

FOSTER YOUTH: FINDING A PATHWAY TO HIGHER EDUCATION

By

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## FOSTER YOUTH: FINDING A PATHWAY TO HIGHER EDUCATION

### ABSTRACT

Inconsistencies in the educational system and difficult life conditions make foster youth less likely than their peers in the general population to attend college and obtain a degree. Studies have estimated that between 2%-11% of all foster youth in the United States graduate with a four-year degree (Casey Family Programs, 2010; Pecora, 2012; Wolanin, 2005) compared to 33% of the general population (Ryan & Bauman, 2016). This research illustrates factors that assist former foster youth on their pathway to higher education. In doing so, the research uncovers important themes that contribute knowledge to the literature on higher education for marginalized populations, more specifically foster youth. The purpose of this research is to provide individuals working with foster youth information that can be used to assist students as they move into and through higher education.

The study is based on 14 semi-structured interviews with students in the Guardian Scholars Program (GSP) at California State University, Sacramento (CSUS) and University of California, Davis (UCD), the Guardian Professions Program (GPP) at UC Davis, and the three program directors from each campus program. The research utilizes the concept of resiliency as a framework to analyze the findings. This study found that all 14 students interviewed shared two factors: resiliency, as well as having had an important supportive relationship with an adult who helped them further their education. Findings also show the biological family plays a large role in the students' motivation to pursue education, as they either want to make them proud or use their family's situation as motivation to succeed. The majority of students find campus support

programs contribute to their success in higher education. Students interviewed for this study felt graduate school seemed more attainable once they had knowledge of support services for alumni of care students who wish to pursue graduate school.<sup>1</sup> Participants recommend providing outreach about support services at college campuses to foster youth as early as middle school and no later than high school to create higher expectations and provide students with knowledge of their options beyond high school. Recommendations include extending the age limit of support programs and grants, provide more training to administration in educational institutions about foster youth students, include foster youth and their unique needs into training programs for future teachers, and look for ways to increase students' resiliency.

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<sup>1</sup> Alumni of care is a term sometimes used in place of former foster youth.

## **DEDICATION**

This is dedicated to my family, friends, mentors, program directors, advisors, coworkers, and anyone else who has believed in me, pushed me, provided me with opportunities, never gave up on me, supported me in a magnitude of ways, and inspired me. Thank you. I would not be here without your love and support. It is also dedicated to any person who has spent time in the foster care system. There is a light at the end of the tunnel, keep pushing through. You have the ability to make a difference in your life. Don't be afraid to ask for help or set high expectations for yourself. You are stronger than you know.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

*“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.”*

- Nelson Mandela

Resilience

Resilience the need to defy the obstacles

Swift agility used to maneuver through mountains and trials malignant instability

Resilience the allegiance to this almost great nation despite its almost fixed discrimination

The loyalty of my faith in contrast to its lack of patience

Resilience the obedience my hopes and dreams I will succeed in the mist of adversity and  
the need for my ends to be justified its needs

Resilience

- Nicole (Student Interviewee)

There are approximately 300,000 former foster youth in the United States between the ages of 18 and 25 at any given time though nearly 800,000 youth come through the foster care system each year (Wolanin , 2005; Brand & Christodulidis, 2008). Of that number, 150,000 are college qualified but only approximately 30,000 are attending college. The largest foster youth population in the United States resides in California with 60,000 youth in care, and on average 5,000 youth transitioning out of care per year (Balfour, 2013).

There is a long and troubling history of a relatively low number of foster youth obtaining a college degree in comparison to the general population. For many foster youth there is a lack in college readiness that prohibits them from attending. Lack of college readiness stems from many obstacles which are set in motion from time in foster care placement and earlier. These include mental health issues stemming from physical and emotional trauma, lack of financial assistance, a culture of low expectations, housing instability, criminal justice system involvement, substance abuse and a higher rate of foster youth dropping out (Courtney, et al. 2010; Day, et al., 2011). Care for Foster youth has often been centered on making sure they are safe and complete high



school. College is something less commonly discussed or set as an expectation. Yet, around 84% of 17-18 year olds in this population want to go to college which shows there is no lack of desire among foster youth to pursue higher education (Okpych, N. J., Courtney, M. E., & Charles, P. (2015); *Fostering Success in Education*, 2014).

Despite their desire, many foster youth never reach their goal of degree attainment. A lack of college readiness prevents the majority of foster youth from heading directly to a four-year university; their option is to begin at a community college. Prior research has found that support programs, such as Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOP&S) at community colleges for disadvantaged populations can be crucial to their success. The research shows that students who utilized this program had higher retention rates, higher rates of completion of transferable math and English classes, higher rate of transferable units, and a higher rate of earning an academic award (Willett, Hayward, Cooper, & Gonzalez, 2012).

If foster youth do not receive support during these formative years, there is a strong probability that many will not attain a college degree. Many foster youth are first-generation college students and have a difficult time navigating the college system without some sort of supportive network. Though there are many programs to assist youth during their transitioning period out of foster care, such as independent living programs (California Department of Social Services – ILP, 2007) the Chafee grant (California Student Aid Commission – *Chafee*), AB12 (California Department of Social Services, 2012), which extends foster care to eligible youth beyond 18 and up to 21, these programs do not fully meet the needs of this population.

For many foster youth, a degree can feel out of reach and unobtainable. This can be due to lack of confidence and skills brought on by multiple placements and multiple schools.

Whenever a foster youth transfers to a new school, they typically lose four to six months of progress each time (American Bar Association and Casey Family Programs, 2008).

Many times teachers and support staff are unaware that a child is in foster care or may not be trained in how to best assist a child in the foster care system. The systems in place to track students in foster care is slow and often inefficient. With frequent school changes, delayed enrollments when changing schools, and little to no communication between caseworkers and educators, it is easy for students to be incorrectly placed in classes, not receive the academic assistance they need, or may be seen as defiant when they require special attention and assistance. In addition to behavioral issues, many foster youth suffer from some form of psychological disability. A national study by Pecora et al. (2003) found 50.6% of 1,067 alumni of care who participated in their research had been diagnosed with some type of psychological disorder during their childhood compared with 22 % of the general population. As these youth grow into adolescence and adulthood the serious mental health issues seldom go away and are often exacerbated. Many of these children may be intelligent and capable but the trauma and constant life and educational setbacks contribute to their underachievement (Brand & Christodulidis, 2008).

Though many youth are resilient<sup>2</sup> and have overcome much adversity, by the time they turn 18, they often face life-changing decisions without sufficient resources and support to make the right choices (Pecora, et al., 2003). For those who do manage to be college ready, they confront the challenges of year-round housing, financial support, in addition to both emotional and academic struggles in order to succeed in college. While many college students face some of these obstacles, many former foster youth do not have a support network to provide a safety net

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<sup>2</sup> As used in this research, resilience is “a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity” (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000).

like many of their peers. Many keep their foster youth status to themselves to avoid stigmatization. In working with foster youth at the college level I have come across many who feel guilty for asking for help or who tend to avoid reaching out for help all together. Many foster youth have a difficult time trusting people due to their past and it can make forming relationships with people more difficult, forgoing potential benefits and support.

My research focuses on information accessibility concerning higher education, available resources, assistance and outreach to foster youth which are all programmatic issues. I am also interested in the traits of resilience in this population. The goal is to build knowledge about foster youths' pathways into higher education by analyzing what factors contribute to these students' resilience and success. To achieve these goals, this research will explore how former foster youth who currently participate in campus support programs at UC Davis and CSUS called the Guardian Scholars Programs (GSP) and Guardian Professions Program (GPP), heard about the campus support program and what other avenues of support they utilized before and during university. This study adapts a resiliency model based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Model as well as ideas of internal and external factors that contribute to resiliency from Hass & Graydon's (2009) as a lens to investigate how the individuals in this study became resilient and how that resiliency support their academic success.<sup>3</sup>

The research will answer the principal question of "*What are the successful pathways for former foster youth into and through higher education?*" To better understand what those pathways are, the following questions will also be addressed:

- 1) In what ways did the availability of support services for former foster youth on campus play a significant role in their decision to choose their university?

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<sup>3</sup> Due to the low number of foster youth who attend four-year universities, for the purpose of this study student participants are considered resilient.

- 2) In what ways did campus support programs play a role in the students' academic success, either before or since they have started college?
- 3) What has contributed to these students' resiliency in addressing challenges towards applying, enrolling and persisting in college?

This research looks at data regarding former foster youth and their pathways to higher education through data analysis of 14 college students in the Guardian Scholars Program and the Guardian Professions Program, along with the three program directors who run them.<sup>4</sup> The data collected through qualitative interviews, the scholarly literature, and policy reports will provide insight into the world of former foster youth and see what factors have made them successful this far.

Chapters 2 will provide: 1) a literature review about why education matters, 2) further explore campus support programs, and 3) provide a conceptual framework for resiliency. Chapter 3 presents the research design and methods where the framework, site selection and recruitment process, methodology, positionality and connection to the research, research settings, and data analysis process is discussed. Through my own story I hope the reader is able to understand the various internal and external factors that helped to guide and shape me and assisted in my resiliency to be in the position I am today. Chapter 4 will present the research findings. First I provide an introduction to some of the student interviewees quoted throughout the paper. Then I discuss some demographic information from the student interviewees. Next I examine the student interviews on the following topics: student pathways to higher education, community college, the Guardian Scholars Program, and the students' views of success in

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<sup>4</sup> The Guardian Scholars Program (GSP) and Guardian Professions Program (GPP) are campus support programs that focus on former foster youth. All University of California campuses as well as State Universities, with the exception of Cal Maritime Academy, has a program equivalent to GSP. However, GPP is a new program that works with graduate students and is unique to UC Davis.

education and resiliency. I then analyze interviews with the program directors and give some of their perspective about the population they serve. Chapter 5 will further analyze the research findings, discuss strategies for creating a climate for success, building resiliency, and describe limitations, directions for future research, and recommendations.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Foster Care Primer**

Foster care (also known as out of home care) is a service designed for child welfare officials to temporarily remove a youth from their home where they reside with their biological family (Children's Bureau- Family Foster Care, 2017). Neglect is the number one reason children are placed into foster care. Other reasons include physical and emotional abuse, drug use in the household, being exposed to other dangerous conditions, inadequate housing, and child behavioral problems (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). The goal for removing a minor is to create a safe environment and meet the physical, mental, and emotional needs that were not being met at home. Depending on the circumstances, the youth will be placed into kinship care, a private home (foster home), or group home, with the hopes of reunification with the family once the presenting issue has been addressed and it is safe for the youth to return home.

Kinship care is often considered the most desirable option for a placement as it allows the youth to live with family members, or in certain circumstances close family friends, instead of with strangers, maintaining the youth's connections with their families (Child Welfare – Kinship Care, 2016). This arrangement can be carried out privately between the families or social services, or a governmental agency tasked with protecting youth, intervenes and appoints a guardian; the person(s) legally responsible for the youth. The next preferred option for placement

if no relatives are available is family foster care in a foster home. Family foster care or a foster home is an arrangement in which the youth live with state or licensed agency approved relative or nonrelative adult (Children's Bureau, n.d.). Children reside in this placement until either the child welfare system assesses that they may return to the biological family, they must move to another placement due to complications, they are adopted, or they emancipate out of care. In certain circumstances, a foster home or kinship care is either unavailable to the youth or it is deemed a safer option for a youth to be in a more supervised placement of care. This is known as a group home.

A group home is the most restrictive out of home placement for children in the foster care system. Group homes are often reserved for children with substantial emotional or behavioral problems who need a stricter environment to remain protected and receive necessary care. These homes typically have rotating staff to maintain 24-hour care (California Department of Social Services, 2007). These placements often have strict regulations and provide the children with little freedom. States such California are currently working to improve outcomes for former foster youth through legislation seeking to remove long term placements in group homes because they are associated with a greater risk for negative outcomes. California Assembly member Mark Stone states:

Foster youth who live in congregate care settings (group homes) are more likely than those who live with families to suffer a variety of negative short- and long-term outcomes. Such placements are associated with the creation of lifelong institutionalized behaviors, an increased likelihood of being involved with the juvenile justice system and the adult correctional system, and low educational attainment levels (*AB 403 (Stone): Foster Youth: Continuum of Care Reform*, n.d.).

Studies have shown institutionalization of children negatively affects growth and development of youth subjected to living in these environments (Miller, 2000; MacLean, 2003). A study by Moulson et al., (2015, p. 309) found children who were institutionalized had a harder time using “facial expressions of emotion to guide social decisions” when deciding who they want to befriend and help compared to children in foster family homes and non-institutionalized youth. Miller (2000) notes that foster care is not always well managed and can expose children to problems often associated with institutionalized care. Some of these problems include poor nutrition, developmental delays, further abuse, and poor medical care. Furthermore, MacLean’s (2003) study discusses the effect institutionalization has on the development of youth and their academic achievement. The study found the longer a youth is institutionalized the greater their IQ and academic achievement declines. It further shows that after removal from a group home, the youth improve developmentally, but those who spent a long time institutionalized continue to show considerable delays years after adoption. The older the youth is at the time of adoption, the more difficult the task of bringing them up to a stage of cognition where they are similar to their age peers. These three studies looking at youth in orphanages show that the strict, confining, impersonal environments such as orphanages and group homes have a greater ability of negatively impacting the youth than foster care or kin care and can severely hurt a youth’s academic development.

The culture in the United States emphasizes the importance of obtaining a college degree. With an increase in college attendance and degree attainment, the job market is becoming more competitive. While there is a select group of individuals who are able to create a comfortable and successful life without obtaining a degree, research demonstrates that a college degree creates a greater chance at a secure future. Foster youth face significant obstacles and challenges in their

pursuit of higher education. Of those who do manage to gain admission into college, only a small percentage of former foster youth will graduate with a degree. While 75% of foster youth aspire to go to university, approximately 2-11% actually graduate with a Bachelor's degree (California College Pathways, 2017; Casey Family Programs, 2010; Pecora, 2012; Wolanin, 2005) and it is estimated that less than 1% will complete one or more years of graduate school (Texas Education Agency, 2013).

As of 2014, nationwide there were 415,129 children currently in foster care. Twenty nine percent resided in relative homes and 46 % were in non-relative homes. Fifty five percent had a case goal of returning to their families and approximately 51 % of the children who left foster care in 2014 were returned to their parents or guardians (Child Welfare – Foster Care Statistics, 2016). This number does not represent those who aged out of the system, a process which involves the youth being emancipated from a foster home once they turn 18. Aging out of the foster care system can be a very difficult and stressful process, as many youth do not have a place to go or a supportive network to fall back on. In 2015, approximately 21,000 foster youth were emancipated from the system (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). This means that they either chose not to, or were not able to reunify with parents(s) or principal caretaker(s), live with other relative(s), be adopted, be placed in long-term foster care, or guardianship. While there are transitional services available for housing and support services after aging out, foster youth must meet the requirements and follow the facility's terms to participate, or they must be attending school or completing job training to receive services, such as with the Chafee grant (California Student Aid Commission – Chafee, 2015).

Furthermore foster parents and social workers need to be well informed of the options available to pass this information on to the youth. Unfortunately, social workers are often



overloaded with cases and may become emotionally and physically drained by the demands of their work (Jones, C., 2001). They may believe a child is doing fine and will fail to follow up with them or assume other people in students lives are providing informing the students about resources available to them.

Even when foster youth find loving and supportive groups/families to rely on, often the trauma that they endured—the reasons for being placed into foster care—stays with them for years, if not for life. The effects of trauma can manifest by actions that may be interpreted as inappropriate as well as detrimental to their academic progress. These can be reflected by missing classes, avoiding tests, extreme reactions to class discussions or activities, anxiety, and poor concentration, to name a few (Kerka, S., 2002).

### **Why Education Matters**

The primary site of socialization is typically at home, with family. “In the normal course of events, a child in society gains the skills and competencies required of an adult, particularly those with whom the youth has a sustained a close and caring relationship” (Wolanin, 2005, p.12). In typical upbringings, this means that youth learn these skills and norms by imitating their parent’s actions. However, “Foster youth have had the most important bond with adults broken or severely interrupted, the tie between parents and children” (Wolanin, 2005, p. 12). Many youth have indicated teachers as being one of the most important people in their lives. The bonds some students create with their teachers, along with the amount of time spent in the classroom each week, can help to shape a big part of how they learn societal norms. Therefore, it is important to create a stable school environment for these youth so they can better develop and mature.

While some foster youth succeed despite adversity, they often have a more difficult time building necessary skills and maturity that affects their development and success in higher education (Wolanin, 2005). Unfortunately, the foster care system has traditionally done a poor job of cultivating academic success while the youth are in the system as they move forward in their educational trajectories. The child welfare system is constantly under-resourced and overloaded and their focus has been to provide a safe place for children while complying with state and federal regulations. Unfortunately, educational progress of youth in this system has not been the number one priority (Bruce, Naccarato, Hopson, & Morrelli, 2010). Research by Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, & Wyatt (2005), studied 216 emancipated foster youth attending a four-year university. They found “63.8% reported that the foster care system did not prepare them very well for college, 25.1% felt fairly well prepared and 11.1% felt extremely well prepared” (p.883). Sixty-three percent is too large of a number. Foster youth need to be better prepared to enter higher education.

Wolanin (2005) states, “compared to their peers, foster youth are much more likely to be poor before they enter the foster care system, while they are in the foster care system, and after they leave foster care” (55). Research has shown that receiving an inadequate education—which often comes with many relocations—contributes to the cycle of poverty as it makes it more difficult to escape from it (American Psychological Association, 2017).

According to Hines et al. (2005, p. 381), “studies show that a disproportionate number of former foster youth are homeless, dependent on public assistance, and unemployed and are less likely to attend and graduate from college than other youth.” Education is one significant way foster youth can help themselves to assure a more secure future. “Although former foster youth are among those least likely to attend college, the attainment of a college degree could contribute

to their future financial stability and the promotion of enhanced developmental outcomes throughout adulthood” (Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005, p. 382).

Not only does attending college help to provide a more stable future, but it also gives a foster youth the opportunity to extend care and support. Foster youth who decide to attend college now have the chance to qualify for extended foster care until they are age 21 (California College Pathways – Why College?, 2017). Foster youth can apply for funds, such as the Chafee grant, which is specifically for current and former foster youth. It provides up to \$5000 a year for job training or college (California Student Aid Commission, 2012). Eligible students can receive this in addition to any other state or federal aid they qualify for. Grants such as these can alleviate some of the financial burden foster youth feel when beginning college.

Though foster youth face similar barriers in academia to other disadvantaged groups, research has shown foster youth are a unique sub-group that require a different approach when providing support, as foster youth generally achieve academically at lower levels, and suffer from higher rates of mental illness and financial insecurity than other economically disadvantaged students (Day et al., 2011; Pecora et al., 2005; Frerer, Sosenko, & Henke, 2013). Frerer, Sosenko, & Henke (2013) selected students who had been in foster care between third and eighth grade during the years 2003 to 2004 and 2006 to 2007. The researchers then selected a sample of children who were not in foster care but were considered disadvantaged based on English learner status, participation in the school lunch program, grade level, school year, gender, race, ethnicity, and proficiency on the California Standards Test (CST). Researchers found 22 % of non-disadvantaged 11<sup>th</sup> graders scored in the advanced level on the CST compared with 12 % of economically disadvantaged 11<sup>th</sup> graders throughout California. In contrast, only 4 % of the foster youth sample scored at the advanced level. At the lower end, 11

% of non-disadvantaged peers scored far below basic, 15% of economically disadvantaged 11<sup>th</sup> graders scored far below basic, and 23% of foster youth scored far below basic proficiency levels. This study shows that foster youth, even when compared to other disadvantaged populations, have unique challenges that can hinder their academic performance, which can carry through to post-secondary education (Frerer, Sosenko, & Henke, 2013). Understanding those challenges can aid in providing greater support to foster youth.

### **Campus Support Programs**

Vulnerable young people, such as foster youth, need support services to be successful in college. Although some students may have one parent or family member to help guide them while in college, many times foster youth do not. Many of these students do not have the stability of a home and often have no family support when they turn 18. Because of this, funding, housing, and guidance in the process of college matriculation can become difficult.

Youth who have been in foster care at any time since they were 13, are in legal guardianship, or have emancipated, are considered “financially independent” because they are no longer supported by parents (XAP Corporation, 2017). In a report Frerer, Sosenko, & Henke (2013) found that those receiving financial aid during their first year in community college showed a 9% increase of persisting to a second-year. This financial aid also gives the students a greater chance of continuing on to a four-year university. There is a clear advantage and positive correlation of enrollment in college when receiving both financial and academic support compared to not receiving it (Myers, Brown, and Pavel, 2010).

Often time foster youth are emancipated from care without the resources needed to pursue their education. Campus support programs have stepped in to take on the role of assisting

current and former foster youth with these things as they pursue their education by providing a network of resources and supportive relationships from staff.

The Guardian Scholars Program (GSP), which was first created at Cal State Fullerton in 1999, led the way in developing programs throughout community colleges, vocational schools, and public and private four-year universities in California and Washington (College Pathways, 2009). There is no central hub for these programs as they are all independently run according to the college's needs and budgets. Some programs are stand-alone and some are encompassed within other programs such as Extended Opportunity Programs & Services (EOP&S). GSPs work in collaboration with both private sector and public agencies to support former foster youth students effectively and efficiently to help them recognize and reach their full potential as well as provide life skills beyond academia (California Department of Social Services, n.d.).

These support programs provide many if not all of the following for foster youth students: Academic counseling and education plans, personal guidance and mentoring, on-campus housing, year round housing, housing support services, financial aid assistance, supplemental financial support, career advising, the summer bridge program, meal vouchers, books, and academic and emotional support, workshops, mentoring, and a community on campus.

The most supportive universities provide all of these services to current and former foster youth, though issues of eligibility can be problematic. Some of the eligibility requirements that could prevent students from participating in programs include age, as many programs do not accept students over 25 years old, and location, some will only assist those who were in care in that county. Furthermore, academic barriers can also prevent students from participating in a program if they drop below a certain GPA or has over a certain amount of degree applicable

units. Most programs require some form of verification that the student was once in foster care, if the student has a difficult time retrieving the documents they may not qualify for services.

Following the Guardian Scholars Program, a first of its kind pilot campus support program called the Guardian Professions Program (GPP) has been operating out of UC Davis to assist alumni of care who wish to pursue graduate degrees at universities across the nation. While they are both campus support programs for foster youth, there are some significant differences. The GSP for undergraduates does much more than the GPP as far as providing services for the program participants. This makes sense as students are adapting to being on a college campus and these programs often fulfill support roles a parent normally would. When a student wants to go to graduate school, they have successfully completed an undergraduate degree and it is assumed they are in a more stable position that does not require as much support.

A large part of what the GPP does is assist potential graduate students who are still undergraduates, or already have their BA, with getting into graduate school. The program helps with their statement of purpose and letters of intent, creates connections between the potential student and university—such as with program coordinators or faculty—and provide guidance with navigating the application. The program provides students with funds to cover costs as they apply for graduate school such as application fees, traveling for campus visits, GRE prep courses, etc. and emergency funds if they are needed. GPP also provides scholarships once they have successfully gained admittance into their graduate programs based on financial need. The Director of the GPP at UC Davis has created a number of pedagogical tools, such as a curriculum website and teaching cases, that are designed to assist alumni of care and teachers wishing to help them with their academic goals. As Stanton-Salazar (2010) explains, when low socioeconomic youth are able to overcome the odds, it is typically due to interventions that insert

them into a network of supportive adult relationships who are connected to services, organizations, and resources positioned to assist with the students' empowerment.

## **Resiliency**

Resiliency is a term that has been used across many disciplines including psychology, psychiatry, and human geography. Psychologists describe it as the ability to bounce back and withstand hardship by repairing oneself after difficult situations (American Psychological Association, 2017). This is similar to views in psychiatry in which resiliency is seen as a "one's capacity to recover from extremes of trauma and stress" (Shastri, 2013, p. 224). Human geography scholars such as Adger (2000, p. 347) describes resiliency as "the ability of groups or communities to cope with external stresses and disturbances as a result of social, political and environmental change."

Hass & Graydon (2009), explain that resiliency can be thought of in two categories. The first being personal strengths (internal factors) and the second being environmental protective factors (external factors). Hass & Graydon (2009, p. 458) state "the environmental protective factors are present in the family, community or schools and include caring relationships, clear and positive expectations by family members, educators, and community members for achievement, and opportunities to participate and contribute." They argue resiliency is a trait any person can have and develop through adaptive processes.

There are three models that explain resilience that are especially in ways related to the present research. These models include the compensatory model, the challenge model, and the protective factor model (O'Leary, 1998). The compensatory model highlights positive factors can help to neutralize exposure to risk (Garmezy, Masten, & Tellegen, 1984). O'Leary (1998) explains that the compensatory factor does not interact with the risk factor but has an influence

on the outcome of interest. For example, Werner and Smith (1982) studied 700 children on the island of Kauai, Hawaii. They found four central themes common among those who were labeled resilient: an active approach to solving life's problems; a tendency to perceive or construct their experiences positively, even if those experiences caused pain and suffering; the ability, from infancy, to gain other people's positive attention; and a strong reliance on faith to maintain a positive view of a meaningful life. Werner and Smith found compensatory factors either initially lowered risk or improved the risk of being affected by negative situations as the children grew (O'Leary, 1998).

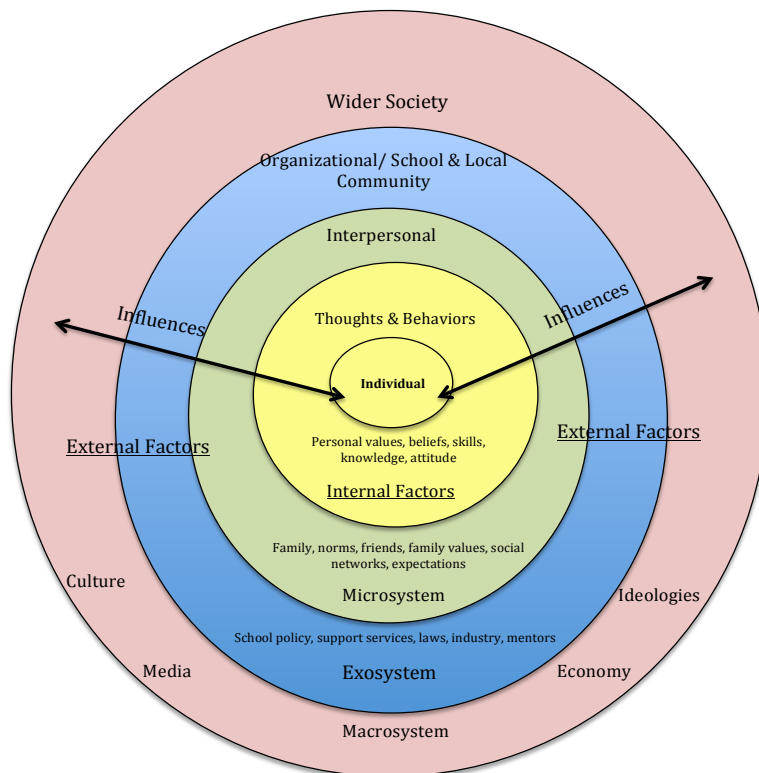
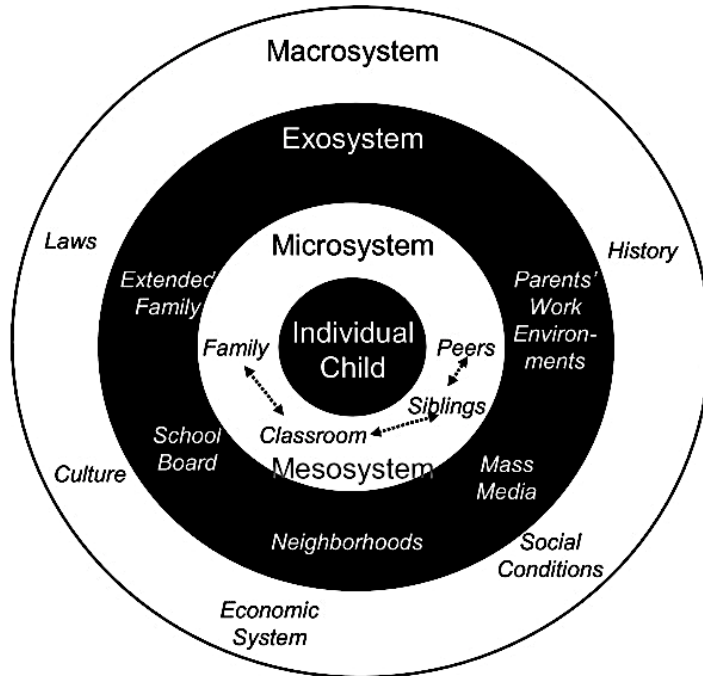
The challenge model focuses on social, emotional, and environmental stressors as enhancers of success, as long as they are not too severe (O'Leary, 1998). This model explains that too little stress is not beneficial to one's success, as it does not motivate someone to move forward. However, it also recognizes that too much stress will cause dysfunction. Moderate levels of stress, when overcome, help to increase a person's perceived and material competence and helps to prepare a person up for the next challenge. Forest (1991, as cited in O'Leary, 1998) found that woman who experienced severe trauma or losses during childhood were less likely to respond with depressive symptoms to stressful situations as adults. It is found that resilience was not gained by avoiding risk but by successfully engaging it (O'Leary, 1998).

Finally, the protective factor model "is a process that interacts with a risk factor to reduce the probability of a negative outcome. It moderates the effect of exposure to risk...it operates indirectly to influence the outcomes" (O'Leary, 1998, p. 428). By reducing risk factors and increasing protective factors, a person is more likely to succeed. Though there are differences between each model they are not mutually exclusive. For example, if a child is facing domestic abuse but has a strong relationship with a caring adult to support them as they face this hardship,



they have a better chance at overcoming it than children who do not have this support. Ungar, Ghazinour, & Richter, (2013) report the higher the rate and exposure to adversity, the more a child's resilience depends on the quality of their environment instead of their internal drive.

To study resiliency I adapted Bronfenbrenner's Social Ecological Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Eisenmann, Gentile, Welk, Callahan, Strickland, Walsh, Walsh, 2008) to examine influences of individual factors, interpersonal factors, and external factors that influence peoples resilience. Both the original model by Bronfenbrenner and the adapted model are figures 1 and 2 on the next page. Though similar, I have made a few changes to better fit the needs of this research. While Bronfenbrenner's model shows how the environmental influences can affect a child, my model uses Hass & Graydon's (2009) ideas of internal and external factors to look at how they influences a person's resiliency.



Bronfenbrenner (1979), a developmental psychologist known for his ecological systems theory, created a model to identify five systems that form an individual's environment. The five systems included in his model are the Individual, the Microsystem, the Mesosystem, the Exosystem, and the Macrosystem. The Individual refers to the person's influences of sex, age, and health. The Microsystem includes those groups that directly impact the person's development, such as school, peers, and family. Events and institutions in these settings go on to affect the individual. Consider, for example a child's parents have recently been divorced. One parent is overwhelmed and the other parent is no longer around on a daily basis to assist with parental duties. This can significantly shape the patterns of parents' treatment of the child. The Mesosystem involves the interconnections between the microsystems such as relationships between family and teachers. The Exosystem consists of one or more settings where the individual does not play an active role, such as their parent's workplace. The child may never go there but what happens to the parent at their work place can carry over to affect the child. Finally, the Macrosystem encompasses the culture, belief systems, and ideologies of the society as a whole (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The social ecological model that I have adapted to reflect resiliency can be seen in figure 2. The model reflects the following categories: 1) individual factors, 2) interpersonal/ (microsystem), 3) organizational/school and local community factors (exosystem), and 4) wider society/cultural ideologies/the economy (macrosystem).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> With the exception of individual factor, all categories are considered external factors.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

#### Conceptual Framework

This research seeks to complement existing literature in the areas of foster youth, higher education, and resiliency using grounded theory and a modified ecological model to find answer the principal question, “*What are the successful pathways for former foster youth into and through higher education?*” Grounded theory is an inductive systematic, and comparative approach where the researcher collects and analyzes data simultaneously. Unlike other methods where a researcher would start with hypotheses, grounded theory allows for the data to further inform and expand the research possibilities (Bryant, & Charmaz, (2007). Furthermore, I used a resiliency lens to analyze my research. I examine how resiliency factors play a role in the students’ pathways to academic success.

#### Site Selection and Recruitment Process

I chose UC Davis and CSUS as my case study settings for three reasons: 1) The differences in the type of educational contexts allowed for comparison in institutional context.<sup>6</sup> 2) Both universities have campus support programs for current and former foster youth students. 3) Their closeness in proximity to each other made it possible to be somewhat flexible with student schedules when conducting interviews.

Although initially my research was only going to focus on undergraduate students, it made sense to have graduate students participate. By including graduate students, I was able to gain information from those who have fully completed the undergraduate process. They are able to reflect back on their experiences in terms of the roles campus support program played and

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<sup>6</sup> UC’s are known for being geared toward theory and research, move at a faster pace, and have higher tuition rates whereas state schools focus more on practical applications and non-research careers, have smaller class sizes, and are able to keep the cost of tuition down because they tend to receive more state funding (Noa, 2011).

more fully understand what assisted them to be successful as well as what hindered them. I included the program coordinators in my research in an attempt to understand their viewpoint of the programs and the population of students they serve.

I first began by reaching out to the program coordinators of the Guardian Scholars Programs and Guardian Professions Program via email and explained who I was and what I was seeking to accomplish. I then asked if they would be willing to be interviewed and set up appointments with them (see appendix A for email to directors). After obtaining permission from each of the programs and gaining clearance from the IRB, I sent each coordinator a document for the students and I requested they distribute it via email to all students in their program. The email contained information about who I was, what the purpose of the research was, and my contact information (see appendix B for invitation email to students).

To participate, students must have been in foster care at some point, participating in either the GSP or GPP at UC Davis or GSP at CSUS, and be over the age of 18. They were asked to contact me if they were interested to set up a time for a 45-60 minute interview. Incentives for participation included any food of their choice during the interview, up to \$15. While many students accepted my offer to bring them food, a few politely declined and were willing to just participate in the interview. Through convenience sampling I selected those students who matched the criteria, as the entire population of potential students I could interview was less than 180 participants across the three programs. In total I was able to conduct interviews with 14 students and the three program directors: four undergraduate students (GSP) and four graduate students (GPP) from the University of California, Davis (UC Davis), six undergraduate students (GSP) from California State University, Sacramento (CSUS) and the three Directors from both campuses. In the end, I interviewed 14 of the 17 students who volunteered due to scheduling

conflicts when I tried to set up a time to meet. Among the 14 interviewees, there were 10 females and 4 males. Ages ranged between 19 and 39 with a mean age of 26.6 and a median age of 26.5. A larger sample size and more male participants would have been ideal to have more balance and a greater representation of the population.

I did not include questions that would put the students in a position where they felt they had to tell me the reason they were in foster care. While this information can be useful in understanding the best ways to assist this population, it can be a triggering experience to be asked such personal questions by a stranger. Therefore, to make the students as comfortable as possible, I tried to focus the questions about their educational trajectories and students were invited to share personal details in whichever capacity they felt comfortable.

While I invited 20 students to participate I only interviewed 14. There were others who were interested in participating but due to schedule and time conflicts we were not able to make it

## **Methodology**

I received verbal consent from the participants that they were aware the interview was completely voluntary, they were aware of any potential harm, and could stop at any time. Students were informed they were under no obligation to answer any question they did not want to though all 14 students willingly provided all the information that was requested. Participants were informed that identifiable information would be coded and protected for participant's privacy and that once the data is no longer needed, it will be destroyed.

The method I utilized for this research was semi-structured interviews. This format allowed me to ask questions related to their academic history and life as well as about how they deal with setbacks. The use of semi-structured interviews encouraged a relaxed environment and made possible for a flexible dialogue during the interviews. This was important because being

able to connect on a more personal level allowed for more in-depth data to be collected as well as permitted me to answer any questions they had at the time whereas I could not do this with surveys. It was somewhat of an emergent design as I had a strong base of information on the topic given my own foster care experiences and professional work in the field when starting but adapted it as further insights were gained. I recorded each interview on a recorder with the interviewees' approval and later transcribed them. This allowed me to converse with the participants and pay more attention to what they were saying as well as non-verbal communication instead of making sure I caught every detail immediately in writing. To ensure valid data collection, I avoided leading questions and pressure to the best of my ability (Farquhar & Wing, 2003).<sup>7</sup> Participants were informed that identifiable information would be coded and protects for participants' privacy and that once the data is no longer needed, it will be destroyed.

### **Positionality and Connection to the Research**

My position as a graduate student and personal experience with time in the foster care system provides me with a unique perspective on my research topic; one that is not often heard as studies about foster youth are often conducted by people who were not in the foster care system. Having a background of spending time in the system allowed me to develop an initial analytical framework and to build trust and relationships based on shared experiences with the participants of this study. Nationally, the majority of foster youth are white (Child Welfare - Foster Care Statistics, 2016), however, California's foster youth population is disproportionately Black/African American and youth from a Hispanic background are the second largest group (Danielson, & Lee, 2010). Although I am an alumna of care, I am also a white, female, graduate student and I had to be aware of my positionality and privilege

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<sup>7</sup> A complete list of questions can be found in Appendix D. Bolded questions were the primarily interview questions.

By virtue of my traits and position as a graduate level researcher, I had to recognize that this could create barriers or make forming trust harder with my interviewees if they have had negative experiences with white people or researchers in the past. I also had to remember that current and former foster youth are often the subjects of research and there is a chance they could mistrust who I am or believe I may misrepresent them. I was aware they may have been approached for interviews numerous times in the past and could be reluctant to participate in another study. Another factor I had to consider was being an academic and an alumnus of care they may feel the need to tell me what they think I want to hear instead of what they really felt. Being both an insider and outsider, I was able to utilize my knowledge and unique perspective on this subject during all stages of the research. Written below is part of my own story where I included the themes found throughout my research. I share my own experience into higher education to illustrate my unique relationship to the topic of the research and to provide some detailed – if individualized – context for my findings in chapter 4.

I spent six years on and off in the foster care system, from the age of 12 until the age of 18 and experienced the difficulties that arise from the constant disruption, stress, moving, and trauma of it. I attended 10 different high schools or independent study programs during my time in foster care and each time it was a struggle to catch up with my peers. It took a toll on me as I felt I was not as capable or able as the other students and this impacted my confidence and willingness to attend school. At times I felt that college was unattainable when I was trying to get the rest of my life under control. On the other hand, through foster care I learned to adapt quickly to new situations and became very social. These skills have helped me in different situations such as moving to a new place, going to new schools, or starting a new job. Living with diverse



groups of people has also allowed me to view and experience other cultures and customs and it has made me very empathetic.

I had a difficult time dealing with my emotions during this period in my life. I did not do well interacting with those in authority. What may have appeared to be a lack of interest in learning was actually a product of my constant moving and changing of schools. This process resulted in the loss of 4-6 months of academic progress each time due to the inconsistencies in the school systems. I was trying to assimilate to my new environment and cope with my thoughts and feelings of frustration on a daily basis, not to mention the constant feeling that I was not as capable or smart as my peers. I was smart, but I did not understand my abilities or believe in myself at that point in my life. The push to place students like myself in alternative schools to quickly make up the credits through packet work did not whet my interest in education as it was uninspiring and tedious work.

I believe I graduated from high school for two reasons. First, I put the time in and did the work. I was never a straight A or even a B student at that point in my life as I was dealing with many other issues outside of academia, but school was one place I enjoyed going to every day regardless. It provided me with an escape from whatever program/home I was in and it allowed me to interact with people from outside of my placement. These things assisted in keeping my morale high.

The second reason that I graduated was due to some wonderful, caring individuals who believed in me and went out of their way to make sure that I would succeed as well as encouragement from my family. For instance, a counselor ensured that I was credited for units that were lost or miscalculated during school transfers. This counselor also provided a space that I could go whenever I needed someone to just talk to, vent, or cry. Without that kind of support

and compassion, I may not have made it through high school as I wanted to give up so many times. I was lucky to remain in this placement and at Arroyo Grande High School on the central coast of California until I finally aged out of my last placement and was released from foster care the day after high school graduation as I had already turned 18. I was fortunate that my caseworker secured an extension for me to stay in the home until the day after I graduated as I turned 18 in March and graduation was not until June.

Unless foster youth or their caseworker have taken certain steps to ensure the youth stay in their placement after they turn 18, they can be required to leave it as it is no longer the state's obligation to take care of the youth since they are now considered an adult. If a person has not been able to receive extended care services and has no support network there is a good chance they may end up homeless or find their way back into the system, such as jail.

When I was eighteen in 2002, the programs that were available to assist former foster youth leaving the system were limited. I was not aware that any campus support programs existed to assist marginalized populations on my community college campus. The one exception was the Board of Governors (BOG) fee waiver. The BOG covers the cost of classes for foster youth and other marginalized populations that qualify, however the student still has to pay all other fees, books, and supplies. It is also only available at community colleges.

When deciding to go to college, community college was the only option that I had since I never took the SAT or many of the other standardized tests necessary to enroll in a four-year university in high school since I changed schools frequently. Because I did not think I was capable of completing a four-year degree at that point in my life, this did not bother me. When I entered community college, I only took one or two classes at a time, but found even that a challenge since I worked multiple jobs and was trying to figure out my life outside of the foster

care system. I eventually decided to forgo the Associates degree, and instead I opted for a certificate program where I obtained my Certified Nursing Assistant certificate (CNA) through Allan Hancock College in Central California.

Around the age of 25, I decided I wanted to return to college. It is not uncommon for alumni of care to return to school at a later age and there are both pros and cons to this. The advantage to students returning to school at a later age is they are more determined, generally have greater control of their lives and ability to focus on their academics, and are more prepared to value and actually engage in their education. By that age I had finally started to build up confidence and determination to finish school. I spent a great amount of time in the tutoring labs to ensure I would do well in school and built a strong rapport with my professors. It was my hard work and determination that enabled me to pass my classes and begin to achieve good grades. The professors, counselors, and tutors who aided me when I needed support gave me an outlet to further develop my confidence, and I realized I wanted an education. My confidence began to develop by going to office hours or the tutoring labs where I eventually created a rapport the professors and staff. I was shy and did not like asking questions, so speaking one on one gave me an opportunity to work around that. Through my interactions with them and my dedication to do well, I began to excel in my classes and grew more confident. That began trickling down to other aspects in my life and has continued growing ever since.

The negative side of returning to education at a later age is that I was too old to qualify for the majority of support such as funding opportunities that could have better assisted my academic success. Many programs have age limitations and restrictions that prevent older students from participating. This is the situation of many foster youth, including me, as I was too old to receive the Chafee grant. While I did qualify for financial aid, the extra funding that I no

longer qualified for would have allowed me to take out less students loans and take away some of the stress that comes with working multiple jobs while attending school.

Once at Humboldt State, I joined the debate team, the Communication Club, and a program/club specifically for former foster youth –The ELITE Scholars Club (Excelling and Living Independently Through Education). I was driven to do well and prove to everyone, especially myself, that not only was I capable of graduating with a degree but with exceptional grades as well. I challenged myself and began getting straight A's for the first time in my life. I was becoming a stronger, more confident, and more resilient person than I had ever been.

It was my participation as president of the ELITE Scholars club that helped me realize where my passion lay. I wanted to assist those people who are/have been typically marginalized; specifically current and former foster youth, in their journey through higher education. The summer before my senior year I received an email from the Guardian Professions Program at the University of California, Davis. They were looking to recruit people, such as myself, into attending the University. I initially wanted to pursue a Social Work degree but this was not a program offered at UC Davis. I was then told about Community Development, and while it was not a program focused on my exact interests, it was one that was very interdisciplinary and allowed me to take courses from around the campus. Community Development is also a program that aims to help communities and make people's lives better, stand up for social justice, and is very forward thinking. It was something that I was able to mold to fit my interests.

I was filled with fear and amazement when I started graduate school. I was overcome with imposter syndrome – the feeling that you do not belong in the position you are in such as a leadership role at your job or graduate school and the feeling that at any moment someone is going to figure out that you were right you don't belong there (Robinson-Walker, 2011).

I once again at times felt academically behind my peers and wondered if I had made the right decision. Eventually I realized that I did the work, I took all the same tests and wrote the same essays as the other students. I belonged here. Not only that, but I excelled in all of my classes. I went on to win the Outstanding Graduate Student Award for my graduate program and was awarded multiple fellowships throughout my time there. My success showed me another way of life that was unknown to me until I was engaged in the world of education. I have become a completely different person by expanding my knowledge and thought process and because of that I am now able to assist others who are in a position I was formally in. Education was the great equalizer for me.

Throughout this time, I always had a caring person in my life to cheer me on, talk to me, and support me when I needed some help, whether it be my family, friends, partner, or professors/advisors. Though much of my resilience comes from my drive and dedication to succeeding, being in supportive environments and having people to provide me with resources, encouragement, and inspiration played a big part of creating it.

### **Research Settings**

The interviews took place at a variety of sites as the location choice was up to the participant. No student interviews were held on CSUS's campus. All but one, which was held at the person's house, were conducted at a restaurant or Starbucks near the college campus in Sacramento, CA. This is likely due to the fact that all the students at CSUS took me up on my offer to provide them with food during the interview. The exception to this was when I interviewed the CSUS GSP coordinator as I interviewed her at her office on campus. Interviews with the UC Davis students were conducted outside in the quad, at a restaurant, their home, or in a room they knew to be available. The majority of the UC Davis students wished to have their

interview held on campus. I found that many of the students at UC Davis seemed to be on a much tighter schedule and had less time to spare as we generally did the interviews before and after class or during class breaks. Although I offered to bring the food to them ahead of time some still politely declined. All three-program coordinators for the GSP and GPP programs were interviewed on campus. While I feel letting the participants choose their own location was a positive experience for them, sometimes it was very noisy. In retrospect, it would have been better to provide a few options for them where I knew there was both more privacy and less noise.

### **Data Analysis Process**

Once I had finished transcribing I re-read my interviews and began to make notes when relevant or interesting information was found. Each interviewee was given a number that is used when I was coding and a pseudonym to protect privacy which was used throughout my thesis when quoting. I created a coding system applying different colors to different categories. For example, all UC Davis students' answers were written in blue pen and CSUS data was written in green. I broke down interview responses based on the conceptual factors of resiliency I had adapted from Bronfenbrenner (1979): individual self, family/external factors (microsystem), community (exosystem), and society (macrosystem). Each category was coded with a corresponding color. I highlighted specific and reoccurring themes that appeared throughout the interviews, using the resiliency model as a lens. Once I had finished coding the information I then went back and used these codes to develop my analysis. I then went back through the transcriptions to pull meaningful and significant quotes to provide a deeper level of content for the research.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

Much of the data in this paper was derived from qualitative interviews from students at UC Davis and CSUS. Throughout this chapter, I highlight compelling excerpts from interviews with foster care alumnae such as Alex, Danica, Taylor, Amy, and Sarah. All names are pseudonyms to protect individual identity.. The following is some background on these students:

Alex is a 24-year-old, African-American male and a senior at UC Davis studying political science. He has a strong, but sweet personality and it is easy to imagine him accomplishing his goals. Alex spent time in kinship care, foster homes, and group homes from the age of 4 to 18. During that time he was in 15 foster homes and 3 group homes. Alex drew strength to pursue higher education primarily from his older brother who was attending UCLA. Besides his brother, thinking about where he would be in 10 years, and his aspirations for economic mobility were a big motivation in wanting to obtain a degree. Alex wants to leave an impact on the world by using his experiences in foster care to eventually create an organization that will assist foster youth in their transition to high school and college.

Danica is an outgoing 26-year-old, African-American female and a senior at CSUS, majoring in child development. Her kindness and approach with people made for a relaxing and easy interview. She was in kinship care with her grandmother from the ages of 3 to 18. She attributes her success and having the encouragement of her biological parents, once they became sober, to her resiliency and success. She became very determined to pursue higher education when, during sophomore year, a teacher told her she would never amount to anything besides making babies. She hopes to pursue social work to assist youth in need.

Taylor is 23-years-old, white female, and a senior at CSUS majoring in social work. She has a very welcoming sense about her and is very easy going. She is very humble as she shares recent accomplishments of being asked to speak at commencement and appear on the Today Show in New York. Even when I express my excitement, she explains she is just an “average Joe.” After her mother made some poor decisions her and her siblings became homeless. For nine years she spent time in foster homes and group home. During that time she moved to five different placements and she was often abused in them. It was not until she moved in with her last foster family that she finally understood what it meant to be a part of a loving family and was eventually adopted by them. She cites her social worker as the person who really helped to guide her on her path to higher education. Taylor would like to go on and earn her MSW to work for the child welfare system and eventually have her own agency where she can screen for foster parents and train social workers.

Amy, a 28-year-old, white, female graduate student at UC Davis, is pursuing a Master’s in the teaching credential program. She is a self-identified introvert but opened up quickly during the interview. She did an excellent job at multi-tasking while tending to her infant son and speaking to me for an hour. As one of my first interviews, she was very patient and sweet as I worked through my own nerves. She spent 3 1/2 years in foster homes and lived in four different placements until she went into transitional living at the age of 16. One of her biggest influences to pursue higher education was the feeling that if she did not go to college, she would not be able to take care of herself, as she did not have family support. She knew working a minimum wage job was not going to be enough to support herself and felt education was the best way to obtain economic mobility. She credits the support staff in AVID, a support program in high school, as the people who primarily help to guide her on her pathway to higher education.



Finally, Sarah is a 39-year-old, white, female pursuing her PhD at UC Davis in entomology. She mentions she is naturally an introvert at first but she opened up as the interview proceeded. She is very kind and makes people feel comfortable quickly. She spent 2 1/2 years in foster care and was placed in two different homes during that time. Sarah felt that getting an education was the only way out of her situation. As she puts it, “it was my only way out of living in the ghetto.” Sarah started college in 1998 before there were campus support program specifically for foster youth, which initially made pursuing higher education difficult. She believes that her difficult life has contributed to her resiliency as she learned how to survive and how to get by on her own. She says her foster parents were supportive when it came to higher education but she believes it was mostly due to her internal drive that pushed her to pursue it.

The findings of this study suggest that both internal and external factors contributed to each individual’s resiliency. This study also showed that while they all had different experiences in foster care, the majority all had a few factors in common: 1) They all consider themselves to be resilient. 2) Almost all credit a person or people in motivating them or assisting them on their pathway through higher education. 3) All students find support services beneficial and recognize the assistance they provide.

## **Demographics**

For each student interview, I asked some demographic information about their age, race, class standing, major, gender, type of placement, length of time in the foster care system, and number of homes/facilities they stayed in.<sup>8</sup> The following figures show the demographic data from the student interviewees.

Figure 3 below shows that of the 14 students, 29% (4) spent time in kinship care, 43% (6) spent time in a group home, 71% (10) spent time in a foster home, and 14% (2) lived in a

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<sup>8</sup> Demographic questions can be found in appendix E along with a full list of interview questions.

transitional living facility. This shows the majority of students were placed in homes without relatives taking care of them.

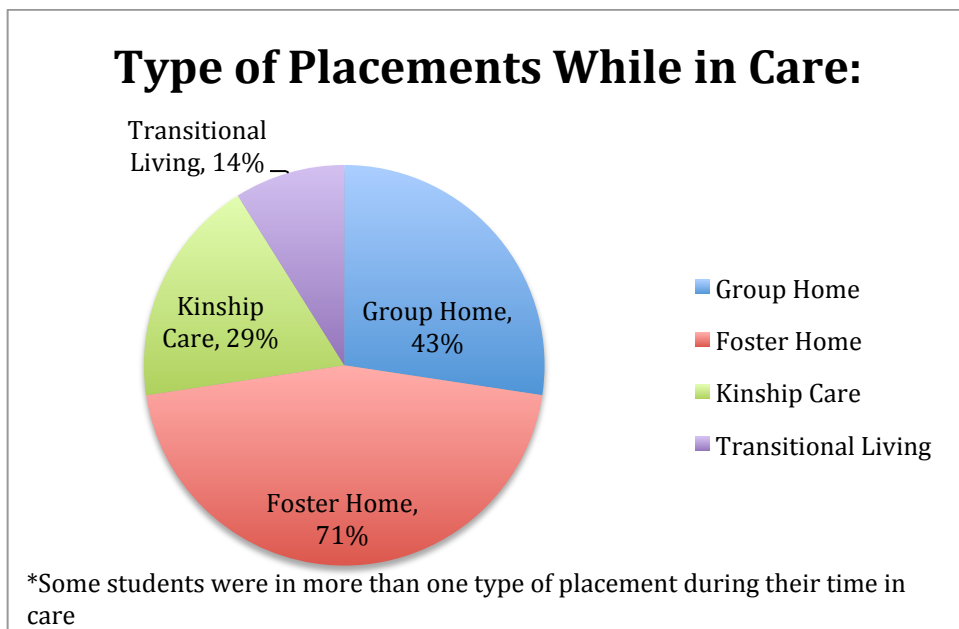


Figure 3

Figure 4 represents the number of placements the students were in over the course of their time in care. 29% (4) were in one placement, 29% (4) were in two, 14% (2) were in three placements, 14% (2) were in five placements, 7% (1) was in six placements, and 7% (1) was in 18 placements; the mean is 3.7.

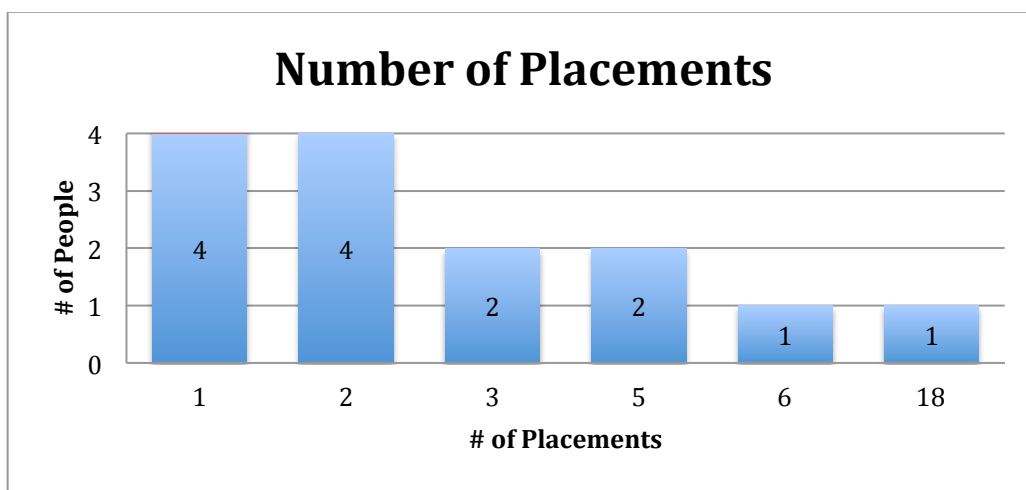


Figure 4

Figure 5 represents the amount of time the students spent in care while in the system. Seven percent of the students (1) were in care for less than 1 year, 29% (4) of students were in care for 1-2 years, 22 % (3) for 2-4 years, 14% (2) for 9-10 years, 21% (3) for 14-15 years, and 7% (1) for more than 20 years. The average number of years in care was 3.5.

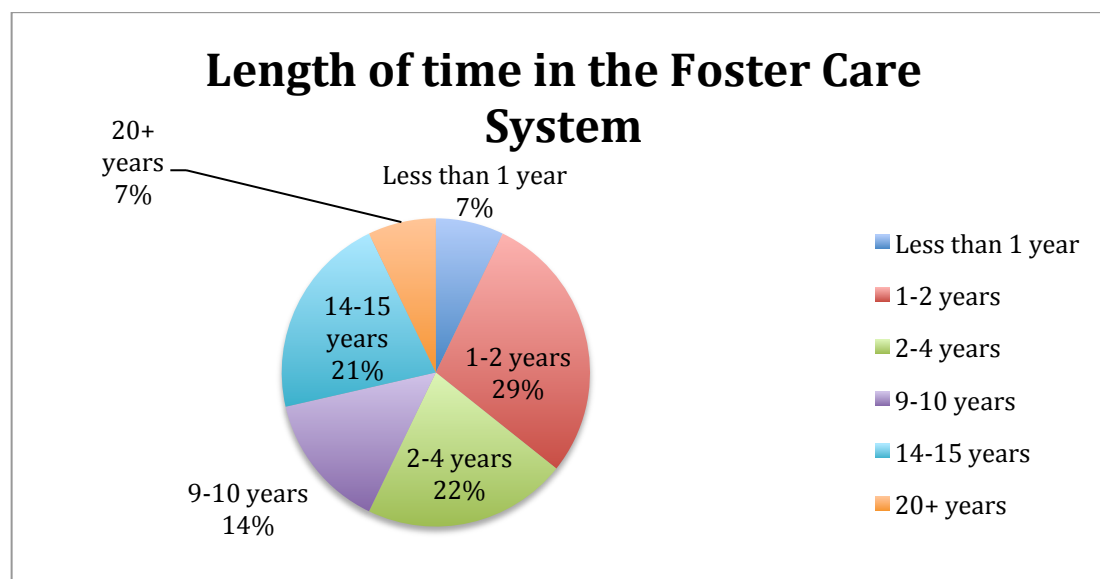


Figure 5

## Interview Findings: Students

### The Path to Higher Education

Students were asked what influenced them to pursue higher education. All of the students felt that education was their key to having a better life. The two most common themes cited focused on their drive to do well - the feeling that education was the only way out of the life they grew up in (Internal factors) and family (Interpersonal relationships) as a reason to want to do better. This included either being able to take better care of their family, prove to their biological family they were able to break the cycle, and/or wanting to make them proud.

Some people wanted to prove to others that they were able to do more than what people expected them to do. Danica<sup>9</sup> stated:

The teacher said I wouldn't amount to anything besides laying on my back and having babies. After I got my Associates degree I went back and shoved it in her face. She said 'sorry' and that she shouldn't have said that to me or prejudged me as a foster youth. That she has had many foster youth before and they were troublemakers.

Taylor recalls:

In 8<sup>th</sup> grade after learning about [UC] Berkley, that is when I knew I wanted to go to college. I went home and told my foster mom and she told me I wasn't smart enough to go to college.

Taylor went on to become commencement speaker for her graduating class. These students have faced much negativity throughout the years but largely due to their resiliency and perseverance, they have progressed to where they are today. Danica and Taylor are both good examples of the challenge model (O'Leary, 1998) which credits some stressors as a source of enhancing resiliency and success. Both of these women were told they were not capable of pursuing higher education but they used that to push forwards.

When asked what the most influential factor was when choosing their current university the top three answers in order of the frequency of being mentioned were: 1) Financial aid. Four people mentioned the financial aid they were able to receive by going to their current university was the number one reason for their choice to attend that school. All four of these students attended UC Davis. 2) Convenience/Location. Three people felt convenience and proximity to where they live was crucial to their college choice. In these instances their decisions were largely based around wanting to stay close to their family (biological or foster), stay close to their

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<sup>9</sup> All names have been changed for privacy.

friends, or stay in an area that they were familiar with. All three of these students were from CSUS. 3) Prestige. Three people mentioned prestige was the number one reason for choosing their university as it has a strong reputation or their chosen major is well known for its excellence. All three of these students went to UC Davis.

Students were then asked if there were any other factors that influenced their decision in choosing their current university. Similar to the answers in the previous question, distance (both near and far from family) was a prominent answer. Four UC Davis students reported the location of the University being away from their hometown played a big role in their decision while three students, two UC Davis and one CSUS student, cited being able to stay close to the people they care about as a strong reason to choose their school. The Guardian Scholars Program (GSP) was mentioned three times by CSUS students but none by UC Davis students. These findings imply that the students from UC Davis were more influenced by funding and prestige (Organizational factors) while the students from CSUS were more influenced by convenience and proximity to the people they care about (Interpersonal factors). Internal factors influenced both groups as they acted based on what they felt was most important to them.

When asked if they felt they had a caring adult relationship that helped to guide them on their path to higher education all but two students said yes. Of the 14 students, eight stated this person was either a social worker or some type of advisor/counselor. The others cited family (both biological and foster), spouse, or friends as their supports. These adult relationships act as protective factors such as those in O'Leary's (1998) protective factor model. This also relates to Ungar, Ghazinour, & Richter, (2013) in regards to the environment playing an important role in building resilience as a child faces adversity. Though the students' were going through a difficult

time in their lives, they had some positive environmental factors through their relationships with these adults that influenced their resiliency.

Nicole explains:

[My] school social worker when I was in seventh grade was definitely my pivotal point.

Senior year in high school I almost failed out. That year it was the school social worker there, she helped me not fail and an English teacher helped me as well.

Like Nicole, Taylor also attributed her social worker with guiding her to success. “My social worker really helped with the application process. My biological mom didn’t know what to do and my foster parents didn’t care.”

Melissa’s aunt played a big role in guiding her to want to pursue higher education:

It started when I was placed in a home with my aunt. Just to see something different, it was so foreign to be in her home because we had clean clothes, we had clean rooms, we have food when we were supposed to have food. I thought I wanted this because I never had anything like this prior. They valued education there so that’s why I started taking it more seriously and then moving on from there and making those connections at a university level, pushed me a little bit further.

When questioned about their experience with people encouraging them to pursue higher education the majority said they had relatively positive feedback. The majority of the interviewees were first generation college students so there was not a lot of prior knowledge or understanding about the process from family members as they had not experienced it, but family members typically encouraged the idea. Alex describes how his biological brother was his biggest source of encouragement:

[My] brother was the biggest influence. I didn't want to let him down either. He was very straightforward with me about what I needed to do to succeed. He pushed me to go higher. He never doubted me once. Never said you couldn't do it. He's always trusted me that I'll get it done.

Danica explains how her teacher's positive words and encouragement stuck with her over the years:

It was a positive experience after getting out of high school. I had a teacher named Dr. White who was telling me not many African American males or females go to pursue their PhD and she has one and she wishes that more African American people would pursue higher education. So she always kind of stayed on me about finishing my degree and continuing on.

In contrast, Melissa did not feel she received much encouragement but had a lot of internal motivation:

No one discouraged me but no one really encouraged. It was my own journey, my own path, and to prove to myself that I wasn't who they said I was. You know, not being anywhere in high school and knowing that I can get through this. I know I'm smart. It wasn't even talked about at our high school enough for me.

These students have shown that an inspiring message and a helpful, caring adult can make a big impact on their lives but they have also shown how strong they are. They used their internal motivation to help themselves break free of their past and push forwards, even when they were told they could not do it. In Melissa's case, she displayed factors from the "individual" section of the resiliency model adapted from Bronfenbrenner (1979). In this instance, her personal values, beliefs, values, and attitude are aiding her educational trajectory.

## **The Role of Community College**

Community college was the starting point for many of the interviewees into higher education. A total of nine students, four from UC Davis and five from CSUS had transferred in from a community college. On average it took the UC Davis students 4.5 years to transfer and the CSUS students averaged 4.6 years. It should be noted that it took one UC Davis participant 13.5 years to complete their transferable credits as they took long breaks in-between. If removed from this specific dataset, the average time to transfer for UC Davis students is 2.25 years.

Four of the five students from UC Davis who attended community college said they were not aware of any campus support programs for foster youth on their campus. The one student who was aware of a program mentioned Extended Opportunity Programs & Services (EOP&S). While this program does assist current and former foster youth, it is not a program whose primary goal is aiding them, as it is a program for all people who come from a disadvantaged background or are first generation college students. All of the students who went to CSUS and transferred in from community college stated being aware of campus support programs at their community college.

All UC Davis students who went to community college did so in Southern California. In contrast, all of the students at CSUS went to community colleges in Northern California; many of them in the Sacramento area. Based on my knowledge of working in the area, there has been a focus on supporting foster youth students for some time. Although there has been increasing efforts into creating support programs across campuses throughout California, it appears during the time UC Davis students were attending community college they either did not have them at their community colleges or the people who supported them such as caseworkers, counselors, or teachers, did not have or share this information with them. When asked if they utilized any



support programs for foster youth on or off their community college campus, three students responded to not having utilized any programs and six said they did.<sup>10</sup>

While many of the interviewees expressed their desire to go directly to a four-year university, the majority did not. For many of the interviewees who did attend community college first, they found starting at a community college ended up working well for them as a starting point as it allows a bit more flexibility to explore majors, cost less, and work on a semester system, unlike most UCs that work on a quarter system. Beth showed her support community colleges:

I would really recommend people go to CC first before going to a UC because it's an easier transition and there are more people to help you. I don't know if I had come straight into the university from foster care how I would have done, even if there was a GSP program.

### **Guardian Scholars Program/Guardian Professions Program**

With the exception of one graduate student, all students currently, or at one point, were part of a GSP program as an undergraduate. Each student became a member of the program when they began at their university as either a freshman or a junior in the case of transfer students. When asked what age they felt would be the most beneficial to receive initial outreach from the GSP, five people responded with middle school, three said 9<sup>th</sup> grade, two said 10<sup>th</sup> grade, three said 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade, and one stated as a college freshman. Of the four graduate

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<sup>10</sup> Types of programs utilized by the interviewees included: the Chafee Grant, open to any foster youth between the ages of 18-21 in college; Board of Governors (BOG) Waiver, open to community college students who are current or former foster youth (they will have their enrolled units paid for); YES, a scholarship sponsored by the Silicon Valley Children's Fund, the program provides scholarships, tutoring and academic coaching to all qualifying students in their geographic area (Silicon Valley Children's Fund, 2014); The Enriched Scholars Program, a program similar to GSP; EOP&S; and early registration and book scholarships through their schools.

students, 3 out of 4 chose middle school while one thought high school to be the best time for outreach.

When asked if they were aware of the Guardian Scholars Program before beginning at their university, seven out of eight UC Davis students said no while all six CSUS students said yes. In contrast, all four students from CSUS who attended community college were aware of campus support programs. Therefore, they would have likely been made aware of the university support programs before they transferred through their community college support program. The other two who did not attend community college were made aware through a social worker and a therapist.

Eight out of ten of the undergraduates were interested in attending graduate school, the other two said possibly. After my description of the GPP, students were asked if knowing about such a program further influences their decision to look into graduate school. Two students stated it did not influence them as they either would or would not attend graduate school regardless of access to a campus support program dedicated to assisting them. All of the students who had answered yes to being interested in graduate school stated that the existence of the GPP not only helps to influence them but it makes graduate school seem more attainable.

Students in the GSP/GPP at UC Davis identified the most valuable resource the GSP/GPP provides to its students as networking, followed by priority registration, and then financial aid. CSUS students cited scholarships as the most important resource. They identified opportunities to get involved with the program and community such as volunteering by speaking about higher education opportunities at high schools, job corps, and advocacy, as their second ranked factor. When students were asked what additional types of support they felt are needed to better assist foster youth the most common themes were more funding, mentoring, transitioning

programs for those about to graduate, and having a welcoming space on campus where they could go meet and interact with other former foster youth in their program.

### **Students' Views of Resiliency and Success in Education**

Students were asked if they felt they were resilient. If students were not clear on what that meant I explained that a resilient person is commonly known as being able to bounce back from difficult times and continue to do so when they face hardships. I explained that it does not mean they do not have up and down moments, but that overall they have been able to overcome their adversities to achieve their goals. All of the students agreed that this definition represented them. Many of the students cited their resilience as something that came about because of their difficult situations. This is another example of the challenge model (O'Leary, 1998). Amy stated:

To be a resilient person you have to overcome certain things, and not give up when other people would give up just because something is harder. You have to keep trying and do the best you can do. I think that's the kind of person I am.

Beth expressed, "Yes, without a doubt. Life won't let me be any other way."

Melissa explained:

I think I am a very resilient person because I had to be that way to get this far...I've experienced so much adversity just this semester alone that I have to keep going. I'm a bigger picture type of person. Yes I'm hurting; yes I'm going through things right now. There are issues with my family and issues with my relationships right now, but I have a goal that I have to get to and I have to remain motivated no matter what. I may be hurting and going through stuff, but I have to remain motivated no matter what.

Here we see these students recognize that if they give up and lose that drive they are not going to get out of the situations they grew up being a part of.

To further investigate their resiliency, participants were asked what external factors in their life contributed to their resiliency and success. Many cited what they went through has made them stronger today as seen above. This coincides with the challenge model that states some adversity at a younger age can be beneficial as an adult as it helps teach them how to push past difficulties (O’Leary, 2010). Sarah explains, “All the shit we had to go through as kids. Because either you’re going to figure it out on your own, or die.”

Mentors, teachers, spouses, family (both biologically and foster/adopted) were a source of resiliency for many of the students which represents the microsystem in the adapted resiliency model. In particular, many cited their biological mother encouraging them and telling them they can do what they set their mind to as a strong influence. Though for others, seeing what their mother went through and not wanting to end up like her proved to be a powerful factor. Other external influences included comic books, being around positive people, and having people and resources in the community that have assisted them. Comic books were an unexpected answer to this question and fit within the macrosystem section of the resiliency model as it aligns with media and culture. I wanted to understand why so I asked Alex to elaborate more. He found comic books to be a strong influence in building his character and resiliency over the years:

I have stacks of comic books and each one of those comics are interesting stories that have helped me be the person I am today...they are all about being resilient. That’s one of the main words in these comic books. It’s about motivating yourself and doing better. All the main characters come from nothing and they come up to be the best person in the world. They are heroes. And every time I go to school I think, ‘what am I doing? I can’t be clowning around because I won’t make my goals.’ I can just cry about it [his problems] and then I am reading these stories and it’s always motivating. It makes me

realize my situation could always be worse. The comic books have made such a big impact. They aren't just for kids.

As community and organizational supports (exosystems) can have a large impact on these students success, I asked the students if they felt there was support for them through the community or governmental programs during their time in out of home placement. Of the eight UC Davis students, four stated they did feel they had resources, such as therapy, two said not really but noted there were some but though they did not utilize them, and two said they could not remember. In the CSUS group, two cited ILP (Independent Living Programs) as being a resource, two said they did not have organized resources to draw upon, and two said no. While students cited sources as ILP, multiple stated they were not very helpful.

Two UC Davis students and four CSUS Students reported that they first started thinking about college as early as ten and under, five UC Davis students and one CSUS student stated middle school, one student from UC Davis and one from CSUS cited high school, and one student from CSUS stated around 22-23 years old.

All students stated they enjoyed some aspect of school or loved school when they were younger and moving through K-12<sup>th</sup>. A few students stated it was something they felt obligated to do, like a chore, but almost all of them mentioned it was a safe haven or sanctuary from the chaos at home and their lives. It was a place they could escape to. This finding fits within the microsystem of the resiliency model. Almost daily the student is spending time at school and in the classroom, having a direct interaction with the factor (the school/classroom) and the school influences the students positively as it is a place they enjoy “escaping” to. Danica explains:

I always liked school. I liked it because it was a way for me not to think about the situation at home. I could just be a normal person blending in with the rest of the kids.

Then having to go home and understand my parents chose a different pathway to life and I don't get to live with my parents like these normal kids do. It was an escape for me.

I wanted to know what type of expectations these students had for themselves regarding college to see if they were achieving those expectations or not and how their expectations may have changed now that they are in college. Some students stated they did not know what to expect but they just knew they were going to go or that they did not have any expectations and they just wanted to get through it. Some people expected to get high grades, realized it was harder than they thought, and learned to accept not getting straight A's. They wanted to do well and learn as much as they could. All but one student were clear they wanted to receive at least a Bachelor's degree. Melissa thought she was only going to go as far as an Associates degree and be done but later realized that was not the case. She explained, "With education comes knowledge. It enhanced my thinking and I realized I wasn't done yet."

All interviewees are hoping to be successful in higher education and become a part of that small percentage of foster youth who attain a degree. While completing their degree was on most interviewees' list of goals in regards to success, they also expressed other ideas of what success means to them as well as identified other goals such as: growing personally, applying what you learn to your life, and signing up for classes and going

Amy, a UC Davis graduate student, stated:

Success in higher education is not always about the grades. But that's what schools always look at, your GPA, which I think holds back a lot of foster youth. Should be more about life skills and what you went through, the traits you have that would make you a good worker, instead of, 'oh, did she get a 4.0...a 3.0...?' Especially former foster youth should be considered more than just grades. Maybe they had a really rough placement,

working multiple jobs, raising kid; tests are also a big issue. Some of us have learning disabilities that have gone undiagnosed and probably never will be diagnosed because we're in so many different foster homes. There are a lot of barriers financially and school wise that can really set people back.

Beth said,

I think success in higher education is growing personally. I don't think it's necessarily getting the good grades unless you're trying to accomplish med school or something like that...For me, it's taking what I learned in the real world and re-evaluating it here and kind of playing with it and see how I can come back out into the work world and be a better person.

Tony, a UC Davis grad student expressed his goals in higher education:

My goal has been to get my PhD in water resources and management groundwater modeling and then use that to work in academia, or nonprofit management, or a consulting firm, or state or local government on these issues that affect human health from the lens of water science. But right now I'm not really sure. I think that's changing and I think it should shift as you start to learn more about yourself.

While students understand good grades are important, especially if they want to pursue a graduate degree, none of the students cited good grades as being one of their measures of success. Instead, many viewed success as their degrees, growing as an individual, and using what they learned to make positive choices. There is a possibility that good grades were assumed an obvious goal and they therefore did not feel the need to expand upon it. Completing their degrees was stated the most.

## **Findings: Program Directors**

It can be difficult for foster youth in higher education as they can struggle to find a place of belonging, people who they can relate to, and guidance from supportive adults. The three women who run the GSP/GPP do just that for these students. Ashley<sup>11</sup>, a white woman in her 20's, is the director of the GSP at CSUS. She completed her Bachelors degree in Social Work and began working with the program during her fieldwork and was brought on as a full time employee in 2013. Vanessa is of Hispanic descent and in her 40's. She is the program director of the GSP at UC Davis. She obtained both a Bachelor's and Master's degree in Kinesiology and became involved with the GSP in 2008. Susan is white and in her 60's. She is the program director of the GPP at UC Davis. Before starting at UC Davis, Susan obtained a Master's degree in Anthropology and a Ph.D. in Public Policy and Social Research. She has been the director of the program since it began in 2014. Each of these woman act as a caring and supportive agent for their students to turn, create an environment to help them succeed, and push the students to complete their academic goals. Since these women work so closely with this population of students, and have done so for years, it was important to understand their views on access to higher education for former foster youth, and to see how their ideas compared with those of the students.<sup>12</sup>

All three program directors stated that the number one factor to which students attributed their resiliency was having someone who helped them, be it a family member, a social worker, or mentor. Two out of the three also mentioned internal motivation such as not wanting to fail or having internal "grit." This coincided with what the students state, as many expressed a large

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<sup>11</sup> Names have been changed for confidentiality

<sup>12</sup> Interview questions can be found at the end of Appendix E



part of their motivation was due to their relationship with an adult that pushed them to do well as well as having the motivation to create a better life for themselves.

Since each program is run independently they have their own unique ways of providing outreach to youth. However, all three directors stated word-of-mouth was a large factor in getting the word out. All three have created relationships with campus and community programs such as Independent Living Programs, Sacramento County Office of Education, and caseworkers to spread the word about their programs. Some programs were able to obtain data from college applications where students self-identified as former foster youth which allowed the directors to reach out to them personally. Overall, having a presence in the community and relationships with community colleges, high schools, and foster youth workers is the way the programs are able to bring in their largest number of students.

All stated that middle school and high school was the period that they believe outreach would be the most useful to students. Their reasons for middle school included that while they are young and have another 5-6 years of school, depending on when one speaks to them, it gives the students plenty of time to prepare for college. It alerts students that there are options for them and they do not have to do it on their own. Ashley explained while it is good to let foster youth know in middle school about services available to them, they were more receptive to hearing the information in high school since they may start thinking about college then.

At CSUS scholarships, emergency funds, counseling and the food pantry were the top services used by the students. In the GSP program at UC Davis, individual appointments, mentors, and one on one support were utilized the most. In the GPP at UC Davis, preparation for graduate school, such as completing the graduate school application, gaining professional

experience, and funding were the services used the most. Their answers matched to those given by the students at their schools.

Reflecting on their success and future developments that could ensure their support of foster youth Vanessa, the Program Director of GSP at UC Davis, identified the need for more student-to-student engagement among the students in her program. She expressed that students want more engagement but they do not respond when given the opportunities to do so such as at workshops or cohort events. Finding a way to create an environment that will produce more student involvement is her current goal. Ashley, Program Director of GSP at CSUS, said understanding when something is not working is a very important skill to have when working with this population of students. One example she cited was when she discussed outreach to incoming students and the use of presentations with PowerPoint versus a round table type setting. She found students check out if she presents a PowerPoint but they were much more engaged and open up when they are in a round table setting as they can have more of a dialogue. She also stated,

My official title coming in was academic advisor. But I would say that is the least of what I do. It's more like being a fire fighter. Just making sure that everyone is cool. Making if there's an issue they feel comfortable enough coming up to me and talking about it, then I do everything that I possibly can to get it worked out. Whether it be something on campus like counseling or health services, or kind of whatever financial aid, admissions.. yada yada..we'll just basically go through there.

Susan, the program Director of GPP UC Davis stated it is important to "never say never." Listening to students both what they say and how they say it can tell you so much. Often times they may tell you what they think you want to hear or want to aspire to but they may not

feel they are capable. Being sensitive to this population and carefully listening will ensure you are helping students work to their full potential. Susan also notes,

It's very difficult if students have been in foster care where they have not gotten good feedback about who they are throughout their life. Many students don't, but in particular they (foster youth) haven't, and so often they aren't aware of their own capabilities.

Sometimes they will push themselves too much, and sometimes not enough. So it's a little bit tricky.

Drawing insights from the three program directors it is clear that it takes someone with a lot of sensitivity, compassion, creativity, and motivation to best assist this population of students reach their goals and understand their full potential. It is easy to doubt a person's ability when they have been acting out or not doing well. However, it is crucial that people in their position provide support to those people to help them realize their full potential. It is extremely important for people who work at any academic institution to assist in creating a climate for success. People need to be open minded and understanding when it comes to this population of students and build them up. Traditional methods of encouragement and punishments may not work as many youth in this population have had a difficult time with authority and do not respond well to harshness.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISCUSSION, OUTCOMES, AND LIMITATIONS**

Finding and following a path that leads to academic success can be difficult for foster youth due to many different internal and external influences that they may experience as they are growing up. Nevertheless, through persistence and resilience the student participants in this study have done just that. Evidence found in previous chapters shows that both internal and external

factors play a part in making a person resilient. It illustrates that having a supportive adult relationship and a strong desire to prove to themselves and others that they are capable of succeeding in higher education has played a big role in these students' pathways.

Based on the findings, the challenge model is most represented in the interviewees' experiences. Data from the interviews show this to be true as each student was able to overcome much of their adversity and become resilient to be in the position they are today. However, it was through their misfortune that their resilience was built and they learned to persevere. The protective factor model was also demonstrated throughout the study. Each student interview cited having a protective factor such as school or a caring adult that helped to lower risk factors that they may not be able to move past without the positive outlet. The compensatory model was not seen much in this study. I believe that is partially due to the questions I asked which did not go into their beliefs or problem solving abilities. The individual, microsystem, and exosystem appeared most from the adapted ecological model that contributed to resiliency. For a person to be resilient they need internal drive, but also the right environment and influences to cultivate it.

### **Creating a Climate for Success**

As previously noted in the demographics section, almost 60% of students in this study are 26 years old or older. According to the National Center For Education Statistics, on average, students aged 25 years and older make up over 40% of college students and that number is set to increase in the upcoming years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). This is problematic for foster care youth because many of the academic programs they qualified for when they were younger become unavailable once they reach the ages of 22-25. Similarly, many student support programs at colleges have strict age limits that will not provide monetary resources or potentially participate in the program once they reach 25. Since many laws

regarding foster youth consider 24 years old to be the cut-off age, many programs use that to form their program requirements. Three participants in this study currently qualify for the Chafee Grant. Of the 14 student participants, only two have actually utilized the Chafee Grant at some point in time. Though free money seems to be something anyone would take, the application process for this grant involves more than just filling out the application. First they must complete the FAFSA application, they must have a valid social security number or fill out the California Dream Act application, next they must fill out the Chafee grant application, and finally have their school complete and submit the Chafee Need Analysis report (NAR) (California Student Aid Commission – Chafee, 2015). This can be a daunting process for anyone, let alone foster youth who likely have less assistance with these matters than others.

One of the newest programs for former foster youth students is called Cooperating Agencies Foster Youth Education Support (CAFYES). The Californian state budget has allocated \$15 million to fund the program and distributed money to 10 community college districts in California. There are only three requirements to be a part of this program. In order to qualify, students must be under age 26, in foster care on or after their 16th birthday and enrolled in at least 9 units at a college with a CAFYES program (Cooperating Agencies Foster Youth Educ. Support (CAFYES) | California College Pathways, 2015). If looking only at age, 60% of students who participated in this study would no longer qualify for those grants and resources. Sarah, a graduate student at UC Davis explains her frustration with the age limits:

A lot of scholarships that were available had an age limit and me being a reentry student was one of my biggest complaints. Did you [policy and law makers] think as soon as I turn 25 everything was normal again? It's not like you turn 25 and everything goes away

and your life is normal all of a sudden, like you don't struggle with things and you don't have issues related to your time in care.

Sarah's example further demonstrates how the exosystem, in this case policy, can negatively impact a person and stifle their resiliency if they have very few options. Though Sarah does not interact with the policy directly, it impacts her everyday life. Sarah is one of many students who expressed this frustration during this study. The 30-35k annual price of a UC make it increasingly out of reach for the middle class and lower income students so more of these students need to obtain some aid and/or must work. As many foster youth already face hardships at a higher rate than most other disadvantaged students withholding or restricting support services so that the student must work one or more jobs will not only prolong the time it takes them to complete their education but it puts them at a higher risk of dropping out altogether.

### **Building Resiliency**

Reunification is the number one goal for youth in foster care. Even if foster youth do not reunify with their family before they emancipate from foster care, many foster youth still remain in touch with their family in some form or another. This is important because as was seen in the findings, many youth credit part of their resilience to their family members. These interpersonal relationships and external factors influence their internal drive to do well. Whether it is because of positive or negative emotions associated with their families, it has helped create them into the person they have become and pushed them into pursuing higher education.

Support programs, financial assistance, and mentors were areas mentioned that also assisted student resiliency. These external factors were in the Organizational/School & Local Community category in the adapted socio-ecological resiliency model. Each factor played a part in building up the students' strength and ability to push forward. Many students not in foster care

receive financial and emotional support from their family throughout their education and during their young adult years. They also learn to grow and how to deal with adversity through their experiences with their family. These actions are all part of the microsystem and contribute to a person's ability to be successful in life. Mentors and support services help former foster youth do this by assisting to create an environment where the youth are able to grow and discover who they are outside of foster care while creating strong relationships with the youth.

As noted above, all the students had a positive answer to the question of whether they were resilient. They have had setbacks, traumas, and hardships that many people cannot imagine but they pushed through. They are attending college and are getting a degree to give themselves an opportunity at a better life. These foster youth are resilient but sadly they are part of the small percentage of students who make it to college and graduate. The factors that built their resiliency were not available to many thousands of their peers. For example, some may not have the support necessary to pursue a degree and may not be aware of programs to support them. California does well at recognizing foster youth and providing resources to meet their needs but other states may not. These youth may not have that internal desire or "grit" that students in this study do or do not believe they are capable. Some may take on the role of providing for their younger siblings and they must work instead of furthering their education. Without a larger study of youth including foster youth not pursuing higher education, it is difficult to say exactly why.

The students that participated in this study have either successfully graduated from college or are well on their way. Resilient people will possess many similar attributes: the ability to bounce back from adversity, a generally positive attitude and outlook, the ability to use problems to push themselves forwards instead of hold them back, a certain degree of confidence and self-efficacy, a support network of some type, and problem solving skills. The data in this

study have shown these students possess most, if not all, of these components that constitute resiliency.

One of the most compelling patterns in the interviews is that resilient youth turn their negative experiences into a driving force. This drive comes from within. However, many of the experiences that challenged and tested them were external factors. It was through these experiences that they were able to test and build their own resiliency. This was seen when all students expressed having high expectations regarding educational attainment for themselves. Once the students see themselves as resilient they will hopefully make decisions about their future that benefit them as they have the desire to do well and believe they can. Having high expectations for oneself is necessary to fuel the internal drive but some need feedback from other factors, such as family or caring adults (microsystem) to create these expectations so that they are aware of opportunities and possibilities. Just as internal drive is an important aspect of resiliency, the external factors such as culture, policy, and social networks in the other three categories of the model are just as important. It is no surprise that family and caring adult relationships are one of the primary factors the students credited to their resilience. Each area of the model works to influence one another either directly or indirectly, but they all contribute to the student's resilience.

One way to help build resilience is to not only be mindful of the factors that build resilience, but also use the adapted resilience model when getting to know a new foster youth or when you are looking to better understand someone you already know. For example, if you were run a program for foster youth you could go through the individual sections of the model and ask questions that pertain to the various factors. These questions could be about: goals and drive, belief, and attitude (individual); what type of support system and network do they have, if any,



outside of your program; gain an understanding of community and organizational influences in their lives and how they are impacted by policy (exosystem), and enquire about their ideologies, culture, and media interests (macrosystem). Utilizing this model as a tool to gain greater knowledge about the youth you can then use that to provide a support network that will help increase the youths' resiliency and success on a more personalized basis.

### **Limitations of This Study**

Having a larger number of people in this study would have helped to increase the rigor of the data. Having more time to do the research would have been useful since time constraints also played a role in limitations as some students were not able to participate due to conflicts between our schedules. In addition, I believe it would have been good practice to start with a focus group of current and former foster youth to create questions for the study as they may have some thoughts and insights that I did not have. Surveys could have been utilized to gain further information from a larger group of students as they are more easily distributed and typically take less of the students' time. Overall, a mixed methods approach would have created even more in-depth information that would be useful to those seeking to assist this group of students.

### **Future Research**

Graduate students in this study helped to provide some insight as former foster youth who have completed their undergraduate degree and went on to graduate school. As less than 1% of foster youth are enrolled in graduate school their experiences and feedback about how they have gone on to be successful in higher education is invaluable. Graduate school is something few people in the general population complete, so to understand in greater detail how foster youth have been able to navigate the system and accomplish these goals can further explain the pathways of alumni of care who have attained that level of achievement. However, there is very

little research done on former foster youth graduate students. More studies on graduate school attainment of former foster youth can help to raise the expectations of foster youth and help to change policies that could benefit them in the future.

Studies on the age foster youth return to higher education (often in their late 20's or older) may help to better inform policy that will provide financial and other resources to support their entry and success.

### **Recommendations**

One of the biggest hurdles to entry and success in higher education I came across with foster care alumnae is the age limit on monetary programs these students can access. Often times many of these students are not able to fully immerse themselves in higher education until they are at a later age. This is problematic, as they do not qualify for many of the financial resources that they would at a younger age (often the cutoff is 24). Therefore, extending the age limit of foster care programs to at least 27 or even 30 years old would be more inclusive. For graduate school access this extension would create more equity for these students, especially as the average age of a graduate student is 33 years old. One way to work around the age limit would be to allow eligible foster youth to receive their grant, such as the Chafee grant, once they begin school and not have a set age limit. The financial aid distribution model allows students to collect aid for a total of six years while in school regardless of what age they start. Using that model, students who qualify for this grant will not miss out on a substantial amount of money that can greatly benefit them as they work toward a more secure future.

There should be more training to administration in educational institutions about foster youth students, their unique needs, and what type of support campus programs need. While it is understandable that funding is allocated to programs based on the number of students the

programs serve, without fulltime support or sufficient funding it can make growing a program difficult.. Using former foster youth currently enrolled at the university, educators, and trained facilitators, these students and professionals could create videos and trainings that come from [actual places of] experience. Trainings on how to deal with unique populations often come from people who have never experienced the situations they are teaching about. While they may do an excellent job, having a person who can speak from experience can provide richer context and be more impactful.

Foster youth and their unique needs should be built into teaching credential programs and in-service trainings. With students constantly changing schools and falling behind, it is necessary to train teachers on best practices pertaining to foster youth students. Many times foster youth are grouped with other disadvantaged populations (a common practice throughout all levels of education) and this is partially the reason so many fall through the cracks because they are not receiving the help they need. Providing the training to teachers can help to better acclimate students when they transfer to new schools.

Finally, service providers should look to support the growth of resiliency in foster youth. Taking the internal and external factors discussed in this research and looking at ways to implement those into the students' lives may help to create stronger individuals in the future.

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## **APPENDIX: A**

### **Email to Directors**

Hello \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Michelle Dean and I am a second year Master's student in the Community Development Graduate Group at UC Davis. I am also a member of, and work with, the Guardian Professions Program (GPP) at UC Davis. I am currently beginning my thesis research on former foster youth and their pathways to higher education. My goal is to discover what trends evolve in students who come from this background and pursue a college degree. As a former foster youth student myself, I believe that this knowledge will be beneficial to those people who work with current and former foster youth, to better assist those students in understanding that a college degree is obtainable.

I am very interested in interviewing students and the Directors of the GSP at both UC Davis and Cal State Sacramento, and also plan on interviewing graduate students and the director of the GPP. I have looked at your website and I was hoping to set up a meeting with you to discuss my project in further detail and gather more information about your program. If possible, I would also really appreciate any reports you are able to send me regarding student success, background information, or trends you have come across.

I am happy to answer any questions you have and am looking forward to speaking with you.

All the best,

Michelle Dean

## **APPENDIX: B**

### **Email to Students**

Are you a former foster youth student participating in the Guardian Scholars Program (GSP) or Guardian Professions Program (GPP), and are at least 18 years old?

If you answered YES to the above I am looking to interview YOU for my research titled: Foster Youth: Finding A Pathway To Higher Education.

So, who am I? My name is Michelle Dean and I am a former foster youth graduate student at UC Davis, and this research is for my thesis. However, it is more than just my thesis...It is my goal to one day run a program where I am assisting former foster youth during their time in college. Much of the information I am looking for will help to better inform fellow colleagues and myself of the best way to provide support for students.

Did you know that less than 3% of former foster youth graduate with a college degree? As a fellow former foster youth, I believe it is important to discover what factors influenced former foster youth and assisted them on their path to higher education. As everyone in the GSP and GPP has successfully managed to gain entrance into a university, I want to hear what aided you in getting there. Questions will be on a variety of topics but will be tailored around your resilience, programs you utilized, and people who may have assisted you in successfully making it to college. This information can provide the people who assist former foster youth with knowledge and a greater understanding of what students in university, such as you, feel benefited them the most.

I am looking to interview around 20 people between the months of April and May and I will provide you with food of your choice (up to a \$15 value) during the interview. The interviews will be conducted at a location of your choice and convenience, and no names or identifiable information will be used in my thesis.

If you are interested, or have any questions please email me at [mldean@ucdavis.edu](mailto:mldean@ucdavis.edu) or call me at

xxx-xxx-xxxx

Warmest Regards,

Michelle Dean

## APPENDIX C

### Consent Sheet for All Research Participants

[888440-1] Foster Youth: Finding a Path to Higher Education

**Investigator:** *Michelle Dean*

Hello,

You have been asked to participate in this study because you are either a former foster youth student participating in the Guardian Scholars Program or Guardian Professions Program or a program director for one of these programs. Your participation in this study can provide valuable insight regarding former foster youth's pathways to higher education. ***Information collected in this study will be used for my Master's thesis and potentially be utilized by program administrators, directors, and other people working with current and former foster youth.*** If you chose to participate in this study, your involvement will consist of an interview lasting approximately 60 minutes. ***With your consent I would*** also like to record this interview. If you would prefer to not have the interview recorded, I will take typed notes.

Efforts will be made to limit use or disclosure of your personal information to people who have a need to review this information. We cannot promise complete confidentiality. Organizations that may inspect and copy your information include the IRB and other University of California representatives responsible for the management or oversight of this study.

I will, however, ensure the confidentiality of data collected from the individual interviews by using pseudonyms and storing the information in a separate file-protected document in a password-protected computer. The computer will be in a safe location. I will ensure to omit any identifying information from any written reports. I will also destroy the recordings from the interview at the end of the study.

If you agree to take part in this research study, we will compensate you by providing food of your choice (up to a \$15 value) during the interview, which will be discussed and arranged before the interview, to compensate for your time.

You may decide not to take part in the research and it will not be held against you and you can leave the research at any time and it will not be held against you. You may also ask any questions you want about the study before you decide.

If you agree to take part, you acknowledge that participation is completely voluntary. Your verbal agreement of yes will suffice in place of a signature. You will be provided with a copy of this consent form which you can keep for your records.

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt you, talk to Michelle Dean, at 805-259-6871 or [mldean@ucdavis.edu](mailto:mldean@ucdavis.edu) or you can speak to her advisor, Jonathan London, at [jlondon@ucdavis.edu](mailto:jlondon@ucdavis.edu).



## APPENDIX D

### Table of Student Demographic Information

School	Participant Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Race/ Ethnicity	Years in out of home placement	# of out of home placement	Type of placement	Academic class standing
UC Davis	Amy	Female	28	White/ Hispanic	3.5	4	Foster home / transitional living	Grad student
UC Davis	Tiffany	Female	25	White	2.5	2	Foster home Kinship/ Foster home/ Group home	Grad student
UC Davis	Alex	Male	24	African American	14	18	Group home	Senior
UC Davis	Leah	Female	19	African American/ Hispanic	8	4	Foster home	Freshman
UC Davis	Sarah	Female	39	White	2.5	2	Foster home	Grad student
UC Davis	Tony	Male	28	Thai/ Chinese/ White	1	1	Foster home	Grad Student
UC Davis	Julia	Female	19	Hispanic	1	1	Foster home	Freshman
UC Davis	Beth	Female	31	Does not identify	1.5	6	Group home	Senior
CSUS	Nicole	Female	21	Vietnamese /Black	21	2	Foster home/ Kinship Group home/ Group home/	Senior
CSUS	Jeff	Male	33	African American	2	1	Group home/	Junior
CSUS	Austin	Male	30	African American	15	2	Kinship Foster home/	Junior
CSUS	Melissa	Female	27	African American	2	5	Kinship Foster home/	Senior
CSUS	Taylor	Female	23	White	9	5	Foster home/ Group home	Senior
CSUS	Danica	Female	26	African American	15	1	Kinship	Senior

## APPENDIX E

### Semi-Structured Interview Questions

**\*\* Bolded questions were the ones primarily used. Initially I had intended on using more if not all but found their answers often times included the answers to the questions I was seeking. To avoid asking then to repeat themselves, and what I found after a couple of interviews regarding time constraints, I chose to limit the questions to only a select group.**

Michelle Dean

Title: Foster Youth: Finding a Path to Higher Education

**Bolded questions are the ones that will be the main focus for students.**

Individual Interview Questions

#### Demographic Questions

- 1. Can you tell me the year of your birth?**
- 2. What is your racial/ethnic background?**
- 3. What is your academic class standing?**
- 4. What is your major?**
- 5. What gender do you identify with?**
- 6. What type of placement were you in while in the system? foster homes, group homes, or other?**
- 7. How long were you in the foster care system?**
- 8. How many homes/facilities were you in?**

Questions regarding the student's path to higher education

- 1. Can you tell me about your pathway to higher education?**
2. What types of support services for current/former foster youth, if any, did you utilize prior to beginning college?
3. What information did you receive about college campus support programs before you began college?
- 4. When considering what university you wanted to attend, what was the most influential factor that ultimately made you pick your current university?**
  - a. Were there any other factors that influence your decision?**
5. Was there a person or people in your life that assisted in choosing what university you would attend?
6. Do you have a relationship with your biological family? If yes or no, did this impact your journey into higher education?
- 7. What influenced you to pursue higher education?**
8. Where did you find information about the university you currently attend?
- 9. Are you interested in pursuing a graduate school or professional degree? Please explain.**
- 10. Does knowing there is a support program for former foster youth who wish to pursue a graduate degree influence your decision to look into graduate school?**

Questions regarding time spent in Community College

- 1. Did you attend community college before transferring into the university?**

- 2. Were you aware of any campus support programs for former foster youth on your community college campus?**
- 3. Did you utilize any support services for former foster youth on or off of your community college campus?**
- 4. How long did it take you to transfer or complete your Associates degree?**

Questions regarding how students utilize the Guardian Scholars Program & Guardian Professions Program

- 1. At what grade level did you become a part of the guardian scholars program?**
- 2. What types of activities do you engage in at the Guardian Scholars/Professions Program**
- 3. Do you attend any workshops or programs hosted by the Guardian Scholars/Professions Program. If so, which?**
- 4. What do you think is the most valuable resource the Guardian Scholars/Professions Program offers?**
- 5. Which additional types of support do you think is needed?**
- 6. What is your favorite thing about Guardian Scholars/Professions Program?**
- 7. At what age do you feel initial outreach from the Guardian Scholars Program be the most beneficial?**
- 8. Would you change anything about your experience in campus support programs?**
- 9. What type of outreach is the most effective when trying to reach students?**

Question regarding the significance of the Guardian Scholars/Professions Program

- 1. Were you aware of the Guardian Scholars before starting at your university? If yes, how?**

- 2. How did you find out about the Guardian Scholars/Professions Program?**
3. What did it mean to you to find out about the Guardian Scholars/Professions Program?
4. What is the significance of having a program that caters to the unique needs of former foster care students?
5. How does the having a Guardian Scholars/Professions Program reflect on your university?
- 6. If you had multiple choices of universities to attend, did knowing there was a guardian scholars program have an impact on your choice of university to attend? If so, why?**
7. Guardian Scholars/Professions Program means \_\_\_\_ to me.
8. What types of programs and/or workshops would you like the Guardian Scholars/Professions Program to develop?

Questions regarding student's view of resiliency and success in education

- 1. How do you explain success in higher education? What does that mean to you?**
- 2. Do you consider yourself a resilient person? Please explain.**
- 3. What external factors in your life have aided in your resiliency and success?**
- 4. What are your higher education goals?**
- 5. Did you have a person or caring adult relationship that helped to guide you on your path to higher education?**
- 6. What age did you first start thinking about college?**
- 7. What type of expectations did you have for yourself regarding college?**

- 8. Did you feel there was support for you during your time in care through community / governmental programs? Were they accessible?**
- 9. Were you able to maintain close friendships during your time in foster care?**
- 10. How did that affect you?**
- 11. What was your experience in k-12 school during your time in foster care?**
- 12. Did you feel teachers were understanding about your situation?**
- 13. What type of personality do you consider yourself to have?**
- 14. What was your experience with people encouraging you to pursue higher edu?**
- 15. What were your feelings about school when you were younger?**
- 16. Anything else?**

Questions for Guardian Scholars/Professions Program Directors

1. What is the number one factor students attribute their resiliency and success to?
2. How to you conduct outreach to former foster youth students regarding your program?
3. What age or grade do you believe outreach would be the most useful to students?
4. What are the services students utilize the most in the program?
5. How are you able to determine which students are foster youth and how do you reach out to them about your program?
6. What do you feel is the most important service you provide to students?
7. Is there anything else you feel I should be aware of regarding students in the program?

Although, these are questions I intend to use, modifications will be made based on the semi-structured interview approach