FINAL REPORT

Higher Education as the Lifeline to Social Mobility for Former and Current Foster Youth:

A Comprehensive Needs and Assets Assessment

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This report represents the results of a two-year study, which examines the socio-emotional well-being, academic performance, and social support needs of current and former foster youth who attend college[1]. This two-year assessment utilized a mixed-method approach which includes two components: 1) An online, anonymous student "needs and assets assessment" conducted in 2016 by Drs. Doris M. Houston, Christopher Gjesfjeld, and Tiffany Gholson (See Part I); and 2) one-on-one qualitative interviews conducted in 2017 by Drs. Deneca Avant and Aimee Miller-Ott (see Part II). The qualitative portion of the study was conducted with a self-selected sub-set of the online survey participants. The qualitative methods helped to inform the results of the on-line survey and add to the reliability of research findings. Further, the qualitative interviews provided study participants with an opportunity to self-reflect and express in their own words what they viewed as their current educational needs, strengths, and level of social-emotional well-being.

The results of this study lay groundwork for institutions of higher education to better understand and address the needs of current and former foster youth who seek access to a college education. With a greater understanding of students' need and strengths, universities and community colleges will be better equipped to implement targeted support programs for this unique, non-traditional population of young adults who currently have a 4-6% chance of obtaining a college degree.

INTRODUCTION

Nationwide, more than 400,000 children and youth reside in foster care with only a 43-50% chance of ever returning home to a safe and stable family environment (Child Trends, 2015;

[1] Study participants consisted of current and former foster youth, some of whom were adopted while in foster care.

Rolock, 2011; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). Many transition out of state care as young adults without the benefit of economic security, family stability, social support or consistent educational preparation. Successful completion of a higher education program can serve as a critical turning point for this population of young adults as they strive to acquire credentials and skills necessary to succeed in adult life and break the cycle of poverty (Okpych, 2012; Peters, Dworsky, Courtney, & Pollack, 2009). Studies show that students who successfully complete a college degree program are likely to increase their lifetime earning potential by more than $480,000 on average (Peters, Dworsky, Courtney, & Pollack, 2009). Furthermore, exposure to higher education creates a new trajectory of social mobility for young adults from foster care who are otherwise more likely than their peers to experience homelessness (46.6%), multiple out-of-wedlock births (60%), and drug and alcohol dependence (8%), while rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are twice that of military veterans (Casey Family Services, 2005).

While access to higher education yields many social and economic advantages for former and current foster youth, higher education institutions have not been successful in attracting, supporting, and retaining these students (Day, Dworsky, Fogarty, & Damashek, 2011). The Annie E. Casey Foundation and others have found that but for a small handful of institutions, most colleges and universities lack the knowledge-base to address the unique needs and circumstances of students with a history of abuse, trauma, and family instability (Davis, 2006; National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014). Specifically, inadequate academic preparedness for college due to multiple school changes and insufficient access to student support services poses unique challenges for this population (Day, Dworsky, Fogarty & Damashek, 2011; Okpych, 2012; Peters, Dworsky, Courtney, & Pollack, 2009). Furthermore, lack of family guidance and worries about younger siblings can create additional stressors, which affect the likelihood of

college enrollment and completion among students from foster care (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010; Unrau, Font, & Rawls, 2012). Finally, students from traumatic family environments may also face social and emotional difficulties such as anxiety, depression, stress, and lack of social support which can impede their ability to persist academically (Casey Family Services, 2005; Courtney, Dworsky, Cusick, Havicek, Perez, & Keller, 2007).

Despite these obstacles, students from foster care who do make it to college often possess tremendous leadership ability, life wisdom, and resilient qualities. These attributes can enhance their chances of academic success if provided with the supports they need to succeed (Cicchetti, Rogosch, & Holt, 1993; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010; Unrau et. al., 2012). Two separate studies found that in college, students from foster care are generally more motivated to succeed compared to their peers. They also demonstrate more confidence in their college instructors and more resilience in the face of adversity (Merdinger, Hines, Lemon Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005; Unrau et. al., 2012). While an emerging body of research attempts to better understand the experiences of college students coming from foster care, these studies are largely descriptive in nature. This study represents an additional contribution to the previous research through an examination of students' resilient qualities and needs, in relation to academic performance and use of supportive resources.

CENTRAL RESEARCH QUESTION:

To what extent do resilient qualities, personal challenges, and use of academic and social supports influence academic performance among current and former foster youth who attend college?

PART ONE:
STUDENT NEEDS AND ASSETS
ONLINE ASSESSMENT

METHOD

Participants

Approximately 350 students enrolled in Illinois institutions of higher education as former or current foster youth were invited to participate in an anonymous online survey developed by Illinois State University researchers. The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (IDCFS) assisted in this effort by identifying eligible students for the study based on their participation in one of three of the following financial aid programs administered by IDCFS: 1) Youth in College Program (YIC), 2) Youth in Scholarship Program (YIS), or the 3) Education and Training Voucher Program (ETV). Of the 350 emails that were sent out to potential participants, 112 students initiated the on-line assessment which yielded 74 completed surveys and a 66% completion rate.

Context for Data Collection

It should be noted that the data collection period was accelerated by three months at the request of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. Whereas the initial data collection period was scheduled to begin in September of 2015 while students were enrolled in class, IDCFS officials who agreed to identify participants expressed concerns that all eligible participants were at risk of losing funding to attend college in the fall of 2015 due to a pending Illinois budget proposal which would have eliminated college support for IDCFS-involved students. If the targeted students would have lost funding to attend school in the fall of 2015, it would have been extremely difficult to identify and locate potential participants given that this group made up the entire population of targeted participants for the study. Also, from an ethical

standpoint, the research team was concerned about seeking survey feedback from economically vulnerable participants who would have been in the midst of a financial crisis which could have limited their ability to enroll in classes during the 2015-2016 academic year. As a result of these unforeseen events, the research team made a decision to implement the survey portion of the study earlier than planned with the understanding that a summer data collection period would not be the most ideal as students would be more difficult to engage. Given this change in the data collection timeline, the research team, in partnership with the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, decided to collect the year-one survey data followed by a series of in-depth qualitative interviews to be administered in year-two of the study. A demographic description of the 74 respondents who completed the survey in the summer of 2015 is presented in Tables 1 and 2 of this report.

Study Procedures

All eligible participants over the age of 18 received an invitation to participate in the study via an electronic letter prepared by Illinois State University (ISU). To preserve confidentiality of the potential participants, the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services sent the ISU letter to all potential participants via an email that informed prospective participants about the research and their right to accept or decline participation. The email included an online link to the Illinois State University survey. The letter of consent, description of the study, and survey questions were contained within this online link. The email explicitly stated that the study was being conducted by Illinois State University, not IDCFS. Students who chose to complete the survey were offered a $20 e-gift card from Walmart if they chose to enter an email address at the end of the survey which was forwarded to a third party university official not affiliated with the research team. The third party official used the email provided to send the e-gift cards to participants.

Measures

One hundred and twenty-one items (including twenty personal background questions) were used to answer identified research questions. For this study, the following domains were assessed:

Personal strengths and talents. Gjesfjeld and Houston (2014) developed an exploratory assessment tool (Personal Strength Inventory) incorporating indicators of strength and resiliency identified in previous studies. Specific areas of this assessment tool include students' perceived strengths and talents in specific areas, including time management, peer relationships, resourcefulness, and determination. Indicators of personal strengths and talents were also assessed through modified survey items from the Gallup Organization's Clifton StrengthsFinder developed by Lopez, Hodges, and Harter (2005) and used in previous assessments of student leadership qualities.

Resilient qualities. We used a 6-item hardiness scale known as the Brief Resiliency Scale developed by Smith et al., (2008). This scale attempts to measure the degree to which an individual "bounces back" from various life adversities.

Student engagement. In higher education, co-curricular activities have been cited as an indicator of student strength and resilience as well as a predictor of academic success (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Zacherman & Foubert, 2014). Houston, Gjesfjeld, and Gholson (2014) developed an exploratory assessment of student engagement which asks students to select from a menu of various *activities or clubs* in which they currently participate.

Social support and networks. Social support is vital for all individuals, including college students. Yet, the type and amount of social support needed by college students previously in

foster care has not been explored. Gjesfjeld, Greeno, and Kim (2008) have confirmed the utility of 12-item social support survey (MOS-SSS; Sherbourne & Stewart, 1991) assessing subtypes of support including tangible, emotional, positive-interactional, and affectionate. The extent of these students' social networks were assessed with an adapted Social Network Index initially developed by Cohen et al., (1983). Access to *concrete aid* as another aspect of social support (See Houston & Kramer, 2008; Groze, 1994) was also assessed using 5 items which ask students to rate the frequency with which they accessed housing, employment, academic tutoring, housing and life skills assistance.

Psychological health. We assessed the *general stress* that students from foster care experience as they navigate college through a 4-item perceived stress survey (PSS) - a measure specific to determining basic stress (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983). Another 4-item scale, the PHQ-4, assessing *anxiety and depression*, is included because it has been used as a screening instrument for anxiety as well as depressive disorders (Kroenke, Spitzer, Williams, & Lowe, 2009). These are important variables because stress, anxiety, and depression can all influence the academic success of students.

Academic support. Utilizing a modified version of the "Campus Resource Survey" (Illinois State University, 2013), students were asked to identify their use of various academic supports and services. These services include academic tutoring and remediation, student counseling services, and many others.

Academic performance. Given that the current study seeks to promote student enrollment and retention, student grade information (e.g. GPA) concerning both the student's recent semester as well as cumulative GPA was self-reported.

Characteristics of Survey Participants

Gender, age, and school characteristics. The overwhelming majority of respondents were female (84%). Students were on average 20.6 years of age with 10% identifying as freshman, 24% as sophomores, 31% as juniors, and 26% as seniors. Ten percent reported recently completing their higher education program. The majority of the participants in this survey attended a 4-year public university (68%), 16% attended a 4-year private university, 12% attended a 2-year community college, and 4% attended a vocational school.

The majority of students surveyed reported majoring in the social sciences (30%), while science and technology degrees were being sought by 21% of students. Fourteen percent of students were pursuing a degree in education, 12% in theatre, and 18% were pursuing plans of study in business or a professional program such as nursing or social work (see Table 1).

Living arrangement, relationship status, and grade point average. In terms of living arrangement while in school, 29% of students in the study resided on campus, but the majority (71%) reported living off campus. When asked about their own relationships and parenthood, 95% reported being unmarried, 91% of these students had no children. Students' self-reported recent semester grade point average was fairly high, with 31.6% reporting a 3.5 or greater, and 86.4% reporting a recent semester GPA of over 2.5. (see Table 1).

Child welfare and maltreatment history. The mean age at which students entered foster care was 6.8 years (SD = 5.9) with a majority entering foster care as infants before the age of two (31%). Sixty percent resided with one or more sibling while in foster care, and 68% reported having 3 or more biological siblings. It is worth noting that 41% of students reported having more than five siblings (see Table 2).

Parental substance abuse was the number one reason students reported entering foster care (47%), with equal proportions reporting physical neglect or physical abuse (36.5%). A lack of supervision (30%), parental domestic violence (16%), and medical neglect (12%) were

experienced by some portion of these students prior to entering foster care.

Family and custody arrangement. Although all participants in the study have a documented history of child maltreatment and foster care placement, family custody arrangements varied significantly. For example, 40.6% of participants reported being legally adopted at some point during their childhood. An additional 18.9% reported living with a relative who maintained legal guardianship, while a total of 36.5% reported remaining under IDCFS guardianship or became emancipated from IDCFS guardianship as an adult.

Table 1: Characteristics of Former Foster Youth in Higher Education (*N* = 74)

	n	Valid %
Gender		
Male	12	16.2
Female	62	83.8
Age (years)		
18	2	2.7
19	13	17.6
20	20	27.0
21	20	27.0
22	16	21.6
23	3	4.1
Year in School (*N* = 72)		
Freshman	7	9.7
Sophomore	17	23.6
Junior	22	30.6
Senior	19	26.4
Graduated	7	9.7
Education Type		
4-year Public	50	67.6
4-year Private	12	16.2
2-year Community College	9	12.2
Vocational school	3	4.1
Major (*N* = 73)		
Social Science	22	30.2
Science/Technology	15	20.6
Education	10	13.7
Arts/Theatre	9	12.3
Business	7	9.6
Professional Program (Social Work, Nursing, etc.)	6	8.2

Other	5	5.5

Living Arrangement (*N* = 73)		
On-campus	21	28.8
Off-campus	52	71.2
Relationship Status		
Married	4	5.5
Unmarried or Single	70	94.5
Has Children	7	9.5
No children	67	90.5
Grade Point Average Recent Semester (*N* = 73)		
3.5 – 4.0	23	31.6
2.5 – 3.49	40	54.8
0 – 2.49	10	13.7

Table 2: Child Welfare and Maltreatment History (*N* = 74)

Characteristic	*n*	Valid %
Entered Foster Care (*N* = 73)		
≤ 1 year of age	23	31.5
2 – 4	10	13.7
5 – 7	10	13.7
8 – 10	6	12.2
11 – 13	8	11.0
14 – 17	16	21.9
In Care with Sibling (*N* = 73)		
Yes	44	60.3
No	29	39.7
# of Biological Siblings (*N* = 73)		
0	1	1.4
1 – 2	22	30.1
3 – 4	20	27.4
> 5	30	41.1
Circumstance(s) associated with Foster Care*		
Physical Neglect	27	36.5
Physical Abuse	27	36.5
Medical Neglect	9	12.2
Lack of Supervision	22	29.7
Parental Domestic Violence	12	16.2
Parental Substance Abuse	35	47.3
Family and Custody Arrangement*		
Adoption by relatives	10	13.5
Adoption by non-relatives	7	9.5
Adoption by foster parent	13	17.6

IDCFS guardianship	13	17.6
Legal guardianship by relatives	14	18.9
Emancipated	14	18.9
Other	3	4.1

*Does not total 100%; Student can endorse more than one circumstance

PART I RESULTS

Assessing Student Talents, Needs, and Stressors

Student talents and strengths. As one indicator of resilience, students self-assessed their perceived strengths and talents based on a 5-point Likert scale (1= Not strong whatsoever; 2= Not so strong; 3= Somewhat strong; 4= Very strong; 5= One of my best strengths). The results indicate that students rated themselves highest on *self-confidence* ("I take *personal pride* in my talents and accomplishments") and *resourcefulness* ("I generally find a way to get access to the things I need"). Their lowest scores were on help-seeking skills ("I am willing to seek help/support when needed"), time management ("I make the best use of my time and resources to accomplish my goals"), and study skills ("I am a planner and consistent in my study strategies") (see Table 3).

Table 3: Strengths and Talents (*N* = 74)

Characteristic	*M*	SD
Self-confidence	4.42	.57
Resourcefulness	4.26	.70
Self-discipline	4.14	.84
Influence	4.14	.87
Social Skills	4.05	.92
Determination	4.03	.97
Enthusiasm	3.95	1.00
Organizational Skills	3.93	.98
Creativity	3.89	.87
Focus	3.85	.89
Communication	3.81	.92
Help-seeking Skills	3.74	1.07
Time management	3.73	1.01

Study Skills	3.58	1.05

When further examining student strengths and talents through the lens of gender, we found statistically significant gender differences in the areas of *enthusiasm, influence, and help-seeking skills.* For these indicators of resilience, women maintained higher scores in perceived enthusiasm, influence, and help seeking skills (see Table 3a). Other variables did not significantly differ between male and female students. While we are unsure if gender distribution in our survey (84% female) is reflective of the differences in response, it is conceivable that male students either do not receive the same type or levels of social support, or they may perceive themselves to have lower skill levels in the areas assessed when compared to female students.

Table 3a: Comparison of Male and Female Students on Enthusiasm, Influence, and Help-Seeking Skills

Variable	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*
Enthusiasm			-2.38	72	.02
Males	3.33	1.07			
Females	4.06	.96			
Influence			-2.31	13.20*	.04
Males	3.50	1.09			
Females	4.26	.77			
Help-Seeking Skills			-2.25	71	.03
Males	3.09	1.22			
Females	3.85	1.00			

*The *t* and *df* were adjusted because variances were not equal.

Another significant difference in perceived strengths and talents was revealed when comparing students attending public 4-year institutions vs. private institutions. Specifically, Public institution students (N=50) had significantly higher mean scores than students at private 4-year institutions on 6 different domains (self-discipline, focus, time management, influence, determination, and help- seeking skills). While we cannot explain the direction of this effect, it is plausible that there are aspects of social comparison present in these findings. Based upon

common perceptions that private schools (accurately or not) are likely to admit more academically talented and well-resourced students, our sample of students in private institutions (N=12) may perceive themselves to be less academically talented and prepared because they are comparing themselves to more economically advantaged private school peers. Given that private schools are more likely to enroll students from higher income families and high resourced communities, these factors could conceivably contribute to our sample of students' perceived ability to "fit in". Moreover, if private institutions are not equipped to serve populations from non-traditional family settings, students from foster care may feel less of a sense of belonging in their academic setting. This could impact self-perception and willingness to utilize the campus resources that could help them achieve academically (Stewart, Makwarimba, Reutter, Veenstra, Raphael, & Love, 2009).

Student needs for campus support and assistance. Student participants were asked to identify the frequency with which they required specific assistance in the form of concrete aid while attending college. Concrete aid has been identified as a sub-component of social support and includes areas such as financial support and guidance, housing, academic support, employment, and life skills assistance. Students rated their need for concrete aid based on a 5-point Likert scale (1= Never; 2= Not usually; 3= Some of the time; 4= Most of the time; 5= Always) (see Table 4).

Table 4: How often have you needed help in these areas? (*N* = 74)

	M	SD
Finances	2.70	1.35
Academics	2.24	1.19
Employment	2.18	1.40
Housing	2.15	1.38
Life Skills	1.99	1.34

These results indicate that support in the area of *finances* (described as "having sufficient

income to make ends meet") was the main concern for these students. A paired samples *t* test indicated that finances was a statistically significant concern when compared to support in the area of *academics* (described as "study skills, writing, math, test anxiety, learning disability) $t(73)=3.13$, $p<.01$, $d=.36$. No significant gender differences were found in terms of these areas of need. This finding is particularly noteworthy in light of the context for this study which was conducted during a time when all of our participants faced financial uncertainties as to whether state-funded support for college would continue during the academic year.

Examining differences in support needs between 4-year private and public institutions, students at private universities (N=12) had significantly more needs across the support spectrum in academics, finances, housing, and personal life skills than public students (N=50) (Table 4a). These findings are consistent with the same direction of findings concerning differences in personal strengths and talents when comparing students from public vs. private institutions. Higher scores on finances and housing may also indicate additional costs or issues that are not readily present at lower cost public institutions. Overall, these findings give us some concerns about the integration of former and current foster youth in private higher education institutions. Are they and their institutions prepared to address their specific needs as students? Although the sample for this set of analyses is relatively small, the results suggest the need to further explore the differences between 4-year private and public institutions in relation to students' use of and access to support and concrete aid.

Table 4a: Comparison of Private and Public Students on Academic, Financial, Housing, and Life Skills Needs (N=62)

Variable	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*
Academics			2.40	60	.02
Public	2.06	1.17			
Private	3.00	1.41			
Finances			3.25	60	<.01

Public	2.44	1.20			
Private	3.75	1.49			
Housing			3.12	12.11*	<.01
Public	1.84	1.11			
Private	3.45	1.64			
Life Skills			2.24	13.22*	.04
Public	1.82	1.14			
Private	3.08	1.78			

Assessing Student Engagement and Academic Performance

Student engagement. Student participants were asked to select the activities in which they were engaged during the academic year. Students could select multiple items for this question- therefore, Table 5 indicates the proportion involved in a particular activity. When assessing student engagement in campus life, *volunteering, involvement in a sorority/fraternity, attending a church/faith organization,* and *sports* were found to be the most popular activities for these students. After developing a scale called "engagement" where we simply added student activities together, we examined student responses to the engagement categories in relation to their cumulative GPA. We found that students with higher cumulative GPAs greater or equal to 3.0 had greater involvement in these student activities ($p < .01$). Inspection of the group means indicate that higher achieving students indicated involvement in 2.9 activities whereas the lower achieving students indicated involvement in 1.4 activities. The relationship indicates a potential positive association between academic achievement and campus involvement. This is another area which needs to be examined further in future studies: Do students who engage in co-curricular activities have more of a *sense of belonging* which leads to increased levels of social support and higher academic performance? Or do higher performing, academically confident students engage in more co-curricular campus activities?

Table 5: Common Student Activities (*N* = 74)		
	%	N
Academic and professional		
Pre-professional Club	12.2	9
Academic Club	8.1	6
Academic Support	2.7	2
Research organization (e.g. McNair Scholars)	5.4	4
Service and leadership		
Community Volunteer	27.0	20
Student-led Organization (SRO)	16.2	12
Student Leadership	14.9	11
Service Learning	5.4	4
Social		
Sorority/Fraternity	21.6	16
Social Club	16.2	12
Student Housing Programming	2.7	2
Affinity		
Church/Faith Organization	23.0	17
Cultural Diversity Organization	6.8	5
Women's Organization	6.8	5
LGBTQ Organization	6.8	5
Parent Group	1.4	1
Health, fitness, adventure		
Sports (Intramural or organized)	20.3	15
Dance/Theatre/Art Club	16.2	12
Study Abroad	13.5	10
Politics, government, social justice		
Civil Rights Group	2.7	2
Political Organization	1.4	1
ROTC	1.4	1
Student Government	1.4	1

Assessing Usefulness of Academic and Campus Supports

Academic support. Students were asked to identify the *usefulness of various campus* supports and services. These services include academic tutoring and remediation, student health services, student counseling services, and many others (Table 6). Students rated their usefulness on a 5-point Likert scale (1= Very Useless; 2= Useless; 3= Neither; 4= Useful; 5= Very Useful (see Table 6). They could also indicate if they had not used these supports.

In assessing the most useful campus resources, study participants sited: financial aid (4.08), health care (3.80), campus housing (3.76), and academic advising (3.69) and summer internships (3.69) as the most useful followed by tutoring and employment services. While no gender differences were found, public university students reported academic advising and health care services as more useful to them than private university students, t (51) =-2.91, p<.01 and t (45) =-2.84, p<.01, respectively.

Table 6: Most Useful Campus Resources

	Usefulness (1-5)
Financial Aid*	4.08
Health Care*	3.80
Campus Housing*	3.76
Academic Advising*	3.69
Summer Internship	3.69
Tutoring*	3.65
Employment/career Services*	3.50
Faculty Mentoring*	3.44
Affordable Off-Campus Housing	3.36
Spiritual Worship	3.35
Credit Counseling	3.28
Counseling	3.24
Graduate School Advising	3.15
Peer Mentoring*	3.12
Childcare Services	3.12
Summer Break Housing	3.11
Case management Services	2.97
Network for foster youth	2.90
Disability Services	2.87
Legal Services	2.86
Sibling Visit Services	2.83
Adult Learner Services	2.80
Birth Family Reconciliation	2.77
Child Support Enforcement	2.66

*****These resources were utilized by over 65% of students.

Assessing Desire for Social Support

Desire for social support from family. Social support has been identified as nurturance, reinforcement for behavior, guidance, access to resources, or tangible aid (Tracy & Whittaker, 1990; Uchino, 2009; Whittaker & Garbarino, 1983). Supportive behaviors may also include approval, help, guidance, kindness, emotional help, information, and concrete aid (Groze, 1996; Houston & Kramer, 2008; Xu & Burleson, 2010). Participants completed a modified version of Xu and Burleson's (2010) "Desired and Experienced Levels of Support" scale to assess support they desired from others. Specific areas of this measure include students' desire for "affirmation", "doing things together", "advice", and "comfort when upset" among other items (Table 7). Participants rated their desire for familial social support based on a 5-point Likert scale (1= Didn't Want at All; 2= Wanted Rarely; 3= Wanted Occasionally; 4= Wanted Regularly; 5= Wanted a Great Deal).

Table 7: Desire for Social Support from Family (*N* = 74)

	M	SD
Desire for Affirmation	3.93	1.27
Desire for Doing Things Together	3.89	1.37
Desire for Advice	3.82	1.23
Desire for Being Taught	3.77	1.23
Desire for Being Close	3.74	1.21
Desire for Comfort When Upset	3.72	1.30
Desire for Tangible Support	3.36	1.37
Desire for Offer to Lend Something	3.26	1.40

The mean scores and differences indicate students wanted togetherness, affirmation, and emotional support from their caregivers (foster or adoptive parents) more frequently than specific tangible resources. In terms of gender differences, the significant differences in Table 7a were found. These three findings indicate male students report less desire for these types of social support.

Table 7a: Desire for Social Support by Gender					
Variable	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*
Comfort When Upset			-2.31	69	.02
Males	2.91	1.45			
Females	3.87	1.23			
Offer to Lend Something			-2.88	68	<.01
Males	2.25	1.22			
Females	3.46	1.35			
Do Things Together			-2.15	70	.04
Males	3.09	1.51			
Females	4.03	1.30			

Assessing Social-Emotional Functioning and Academic Performance

Psychosocial variables and academics. Participants took 4 brief instruments measuring resiliency, or the ability to "bounce back" from adversity (Smith et al., 2008), perceived stress (Cohen & Williamson, 1988), perceived availability of social support (MOS-SSS; Gjesfjeld, Greeno, & Kim; 2008), and psychiatric symptoms with the PHQ-4 (Kroenke, Spitzer, Williams, & Lowe, 2009), a commonly used screening tool for depression and anxiety disorders. This series of assessments was particularly important for our study participants given that former foster youth are more likely to cope with adverse childhood experiences (ACE) (i.e. abuse, neglect, trauma and family separation) as they transition to adulthood (Courtney et. al., 2007; Houston & Kramer, 2008).

Results of this assessment revealed that eight participants reported severe psychiatric symptoms with six of these eight reporting childhood physical neglect. For the more than 1/3 that experienced physical neglect as a child, their PHQ-4 scores were 2.2 points higher. Results also indicated that resiliency and stress were significantly associated with PHQ-4 scores (see Table 8a).

Table 8a: Psychosocial Variables		
	M	SD
PHQ-4: Psychiatric Symptoms	3.42	3.43
PSS-4: Perceived Stress	16.4	12
Resiliency	21.9	16
MOS-SSS: Perceived Social Support	50.7	37

We also examined the relationship between these variables and academic grades. Specifically, separate T-tests comparing two groups of students (GPA at or below 2.5 vs. GPA over 2.5). While no differences were found in students' recent semester, students in the higher cumulative GPA group (N=48) had significantly higher mean social support scores compared to students with lower cumulative GPA (N=25), t (71) =2.16, p<.04. These results highlight the importance of social support in promoting academic achievement.

Psychosocial variables and psychological health. Stepwise multiple regression was conducted to determine the accuracy of psychosocial variables (perceived stress, resilience, perceived social support, desire for familial support, and engagement) in predicting psychiatric symptoms measured by the PHQ-4. Results indicate that the overall model with 2 predictors significantly predicted symptoms, R^2=.39, R^2_{adj}=.37, F(2,62) = 19.68, p<.01.

Table 8b: Model Predicting Anxiety and Depression Symptoms					
	B	*ß*	*t*	*P*	Partial *r*
Perceived Stress (PSS-4)	.66	.55	5.38	<.01	.56
Resilience	-1.03	-.21	-2.11	.04	-.21

Perceived stress had a strong positive relationship with symptoms, while personal resilience had a smaller but significant negative relationship to symptoms. In summary, greater stress had a strong relationship with psychiatric symptoms, yet those with greater resiliency were less likely to experience those symptoms.

Predictors of Academic Performance

Grade Point Average (GPA) and Potential Predictors. Student participants were asked to self-report their most recent semester as well as their cumulative GPA. We were interested in if various attributes were associated with higher GPA. In terms of their recent semester, 35.6% (N=26) of students had a GPA under 3.0, whereas 64.4% (N=47) of students had a GPA of 3.0 or higher. When we compared scores on resilience, desire for support, perceived social support, depression/anxiety symptoms, perceived stress, we found *no significant mean differences.*

When we examined concrete aid, students with a *lower recent GPA noted that they had a greater need for academic help* (M=2.77/5) than students with higher GPA (M=1.98/5), t (71) = -2.85, p<.01. This suggests that lower performing students are aware of their academic needs. Ironically, we also found that *lower GPA students had higher scores on several self-reported strengths*. Whereas higher achieving students identified that they had more self-discipline than students with a lower GPA, lower performing students reported greater strength levels in the areas of *resourcefulness* and *help-seeking skills*. While these strengths were not predictors of achievement, they may have served as internal protective mechanisms to keep students engaged during periods of academic under-performance.

Table 9: Comparison of GPA with Resourcefulness and Help-Seeking Skills					
Variable	*M*	*SD*	*T*	*df*	*p*
Help-Seeking			-2.05	71	.04
< 3.0	4.08	.89			
≥ 3.0	3.55	1.10			
Resourcefulness			-2.76	71	<.01
< 3.0	4.54	.76			
≥ 3.0	4.09	.62			
Self-Discipline			1.96	70	.054
< 3.0	3.88	.91			
≥ 3.0	4.28	.78			

SUMMARY OF SURVEY RESULTS

Based on syntheses of the above data, several themes emerged. These themes will set the stage for dialogue with stakeholders, decision makers, and research partners. Moreover, these themes will provide a structure and context to complete additional research and critical exploration:

#1: Survey participants are confident, doing well academically, and are predominately female. In terms of most recent semester grades, over 85% of students report a GPA over 2.5 (a 2.0 GPA is required to maintain the scholarship), with nearly a third having a GPA between 3.5 and 4.0. While it is unclear if our sample is an accurate representation of all former and current foster youth in Illinois higher education institutions, the self-reported GPA of these students does suggest that those who utilize the scholarship have achieved a degree of academic success in higher education. It should be noted however, that there are currently no mechanisms to assess the academic performance of students who exited their institutions of higher education before degree completion. Further, there is no current mechanism to assess the grades of former and current foster youth who attend college without the financial support of IDCFS. In terms of self-identified strengths, participants perceive themselves as "self-

confident" and "resourceful", but self-rate their specific study skills and time management skills much lower. In the current assessment, the majority of respondents were female (84%), which is reasonable to expect given the gender breakdown of scholarship and stipend recipients (249 females and 101 males). While the underrepresentation of male students may limit our current knowledge about their pathways to higher education, some clues may be found in our survey results in terms of self-perceived strengths and talents. Female students had greater enthusiasm, influence on others, and more willing to seek-out help than male students. It is not inconceivable that these gender differences in our sample impacted admission and success in higher education.

#2: Childhood experiences can impact psychological well-being in higher education. While physical neglect was not found to be associated with GPA, we did find that students who reported childhood physical neglect (N=27) had mean PHQ-4 scores 2.2 points higher than students not reporting physical neglect (N=46), t (71) = -2.77, p<.01. To give some greater context to this finding, physical neglect was experienced by 36.5% of the sample. However, when we examine the 8 students with severe psychiatric symptoms in our sample, 75% of this group noted physical neglect in childhood. This finding highlights the importance that counseling services must be advertised and available to these students. This is particularly important because students previously in foster care may have ambivalent feelings about helping professionals based on their past experiences. Though well-being and social emotional factors are often touted as being important, the effort to address some of those factors in college doesn't seem to be enough. Many colleges have institutional learning standards that measure academic outcomes but most have no explicit measure of student well-being (Wexler, 2016). Because of the often distressing perception of youth in foster care, it would seem that the ones who have achieved acceptance into college may also feel more pressure to succeed which could

encourage higher rates of feelings of poor well-being. As research grows in this area, measures of well-being and future self-sufficiency (e.g. household wage, neighborhood location, stable support system, college alumni connection) must be noted.

#3: Finances are the #1 concern of these students. Finances were a greater concern for students than other domains. First, these financial concerns highlight the importance of any sustained IDCFS assistance for education. Second, financial insecurity remains a concern for students even after financial assistance is provided which may indicate that the current level of financial support, while extremely valuable, may be insufficient nevertheless. For example, a recent report by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD, 2015) indicates that the average cost of room and board for college students is $9,804.00 per academic year. This expense does not include the additional three months of housing expenditures that are required for the average student during the summer months when school is not in session. When academically vulnerable students experience income insecurity, they are much more likely to compromise their focus on academics by holding down multiple part time jobs. For this population of college students, income and housing insecurity are of particular concern given that they are less likely to be able to secure financial support from trusted family members to help them bridge the financial gap. Based on the results of this study, *financial aid* was seen as the most useful resources when compared with all other resources. This finding highlights the importance of a sustained financial safety-net and financial literacy support for former foster youth attending college.

#4: Desired connection and support from families. Whereas college students are generally considered young adults who strive for independence, our study participants demonstrate the ongoing need for support, nurturance, social interaction, and affirmation from family members. Further, in contrast to the research literature indicating that during college,

students seek to develop autonomy from families (e.g., Harrigan & Miller-Ott, 2013), students in this study specifically expressed the need and desire for emotional comfort, time spent together, and family members' willingness to lend resources when needed. This finding sheds light on the fact that students with a background of family disruption, abuse, and neglect may not have the necessary social support and access to resources from family members as they negotiate a critical developmental milestone into adulthood. The lack of necessary support from family members and trusted adults may increase the level of social and academic vulnerability among this group of students when compared with their peers who attend college.

Interestingly, the need for social support from family members also differed by gender. Previous research (e.g., Martínez-Hernáez, Carceller-Maicas, DiGiacomo, & Ariste, 2016) has revealed that emerging adult men and women desire different types and amounts of social support. Male students did not express the need for these specific supports to the level of their female counterparts which may suggest that a broader range of assessment is needed to adequately capture the social support needs of male students as well as other gender identity issues. As universities expand their academic reach to include students from vulnerable populations, it may behoove them to identify resources within the community such as adult mentors and host families who can help to fill the void experienced by students who lack sufficient family support. Additionally, academic counselors, financial aid officers, and professors need to be educated regarding the disparities that are inherent when students do not have consistent support from parents and other adult figures. Currently, university policies are established on the assumption that students have reliable family members whom they can turn to for emotional support and concrete assistance such as assistance with financial aid applications, new semester move in days, support and companionship during holidays and breaks, and access

to needed financial resources when needed. Institutions of higher education may need to re-think these assumptions if there is a desire to recruit and sustain greater numbers of students from foster care and other non-traditional family settings. Therefore, it seems pertinent as to whom students consider as their support network and what factors make them identify those people. Such information could help child welfare agencies other human service providers as they seek family permanency for youth.

#5: Interventions to improve academic performance and psychological health may involve different key predictors. In our survey, we found campus engagement and social support associated with GPA, whereas stress, resiliency, and a history of physical neglect had significant relationships with psychological health. We see these different results as an example of how interventions to improve the higher education experience must be comprehensive and take into account both social factors and individual factors that impact student success and well-being.

PART TWO:
QUALITATIVE STUDENT INTERVIEWS

CENTRAL RESEARCH QUESTION:

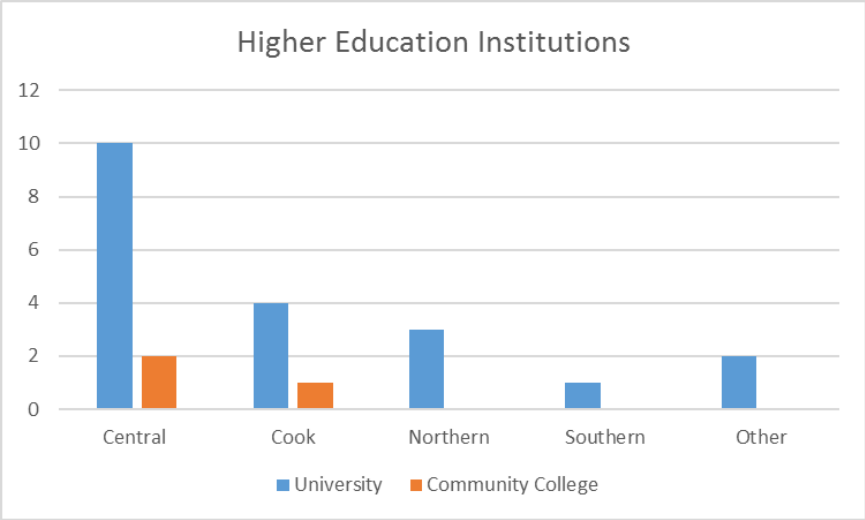
What are the factors that contribute or impede well-being and academic performance among current and former foster youth as they navigate college?

Interview Participants

Part II of the study consisted of a self-selected sub-set of students who were eligible to participate in Part I of the study. Specifically, a convenience sampling of current and former foster youth attending college with the financial assistance from IDCFS were invited to participate in the interview portion of the study. From the invitation, twenty-three interviewees were identified to participate in the qualitative assessment. Over half (57%) of the sample identified as White/Caucasian with over one-third of respondents (39%) African-Americans and the smallest group (0.4%) as Latino. All participants were at least 18 years of age or older and enrolled in a university or college. As is typical of students enrolled in college, the majority (83%) were female with 17% being male.

The majority (92%) of the respondents were enrolled in a university or college within the state of Illinois, while .09% were attending an institution outside of Illinois. Eighty-seven percent of the schools attended were four-year institutions of higher education, whereas three of the institutions were Community Colleges. Over half (52%) of these higher education institutions were located in the Central region of Illinois, while one-third (35%) of the institutions were in Cook (Chicagoland) and Northern regions of the state, and .08% located outside of Illinois in Michigan and Indiana (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Higher Education Institution Type by Geographic Region



Procedures

Survey participants from Part I of the online study were identified by IDCFS to receive an invitation to participate in the follow-up interviews based on their participation in the Youth in College and Youth in Scholarship programs. To avoid releasing students' confidential contact information before they have agreed to participate in the study, a designee from IDCFS forwarded potential students an email informing them of the study and referring them to an attached recruitment letter prepared by ISU, which contained the study details. This correspondence provided study logistics, research criteria, and assurance that participant responses would be voluntary and confidential. Potential participants also received the year-one survey results in the form of a research brief (student version) along with the offer of a $20.00 gift card as an incentive to participate in the interview. All students who completed the interview had their names entered into two drawings for a $100 gift card. Students who indicated their willingness to participate were asked to self-identify by the response deadline. Those interested were asked to email their contact information to the research team so they could be contacted directly to schedule the interview session. To ensure students' level of comfort, they were provided the option of having

the interview conducted at their local IDCFS office, their educational institution, or in a private location away from the campus (i.e., coffee shop) of their choosing.

Following the recruitment process, 60-90 minute face-to-face and Skype interviews were conducted to better understand students' perspectives regarding their social and emotional well-being and their academic adjustment as they matriculate through college. Interviews began with students granting written permission to be included in the study. The interviews allowed researchers to probe further in understanding the perspectives of students regarding their college and overall life experience. While an audio recording of the interview was not mandatory, all interviews were recorded for transcription accuracy. To protect the confidentiality of participants, transcribed interview access was restricted to the researchers. Students were provided a code for identity to protect from identification.

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative research design. Qualitative research is the collection of extensive narrative data in a naturalistic setting. Qualitative research is ideal for discovering underlying meanings and patterns of relationships. Given that students transitioning from foster care rarely have influence over the programs and policies designed to assist them, it is imperative that their voices are heard. Ultimately, the interview process provided the researchers an opportunity to obtain a greater depth of information and clarify statements from the research participants.

Instrumentation

Interviews allowed students to self-identify the factors that contributed to their social and emotional well-being and academic performance as they navigate college. This study utilized an instrument composed of 21 open-ended questions and follow up probes. Questions inquired about

factors that influenced students' decision to attend college such as messages received, provided resources, college visits during high school and overall preparation for pursuing higher education. Interview questions also inquired about specific experiences as a college student. For example, involvement in campus extracurricular activities, students' personal descriptions of their strengths, challenges and use of campus resources and the role that race and gender has played in their experiences were asked. In addition, interview questions asked about students' social/emotional well-being and experiences that promoted or encouraged positive life development. Lastly, needed supports and services to ensure academic and life success following college was discussed as well as advice for other youth in foster care who may be considering their pursuit of higher education.

Data Analysis

Interview responses were filtered and information was analyzed and organized into themes. Content analysis focused on ascertaining identifiable themes and patterns in an effort to group the common themes that arose in participants' responses (Engel & Schutt, 2012). Themes that emerged most frequently in the responses were considered as factors that contributed to student perceptions and their collective experiences, whereas themes that were mentioned rarely were revisited to see if they could be incorporated as a sub-theme or should be discarded. This data-driven analysis process required constant comparison and grounded theory techniques as referred to by Strauss and Corbin (1998). This study included a code-recode procedure as narrative responses were reviewed and matched to the identified themes. This method of organizing data determined which themes formed a comprehensive picture for addressing social work students' readiness for practice in diverse environments.

Co-analysis triangulation was used to validate themes and strengthen the trustworthiness of data (Lauri, 2011). Co-analysis triangulation provided an opportunity for authors to review

findings to understand multiple ways of seeing the data, hence providing selective perception and illuminating blind spots. When disagreements arrived, authors provided additional perspectives to review the findings data and thus achieve a final coding. This method of organizing and triangulating data was selected to ensure a well-developed and comprehensive analysis for addressing the study research questions.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW RESULTS (PART II)

Three main themes regarding foster youths' experiences with college emerged from their interview data: 1) The importance of pre-college support and encouragement prior to college enrollment, 2) External and internal factors influencing college adjustment, 3) Strategies for managing stress during college.

Support/Encouragement to Attend College

Within this theme, there were three significant factors that influenced foster youth's decision making related to college – 1) deciding whether to attend college, 2) deciding which college to attend (and applying for college and financial aid), and 3) remaining in college in spite of family and academic stressors.

Factors influencing college attendance. When talking about deciding whether to go to college, many participants talked about how it was always assumed and expected that they would go to college, that college was the natural next step after high school. As Chris recalled, *"It was just instilled in me that after twelfth grade I would go on to college." Stacy explained that "College was always kind of an assumption, I knew I was going to go."* Jane said, *"It was basically not an option for us not to college."* As Lauren explained, *"I was obviously pushed towards higher education, especially because my foster mom and her boyfriend…there was always, always, always a push for higher education."*

Stability in living arrangements while in foster care appeared to have an impact on college attendance expectations. For example, differences emerged in messages and expectations about college based on whether the foster youth were in the same placement throughout high school. If they were not, the messages were inconsistent and at times, contradictory. For instance, as Kayla explained: *"I was adopted [from foster care] and I lived with them [her adoptive family] from 3 to 15 years old. So college was always assumed, I was always going to do college. It was always there, I always knew that I was going to go. But, once I entered the group homes and everything, they never said anything about it but I still knew that I was going to do it*." Demonstrating consistency in foster placement, Michael recalled: *"I was lucky enough to stay in the same foster care throughout high school, when I began living with them in beginning of high school they were like, "Hey, this is preparing you for college, keep that in the back of your mind for everything you do because things you do today will kind of influence what is about to happen in the next few years."*

Foster parents' college and career experiences also seemed to influence the type of support and information about college that foster youth received. Amara recalled that she received messages from her foster parents *"Telling me about like their experience or about what they did."* Michael also recalled that *"They stressed [college] a lot, my foster dad was a psychologist; he would always talk to me and make sure I was in a good position, working towards a brighter future."* Aisha explained that her foster mother was all about her going to school. "She was like *'Yeah, keep going, don't stop.' My foster dad, he ended dropping out. He would say, 'Aisha, I swear to God, you better go to school."*

Some participants recalled their foster families pushing them to "aim higher," that is, to be more successful than what people perceive foster youth to be. As Ayana explained, *"I didn't really receive any messages, I was just told that I needed to go college and I wasn't allowed to go*

to a community college. I needed to aim higher." Michael similarly explained that *"I think my foster parents were very supportive of me going to college. They pushed the idea that I needed to be successful. I couldn't stoop to the level of just another kid in the system."*

While foster parents did convey some messages about college, foster youth also described talking about college with school personnel. This information, assistance, and encouragement laid the foundation for youth to consider college as an option. As Cathy recalled one of the things they [staff from colleges who came to her high school] often said is, *"If you don't go to college you won't be able to get a good job to take care of yourself." So it was one of those things where it was necessary to go to college because so many places require a degree and they wanted to makes sure that I at least had a chance."*

Similarly, Natalie recalled her school counselor and caseworker "*giving me all the information I needed about financial aid and different programs that could benefit me in the long run for college."* In fact, Chloe reported not getting any messages or assistance from her foster family but instead talked about college with a teacher in high school. She recalled: *"We actually became close and when the time came to apply for school they were present. They asked me if I applied and if I needed help filing out applications."*

Factors influencing college selection. Once students decided to attend college, there were a variety of factors that impacted which college the foster youth attended. The most common factors reported were financial aid, distance from family, majors/programs offered, and size of school. The "feel" of the school was also commonly reported. Cathy explained that:
"I wanted to come here because it was small. I went to a school where my graduating class was 62 other people. So, I wanted a small community where I could ease my way into the big college life. One of the great things about a small college is I know a lot of the professors. I like the small community because I know if I need help with psychology, I know I can go to the professor and

get help." As Aisha explained: *"I met a lot of the faculty and professors. They seemed really, really welcoming and I felt like I was wanted here. I felt like it was a magnet pulling me. I even looked at the classrooms, you know, it just gives a warm and welcoming feeling."*
Likewise, Kelly said, *"I decided on the school because during, like, the year when you first get there they get you in classes that prepare you more, they keep you accountable."*

Participants often talked about seeking support for applying to and starting college. The people in their lives, along with the resources available at school, were the primary sources of support. First, supportive people included family, high school personnel, and case workers. Family provided a support network for college. Sammy explained that *"My aunt was the biggest advocate/ motivator for school, she helped with completing college applications, especially when I was overwhelmed and wanted to quit because it was difficult."* Similarly, Jennifer said that *"My grandma is a helicopter parent so she would be on top of making sure I filled out forms and sent them back. My family also helped me figure out what I needed to bring with me and what kind of people I needed to talk to once I got to campus."*

Michael explained that they [his foster parents] did that stuff well: *"I was able to function, keep schedules, task completion and manage my resources, so that when I got to college world I could manage my time correctly. I also learned how to clean, do laundry, look for jobs, [manage] bank account, and act appropriate in business settings."*

Foster youth also recalled high school staff, specifically teachers and guidance counselors, providing support during the application and transition to college. As Chris recalled, *"I attended a college prep high school. I had love, encouragement, and support of my teachers and teammates and faculty and staff and all them wanting to see us all do better."* Gabrielle also mirrored similar experiences: *"My school was very supportive in high school, my counselors… They made us take*

the practice three times before we took the actual ACT test. We even had a day we invited our parents to the school and they taught them how to fill out our financial aid forms."

Lastly, case workers were helpful in the college and financial aid application processes. Eva explained that *"I had a really awesome caseworker who I still talk to all the time. She is the one that helped me on debut day and my financial aid. She is the one that really helped me get things together for college."* Natalie also explained that: *"After my senior year of high school my counselor and my case worker coached me in getting the feel for filling out financial aid. My case worker sat me down and helped me fill out the necessary paperwork for financial aid. She helped me with any questions I may have for that."*

While other people did help many of the foster youth, some participants in the study explained doing a lot of the preparation themselves. Sammy explained that *"I had to do it on my own, figure out how to apply how to figure out funding. I worked really hard on my grades and I applied for scholarships."* Similarly, Jennifer explained that *"I did some research on it [colleges], like what I needed to know or what the first few years would be like… I am the first one in my family to have a traditional college degree."* Cathy explained that: "*My foster parents encouraged me to look [at the DCFS scholarship], but didn't really go through it with me. In hindsight, it would have been nice because I was a first-generation college student. It would've been a lot easier to have help while going through that."*

External and Internal Factors Influencing College Adjustment

Importance of Campus Support. Whereas the online study indicated students' *desire to have more support from family members*, interview participants indicated that in actuality, they relied less on family and more on the resources and people available at college. Many participants talked about joining clubs geared toward their majors and other interests, seeking tutoring

services, working with career services for job preparation, and seeking assistance from professors. In fact, contact with faculty seemed to be a common source of support for foster youth when in college. Natalie explained that, "If I struggle I found myself going to my teachers personally or emailing them because it's usually more course-specific." Mia explained that: *"I usually try to friend them [her professors] because I get along better with professors than I do with students, just because maybe the age difference. I've had a lot of professors encourage me to apply to grad school and I tell them what I plan to do and they recommend me to other professors and that's helped a lot."*

Some also talked about going to counseling on campus. *Ayana explained that "I do go to counseling, I just started going. It really helps to sit down with someone who wants to listen instead of having to listen.*"

Sustained Support from child welfare agency. Many participants addressed support from the state of Illinois and DCFS when talking about finances. As Mia recalled: *"I applied for the DCFS scholarship and I think two other ones and I got two of them so I'm at school with those two scholarships."* Similarly, Ayana explained that: "*Since I was in the foster care system I applied for the DCFS scholarship. So I get $511 a month and they pay for my books and the only thing I have to pay for is my room and board, so that's exciting."* Similarly, Amara explained: *"To be honest, I mean that's money that will help me out and instead of having to work full time, lots of hours just to make ends meet I can work you know maybe you know part time and stay in school because that's what I had made up my mind I wanted to do it I wanted to stay in school but if I didn't have the youth in college it's like how am I gonna do that? You know, I have a son, I have bills…"*

Personal characteristics influencing college adjustment. Beyond support provided by others, participants also discussed their own personal characteristics that support their success in

college. Of these characteristics are time management, their work ethic, the effort they put forth, and maturity. For example, Kelly said, *"I might procrastinate, I think I just, these past couple of years I get mad if I get a B and C's are no longer acceptable for me. …But that's just who I am, I'm a hard worker."* Similarly, Ayana explained that: *"I'm very hard working and I really do like to do work even if I don't have homework, I like to make homework for myself. I'm a very hard worker, I always push myself to do more. I stay up until whatever hours of the night to finish work because I'd rather finish it late at night and do it well than do it early and do a half-butt job."*

In addition, participants talked about not being afraid to seek help. Michael explained that his *"inadvertent strength is my ability to communicate with people and not be afraid to reach out for resources, networking capabilities for my age, getting to know people, asking for favors…"* Some of the participants talked specifically about how being in foster care has aided in their success. For instance, Chloe said: *"As far as being in foster care I had the sense of being able to push through stuff. My strength is not letting all that eat me up. I think that this also came from being in foster care like my level of maturity is higher than most and it allows me to balance decisions out and it not make decisions that a lot of people might make without the knowledge that I have from being in foster care."*

These findings indicate that foster youth rely on numerous sources of support as they navigate the college decision-making and application process and during their transition to college. Foster parents, school staff, and campus resources appear to be the most influential during these times.

Challenges and Stressors During College

Academic challenges. Foster youth provided many examples of the provision of support from family and school staff, and the use of college campus resources to assist in their transition to and success in college. However, their college experiences are not without stressors and

challenges; the most common are feeling overwhelmed with a busy school schedule and deadlines, family problems at home, and lack of family support. A similar experience shared by many is getting involved in too many activities and working in addition to taking classes. For example, Jennifer explained: "*Sometimes I spread myself too thin. I work, and I am also a full-time student. I have 50 hours to spend on clinicals, 42 hours of those outside of class time. I have a hard time saying no to people who ask me to do things with or for them."*

Family stressors. In addition to being busy with work, many foster youth talked about family as a stressor that they struggle managing. For instance, Bradley reflected on stress from his mother's mental illness: "*My [biological] mom has a mental illness so that's one of the reasons she went away. It was kind of like a stressful thing because I didn't know where she was, she wanted to see me, but I didn't want to see her. That kind of thing was emotionally stressful and so right now I still try to deal with that but I don't really know how to."* Similarly, Natalie provided her own example of family-related stressors: "*My family can be a little chaotic at times. I have a really big family and my mom's side of the family and dad's side of the family. I have siblings ranging from ages 16-36 and I have seven siblings, and my brother was adopted by my second cousin. My younger sister and my mom can be a big priority, especially since my mom is handicapped. My sister suffers from psychological disorders as a result of the foster system and being in residential. I try to help her but I can only help her as much as I can. Sometimes it can be too much and I would have to remove myself from that situation. She's my sister and I love her but sometimes too much is too much. I just have to remember that I am important too. But I find myself dealing with that."*

Lack of social support. In addition to family issues at home, foster youth talked about the struggles of trying to manage college without a strong family support system. Chris explained that his stressors peaked during his first year in college because *"I didn't have a support system, I was*

doing everything on my own." Similarly, Bradley explained that *"with life challenges with my parents being out of the picture so much. I guess I had a hard time figuring out who I was and what I wanted to do."*

Many participants talked about multiple stressors happening simultaneously. For instance, Eva is experiencing financial stressor and the lack of family support: *"I feel like it's tricky because with the scholarship I am a little bit extended. I will technically be a ward of the state until I am 23. I am 22 now. I get that extended, but otherwise it gets cut off when you turn 21 and it's kind of hard because you just kind of get dropped. I don't really have family outside of this, so once I'm done with school I feel like I am kind of being dropped in a way. So I don't know of any programs that are after college or anything. I know that I am doing fine, but it's like looming…"*

Although not a major stressor that emerged in the data, some participants did report struggles related to race and gender that they see as impacting their college experience. Specifically, some of the African American participants talked about stereotypes that other students and professors have that create stress in the classroom. For men, the stereotypes seem to focus on academic ability and physical appearance. For instance, Chris explained *"I think just being a black male in certain classes, I am noticed and when I miss class it's noticed. Then there is also stereotypes that accompany that like I'm not going to do that well academically."* Similarly, Bradley said: *"I'm dark-skinned and I guess I have like this intimidating stance or something. That plays a lot into the classrooms because students wouldn't talk to me or work with me as much. Because they thought that my work wasn't good, they didn't even know my work, they just assumed that my work wasn't good enough or that I was going to fail."*

In addition to the normal challenges experienced by students as they adjust to college, African American women reported additional stressors related to stereotypes based on their gender and race. As Gabrielle said, *"There's a lot of stereotypes against us [African Americans].*

Like we're not going to go to school, we're going to have kids before we finish school. It was always me wanting to fight against that." Ayana explained that: *Everyone thinks of African Americans as loud and ghetto and very violent, especially girls. They think that every time a black girl rolls her eyes or rolls her neck, they always say "Oh she's about to take off her earrings or put her hair up and fight somebody." But that's not it. When I have a problem with one of my teachers, he's always like "Ok, ok just don't fight me"* and he says that as a joke, but I don't think it's funny. Racial stereotyping in the classroom are still impactful to the students experiencing it.

Strategies for Managing Stress in College

The final theme in foster youths' college experiences center on strategies they use to manage these stressors. To overcome these struggles, participants rely on, among many approaches--exercise, becoming more active on campus, talking to their families, and seeking counseling. The two most common strategies for stress management appear to be talking to friends and taking control of their own lives.

Most participants discussed relying on their peers for support. For instance, Aisha talked about relying on her friends for help when times are stressful. She described a time when she and her friends *"went to one of the diners on campus… [we] became our own little support group…I have met some really good friends who have supported me… and taught me good lessons…" It appears that peers become very important when foster youth cannot rely on their families for support.* Stacy reflected: *"But it's [support from home] not the best all the time. So, I would say the last few years I've made quite a few friendships through work and it's really made a difference. I'm happier to go to work and I have it's a huge stress reliever to know that I can confide in a friend."*

Ayana shared a story of her foster parents promising to live near her during college but deciding now that she is in college to move across the country. She explained relying on her

friends: "*I really wanted that support. They aren't going to be able to financially support me. Me knowing that I have all of these bills and not having a job really stresses me out and really gives me anxiety and it makes me feel like I'm not going to get through it. To overcome some of this I've gotten really close to my sorority sisters. I don't ask them for money because I don't like doing that. They are just there to mentally, emotionally, and physically support me."* Cathy also reflected: "*There have been many positive experiences. I have wonderful friends who are encouraging and the best part about them is that they will encourage me when I can't encourage myself. They will also tell me that I am wrong and tell me when I am doing something stupid even when I don't want to hear it*."

In addition to relying on others for support, many participants talked about taking control of their own lives, specifically trying to overcome their experiences as foster youth to succeed in college. When asked what advice about college he would give other foster youth, Chris advised: "*Don't let your situation dictate your future. Just because you're in foster care doesn't mean that you can't be the same as everyone else. It's not that big of a difference, it's really not. They just have their real parents and we don't. It's all about how you take your situation and go with it instead of sitting there beating yourself up about life not going right."* Similarly, Natalie said: "*Use the bad to motivate you and lift you up. Don't give up, keep moving on no matter what anyone tells you. Discover your inner self and that's the key to everything else. Once you discover your inner self you will have a lot of determination. Go for your goals, don't do something that is going to make someone else happy because you're the one who has to live with that decision."*

Michelle also reflected on being in the foster system as it relates to college: *"You may have had a rough past and been through some crazy stuff in your life, but if you really want to succeed you should just go for it at first. Just go after your dreams." Gabrielle also advised:*

"Don't stop. If you feel stressed and you feel like all the odds are stacked against you, it's not. You can always get through it at some point."

Taking control, for these participants, meant finishing college and making the best choices for themselves. Stacy's advice to other foster youth is: *"Really stick it [college] out. I mean, it might suck now but it won't suck later. And it makes a huge difference in your life."* Ayana advised: "*If they are considering going to college do what makes you happy, don't listen to your parents like I did. Your foster parents really do love you but it's like you're living with strangers. If you know what you like and what you want to do, go for it. Just don't give up. I know your life has been nothing but rough, but if I can do it and people who have been in worse conditions can do it then you can do it."*

Michelle shared that during college, she ended what she labeled a "toxic" romantic relationship. She reflected that *"It changed my perspective on what kind of person I am. So, I now am in control of my own life. At a time where I thought I was broken, I became really strong through that. I started to take more control of my life."*

Utilizing the available college and financial resources is one way that participants take care of themselves and manage stress. Chloe explained the importance of taking charge of her own life: *"Being proactive, if you ask a question you are going to get a ton more help than if you didn't take the time to ask. Even if no one is telling you that, you know when and what you have to do."* Anaya explained: "*If you have money problems try and find a job to help you. Try and find someone you can talk to. If you know you're struggling with classes, go to a tutor. If you know that you have mental disorders go to counseling, it's free. Just don't give up so quickly."*
As Amara described: "*Try your best try to stay in as long as you can and utilize this program [DCFS funding]. I feel like this program is investing in our future. Because they know that we don't have family. . . . It's hard because we have not only rent to pay for but we have kids*

to provide for and so going to college full time and working full time can be a lot especially if you don't have support and so you're going to weigh your options and you're going to be like school or work and more than likely school is going to go under the table and you're going to pick the job over school because you're getting money and that's how you provide for your family but because they have this program that's paying you to stay in school full time. Why not?"

Overall it appears that current and former foster youth in this study sought assistance prior to and during college, but have also learned during college to rely on themselves and make the best choices for their own lives. Cathy explained that she utilizes resources and people available to her for support but also relies on her own sense of self to succeed in college: "*It will be difficult, especially if you've been discouraged. But if you can find somebody who can will be there to walk you through it and stand by you through the good and the bad, will push you to be a greater you than you are currently and believe in you even when the odds are stacked against you, which is something that many people who have been in DCFS encounter… Keep going. Know that you are worth so much. There is no quantity that can be named as to how much you are worth."*

DISCUSSION:

Similar to the survey results, the interview portion of this study revealed that students who attend college from non-traditional family backgrounds require a variety of sustained supports and resources to help them enter and succeed in college. While in high school, students require a stable family life, a sense of security, and caregiver commitment to help them launch into young adulthood with a sense of future. Other trusted adults that have an impact on college attendance include high school counselors, mentors, and child welfare case managers. Whereas in traditional family settings, college bound youth may look to their parents for support and encouragement to

attend college, youth in foster care may look to an expanded support network of caregivers, education professionals, and human service professionals to fill in the gaps.

Once youth in foster care are successfully enrolled in college, academic support staff have an important role to play to ensure that students can successfully integrate into campus life-particularly given that they are likely to be coming from backgrounds that are much different than their peers. Academic support staff, college professors, campus therapists, and campus mentors can play a critical in ensuring that students who come from foster care are provided with the academic tools and social support needed to succeed in the face of compounded academic family and social stressors. As such, it behooves university and college staff to become more familiar with the unique challenges, stressors, and strengths that students from foster care experience as they seek to successfully complete college as non-traditional students.

A disappointing finding from our student interviews was the realization that students of color who make up the overwhelming majority of the foster care population both in Illinois and nationwide, must face compounded stressors which include inconsistent family support, stereotypes related to foster care, in addition to racial and gender stereotypes. As institutions of higher education continue to strive for equity and inclusion on campuses, administrators should also recognize that diversity in family background is important to address as well.

Yet, in spite of the extraordinary challenges faced by students who attend college from foster care, their resilient qualities, sense of determination, and eagerness to succeed can be a source of inspiration and motivation among educators who seek to improve outcomes for students.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study reveals several important implications that can inform future services and supports for foster youth who seek a college education. Those implications are as follows:

- *Childhood experiences can continue to impact the psychological well-being of these students*:

  Physical neglect was experienced by 36.5% of the sample. However, when we examined the 8 students with severe psychiatric symptoms in our sample, 75% of this group noted physical neglect in childhood. This finding highlights the importance that counseling services must be advertised and available to these students. This is particularly important because students previously in foster care may have ambivalent feelings about helping professionals based on their past experiences.

- *Finances are the top concern for these students:*

  In addition to tuition costs, a recent report by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD, 2015) indicates that the average cost of room and board for college students is $9,804.00 per academic year. This expense does not include the additional three months of housing expenditures that are required for the average student during the summer months when school is not in session. When academically vulnerable students experience income insecurity, they are much more likely to compromise their focus on academics by holding down multiple part time jobs. For this population of college students, income and housing insecurity are of particular concern given that they are less likely to be able to secure financial support from trusted family members to help them bridge the financial gap.

- *Students desire affirmation and emotional support from family and caregivers more so than tangible resources:*

Whereas college students are generally considered young adults who seek a certain separation and autonomy from family, our study participants demonstrated the ongoing need for nurturance, social interaction, and affirmation from family members and caregivers. The lack of necessary support from family members places this group of students at a social and emotional disadvantage when compared with their peers who attend college.

- *Interventions to improve academic performance and psychological health need to be comprehensive:*

  We found campus engagement and social support associated with GPA, but stress, resiliency, and a history of physical neglect also had significant relationships with psychological health. We see these different results as an example of how interventions to improve the higher education experience must be comprehensive and take into account both social factors and individual factors that impact student success and well-being.

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