housing instability, school uncertainty, and family dysfunction seem to be relevant topics to the emancipated foster youth population (Iglehart, 2002). Future emancipation intervention programs could minimize the uncertainty and stress for this at-risk population by helping youth about to be emancipated make plans for stable housing and education, as well as ensure that they are sufficiently supported by at least one individual in their lives.

With all the challenges emancipated foster youth face, these youth also need to decide whether to continue their education. In one study, college students who were previously emancipated from foster care were interviewed (Batsche et al., 2014). The researchers designed their study around concepts of the KnowHow2Go campaign, developed by the Lumina foundation (2007). KnowHow2Go outlines four steps that are helpful for supporting first generation college students. Seeing the similarities between emancipated foster youth wanting to attend college and first-generation college students, the researchers investigated the applicability of the KnowHow2Go campaign for emancipated foster youth. This campaign consisted of four steps: 1) Find someone to help you gather information about college. This step is described as being particularly important, because first generation students typically will not have a close family member with knowledge about the process of applying to or attending college. In the
same way that first generation students will need to find someone to help, students who were emancipated from foster care will likely also need to obtain this type of assistance. 2) Pushing yourself to take difficult classes and perform well on entrance exams. 3) Finding a good fit in terms of what college an individual wants to attend. 4) Finding finances by applying for scholarships and financial aid. One of the aims of this study was to find out if the KnowHow2Go campaign was helpful for youth who had been emancipated and how it could be modified to better suit this population. The participants included 27 formerly emancipated individuals currently attending college. Results showed that 24 out of the 27 participants found that the first step, finding someone to help, was important to their success in secondary education. Participants identified supportive people who helped them as teachers, high school counselors, adult mentors, and independent living specialists. One participant identified a supportive foster parent who helped them gather information about college. The second step, pushing yourself to take hard classes and entrance exams, was less highly endorsed. Only 6 out of the 27 participants stated that they had knowledge about what high school classes were important to take for college preparation. The participants who did not endorse this step explained that factors such as lack of understanding about the connections between taking advanced high school courses and being prepared for college, negative stereotypes about foster youth and college potential, and lack of understanding about high school grades affecting college acceptance stopped them from relating to and endorsing this step of the process. With respect to the third step, finding the right fit, almost all of the participants said that they had found education programs that were a good fit for them. Participants reported considering the same factors that most students use to choose a school, such as location, cost, and size of the school. However, they also reported considering a few factors that not all students consider when determining whether a school is the right fit. The
participants reported considering whether a school was accredited and a public institution (due being eligible for a tuition exemption), if the school had sufficient public transportation, and whether they had a support system to rely on in their area. For the fourth step, financial aid and scholarships, 16 out of the 27 participants reported paying for college with tuition exemptions, state stipends, Pell grants, jobs, and other scholarships. Financial support for college was regarded as being very important by 26 of the 27 respondents (Batsch et al., 2014). Taken together, these results suggest that emancipated foster youth who are currently in college relate to and regard many of steps outlined in the KnowHow2Go campaign as being helpful and important. This suggests that the supports that are helpful for first-generation college students can also be applied to emancipated foster students with a few modifications. It would likely be helpful to have someone to help with implementing the most highly endorsed steps of the campaign in this study on college campuses. Furthermore, it would be important for an individual that was chosen to help to know the specific challenges that foster youth face. This person would ideally understand the financial options available to youth in foster care, specifically, tuition exemptions and which schools provide them, and resource availability such as public transportation. Additionally, the individual who is sharing information with foster youth should explain the connections between getting accepted into college and having a high-grade point average in high school, as well as being prepared for standardized tests used for college admissions.

**Foster Youth and Foster Parent Perceptions of Emancipation**

Along with considering ways to support college students with a history of foster care on campus, support for foster youth as they approach emancipation should also be investigated. In a study examining foster youth’s perceptions and experiences during their transition to adulthood,
researchers sampled 170 emancipated youth (Tyell & Yates 2018). Participants were interviewed three times over the course of three years, beginning after they were emancipated from foster care. The themes that emerged from these interviews pertaining to the transition process included many reflections about the difficulties they endured. Participants shared that they felt unprepared for the transition into adulthood and also that adulthood was not what they had expected. One participant said, “there’s a lot of things I never learned how to do, like taxes and stuff, like I don’t even know how to do that, but they’re not taking the time to teach me, so it’s like I don’t know how else to find out until I get in trouble for something… So, I guess it’s been hard transitioning into things that I have no idea how to do. Like grocery shopping, I never done that – in group homes you don’t do that – in foster homes I never did that.” More than half of the participants also discussed the theme of material needs and resources. The participants’ main concerns involved finding housing, not having a stable support system, financial problems, food security, and health care. Another theme that was addressed was relationship concerns, with nearly half of the participants discussing topics such wanting to maintain relationships with their biological and foster families. The majority of the topics discussed under the theme of relationship concerns reflected a sense of disappointment and distress. Lastly, under the theme of affective experiences, about a third of the participants expressed socioemotional concerns, such as anxiety. The researchers emphasized how participants expressed an overwhelming sense of difficulty and stress surrounding the transition process. Future research and interventions concerning transitional age foster youth should consider the stress and pressure of this already developmentally difficult time when identifying the most effective supports and resources.

In a similar study, Lalayants and colleagues (2016) interviewed former and current transition age foster youth (ages 18 -24) and their foster parents in New York City to examine
perceptions of self-sufficiency between both groups. Questions such as “When you think about leaving foster care and entering adulthood, what are the most important things that you need or need to learn?” were asked of foster youth. Foster parents were asked similar questions, such as “When you think about youth in your care exiting foster care, what are the most important things that they need?” Both groups were also asked about their goals or expectations for future education and employment. After the focus groups were conducted, core concepts from both foster youth and parents were analyzed for similarities and differences. This study found that transition age foster youth’s perceptions of emancipation were more oriented towards the future, whereas foster parent perceptions emphasized more immediate needs for action and support. However, similarities were also found, with both groups describing self-sufficiency as having adequate education, achieving financial security, possessing practical knowledge, and obtaining housing. Both foster youth and parents also emphasized the usefulness of learning money management skills. Foster parents in particular stressed the importance and desire for financial literacy skill training and assistance in finding a job. Foster youth described supports that had helped them achieve financial security, including foster care agencies who assisted with job hunting, as well as high school courses, such as marketing and personal finance, that aided in building financial literacy skills. In terms of education, all foster parents insisted on the need for continuing education following the transition out of foster care. Many foster youth cited an educational coordinator at their foster agencies who was able to help them choose schools, apply to colleges, and checked in with them once they were in college to provide additional support. When it came to practical knowledge, foster parents reported that life skills such as organization, cooking, and cleaning were important transitional skills for their foster youth. Interestingly, foster youth did not emphasize practical knowledge as being important for self-sufficiency.
Lastly, housing support was mentioned by both foster youth and parents. Foster parents reported concerns about a lack of help in getting foster youth set up with secure housing before they are emancipated. Foster youth expressed concerns surrounding the limited amount of housing options and the slow and complicated process of obtaining housing. This research suggests that there are many factors to consider when it comes to emancipation from foster care, with foster parents and youth having similar concerns, but sometimes different perspectives. To understand both perspectives, similar to Lalayants and colleagues (2016), it is imperative that future research continue to examine both the perspectives of foster children and parents. Without obtaining information from foster youth experiencing emancipation firsthand and foster parents helping them through the process, interventions that ensure a more effective emancipation process cannot be developed.

**Rationale for the Current Study**

The current study had two aims. The first aim was to explore and compare the perspectives of former foster youth and foster parents surrounding the emancipation process. The current study aimed to uncover what information is being shared with foster children when approaching the age of emancipation about life choices such as college, careers, housing, finances, and social support, as well as who is sharing this information and how accurate and helpful it is for the foster youth. Foster parents were asked questions pertaining to their level of training, knowledge of available resources, and experiences with transitioning foster children out of foster care. Previous research has revealed that both transitional age foster youth and foster parents have ideas and opinions about the usefulness of certain knowledge, supports, and skill acquisition as youth approach emancipation (Lalayants et al., 2016). On the other hand, information regarding career choices and college, who is sharing information with foster youth
about planning for the future, as well as how helpful it is, and how these youth are being prepared for emancipation and supported in life after foster care is less readily available.

The second aim was to explore the college experience from the perspective of former foster youth currently enrolled. In 2023, the National Foster Care Institute reported that only three to four percent of former foster youth obtain a four-year college degree. Being that former foster youth in the current study are enrolled in college, their experiences are fairly unique and important to consider. Foster youth currently attending college were asked questions pertaining to their experiences in college, as well as the factors that played a role in getting them to college. Additionally, college students with foster care histories were also asked to share their perspectives regarding what supports have been useful and what is missing on campus. These questions aimed to identify specific themes across participant responses to inform which individuals are sharing information about life after foster care, what information was the most helpful, as well as identifying areas of need for future intervention.

These questions were explored with a sample of former foster children currently attending college, as well as foster parents in the mountain west region of the United States. The current study utilized a qualitative approach, conducting interviews with both groups. Former foster youth and foster parent perspectives surrounding the emancipation process and the college experience were explored. The goal was to gain information through rich descriptions of experiences that will help foster youth succeed in college and life after foster care.
Positionality Statement

In the interest of transparency, it is important to reveal relevant researcher identities and positions regarding the topic of the research. For this reason, the positionality statements of both researchers have been included below.

I, the principal investigator, am a fifth-year school psychology doctoral student at the University of Montana. I identify as White, cisgender female. My parents have been foster parents for ten years, beginning when I was in high school. My family has fostered many children on both a short and long-term basis, with some children staying with us for up to two years. Throughout these experiences, I learned about the foster care system and witnessed the challenges that both foster parents and foster children face. I self-identify as a close outsider to the foster care system, being that I was neither a foster parent nor foster child but have been indirectly involved for quite a long time.

The second coder and research assistant is a third-year student at The University of Montana and is studying psychology and Spanish. She identifies as a White, cisgender female. She has never been involved with or affected by the foster care system in any way, as her parents have never fostered a child and she has never met anyone who grew up in the system. Throughout this coding experience, she was able to learn more about the transition process and the adversity that foster children are confronted with both in and out of the foster care system.
Chapter III: Method

The goal of this study was to collect information that could potentially help foster youth succeed as they transition out of foster care. By hearing directly from both former foster youth now in college and foster parents of transitional age foster youth, we may be better able to understand their perspectives regarding the emancipation process and college experience. The current study attempted to identify what information was shared and what supports were offered to foster children approaching the age of emancipation, as well as the effectiveness and usefulness of these supports. Additionally, information was gathered regarding the perspectives of former foster children currently enrolled in college pertaining to their transition to college and they evaluated the current level of effectiveness for supports and resources available or missing from campus. To some extent, previous research has examined both emancipation and college experiences with current and former foster youth but has not specifically discussed the emancipation process with former foster youth who are now attending college. This is important because according to the National Foster Care Institute in 2023, children who have been in foster care are less likely to enroll in college and more likely to drop out than their peers who have not been in foster care. By talking with former foster youth who have made it to college about their experiences, we become closer to answering how they got to college and what factors helped facilitate their success. Additionally, supports that are already working during the emancipation process and on campus can be identified more clearly, built upon, and strengthened for future generations of foster youth. The information gleaned from this resilient group could inform future intervention in both the emancipation process and how former foster youth are supported on college campuses. Foster parents were also interviewed for the current study. Foster parents were asked to share their experiences fostering transitional age (16-21 years old) youth. By
including foster parent experiences and perspectives, we are able to draw connections between both groups and gather a more well-rounded view of the emancipation process from those who have been immersed in it.

**Participants and Procedure**

**Former Foster Children**

Ten former foster children participated (N = 10) in the current study. Participants identified as females (100%) between the ages of 18 and 48. Seven participants (70%) were under the age of 25 and three (30%) were between 25 and 48. Participants identified their race/ethnicity as White (80%), Native American (10%), and White and Native American (10%). Participants indicated their year in school as freshman (40%), junior (20%), senior (10%) and graduate student (30%). The demographic survey did not offer an option for participants to choose ‘graduate student’. The three graduate student participants clarified their correct year in school during their interviews. The average number of placements changes experienced was ten, with a range from one to forty-three. They reported entering foster care between birth to seventeen years old and exiting between the ages of ten and nineteen.

Former foster children currently enrolled in a college or university in the mountain west region of the United States were recruited to participate in this study through the undergraduate research sign-up system (SONA), as well as through emails delivered to students through their academic departments. Participants were asked to partake in semi-structured interviews with the researcher with the monetary incentive of a 25-dollar gift card. Some participants were also given the incentive of extra credit points toward their classes when they signed up for the SONA system. Inclusion criteria included that participants be 18 years or older, formerly in foster care,
and current college or university students. Participants were primarily from Montana colleges and universities.

**Foster Parents**

Six foster parents participated (N = 6) in the current study. Participants identified as female (83%) and male (17%) between the ages of 30 and 49. Participants identified their race/ethnicity as White (100%). They reported the number of years they had been foster parents as being between one and fourteen, with a range of one foster child to over 100 foster children in their homes over that time. Participants estimated the length of stay for foster children to be between five months and two years. All participants reported fostering at least one transitional age foster child during the last two years. Participants were from Montana (16%) and North Dakota (83%).

Foster parents from across the mountain west region of the United States were initially recruited to participate in this study through their current foster care agencies. A recruitment email was sent to the foster agencies that contained the primary investigator’s contact information and the link to the Qualtrics survey where potential participants could enter their email addresses. After email addresses were obtained, the primary investigator followed up to schedule the Zoom interview. All participants were offered a monetary incentive of 25 dollars on an electronic gift card. Inclusion criteria included that participants be 18 years or older and are currently, or have in the last two years, fostered children of transitional age (16-21).

**Qualitative Methodology**

The current study is phenomenological in nature in that rich descriptions of personal experiences and perspectives were sought. The phenomenological approach to qualitative
research focuses on individual participants’ lived experiences (Gilgun, 2014). The phenomenological approach allows researchers to ask questions like ‘what was this experience like?’ and ‘what did it mean to you?’ (Rodriguez & Smith, 2018). In the current study, qualitative data was collected through individual interviews with each participant. As is the goal of phenomenological qualitative studies, the information gained from the participant interviews is meant to contribute to a more well-developed understanding of the foster parent and foster youth experience (Teherani et al., 2015).

**Interviews**

Semi-structure interviews were utilized in the current study to explore the research aims previously stated. Interviews are considered to be one of the primary ways of obtaining data in qualitative research (Polkinghorne, 2005). In phenomenological research, interviews questions are designed to be broad and open-ended so as to not hinder the respondent’s ability to share their experiences in their entirety (Giorgi, 1997). When the interviewer asks broad questions about the research areas, it serves as the basis for more in-depth follow-up questioning (Green, 1999). This approach allows for rich descriptions of perspectives and experiences to be shared, recorded, and examined for themes. To gather in-depth information from former foster children and foster parents, semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with each participant. Semi-structured interviews often consist of a conversation between the researcher and the participant that is guided by a flexible interview protocol, as well as follow-up questions, to further explore participant answers (Dejonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). All interviews were conducted virtually using Zoom. All participants signed an informed consent which included a statement about recording the interview. Participants were also asked to provide their verbal consent before the principal investigator began recording the interview. An outline was utilized
(see Appendix B and Appendix C) to guide each interview and ensure that all topics were covered to the extent that they were relevant. The former foster youth interviews focused on gaining information about a participant’s experience during their emancipation from foster care, any preparation before the transition, supports that were helpful, and challenges that arose. Additional questions were asked about their experiences transitioning to college and challenges that occurred. The foster parent interviews were centered around each foster parent’s experience fostering transitional age children in their home. Foster parents were asked to reflect upon how they view their role in the emancipation process, challenges that have occurred, and supports and resources that have been utilized or desired.

**Data Analysis**

**Demographic Information**

Demographic information (see Appendix A) obtained from both former foster children and foster parents was collected using the online software program, Qualtrics, then analyzed using the statistical software program SPSS, version 29. Demographic questions included the participant’s age, race, gender, and also required them to indicate if they were a former foster child or a foster parent. Depending upon their answer, participants were directed to specific survey questions related to either foster children or foster parents. Former foster children were asked to report their current year in school, how many placement changes they experienced while in the foster care system, and what age they were when they entered and exited foster care. Foster parents were asked to report the number of years they had been foster parents, an estimate of the number of children they had fostered, and an estimate of the average length of stay for those children in their home.
**Qualitative Analysis**

Recorded interviews were transcribed independently by principal investigator. At this point, all participant identifying information was removed. The interview transcripts were then coded using NVivo 12 Qualitative Analytic Software (NVivo Pro 12; 2021). NVivo is a software program that organizes qualitative data in such a way that themes and patterns across participant response can be identified. The principal investigator coded all interview transcriptions and written responses. The principal investigator’s academic advisor was consulted to determine an appropriate procedure for coding throughout the process. To follow the standard qualitative data coding practice, a research assistant coded one fourth of the total data (Kahn, 1999). The principal investigator and research assistant relied on a codebook (see Appendix D) created for the current study to assist in the coding process. After the research assistant coded one fourth of the data, it was sent to the principal investigator for comparison. Four discrepancies were found that were structural in nature. For example, the research assistant coded a large segment of an interview under social and emotional difficulty, whereas the principal investigator broke the same large segment up into smaller more specific codes. All discrepancies were discussed and a consensus was reached.

Content analysis methodology was utilized to guide the coding process. Content analysis methodology is a critical aid in qualitative research that helps identify relevant themes. Content analysis involves pulling out and refining important concepts within the data. Identifying themes across the data assists in the process of uncovering patterns in the participants’ responses while leaving out non-essential information (Patton, 2015). Content analysis is effective for making sense of the overall volume of the qualitative material by reducing the interviews to their meaningful parts and grouping them similarly.
In accordance with content analysis methodology, open, axial, and selective coding processes were also utilized. Open, axial, and selective coding processes help uncover the themes and patterns within the data (Patton, 2015). During open coding, initial codes were structural in nature and followed the semi-structured interview outline. These codes served as a framework, organizing the information into broad categories that aligned with the interview questions. The following codes were driven by the data in that the interview transcriptions were read several times and from there relevant themes were coded. In the final step, selective coding, the core meanings that existed within the theme were identified and connected to each other. The number of times a theme was referenced is reported as a number and the number of participants who discussed the concept is reported as a percentage. By reporting the results in this way, readers are able to see how many times certain topics were discussed and how many participants endorsed each theme.

Finally, in an attempt to establish trustworthiness (e.g., Nowell et al., 2017) and limit bias in the current study, a few steps were taken. First, bracketing was employed by both the principal investigator and the research assistant. Bracketing involves the use of a personal journal to record opinions, thoughts, and feelings throughout the data analysis process in an effort to be as aware as possible of the personal biases held and separate them from the project. Next, as previously mentioned, the research assistant reviewed and coded one fourth of the total data. The use of multiple coders helps decrease subjectivity that exists when one person codes all of the data. When multiple coders are involved, we are better able to achieve a level of inter-subjectivity by having more eyes on the data and more perspectives to interpret it. Lastly, a reflexivity statement was created to allow readers to understand the identities, backgrounds, and personal interests in the current study.
Chapter IV: Results

The primary aims of this research study were to gather information about the transition process from foster care to adulthood and from foster care to college life. These results give a glimpse into the challenges faced and potential areas that can be strengthened. The following section reveals the themes that were uncovered.

Transition from Foster Care to Adulthood

Former foster children were asked to talk about their experiences during their transition out of foster care. More specifically, they were asked to describe the challenges and areas of success they encountered during their transition out of foster care and into adulthood following their emancipation. Foster parents were also asked to reflect upon their experiences with transitional age foster children. Overall, the former foster children were easily able to report many challenges and struggles they faced during this time but had more difficulty identifying areas of success. The foster parents were able to discuss both the specific conversations and teaching techniques they have used to help prepare foster youth for emancipation and the gaps they were not able to address on their own. Four themes (Future Planning and Guidance, Social Support and Supportive Adults, Life Skills, and Supports and Resources Missing and Utilized) emerged from the interviews of former foster children and foster parents regarding their experiences with the emancipation process. These themes are detailed below.

Future Planning and Guidance

Foster Youth. (Referenced 17 times by 60% of former foster youth). Experiences and opinions falling under the theme of Future Planning and Guidance were mentioned by many foster youth. Former foster youth endorsed being dissatisfied with the future planning and
guidance they receive during their transition out of foster care and into adulthood. One former foster youth said:

*I really didn’t have any idea what the heck I was doing. My senior year I was in two different foster homes so that was really confusing. No one really helped me decide what I was going to do after I graduated. I also remember my social worker coming into the home and just giving me these workbooks. [The workbooks said things like] here is how you look for an apartment, how to get a job, how to go for an interview, how to get your driver’s license, and I was like ok, so these books have all the answers? And she was like yeah. But I was kind of being sarcastic because I was really freaking out.*

Although this former foster youth received some sort of manual or workbook, despite it being unhelpful, most others reported receiving nothing. One said, “Literally the second I turned 18, like midnight the second the date said my birthday date, they kicked me out. I was moved out by two-o-clock in the morning. They didn’t offer me anymore support or resources after that either. I never heard from any social workers again.” Although that is the most extreme example, others also felt that they were generally on their own for future planning. For example, another former foster youth said, “The counselors and case manager didn’t really push me to go to school, they were just kind of there. They did not really talk to me about what I was doing after I aged out. They were very focused on what I was doing now. For older foster youth, I feel like future planning is really important. A lot of stuff I have had to stress about on my own and figure out on my own.” Similar to what was found when discussing finances, former foster youth felt that they were completely on their own when figuring out how to navigate the adult world and their futures.
Foster youth also talked about their general lack of preparation to be financially independent. One former foster youth talked about her lack of understanding about the cost of living independently because she had grown up in a very structured group home setting: “No one explained that the money runs out. In the group home I could say, hey I need new clothes and they would say ok here is new clothes, but they didn’t explain that once you are an adult, new clothes don’t just appear.” Two participants said something similar when talking about ending up homeless or in a non-preferred living arrangement, because they were not financially independent at the age of 18. One said, “I got kicked out of my last foster home at 18 when I aged out. So, I ended up living with my boyfriend at that time for about 2 years. I basically felt really stuck with him for a long time because I wasn’t financially ready to be living on my own.” Another said, “I ended up homeless and I had to drop out of high school because I needed to work and have a job.” These quotes emphasize the setbacks that emancipated foster youth face when they are abruptly thrown into the adult world with no support and are expected to be completely self-sufficient. The participant who dropped out of high school had not yet finished her senior year at the time of her 18th birthday but found it impossible to attend high school while working to support herself, which forced her to make the decision to drop out.

Lastly, former foster youth talked about being unprepared for early parenthood after exiting foster care. One participant explained that having “a bunch of kids” right after her emancipation made financial stability much harder to achieve. Another participant explained a rather unique situation in which she now takes care of her younger sibling, essentially assuming the parent role. She said:

[My younger sibling] is still legally under the care of my relative, but she is living here with me [at college] because my relative is so busy with her job and has her own kids to
take care of. My sibling also has some behavioral issues, so I figured since I have room for her here, I thought it would be good for her to come here. She goes to [a local high school] and the goal is to get her on the right track to learn and take care of herself because she never really had great structure. I actually just had to call her school because she is failing one of her classes.

The challenges of supporting oneself can be overwhelming, but caring for one’s children or relatives as a young adult coming out of foster care adds a new level of difficulty.

**Foster Parents. (Referenced 25 times by 100% of foster parents).** Experiences falling under the theme of Future Planning and Guidance were mentioned by all foster parents. Many expressed that they have talked to their transitional age foster youth about pursuing higher education and tend to push this option above others. In contrast, some foster parents discussed their tendency to avoid pushing higher education onto their foster youth. Some foster parents shared experiences where they discussed career options such as job corps or trade school with their foster children. However, most foster parents seemed to think that offering life guidance was complicated and though they might see the potential for a foster youth to go into higher education or trade school, each child has their own plan and path that may not necessarily align with what the foster parent thinks is best. One foster parent described his philosophy rather simply and it seemed to be echoed by three others. He said, “To be honest, in foster care you have to look at each kid individually and try to figure out what is best for them and what success means for them individually. It is really hard to focus on one agenda when every single kid is different and has different needs, motivations, and personalities.”
Additionally, foster parents shared experiences where the life guidance they had offered was and was not well received. For example, one foster parent talked about a time when encouraging a future in higher education did not go as planned. She specifically said:

One time we were talking about it, and I said ‘you know you have a lot to give back, what are you thinking of doing?’ She said she was thinking about social work, but ‘I don’t think that’s what my family does.’ I said, ‘well you can always be the first.’ Not too long after that, she hollered at me and said, ‘this is your normal and not mine.’ At that time, she didn’t have a member in her family who was not either incarcerated or in foster care.

When we went to therapy one time, I said something to the therapist about how I was hoping to give her a new normal, but that it wasn’t well received and he said, ‘because that’s her normal, you can’t push your normal onto her.’ It kind of took me awhile to soak that in. But yeah, she was very adamant that college was not something her family did.

One foster parent was able to share an experience where her life guidance was well received and ended in a positive outcome. She said, “So she did take a college class this summer before she left. I was really trying to encourage her to look at some college options. She’s a very talented artist. So, I talked her into taking an art class at the tribal college. She also was really getting into her native heritage. She took the class, and she loved it. She learned all these different Native American art techniques. She thrived.”

Foster parents also reported having direct conversations or explicitly teaching financial skills to their transitional age foster youth. Some parents talked about expecting their foster youth to get part-time jobs to learn about budgeting and saving their money. One foster parent said that she helps her foster youth create a budget after they get a job. She said, “The rule at my house is that 50 percent goes into savings, and it doesn’t get touched. The day is going to come
when they are going to want a car, or they are going to rent an apartment or something like that, so that is what this is for. Twenty five percent usually goes into their short-term savings, and they can use that to go buy shoes or clothes or whatever if that’s what they want to do.” Another foster parent similarly reported helping her foster youth create a budget. She said, “With some kids getting closer to 18, we sit down and write out a budget and talk about ‘okay so you are paying 700 dollars for rent and you still have to pay electricity, you are going to want WIFI, and you are probably going to want to eat, and how many hours a week do you have to work if you are making 12 dollars an hour.’ Those kinds of conversations, I wouldn’t say they are scheduled or intentional, but they come up.” Another foster parent shared that she tries to teach financial skills throughout daily life activities. For example, when they are grocery shopping, she talks to the foster youth about how much the meal will cost and compares that to what it would cost if they went out to eat.

**Social Support and Supportive Adults**

*Former Foster Children. (Referenced 37 times by 50%).* The theme of social support and supportive adults was endorsed by fifty percent of former foster youth. For the purposes of this project, the theme of Social Support and Supportive Adults refers to both peers and adults, including relatives, from which one might derive a sense of emotional support, connectedness, or belonging. Any type of support seeking fell under this theme. Former foster youth reported that finding social support and supportive adults was both a challenge and success. Former foster youth reported feeling alone or isolated because of their foster child status. One participant said:

*I went to a really small school, and I was an outsider. I wasn’t always in class because I was gone for appointments and court dates [related to my CPS case], so that was kind of difficult. Interacting with peers was hard. Even now that is something I struggle with.*
Dealing with a lot of the emotional traumas I have had made it challenging to relate to peers. I am an introvert, so I felt very withdrawn and alone.

In terms of losing social support and supportive adults after family connections are severed as a result of a foster care placement, one participant said:

*I joined the military after one semester of college. I served 6 years because I had no one to come home to. The saddest thing was they asked me, who do you want to sign your benefits to, and I was like well, I don’t really have anybody. The people who were signing me up were like well don’t you want to give it to your mom, and I was like I don’t even know where my mom is. So that was kind of the heartbreaking part of it, not having anybody.*

Overall, participants who endorsed finding social support and supportive adults as a challenge mentioned feeling like they had no one in their corner, trouble fitting in, and trouble relating to peers because of their foster care status.

Former foster youth shared that social support and supportive adults were also source of success in their lives during the time of their transition. Most of the former foster youth mentioned a specific teacher who they felt connected to and who supported them. One participant mentioned a case worker, and another mentioned a big sister from the Big Brothers Big Sisters program. The importance of connection building with at-risk youth cannot be overstated. One former foster youth emphasized this when she said:

*I think connection is one of the hardest things to get as a foster kid. Just that one adult who you can connect with can change things. Because as a foster kid, that is what you are wanting after you had your connection with your biological parents break apart.*
Foster Parents. (Referenced 18 times by 100% of foster parents). Foster parents talked about their experiences witnessing the social support or lack thereof for their foster children. One foster parent shared that her foster youth keeps in contact with a former teacher and relies on that relationship for advice and guidance. It makes sense that youth might have access to a supportive adult at school, but as seen in this participant sample, a supportive adult can be found anywhere and can have a large effect on the youth. Although no former foster children in the current study identified a former foster parent as a supportive adult or a source of continued social support following their emancipation, one hundred percent of foster parents interviewed expressed a desire to offer social support to their transitional age foster youth. One foster parent said, “I have told all my kids that no matter how they discharge, I will always be a support to them. All my kids have my number and I still stay in contact with all my kids. Because social barriers are a real thing and having nobody to turn to is a problem.” Only half of the foster parents reported actually maintaining contact or being a source of social support with at least one of their former foster children after emancipation.

One foster parent who is involved with her former foster children described her experiences with several who aged out in her home. She said:

*We keep in touch with a lot of our older kids that have aged out. They come home for holidays, and we keep in touch. Most of them have children of their own so we get to meet them too. Even our kids who have aged out and are not doing so good, I send them birthday cards in prison. When they get in trouble, our one kid said, ‘why do you keep calling me why do you keep trying to talk to me I am such a disappointment and failure,’ and I said ‘yeah you really missed up and have to live with those horrible consequences,*
but there is still hope for you. You can still turn your life around. ’I think just having someone who will stick by them in their lives is so powerful and I see that in all our kids. As a foster parent, I feel like you have to make the effort to reach out and let them know that you are there, and they are welcome.

Other foster parents reported being a more removed source of support for their former foster children. One said, “We have stayed in touch. We still get her mail, and we are her permanent home address. So, the relationship didn’t stop when the foster care ended.”

**Independent Life Skills**

**Former Foster Children. (Referenced 4 times by 40%).** Former foster children brought up that they had not received instruction in independent life skills. Independent life skills refer to things like learning how to find housing, open a bank account, build credit, cook meals, and time management. One former foster youth said, “I trashed my credit at 18 because I didn’t know what I was doing. I had never even heard the word credit before.” Another former foster youth talked about her experience of never being allowed in the kitchen and therefore never learning to cook. Several participants talked about learning how to support themselves through trial and error. One said, “I learned through making mistakes first. You learn how to budget by not being able to pay your bills.”

**Foster Parents. (Referenced 7 times by 50%).** Foster parents reported teaching life skills to their transitional age foster youth. One foster parent said:

*These kids don’t know how to cook a lot of meals, maybe ramen noodles and bowls of cereal, you know that’s what they come with. So, we are trying to teach them just some meals like hot dishes or how to fry burgers. Teaching them how to wash clothes, teaching*
them to organize their stuff. We had a young man who was a diabetic and you know his pumps and his access points, and his needles and all that stuff would come by mail, and it was just in boxes everywhere, so helping him get organized with all of that. And then one big thing that we kind of do is try to teach these kids how to drive. So, we live about 10 miles out of town, we have 40 acres, and we teach them gas and brakes on snowmobiles and four wheelers.

Another foster parent emphasized the conversations she had with her foster youth regarding self-care and hygiene. She shared that many of her older foster youth have come to her home not knowing how to take care of their basic hygiene. She has taught foster children how to bathe and brush their teeth properly.

**Supports and Resources, Missing and Utilized**

**Former Foster Youth. (Referenced 8 times by 50%).** Former foster children were asked what supports, services, and resources were missing during the transition process. Former foster children offered ideas for improvements. Former foster youth mentioned that they would have liked to have more direct guidance and coaching from school counselors or case workers surrounding how to apply to and prepare for college. One said, “I think being informed on how important it can be to go to college and how much it can have an impact on your life for the better would probably be my advice. You can get financial help with school and that can help support these teenagers’ thoughts into going into college because finances can be a very scary thing, so talking with them about options and ways to pay for college might influence or encourage them to go to college.”
Another highly recommended adjustment to the current transition process was better education for foster parents. One participant said, “I think for foster families, there should be more resources or like classes because as a kid you just want to connect and feel like you belong or are wanted and loved. A lot of the homes don’t do that because they are just doing it for the money. So, I think if there was mandatory training every month that could help.”

Another participant reflected similarly saying, “Honestly I think it would be really smart if depending upon what age the kid is when they go into foster care, the foster parents should have to take a class that’s designated to that age range because it’s important to talk about different developmental things that are going on during those ages.” Targeted education for foster parents could better prepare them to support foster youth as they encounter common developmental and transitional challenges.

**Foster Parents. (Referenced 18 times by 100%).** Foster parents were asked what supports, services, and resources they have utilized as well as what they think is missing from the transition process. One foster parent said, “We all pick our preference right. I preference older boys. That’s who I want to take in. So, once I hit that preference button, the system could shoot me specific trainings about things I need to know to work with that population. I think that would be cool for any age group. Another foster parent mentioned that the lack of positive social outlets and supports was a concern for her when considering her foster children. She suggested that a mentorship type program utilizing former foster youth and connecting them with transition age youth still in the system could be very helpful. She said:

\[ I \text{ think if we had ex foster kids talking to recent foster kids that would be really powerful. I think that would be more powerful because it is somebody that they } \]
can relate to. If they are talking to somebody who is a few years older than them who can say: here is what I went through, I was where you were a few years ago, and here’s what helped.

Foster parents were also asked to describe what, if any, resources, training, and supports were provided to them by their foster care agency to aid in the support of their transitional age foster youth. More than half reported that they had not found anything offered by their agency to be helpful and had to obtain their knowledge from other places. One foster parent said, “Education for us sucks. The county is either not educating us or expecting us to deal with things and figure it out.” She then explained that the foster agency has one training course a month on a specific topic, but that some topics are not always relevant. For example, one of the training topics was about fostering severely autistic children, but not everyone in the agency takes children with severe disabilities.

Another foster parent similarly shared that she has been disappointed with the training and resources available to her through the county foster agency, but that she has found other community groups to be much more valuable. She shared:

Our church started a support group for foster parents and is really making foster parenting a priority. They said if you need something, like if you need beds, or you need resources, babysitter, or a grandparent mentor, they will get you that. One of the things that came out of that is that, from January to June, we had 10 kids at one time. The county called us in the middle of the night, and they had these four kids, and they needed an emergency placement and I cried, and I was like, there is no way I can’t have ten kids. And they said, well we have nowhere for them to go so they will have to sleep in the office. So, I said okay, maybe we can make it work for a week. And we made it work for a
week and then the people from the church group came and helped. They came and assembled beds because I was like, ‘I don’t need finances. I need someone to come and put these beds together.’ So that’s what they did. There was also no way we could do it without transportation because there were about seven different daycares and schools that we needed to go to in the morning. So, one of the ladies from the church group volunteered to come every morning and every night to come and transport three of the kids. So, it was like you know that was a huge commitment. Because we didn’t know how long we would have them and it ended up being the rest of the school year, so like five months. And without her we wouldn’t be able to keep these kids together. So, it was really awesome, that just really shows how people are putting action behind their words.

Three foster parents mentioned utilizing an independent living coordinator’s service, with little confidence in the program’s effectiveness. Essentially, the independent living coordinator is supposed to connect with foster youth after they turn sixteen and maintain regular monthly contact with that youth while teaching independent living skills such as budgeting, self-care, applying for college or trade school, and securing housing. Several foster parents reported that there was a lot of staff turnover in this particular position and that harmed its ability to be useful or effective with their foster youth who are already fairly untrusting of new people and need sufficient time to build relationships before progress can be made.

Two foster parents reported being happy with the training, resources, and support they receive from their foster agency. One foster parent said, “Anything weird or any situation I have run into, I can say okay here’s the issue, and they have been very supportive in helping me find a solution. They have been responsive whenever I needed anything.” The other reflected that the
education he received from his foster care agency on trauma-informed care had been extremely helpful.

**College Experiences**

Former foster youth were also asked to talk about their experiences during college. More specifically, they were asked to describe the challenges and areas of success they encountered while attending college. Three themes were identified: Finances, Social Support, and Missing and Utilized Supports and Resources. These themes are detailed below.

*Finances (Referenced 9 times by 60%)*

Former foster youth reported that finances were a struggle for them in college. Their struggles included paying tuition, paying for life expenses while attending school, finding scholarships, and dealing with financial aid. Two former foster youth reported that the search for funding support through scholarships and grants was overwhelming. One former foster youth said, “I know that there are specific grants for foster kids in college and other stuff, but I have never gotten any of those. People say there are these scholarships for foster youth, but I don’t know where they are or how to access them or even if I qualify.” Another similarly said, “I tried looking [for scholarships], but it was honestly overwhelming. Everyone says the money is out there, you just have to find it but it’s just very overwhelming as a high school student. It was a lot.”

All former foster youth reported receiving Pell grants to help pay their tuition, but many said that it wasn’t enough to alleviate the financial burden. One said, “I got a Pell grant, but I was still forced to take out two federal loans and that barely covered my tuition. I am out of money, and I didn’t even pay for housing with it.” Another said, “I wasn’t super savvy with finances. I had a job, and I took out a ton of student loans. Now, I am realizing that I am still paying off my
four-year degree and going back and getting more student loans [for my graduate degree].” The financial burden of a college degree continues to be a barrier for many students coming from traditional family backgrounds and the same is true for former foster children. The difference lies in the fact that former foster children typically do not have the option of receiving any financial support from their families.

**Social Support (Referenced 21 times by 70%)**

About half of the former foster youth reported that acquiring social support was a challenge for them in the college environment and another half reported that it was a source of success, with some former foster youth reporting that both were true in their experience. Former foster youth who reported that social support was a challenge mentioned that fitting in, trusting others, and relating to peers were ongoing issues. One said, “It is constant trouble trying to be a part of my peer group and be normal because what I have been through has not been normal.” Another echoed this saying, “I don’t know anyone else who has been in foster care or had some of the same childhood experiences as me. So that has made it more difficult to relate to others in a genuine way.”

All former foster youth reported struggles with peer relationships in some form. One former foster youth brought up a unique experience regarding relating to peers. She said, “Probably the most difficult thing was my friends having relationships with their family. I remember Christmas break and spring break seeing all of those friends in the dorms go home. It was just me and maybe three other people still there. Seeing other kids with family connections was the hardest part of college.” This quote highlights the small things that often are overlooked when considering the challenges that the college environment possesses to those coming from nontraditional family backgrounds, both socially in terms of relating to peers who have families
that support them, and logistically when it comes to considerations such as making plans during school breaks.

Although social support was revealed by many to be a significant challenge, it was also reported by some to be positive. Five former foster youth expressed positive experiences within the theme of social support when asked to share what has been going well for them in college. One said, “I have a lot of friends in my age group now. I have always had friends who were older until I got to college. It took me a really long time to realize that I am the same as people who are my age.” Another said, “I made some friends freshman year that I still have. Now I also have a significant other and that relationship is going pretty well. I used to be in a situation where my brain was just hard wired to survive, but now my brain is expanding its ability to make connections with people.” Overall, the former foster youth who reported social support as being helpful to them in college agreed that it was a valuable asset.

*Supports and Resources in College, Missing and Utilized (Referenced 12 times by 60% of former foster youth)*

Former foster youth offered ideas for supports, services, or resources that they wished were available on campus and could have benefitted themselves or other students from similar backgrounds. Many mentioned that a support group could be helpful. One participant said, “I think a club, or a group of people could be helpful. I have always wondered how I would feel if I sat down with a group of people who were also in the foster care system and just got to say like ‘bro today was hard.’ I wonder what it would be like to connect with other people who have been in the foster care system, so they know how hard it is.” Another participant similarly said, “I think support groups with peers could be really helpful. Because it is hard to find someone who has had the same experiences as you, at least in the college scene. No one has really had this...
experience except a select few, so if they could talk about it and get it out, then it won’t be all bottled up.”

The second potential resource mentioned by former foster youth was the establishment of a foster care liaison position at their university. One former foster youth equated it to her experience with a similar position designed for helping veterans on campus. She said, “Well they have designated people on campus for veterans. If they had one designated person for foster students that would be great, and they could help them find resources.” Others mentioned that they had no idea what was even available on campus in terms of resources that could be helpful for them, so the creation of a liaison position could potentially bridge this gap and connect this at-risk population to supports and services.

Former foster youth were also asked to talk about any supports or resources they have utilized on campus and found to be helpful. Former foster youth expressed glowing reviews of the TRIO student support services. TRIO student support services is a grant funded program from the U.S. Department of Education designed to assist students who are low-income, first-generation college students, or have disabilities. TRIO offers services such as academic and career advising, tutoring, textbook and technology loans, financial aid assistance, and peer mentoring. One said this about staff, “My TRIO advisor has been amazing. He cares about my education. He was the person who said ‘this is your education and you get to decide what is good for you,’ and he helped me make a pros and cons list to staying in one program instead of another. That was really helpful.” Another also mentioned the helpful staff, “TRIO has been treating me so well for the most part. I really suck at asking questions. Social anxiety is not a small thing in my life, but they have been pretty great about making me feel comfortable to ask questions and get some help.” In terms of services used at TRIO, one former foster youth said
that the free printing available in the TRIO office was a major benefit to her, because she could not afford to print her assignments. Another mentioned the use of the textbook loan service and how helpful it was to not have to worry about buying expensive textbooks. Lastly, one person mentioned being grateful for the financial aid assistance services and the resume and CV building guidance that she received from TRIO.

One former foster youth talked about her involvement in a scholarship program specific program within her university system. She said “I actually joined a program that is like a support program for students who are Pell grant eligible. I qualify for a full Pell grant, so I also qualify for this program. They gave me two advisors and a monthly stipend for doing things that would help with my career or academic progress. They have meetings and lots of resources. There is a lot of stuff and that has really helped.”

**Personal Strengths**

All former foster youth were told the statistics from the National Foster Care Institute about academic outcomes for foster children and asked to reflect upon what personal strengths they relied on to get them where they are today. The statistics indicate that only about half of foster children graduate from high school, less than 3 percent graduate from college, and only about 20 percent enroll in college compared to the national average of around 60 percent. Given that all of the former foster youth in this study graduated from high school and enrolled in college, they were asked how they got here and what set them apart from other foster youth who do not attend college. One theme was identified: *Determination to not End up like Biological Parents.* This theme is detailed below.

* Determination to not End up like the Biological Parents (Referenced 6 times by 50% of former foster youth)
The theme of Determination to not End up like the Biological Parents was mentioned by half of all former foster children interviewed. Overwhelmingly, former foster youth reported feeling fearful of ending up like their biological parents and most could remember a specific moment when they realized they did not want this to happen. One former foster youth who was put in foster care as an infant and had no memory or contact with her biological family explained that she asked her case worker for her case file and learned about her family history. She said this about the moment she received her case file:

*In my case file, the first thing that is in there when you open it up is my biological mother’s mugshot and her death certificate. I had no idea that she had even died. She had died from an infection caused from using a dirty drug needle. I remember at that moment just looking at her mugshot and thinking I don’t want this to be me. I don’t want to follow in the same footsteps as her even though I am still biologically hers. I was just determined not to be her.*

Others reported almost identical moments when they realized they wanted a different life than the one their biological families had led. Most people seemed to have a lot of fear associated with following the same path as their biological families driving them in the opposite direction. One former foster youth said, “I reflected on my life and on my mom’s and what scares me most is when some of my family members will say you are just like your mom or you sound just like her and I am like do not say that.” Another said, “I think my real driving force is that I have seen what my family has been through, and I see where my mom is today, and it scares me honestly. I do not want to be that person. I want to be able to say I have had these barriers, but I reached my goals anyway and the barriers didn’t hold me back.” Lastly, two former foster youth discussed that becoming parents themselves caused them to reflect upon their own upbringing and desire to
provide something better for their children. One former foster youth said, “I am a mother now and I always tell myself I never want my son to have to go through what I went through. So, he’s my biggest reason why I do what I do.”

Chapter V: Discussion

The current study gathered the perspectives of former foster students currently enrolled in college and foster parents of transitional age foster youth. Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured virtual interviews conducted with each participant. Two main topics were explored through the interview question structure: the emancipation process and the college experience. The themes that emerged from these interviews will be further reflected upon below, along with possible limitations and future directions.

Transition from Foster Care to Adulthood

Future Planning and Guidance

Foster parents and former foster children alike discussed the need for foster youth to receive guidance when it comes to future planning. Both groups specifically talked about the heavy burden that finances play in the lives of foster youth as they prepare to live self-sufficient and independent lives as adults. All of the foster parents interviewed were able to give examples of the steps they have taken to teach their foster youth financial skills. Based on the amount of detailed information they shared, it became clear that finances were a topic that was taken very seriously. One foster parent described the budgeting conversation she had with older foster youth in her home, which included talking about hypothetical rent prices, utilities, WIFI, and grocery bills. Several of the former foster youth interviewed discussed the challenges that finances presented during their transition out of foster care. Two participants even reported becoming
homeless immediately following their emancipation due to lack of finances. The significance of this theme has also been found in previous research with emancipated foster youth. Okpych and Courtney’s (2018) found that for emancipated foster youth who had attended college, the biggest barriers to degree completion were not academic in nature but were related to family dysfunction and financial difficulty. Previous research has also found that foster parents, transitional age foster children, and emancipated foster children highly emphasize the importance of learning financial literacy skills (Harris & Raskin, 2017; Lalayants et al., 2016). Although some former foster youth in the current study reported having experienced financial difficulties during their transition, foster parents in the current study reported being passionate about teaching financial skills, which is a promising step towards eliminating this challenge. However, all of the foster parents who mentioned teaching or talking about financial skills with their foster children explained their process of doing so differently. The outcomes of each method independently employed by foster parents have not necessarily been tracked to determine what is most effective. Future intervention targeting financial skills could potentially be developed to be research based and effective for use with foster children.

Beyond teaching financial skills, there are also opportunities for financial support from the government. In 1999, congress passed the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act. The Chafee Act offered states flexible funding that could be used for the support of 18- to 21-year-olds transitioning out of foster care. The goal of the Chaffee program is to help current and emancipated foster youth achieve a successful transition into adulthood. The funding provided can be used for a variety of things depending upon the programs that are aligned with the state in which the recipient is a resident. In 2008, Congress passed the Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, which expanded the funding provided by the Chafee act to states who
chose to extend the amount of time that youth could be in the foster care system up to 21 years of age. As of March 2022, 48 states have adopted some form of extended foster care. Additionally, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 was passed. This act gave a onetime payment of 400 million dollars to state Chafee programs and temporarily extended the extended foster care age limit from 21 to 26. Extended foster care is just one service that Chafee programs offer. Extended foster care is an agreement between the foster agency and the foster child when they must voluntarily sign themselves back into foster care after they reach the age of 18. By signing into extended foster care, these youth are able to stay in their current foster homes and those homes continue to collect payments that aid in the care of the youth.

Separate from financial issues, several former foster children also mentioned feeling like there was no one helping them plan their goals for their future after leaving foster care. Previous research has theorized that one of the reasons foster youth often report feeling unprepared for life after emancipation lies in the structure of the system itself. The life of a foster child is often heavily structured and controlled by adults who cannot or do not include the child in the decision making of their lives (Morton, 2018). This finding was reflected in the statements of foster youth included in the current study as they talked about caseworkers and foster parents only being concerned with the ‘now’ and not taking the time to think about what comes next. In other research completed with transitional age foster youth, a theme of uninformed and uninvolved caseworkers and foster parents was found to be a barrier to academic achievement (Rios, 2008). Although the former foster youth in this study were discussing general challenges that arose during their transition out of foster care, the connection still exists in that foster youth are desiring more intense future planning and guidance support from people on their care teams.
Additionally, two former foster youth shared that their experiences becoming parents were barriers to their success. Participants mentioned the financial burden of having children, as well as struggling to manage their own academic responsibilities while caring for children, were large hurdles in their lives. Foster parents having conversations about sexual health with their older foster youth could be an extremely valuable preventative measure given that previous research has identified that foster youth are at an increased risk of teen pregnancy while in care as well as following emancipation (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010; Zoltnick et al., 2012).

Considering all of the risk factors that emancipated foster youth face (e.g., homelessness, limited social support, mental health issues, financial difficulty, etc.), adding a pregnancy and later a child to the equation could make the situation exponentially more difficult. Given that parents of non-foster youth typically speak with their children about sexual health, foster parents, case workers, and social workers should prioritize teaching older foster youth as well.

Foster parents in the current study reported a desire for more support from their foster agencies in terms of education and training targeted specifically at transitional age foster youth. This finding aligns with previous findings, which revealed that foster parents’ biggest concerns for their transitional age youth were practical knowledge, educational attainment, and housing (Lalayant et al., 2018). There appears to be a need for a streamlined approach to helping foster parents support their foster youth through the emancipation process. Foster parent training that focused on future planning and life guidance would need to include specific resources and information designed to help facilitate conversations with older foster youth about the types of choices they can make when they leave foster care and the life paths that are available to them. A foster parent training intervention in this area makes the most sense when considering the nature of the subject matter. Life guidance is obtained from others and is usually not generated on one’s
own. In the lives of non-foster children, parents usually assume the responsibility of helping their child consider possible future paths and offer guidance when questions arise. Foster children should be treated no differently.

**Social Support and Supportive Adults**

The theme of social support and supportive adults came up in several different contexts across both participant groups. Former foster children reported that social support was a significant challenge during their transition out of foster care. More specifically, former foster children reported feeling alone and abnormal during their time in foster care, which made relating to peers, fitting in, and trusting others difficult. This is consistent with previous research showing that foster children often suffer increased rates of social problems (Zoltnick et al., 2012). It is likely that foster youth would be better able to relate to peers who are also in the foster care system. In Montana, a Chafee program funded event exists called the Reach Higher Montana Summit. This event brings foster youth from across the state to college campuses, where they have a chance learn about the resources available to them to reach their education and career goals, as well as socialize with peers. One former foster youth interviewed for the current study talked fondly about attending this summit and having the chance to socialize with other foster youth.

On the other hand, some former foster youth reported that deriving social support from adults or older peers was easier for them. Previous research has found that the presence of just one supportive adult in a child’s life can serve as a protective factor against adverse experiences (Meng et al., 2018). It makes sense that foster parents could be that supportive adult in the lives transitional age foster youth. Foster parents could also be a source of social support after foster youth have been emancipated, considering that a relationship would have already been
developed during their time in care. Within this study, foster parents reported worrying about the lack of positive social support available for their foster children as they aged out of the system. Furthermore, all of the foster parents interviewed expressed a desire to be a source of social support for foster youth after they have been emancipated. However, not all foster parents were always able to offer support, nor did former foster youth always accept this support. This happened for a variety of reasons. For example, one foster parent said that she hasn’t received a call from her former foster youth, even though she provided them with her contact information. Another had not been a foster parent long enough to have any of his foster children age out.

For the foster parents who managed to continue providing social support to their previous foster youth, that support looked different for everyone. Some examples included: periodically sending texts, cards, or calling to check in, following emancipated foster children on social media, and having dinner or spending holidays together. The degree of social support that would be helpful or needed can presumably be expected to vary from individual to individual. For example, one former foster youth said that she had nowhere to go during winter and spring break while living in the dorms. For that student, a foster parent offering social support would likely have been very valuable. It is interesting that within this study, most former foster youth reported struggling to find social support during their transition and all foster parents shared a desire to provide it. No former foster youth interviewed for the current study reported staying in contact or deriving any social support from their former foster parents. It is possible that the foster parents who agreed to be interviewed for this study were among the most passionate about providing quality care. This limitation will be discussed in more depth in the limitations section. However, it is also possible that most foster parents are open and willing to provide social support to their former foster children, but that the amount or kind of support that each individual desires does
not match. For example, the former foster youth who shared that she had nowhere to go during spring break may have benefited from a former foster parent who was able to offer her a place to stay, but her former parent may not have bedroom space anymore due to taking on a new foster child. A possible solution to this problem was described by a foster parent when she said that it could be helpful to connect transitional age foster youth with recently emancipated foster youth so that they could engage in a mentorship type relationship. This idea may better address the social concerns foster youth have mentioned, such as feeling abnormal and having difficulty relating to peers, because emancipated foster youth would have been through life similar experiences.

**Independent Life Skills**

Former foster youth and foster parents both discussed independent living skills in some capacity. Foster youth indicated that they did not receive sufficient independent living skills training while in foster care, and it became apparent when they were emancipated. Skills mentioned included finding housing, opening a bank account, building credit, cooking, and time management. Foster parents from the current study shared their experiences explicitly teaching life skills to their older foster youth. Foster parents mentioned teaching basic hygiene, cooking, laundry, organization, and driving. In previous research with foster parents and transitional age foster youth still in care, it was found that only foster parents and not current foster youth endorsed practical knowledge or life skills as being an important factor for future self-sufficiency (Lalayants et al., 2016). Interestingly, in the current study completed with former foster youth, instead of current foster youth, life skills were endorsed. It may be possible to draw the conclusion that after emancipation, the importance of life skills becomes much clearer.
In previous research, a similar question was asked about the challenges of emancipation. Those participants reported that they felt unprepared for the adult world following emancipation and were missing critical skills like grocery shopping and taxes (Tyell & Yates, 2018). As previously mentioned, it has been theorized that because of how foster care is structured, foster children often do not learn everything that goes into taking care of themselves before they must independently function in society (Morton, 2018).

Foster parents in this study were overwhelmingly energetic and passionate when talking about the life skills they try to teach their older foster children. However, it is worth noting that many equated financial skills with life skills and were more inclined to talk about related skills. This could be because each foster youth likely requires different amounts of life skills training. Considering the individuality of every child, some children are inherently more independent and self-sufficient than others. Some foster youth might need support to learn how to bathe properly, whereas others may not need explicit instruction about the importance of hygiene. Foster parents may need to consider the individual traits of each child when deciding what life skills to prioritize, but overall, an increased exposure to a variety of daily life skills could benefit everyone. It could also be useful to offer opportunities for older foster youth to practice independence. This could look like tasking an older foster youth with planning a meal within a certain budget, grocery shopping for supplies, and then making the meal one evening a week. By offering foster youth opportunities to practice a variety of life skills, they may be less likely to feel unprepared to be self-sufficient when they are emancipated.

**Supports and Resources, Missing and Utilized**

In terms of supports and resources utilized, all foster parents reported being required to complete some amount of education or training to stay licensed as foster parents. However, they
had mixed reviews on the quality and value of the training provided by their foster care agencies. More than half reported extremely negative reviews of the training they were provided with or to which they had access. The relevance of the trainings topics was a concern for some. Some foster parents reported searching for training from sources other than their foster agency to get the information they need. An adjustment to the transition process that was highly recommended by foster parents and former foster children alike was better quality foster parent training. Both groups recognized a need for education and training that is specifically targeted to certain demographics of foster children. Targeted training could potentially be more relevant and helpful for foster parents of transitional age foster children because it could discuss the specific things that need to be addressed with that demographic of children.

In contrast, two of the foster parents interviewed reported being completely satisfied with the training they received from their foster agency. Additionally, the same foster parents were also happy with the support they received from the foster agency, both reported that they were able to get answers to their questions and solutions to any problems that had arisen when the case workers on their foster children’s team were called. Others reported receiving little to no support when they had reached out, and many cited staff turnovers as a major issue in building rapport and relationships with the case and social workers on their foster children’s teams.

Foster parents also mentioned utilizing an independent living program that is available to them and their transitional age foster youth. The independent living program is staffed by independent living coordinators who are connected with foster youth as they begin to reach the transitional age. The independent living coordinator is supposed to support foster youth in acquiring skills that are in accordance with their personal life goals following emancipation. For example, the independent living coordinator could help a foster child complete a college
application, find and apply for scholarships, and find and apply for housing. If this program worked as it should and was applied across foster agencies, it could help fill the gap in the area of direct guidance and coaching regarding preparing for and applying to college, which was mentioned by former foster youth in the current study. Unfortunately, foster parents mentioned that staff turnover was a particular barrier to the effectiveness of this program. It was reported that when staff changes happened in this position, it was not often well received by foster children who already struggled to build trusting relationships with new people.

Collectively, these results seem to point to the fact that the quality of the services, support, resources, and trainings vary greatly between foster agencies. This finding could be connected to a complex and systemic problem within the foster care and social work field. According to the Child Welfare League of America’s 2022 statistics, the average turnover rate for a child welfare worker is between 23 and 60 percent. The ability to provide quality services and connect foster parents with relevant information and services may likely be impacted when there is frequent turbulence within foster care agencies. When social workers leave the field, it ends their relationships with their former case load of foster children, which reduces their social support. Additionally, as mentioned above, foster children already struggle to build trusting relationships, so when their providers leave, it likely exacerbates their feelings of distrust and abandonment. Also, research has found that high turnover rates are associated with increased burnout ratings in workers who stay in the field. The social workers who stay in the position experience an increased amount of work and cases, which limits their ability to provide services above and beyond the minimum requirements (Cho & Song, 2017).
College Experiences

Finances

Half of the former foster youth interviewed reported experiencing financial challenges in college. Specific struggles included feeling overwhelmed when searching for funding and being in debt from student loans. There are programs that can minimize the financial burden of college for low-income, first generation, and former foster children. One such program, that was previously discussed above, is called the John H. Chafee Foster Care for Success Transition to Adult (the Chafee program). Some approved uses for the Chafee funding in Montana include higher educational expenses, vocational training, travel costs to school or a job site, and housing. Through the Chafee program in Montana, foster youth can receive up to 5,000 dollars a year to be used for educational expenses. Five thousand dollars can make a moderate to slight dent in the overall price of college tuition depending upon the institution, but there are other expenses that come with attending college. In previous research, it was found that even when former foster youth enrolled in college and obtained funding to pay for tuition, they still indicated that they lacked the necessary financial support to cover the cost of living, as well as the financial skills needed to manage personal finances (Katz & Courtney, 2015).

Knowing that the need for more intense financial support exists to support all aspects of former foster youths’ lives in college, some states have created independent living programs that offer a variety of services to fit a youth’s needs. North Dakota has a state funded program called the Supervised Independent Living (SIL) program, which allows foster youth who are in extended foster care to live in fully furnished apartments rent free initially as long as they are attending school full time or working a minimum of 80 hours per month. After the initial three months, the foster child is expected to start paying rent on a gradual schedule (i.e., Months 4,5,6:
$200; Months 7,8,9: $400; Months 10, 11, 12: $600). Foster children in the SIL program are also given a three hundred dollar a month allowance for food. The program can be utilized for a maximum of a year. A foster child in the SIL program can leave at any point and when they do leave, they are given back all of the money they paid in rent to help them start their lives somewhere else. Programs like this seem to address all of the financial support needs that foster youth attending college require. However, they are not currently available in every state, so accessibility to funding continues to be an issue for most foster children.

As covered above, programs exist in most states that are able to ease the financial burden of higher education in some regard; however, it is still important to think about the distribution of this information. Of the former foster youth in the current study, most reported having no idea where to look for financial support and never receiving anything more than a Pell grant to help them pay for college. There seems to still be a gap in the system of supports in terms of connecting resources to eligible foster youth. What exactly is available to foster children in each state in terms of programs, resources, and services is not always evident. A website that outlines specific supports available in each state and includes enrollment or contact information could eliminate some of the confusion expressed by former foster children regarding what is available.

**Social Support**

Social support was both a source of struggle and comfort in the college environment for the former foster youth in the current study. Considerations mentioned regarding social support in college did not change much from what was reported during the transition process, with the exception of a few participants reporting that they were slightly more successful in developing connections with same-aged peers at college. Overall, former foster youth emphasized that it was hard to relate to peers because they felt that their experiences were too far-removed from those of
their peers. One former foster youth talked about her experience with watching her peers go home during the holiday breaks and having nowhere to go herself. This barrier has also been revealed in previous research with former foster children in college. Gillum and colleagues (2018) reported that some colleges have adopted entire support programs designed to support former foster youth on campus and an aspect of those programs includes access to break housing. Ninety percent of the students who utilized the break housing indicated that it was very helpful.

Several former foster youths in the current study also discussed a desire for social support groups or clubs that would provide them with an opportunity to connect with peers who came from similar backgrounds as their own. This has also been found in previous research. In one study, former foster children currently enrolled in college were asked to detail what they thought was missing on campus that could have benefited them. It was found that students often brought up a desire for support groups and social activities, or events that facilitate connections with peers from similar backgrounds (Gillum et al., 2018). In another study, former foster children who were involved in on-campus activities experienced significantly less stress and reported that the weight of challenges they faced in relation to their foster care background was reduced (Avant et al., 2021). In accordance with past studies (e.g., Kincaid, 2021), the current study found that when former foster children were asked about what they wished had been available to support former foster youth on campus, they mentioned the creation of support groups or clubs. They expressed a desire to have a place to make social connections with peers who had been through similar life experiences. With social support being such a widely reported challenge for students coming from foster care backgrounds, and there also being a robust research base validating its importance and usefulness as a protective factor, it seems to warrant some sort of intervention.
Supports and Resources in College, Utilized and Missing

In terms of support utilized on campus, many of the former foster youth had great things to say about TRIO, which is a program designed to support low-income students, first generation students, and students with disabilities. Services such as academic advising, free printing, textbook loans, financial aid navigation assistance, and resume building assistance were endorsed as being helpful. Additionally, two participants specifically mentioned feeling comfortable, supported, and cared for by their advisors at TRIO. This finding suggests that some former foster students were able to find and connect with a supportive adult in the college environment. It could be beneficial for universities to know what service programs, like TRIO, students have valued and found essential to their success. After uncovering this information, universities could begin to understand what makes a particular service or staff member helpful and what kinds of training or philosophies underscore their business model. Then, any relevant findings could be applied to other programs and services on campus to increase their effectiveness for students.

In terms of support that were identified as missing on campus, as previously discussed, half of the former foster youth suggested social support groups for students from similar backgrounds. Another suggestion involved a staff member who could serve as a foster care liaison on campus. Several former foster youths mentioned that they had struggled to find out what kinds of resources were available to them on campus. A foster care liaison could likely help with this issue. Some educational districts have added a foster care liaison position whose primary duty is to advocate for the needs of students in foster care. For example, in 2015, Texas passed legislation that required at least one foster care liaison be employed at all public educational institutions, including higher educational institutions. In Texas, the foster care liaison
role is described as someone who will work to connect former foster youth with resources and supports available to them on their campus (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2017). A foster care liaison position could potentially make a big difference for former foster youth in college and increase their ability to succeed in college.

**Determination to not End up like the Biological Parents**

Former foster youth were asked to reflect upon the fact that foster children overwhelmingly do not enroll in or graduate from college, as well as what personal strengths they relied upon that helped them get to where they are today. The theme that emerged was a desire to not end up like their biological parents. The tone of the former foster youth who endorsed this theme varied from determined and confident to fearful. Some seemed to think that their genetic connections to their biological parents would lead them toward the same path if they did not take action. Interestingly, several participants could remember the actual moment that they decided they did not want to end up like their biological parents. This could be evidence of how all-encompassing this desire was for many former foster youth. This finding is in line with similar research that found a theme of ‘rising above their conditions to avoid repeating the cycle of family detriment’ in a group of African American former foster children enrolled in college (Lane, 2017). In both Lane’s (2017) study and the current study, past adverse experiences seemed to fuel the desire to create a better life for former foster children.

Implications of this finding can be applied broadly in terms of the ways those working in foster care interact with foster children. The former foster children in the current study expressed that they were motivated to lead different lives than their biological families. If the goal is to have all foster children grow up to live successful and fulfilling adult lives, presumably not repeating the cycle of family dysfunction, foster care providers need to talk to their children in
ways that express how capable they are of achieving their goals. Foster parents, social workers, group home staff, and case workers can show their foster children the pathways that exist to reach their life aspirations. They can talk to their foster children in ways that build self-confidence and inspire them to fulfill their dreams. Foster parents can model healthy family and parent-child relationships to introduce the idea that there are other ways to live than previous maladaptive ways that they may have learned prior to entering the system. There should be a valiant effort made to help foster children believe that they can do or be anything they want in the world. Along with that effort, advocacy for the types of programs that will support foster children after emancipation or in extended foster care needs to be a priority. Programs that support former foster children transitioning into the adult world lessen the overwhelming number of barriers they must overcome to achieve their goals. With these changes, it is possible that we will not only see more foster children enrolling in and graduating from colleges and universities, but we might also see decreases in the rates of homelessness, substance abuse, social difficulties, mental health issues, and financial insecurity in this at-risk population.
Chapter VI: Limitations and Future Directions

Limitations

As is common in research, this study has several limitations. A primary limitation was the participant sample size. Though the inclusion criteria were few, they targeted a very specific and sparse population. The former foster youth recruited needed to be emancipated from foster care, eighteen years or older, and currently enrolled in a higher education institution in the mountain west region of the United States. The foster parent participants needed to have been foster parents to at least one transitional age foster youth within the last two years, eighteen years or older, and live in the mountain west region of the United States. The specifics of the inclusion criteria were required to study the topics of interest but did affect the number of individuals that were eligible and available to participate. As discussed previously, there are not many former foster children in college to begin with, so finding a large sample of eligible and willing participants would be difficult, and in the case of this study, was unattainable. Future researchers could increase their recruitment efforts to include a larger geographical region in hopes of obtaining a larger participant sample.

Another limitation is the possibility that the foster parents who were recruited for the current study were essentially a sample of the ‘best of the best.’ All of the foster parents interviewed were extremely passionate about foster care and talked at length about the ways in which they strive to provide quality care to the children in their homes. Thinking about some of the responses the former foster children gave in their interviews, most had slightly to extremely negative experiences with their foster parents. This contrast in experiences between the two participant groups seems to indicate that the foster parent results found in this study cannot be generalized to all foster parents with regard to the motivation to provide quality foster care.
Likely, foster parents who are less well intentioned would not take the time to sign up for an hour-long interview. Future research could attempt to obtain a larger sample of foster parents.

Another limitation to the current study is the interview format. Within phenomenological qualitative research, it is recommended to conduct multiple interviews with each participant to establish depth in the material (Gilgun, 2014). In the current study, a choice was made to limit the interviews to one per person to decrease the demand on participants who were busy college students and foster parents. However, the interviews were not exceptionally short. Most lasted about an hour and a few lasted two hours. For this reason, it might be incorrect to say that some amount of depth was not achieved. Either way, future research examining these populations should attempt to conduct multiple interviews so that follow-up questions can be asked to further deepen the information regarding particular topics of interest.

Lastly, all of the former foster youth in this study identified as female. This limits the generalizability of these findings to male identifying former foster children attending college. One theory is that there are more female identifying students enrolling in college overall. The National Center for Education reported that in 2020, female students comprised just under 60 percent of all undergraduate enrollments. Interestingly, other researchers seem to have collected similar samples. For example, in Dworsky and Perez’s (2018) research sample of ninety-eight former foster youth enrolled in college, 78 percent identified as female.

**Future Directions**

Former foster youth and foster parents in the current study shared their experiences, challenges, and successes in regard to the transition out of foster care. Additionally former foster youth currently attending college shared their college experiences, challenges, and successes. From the experiences shared, several themes emerged and were detailed above. Previous
research has identified similar themes to the current study, and support programs based on some of these themes have been implemented on college campuses (Dworsky & Perez., 2010). Some students who have taken part in foster care support programs on college campuses have evaluated the effectiveness of each of its elements, which is useful for future programs (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Gillum, et al., 2018). Outlined below is a list of potential interventions that could be implemented during the transition out of foster care, as well as on college campuses to better support former foster youth.

**Financial Support**

**Transition Interventions.** When thinking about the challenges that they faced during their transition out of foster care, many former foster children in the current study mentioned their lack of financial skills, literacy, and lack of access to funds. It is important that future efforts are made to mitigate this issue. Foster parents can receive targeted education and programming focused on the teaching of financial skills to their transitional age foster children. Additionally, foster parents can be strongly encouraged to help their foster children learn to budget and save money for their future emancipation. Lastly, it would be helpful if all transitional age foster children and foster parents alike were informed about the types of funding, scholarships, and opportunities that are available to help support newly emancipated foster youth. Case and social workers can relay this information to the families they support.

**College Interventions.** Previous research has found that scholarships and financial assistance were highly rated by former foster youth (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Gillum et al., 2018). Former foster youth in the current study endorsed having financial struggles they were unable to solve as they entered college and many expressed experiencing distress over their
financial debt due to the cost of living, as well as tuition and other school expenses. Higher education poses a large financial burden to many young adults, but for former foster youth, it is often overwhelming. To make higher education accessible to former foster youth, campus support programs should include financial aid that is able to cover their variety of expenses. Additionally, teaching financial skills and literacy should be provided, since many foster youth report not receiving this kind of instruction while they were in the foster care system.

Housing Assistance

**Transition Interventions.** As reported above in the discussion section, some states have programs that support the housing needs of recently emancipated foster youth. One such example is the Supervised Independent Living (SIL) program ran in North Dakota. This program, and others like it, allows foster youth who have aged out of the system to obtain safe and affordable (or free) housing after their transition. Often these housing interventions have requirements such as holding a full-time job or attending a secondary education program. With the increased risk of homelessness in foster youth after emancipation, it is imperative that systems be in place to help these vulnerable youth.

**College Interventions.** The second service reported to be of high importance to former foster youth enrolled in campus support programs was housing assistance (Dworsky & Perez, 2010). Former foster youth in the current study expressed being unable to find housing because they had no one who could cosign for them, or they were unable to find housing within their price range. One participant in the current study talked about having nowhere to go during school breaks (e.g., spring break, winter break). Gillum and colleagues’ (2018) review of an existing campus support included break housing as a service for students and found that ninety percent of the students who utilized it indicated that it was very to extremely helpful. Campus support
programs with the goal of helping former foster youth succeed on campus should consider including a service that assists with finding housing for older students and provides a place for students who live in the dorms to go during school closures.

**Academic & Career Guidance**

**Transition Interventions.** Many former foster youth in the current study emphasized the disappointment they felt and struggle they endured trying to navigate and plan their future. It seems possible that high quality and consistent foster parents and child welfare workers could reduce the severity of this issue. As discussed above, the child welfare system has struggled to retain social workers over the past decade, which some have linked to a decrease in the quality of services able to be provided. Additionally, the foster parents in the current study mentioned that high turnover rates of social and case workers effected their transitional age foster children’s ability to trust anyone new after having to say goodbye to others with whom they built rapport. This issue is complex, but in a perfect world, social workers would stay with their foster children throughout their entire foster care journey and be a consistent support person able to offer career and academic advice catered to their clients’ needs. Similarly, foster parents can be given target training and education surrounding the topics of helping with goal setting and life guidance with their transitional age foster children. This type of intervention could potentially be very important based on research that says that supportive and trusting adults can be a protective factor for at-risk youth (Meng et al., 2018).

**College Interventions.** Past research has found that foster youth benefit from support in choosing their courses and from career service programs (Dworsky & Perek, 2010; Gillum et al., 2018). Former foster youth in the current study expressed a desire for more life guidance and
future planning during their transition out of foster care, but the usefulness of this type of service is likely beneficial at all stages of young adulthood. Some did, however, mention that their advisors were extremely helpful in answering their questions about their college majors and planning their educational timeline. Campus support programs should include advisors who specifically work with students enrolled in the program and are trained to take additional time to discuss the student’s goals for their education and career.

**Social Support**

**Transition and College Interventions.** The campus support program reviewed by Gillum and colleges (2018) did not offer any services related to social support. Furthermore, of the campus support programs reviewed by Dkworsky and Perez (2010), there was only one service related to social support, which was mentoring. Mentoring was reported to be utilized by over half of the respondents, but only around fifty percent rated it as being important or very important. However, over eighty percent of respondents reported that they felt they were provided with a sense of family by being enrolled in the campus support program. In contrast, former foster students in the current study reported feeling alone on campus and many desired social support groups to attend with peers who come from similar backgrounds. This finding is important to note because the act of belonging to a designated campus support program could likely increase feelings of belongingness, as well as offer opportunities for former foster youth to connect with one another, thereby increasing social support. Campus support programs should be created to help increase social support for former foster students on campus. Social support groups, or social events should be offered as a service, as this has been a desire of former foster students on campus, as highlighted in several previous studies (Avant et al., 2021; Gillum et al., 2018; Kincaid, 2021). Similarly, former foster children who do not choose the college route
could also benefit from these same supports. In both the current study and Kincaid’s (2021) study, former foster youth reported wishing for social support groups focused on connecting youth who come from similar backgrounds. Creating social support groups for students from non-traditional family backgrounds could be fairly easily achieved and impactful.

**Mental Health**

**Transition Interventions.** Though mental health did not emerge as a theme in the current study, it is a well-researched concern for the foster youth population as a whole (Choi et al., 2020; Felitti et al., 1998; Teicher & Samson, 2013). Foster parents and child welfare workers should be aware of the immense toll that separation from biological families can take on children (Agid et al., 2000; AAP 2018; AAP 2017). The trauma that this type of event can inflict should be well known and steps should be taken to avoid lasting impacts. Foster children and their caregivers should be screened for mental health concerns and offered services. In a perfect world, all foster children would receive mental health services following their initial intake into the foster care system and mental health professionals could decide the course and length of treatment from there. Additionally, as one foster parent in the current study suggested, a mentor type intervention could be helpful for transitional age children still in care. The former foster youth in the current study mentioned that it was difficult to relate to same-age peers because it felt like they could not fully understand their experiences as a former foster youth. For this reason, a mentorship intervention between older, previously transitioned former foster youth and current transitional age foster youth could be impactful and fulfill the need for social support from others to whom they can relate.
**College Interventions.** All campus support programs reviewed offered some sort of mental health support or services. The campus support program reviewed by Gillum and colleagues (2018) found that well over half of the students who utilized the counseling services provided through the program said that it was moderately or strongly influential in helping them adjust to college. In the campus support programs reviewed by Dworsky and Perez (2010), program directors talked about the importance of making referrals to counseling services, and sixty percent of the student respondents reported getting a referral from the campus support program for counseling services. Although the former foster youth in the current study did not frequently talk about mental health issues, it was mentioned by some that they felt they had undiagnosed learning and behavioral disorders, or ongoing PTSD symptoms, as a result of their adverse experiences. Given that foster children experience increased mental health issues while in foster care and once they are emancipated (Zoltnick et al., 2012), it would be beneficial for campus support programs designed to help former foster students succeed in college to include pathways to mental health services.
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Appendix A

Demographic Questionnaire

All Participants

1. Please indicate your gender: __________
2. Please indicate your age: __________
3. Please indicate your race: ________

Former Foster Children

1. Please indicate your year in college
   a. Freshman
   b. Sophomore
   c. Junior
   d. Senior
2. How old were you when you entered foster care?
3. How old were you when you exited foster care?
4. How many placement changes did you experience?

Foster Parents

1. How many years have you been a foster parent?
2. Please estimate how many children you have fostered.
3. What is the average length of stay for a foster child in your home?
Appendix B

Foster Parent - Semi Structure Interview Outline

These questions will be used as a guide to direct the interviews with foster parents.

- How do you view your role in the emancipation process?
- What conversations have you had with your foster children surrounding emancipation?
  - Specifically, detail and describe the information and advice you have shared surrounding these topics:
    - Educational options
    - Career options
    - Financial skills
    - Securing housing
    - Social support
- What information/training/resources have you relied on or referenced to help your foster children with the transition process?
- What do you consider to be the biggest challenges facing foster children as they transition out of foster care?
- What supports or resources do you think are missing and could be helpful in the process of trying to adequately prepare foster children for emancipation?
Appendix C

Former Foster Children - Semi Structure Interview Outline

These questions will be used as a guide to direct interviews with former foster youth currently in college.

- Emancipation experiences
  - Can you talk about the challenges you faced during your transition from foster care to adulthood?
    - What things do you think were missing in terms of supports or resources that would have benefited you throughout the process?
  - Can you talk about the things that went well during your transition from foster care to adulthood?
  - What personal strengths did you rely on to get you to where you are today?

- College experiences
  - What are the most difficult challenges you have faced in college?
    - What, if anything, do you think is missing in terms of supports and resources to help students like yourself succeed on campus?
  - Can you talk about the things that have gone well during college?
    - What supports and resources have you utilized on campus that you have found to be helpful?
Appendix D

Code Book

Foster Parent Interviews:

- Challenges
  - Definition: Challenges foster parents perceive foster children face as they transition

- Emancipation/Transition Preparation
  - Definition: Any steps foster parents have taken to help prepare their foster children for emancipation. Including, conversations, skills taught, actions taken.

- Missing Supports and Resources
  - Definition: Any resource, training, or community support, unavailable but desired to aid in the fostering of transitional age foster youth.

- Training and Resources Relyed on
  - Definition: Any resource, training, or community support utilized to aid in the fostering of transitional age foster youth.

Former Foster Youth Interviews:

- Emancipation
  - Challenges
    - Definition: Challenges that occurred during transition out of foster care.
  - Things That Went Well
    - Definition: Things that were helpful/beneficial during the transition process.

- College Experiences
- Challenges
  - Definition: Challenges Former foster youth report while attending college.
- Things That Went Well
  - Definition: Life factors that have improved while attending college.
- Personal Strengths relied on
  - Definition: Personal qualities, attributes, motivations, or experiences that an individual believes have led them to the success they are experiencing today.