Emancipated Foster Youth's Transition from Care to Virginia Community Colleges

Shylan E. Scott

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Emancipated Foster Youth's Transition from Care to Virginia Community Colleges

A Dissertation
Presented to
The Faculty of the School of Education
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

By
Shylan E. Scott
January 2012
Emancipated Foster Youth’s Transition from Care to Virginia Community Colleges

by

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this study was the experience of students who had successfully achieved the transition from foster care to enrollment in Virginia Community Colleges. The following questions guided the inquiry: How do students who are emancipating from foster care describe their transition to enrollment at one of the Virginia Community Colleges? What challenges do students who are emancipating from foster care face in the transition to college? What types of support do these students require to successfully transition to college?

This study used a qualitative approach to examine the transition from care of emancipated foster youth to post-secondary education. Narrative responses from semi-structured interviews with emancipating youth now enrolled in a Virginia community college provided insight into their transition from care to enrollment in college.

Twelve students aged 19 to 21, participated in this study. Ethnicity of participants included one biracial student, five Caucasian students, and six Black students. Findings from the study showed the importance of the influence of a single secondary educator in each participant’s experience, the importance of financial assistance, and the importance of campus/institutional support on college choice and transition from high school to college. Participants were challenged by their lack of academic preparation, lack of family privilege, and lack of understanding of the norms of college.

Keywords: college transition, foster care, college students, community college
Emancipated Foster Youth’s Transition from Care to Virginia Community Colleges
CHAPTER I

Introduction

One priority of President Obama toward public education is to increase the number of college graduates by 2025 (American Graduation Initiative, 2009). Recently, Virginia passed the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2011 that aimed for an increased number of college graduates throughout the state by 100,000 by the year 2026. As leaders at institutions of higher education are pressed to graduate more students, finding and providing opportunities for higher education for underrepresented students becomes crucial. One group for which higher education has been limited is youth emancipating from foster care. Emancipated youth or former foster youth are young adults who have reached the age of majority without being adopted or reunified with their families of origin (Hochman, Hochman, & Miller, 2004). Youth formerly in foster care are at high risk for homelessness, unemployment, under-employment, and corresponding poverty (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Naccarato & DeLorenzo, 2008). Researchers report that fewer than 10% of youth from foster care nationally obtain a bachelor’s degree (Barth, 1986; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Festinger, 1983). In Virginia, the rate of successful four-year college completion for youth from foster care is unknown. Though the number varies from year to year, consistently over 1,000 youth emancipate from the foster care system in the state each year. Using the national averages, only 10 individuals
emancipating from care in Virginia each year would be predicted to receive a baccalaureate degree.

Foster care provides substitute care for children living outside of their biological family homes until the age of majority, which occurs between the ages of 18 and 21 (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2009). In 2010, of all the children in Virginia in foster care, 36% were age 15 and older. Currently, 1,808 youth in Virginia are facing or navigating an exit from state foster care (Virginia Department of Social Services, 2010).

With more attention and support, this population of students could contribute to the targeted completion rates for college graduates if they would only enroll and persist to graduation. The large numbers of foster care students who become homeless or incarcerated and do not enroll in college raises issues of state responsibility for ensuring children in care are prepared for adulthood, including the possibility of college attendance. Therefore a critical understanding of the reasons for the underrepresentation of foster care students in post-secondary education may assist other youth from care toward enrollment in college and increase college completion rates. In order to enhance college completion rates for foster youth, understanding the challenges they face in college decision making and transition to enrollment is essential.

Youth in care face particular challenges when considering and pursuing post-secondary education. For example, they have lower levels of academic achievement as compared to youth from the general population (Pecora et al., 2006a). When compared to their peers, foster youth are much more likely to be economically disadvantaged before they enter the foster care system, while they are in foster care, and after they leave foster
care (Wolanin, 2005). In addition to challenges resulting from a background of poverty, foster youth who attend college are often first-generation college students, a group that typically faces more adjustment issues than their non-first generation peers (Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007). Youth from care share college attendance rates similar to students who are first-generation, low income, or youth of color, rates that are all significantly lower than their counterparts who do not share these characteristics (Matthews, 2009). Community colleges provide an important point of access and entry in post-secondary education for students in these at-risk categories (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Students from these vulnerable groups are overrepresented (based on undergraduate enrollment) in two-year or shorter post-secondary programs, making community colleges the institutions enrolling the largest number of low income and first-generation college students (Bailey et al., 2004), which are also demographic markers for foster care students.

Of all types of institutions of higher education, community colleges provide the most likely entry point for emancipated foster youth. Cooper, Mery, and Rassen (2008) suggested that in community colleges former foster youth can pursue academic studies according to their skill level, ultimately achieving an associate’s degree and/or transferring to a four-year institution for a bachelor’s degree. Additionally, community colleges can provide career and technical education for certificate programs that will qualify youth in care for employment, which assists students in becoming financially self-sufficient (Cooper et al., 2008).
To encourage and ease the transition to the community college for foster care youth, the Virginia Community College System developed their Great Expectations program in 2008. The program was geared specifically toward supporting youth from care. Through this program, the state of Virginia and the Virginia Community College System has increased recruitment and financial aid for college attendance for youth from care. Virginia provides emancipated youth tuition waivers to community colleges in the state. The program also includes campus support programs, financial assistance, college counseling, and other sources of encouragement and aid. Despite evidence that these state programs support foster youth transition and enrollment in two-year colleges, youth from care emancipating in the state of Virginia have not been studied and are only minimally represented in the literature. This chapter discusses the problem and purpose of the study, situating the context of youth leaving care and moving into college both inside and outside of the state.

Problem Statement

Foster youth face challenges when navigating the decision to enroll in post-secondary education. Advocacy and public policy over the last 10 years increased the visibility of the difficulties faced by youth in care and resulted in creation of supportive policies, financial aid, and resources for emancipated foster youth nationally. A particular focus of these policies has been the transition between foster care students’ early public education and enrollment in college. As noted, community colleges provide a likely and feasible avenue for youth from care to access post-secondary education given the open access mission of the institutions and the location of community colleges within
commuting distances for the majority of the population (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Although community colleges make advanced education a more economically viable option, most of these colleges do not have specific programs to provide young people making the transition from foster care to college with assistance to address their non-financial needs (Dworsky & Perez, 2009). Understanding more about the ways in which students successfully navigate the transition from care to higher education enrollment can lead to the provision of practical advice for foster care students who are still in middle and high school, their educators, and their service providers.

Currently, only limited information exists about Virginia’s former foster youth and their experiences in post-secondary education (Dworsky & Perez, 2009). The number of foster youth graduating high school and attending institutions of higher education is unknown in the state. Nationally, the low college completion rates of emancipated youth underscore problems with transition to and enrollment in post-secondary education and represent an opportunity for contributions that will enhance the achievement of national and state education goals and targets regarding college completion. The gap in the literature on college transitions for foster youth in Virginia and on the national level underscores the need for studying this population. Like other low-income and first-generation students (Day, Dworsky, Fogarty, & Damashek, 2011; Unrau, Font, & Rawls, 2011), youth from care who achieve enrollment in higher education are unlikely to persist to degree completion.

For this study, a qualitative approach was used to examine the transition from care of emancipated foster youth to post-secondary education. Narrative responses from
12 emancipated youth now enrolled in a Virginia community college provided insight into their transition from care to enrollment in college. The focus of this research was on the challenges facing emancipating youth from care as they transition through enrollment in Virginia Community Colleges. The following research questions guided this study.

**Research Questions**

In this study, the following questions were investigated:

How do students who are emancipating from foster care describe their transition to enrollment at one of the Virginia Community Colleges?

1. What challenges do students who are emancipating from foster care face in the transition to college?

2. What types of support do these students identify as helpful in their successful transition to college?

**Significance**

This study examined emancipating foster youth's transition to enrollment in Virginia Community Colleges through their narrative responses to semi-structured interview questions with the goal to understand better issues related to the transition process to college. The students' stories are significant because they contribute to knowledge regarding underrepresented, low-income, and first-generation students who come from foster care settings. The themes and patterns emerging from the interviews of youth in this study add to information about ways to provide better secondary educational experiences, to support transition to post-secondary education, and to achieve positive outcomes for the students. The findings from this study also contribute to the literature.
about the life experiences of foster youth in care, their aspirations for, and subsequent enrollment in post-secondary education. As well, this study provides information that can support state and national goals concerning access to higher education and achievement of college completion targets. This study adds to a foundation upon which future studies of youth from foster care who access post-secondary education may build.

This study contributes to knowledge and practice regarding the role of community colleges as a point of access by exploring the college choice and decision making of the participants. Policymakers may use the findings from this study when generating policies for emancipated youth to enable their increased participation in higher education. Further consideration of the range of issues and challenges that youth from care encounter when deciding whether to participate in higher education will allow legislators and educators to make informed choices regarding the use of resources.

A central concern of policymakers is the goal of increasing college completion rates (Caldwell, 2011; McClure, 2009). Findings from this study may aid policy making targeting youth from foster care and may also have implications for policies for low-income students and first-generation students. The results of this study add to the literature on youth from care and their pursuit of post-secondary education. These data contribute to an enhanced understanding of the post-secondary education and training needs of emancipating youth.

Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations

This research rests on the assumption that youth from care are less likely to enroll in post-secondary education than their peers who have not been in care. Another
assumption underpinning this research is that youth who pursue post-secondary education can articulate factors that contributed to their success and identify the challenges that were most pressing for them in the transition. Further, with the use of narrative inquiry, this study rests on the assumption that the participants were honest in their retelling of their educational journeys.

This research is delimited by its focus on emancipated youth enrolled in community colleges within the state of Virginia. Limitations of the research include the specific cultural and institutional context of the Virginia state system of foster care and the community college system that preclude generalizability of the findings. Participant self-selection for the research and the sensitivity of having been in foster care may have contributed to limitations in data collection. The recollections of the students may resonate with others, but do not necessarily represent the experiences of all youth exiting from care. Researcher bias was guarded against using appropriate qualitative techniques. The interviews occurred at a specific moment in time and emphasize the participants’ present perceptions of their experiences.

Overview of Literature

The literature review focuses on research examining youth emancipating from foster care and the challenges they face in accessing and transitioning to post-secondary education. Further, it explores life outcomes and barriers in accessing post-secondary education for these students. Youth from care face unique challenges, thus a review of the literature on their experiences in life and in education while in the foster care system aids in understanding better how past experiences influence their college decision making.
and enrollment. The literature review examines the feasibility of the community college as an entrance to post-secondary education for youth from care. Additional literature covers the intersection of policy regarding post-secondary education and former foster youth, and the ability of policy to widen the pathways from care towards post-secondary education. Several federal and state policies create specific provisions for promoting post-secondary attendance for emancipated youth. Finally, the literature review provides further information on the role of college financial aid and other transitional supports for youth from care in making the decision to attend college.

Conceptual Framework

The use of Transition Theory (Chickering & Schlossberg, 1995; Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg et al., 1989) and the Multilevel Model of College Enrollment (Perna, 2006a) as theoretical constructs provided a framework for understanding emancipated youths’ transition to community college enrollment within multiple contexts. This study does not seek to use theories to explain the experiences of the youth, but rather to enhance understanding of the findings that emerge. Though the initial focus is on environmental factors, specifically educational and policy factors, the individual factors contributing to the transition process could not be overlooked, particularly since these youth faced challenges that many youth do not.

The conceptual model that sets the foundation for this study places the youth as the primary focus for study and then includes a review of the contextual factors that influence the youths’ decisions to attend college and their transition to college (See Figure 1, p. 56). The unique experiences of the participants are influenced by context,
including the policies guiding the child welfare system and policies designed to increase their opportunity for higher education. Thus, at the center of the model are the individual stories of emancipated youth in transition from care to enrollment in college.

**Methodology**

This study used a qualitative approach for collecting and analyzing participant narrative responses to provide for a rich description of college transition experiences from the perspective of the foster youth (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The research design addresses issues of data collection, management of the data, and data analysis. This research included 12 participants selected from two Virginia Community College Campuses. A requirement for participation was emancipation from foster care and current enrollment in a community college in Virginia.

The data collection occurred through semi-structured interviews. An interpretivist/constructivist conceptual framework guided the inquiry and provided structure for data analysis. Inductive analysis allowed for identification of themes and patterns emerging from the data (Lichtman, 2010).

**Overview of the Dissertation**

Chapter One introduced the issues and focus of the study. Chapter Two contains a review of related literature concerning the experiences of youth in care, their underrepresentation in post-secondary education, and the role and opportunity of community colleges. Presentation of the theoretical framework highlights developmental models about transition and college choice. Further, the literature review examines the intersection of policy, education, and child welfare in the lives of emancipated foster
youth. Chapter Three contains the research methods section and reiterates the purposes of the study, describing the procedures including the research questions, research design, population, sample, data collection, and analysis of the data. In addition, specific information regarding data collection, analysis, and trustworthiness of the findings is addressed. Chapter Four provides a portrait of the 12 participants. Chapter Five details the findings of the study including the influence of participants' foster care experience and educators on their subsequent decision to go to college and the influence of life challenges, other supports, and strategies within their transition to college. Finally, Chapter Six discusses findings from this study, implications for practice, and areas for future research.

Summary

Emancipated foster youth leave the foster care system and face many challenges during transition to independence from institutional care. One option in this transition phase is to attend an institution for post-secondary education. One of the most viable pathways to post-secondary education for this population of students is a community college. The state of Virginia, working to meet the needs of emancipating youth, provides tuition waivers for emancipated foster youth to enroll in the Virginia Community College System. This study examined the transition to community college enrollment from the perspective of youth emancipated from foster care and currently enrolled in community college.
CHAPTER II

Literature Review

Scant research (Merdinger, Hines, Lemon Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005; Sim, Emerson, O’Bien, Pecora, & Silva, 2008) exists about how youth from foster care make the decision to enroll and persist to a degree in post-secondary education. Yet, the initial conclusions of these studies point out that youth from care are less likely to graduate from high school, to attend college, to persist to degree completion, and are often low-income and first-generation students. What remains unknown from existing research is how youth from foster care transition into college or what contributes to their decision to attend.

This study examined the factors influencing the decision-making process for youth formerly in foster care regarding post-secondary education attendance. Further, this study examined the transition of youth emancipating from foster care to enrollment in a community college. This review of the literature presents information to aid in understanding of the foster care experience, the influence of context on students who are in foster care or who have emancipated from foster care on choices about post-secondary education, and the development of policies concerning youth from care and post-secondary education.

This chapter reviews the literature about youth from foster care tracing their path from foster care through the pursuit of higher education. The chapter provides an overview of the experience and characteristics of children and youth in foster
care in the United States and Virginia. Secondly, the chapter reviews the educational experiences of foster care youth, including the role of community colleges and post-secondary education in general and the characteristics foster youth share with low-income and first-generation students. A review of federal and state policies designed for emancipating youth accessing post-secondary education provides a backdrop of factors influencing foster youth when choosing higher education. An examination of the policies of the Virginia Community College System for emancipating foster youth provides added information about how youth from care in Virginia are making the decision to attend college. Finally, this chapter provides a detailed review of the conceptual framework and model used in the study.

**Foster Care**

An overview of the foster care system in the United States consistently shows a large number of children and youth in state care. In the United States, there were 463,000 children in foster care in September of 2008 (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2009). In spite of their numbers, foster children’s voices remain significantly underrepresented in research and literature due to methodological challenges, such as the lack of comparison groups, infrequent use of similar standardized instruments across studies, minimal statistical controls, and use of multivariate models (Pecora, White, Jackson, & Wiggins, 2009). The majority of children enter foster care due to family problems and maltreatment including abuse, neglect, and underlying problems like parental substance abuse.
(U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2009). The Administration for Children and Families (2003) reported that most children referred because of abuse and neglect fall into the category of neglect for reasons related to poverty.

In 2011, over 32,000 youth exited the foster care system by aging out to independence (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011). In the United States, children stay in foster care for an average of 21 months and many experience multiple placements (Barbell & Freundlich, 2001). Each youth has a distinctive experience in the foster care system and ultimately, the formative years spent in foster care may influence the transition from care to post-secondary education.

Portrait of Youth in Care

The numbers of youth in care in the United States over the last 10 years has ebbed and flowed in terms of total population served. From 1999-2005, consistently more than 500,000 youth lived in foster care. At its height in 1999, there were over 567,000 youth in care (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2006a). Between 2006 and 2010, the number of youth in care hovered just below 500,000. Foster youth in the United States range in age, gender, and ethnicity. Consistently, about 33% of youth in care are between the ages of 14 and 19. Each year an average of 277,000 children and youth exit the system due to reunification, adoption, institutionalization, runaway, death, and aging out. Of that total, close to 11% exit the system through emancipation. Emancipating or aging out of foster care is a legal event that occurs when the court formally discharges a young person from the state’s custody based on the youth’s chronological age. In
the last four years, that number averaged just over 29,000 (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2009). In most states, foster youth are discharged at 18 years of age; however, an increasing number of states are extending care to 21 years of age as a result of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-351, 2008).

Even though legislation favors seeking permanency for children in foster care, of the over 50,000 children adopted only 7% were between ages 14 and 18 in 2005 (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2006b). More troubling, three times as many youth from ages 12 to 18 transitioned to adulthood through emancipation versus a permanent family placing, and this number is increasing (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2006b). Part of the support system for foster care youth includes working with a case manager to develop individual goals for the future. Over the last seven years, at least 6% of the foster care population had an exit goal of emancipation (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2011). The large number of teenagers and young adults in care has served as an impetus for expansion of programs to address their needs as they transition to adulthood (Pecora & Pecora, 2008).

The teen years are particularly important for those seeking a college degree as college-going decisions are explored and academic preparation becomes more critical as it bears upon college choice and ultimately college persistence. If emancipation is their goal, these youth have limited family support and guidance regarding the transition to adulthood and college. The foster-care experience
presents paradoxes for youth in which they are expected to leave care prepared to live independently, yet are afforded minimal opportunity to practice skills of self-determination while in care (Geenen & Powers, 2007). Seita and Brown (2010) found that youth from care were ill-prepared for emancipation and integration into society as adults due their reliance on strangers in care, and the effects of trauma related to their entry into care.

To understand the circumstances emancipated youth face, this research focused specifically on youth in Virginia. A comparison of Virginia foster care data and national data is detailed in Table 1. Even though Virginia has a very low rate of children in foster care, it ranks first among the states in the percent of youth (32%) who age out of foster care (Virginia Performs, 2007). Virginia has the distinction of having three times the number of youth exiting state care compared to national norms. This high percentage of youth exiting foster care provides an appropriate population to study with respect to their transition to college.

Table 1: *Comparison of Virginia & National Foster Care Data in 2008*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Virginia</th>
<th>National</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of children in out-of-home care</td>
<td>7,000</td>
<td>491,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rate out of home (per 1000 in child population)</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of youth age 12-18 with APPLA goal*</td>
<td>34.5%</td>
<td>20.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of youth aging out (% of all exits)</td>
<td>31.6%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Adoption and Foster Care Analysis & Reporting System (AFCARS) FY2008.*

*APPLA means Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement*
Youth in Care in Virginia

Youth in care in Virginia are more likely to age out of foster care without a permanent family (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2007). As of 2007, more than one-third of youth in the system in Virginia were deemed unlikely to be reunited with their families or adopted. Faced with the growing number of youth in this age group, Virginia recognized an opportunity for reform (Virginia Performs, 2007) by emphasizing permanency through adoption, improving community supports, and working to give youth a voice in their experience. Another key reform started in 2007. The Virginia Children's Services System Transformation worked to begin to improve foster care youth outcomes by coordinating the delivery of services by all stakeholders, including state agencies such as the Departments of Social Services, Education, Juvenile Justice, Mental Health, along with local government and community groups.

As of June 1, 2010, 6,344 children were in foster care in Virginia (Virginia Department of Social Services, 2010). About 3,331 (52.51%) of this total are male and 3,013 (47.49%) are female (Virginia Department of Social Services, 2010). Consistent with national trends, African American children, who comprise about 24% of the child population in the state, are overrepresented as youth in care at 44% of the total (Voices for Virginia’s Children, 2008). In 2007, teenagers made up 50% of Virginia’s care population (Voices for Virginia’s Children, 2008), a rate higher than the national average. Currently, teenagers make up 45% of youth in care (VDSS, 2010), with 8% staying in care after their 18 birthday. With one-third
of teenagers emancipating from foster care in Virginia each year (Jones & Beecroft, 2010), it is important to understand their transition process after care.

In addition to emancipation, the state of Virginia has three primary exit types: adoption, reunification, or exit to a relative. Reunification or exit to relative refers to reconnection with the biological family of origin or another biological family member. No matter the age of youth in care, the amount of time in care depends on the type of exit. The young people reunited with their biological families spend the least amount of time in care. Youth who are adopted spend as much as five times longer in care than other fostered youth because the process of adoption in Virginia takes longer than in other states (Jones & Beecroft, 2010). The permanency outcomes are particularly bleak for youth who enter care at age 12 or older. Only 2% of the children who entered care at age 12 and older were adopted (Voices for Virginia’s Children, 2008).

A review of the system of care in Virginia found several challenges present in the current operations of foster care, including too many youth exiting care through emancipation, inadequate maintenance payments and support for foster parents, and too frequent placement in congregate care/group homes (Voices for Virginia’s Children, 2008). Understanding the challenges faced by the teenage population in foster care in the state may allow for the development of strategies to improve youth outcomes. Due to the large numbers of youth emancipating from care, Virginia continues to focus effort and resources on this population of youth, including providing support for transition to college.
Experience in Foster Care

Regardless of the circumstances, being separated from family influences the lives of all human beings. The effects of separation from family especially impacts youth from foster care. Though there are thousands of successful adoptions of youth who have been in foster care, the literature highlights the struggles faced by youth who remain in care. Youth in care face constant change and intense loss. Common experiences include loss of relationships, loss of a sense of belonging, and a loss of personal control (Osgood, Foster, & Courtney, 2010).

Although children are always under authority of some form, for children in the foster care system authority is absolute. Children and youth in the child welfare system have little or no say in decisions made about their welfare, thus they feel little control over or ability to influence their lives during their time in care (Unrau, Seita, & Putney, 2008). Youth must navigate building trust and relationships, yet submit to having no voice or say with decisions made for them (Wolanin, 2005). Youth in foster care have histories of developing unhealthy relationships with adults prior to placement; this lack of connection to trusting adult figures works against youth who need caring adults and mentors as they navigate the college-going process (Osterling & Hines, 2006).

In addition to a loss of agency over their own circumstances, a loss of family relationships deeply affects youth from care. The workforce turnover in child welfare personnel further disrupts the development of healthy nurturing relationships with at least one caring adult (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2010).
Children in foster care face limited contact or the loss of their birth parents, extended family, families of origin, and familiar environments (Dunn, Culhane, & Taussig, 2010; Pecora et al., 2009). This loss of family connections coupled with lack of traditional family involvement can create feelings of uncertainty and frustration or feelings of disconnection (Dunn et al., 2010). Youth also disclose feelings related to the stigma about not having a normal family experience and express a sense of profound loss (Unrau et al., 2008). Those who age out of foster care have likely experienced some of the highest rates of placement instability (Stott & Gustavsson, 2010). Qualitative studies involving youth in care and young adults formerly in care have consistently found themes of pervasive loss, isolation, loneliness, and disconnection due to placement instability (Unrau et al., 2008).

This loss also translates to loss of a sense of belonging. In particular, youth face uncertainty, loss, social risk factors, relationship difficulties, and emotional concerns (Avery, 2010; Dunn et al., 2010; Mech, 1994; Samuels & Pryce, 2008; Strolin-Goltzman, Kollar, & Trinkle, 2010). Further, youth face concerns about their living arrangements and their mental health. Living with multiple foster care families can contribute to or exacerbate behavioral and emotional problems. Placement changes, difficult relationships with foster parents or siblings, and the stigma of being in care can occur (Pecora, 2009). One support that some youth have is being placed with their siblings.

Siblings are unique in that they provide a life-long connection that outlives almost every other social relationship, a bond that is established in early childhood.
and persists across the life span (Sherman, Lansford, & Volling, 2006; Stewart, Verbrugge, & Beilfuss, 1998). Studies have emphasized the positive role of siblings as a source of support while in foster care. When sibling groups reside in the same foster home (intact sibling groups), siblings serve as a protective factor, as compared to siblings placed in different foster homes (split sibling groups) (Drapeau, Simard, Beaudry, & Charbonneau, 2000). Studies on siblings in substitute care generally demonstrate positive outcomes when siblings are placed together (Herrick & Piccus, 2005). Children placed with the same number of siblings throughout their stay in foster care adapted better and had more positive outcomes, including a higher likelihood of achieving a permanent living situation (Leathers, 2005). Buhrmester (1992) found that brothers and sisters can function as confidants and companions. Based on the previous research, siblings may provide an additional source of support during periods of transition, such as moving from care to college.

Perhaps because of their loss or compounded by their loss, youth from care experience higher rates of educational disabilities, financial insecurity, and mental illness when compared with non-foster peers (Pecora et al., 2006). Former foster youth are at an increased risk for depression compared to their counterparts in the general population (Pecora et al., 2009). The elevated rates of Post Traumatic Distress Disorder (PTSD) experienced by youth before exiting care sometimes persist into adulthood (Pecora et al., 2009). Mental health and substance use and abuse also are associated with foster care out-of-home placement, such as kinship
foster care, non-relative care, group care, and supportive independent living arrangements (Keller, Salazar, & Courtney, 2010).

Multiple placements during foster care may result in placement in group-homes and involve frequent moving and changing schools, which can create fractured relationships for youth (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001). Placements in state care have also been linked to other negative circumstances such as an increased likelihood of having trouble with the law, incarceration, homelessness, higher rates of pregnancy, and violence in a dating relationship (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney et al., 2001; Pecora, 2009). A higher proportion of former foster care youth also reside in the criminal justice system (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Jones, 2008; Reilly, 2003). Research suggests that individuals with child welfare or foster care histories remain disadvantaged in terms of well-being and personal achievement (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Pecora et al., 2006b).

Most children in foster care come from families with low income and reside in low-income foster homes. These families confront challenges such as maintaining housing, employment, health, mental health, lack of parenting skills, and poor education (Barth, Wildfire, & Green, 2006). The compounding impact of these factors, along with mandated court appearances, can disrupt the educational experience of foster youth (Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, & Ruth, 2007). Their experiences in care also significantly influence their time in early and secondary
education, which ultimately affects options available for these youth as they seek college admission.

**Education Challenges**

Emancipated youths' journey through educational settings differs from their peers who are not in care. These significant educational challenges influence their options for post-secondary education (Osgood et al., 2007). The experiences of youth in public education set the foundation upon which college work builds. Thus, academic deficiencies in the early years of a child's educational experience create a barrier for future success in college. This section reviews issues emerging in the public school experiences of youth in care as well as problems evident during the college years.

**K-12 Educational Experiences**

The early education experiences of the youth can create expectations, behaviors, and attitudes regarding education that affect aspirations for a college education. Christian (2003) identified three major systemic obstacles to ensuring that foster youth receive the best academic preparation possible for post-secondary education, including changing schools and foster care placements, lack of coordinated advocacy for youth in care, and inconsistent follow through concerning youths' education. In addition, the fact that youth in care have high levels of behavioral and emotional concerns contributes to difficulty in graduating from high school.
Initial placement in foster care creates an immediate challenge for youth. This challenge is intensified according to the reasons for placement. Abused children may experience delays in developing self-control and often demonstrate problems with core cognitive, language, and social functions (Committee on Early Childhood, 2002). Children who experience abuse and neglect display a wide range of problem behaviors including aggression, poor social relations, and emotion management. In the secondary school setting these tendencies are expressed in higher levels of behavioral and emotional problems, a higher likelihood of suspension and expulsion, and a greater difficulty in coping and developing relationships (Courtney et al., 2001; McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White, & Thompson, 2003; Needell, Cuccaro-Alamin, Brookhart, Jackman, & Shlonsky, 2002; Sullivan, Jones, & Mathiesen, 2010). Crozier and Barth (2005) argued that there is a relationship between maltreatment and academic maladjustment. Maltreated youth tend to be less engaged in academic work. As a result, children in foster care test behind their peers, and are more likely to drop out, repeat grades, experience higher enrollment in special education, have lower high school graduation rates, and have less post-secondary preparation than the general population (Pecora et al, 2006a). All of these factors can contribute to whether or not foster care youth transition to college.

Challenges facing youth in care also relate to residential and family mobility. Foster children experience high rates of poor achievement and even school failure due to higher absenteeism and tardiness compared to other children.
These findings of poor performance are linked to the number of school moves they experience (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2006). Moving foster youths between various placements often requires them to move schools as well. School changes result in delayed academic progress, repetition of grades, and corresponding emotional trauma related to adjusting to new teachers, peers, and school surroundings (Christian, 2003; Massinga & Pecora, 2004).

Youth in care often experience several placements, they must interact with several families, and they are reliant on numerous service providers. Consequently, there is a lack of clarity about who is responsible for educational decision-making or accountability for educational attainment or achievement for the youth (Christian, 2003; Massinga & Pecora, 2004). Typically, schools and child welfare agencies often do not coordinate efforts to serve students. Social workers and other agency staff are often unaware of the academic progress of their clients and agencies are unlikely to share data with school administrators, which make school, city, or statewide collaboration challenging (Bellis, 2004). Teachers and guidance counselors who do not know which students are in foster care, cannot tailor services to meet their needs. Added to these difficulties is the finding that foster youth often attend schools in under-resourced areas. Frequent changes in home and school placements can cause or compound serious academic problems and make it even harder to develop the positive social networks and relationships with teachers and administrators that might yield helpful information about college access and financial aid (Cochrane & Szabo-Kubitz, 2009).
Foster youth are at significant risk for dropping out of school and failure to complete a high school graduate equivalency degree (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003; Wolanin, 2005). Youth formerly in care at age 21 are less likely to have completed high school or obtained a GED relative to their nationally representative peer group (Courtney, Dworsky, & Pollack, 2007). A retrospective examination of young adult foster youth found that 30% reported they failed to successfully complete a grade level, they were enrolled in special education classes, and they had at least four school changes in their formal education (Courtney et al., 2001). Yet, this same group of participants aspired to go to college (Blome, 1997; Courtney et al., 2001). Secondary education provides a key foundation for college preparation, college choice, and college transition.

As young people grow up in the foster care system, they face choices about their next steps towards independence and adulthood. Educational attainment for foster youth lags far behind their non-foster-care peers, with just over half of foster youth completing high school (Wolanin, 2005). For youth in care who finish high school or obtain their GED, college provides a strong option for social mobility and a way to move beyond their circumstances. Young people who have lived in foster care are less able to depend on family members for shelter, adult guidance, and financial support after high school compared to non-foster youth (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010). Many youth are aging out of the system with limited resources for independence, most striking are the lack of bank accounts, stable housing, or sufficient financial resources. This aging out process occurs
concurrently with the timing of college attendance for traditionally-aged college students and impacts the options and process of transition for youth in care.

For many youth in care, attainment of post-secondary objectives remains particularly challenging. The few studies available on the post-secondary educational attainment of former foster youth show that this population struggles significantly compared to their non-foster youth counterparts in attendance, persistence, and graduation (Courtney, 2006). Only 20% of college-qualified foster youth attend college compared to 60% of their non-foster-care peers (Wolanin, 2005). Similarly, degree completion for foster youth is substantially lower (estimates of 1% to 10.8%) than the degree-completion rate of non-foster youth (24%) (Pecora et al., 2006b; Wolanin, 2005). There is little research that explores how youth from care successfully navigated the transition to college.

Though aspirations are present for higher education among foster care youth, attainment, persistence, and graduation have not necessarily followed (Courtney et al., 2001). College attendance and persistence for emancipated youth are effected by a lack of academic preparation, finances, and housing (Blome, 1997; Merdinger, Hines, Lemon, Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005). Life in the foster care system puts foster youth at risk due to the absence of academic, social, and familial support networks that help students prepare for college and access financial aid (Cochrane & Szabo-Kubitz, 2009). Even with these challenges, some fostered youth do later obtain college degrees. What remains unknown is what type of support enables them to overcome known obstacles.
Limited knowledge of access to information about post-secondary education options, college admissions requirements, financial aid availability, or campus support programs also factor into youths' college decision-making (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010). Central to the college choice process is access to information about application procedures and support during transition to enrollment. Recognizing the importance of information in moving youth from care into college, national and state leaders and policymakers established various pieces of legislation to aid college enrollment and attendance of this population. The following section provides an overview of policy and legislation targeting foster care students and college enrollment.

In relation to their transition to adulthood and college enrollment, emancipating foster youth are a vulnerable population. It is only in the last 20 years that research on former foster youth and their involvement in higher education occurred. Determining exact post-secondary enrollment and graduation rates for youth from care over time is difficult due to studies with different sample sizes and characteristics, methods, and analyses (Courtney et al., 2001; Pecora et al., 2006; Reilly, 2003). Despite limited data, it is well established that the educational attainment for youth who have spent time in foster care is problematic and they fall far behind that of the general population at all levels of education (Pecora et al., 2006b; Stone, 2007). Foster care experience puts youth more at-risk educationally.
Post-secondary Experiences of Emancipated Foster Youth

Studies that compared foster youth with a matched group or national sample found that youth from care fall behind their peers in educational pursuits (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney & Heuring, 2005; Courtney et al., 2001; Pecora et al., 2006a; Pecora et al., 2006b). This lag in educational attainment begins in high school. Lower high school completion contributes to low rates of college completion (Courtney et al., 2007; Wolanin, 2005). Wolanin (2005) determined that for 300,000 former foster youth between ages 18 and 25, 50% graduated from high school or attained a GED, however, only 30,000 attended higher education. Thus, even for the youth that graduate from high school, it is less likely they will attend college. For the small percentage of youth from care that do matriculate into college, retention rates are lower compared to non-foster youth.

When investigating college persistence and degree attainment, estimates of achievement vary depending on the study. Some research reports as few as 1% of former foster youth graduate from college (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003), whereas other studies documented as many as 10% of former foster youth graduated from college (Pecora et al., 2006b; Wolanin, 2005). These figures stand in stark contrast to the 27.5% of the general population aged 25 to 34 years that have college degrees (Pecora et al., 2006b). Disparities in college graduation rates for foster care youth also appear due to differing data collection methods and differences in samples. Despite these differences, the data highlight low rates of participation in higher
education and present a case for needing to know more about the post-secondary education choice and experience of foster care youth.

A report by the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (Davis, 2006) examined data from the NCES 2001 Beginning Post-secondary Students Longitudinal Survey (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005) and found that despite having similar rates of enrollment, six years after college enrollment only 26% of youth with foster care experience have completed a degree or certificate versus 56% of youth without this experience. Furthermore, while some students were still enrolled in school, 53% of youth with foster care experience had exited school without obtaining a degree compared to 31% of non-foster youth. These rates of early exiting are much higher than those found for other at-risk populations. Thus, despite having commonalities with first-generation college students and low-income students, the foster care experience seems to exacerbate barriers to obtaining a college degree. Even when youth from care enroll in college, retention remains an issue of concern.

The investigation of the educational transition experiences of youth from foster care to college becomes important to improve their educational opportunities and outcomes. Limited research has explored foster youth experiences in college including their social, academic, and campus life experiences. Merdinger et al., (2005) undertook in-depth interviews with a group of 15 former foster youth currently enrolled at a four-year college. Their study focused on internal characteristics and expectations associated with the academic success of foster care
youth, including intelligence, identification as gifted and talented in elementary school, and enrollment in Advanced Placement, honors, and college preparation courses in high school. Educational stability in high school and a challenging high school curriculum were the major external factors supporting successful enrollment. The presence of role models provided additional positive support. While this study focused on the internal and external factors supporting enrollment in college, it did not focus on youths' college decision-making experience or their experience of transition to enrollment. Neither has research tracked youth who have enrolled in a community college setting.

Other studies examined personal and institutional support factors. Dworsky and Perez (2009) explored how to support former foster care youth in college. They discovered a variety of factors that may interfere with attaining a higher education degree. These included a lack of academic preparation for college, no family to depend on to help pay for college, and a lack of awareness of financial aid for which they are eligible. Other hindrances included emotional or behavioral problems, and a lack of appropriate supports offered by colleges. Finding replacements of support mitigated these pitfalls and was instrumental to youth navigating college.

Institutional support programs often served as a source of this replacement support. Dworsky and Perez (2010) interviewed program staff, participants, and stakeholders regarding their perceptions of the effectiveness of the programs and services and determined that support services and effectiveness varied by location.
The key elements of effective student support programs included identifying a single go-to person for students to contact about resources, supporting accessibility to year-round housing, providing comprehensive financial aid packages with minimal loan components, providing access to multiple types of counseling, and maintaining connections with social services and independent living programs. A central component of the institutional programs was personal support.

Speaking to youth already in college, Dworsky and Pérez, (2010) collected data from about 100 youth participating in a campus support program on a campus in Washington or California. Participants cited academic advising and opportunities for leadership as important support mechanisms. The campus support program provided them a sense of belonging on campus. In terms of challenges or concerns, participants consistently cited financial aid and housing.

Another study by Salazar, Keller, and Courtney (2011) on foster care youth in college found that out of four types of social support (people to count on when feeling low, when needing small favors, when needing money, and to encourage the participant), over 80% reported having sufficient support of at least one of these types, but only 40% reported having sufficient levels of all four types. Youth reported most frequently having access to affectionate support, but noted they less frequently had access to emotional/information support and tangible support.

The least frequent type of social support available to these youth was having someone to lend them money during an emergency (Salazar et al., 2011). Further, a study by Merdinger, Hines, Osterling and Wyatt (2005) focused on a
sample of foster care youth still attending college in their junior year or beyond. Of this group, over three-fourths (75.5%) reported they had someone they could tap to borrow $200 if needed. These research studies found that access to financial support and resources was critical for persistence.

Most recently, Unrau et al., (2011) studied 81 traditional-aged former foster youth, ages 17-20 in a descriptive study on self-reported readiness to engage in college. They matched the sample with a similar peer group of youth not in foster care. Their research reported that students from foster care are significantly different from their non-foster-care peers in their readiness to engage in college. As noted in previous studies, this study also found that youth from care were less academically prepared. Foster youth also differed from their peers in being less receptive to career counseling, having less family support, and focusing less on academic achievement upon entrance to college and after the first semester as freshman.

Research on foster youth in community college remains more limited (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). Pecora et al., (2006) in their study of Midwest former foster youth found 16 % of students were attending a community college and 9 % were in vocational training. Among that sample, 16.1% completed a vocational degree (21.9% among those ages 25 or older), while 8% noted receiving an Associate’s degree. Cooper, Mery, and Rassen (2008) completed a comprehensive report on community colleges in California and how those institutions meet the educational needs of current and former foster youth. They
used survey data of youth enrolled at 12 community colleges and conducted in-depth interviews and site visits. They found that most programs supporting former foster care youth rely on the personal dedication of a single staff member rather than broad institutional support. Youth identified the following critical needs: housing, transportation, and college affordability. The community college system in general has not yet developed a way to track student progress and outcomes. Thus, it is difficult to determine how former foster care youth fare in attending a two-year college compared to a four-year university.

Youth from care have to meld higher education aspirations with competing priorities, including living arrangements, financial aid, and other challenges that their peers may not face. Since they share characteristics with other groups of underrepresented students, exploring their experiences helps to explain their decision to attend higher education, their transition from care, and their enrollment in post-secondary education. These findings may help inform policies for other at-risk populations.

**Intersection of Risk Factors**

The vulnerability of youth due to their foster care experiences is exacerbated by lower socioeconomic status (Dworsky & Perez, 2009; Green, 2006; Stone, 2007), such as impoverished backgrounds and minimal family financial support when preparing to exit care and begin college. Though access to post-secondary education continues to expand, first-generation and low-income students in general still face significant challenges. Most youth from care share similar
background characteristics with low-income and first-generation students (Cheng, 2010; Harris, Jackson, O'Brien, & Pecora, 2009; Hines, Lemon, Wyatt, & Merdinger, 2004). This section reviews research on youth from care, first-generation, low-income students, and access to post-secondary education. Youth from care likely live in poverty (Hines et al., 2004; Wolanin, 2005) and are first-generation students (Cochrane & Szabo-Kubitz, 2009; Day et al., 2011). Knowing more about these background characteristics helps in understanding the transition process to college for former foster youth.

**First-generation.** First-generation college students (FGS) are students from families where neither parent had more than a high-school education (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Walpole, 2003). Post-secondary education enrollment strongly relates to parents' education even when other factors are taken into account, such as less academic preparation when entering college and limited access to knowledge about college, and having minimal knowledge of time management, college finances, and bureaucratic operations of higher education (Thayer, 2000). In completing a profile of first-generation students, Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, and Yeung (2007) found most youth received advice and information about college from high school guidance counselors. In their college decision-making, more first-generation students than their peers place importance on and attend institutions of higher education close to their home (Saenz et al., 2007). First-generation students have difficulty persisting and completing college (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998) due
to lower educational aspirations, previous academic experiences, limited study skills, and lower self-confidence in comparison to their non-first-generation peers (Saenz et al., 2007). In comparison to their peers, first-generation students were employed in the workforce significantly more, clocking in for 20 or more hours a week before starting college and once enrolled (Saenz et al., 2007).

The experiences of first-generation students vary depending on their income background and their ethnicity. Blome (1997) worked with youth from care and determined that youth from care start post-secondary education later than their non-foster peers and experience difficulty adjusting to the post-secondary educational environment because they are usually first-generation college attendees and members of minority groups.

First-generation college students must navigate to and through college with little help from family members who are unable to help navigate the culture of higher education and its associated rituals and expectations; they also often lack financial resources to pay for college (Jehangir, 2010). Youth from care and first-generation students tend to possess limited knowledge about higher education, have a lower level of family income and support, have limited academic preparation, and have lower degree expectations (Pascarella et al., 2004). Indeed, youth from care are typically first-generation students that also possess other challenging barriers to enrolling in college.

A college education provides a means to a better life, a view shared by foster youth and other first-generation college students (Jehangir, 2010). Financial
aid is a major source of support for first-generation community college students, and they are less likely to receive financial support from parents for college-related expenses (Nomi, 2005). Another characteristic many first-generation and foster students share is being in low-income groups.

**Low-income.** Youth are more likely to enter and leave state care in poverty (Wolanin, 2005). Approximately, 33% of transition-aged foster youth have household incomes at or below the poverty level (Fernandes, 2008). College access and choice for recent high school graduates remains stratified by socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity despite policies and programs mitigating some of the challenges for low-income students’ access to college (Thomas & Perna, 2004). Low-income students regard cost-related factors as a major consideration in their college-choice process (Paulsen & St. John, 2002a). Many academically qualified, low-income students do not attend post-secondary education because of these financial barriers, or due to insufficient information about post-secondary education options and a lack of encouragement or aspiration for attending (Vargas, 2004).

Students from a lower socioeconomic background are more likely to be engaged in multi-institutional attendance patterns (Goldrick-Rab, 2006). For instance, a study of 216 emancipated foster youth who attended a four-year university found that 61.4% had attended another college or university before coming to their current university (Merdinger et al., 2005). The constant change between college programs is reminiscent of the disruptive moves youth had while
in care. In both cases, educational moves create a longer time to degree completion, result in disruption of academic programs, and create weaker ties with faculty and the college (Samuels & Pryce, 2008).

Youth from care may not be receiving the benefits of financial aid available to them because of lack of awareness about these resources or difficulty in applying for financial aid during the application process. College-going rates for youth from care remain low despite programs designed to create opportunity by aiding the cost of attendance. Among those who go to college and apply for financial aid, very few receive all the grants for which they are eligible (Collins, 2004; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). Studying the financial aid emancipated youth receive proves difficult since there is no single method for identifying these youth and no one source of information about their financial aid awards (Andom, 2007; Geenen & Powers, 2007). Without mentors or other guiding individuals, foster youth lack information about the enrollment process, in particular obtaining information about the steps required to obtain financial aid (Andom, 2007; Geenen & Powers, 2007).

Coupled with this, poverty contributes to the limited cultural capital emancipated youth have as they move into adulthood and enter college (Courtney, 2009). As with first-generation students, a lack of knowledge about the campus environment, its academic expectations, and bureaucratic operations; lack of adequate academic preparation; and lack of family support (Bailey et al., 2004; Bragg, Kim, & Barnett, 2006; Green, 2006) create obstacles for low-income students. Low-income, minority, and first-generation students lack knowledge
about the admission process, financial aid, and education and career goals (Vargas, 2004). Foster care youth in college share many of these characteristics and struggle with the transition to post-secondary education.

Policy Aiding Post-secondary Enrollment for Emancipating Youth

In the 1980’s, research began to illuminate startling statistics about youth in state foster care and their post-emancipation outcomes (Barth, 1986; Festinger, 1983; Sims, 1988). Starting in the 1980s and continuing to today, the legislative arm of the federal government recognized the needs and challenges faced by emancipated and other former foster youth including inadequate education, homelessness, incarceration, and unemployment (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Pecora et al., 2006; Reilly, 2003; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Some legislation focused on helping youth to live independently as adults in society, and included a component for financial aid for college attendance.

Federal Policy

As an initial act of legislation from congress, the federal government created the Independent Living Initiative (ILI) in 1986 (Lemon, Hines, & Merdinger, 2005; P.L. 99-272, 1986). The ILI (PL 99-272) addressed the needs of older and emancipating foster youth by providing guaranteed funding to support youth in their transition to adulthood. Each state developed and implemented varying initiatives connected to helping youth function independently as adults in society. Some states provided motivation for participants in ILI such as incentives
or stipends for school tuition, education expenses, transportation, or move out and startup costs (Kerman, Barth, & Wildfire, 2004).

Despite the promising nature of ILI, the initiative did not result in immediate improvement in the lives and outcomes of a majority of emancipating youth (Barth, 1986; Blome, 1997; Cook, 1994; Courtney, 2000; Courtney & Barth, 1996). Thus, Congress replaced the ILI with the Foster Care Independence Act (FCIA) and changed the focus for emancipating youth in transition to a goal of achieving independent living. The expanded act included six defined areas to help foster youth towards self-sufficiency including, housing, employment, counseling, healthcare, education, and continuation of youth services beyond age 18. This legislation provided more direct guidelines for states to develop meaningful programs to aid older youth in care. The Independent Living Initiative expanded to the Independent Living Plan (ILP) that made available Independent Living services to youth in foster care to help with functioning in adulthood. Youth receiving these services should be gaining skills towards self-sufficiency, including money and household management skills, employment services, and educational planning. A few studies comparing youth enrolled and not enrolled in ILP programs have found higher college enrollment and completion rates for ILP youth (Georgiades, 2005). However, it is unclear whether this is due to the success of ILP programs or the characteristics of youth that tend to seek out and to enter ILP programs. Though education was considered an option within the program, the policy did not place emphasis on aiding youth with transition to post-secondary education.
Therefore, the next legislative program specifically related to former, older, and emancipating youth and higher education focused on direct fiscal support for college attendance. The Promoting Safe and Stable Families Act of 2002 (H.R. 2873/P.L. 107-133) sought stability in the lives of foster youth. As a part of this act, Congress provided funding for an education component of the independent living program. The Chafee Educational Training Voucher (ETV) makes vouchers available to youth for education, training, and post-secondary learning (Kessler, 2004). With this legislation, the federal government increased its commitment to youth in state care by authorizing $60 million for Educational Training Vouchers (ETV).

The ETV grants create opportunity because emancipated foster youth are less likely to have existing savings or family to provide financial support for their education (Shirk & Stangler, 2006). Each foster youth adopted after their 16th birthday, emancipating, or participating in the program by their 21st birthday are eligible for up to $5000 a year for a post-secondary education or vocational training program through their 23rd birthday. Eligibility requirements and the amount of assistance available vary widely across states. This grant program directed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services disseminates funding through states based on the number of youth in care (Cochrane & Szabo-Kubitz, 2009). Since the funds are not considered federal financial aid, one of the challenges for foster youth receiving this aid, is that the grant does not represent a guaranteed source of aid (Cochrane & Szabo-Kubitz, 2009). Additionally, the scope of
funding in the grant program is limited. Though this legislation supplied funding, it did not provide much in the way of preparing participants for or encouraging their interest in college.

The most recent major piece of federal legislation affecting former and emancipating youth pursuing post-secondary education is the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (H.R. 6893/P.L. 110-351) passed in 2008. For emancipating youth in particular, the law provides for reimbursement to states that provide support to foster youth up to age 21, thus, increasing their opportunity for success and self-sufficiency after leaving care (Avery & Freundlich, 2009; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). This act further helped youth by providing for increased K-12 educational stability, as well as more stringent transition planning requirements, including post-secondary goals (Law Center for Foster Care & Education, 2008). This law attempted to address the problem of communication among schools by ensuring the prompt transfer of records or by ensuring that enrollment remains consistent at the time of entry into the system. To address higher education access, this legislation required states to allow youth to make higher education a priority in their independent living self-sufficiency plan with social services.

Over the last 20 years, the federal government made a commitment through legislation and funding to help foster youth navigate the transition to adulthood from care and to self-sufficiency. However, each state may implement the programs and services as it sees fit within the parameters of the individual federal
acts. The following section highlights how Virginia developed policies, programs, and services for the Commonwealth’s youth in care.

**Virginia Foster Care Policy**

In 2005, the Commonwealth of Virginia recorded legal custody of 7,877 children. Between 1999 and 2005, Virginia witnessed a modest increase in the number of children in foster care, in which 4 of every 1,000 children was a member of the child welfare system (Virginia Performs, 2007). In 2010, the total number of youth in care decreased to 6,354.

In Virginia, the Department of Social Services (DSS) administers the Chafee ETV program, providing funds for former foster youth to pursue studies at colleges, universities, or vocational training institutions based on need and availability of funds. Requirements for vouchers in Virginia include enrollment in ILP, a written transitional program, a high school degree or GED, last foster care placement in the state, and the completion of a Federal Application of Student Aid (FASFA.) Students and youth must continue their enrollment in a college program, making satisfactory progress, to continue eligibility. Like Virginia, most state policies developed around assumptions that foster youth compare to traditional college students aged 18-24; however, the policy does not consider the markedly different pre-collegiate experiences of youth from foster care. True assessments of outcomes of ETV funding remain incomplete due to limited data collection by localities, states, and the federal government (Nixon, Jones, & Child Welfare League of America, 2000; Wells & Zunz, 2009).
In a review of ETV funding, the Government Accountability Office (2004) determined that many states still return unused funds from the sponsored voucher program to the federal government. Virginia was one of six states returning more than 10% of their initial allotment in at least four of the five grant cycles since the program's inception (Fernandes, 2008). The return of funding may be linked to the state's own level of commitment to youth from care, which in the case of Virginia takes the form of offering a tuition waiver to a Virginia community college for any youth in care after age 14. The Virginia program provides for the payment of tuition or fees to a community college for foster youth who are state residents (Virginia Code § 23-7.4:5). Requirements to receive this scholarship include possession of a high school diploma or GED certificate and placement in foster care or in the custody of the Department of Social Services. To remain qualified, youth must be enrolled or have been accepted for enrollment as a full-time or part-time community college student. The student must take a minimum of six credit hours per semester in a degree or certificate program of at least one academic year in length and maintain a required grade point average of 2.0.

Virginia took a significant step toward improving educational outcomes for foster youth in 2005 when the General Assembly passed legislation allowing foster youth to remain in the same K-12 school even when their foster care placement changes. The significance of this legislation on the impact of youths' college decision-making and attendance has not been studied; however, previous research highlights how school moves result in negative academic consequences for students.
(Pecora et al., 2006; Samuels & Pryce, 2008; Stone, 2007). Because of the number of times youth in care change schools and homes due to changed placement, the new legislation helps create a continuity and stability in the school setting for foster care youth.

Though the federal government and the Commonwealth of Virginia made a commitment to youth in state care, challenges youth face as they transition to college enrollments may not be met by the current policies. Because the policies are designed on the model of a traditional college pathway to enrollment, the legislation assumes students complete high school around age 18, enroll in college, and complete their college degree in four years (Cochrane & Szabo-Kubitz, 2009). Youth who apply are eligible for 5 years of financial support from ages 18-23.

Thus, students who may need remediation, have unclear academic goals, experience limited course selection, or face any setback to the completion of the degree run out of time that is supported by scholarship aid prior to graduating (Cochrane & Szabo-Kubitz, 2009). Most legislative post-secondary supports seem to be geared toward successfully enrolling in college rather than toward maintaining a stable enrollment. Even while making college a more economically viable option, both the federal and state programs still do not provide enough assistance to address students non-financial needs (Dworsky & Perez, 2010).

Despite their limitations, legislation on both the state and federal level has been instrumental in helping youth access post-secondary education. Youth in care benefit from this legislation, but it is still necessary for service providers to be
accountable for implementation of associated programs to help develop youth self-sufficiency. Former foster youth have different background characteristics and experiences related to their time in state care, which may make these policies limited as to how they can best help former foster youth to post-secondary educational pursuits.

Virginia Community College System

Community colleges are an important entry point to post-secondary education (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Traditionally, community colleges provided crucial access to higher education for economically and academically disadvantaged students, given their close proximity to students' homes, low costs, and open access policy (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). These features make community colleges an ideal entryway for emancipating foster youth. Tuition at Virginia community colleges costs only 100 dollars per credit hour, making it a cost effective choice because a full time semester is about $2,700 as compared with almost $8,000 at a public higher education institution in the state. Recognizing this critical access role, Virginia state policy grants emancipated youth tuition waivers to Virginia Community Colleges (Virginia Code § 23-7.4:5).

The Virginia Community College System (VCCS) has 23 colleges located throughout Virginia on 40 campuses, serving over 200,000 students. The community colleges within the VCCS vary in size and are widely distributed and situated within driving distance of any citizen of the state. More than 50% of Virginia Community College students are 24 years of age or younger. Overall
enrollment in Virginia has grown from 11,186 students in 2000 to 29,963 unduplicated students in 2008 (Virginia Community Colleges, 2009).

In 2008, VCCS began a foundation program called Great Expectations to facilitate the transition of youth from care to higher education. Program goals include helping young adults transition to college, helping to increase awareness about the value and availability of a college education, and helping to assist students and service providers to navigate the community college system. The program provides support to aid Virginia’s foster youth in completing high school, gaining access to a community college education, and transitioning successfully from the foster care system to living independently. Some campus-based initiatives work with youth in care starting in middle and high school, whereas others focus on support upon matriculation from high school with navigation of campus, classes, and counseling. Through the Great Expectations program, youth receive tutoring, help with applying for financial aid, support in the application process, and exposure to career resources.

One of the critical services the program provides is a point person on campus to assist students in their academic journey as they navigate the community college system. The program recognizes the difficult transition to college and adulthood and thus strives to support foster youth at this critical point. The program supports one-on-one attention by providing coaching, mentoring, and an individual career pathway plan for students. These types of assistance remain essential for youth from care pursuing post-secondary education.
support can be a key element in helping youth to find needed resources and a sense of belonging on campus. Another essential support is personal advocates who are often from within the community college institutions.

In the present study, the stories of emancipated foster youth in Virginia as they transition to community college enrollment provide an individual perspective on the transition process. Former foster youths’ voices are minimal in the current body of literature regarding community college attendance, college choice, and college student experiences. By sharing their experiences and examining them, the findings contribute to the literature about the perspective of emancipated foster youth related to their experiences in choosing, enrolling, and transitioning into community college. The attainment of adulthood, emancipation, and decision making regarding higher education all converge for youth from foster care. The next section reviews the conceptual framework used to guide the present study.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this research is derived from two theories that inform the college decision and college transition process. The first framework illuminates issues of policy, funding, college location, and overall context in which college-going decisions are rooted (Perna, 2006a). The second framework focuses on how individual conceptions about self influence students’ transition to college and involves multiple levels of adjustment (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006; Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989). The theoretical framework created by using the two models provides a sociological (Perna, 2006a) and a
psychological (Goodman et al., 2006) perspective from which to analyze the data. Thus, this study draws on elements of both theoretical foundations to create a single conceptual model. This perspective provided a way to examine the participants’ transition along the continuum starting prior to college decision-making through student enrollment and matriculation from college.

The Multilevel Model of College Enrollment (Perna, 2006a) provides a framework to examine the decision to enroll using variables that are outside the individual’s control. The environmental, community, and situational factors included in Perna’s (2006a) model only partially help explain the youth’s transition to college and sets the stage for understanding the external sociological factors influencing college-going behavior. To further explain the youths’ individual agency in the college transition process, Schlossberg’s Transition Model (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg et al., 1989) provided a tool for investigating each youth’s personal experience as they faced the transition from foster care and high school to college enrollment. This study used an a priori theoretical framework for analysis, which included the tenets from both models, but also aimed to allow concepts and constructs to emerge from the participants’ interviews (Marshall & Rossman, 2010).

**College Choice**

The literature on college choice explores reasons, motivations, and behaviors behind student decisions to enroll in college (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999a). Efforts to understand how these factors impact students' college choices
have led various researchers to develop models that attempt to explain the stages or influences in students' college decision-making process (Hossler et al., 1999a; Perna, 2006a).

The models propose and describe the decision to attend college as a complicated and lengthy process informed by a diverse set of information sources. College choice involves examination of the foundational supports and processes of students' transitions from secondary to post-secondary education, elucidating choices students make on their path to enrollment (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). College choice takes into account the processes by which students decide to attend post-secondary education, institution selection, and application and enrollment (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999b).

The best tool for evaluation of these contextual factors of college decision making for former foster youth emerges from the college choice literature, in particular the Multilevel Model of Student Enrollment (MMCE) (Perna, 2006a). This model is based in a sociological perspective and examines the environment surrounding the youth that could influence college decision making. The college choice process focuses on societal factors leading up to students' decisions to enroll in college and to make the transition from secondary to post-secondary education. The MMCE depicts the multiple ways policymakers promote college enrollment drawing on an economic approach to college decision making. Using a sociological theoretical perspective assumes that students make their choice about college enrollment based on their perspectives of the benefits and costs of
enrollment. More importantly, the model is based on the assumption that students make decisions within multiple levels of context. Perna’s (2006a) model supports a more complex analysis relative to other college choice frameworks as it includes the influence of policy and societal forces in various contexts on student decisions to attend college. It allows for an examination of how state and federal policies shape students’ decisions explicitly and implicitly through the context of their early educational experience and their experience in foster care.

The few studies that examined linkages among various levels of context and student behavior suggest that types of context, including families, schools, colleges, and states influence student-level college enrollment behavior (Bell, Rowan-Kenyon, & Perna, 2009). Perna’s (2006a) model details students’ college decisions in a variety of contexts, “including school and community context, the higher education context, and the broader social, economic, and policy context” (Perna, 2006b, p. 1623). The model assumes that public policies and programs shape students' college-enrollment decisions directly and indirectly through these levels of context (Perna, 2006a). Further, the most important student-level predictors of college enrollment highlighted in the MMCE are academic preparation and achievement, financial resources, knowledge and information about college, and family support (Perna, 2006a). Other studies using the model found that high school counseling, higher education transfer of information, and state appropriations and financial aid policies all affect college enrollment decisions (Perna & Titus, 2004, 2005).
The MMCE contains four environmental contexts that influence students as they make college decisions, including society, school, higher education institutions, and habitus. The social, economic, and policy context explores the socioeconomic status, financial aid system, and societal factors influencing and determining students consideration of enrollment in higher education (Perna, 2006b). The societal context in the model allows for exploration of the participants’ experiences that included their foster care background, foster care policies, socioeconomic status, and the influence of financial aid. The school and community context layer of the model recognizes the role of social structures and resources in shaping college-related behaviors (Perna, 2006b).

The higher education institutional and school and community context in the MMCE refers to the availability of resources in these contexts that encourage students and that provide information about college attendance (Perna, 2006b). From a college vantage point, institutions provide a site for exploration for incoming students about price, financial aid, and general college knowledge (Perna, 2006b). The final layer of Perna’s (2006a) model is habitus. Habitus, relates to the individual’s knowledge and decision making about college attendance, the internalized system of thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions regarding an individual’s expectations, attitudes, and aspirations (McDonough, 1997; Paulsen & St. John, 2002b). Family background influences the family and knowledge capital students have regarding college expectations. Thus, foster care youth often lack the level of habitus typically found with other students.
Perna’s (2006a, 2006b) college choice model allows for exploration as to the ways in which foster care and financial aid policies influenced emancipating youth’s access to college enrollment. In the case of this study, the tuition waiver available to foster care youth to attend a community college influenced their access and enrollment in college. The MMCE helped illuminate the larger contextual factors influencing college choice; however, the study also sought to understand the youth as individuals and to understand how their use of personal agency helped in developing strategies and support during their transition to college. Rather than view a youth’s individual agency from an environmental perspective or the habitus level, this study looked at the individual from a psychological perspective through Schlossberg’s framework (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg et al., 1989). This study sought to explain participants’ development of positive coping skills and strategies in their transition to college. The use of transition theory helped to explore the individual transition experience.

**Transition Theory**

This study used Transition Theory as posited by Schlossberg et al., (1989) and revisited by Goodman et al., (2006) as the second portion of the conceptual framework. Transition Theory provides a psychological framework and structure for understanding and examining student’s experience on the individual level as they transition from care to enrollment in community college. The perspective of youth transition consists of a change in an individual’s behavior or relationships in response to an occurrence or nonoccurrence that affects that individual’s belief
about himself or herself or the world (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg et al., 1989).

Young people aging out of the child welfare system undergo a dual transition, one from the care of the system to autonomy and a second from childhood to adulthood (Shook, Vaughn, Litschge, Kolivoski, & Schelbe, 2009). As youth transition from care to post-secondary education, their changing experiences are likely different from their peers. Emancipated youth must navigate this transition without adequate preparation, knowledge, or resources. The transition includes dealing with behavioral, emotional, and developmental problems along with self-reported emotional distress, substance abuse, depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress (Fowler, Toro, & Miles, 2010; Harris, Jackson, O’Brien, & Pecora, 2010; Pecora, White, Jackson, & Wiggins, 2009). In this study, each youth’s story involves various paths through foster care, secondary education, and enrollment in college. Therefore, transition theory allows for an exploration of the nuances of each youth’s situation as he or she moves toward enrollment in college, particularly focusing on resources at their disposal and disadvantages they face. Ultimately, this theory helps in exploring student coping strategies during the transition. Many factors affect how well an individual adapts to a transition. Understanding the meaning of a transition for a particular individual requires exploring context, type, and impact of the transition (Evans, Forney, Guido, Renn, & Patton, 2009).
Schlossberg et al., (1989) defined transition as “an event or non-event over a period of time resulting in change in an individual’s roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions” (p. 27). For this research, the transition included the initial decision to attend college and to persist through college enrollment and matriculation. The theory allowed for identification of resources or deficits in the following categories: situation, self, supports, and strategies (Chickering & Schlossberg, 1995; Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg et al., 1989).

This approach to transition assumes that “each individual has a balance of resources and deficits for facing transitions” (Chickering & Schlossberg, 1995, p. 51). Each individual’s “resources and deficits are not permanent, but change over time,” so one can turn deficits into resources (Chickering & Schlossberg, 1995, p. 51). If this proves true, students could be taught how to develop resources and overcome deficits. Further, this model allows for individual consideration of each participant’s perspective, as the transition to college was different for each of them. As students transition to post-secondary enrollment, changes occur in their lives. They must deal with major changes such as ending one phase of life, namely high school and foster care, and beginning or continuing another, the transition to college. The components of the transition model used in this study are detailed below.

The first factor in the model, situation, enabled the exploration of the many circumstances youth encountered during the transition. Further, it also permitted the exploration of the ways in which the individual viewed the transition
(Chickering & Schlossberg, 1995; Schlossberg et al., 1989). The focus of this study specifically defines the situation as the transition to college with a major mitigating factor being the participants’ experiences in and emancipation from foster care.

Self, the second factor, permits the exploration of experiences and personal perspectives, including the types of individual strengths and weaknesses that influence each youth’s transition. The self construct also considers the experience of the individual prior to the transition (Chickering & Schlossberg, 1995). This point is important because of the youth’s experiences in the child welfare system.

The third factor in the model, support, refers to the many types of resources available to an individual (Chickering & Schlossberg, 1995; Schlossberg et al., 1989). Support refers to the resources available to people, including partners, friends, mentors, social workers, counselors, organizations, or institutions. Sources of support can be both positive and negative (Chickering & Schlossberg, 1995). This factor helps to elucidate areas where former foster youth receive support in all areas of their lives during their transition to college.

Finally, the factor of strategies in the model addresses an individual’s existing coping strategies to help successfully navigate the transition. Strategies involve how the individual decides to cope with the situation, and more specifically, what he or she does in response to the change (Chickering & Schlossberg, 1995; Schlossberg et al., 1989). Strategies also take into account how
the individual views the situation and whether or not he or she can manage the new circumstances (Chickering & Schlossberg, 1995).

**Conceptual Model**

The use of Transition Theory (Chickering & Schlossberg, 1995; Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg et al., 1989) and the Multilevel Model of College Enrollment (Perna, 2006a) as theoretical constructs provided a framework for understanding emancipated youths' transition to community college enrollment within multiple contexts. The conceptual model created from both the Transition Theory and MMCE, guided this inquiry and provided a means for framing and understanding the participants' college decision and transition experiences, and findings. Though the initial focus is on environmental factors, specifically educational and policy factors, the individual perspectives and narratives remained paramount, particularly since these youth crossed hurdles that many youth do not.

The conceptual framework for this study is presented in Figure 1. The centrality of the student experience in this research is represented by the concept of self being centered in the model. Located in the center, emancipating youth have a specific and unique relationship to policies created to support them in the child welfare system and policies targeted to increase their opportunity for higher education (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Day et al., 2011; Osgood, Foster, & Courtney, 2010). The inner level of the conceptual model shows how emancipated youth in transition from care to enrollment in college are uniquely placed given their situation, the strategies they employ to cope, and the type and level of support
they have to draw upon. All of these factors regarding the individual have a direct bearing on the focus of this study, which contributes to understanding the transition of emancipated youth to college. The environmental contextual factors that have a significant influence on youth are situated on the outer circle. These factors represent the societal influences on the context in which the youth lives (Perna, 2006a).

![Conceptual Model](image)

**Figure 1. Conceptual Model**

The conceptual model provides a framework to help explore the ways youth experience the transition to college. Through this study, the stories of emancipated foster youth in Virginia as they transition to community college enrollment provided individual perspectives. Further, the framework guided the interview
questions (Appendix D) and \textit{a priori} coding (Appendix F) used in data analysis. This model allowed for a view of the individual as an agent in the environmental context of state policy and other external contextual factors influencing the transition to college.

\textbf{Summary}

Despite increased attention and resources targeting foster care youth and college attendance through state and federal policies, it remains unclear how many emancipating youth transition to college (Cochrane & Szabo-Kubitz, 2009; Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Dworsky & Pérez, 2010; Needell, Cuccaro-Alamin, Brookhart, Jackman, & Shlonsky, 2002). Small pockets of youth have been surveyed or interviewed in different parts of the country regarding different aspects of college-going, but there is no data system to track youth from care (Courtney et al., 2001; Fernandes, 2008). Studies investigating foster youth do not always distinguish between two-year and four-year schools, or distinguish between comparison groups of peers (Davis, 2006; McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White, & Thompson, 2003; Pecora et al., 2006). This study explores the transition to college to add to the literature regarding foster care youths’ experience at the state level. Virginia provides a unique setting given the state policy for college funding and the fact that the state has given back available federal funds due to lack of applicants. Understanding more about the transition experiences of youth from care can inform state policymakers and institutional leaders about effective practices.
This chapter reviewed the literature related to youth in foster care, policies that influence youth exiting care, and how these relate to emancipating foster youths’ transition from care, including challenges and barriers to post-secondary education. Additionally, the introduction of the conceptual model outlined the lens used for analysis. Many converging factors influence emancipated foster care youth in their decisions regarding college attendance. Examination of the intersection of federal and state policy, youth experiences in care, and post-secondary education experiences provides a unique perspective for exploring the ways in which former foster youth decide to attend a community college. The next chapter outlines the methodology for the study.
CHAPTER III

Methodology

This chapter describes the methods and procedures used for data collection and analysis for this research study. This study explored the complex life issues and circumstances facing students as they transition from foster care to enrollment in Virginia Community Colleges. The chapter begins with an explanation of the methodological paradigm underlying the study. Next, details of the research design are described, including the processes of gaining access to the participants, obtaining permission from the appropriate institutional review board to conduct the research, and collecting and managing the data. Finally, procedures for analyzing and safeguarding the quality of the data are explained, as are ethical considerations that factored into the research design.

This study focused on former foster youth in Virginia and sought to explore what factors contributed to the decision-making process of youth from care who decided to attend community college. A qualitative design was selected over a quantitative design for its ability to reveal the socially constructed nature of reality through the depiction of each individual participant’s point of view (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Through narrative inquiry, this study sought “to make sense of personal stories and the ways in which they intersect” in former foster youths’ transition to college (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 1). Bruner (1986) described a narrative as a basic mode of thought and a way to organize knowledge. A qualitative narrative inquiry worked best in framing the study because it allowed participants to tell their own stories. This qualitative design, within an interpretivist paradigm, provided the best choice for this
study due to the assumption that each of the participants could construct his or her own knowledge and perspective through the interview process. The interpretivist paradigm allowed the youths to construct their own interpretations of their experiences in the foster care system, which provided a unique perspective for this study.

**Narrative Inquiry**

The collection and use of descriptive data from former foster youth in Virginia allowed for a better understanding of their life experiences and their decisions to enroll in a community college. This was the rationale for employing the narrative approach in this research. The participants' stories provided personal, rich, and detailed accounts of their life experiences. Taken together, these narrative reflections provided a larger perspective on the experiences of the participants. This approach allowed for an exploration of the influence of policy and social drivers, as well as the role of personal responsibility among the participants. The interviews with the students provided an opportunity for them to tell their stories regarding their experiences in foster care, their educational experiences, and their thoughts about the effectiveness of policies, programs, and services designed to aid them.

For this study, the term *narrative* means the telling or retelling of participants’ experiences. These narratives were then organized using a conceptual model to further examine and describe the context of events experienced by the students (Polkinghorne, 1995). Payne (2000) found that in the telling and retelling of one’s experiences, identity becomes more defined, and perception of the past, present, and future become clear, as do views of the teller’s role in society and relationships. Narratives in this research are not
presented as chronological plots or a list of all that has happened to the participants; rather they are a representation of each participant’s personal story at the point in time of the interview (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). The narrative design is informed by the interpretivist/constructivist paradigm.

**Paradigm**

The aim of this inquiry was to understand the experience of young people in foster care related to their transition to college. This study acknowledges that the participants share multiple realities based on their personal experiences in the foster care system in Virginia. The ontology of the interpretivist paradigm assumes that individuals process experiences and ultimately construct a social reality within social settings (Glesne, 2006). Interpretive research fundamentally focuses on the understanding of a phenomenon through the participants’ views of the situation being studied, and it is employed to understand the meaning of human action (Creswell, 2007; Schwandt, 1994, 2007). Interpretivism further assumes that understanding can never be objectively observed from the outside, rather it must be gleaned and inferred indirectly from the experiences of the people involved (Schwandt, 1994).

Simply, the interpretivist paradigm focuses on individuals’ experiences in the social world (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Within the interpretivist paradigm, a constructivist perspective provides the epistemology of this research. Constructivism emphasizes the unique experiences of each individual (Crotty, 1998; Denzin, 2001; Schwandt, 1994). The constructivist view holds that each person constructs her or his own unique interpretation of the world. Constructivist inquiry provides a way to evaluate
participants’ choices, both at the macro- and micro-environmental level. Within the context of the study, the knowledge created by the participants constitutes their own reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1967).

This inquiry is value-bound, meaning that the values of the participants, and more importantly the researcher, are inherent and affect the context of study. Therefore, care was taken to triangulate the data and guard for researcher bias. Later in this section, these safeguards are detailed. Finally, interpretivism/constructivism assumes that knowledge is connected with participants’ unique experiences in foster care and their varied stories about progression into college.

**Research Questions**

This study investigated the following questions:

How do students who are emancipating from foster care describe their transition to enrollment at one of the Virginia Community Colleges?

1. What challenges do students who are emancipating from foster care face in the transition to college?

2. What types of support do these students identify as helpful in their successful transition to college?

**Data Collection**

The research design for this study used narrative inquiry. The major objective was to examine the transition experience of foster youth in Virginia attending a Virginia Community College. The first phase of data collection identified potential participants.
This section reviews the process of participant recruitment, reviews the interview process, and identifies other information used to triangulate the findings.

**Gaining Access**

Given the prominence of context to this research design, the selection of institutions was critical (Creswell, 2005). Within the institutional setting, the various facets of Perna’s (2006a) model were incorporated, with particular emphasis on the participants’ foster care and P-12 educational experiences. Critical to context were the Virginia state policies affecting foster youth and the programs established to support this student population within the Virginia Community College System. The Great Expectations program supports Virginia’s foster youth in their quest to complete high school, gain access to a community college education, and transition successfully from the foster care system to living independently. The program emerged from a VCCS state-wide initiative and directive. The program operates on various campuses using activities and counseling.

In selecting sites, initial contact was made with the Executive Director of the Great Expectations program. The Great Expectations director then provided information about the various programs in the state and the counselors on individual campuses. After this initial introduction, I contacted six counselors to solicit their assistance in setting up the study with students on their campuses. Each counselor received an e-mail that served as a letter of invitation (see appendix A). This letter explained the type of research being conducted and the purpose of the research. Ultimately, two campuses opted to participate in the study. The sites included both a rural and an urban campus. Both colleges hosted
Great Expectations programs, with counselors directly serving emancipated foster youth. Further, the counselors at both locations expressed enthusiasm and a commitment to encouraging youth in their program to participate in the study. The counselors served as gatekeepers to the institutional site by providing access to the students eligible to participate in the study. Finally, the decision to focus on only two community colleges allowed for more in-depth description and analysis of the participants interviewed. Having two campuses also allowed for comparison of diverse perspectives in two different settings.

The two public Community Colleges are part of the Virginia Community College System, but are located in different geographical regions. Pseudonyms are used for the colleges in this study and for the participants to help ensure confidentiality. The first college (Metropolitan College) serves a student population of about 13,000 with multiple campuses. This college is among the largest in the Virginia Community College System and is categorized by the Carnegie Classification (Classifications Carnegie Foundation, 2010) listing as a large two-year college in an urban setting. The second college (Pastoral College) serves a student population of approximately 3,000 students. Pastoral College buildings are located on a rural 100-acre campus. This college is described within the Carnegie Classification (Classifications Carnegie Foundation, 2010) as a small two-year institution in a rural setting. The counselors at both colleges assisted me in setting up interviews on multiple occasions to accommodate students’ schedules.
Participant Recruitment

The participants for this study were drawn from the population of emancipated foster youth attending a community college in the state of Virginia. Ultimately, 12 young adults participated in the study; seven from Metropolitan College and five from Pastoral College. This number of participants allowed for a greater understanding of the experiences of students within this population. Participants were recruited based on the following criteria:

(a) Participants were emancipating, or had been in foster care after age 14 in Virginia,

(b) Participants were between the ages of 18 and 25,

(c) Participants were currently enrolled in a Virginia Community College with a Great Expectations Program.

The initial contact by the campus counselors (see Appendix A) with the students did not generate any student participation. Thus, a flyer was designed and posted on each campus site to recruit students (see Appendix B). This approach was also unsuccessful in garnering any participants.

Next, contact was made with the Great Expectations counselor at each of the two institutions, with the request that they serve as advocates. These two counselors served as the liaisons between the students and me. However, even with the counselors’ assistance, participants were not forthcoming. When queried, counselors reported that students were more likely to be interested in participating in the study with financial compensation.
After multiple attempts at recruiting student participants, the original research protocol was changed and Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval sought to include a monetary incentive. A $25 VISA gift card was used as an incentive to aid in recruiting participants. This incentive, in addition to the active involvement of the two on-site counselors, helped me to gain access to the students. The respect the students held for their counselors served to help me gain participant trust during data collection. Additionally, counselors assisted with scheduling and rescheduling interviews and at some points served as “go-betweens” in communicating with participants. Further, counselors helped secure locations for the interviews and facilitated the exchange of compensation to the students.

**Interviews**

Semi-structured interview questions provided participants a means to construct meaning and to convey how their experiences in the foster care system influenced their transition to college. This approach allowed me to create a narrative for each participant and to see commonalities across participants. Interview questions were developed based on the theoretical model. Questions dealt with the sociological factors of the model, including community and school influence, financial aid, and higher education institutional policies (Perna, 2006a). Several questions related to the individual psychological component of the study, including self, strategies, and support (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006; Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989). A crosswalk table shows the intersection between the interview questions and the research questions (Appendix E). The open-ended interview questions (Appendix D) explored participants’
experiences from earlier in life to their transition to college. A number of questions were asked to elicit stories about the participants' path to becoming college students. Questions were designed to encourage participants to share their stories about transition to college, to recall strategies they had used to be successful, to reflect on support that aided their college decisions, and to recount some of their challenges in the college transition.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted at a mutually agreed-upon location, or via a video Internet connection. Seven interviews were completed in person at Metropolitan College. Due to inclement weather on the day scheduled for interviews at Pastoral College, the five participants from that site were interviewed via Internet through Skype. I worked closely with both Great Expectations counselors; the counselor at Pastoral College helped to distribute and collect informed consent forms and deliver compensation due to the need to conduct those interviews at a distance.

Participants selected a time most convenient for them to interview: between classes, at lunch, or other times during their school day. Participants gave verbal informed consent at the start of each interview; each student also signed a full consent form, which was either returned in person or mailed to me t after the interview (see Appendix C). Each participant interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. At the beginning and conclusion of the interview session, participants could ask questions, or share comments or concerns. Interviews provided participants the ability “to move back and forth in time to reconstruct the past, interpret the present” and consider the future (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 273). As interviewing progressed, interview questions were
rearranged to allow for a better flow. During the interview, students' nonverbal expressions, tone of voice, and emotions were noted and recorded by hand. Follow-up questions were asked to further probe initial responses.

Data Management

I maintained a log and at the conclusion of each interview, I wrote about the interview experience, including anything that seemed striking or unusual. I also recorded personal thoughts about the interview and how the interviewing process could be improved. A verbatim transcription of each interview was completed within one week of the interview to facilitate context recall and the remembrance of nuances. In order to ensure confidentiality, recordings of interviews were saved under a uniquely assigned number. Each of the individuals ultimately was assigned a pseudonym to use in reporting the findings. In order to secure data, I made three copies of each data file: one on my personal workstation hard drive, one on an external hard drive, and one on my password-protected storage drive. All data remained secured throughout the duration of the research and were destroyed upon successful completion of the defense of this study.

Informed Consent and Ethical Considerations

Approval to conduct research was submitted to the College of William & Mary Institutional Review Board and approved on October 15, 2010; a revision in the methods to provide compensation to participants was approved on February 22, 2011. The final approval form is located in Appendix G. As promised in the Human Subjects proposal, interviewees received information that explained that the information they provided during the interview was to be a part of a doctoral dissertation and that their privacy was
protected at all times through anonymity. Prior to the start of each interview, participants also gave verbal consent and signed an informed consent form (Appendix C). Participants understood that choosing not to answer questions and/or opting out of the study were options at any time.

In conducting the interviews, I utilized the approach of Marshall and Rossman (2010), who asserted that “the most important aspect of the interviewer’s approach concerns conveying the attitude that the participant’s views are valuable and useful” (p. 145). Creswell (1998) stressed that to gain support from interviewees, researchers should convey why their participation is important to the study, explain the purpose of the study, and not engage in deception about the nature of the study. Participants were given information detailing the requirements of the interview, and they were provided with transcriptions of their interviews to review for accuracy.

Since ethical issues continue beyond data collection and analysis and extend into the actual writing and dissemination of the final research report (Creswell, 2003), I took the precaution of assigning a fictitious name to each participant to ensure confidentiality and protect each person’s privacy. The list of real names and corresponding pseudonyms was kept in a separate location from the transcribed interviews.

Data Analysis

This section describes how the findings emerged from the data. As noted, each interview was transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were reviewed for accuracy and were sent to the participants to confirm that the transcript accurately reflected the participant’s interview. Participants did not notify me of any changes. I conducted a line-by-line
review of the transcripts as I replayed the interview recordings for a second and third time. Thematic analysis provided a way to study the personal narratives based on the content of the text from the interviews (Riessman, 1993). The following sections explain the coding process and the emergence of themes.

Coding

Thorough data analysis began with an examination of the transcripts and viewing the data in relation to the research questions and the conceptual framework. This analysis process involved coding data to identify themes and categories (Marshall & Rossman, 2010). The analysis followed a three-part process: organizing, meaning making, and writing.

This study used both emergent and *a priori* code development. The emergent coding categories developed after several preliminary examinations of the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, see Appendix F). The theoretical models presented in the conceptual framework helped establish the *a priori* coding categories (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, Appendix F). The conceptual model (see page 54) provided an analytical tool for analysis of the factors that were likely to influence the college choice decisions and transition of emancipated foster youth enrolling into college. After organizing the data and highlighting the *a priori* codes, the open coding process occurred, followed by the creation and organization of emerging patterns. The primary coding categories resulting from the conceptual model included self, support, strategies, challenges, and financial aid. Some of the emerging patterns and codes related to foster care experience, educational supports, and employment.
The open coding method allowed for a deeper analysis of the data and provided a more nuanced analysis of the experiences of the participants’ transition process. Throughout the coding process, the use of the constant comparative method allowed for ongoing comparisons among participants’ responses, among data from the same participant, and between data within the multiple categories and themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Upon careful review of the transcripts, coding, and themes, a narrative pattern emerged regarding the collective story of the participants. These patterns, after further categorization and organization by similarities, developed into a comprehensive set of themes.

Themes

After the initial coding of the data, resulting coded data were systematically reviewed and organized into categories, themes, and patterns. The a priori codes emerged both directly and indirectly within participant’s responses. While the emerging codes were often explicitly stated and were based on participant’s directly stated responses. The overarching categories used to organize the data before coding included educational experiences, foster care experience, and college experiences. The interviews were systematically coded based on the a priori coding system. Next, the interview data was systematically organized by the emergent codes. The data and both sets of codes were reviewed again. Notes were taken and data was discussed with the research advisor. With both sets of codes major meaningful themes were identified and data was categorized within the themes. Next, the data were further organized into themes and patterns to tell a coherent story and gain an understanding of participant experiences.
(Rossman & Rallis, 2003) until no additional themes emerged. Finally, through writing the results of the analysis, findings were interpreted and communicated.

**Trustworthiness and Authenticity**

Trustworthiness demonstrates the accuracy of the construction of findings and any conclusions drawn based on participant data. Trustworthiness consists of four elements: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Trustworthiness relates to the methodological quality of qualitative research. Authenticity addresses the ethical aspects of research dealing with human subjects. Trustworthiness and authenticity were supported by the processes of member checking, persistent observation, audit trail, and triangulation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

**Member checking.** Credibility and ontological authenticity were established through member checking. Since interview texts were co-created, in order to guard against simply producing the texts without explanation to fit the description (Janesick, 2000; Polkinghorne, 2007), each of the participating youth checked the information attributed to them to confirm its veracity (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Credibility seeks to address the concern of the differences between participants views and the accurate representation of their views (Schwandt, 1994), while ontological authenticity allowed the participants to enhance their own construction (Schwandt, 2007). Member checks occurred in order to gain validation of the transcribed text. By returning the texts to participants to seek clarification and further exploration of questions, participants had the opportunity to give their feedback regarding data collected (Polkinghorne, 2007).

Participants were asked if the description was accurate, fair, and representative (Creswell,
2005), and were given a chance to clarify any discrepancies. This process resulted in one response from one participant with the correction of a name. Therefore, only a minor change and correction were generated from this process. Another participant did respond with news that graduation was impending.

This form of member checking sought to maximize my understanding from the participants’ perspectives, thus establishing credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Fairness and authenticity refers to how the participants’ perspective or interpretation were solicited and represented in a balanced way (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Schwandt, 2007). Through the development of interview questions and the evaluation of each interview, the researcher refined the data collection process, allowing participants to elaborate and introduce information to clarify their perspective. The invitation of participants to share their stories provided a way for them to present their perspectives. In order to make sure their perspectives were represented in a balanced way, the researcher used member checks and the systematic processes detailed through persistent observation and in keeping the audit trail.

**Persistent observation.** Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined persistent observation as a recognition that the research is open to the multiple influences - the mutual shapers and contextual factors - that impinge upon the phenomenon being studied, the purpose of persistent observation is to identify those characteristics and elements in the situation that are most relevant to the problem or issue being pursued and focusing on them in detail. (p. 304)
Persistent observation while on site or online and during the interviews allowed me a means to determine how context might influence the participants. I created a detailed audit trail that described and documented the research process and made notes here on how my observations helped corroborate what the participants related (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Further, after delineating the most pervasive themes among the participants, for example needing financial support during college, I was able to observe how the institutional policies and policies of social services confirmed the participants’ views articulated during interviews. The most important characteristics and factors in the lives of the participants in relation to their foster care experience related to their college experience. Persistent observation allowed the examination of the data in scope and in depth to illuminate the most relevant factors in participants’ experiences and focus on them in detail.

The methods detailed above along with the informed consent also contribute to fairness of the study because they address the thoughts and views of the participants. By paying close attention to the details of the research process and by keeping a clear audit trail, I was able to support dependability of the methodological process.

**Audit Trail.** Dependability supports the constructivist assumption that knowledge and reality are being continually constructed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Further, dependability, which is the qualitative counterpart to reliability in quantitative studies, is established by authenticating data generation and more importantly interpretation (Schwandt, 2007). In order to address “record keeping and encourage reflexivity about procedures,” I documented the implementation of the methodology and
all study processes (Schwandt, 2007, p. 13). Accurate and detailed records of the research process were maintained along with a personal research journal, including all correspondence, interview schedules, reflections, initial analysis, and interview transcripts. In addition, this collection of materials also included methodological notations, raw data, procedural notes, and ideas during the theme development process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The data originated during the data collection process starting with interviews. Each interview was recorded. Through the interview process, notes and processing thoughts were generated during the interview process. I also kept notes on thoughts from throughout the data collection process, calls with coaches, interview appointments, and note of process information between interviews including possible findings and conclusions, and reflexive personal notes about the study process including thoughts that arose and ways to improve continuously as a researcher. Since the interview process happened over time, this information helped to track the research process. This information was consulted throughout the data gathering process and beyond. The recordings of interviews were transcribed verbatim line by line. The transcribed interviews were compared against the recording. Each interview transcript was re-read several times.

Open coding started with using the *a priori* codes to categorize the data. During this process, data were separated into categories and the emergent categories were also established. Using a spreadsheet, all interview data was organized and categorize by code, by category, and by participant. The data were also organized by interview question across participants. Through the data analysis process, each of the ways the data
were organized was reread in order to determine the most salient themes related to the conceptual framework and youth’s experience. The data were also reviewed extensively in light of the research questions to identify data that addressed and answered the central questions of the study.

Through documenting all procedures through systematic data gathering, data analysis, and data support for interpretations, a balanced view of the participants experiences emerged via various themes. Next in the research process came data validation. The codes, definition of codes, themes, categories, and writing were submitted to a reviewer and discussed to ensure mutual understanding, clarity, and accurate representation of data. The audit trail complemented confirmability by taking care to ensure that the findings were derived directly from the data generated. The process of confirmability began with the acknowledgement of my own predispositions through the researcher as an instrument statement (see Huberman & Miles, 2002, page 75). The audit trail helped to demonstrate the process of the study and to show through the methods of data management and analysis how the participants’ views shaped the findings of the study. The audit trail details the process, triangulation helped to generate a better understanding of the participants’ perspective and experience.

**Triangulation.** According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), triangulation is the process of using more than one data collection or analytic method to strengthen the credibility of findings. Triangulation helped to check the integrity of the inferences made in the results (Schwandt, 2007) by authenticating participant responses to the interview questions, confirming their perceptions from another source. For this study, triangulation
included comparing program information and the perspective of coaches to determine corroboration and alternative perspectives to validate existing findings (Denzin, 1998).

Data triangulation refers to the use of a range of types of data sources. Because of the unique context of this study, data triangulation was achieved through contrasting the data from two different settings. The variance in settings for the participants revealed reoccurring patterns in the data, which improved the confidence of the findings related to student experiences. For instance, the data from both sites revealed participant difficulty in applying for financial aid regardless of urban or rural location. Other common examples among the participants were the lack of reliable transportation to and from school, lack of planning for college, and lack of adult/family support.

Further, data triangulation served to confirm the veracity and integrity of participant data. It provided a more detailed and complete narrative about the participants’ experiences. Besides interviewing participants in two different settings, data triangulation happened through additional information gathered informally that also confirmed and validated the interpretation of participants. For example, through extended conversations with counselors in their role as gatekeepers, information emerged that was used as further confirmation and triangulation of the data. Here, counselors confirmed that the participants had limited academic preparation for college, that the participants had difficulty in foster care, and that the participants faced challenges in their college transition. The counselors spoke candidly and enthusiastically about their students and their program. They shared day-to-day operational information in addition to success stories about the participants and other students in the program.
The counselor at Metropolitan College invited me to attend a celebratory banquet for students in the program. This served as an equally important yet informal way to triangulate the data. Here, the opportunity to interact with a broad array of students in the program and to observe supportive exchanges among other current and former students at my table who were not participants helped support the narratives obtained from the participants. More importantly, current and former students served on the program and as guest speakers. The stories of former great expectations participants shared during the banquet also reiterated participants’ narratives.

These observations directly corroborated the participants’ assertion that the counselors and program provided the impetus for college continuance. Further, a review of printed recruitment and on-line informational materials about the Great Expectations program, which included written and video testimonials of previous Great Expectations students, also addressed the common difficulties students faced as they transitioned out of foster care and into college, and of course the immense support of the Great Expectations program. In the cases detailed above, the information garnered from these interactions helped to confirm responses provided by the participants.

This study also incorporated theory triangulation, which involved using more than one theoretical framework in analyzing and interpreting the data. The use of two different theories within the conceptual framework enabled viewing the data from both a psychological and sociological perspective. Using the MME (Perna, 2006a) and the Transition Theory (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg et al., 1989) permitted an analysis
of data from different disciplines that showed congruence and similar interpretations in the findings.

This study further addressed trustworthiness through transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability is most closely associated with the concept of validity in quantitative research and refers to the generalizability. Lincoln and Guba (1985) described transferability as the depth of description so readers can assess whether the results are transferable to a similar study. I addressed this topic by using data immersion, which included first becoming familiar with the data, and then conducting multiple readings and re-readings during the analysis of the data. Another example includes providing detailed description of the data and findings and keeping notes to prompt critical thinking about the data and any interpretation. In the analysis, the depth of description of the aspects of the study also contributes to transferability, examples include the description of the context, Pastoral and Metropolitan Colleges, the participants, their thoughts and their experiences, allows for evaluation of the conclusions of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability and confirmability, demonstrated through the audit trail, which details how the study could be replicated, and are truly representative of the data collected. Persistent observation, triangulation, and member checking also helped to establish credibility, by demonstrating the veracity of the findings. According to Lincoln and Guba, (1985) trustworthiness demonstrates the worth of research. Through member checking, persistent observation, triangulation, and the audit trail, the study was evaluated and assessed to guarantee trustworthiness. The final evaluative measure in ensuring
trustworthiness was the last step. In the earliest stage of the research process, I took steps to address my roles and influence as a researcher by analyzing reflexively my own ontology, knowledge, skills, experiences, and truths as they relate to my participants and my research. The process of self-reflection and evaluation is detailed in the researcher as an instrument statement.

**Researcher as Instrument**

Self-reflection on my role as a researcher was important in limiting bias during the interviews and in the analysis of findings. “Any gaze into another’s life is filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 761). It is not possible to eliminate bias; however, recognition of my frame of reference helped highlight obvious biases and made me attentive to bracketing my own perspectives. My own history and beliefs, and social and professional position influence the research design and the manner by which the study was conducted and data interpreted. Although I was not a product of the foster care system, I possess a deep caring and concern for children separated from their biological parents and their circumstances in the system. Youth in the custody of the state deserve the best. Due to severe circumstance, which predicated their time in care, youth already have difficult roads to travel to have healthy and productive lives. The start of the road to productive adulthood is aided by possessing a college degree. To learn that only 1-10% of youth from foster care ever get a college degree was deeply troubling to me. Because I did not have extensive experience with emancipating youth, my personal characteristics and background may have made a difference in how participants related to me. These
characteristics include age difference, ethnicity, and class. I sought to find a clear balance in sharing the stories of the participants within this inquiry. I assumed an open listening stance and carefully attended to all nuances of participant responses, which assisted in ensuring that the participant’s voices were heard and not the researchers (Polkinghorne, 2007). I documented my perceptions and beliefs at the onset of this study in my research log in order to address the quality of research and conclusions and to guard against errors trustworthiness and credibility.

Summary

This chapter presented the research methods for this study. A discussion of the research questions, research design, and the theoretical construct framing the study was also provided. Information pertaining to the participants and institutions, data collection and confidentiality procedures, and statistical treatment provide details about how the study was conducted. This research sought to provide clear direction for understanding how emancipated foster youth achieved enrollment and transitioned to a community college in Virginia. This study explored the complex life issues and circumstances facing emancipating youth from care through their transition to enrollment in Virginia Community Colleges. This chapter argued that the qualitative design selected for the study was appropriate given the ability using this methodology to view the socially constructed nature of reality aiming to depict each individual participant’s point of view (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This qualitative design, within an interpretivist paradigm allowed each youth to construct through their own interpretation of their experiences in the foster care system, which provided a unique perspective for this study.
The details of the research design were covered including gaining access to the participants, data collection and management, along with the institutional review board permission to conduct research. Finally, procedures for data analysis were detailed including coding, trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and the researcher as an instrument statement. This chapter discussed and described the methods and procedures chosen and used for data collection and analysis for this research study.
CHAPTER IV

Participant Stories

This chapter presents portraits of the individual participants involved in this study. I interviewed a total of 12 current community college students. All of the participants are emancipated foster care youth and had direct experience with the transitions involved in going to college. Emancipating from foster care results from participation in the foster care system after age 14 without being legally adopted.

Each of the participants varied in their personal experience and family circumstances. Yet, all offered personal stories regarding their involvement in the foster care system and the community college. When available, the individual narratives include their placement into the foster care system, the influence of the foster care system on their decision to go to college, their experiences of transition to community college, and their future plans beyond attending and graduating from their present college. In general, all of the participants noted the challenges presented by their history in foster care and how this experience influenced their decision making to attend college and their ultimate transition into higher education. Despite their reticence to dwell on their experiences in care, they eagerly shared about their transition to college. Given their past experience in care, graduation from high school, and entry into college represented significant milestone events in their lives.

Students shared their stories, some troubling and painful, about their family dynamics and their experiences in the foster care system. They told their stories in a matter of fact manner and did not display much emotion in the relaying of their difficult
circumstances and experiences. The participants’ personalities range from shy and
reserved to assertive and outgoing. In relating their situation, they refused to use foster
care as a crutch or an excuse for their current challenges. The students saw college
attendance either as a way to break the cycle of poverty or simply as a way station in life
that offered some form of compensation.

This chapter includes brief vignettes of all 12 participants. Confidentiality limits
revealing demographic information about the participants. However, the portraits entail
background details that will help the reader understand more fully the context of the
students’ lives and what the process of attending college entailed for them. The
portrayals of the participants’ lives, while individually distinct, also highlight
commonalities across the group. These individual biographies establish a context for the
analysis, theme development, and discussion that follows. Some of the individual quotes
found in these portraits may be duplicated in the findings chapter to also support the
emerging themes. The student’s stories are presented by college site to highlight the role
of college context.

**Pastoral Community College**

Five of the participants in this study attend Pastoral Community College. This
rural two-year college is located in a town of about 8,000 residents. Pastoral College
enrolls approximately 1,800 full-time equivalent students and has a total enrollment of
3,000 students.
Alice

At the time of the interview, Alice was a 19-year-old part-time student at Pastoral. She lived with her foster mother in a rural county near Pastoral College about 30 minutes away. Alice did not speak very specifically about her foster care experience, so it remains unknown the circumstance surrounding her entry into foster care. However, she did share about significant behavioral instances that occurred in elementary, middle, and high school. She described herself as being bad and mentioned having to go to the principal’s office many times, but she did not elaborate on her behavior problems.

Alice was the only participant who had attended a four-year college prior to starting at the community college. With the help of her foster mother and her social worker to complete the application and financial aid process, she stated at a state university in 2010. She reflected, “I lived on campus and just let things get to me and those things affected my school work so I transferred out.”

She is currently attending Pastoral part-time, but noted how she is working to improve her GPA and to regain her financial aid so she can return to her original four-year college. Alice lost her financial aid due to her poor academic performance at the four-year institution. In describing her experience at Pastoral she offered, “Well, it’s pretty bad. I don’t like Pastoral. It’s just too small for me. It’s hard to go to school every day when you don’t want to be there, it’s hard to stay motivated.” Alice felt a major challenge and hindrance to her college success was her “having to work for everything.” She explained, “You have to balance [doing well academically] against [the fact] that I have to pay for my car, my gas, my college, everything... and it’s just a
struggle every day.” Alice currently works at a local grocery store for more than thirty
hours a week.

**Debby**

At the time of our interview, Debby was a 20-year-old full-time student at
Pastoral College. She lived on a “55-acre farm with her foster family.” In describing her
foster care experience, she spoke of her current placement.

> I have my foster mom and my foster dad and anytime I need anything I can just
go and ask them and they will help me out. And then I have their kids and their
kids are there for me and they will be there for me for as long as they are able to
help me, their family has just kind of accepted me as part of their family.

She spoke briefly about her earlier foster care experiences. She was adopted when she
was two days old. Debby then entered the foster care system at age 11, moving into a
group home. Debby did not share about her path from the group home to her current
foster family. In her early educational experiences, she received an Attention Deficit
Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) diagnosis. Before that diagnosis, she “failed the third
grade.” However, after medication and an additional diagnosis of a learning disability,
she got back on track academically. In contemplating her educational experience after
her diagnosis, she noted,
I did really well.... [but] [the teachers] didn’t think I was smart enough to take my high school SOLs or any of my SOLs. So I went to [another high school] I had to take my ninth grade, my tenth, and my eleventh grade SOLs that year so I could graduate with a standard diploma.

Debby first started thinking about college on her high school graduation day. She reflected,

I guess what would have helped me is if I would have known about it [going to college] sooner. I mean I knew college was there, but I didn’t know I’d get kicked out of the foster care system if I didn’t go to college when I graduated.

Debby stated, “If I wanted to or needed to get a good job and be able to make it in life, I would have to go to college, so I started going to college.” She is slated to graduate from the community college in a year. To date, she has maintained a 3.25 GPA. Once at college, she commented on how she adjusted her study habits and time management of activities. Although not currently employed, she is working on her foster family’s farm. She stated, “My foster dad, he has Parkinson’s, he has heart problems and his hip has problems, so I help him run the farm, feed the animals take care the animals, and all that stuff.” Her responsibilities at home preclude her holding paid employment.
Debby’s focus right now is finishing community college. She is thinking about the future and her career options. She noted,

I [want to be a social worker] because I want to help kids [who have] gone through the same things [as me], some social workers they don't understand… they really don't because they haven't been through it, I mean.... it seems like they're just in it for the money.

She feels that she can provide a better experience for other foster youth because she can relate to their experience.

**Donny**

At the time of our interview, Donny was a 20 year old and a full-time student at Pastoral College. Donny still lived with a foster family. He spoke about entering the foster care system: “[My dad provided] probably …. the most stable place until he passed away when I was 11.” At that point, Donny went to live with an aunt and uncle but felt “they treated my cousin, their actual son with more favoritism” which prompted Donny to run away. He went to live with a former girlfriend of his father’s, and there he said, “I kind of got in trouble.” He entered the foster system in the seventh grade. Donny noted his foster care history: “I went through actually three placements and one foster home…. before I went back to live with [my father’s girlfriend] again.” After that time, he went back to his original foster care placement, then he went to another foster family,
and then he was moved to his final foster family, which was his living arrangement at the time of the interview.

Donny did not talk much about elementary school. He described himself as "really wild kid, [getting] in trouble all the time." He relayed that he calmed down sometime in middle school. Donny did not mention any behavior concerns in his high school experience, though he noted that he went to three different high schools. He remembers, "I graduated not hardly knowing anybody at [that high school] because I wasn't there long enough to get to know most of the seniors and stuff." However, during his time in high school he joined a technology club where he was able to compete in statewide competition, which fostered a desire to make this area of study his vocation.

In making the decision to go to college, Donny shared that "At least with college, I'd be able to have a longer more interesting day and actually to hang out with people. But that was just the secondary reason; my primary reason is for career." His current foster mom was highly influential in helping him to go to college. She worked through the financial process with social services to help him to get financial aid and secure admissions.

Since entering college, Donny has worked to develop better study habits, in particular to avoid procrastinating. He said that his "[procrastination] really caught up with me a lot in my first semester in college." At the time of the interview, he was working to improve his grades "so I can make it farther through the community college.... and transfer to a bigger school and maybe go into [technology]." He discussed the support he receives from the college’s Great Expectations Counselor and his foster
family. Donny was in the process of looking for employment but shared that this was difficult due to living in a small town.

**Imad**

Imad was a 19 year old at the time of the interview and was attending Pastoral College full-time. When we spoke, he said he was staying with his brother in town as this was within walking distance to the college even though he currently has a living arrangement with a foster family. Imad commented about a rift with his foster parents regarding his decision to attend college. He stated,

> So, my foster parents aren't really happy about [me going to college]. They don't care [about what I want],… I have to [stay where I am] because I can walk to work, I can walk to college I can walk from college to work and back to the place I'm staying in.

Imad and his brother Jerry (who also participated in this study) entered foster care due to their mother’s incarceration. When asked about his experiences in foster care, Imad shared this about his foster family.

> They were never really big on helping us or taking us places or trying to help us find jobs. … I mean if they were nicer to us that I would say it's good to be around them but they could've done a lot better with how they tried raising us.

Imad did not feel supported in his foster care placement. He commented that what affected him and his brother the most was not being able to maintain connections with his biological family.
The thing that brought us down the most, was when we couldn't see our mother who was in prison right now, and when social services and their foster family denied us visitation with our older brother [Charles] ... yet the judge told us we could see her our mom once a month and we got to see her the first month and then we didn't get to see her for three years. And it was social services job to take is up there to see her at least once a month and we never got that privilege.

Not being able to see his mother had an impact on Imad, especially because he felt a lack of support from his foster family.

When it came to college, Imad had mixed feelings. Initially he did not think he would go. He commented,

Because my foster parents didn't really care, my brother [Jerry] did. And he kept telling me, “Imad go take [the entrance exam] now you have to take it now. It will be here this day this day and that day take it.” So eventually it was kind of last minute, [but I took it].

Once starting college, Imad noted the difficult transition. He said, “I underestimated [the work at college], but now I know what to expect, well what to do to figure out the perfect way to balance a job, college, and studying.”

The difference in the amount of work required in high school versus college was notable for Imad.

In his first semester of college, Imad explained that he was “working 20 or 25 hours a week, [but now second semester] working 34 to 38 a week and I have classes all day on Tuesdays and Thursday, and I have class on Monday and Wednesday.” He
continues to work on juggling school and work. With respect to future plans, Imad intends to finish his degree at Pastoral Community College and then to transfer to a bigger 4-year college.

Jerry

As noted above, Jerry is Imad’s older brother. At the time of our interview, Jerry was a 19-year-old full-time student at Pastoral College. Jerry and Imad are less than a year apart in age. Jerry described his living arrangements as “currently staying with his older brother [Charles and his roommate].” Jerry entered foster care with his brother Imad after his mother was incarcerated. In talking about his experience in foster care, Jerry said,

I was under the impression that going into foster care was to help you, like get yourself away from anything bad and get yourself on track, well .... They [my foster parents] do all kind of stupid stuff that makes me just mad .... I wished I could just leave and I [told them] I'd rather go sleep under the bridge than stay here anymore and they're like “No, no we don't want you to leave, we were just saying....”

However, Jerry did leave his foster care family and stayed with his older brother Charles in an apartment nearer to campus. Although Charles did start college, he dropped out. Thus, he was not able to provide a good role model for Imad or Jerry on how to transition successfully to the community college.

Jerry did not have many things positive to say about his foster care experience. He did express his gratefulness that he and his younger brother Imad were place together
with a foster family. However, he expressed frustration about not being able to see his mother (due to her incarceration) and his older brother.

In beginning to think about college, Jerry commented about the influence of his friends on his decision. He stated,

[My friends were] probably the biggest element next to my oldest brother Charlie, who persuaded me to even attend college. At first, I was like I don't want to go. I can just go get a job and make money now and move out like I want to.... But they [said] you need to get your education.

When he first decided to go to college, his main concern was how to afford attending. It was then he found out about the Great Expectations program. He commented,

I found out that if you live in the state and you were a foster child, [college] could be paid for. So I was like since they are going to pay for my college then I'm definitely going to go.

As noted above, Jerry also influenced his younger brother Imad to pursue a college education. After arriving to college, Jerry faced his first setback when he discovered additional stipulations of the GEP. He reflected, “We were told by our social services counselor that we had to have some kind of a job and be attending school if we were to stay in foster care.” Since this coincided with his first semester, he got a job at a fast food restaurant. This proved to be a strain on Jerry, especially as he juggled his academic work. In talking about his job, he shared,

[My boss] started working me on greater shifts and I was working 10 o'clock at night until seven o'clock in the morning.... I was getting out of work [after the
graveyard shift 10pm-7am] and trying to go to school at eight, nine o'clock in the morning and it was not working.

He eventually left that job, but not before it got him “off track,” which is how he described his poor grades from first semester. He was still working hard to bring up his GPA and get “back on track.” At the time of the interview, he had another job at a different kind of restaurant with a supportive supervisor.

After working to balance employment and school, Jerry began thinking ahead. He and his brother Imad were investigating the possibility of getting an efficiency apartment and moving out of their brother’s apartment. Despite the fact that it would take longer, Jerry was also considering “becoming a part-time student in order to have some money put away….in case of emergencies… and to open a bank account.” His current degree is in teacher preparation. He hopes to go on to obtain a bachelor’s degree so he can teach music education.

Metropolitan College

Seven of the participants in this study attended Metropolitan Community College. This urban two-year college is located in a city of about 205,000 residents. Metropolitan College enrolls approximately 6,872 full-time equivalent students, and a total headcount enrollment of 19,000 students.

Amber

At the time of our interview, Amber was a 21 year old and a full-time student at Metropolitan College. Amber lived her adoptive mother and her twin sister (Jochelle).
Amber entered the system due to severe abuse and neglect. She spoke about her experiences in the foster care system:

I've come from years of abuse.... I was dosed up on various medications that I should not have been on even to the point that they actually admitted me to a mental hospital a couple a times just to figure out what was wrong with me.

She has been “in therapy for years” and felt she “probably will still need that as she moves forward.” Other implications from her experience in care include “having a lot of issues with trusting people because I know what I've been through and it's hard for me to actually be able to relate [to other people].” Amber’s early education experiences are intertwined with her foster care experience. She explained her experience:

I know school before when I was in foster care school wasn't a priority or anything it was kind of like we went to school when the person in our house wanted us to....It wasn't like oh, we have the choice to go to school she was like well you go to school when I tell you to go to school which kind of delayed us.

Amber went to several elementary schools; after landing “at a permanent [school] and she had “behavior problems.” She felt this was a direct result of the abuse she endured before foster care. At that time, she “was placed in special ed classes.”

In the 8th grade, she was moved out of special education classes. Her grades continued to improve throughout high school. Though she had thought about college, she had not prepared at all for the college application or financial aid process.

When I was finally aware, it was last-minute so I didn't want to try to go in and apply for FAFSA form to go to a four-year university ... so I just ended up here.
I ended up having my foster mom pay for my first semester and then afterwards I actually filled out a FAFSA form.

Around this time, she also found out about foster kids going to community college and worked with social services to get the proper documentation for the tuition waiver for Metropolitan. Amber started college in January. She explains about her experiences in her first semester:

The first couple of classes, I was nervous because they expected [a lot], for example, I took a biology class first semester here, and they require us to take a certain math class. At that time, I was taking a developmental math class … but actually, I still managed to get a B in the [biology] math class.

Despite her early college success, Amber still has moments where I feel [as if I’m going to have] a poor semester … because I can't seem to get myself together but I manages to pull through anyway.” Her lack of confidence in her ability to succeed is a remnant of her prior life and educational experiences.

Currently Amber works at the YMCA for 20 hours a week. Although her employer tries to work around her academic schedule, she still struggles with balancing school, work, and life. Looking to the future, Amber plans to transfer to a four-year college where she can study dentistry because her ultimate goal is to be a dentist.

Jewel

At the time of our interview, Jewel was a 21 year old and a full-time student at Metropolitan College. Jewel lived in a state run group home facility. She explained her foster care experience this way:
I was in foster care from a baby until like 4 or 5. I was adopted and then I went to foster care again I was kind of adopted through foster care when I was about 16 through 19, and now am living in independent living facility which was a group home when I came.

Jewel noted how during elementary school she was “held back in the first grade.” She expressed sadness at not being able to move to the next grade with her friends.

Throughout middle school, her grades fluctuated. By the time she entered high school she was “in and out in high school because [she] wasn’t really there due to her mental health.” It was in doubt as to whether she could graduate, but she did end up graduating from high school. About college, she said,

I don't even think I had any [plans for after high school].... The thing is before the whole college thing my goals were like.... I didn't really have goals I would say was going to do something but I knew I wasn't and plus I was in the middle of going in and out of the hospitals and stuff. I thought I would work and then I would move into somewhere with a roommate or something like that. I didn't have a solid good plan.

She initially thought about community college because her former therapist introduced her to the idea and the Great Expectations coach at Metropolitan College. Once Jewel learned of the program, she started the application and financial aid process. Though she still has an adoptive family, she is no longer living with them. This directly affected her getting financial aid for college.
[The admissions process] took forever, because they wanted to see that I was independent before I came here because my parents, my adopted parents, were not going to help at all and it was like they could not understand that, so it took forever for them to understand that.

Jewel described her transition and start in college as “just scary…. Like what in the world I can't do this… but just really scary, just being independent and [responsible].” One of the areas of responsibility that felt overwhelming to her was transportation. She talked about having to take the city bus and how this mode of transportation influenced her attendance in class. Jewel was in the PAVE (Program for Adults in Vocational Education) health and personal care aid program, a one-year certificate program. She also has a non-paying job in the health field to get some experience.

My god mom got me a job … to help an elderly lady. And I have another job helping clean and stuff like that because I will get a home health aide certificate [when I leave Metropolitan] but I’m starting even though I don't yet have the certificate, to get [some experience].

Jewel had found some pride in herself and her ability to do well in college. She shared what she had learned about herself in college in stating, “that I can [do this], that I have support.” She went on to say, “that's the best way I can put it because I used always say “I can't do this. I can't do this,” but I can.” Jewel’s success in transitioning to college created a sense of accomplishment for her. Jewel eventually wants to be a mental health tech at the hospital or be counselor or social worker.
Jochelle

At the time of our interview, Jochelle was a 21-year-old, fulltime student at Metropolitan College. Jochelle and Amber are twin sisters. Jochelle lived with her adoptive mother. She entered the system due to severe abuse and neglect. In talking about her elementary school, Jochelle shared,

Well before we got out of our abusive home, they labeled us. So they placed us in learning disability classes. We felt like we were far from that [learning disabled], but we had to struggle to get out of those classes because they had classified us as disabled. And we were definitely not disabled at all.

In addition to special education classes, Jochelle also “had behavioral problems … not that bad, but it was … , getting up out of my seat, ADHD stuff.” The combination of behavioral problems and neglect meant that Jochelle was not in mainstream classes and learning material required to be successful academically in high school or college.

When it came to considering college, Jochelle recalled, “it wasn't a thought for [me] to go to a university, that's how I ended up [at Metro].” She explained, “I didn't even try to apply for scholarships because I felt like I wasn't going to get in, it wasn't any way I was getting into a college so I started here.” She did not feel prepared or confident about college: She described her mindset as, “yeah college, but mentally… well emotionally really, I was kind of iffy about it. I didn't think I was …or I could make it through. It was mixed feelings.” The combination of lack of strong, early educational experiences and a lack of planning for college resulted in not making choices in high school to support best the transition to college.
As she started college, she struggled academically. In high school, she commented “With my IEP (Individual Education Plan), I received enough time to finish my papers, but now I have to really push myself to finish my papers. So that becomes stressful.” Her academic difficulties continued:

As the [college] school year went on, I had a math class that I was taking and I didn't finish it, I had one more test so they pulled my financial aid, because I didn't finish the class. So since then, I've been trying to get back into it...

In addition to working to regain her financial aid, Jochelle also obtained employment at another local state university. She works about 20-25 hours a week. At the time of our interview, she was working to balance all of her responsibilities.

She felt her family had some high expectations, “wanting her to finish college at exactly a certain date.” She has decided “I will finish college when I finish, [I didn’t] want to rush and .... make it so is stressful that I drops out of school.” Recognizing that she could take her time with her program courses, helped her in the transition process.

**Michael**

At the time of our interview, Michael was a 19 year old and a full-time student at Metropolitan College. Michael still lived with a foster family. He spoke about entering the foster care system at age 15: “it was just mostly because of complications between myself, my mom, and my stepdad. I wasn't getting along with him, so that's how I got into it.” Placement in foster care occurs for a variety of reasons and does not mean that a youth does not have a biological family in the community as well.
After being “kicked out” of his mother’s house, “nobody from that side of the family wanted to deal with [me] because they looked at [me] as just a problem child, who was acting out for attention.” Michael remembers feeling misunderstood. He added,

I wanted to get the hell out of there so bad... so get me out of it or I'm going to start doing reckless things; and so basically my mom really wasn't dealing with me, my sisters were dealing with me. But they’re my sisters so they are going to have my back no matter what and no one really else was really there when I needed them to be.

Despite his family troubles, Michael shared loving memories of his elementary and middle school and even into his early high school years. He reflected,

My ninth grade year, loved it. Well, I loved it but.... I will blame it on getting into the system; it was just like once I got into the system, that's when I started to dislike school because it took more out of me to get to school...and I'll be dead honest with you that's when I first started skipping, it became so easy for me to do it that's when I started to stop caring about school thinking can I don't need this I don't care about this, but somehow I still passed.

Michael also had significant behavior problem, and according to him was “written up 12 times [in a school] year and [on the verge] of being expelled.” Once he realized the magnitude of his behavior, he made a conscious effort to manage better his behavior. At first, he refused to consider college as an option, “because he thought high school would have been education enough for what he needed, for what he wanted to do in life” plus he was “tired of school.” However, around graduation, he realized “I [wanted to get
somewhere in life, not be like his mom] and that’s what made me change my outlook....” Yet, as Michael started college, he struggled academically. He admitted,

I was a little full of myself but now after the first semester I stopped and said if I really want to do this I gotta really strap down and get myself together. Sometimes when the stuff just got too hard, I had no one to push me and motivate me, just myself.

Though he still struggles with transportation since he has to take the bus to school, he began to control his grades. He also secured a job at the school bookstore. Michael commented on how he has learned a lot since starting college. He stated,

I was always the type of person that was looked at as “he’ll never get anywhere; he's just another statistic” but I'm like no, I'm trying to prove them wrong and I know I’m a very smart person but sometimes it's hard work .... I just want to do something with my life .... I just want to make money and take care of my family.

As he looked to the future, Michael wanted to be an electrical engineer. His hope was to transfer to a four-year college, in particular a state university with a good engineering school.

Pam

At the time of our interview Pam was a 20-year-old female with fulltime status as a student at Metropolitan College. Pam lived with her adoptive family and spent a lot of time with her boyfriend.

Pam entered the foster care system after her mother died when she was six. She remembers going to many elementary schools (between 6 and 10) and feeling very
different. She recalled, "Elementary school was hard for me, mostly because I was a very weird looking kid, and you know how little kids are.... so I was picked on a lot, and also my mom died around that time, so I vividly remember that." Pam described middle school and high school as a time she was trying to find herself. She has always been respectful and "....had good grades, I never had trouble with school and if I did, I found ways to get better at it." The first time she had a serious discussion about college was during her late high school years, when an army recruiter at her high school approached her. She offered,

This is when I first thought about paying for college because college.... it was always a dream to me. The first person who actually really talked to me about college is the Army recruiter person. He said, "How are you going to pay for college?" And then I was like wait a minute, I have to pay? No one told me this.... I'll just be working at Arby's the rest of my life I guess.

Pam first made the decision to go to college when one of her former foster families told her that she was useless and was never going to do anything. She stated, "I'm going to prove them wrong.... That was a definite time I knew I was going to do college and flaunt the thing in their face." Pam was motivated to seek a college education despite others not feeling she would be successful.

Pam fought through several bureaucratic difficulties with financial aid and with social services losing her birth certificate. As a result, she had to "get a transcript from every school I ever went to, which was a lot because I moved around a lot and it was so hard. But once I got my school ID--I was excited!" Despite her initial euphoria,
however, her first semester in college was trying. She found it much more difficult than high school, because “high school wasn't that hard.... Well, hard, but doable.” Pam recalled how during her first semester at college that she “had this crazy break... crying all the time because I was [so] tired and I kept forgetting to eat so I started losing lots of weight.” She went on, “and it took a while but I finally got into the rhythm. Now I eat and have stopped crying.” For Pam, the transition to college was difficult, resulting in physical ailments.

After her first semester, Pam felt academically she could handle the schoolwork. She added, “don't get me wrong, it was harder but it was more of a challenge rather than being hard. I was like they're expecting me to fail, I'm going to show them.” Pam noted how she had found better ways to handle her problems. She recognized she “needed someone to talk to, her friends, her foster parents, [and especially] her therapist.” Despite the difficult transition to college, Pam learned from her experiences and was taking action to be successful.

At the time of the interview, Pam had been working at Arby's for “four and a half long, painful years, usually working 35 to 40 hours a week.” She was still working at balancing her work schedule with school. She was studying in the science programs so she could eventually transferred to a state university where she can “study animal science and become a veterinarian and be set for life. I always loved animals [and have] always wanted to do something with animals my whole life.” Pam had a career goal and was taking steps to graduate from her community college and transfer into a four-year university.
Shea

At the time of our interview, Shea was a 20-year-old fulltime status student at Metropolitan College. Shea lives in an independent living program. She described it as “a group home setting [with my] own apartment [and space].” She did not share or elaborate on the circumstances that led her into the foster care system. Though, she did add that she felt “being in the system makes you grow faster than normal kids do .... because you are living with people you don't know already, so moving in [anywhere] would not be really hard .... because you already know how to live with six people.”

Dealing with the changes in the foster care system helped prepare Shea for other changes, including the transition to college.

At the time of the interview, she reflected positively on her experience in the system.

Foster care has had a very good impact on my life.... Everyone goes through the stage where their like I don't want to be here, I hate this.... and I can understand that. But when you really sit down and you focus, it [foster care] can bring you a lot if you take advantage of it.

Shea’s experience in the foster care system stands in stark contrast to the experiences other youth in the study recalled about their time in care. But, these differences highlight how individuals take different lessons from their experiences.

Shea described elementary and middle school as easy. However, she faced a bit of difficulty in high school. “Well the first two years were hard, [but] that wasn't like the school’s fault it was me and my behavior. I just had to get myself together which I
finally did in the 11th grade.” A teacher helped her to learn to manage her behavior and take responsibility for her actions. During this time, she was not considering college. She recalled,

I didn't want to go to college because I was tired of school… but then seeing how the economy was and how the job market started to go crazy, I was like well in the end I'm not really good have a choice but to go to college so I might as well just go as soon as I get out of high school it will be better than being really old trying to go back.

After deciding that college could be a path for her, she found out about the tuition waiver. The waiver ultimately swayed her decision. She felt that if nothing else foster care gave her an opportunity to attend college. She summarized,

... and [foster care] really had a good impact on me going to school: one it's free and why not take the opportunity just to see what it could be like. It's not going to harm you because it's not your money like if then you don't like it.

Shea ended up liking college. However, she did have to be persistent in order to get admitted and enrolled. She had great difficulty with social services in aiding her with the process.

Being in the system, we have to have a lot of paperwork. Saying you are in the system... The social worker has to get the papers and they have do their part by the time it's time for you apply for school. Because if not, that will set you back... I had to call my social worker every day asking her [about my paperwork].
Overcoming the bureaucratic hurdles to enrolling in college may have caused other foster care youth to give up, but Shea’s persistence meant she was not in college and enjoying the new experience.

Before starting college and in addition to her other responsibilities, Shea started volunteering at her therapist’s office. She thought since “[working closely with my therapist] helped [me] a lot and because [it may be what I’d like to do].” Before Shea began volunteering in the therapist’s office, she recalled how she “watched them [the college/graduate students volunteering] …. and they seemed like they were really happy going to school and I thought I want to be like that.” Seeing how others experienced going to college helped Shea envision college as a reality for her too.

As she started college, Shea had high expectations that were thwarted when she started. She described her college as “just a big high school really [but with more demanding work] than high school.” The academic and social adjustments proved difficult for Shea. She explained it as “drama with people.” Initially, Shea expected that the type of students going to college would be different, more mature. However, she was disappointed in her peers and some of her relationships.

At the outset, she struggled with academic expectations and responsibilities sharing, “we have so much freedom. They don't say stop texting on your phone or pay attention…. and they don't write notes and stuff on the board.” She recalled a conversation with a professor, which really pushed her to take responsibility for her college education.
I have this one teacher and she was so hard on me and I'm like give me a break lady.... And she said "I know you can do this. You just don't apply yourself.... You're still having fun and I'm not saying that you can't have fun, but you might have to minimize it because college is very important and you're paying for this ...." I'm looking at her like I don't pay for anything and then she said, "and if you don't pay for it now, one day you will have to pay for and then will be very important to you so you should think about that now."

This conversation was a wake-up call for Shea. As she started to work harder she "realized that I am a lot smarter than what I ever thought. I just didn't apply myself ever." She admitted that the professor "was right and that I should take advantage of this good opportunity that is free and get everything I could get while I am here." College enabled her to see a different future, "I want so many things now that I'm in school I can see all the possibilities of what I can do and I just want to do everything." The college faculty helped Shea see her potential and the exchange resulted in a change in behavior for Shea.

In addition to school, she was working at a retail store for 15 or more hours a week. Shea had difficulty balancing her independent living responsibilities (cleaning, mandatory meetings, etc.), working, and school. Though she has become a happy college student, she feels her future is on hold. Though she hopes to attend a 4-year college someday, at the time of our interview her "...focus was just to get a good enough job to make sure that I can take over the lease on my apartment." For Shea, the immediate demands of living were at the forefront.
William

At the time of our interview, William was a 20 year old and a fulltime student at Metropolitan College. William still lived with a foster family. He spoke about entering the foster care system at around age 4. He did not share the circumstances surrounding his entry into care.

William described his early educational experiences as full of trouble. He added, "When I first started going to school, I was bad, getting suspended from school for silly stuff." He did not elaborate on exactly what type of behavior. He was able to move beyond his early years in high school. William described his educational pathway. "As I matured throughout the school system I just started to become a better person still .... silly .... but no longer was I the kid that was always getting suspended from school."

By high school, William was playing football and this team participation influenced his decision to attend college. He described this time as "going at it, every day, just going hard staying focused." Initially, William did not even consider a community college because he "was just applying to a lot of [four-year] schools and ... getting feedback from some schools but it's just that they weren't giving me enough money." He was accepted at a small private university, who offered him a financial aid package that would cover only half of his tuition. With the anticipation of playing football, he tried to make it work. As he was trying to figure out how he could afford to go, that school let him know he would not be able to play football due to his height. At this point, William decided to attend Metropolitan and then to transfer to a four-year university.
Since starting college, William has developed a strict schedule for himself. The day begins with “classes in the morning [until 11 am, then] tutoring from . . . 11 until one o'clock.” Afterwards, he catches the bus to work. He “gets off at around nine or 10 o'clock at night.” He tries “during his break time to work on some [school] work.”

However, for the most part William “has to use [his] time wisely” because before he knows it, it is time to go to work and “he can't do school work on [his] job.” In addressing the issue of balancing work and school, William expressed the sentiment that “the balance on time...time goes by so fast.” He wishes he could attend school without working, but this is not a financial option. At the time of the study, William worked “about 40 [hours a week] – 20 hours at McDonald's and then 20 [hours] at Hardee's.” He worked to supplement his financial aid and to help his foster family. Though his foster family was receiving support from the state, they asked him to help. He explained, “Sometimes I feel like they forget I'm in college especially when asking for that $200 a month”; however, he felt a responsibility to his foster family to do his part.

As others noted, William also struggled with transportation. He spoke about how having a car would help him. He stated,

A car, off the top I needed a car. I always felt some type of way that we have all these cars at the house and they never let me have one. I got to work my butt off to get one but I can understand that if it was meant for me to have it I would have it right now so I just have to be patient.

Despite his hectic work schedule and his transportation woes, William entered Metropolitan with a plan. He offered,
I was really prepared, I already knew what I was going to do my first year, I was going to join the [Metro] leadership program and …. maintain a B or A in all of my classes but I kind of fell short I didn't know the pre-calculus was that hard but I did get into [the] leadership program.

The math class held him back a bit, keeping him ineligible for the student ambassador program. Yet, he was always planning and looking ahead. William commented,

I was thinking about where I would live and how much it cost for housing. That's why I thought about the ambassador program, if I get in the ambassador program you get a scholarship for the fall and the spring semester and that money for the scholarship I will put a bank account because that will be my money for housing.

William has plans for the future. He participates in a transfer program and is preparing to attend one of the larger state universities.

**Conclusion**

This chapter included the personal life stories of the 12 participants in the study. The vignettes reveal the pathways of the participants in foster care and review their college decision-making process. As well, the portraits provide a perspective of the transition to college and some of the current challenges facing the students. Chapter V reviews the themes that emerged from the interviews and reveals how the foster care experience influenced the transition process.
CHAPTER V

Findings

Options for higher education remain limited for young people in the foster care system. Even though individual circumstances vary for children in the system, some experiences are ubiquitous. Growing up in care youth face “the system,” which involves having to navigate many living arrangements, many schools, and many uncertainties. The participants in this study entered care at different points in their lives, ranging in age from infants to teenagers. The purpose of this study was to examine emancipated foster youths’ transition to enrollment in postsecondary education in the Virginia Community College System.

The main research question sought to explore the transition experiences students faced in their pursuit and enrollment in college. The major themes uncovered in this study reflect the experiences of former foster care students as they entered college. Consistently, participants clearly articulated that their time in the system continues to influence their transition to and experiences in college. The context of their experience in care made them eligible for state funding to attend college. However, it was their personal experiences growing up in foster care and in school that provided their perspective in approaching the transition to college. Four major themes emerged from the data. The themes include the influence of time in the foster care system, the confluence of various factors in the college decision-making process, the personal strategies and coping tools to navigate life circumstances and college challenges, and the influence of external support and encouragement.

First was the influence of time in the foster care system was the beginning for the participants in this study. Participants had varied experiences in the foster care system, but
almost all experienced many different placements, both in schools and in living arrangements. They all shared emphatically their perceptions of how their experience in the foster care system continues to affect them daily. More importantly, participants offered how their early educational and family circumstances posed significant emotional and financial influences on their decisions to go to college and their transition into college.

As the young people reached their young adult years, they started to set the stage for going to college and along the way participants found support. The participants encountered encouragement and advice from people they trusted to help guide them and overcome barriers to college attendance. These advocates further encouraged and supported college attendance. A significant influencing force on youth's enrollment in college was non-nuclear family members (biological or foster) and typically an educator, who took an interest in them, who made a commitment to them, and who made a difference in their lives. Overwhelmingly, participants found external support through their teachers in public education.

Finally, learning how to cope with life and how to process personal events proved a significant hurdle for participants, as some of the participants shared experiences of neglect and abuse prior to their foster care experience. All of participants developed coping strategies to help themselves to handle crises, disappointment, frustration, self-doubt, and interpersonal relationships. These mechanisms to meet challenges aided in the transitions the participants faced when entering college. Typical strategies included learning to better manage their emotions, navigate relationships, and create a positive self-image about themselves and their situations.
As the participants head off to college, they faced challenges earlier in life that required them to face adult responsibilities such as earning income, caring for their physical and mental health, and maintaining employment. In essence, youth faced transition from childhood to adulthood without the usual family support and earlier than their peers. Unlike some traditional college students, the young people in this study constantly considered and navigated concerns such as housing, quasi full-time employment, maintaining relationships, and dealing with the bureaucracy of the higher education system. Despite these challenges, they maintained a hopeful uncertainty about their future.

This chapter shares more about the participants, their personalities, their challenges, and their hopes. The participants’ voices create a portrait of their lives in the foster care and education system. Particularly, their views highlight how they have come to this pivotal point in their lives in which they are progressing from the child welfare system to college and concurrently to adulthood. This chapter traces the participants’ experiences in foster care and early education to their enrollment in college.

**The Participants**

An introduction to each of the participants occurred in the previous chapter. This section presents the overall portrait of the students and provides a summary of their experiences. The stories of the students’ experiences in care were poignantly expressed with a sense that being in the system, though not ideal, put them in a safer situation. Further, being a part of the child welfare system provided the opportunity for these students to attend college. Collectively, most of the participants experienced a range of familial traumas from severe abuse and neglect to the death of their birth parents. In addition, they underwent vicissitudes with social services and
state care. Yet, in general, the young people in this study mostly voiced hope and positive comments about their current lives and their prospects for the future, especially when juxtaposed to their feelings about their experiences in the foster care system. This section reviews the overall demographics of the participants and creates a portrait from their experiences.

A total of 12 students participated in this study, and had the following characteristics: they were aged 19 to 21, were emancipating foster youth or in foster care after age 13; and were currently enrolled in a Virginia Community College. Table 1 provides a list of the pseudonyms given to the participants and basic demographic details, as well as a listing of the college currently attending and employment information.
Table 2: Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Years in Care</th>
<th>Pastoral College or Metropolitan College</th>
<th>Area of Study</th>
<th>College Enrollment Status</th>
<th>Average Employment Hours per Week</th>
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<td>Liberal Arts Program</td>
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1 Pseudonyms
The participants have been in the foster care system between five and 15 years, with an average stay of eight years. Two of the participants were recently adopted, while the others remain in care as emancipating youth working towards independent living. Ethnicity of participant included one biracial student, five Caucasian students, and six Black students. The study contained five men and seven women. Additionally, the participant pool had two sets of siblings, including a pair of fraternal twins who were placed together in foster care.

The participants maintained strong, though mixed feelings about the foster care system, its policies, and the treatment they received while in care. On the one hand, the participants commented on their challenges and frustrations within the system. On the other hand, participants realized that without their placement in care, they would not be eligible for the financial aid that enabled them to attend college.

In general, the participants were satisfied with their decision to attend college and maintained hope about all aspects of their future, including housing, working, and education. Their commentary highlighted an increased confidence in themselves and a corresponding ability to handle disappointment and frustrations; their mindset is best described as hopefully expectant and determined. A strong sense of intrinsic motivation emanated from the participants that was demonstrated through their expressed resolve and desires to do better and to be better than their biological parents, to overcome their difficulties, and to see college through despite the many frustrations and odds against them. Out of necessity, money issues and socioeconomic class served to motivate
participants as they sought to better their circumstances. Attending college was viewed as a step to a better life.

However, like many first-generation college students, the participants entered the unknown in attending college. Other classmates with family experiences in college have more cultural capital or better cultural preparation for college and this background has aided them in knowing what to expect when attending college. Specifically, the participants lacked the privilege of family expectations, family stability, and family financial support. Central to aiding the students' transition to college were advocates who helped them to navigate admissions and academic challenges, but more importantly instilled confidence and provided emotional support. Notwithstanding internal goals and external support, many of the participants still struggled and were unsure if they would finish their degrees at the community college.

With the exception of Debby, Shea, and Donny, all of the participants maintain employment. Three-fourths work in retail or fast food industries and a majority of them work 25-40 hours a week. Debby works in a nonpaying job on the family farm and Shea volunteers as a home health aide. The participants work not only due to the very real need for additional financial resources for rent, books, gas, and personal needs, but also because of a social services requirement that dictates employment to maintain status in care. Yet, this policy was not uniformly enforced among the participants by social workers and case managers as three of the participants were not employed in paid positions. Although a few of the participants lamented the lack of time for friends or
social activities, they chose to forgo these options and make conscious decisions to give priority to work and school over any other activity.

Participants did talk about foster care but were hesitant to share all of the varied nuances and details of their situations. The few harrowing stories related about their time in care included being locked in a room for days at a time, verbal abuse, and severe neglect. Several of the participants continue to be in therapy and work daily to maintain a healthy mental outlook.

The portrait of the participants highlights how they are typical of many college-going students, in age, full-time status, and range of programs of study. Yet, their time in care created a different launching point relative to their counterparts. Navigating the college admission process without the benefit of family support, dealing with issues of trauma from childhood, and experiencing school transitions in public education have all contributed to a long list of challenges to overcome. The following section highlights the themes of the study starting with the earliest experiences influencing transitions for the participants.

In the Beginning

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,*

*And sorry I could not travel both*

*And be one traveler, long I stood*

*And looked down one as far as I could*

*To where it bent in the undergrowth...*

– Robert Frost, 1920

Youth in care are often presented with a life path dictated by circumstances beyond their control. They know and long for another path, another road, but often their foster care experience created limitations. These early experiences significantly
influenced their college choices because of missed school, limited finances, and limited academic achievement. For the participants in this study, their story begins with their first experiences of handling change and uncertainty. Changes stemmed from discontinuity in family life, school life, and personal life.

The participants’ experiences within the child welfare system set the stage for their preparation for college. At the time of the interview, some of the participants were still residing with foster families or in state run facilities. The participants were still grappling with some of their early experiences in the system and forging ahead despite their present and past challenges. The participants lacked continuity and stability in their early lives, resulting from their numerous placements and moves prior to college. Having so many living arrangements had several implications. First, the initial placement as wards of the court created a situation of adjustment. Once in the system, students moved multiple times resulting in their getting to know many families, many homes, and developing many new relationships. Both frequent home moves and family adjustments resulted in missed school, limited educational encouragement, and greatly impacted the participants’ educational learning and educational pursuits. The participants entered the foster care system for a variety of concerns and challenges in their biological family life such as family problems, neglect, and parental incarceration.

**Foster Care Experiences**

For the participants, entering the foster care system changed the entire trajectory of their lives. For most of the participants, child welfare personnel stepped in to intervene when they become aware of a situation where children were abused or
neglected. The reasons for the students’ entering care ranged from parental death or incarceration to difficulty with family relationships. No matter the circumstances for entry to care, participants shared the challenge of having been moved to multiple foster placements.

In addition to having many living arrangements, a few of the participants also sought to maintain biological family connections and juggled several families and family relationships. Navigating their foster care life has implications for their sense of belonging and self, as well as in how they develop a sense of trust. Participants discussed moving from foster home to foster home, and within this context, they dealt with different personalities, different living situations, and different rules and expectations. Since youth are separated from their biological families, flexibility and adjusting to change quickly are required to adapt to new circumstances, new families, and new places to stay.

Participants also had to navigate their multiple families, both biological and foster, or deal with the idea of not having a family at all. Pam stated it best by describing her current foster family as her “now” family. She stated, “well, I have two families, just so you know. I have the whole blood family, and then you know the semi-blood family.” Alice expanded upon the difficulty of navigating multiple relationships and home placements, “Well, (high school) was hard because I had to do it with two different families.”
Even though some participants fought to maintain family relationships, some students were uncertain about their biological family status given the time they entered into the system. William noted:

...by then [after finishing college] hopefully I will know I have a family... I'm trying to crack into that, that something I really need to look into... yeah, I'm not sure she [my mother] still lives there. I haven't seen her since I was seven but that's something I really need to do [find my mother].

Their lives in foster care were not always positive or supportive. Challenges often emerged from their time in care because of lack of stability, limited expressions of love, and few choices in their living arrangements. According to Donny,

[My dad] was probably one of the most or was the most stable places I was at and stable families I was with, until he passed away when I was 11. After my dad passed away, I went to live with live with my aunt and uncle, I stayed there for six months. And one day I got upset about the whole way they treated my cousin. They treated my cousin, their actual son with more favoritism than how I was, and I just got upset with it one day and just left.

When he left his aunt and uncle’s home, he stayed with his father’s previous girlfriend. Ultimately, he entered the foster care system. These multiple moves were common for many of the participants and created an unstable home life.

Shea related that her experience in the foster care system forced her to cope and handle people and situations better. She felt “being in the system makes you grow up faster than normal kids do [mainly] it’s because you [have to live with] people you don’t
Shea went on to share about learning to live in a situation with six other people. The constant upheaval meant that students had to learn how to deal with multiple living situations and that they lacked family guidance at critical points in their lives.

Part of living in foster care was the stigma of placement. Alice added, “I just think that people that are in the situation that I'm in, they just feel like they can't tell people that they are there. They just kind of want to keep it to themselves, like they are normal. So it's harder.” Life in foster care is not predictable and is often not supportive. Jerry reflected,

I was like, [the foster family] do all kind of stupid stuff that makes me just mad. Like saying they would give us rides places, but they don't. All kind of stuff like that and one day, I can't remember exactly why it came up, but they were talking about... like the way they're doing things around the house, and I said I could just leave and I was like I'd rather go sleep under the bridge than stay here anymore and they're like, “No, no. We don't want you to leave; we were just saying,” and I was like well I do want to leave and I am saying this.... [The foster parents have] been trying to act like they were very helpful in helping us getting a job. They just said, “Go find jobs,” but when they did not give us rides to go. They would help us look for applications and stuff, but we basically have to walk when they tell us to go get a job.

Family was defined in a number of ways for the youth in care. Their “now” foster family may have provided a supportive and loving environment, but this was not always the case. In general, the participants’ experiences a great deal of instability in their home
lives and this contributed to how they transitioned to college. Frequent and changing circumstances affected youth emotionally and socially.

The foster care transition, from birth family to foster family, or in some cases multiple foster families, often required physical moves that resulted in the participants attending a number of different schools. Attending multiple schools was a shared experience among most of the participants. This constant changing of school significantly impacted both their primary schooling and ultimately their college attendance due to limited financial planning and minimal family/guardian support.

**Early Education**

In addition to the instability caused by removal from their birth family, students noted difficulty along their educational pathway. A central concern and an oft-repeated experience among the participants involved attending multiple primary and secondary educational institutions. Common features that occurred in their education, which had ramifications for their college transition was the fact that participants were often tracked or labeled in school, diagnosed with disabilities, and retained in a grade. These types of educational experiences acted as detriments for educational achievement and were readily recalled by participants as obstacles to overcome in order to be eligible for college attendance. School officials, and to some extent the foster care providers or adoptive parents, made decisions about participants’ education for them. In contrast, participants felt their values, ambitions, and belief about themselves were different. Several participants spoke emotionally about their experiences in school, including difficulties of
belonging socially with peers, difficulties with schoolwork and promotion, and difficulties with learning disabilities.

Pam had difficulties remembering how many elementary schools she had attended. She attributed some of difficulties in making friends to frequent moving and always being the new kid at school. In thinking back on her schooling, she tried to recount the number of schools she attend, stating,

"Probably about 10, I don't really remember. But as a kid even going to a new grade is different. I'm not really sure, but somewhere from 6 to 10 schools and it was hard....if anything making friends is hard...."

Other participants also experiences attending multiple elementary schools. Jewel expressed sadness about losing her school friends as she reflected on being held back a grade. She said,

"Elementary, I got held back in the first grade because they felt like I wasn't able to move on, or whatever. That made me sad because – my other friends moved into the other grades and I'm down here; it's not right."

These early experiences with schooling impacted the students’ adjustments to the educational content given the constant disruptions.

Amber stated, “I know school, before, when I was in foster care, school wasn't a priority or anything. It was kind of like, we went to school when the person in our house wanted us to.” A perceived lack of family support for education created a sense of void for students and did not set up for them the value of education. Further, instead of seeing that education was worthwhile, due to their early experience, going to school became
hard because of missed learning and being set apart. Their early circumstances regarding education certainly did not support any further post-secondary education pursuits.

Additionally, Amber experienced severe abuse and neglect by one care provider. This guardian impacted her both emotionally and academically for years and even into college. Amber elaborated:

It wasn't like oh, we have the choice to go to school. She was like, well, "You go to school when I tell you to go to school," which kind of delayed us in a sense because by the time we got held back in elementary school we had to catch up on a lot of stuff. I had to teach myself how to do everything, because everybody else was ahead of me.

Because their guardian did not get them to school or make sure they went, Amber found herself in learning disabled classes fighting to get back into mainstream classes. Amber spoke of the uphill climb from being behind academically due to her placement in elementary school in special education to finally getting in regular classes in high school. Due to their behavior, missed school, and family circumstances school officials placed both Amber and her sister Jochelle in special education classes. Jochelle recounted how she and her sister were finally able to move beyond their label of disabled learner. She reflected,

We felt like we were far from that [learning disabled], but we had to struggle to get out of those classes because they had classified us as disabled. And we were
definitely not disabled at all. No, we both got out [of learning disabled classes] at the eighth grade level.

Though Jochelle speaks to her strong belief that she and her sister were not appropriately treated or understood, they eventually were able to fight the label of being learning disabled in order to move out of special education and into mainstream classes.

Amber reflected on how her placement in the special education track held her back educationally. She commented,

> It tended to be [challenging], as I progressed through different schools... I mean there were challenges, in elementary school they put me in... Actually let me go back, in elementary school, I went to several elementary schools, but when I actually ended up being at a permanent one, being that I had behavior problems because I was abused as a child, they had to put me in special ed classes.

These early educational experiences set the stage for how prepared the students were to enter college and how they perceived education in general given their lived experiences.

Participants, Jewel and Debby, were held back a grade early in elementary school. As noted above, Jewel was held back in first grade. Debby failed the third grade, which she attributed to her medication and a diagnosis of ADHD. She recounted that her adoptive parent at the time refused to give her the prescribed medication. Debby most clearly illustrates her struggles in elementary and middle school with a learning disability, sharing,
I failed the third grade, because they diagnosed me with ADHD, and my mom, my adopted mom, she didn't really want me to take medication and stuff, so I really wouldn't concentrate in school.

Debby went on to relate how her educational experience changed drastically once she was diagnosed correctly.

After that, after I started taking the medication, I did really well. And then when I was 11, when I went to the group home, where I was diagnosed again with ADHD and ... the learning disability.

Correct diagnosis of learning disabilities was spotty for the participants. Some, like Amber and Jochelle, were incorrectly diagnosed, whereas others, like Debby, benefited when their learning disability was correctly diagnosed.

Foster care placement resulted in educational disruptions for participants, which ultimately impacted student learning and behavior in school. Many of the participants had atypical experiences during elementary, middle, and high school, including retention, non-mainstreamed education, and absenteeism. As a result, participants had marginal grades and a need for remediation, which significantly influenced participants' perceptions about the availability of college of them. The educational experiences in high school were also pivotal in preparing the students for their college transition.

**High School**

Alice and Donny both experienced high school disruptions. Alice relayed, with some irritation, details about her attendance at different institutions during high school:
Because they moved me from different homes, and I was in a different location, I had to go to two different high schools. Well, I went to one school for 3 1/2 years. And I was going to graduate and they switched me four months before I graduated. So I graduated with a whole different class of people who I didn't know.

This type of movement may be seen as unusual, but was seemingly a regular occurrence for participants. Though the timing of the move for Alice was a challenge, being at one high school for over 3 years created some stability at school. At the same time, in her perspective, the move generated a sense of disappointment, bitterness, and sadness in having to move at that point in high school. Similar to Alice, Donny faced high school changes, but even more extreme. According to Donny,

I was actually at four different high schools. I was at [school A] twice actually. I first started my freshman year then I went for like a week or two weeks maybe, I went to [school B] for the rest of my sophomore year to my junior year went back to [school A] and started my senior year, then I finished my senior year at [school C].

For Donny and Alice, interruptions to their high school education were still significant and poignant to them at the time of the interview. The impact of constantly moving, particularly in high school meant different school expectations, different teachers, different friends, and different academic pacing. For Debby, the number of placements and academic difficulty through her elementary and middle school directly affected her academic progress in high school. Prior to moving to high school, she was not on track
to graduate. Although Debby attended two different high schools, her final high
school move actually helped her to graduate. At the second high school she attended, she
completed her state achievement tests. Debby recounted,

They didn't think I was smart enough to take my high school SOLs or any of my
SOLs. So I went to [school A for my senior year of] high school and I took my
ninth, my 10th, and my 11th grade SOL [state achievement test] all that year so I
could graduate with a standard diploma.

Circumstances such as Debby’s delay in being diagnosed with a learning disability and
difficulty in completing state achievement tests in a timely manner highlights how early
experiences can impact college access and decision making. Though it took her until
high school to recover from her early educational experiences and learning disability, she
was able to do it. However, not completing the required testing directly impacts high
school graduation and the ability to meet college admissions requirements. Being in the
child welfare system, and particularly with the number of different placements, greatly
affected the participants’ early education.

Experiencing multiple moves suppressed participants’ motivation for school and
created social and academic difficulties. Michael blamed his disconnection from school
on his entering the system. He commented, “It was just like once I got into the system
that's when I started to dislike school because it took more out of me to get to school.”
Due to moving to a new foster care placement, he had to get up at 5am in the morning to
catch a series of city buses to get to school. The experience of these participants
demonstrates perceptions how their pathway through the k-12 educational system
contributed to their perceptions about college and their preparation for college level learning.

In another school-related struggle, participants faced internal battles regarding managing their behavior in school. Participants remembered and recounted some of their behavior conduct problems, particularly being reprimanded for classroom conduct. Their foster care experiences and family dynamics often exacerbated their misbehavior. Many of the participants related how it was not until their late high school years that they began to take responsibility for their behavior.

Students faced different classroom behavioral issues depending on their various stages of school. Michael and Shea were self-reflective and ultimately began to recognize their conduct as problematic. When Michael was a high school student, he finally realized that his behavior had gotten out of hand. He commented,

Also my worst time was at the end of my 10th grade year, beginning of my 11th grade year. I was about to get expelled because I was getting into too much trouble. I just looked at it, and I was like, “God, I've gotten written up 12 times so far this year.”

Michael’s recognition of his problem allowed him to evaluate his behavior and start to think about his options and the change process. He did not detail how he specifically changed his behavior but he did not get expelled. Shea recounted how she recognized that her conduct was detrimental and identified a turning point in her attitude. She thought her first few years of high school were difficult due to her conduct. She stated, “Well, the
first two years were hard. That wasn't like the school's fault. It was me and my behavior. I just had to get myself together, which I finally did in the 11th grade.”

Once Michael and Shea realized they had control over their behavior and made personal adjustment, they had an easier time in school. Most students recognized their responsibility for their behavior concerns, but only during their late high school years.

Other behavioral setbacks due to mental health concerns faced the participants during their primary and secondary educational experience. Both Jewel and Amber were hospitalized due their mental illnesses and this resulted in disruption in their education. Jewel commented on her absences from school due to her mental instability and the influence of missing school had on the consistency of her grades. She was not sure she would graduate high school at one point noting, “I wasn’t really there….a teacher came in for about six months [to help me when I was out of school] and I finally got to graduate high school.” In reflecting further about her mental health, Jewel shared more about her struggles and how in college the symptoms of her mental health illness diminished due to her progress in coping with challenges. She highlighted her progress reflecting, “I’ve been not cutting, I haven't been popping pills, or nothing. I've been perfect… not perfect, I still have my ups and downs but I'm not how I was.” Jewel talked about college as a motivation to continue to manage her mental health effectively. Like Jewel, Amber faced challenges due to her hospitalization and absence from school.

Amber spoke of abuse she endured before entering the foster care system and how that affected her education.
I've come from years of abuse.... I was dosed up on various medications that I should not have been on, even to the point that they actually admitted me to a mental hospital a couple a times just to figure out what was wrong with me.

Any type of hospital stay during the academic year required Amber to miss school and to make up work.

At the time of the interview, Amber, like Jewel, felt a sense of hopefulness and pride in the progress she was making with coping and maintaining a healthy outlook. In addition to these two students, Shea, Alice, and Jochelle all spoke of on-going therapy and the work they were doing to sustain their mental health progress and continued improvement. The participants recognized the importance of working to correct their behavior and develop better coping skills and how their mental outlook was important to maintain while in college. The impacted students also recognized the importance of good mental health beyond college and how they needed to be able to cope with whatever comes their way.

Another significant behavior problem was noted by the male participants, namely truancy. Michael, Jerry, and Imad frequently missed school out of personal choice. Lack of consistent attendance in school served as another hurdle for participants on their way to college. For Michael and Jerry missing school became easy. Michael linked his decline in school attendance to his entry in the foster care system. He related,

Then midway through 10th grade year, I got kicked out [of my mom's house] and I'll be dead honest with you that's when I first started skipping. It became so easy
for me to do it. That’s when I started to stop caring about school – and I thought, I don’t need this. I don’t care about this. But somehow I still passed.

Entry into the foster care system spurred Michael’s rationale for truancy. He and Jerry both felt justified in skipping school. Unlike Michael, Jerry did not associate his decision to miss school with his experience in foster care. Jerry with a bit of pride describes a tumultuous school year rife with missing class as follows:

Well, where I was [in the particular school] they don’t really charge you with truancy. I think they say if you’re 18 you’re the one dumb enough to not come to school but I skipped a lot in my seventh period; 59 days. That was more absences I had in sixth hour. I skipped 36 in fifth. I skipped 32 in fourth. Only skipped like 12 or 13 in third period for my senior media class. But second period, only skipped three or four because it was my Latin and I don't want to miss that at all and first. But, I kept my grades up and I stayed on top of it especially Latin, I had no choice but to stay on top of that.

Jerry made it to school every day to get counted in first period. He liked the challenge of Latin and it was early in the school day. He knew he could get away with skipping, so he did it although neither he nor Michael mention what they did during the time they should have been in school. Despite his willingness to skip school, Jerry saw the importance of maintaining his grades. His missing school was not due to a lack of aptitude but about availability and choice. Despite their caviler outlook about attendance, both young men recognized the importance of graduating.
Summary

The participants all recounted how their early experiences with the foster care system influenced their relationships with family, their mental health, and their approach to their early educational years. The participant attended many schools and often had unstable home lives. For some of the participants, their time in care compounded mental health concerns and exacerbated behavior for some of the participants. The end of high school served as a light at the end of the tunnel recognizing issues and need to get their act together with not skipping, behaving, getting grades, passing the SOLs, and graduating from high school.

Setting the Stage for College

*Then I took the other, as just as fair,*  
*And having perhaps the better claim,*  
*Because it was grassy and wanted wear:*  
*Though as for that the passing there*  
*Had worn them really about the same*  
—Robert Frost (1920)

The early experiences of participants clearly began to set the stage for how they thought about college and how prepared they were for college. First, the timing of when they began contemplating attending college typically occurred quite late for the majority of the students. Often, it was not until high school graduation that the students first explored the option of going to college. Second, the motivations of students impacted how they approached the college-going decision-making process. Finally, the act of applying to and matriculating into college created a context for their college careers.
Graduation

Unlike many foster youth, all of the youth in this study graduated from high school. This accomplishment sets the participants apart from many others in care. Yet, their foster care experience meant they had limited preparation and planning for college, which translated into late applications to college. When it came to college decision making, participants lacked belief in their ability, lacked planning for college, and lacked information about the college processes.

Late awareness of college often translated to not considering college as an option until senior year or after graduation. Jerry recalled his first conversation about college, which occurred in his senior year. At this time, he had his first serious discussion with a teacher about college. He heard the mantra of his teachers, “Got to go to college to get a better job.” Jerry then understood the links between going to college and the ability to get a better job. Debby also found herself late in thinking about and applying to college. She shared,

The first time I actually started thinking about going to college was high school graduation day. I mean I knew college was there, but I didn't know that I would get kicked out of foster care system if I didn't go to college until I graduated. Debby felt a push from the foster care system. Since she had no plans for what to do after high school or post foster care, college became a way to still remain in the system with the foster home where she feels like she is loved and part of the family.

The majority of the participants held real insecurities about their abilities to be successful in college. Shea, for example, commented, “I was actually nervous; I was
thinking I don't know if I'm cut out for this.... High school wasn't the best for me.”

Previous experiences in school set the stage for how participants perceived their abilities to succeed in college. Jochelle described her mindset as “kind of iffy about it. I didn't think I was …or I could make it through. It was mixed feelings.” Michael who never saw himself as a college student only started to think about college as he was graduating. Although as far back as middle school, a teacher helped him to believe in himself that he could do it. During the interview he stated, “The whole college thing, I never really would've thought I would've been here.” Not envisioning college as an option, participants had not prepared for what was entailed in going to college or what to expect. Michael elaborated,

Yeah, about as I was graduating [was when I started thinking about college]
because … I'll say, even leading up to senior year, people would say, “You should go to college. I'm going to college.” And I would say to them, “That's not me.”

Thus, Michael did not have a vision of him going to college, college was something for others.

The lack of foresight about going to college impacted others as well. Jochelle also noted how she never thought she would go to college. She stated,

It wasn't a thought for me to go to university. That's how I ended up here because I didn't even try to apply for scholarships because I felt like I wasn't going to get in. There wasn't any way I was getting into a college so I started here [at the community college].
Of note, Jochelle distinguished between going to college and attending the community college. Because 4-year colleges often have higher admission requirements, the community college offers a viable option for less-academically prepared students given its open access policy. With her difficult academic past and ADHD, Jochelle was uncertain about her abilities to succeed in college.

Jewel also commented on her lack of planning and her beliefs about how she would not succeed in college. In high school, she did not hold college as one of her goals. She reflected,

I don't even think I had any goals.... The thing is before the whole college thing [this year], my goals were like.... I didn't really have goals. I would say I was going to do something but I knew I wasn't and plus I was in the middle of going in and out of the hospitals and stuff.... I thought I would work and then I would move into somewhere with a roommate or something like that.... I didn't have a solid good plan.

Not having goals meant there was no planning for next steps, including going to college. Alice continued about her lack of planning when she added, “Well, I never really planned to go to college after high school. It just kind of happened.” The happenstance nature of the transition to college was a common experience for several of the participants.

Brothers Jerry and Imad highlighted how their limited access to advising impacted their college decisions. In thinking about his experiences, Jerry recalled, “I'm kind of like... well I never really had serious discussions about college.... I mean maybe someone mentioned in the 10th grade.” Imad continued, “The first I heard about college,
it was sophomore year. But the first time I started taking it seriously it was… after the end of my junior year,” which was due to the influence of his brother, Jerry, versus via any school counselor.

Limited academic preparation, lack of advising, and scant information about college all contributed to participants waiting until after graduation to pursue college. Yet, it was not until late in high school that students fully understood the ramifications of aging out of the social service system or knew about what benefits they could access for financial support for college.

**Motivation and Action**

Participants had varying motivations for wanting to go to college. For most participants, college seemed like an avenue to a better job and a necessity to making more money. Jochelle related,

Actually, I was like, “I'm going to go to college.” I don't want to be out here flipping burgers or something, not that there is anything wrong with that, but I don't want to do that for the rest of my life so I was like I'm going to go [to college].

Although Jochelle recognized the cause and effect of college on her later life, this awareness did not translate into tangible action towards enrollment. She did not make a decision to really go to college until late in high school. Unlike Jochelle, once William decided he wanted to go to college, he worked to make it happen. He stated, “No doubt, [I made the decision to go to attend college in] my junior year and the beginning of my senior year. I was just going at it, every day just going hard, staying focused.” For
William, athletics provided a starting point to explore college possibilities, including admissions and financial aid. He originally aimed for a four-year college, but found the community college more accessible due to financial aid and his inability to get an athletic scholarship to attend a four-year college. William was unique in having this alternate pathway and the type of information about college garnered through an athletic recruitment process.

A number of reasons served to demotivate students and contributed to why participants were late in deciding to apply to college and to attend once accepted. Challenges included financial troubles, unstable living arrangements, and problems acquiring financial aid to help with college attendance. Stable housing and living circumstances presented problems before entering college and during the transition to college. Imad stated,

Being in foster care, it's always, kind of like, hard to figure out where you want to go [to college], and how you can get the money, and how you can get everything figured out. And .... if you can move out or if you can stay, stay with your foster parents or not.

As well, previous experiences in primary and secondary school set the stage for how participants faced decisions regarding college going. Low academic achievement, missing school, and behavioral problems all served as setbacks and challenges in the perusal of college. Along their path to college, the actions of students, poor personal choices, and mental health issues all contributed to why students did not perceive the
possibility of higher education was an option for them. All of these reasons contributed to the participants’ limited self-confidence in their abilities for continued schooling.

In school, behavior can be just as influential on college attendance as scholarship, as school records affect college entry. Although participants could make personal choices about scholarship and conduct, they also received help and support from others around them. Those participants who found mentors and received encouragement and positive reinforcement, held a stronger belief in what they could accomplish and what was possible.

College Choice and Transition

The transition to college signified an important process in the lives of participants. College for these youth is not viewed as an entitlement. As they transitioned to college, youth faced significant challenges, but also found support to aid them with social and academic concerns. This section traces the participant’s’ ups and downs, excitement, growth, and challenges as they navigated making the decision to go and entrance into college.

When asked about social service’s help regarding the college admission and financial aid process, the participants most often related negative experiences. Most youth recognized without the system they would be in even worse situations, so in some sense the system did support youth in pursing college. Based on their financial limitations, previous school experience, and the circumstances and outcomes resulting
from their entry into and experience in foster care, participants perceived that they are at a disadvantage in going to and graduating from college.

Though some participants can see the supportive aspect of being involved in social services, social services let them down in other areas, specifically helping them gain knowledge about college, helping them make college decisions, and most of all helping them through the financial aid process. About half of the participants had difficulty with social services helping to get the required documentation for financial aid and college. Amber spoke about the difficulty in getting information after having been adopted.

But I kept kind of getting the runaround here and at social services because they were like well, we have money for you that you can use although you’re adopted. And then I said okay, but then they said you don't qualify because you don't meet certain requirements and stuff.

However, that was not true. Amber indeed was eligible for the financial aid because she was still in foster care after age 14. Other participants also stressed the difficulty of the application process because of the need for documentation from social services. Pam commented,

Oh my God! That was so hard for me because for some reason social services lost my birth certificate, which I still don't have by the way. So they are all like how do we know you're you. I was like I don't even know I'm me [laughter]! So yeah, we had to do a lot; we had to get social workers involved, we had to get
transcripts every school I ever went to, which was a lot because I moved around a lot and it was so hard.

From losing important personal documents to providing court documents to prove youth's status in state care, the overwhelmed social service system faced difficulty in providing participants needed help. Yet, some students received the help they needed from their foster families. Donny spoke about how his foster mother took the initiative when social services delayed.

My foster mom was constantly talking to social services about them wanting to, about trying to get financial aid and they kept saying they were going to do it.

And my foster mom, she didn't feel comfortable with that. She's always done the financial forms for her kids and foster kids. So after a while she just got fed up with social services, just dragging their feet behind the doing the financial aid.

And she just started doing it; it was actually only a month before I started classes that I got my financial aid approved.

Donny had an advocate in his foster mother. With the exception of William, who found advocacy from coaches and athletic, the other participants differed in the types of advocacy and the level of encouragement received for continuing their education.

Summary

Several elements contributed to setting the stage for students deciding to attend college. The first was late decision-making, planning, and preparation in relation to college. Second, the participants found motivations for college based on how they
envisioned their future. Support along the way to college was a critical factor in helping students ultimately to make the transition to college.

Support Along the Way

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back
- Robert Frost, 1920

Having navigated their road through foster care and leading up to college, participants forged ahead. This journey was not one of solitude. The participants reflected on how they received help from others along the way. A critical element in the ability to think about college and adult life was the creation of a solid support network. The foundation of their support came through people taking a vested interest in their success. With this assistance and support, the students tried not looking back, only ahead to the transition out of care and into college. The students commented that without this type of influence and motivation to succeed that they would likely not be attending college.

Participants lacked self-confidence and sought supportive relationships with adults to augment dysfunctional family situations. Due to constant life and school disruptions, and the many places they lived, students needed adults whom they could trust in their lives. Sources of encouragement for the participants were relationships fostered at school with educators and peers. Some also found mentorship and advisement
within their foster families, with caretakers, and with social services personnel. For those participants in contact or placed with siblings, having brothers or sisters to rely upon served as a significant source of family support. Even small moments of encouragement made a significant difference in the lives of participants. Jochelle summed it up best stating:

Sometimes I feel like I'm alone, but really I am not because we just have great support [adoptive mother, teachers, and counselors] overall…. I think that if it wasn't for them, I wouldn't even be in college right now because at one point I felt like I wasn't good enough to go to college.

The students recognized and appreciated the encouragement they received from others and were able to point to specific instances of influence for them along their pathway to college.

**Educators**

Those who most frequently served as sources of encouragement to youth in this study were former teachers. Noted by 10 out of 12 participants, verbal support from educators influenced their college aspirations and in many instances their college choices. The participants frequently mentioned a teacher in middle school or high school who influenced them in a way that opened the door to the possibility of college. Teacher support was not necessarily received through learning experiences and academic work, rather in interactions with teachers outside of class time. These educators served as confidants, authoritarians, mentors, and friends. These relationships helped bolster confidence in the participants. Shea and Michael spoke about teachers serving a role as
surrogate parents. Shea specifically mentioned her 9th grade teacher: “He has been there for me. Especially when my parents are frustrated and don't want to deal with me, he's always been there for me.” Michael mentioned the connection he had with his 7th grade homeroom teacher. Michael described his teacher as “a black guy from Philadelphia … who took me underneath his wing.” He went on to further describe the influence this teacher had on his life saying,

He took me fishing, he let me come stay at his crib, and we would just chill. I will not say like a father-son relationship because he had his own family and I didn't want to make it seem like that but it's like he looked after me when I was in school and when I was out of school.

Some of the participants first heard about college through a teacher. Michael remembers his seventh grade learning-skills teacher who first mentioned college to him. Likewise, Jerry talked about a teacher who “was on me a lot and the one who kind of gave me the talk about going to college.”

In addition to mentioning and planting the seed about college, teachers also helped to instill confidence and build esteem in the participants. Educators served as cheerleaders and allies and helped to identify talent and potential within students. Participants received support aiding in their personal growth, such as instilling confidence in themselves and building the value of completing commitments. Educators challenged them to do more and to be better. This personal development and confidence building was essential in helping students to see their own potential. Jochelle spoke about how this type of support was essential to her completing high school. She said,
“But after [getting out of learning disabled classes], school was great. I had my teachers helping me, sticking with me, and telling me I could do it.” For those participants in particular who had been labeled as academically deficient, teachers played a significant role in countering this negative version of the students’ abilities.

Educators also pushed students to recognize their potential, to recognize their self-worth, and to recognize their own self-determination. For example, Michael remembered an interaction with a teacher, “And when [my teacher] asked me about [college], I said I can't go to college and he instilled a little bit in me at the time to believe in myself.” It was teachers who often helped the participants see and realize their potential as college-going students.

The process of thinking about college was not immediate, rather grew over time. Michael explained how his teacher instilled a belief that Michael could have options. He reflected how his teacher said “that if you are telling yourself that you can't do it, you are not going to do it. And Mr. (----) was telling me, “Michael look, I know you can do it!”” Hearing others express a belief in their ability was often the first form of positive reinforcement participants received. Jerry recalled how his first band teacher served as a motivating catalyst. This teacher held him after class to address his intention about quitting music, which he loved. Jerry animatedly described the discussion:

I was like, “what Ms. --------?” And she said, “I heard you were going to quit.” I was like, “maybe.” And she's like, “Well you're really a good student and I see a lot of potential in you and you haven’t practiced as much as you should be. You do have some natural talent and I think you need to stay in here. I will help you
myself. I'll get some extra times of extra people to come in and help the French horn section as a whole."

Not only did Jerry's teacher encourage him and compliment his potential, she devoted her own time to help him to follow through on staying in the band and to have this music class have a positive outcome. With this interaction, she helped him see an alternative to giving up and a way to make it to the next step. Before the end of his time in school, Jerry was second chair of the French horns section and drum major in the marching band. His success directly resulted from a teacher taking time and giving him encouragement that helped him see his potential.

Teachers played a central role in helping students believe they could go to college. These educators not only provided emotional support, they also provided essential help in the follow-through required prior to enrolling in college. Jerry’s experience with a school counselor highlights this critical role.

And if Ms. ------- hadn't been there, I probably never would've gotten nothing filled out. I would've probably gotten halfway through it and said forget it; I'm done. If you'll accept the form halfway filled out, I'm not – I don't want it.

To have someone to hold your hand through the admission process can be extremely helpful as the application can be daunting. Additional help in this phase of applying can mean the difference between getting into college or not.

The close supportive relationships teachers maintained with youth provided consistent interactions, built trust, and offered continual advice for the youths. Relationships with educators went beyond the classroom and continued past high school
graduation. This type of personal intervention was a powerful motivator for students and instilled a sense of possibility about attending college and in their abilities. Shea noted the role a teacher held in encouraging her to attend college. She said,

Mr.------, my ninth grade math teacher he was.... Well he still is my biggest encourager. When I was in ninth grade, he saw how bad I was. He was just like “What is the need for this? You're really smart, but you don't focus because you bad.” And I didn’t want to see it. But as I progressed and as I've grown up, he will go back to those days and he'll say “Remember when you used to do that, why?” And I'm like I don't even know now [laughter] and he just started explaining to me you were such an ugly person back then but now you’ve grown and matured and people see that so they like to be around you now.

This teacher not only helped Shea to think differently about her behavior, he challenged her to see herself differently.

Some teachers moved beyond only being an authority figure and also became friends with participants. Donny represents one of these instances and noted:

Probably, my favorite teacher and now one of my best friends was Mr. --------. He was a technology teacher down at my high school. He taught me and really encouraged me to get into Technology Student Association (TSA). He was always trying to find different ways for me to look at different things or tell me the different schools. He was helping me. I would bring in things or papers from the college fair. And he had tried to explain what he could about what they offered.
Developing trusting friendly relationship with teachers allowed the participants to take advice and help concerning college decision-making. These educators provided continuity for participants. They served as the person to whom the youth could always return and someone to whom they are accountable. The youth have not always received consistent affection, caring, and most importantly discipline during their time in foster care. Youth may not have received expectations, support, or boundaries from their biological parents or other adults. With their absence of parental figures, students benefited from having other adults to serve as accountability partners. Participants spoke with pride and genuine care and enthusiasm about these role models in their lives. School and teachers aside, participants also found this type of care and support in other people and places, mainly foster families, social services, and friends, which helped instill and nurture college as a choice for them.

State Care

Educators impacted the participants through caring relationships that aided the students through middle school, high school, and beyond. Outside of the classroom, foster families, siblings, and social services also played important roles in encouraging youth. As a result of being in the social service system, participants became aware of policies designed to help them go to college with the aid of a tuition waiver. Foster families and social service representatives helped participants negotiate the application and financial aid process. Though the child welfare system provided levels of support, youth also found that the support from social services and foster families was not to the level they felt they needed. In the end, the most impactful way youth received help to go
to college was through policy and financial support. With the exception of Donny, who had received an inheritance from his father, the rest of the participants would be considered students from a lower socioeconomic status without the financial resources to afford tuition and other associated college costs. The social service system provided financial access that would not have been available to then, essentially making college a real possibility for these youth. Participants spoke about their experiences in general with social services, as well as the social service policies that helped them gain access to college. The single most important factor in participants’ college decision-making came by way of policies designed to grant them access to college. Jochelle linked the long-term impact of moving often as a child with planning for college:

> I think as a foster care child you get moved from home to home, and stuff like that. Really, you don’t have any funds there that you can save up so you can go to college... you know some parents have their little college plan and stuff... we don't have that you know. It's like you get moved from home to home and there is no point in having one [college savings] if you get moved so many times. The transition is like... I think that was kind of the scariest part for me not having the money to go to college, but I'm working on it. I mean, it doesn't really matter how long I take as long as I finish.

Policy makers have recognized the challenges facing foster care youth and have implemented a number of polices to aid access to college. The Virginia Community College system, the state of Virginia, and the federal government all have policies in place to assist foster youth and low-income students with college. In Virginia, youth in
care after age 14 can receive a tuition waiver to any Virginia community college. By far, participants noted this policy of providing money for college, along with the support of the VCCS Great Expectations program and counselors as the major reason they took the college track. Multiple participants spoke directly to the importance of financial aid in their ability to enter college. Participants do not have savings or credit or parents willing to co-sign on a loan, thus without the tuition waiver, the youth would not be able to consider college.

Shea commented on how the policy governing financial aid supported her decision to apply to college. She said,

And it [the tuition waiver] really had a good impact on me going to school: one it's free and why not take the opportunity just to see what it could be like. It's not going to harm you because it's not your money. If then you don't like it [you can quit], but nine times out of 10 when you get here you'll like it.

Legislation or policy providing grants and tuition waivers opened the door to college for youth from care who otherwise may not have the fiscal resources or the academic records to get a merit scholarship. The Virginia Community College tuition waiver is especially helpful because it also allows students to explore vocational certificates as well as transfer options.

The participants for the most part were able to view their experience in state care from a perspective from which they could acknowledge the reality of their experience but also see the benefits of being a part of the system. They could see how the system provided physical safety, basic living support, and protection from unhealthy situations.
This safety net helped them to consider college, in particular due to the state and federal financial aid policies specifically aimed at youth in care. Donny and Shea both noted a positive perspective on the role of care in relation to where they are now, in particular as to how the foster care system influences the possibility of enrolling in college. Shea recalled that at some point in her experience she hated foster care and didn’t want to be there. However, she has since realized that “foster care has had a very good impact on my life…. when you really sit down and you focus, it can bring you a lot if you take advantage of it.” Further, Donny went on to explain how his experience in care relates to his experience in college. “If I wasn’t in foster care, like I wouldn't be as ready for school.” He felt that had he still been living in some of the placements he had before the foster care system, things would have turned out differently. Donny elaborated,

> Me being in college, now …. I still possibly could be living with my aunt and uncle and I can't even really imagine if I were living with my aunt and uncle or still living with my dad's friend. She was more supportive of me going to online classes which I've seen to be a lot harder.

Donny reflected back over the different places he had lived and saw that there would not have been the support he required to attend college. Donny added:

> My foster parents are a pretty big help. They actually haven't been to college, but they actually help me with a lot of the stuff that they know about and what they don't know about I can learn from the other foster kids they had that went to college.
Donny’s foster parents had some prior knowledge of navigating the college process with the other children they fostered in the past. He found his foster family believed in the value of college and provided a space in which he could share how he was feeling about going to college and the application process. To have parental figures and foster siblings who provided encouragement and information about the college process gave participants more confidence in their decision to attend college.

Debby also found trusting and encouraging relationships within her foster family. Having a family willing to support her in college and provide the assurance of help proved invaluable to her. She commented:

Well, I have my foster mom and my foster dad and any time I need anything I can just go to them and ask them and they will help me out. ... I had their kids, and their kids are always there for me and they will always be there for me as long as they're able to help me. Their family has just kind of accepted me as a part of their family.

Donny and Debby benefited from foster family support and acceptance. When youth find a home where they are accepted, they receive the support from foster siblings as well as parents. This type of belonging and support provides an additional foundation for their college transition.

**Siblings**

Having two sets of siblings in this study provided a slightly different characteristic within the participant pool. Amber and Jochelle are fraternal twins. Jerry and Imad are brothers almost a year apart in age. Both sets of siblings were placed
together in foster care. In interviewing the siblings, often the conversation and responses was about “we,” instead of “I.” Throughout the interviews, there was a sense of “we,” “us,” and “our,” that communicated a particular level of devotedness and inseparableness. Having a sibling provided an additional layer of support for these four participants. Both pairs see themselves as teams. Imad, in talking about his brother, said, “You know we never really let anything bring us down.” Amber commented about her closeness with her sister:

Another thing I need to probably improve on is actually trying to separate myself from my sister because my sister cannot be there forever. We’re going to have to separate eventually but I know we're so close, she is like the only thing I have in the world.

The siblings noted that their special bonds helped them to navigate their time in the child welfare system. Imad reflected about how he and his brother have made it through foster care, stating

Our resiliency has really kept us afloat because no matter what challenges VSS has thrown at us or the foster family has thrown at us or just life in general has thrown at us. We always find a way to turn around and make it into a learning experience and then use it for something better.

Neither Imad nor Jerry received a lot of encouragement from their foster family. Jerry’s encouragement proved instrumental in helping Imad get to college. Imad shared “another influence or someone who had a role in [my going to college] was my older brother Jerry because I was looking for that thing that would inspire me and get me going and help me
do what I need to do.” However, Jerry received support from his music teacher and
was able to transfer some of the encouragement he received to Imad. Jerry encouraged
Imad to take the placement test required for college. Imad recalled this support,

Because my foster parents didn't really care, my brother did and he kept telling
me, “Imad go take [the placement test] now. You have to take it now. It will be
here this day this day and that day. ...Take it.

Imad took the test and the brothers applied to the same college. Sibling encouragement
for the four participants in this study directly influenced their decision to apply to college,
attend college, and stay in college.

**Pre-College Advisement**

Many of the participants received encouragement in high school that was
sponsored by the local community college. In 2008, the Virginia Community College
System (VCCS) began a foundation program called Great Expectations to facilitate the
transition of youth from care to higher education. Program goals include helping young
adults transition in to college, help increase awareness about the value and availability of
a college education, and help to assist students and service providers to navigate the
community college system. On 12 of VCCS’s 23 campuses, the programs in place have
various levels of engagement associated with them. Some of the campus-based
initiatives work with youth in care starting in middle school and moving into high school.
While other programs focus on support upon matriculation with navigation of campus,
classes, and counseling. The programs at Pastoral College and Metropolitan College
focus on working with students before entry and upon admission and matriculation.
Pastoral College has strong relationships with local high schools. The college coach from Pastoral helped youth to understand the potential value of going to college and helped to alleviate fears or myths about college. At Metropolitan, there is not a focus on high school outreach. However, care providers in-group homes along with some case workers know the Metropolitan College coach and will support connections for youth prior to admission. Both the coaches predominantly focus on supporting youth through the admissions process and maintaining relationships to support academic success and retention upon college entry. Through the Great Expectations program, youth receive on campus academic support, help with applying for financial aid, support in the application process, and exposure to career resources.

The availability of this built-in support program heavily influenced the youths’ college decision making. Many of counselors visit high schools and work with social services, congregate care facilities, and other programs connected to foster care to try to reach youth to share with youth about the Virginia Community College system and the opportunity for college. Knowing about Great Expectations beforehand provided a place to go on campus for support and was an incentive for participants to enroll in college. Jerry explained the effect of hearing about the Great Expectations Program before arriving on campus. He commented,

The biggest influence I had was [the coach], like whenever I was talking to him, when he was explaining Great Expectations to me and like I thought about it. There being such a supportive group at college to help me [meant] that I shouldn't
have to have any issues or any problems or any worries. That I can have someone that I could sit down with that is willing to help me figure out everything.

Having someone willing and committed to being there for them made such a difference in the college decision-making process and in their transition to college. Imad also talked about meeting his coach before school. “[The coach] is such a great guy. And I was like, you know, if when I get to college I can go to his office any time, I was like, why not?”

Sometimes a combination of siblings and counselor support during the college transition is effective as in Imad’s case. Knowing that the support is available is indispensable to youth. Youth feel that they can count on the coach, almost like family. They had developed relationship with a campus administration who they can trust and who facilitate and provide a variety of support services from a listening ear to knowledge of course work and requirements.

**Summary**

The theme of support for going to college illustrated how students obtained help from a variety of sources. Participants found supportive relationships in their family relationship, particularly siblings placed together. In addition, secondary teachers served as sources of correction and instillers of confidence in participants about their behavior and their college prospects. Finally, participants found some support from tuition waivers and systems designed to help youth. From their perspective, this support for educators, siblings, and the state proved instrumental in the application, admission, and enrollment process.
Heading off to College

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference
— Robert Frost (1920)

Though the participants faced college with many challenges, they remain hopeful and excited about where their road has taken them. Although, things have not always been positive or easy, the students adjusted along the way and were able to make it to college. Youth are in the midst of transition as they move towards exiting the foster care system and starting college. After youth made the decision to go to college, there were factors that provided aid to help youth as they started and moved through their college experience. The major features in the heading off to college were choosing an academic focus, seeing college as a new beginning, handling challenges, and experiencing a time of growth.

As students started college, not all of the participants pursued a traditional associate’s degree or the transfer track, one of the participants was in a certificate program. A little over half of the participants actively are planning to continue to a traditional baccalaureate program (three from Pastoral and four from Metropolitan). The other five participants placed a priority on employment and or the immediate need for housing over continuation to a four-year college.
Enrolling in college became a milestone for the youth in this study. They felt excited and proud to be accepted into college. Participants experienced a real sense of accomplishment when college became a reality. Debby noted that she “felt really excited and happy that I was doing something good with my life.” Pam faced significant difficulty in completing the application and financial aid process due to her missing birth certificate. Despite the bureaucracy, she said “…once I got my school ID, once I got my first class, I was in and I was like Yes! I’m in college.”

Amber experienced similar feelings of pride about going to college, noting that when she was visiting the community college right after high school. She commented, “Sitting there looking at the other students, I actually felt some excitement. It really made me feel good. Then when I finally did come here I was excited myself.” Jochelle also reflected on her excitement about going to college, stating, “I was very, very excited when I first got into college. I was really excited to meet new people and see new faces and just experience school in a different way.”

High School did not serve as a happy time for Jewel, she struggled academically and socially; however, she has since found an adult advisor and a surrogate mother in her group home supervisor. Along with encouragement from “home”, Jewel is also maturing as a student and as a person. Jewel talked about the higher expectations in college as compared to high school, saying

You need to get that straight when you get up here for real. There’s no more of the teachers holding your hand. They will be there to support you, but they’re not
going to do what the teachers did in high school. Once you get to here, it's time to put that all away. It's a new chapter.

Starting college gave participants a sense of accomplishment and a feeling of starting something new. Further, it gave them a sense of pride in themselves because many of the young people did not see college as a viable possibility.

**Set Backs and Challenges.** Initial excitement, however, quickly turned to trepidation and frustration for many of the participants. Michael related, “They say high school is supposed to prepare you for college; my high school did not prepare me for college at all”. Michael was not the only person to express an overwhelming sense of not being prepared for the college experience. Participants cited self-doubt and poor academic habits as major reasons they did not feel ready for college-level academics. Jewel shared a general sense of apprehension and self-doubt. She said,

> I was scared as I don't know what - because I know how I am and I’ve always been in school. Anyway so I was thinking I am not going to do any good in college. I was thinking this was not going to happen, it's not going to work out but it has.

Participants had not experienced much academic success in high school and felt underprepared for the academics of college. Yet, they persisted.

The fact that students are independent in college as compared to high school led some participants to comment on the lack of structure in college relative to high school. Jerry worried more about the increase in freedom. He found it daunting not to know anyone. Jerry commented,
I was scared, I'm kind of used to the regimented schedule of high school seeing all kinds of people that I know, knowing all the teachers. Even if I don't have them. And I was like, I'm going off to a place that has all kinds of just adults running around it, students and teachers. I was like, I'm not sure [I'm] going to like this. I think I'd rather go back to high school and stay there for another year.

Though he experienced some feeling of wanting to go back to what he knew, Jerry has been able to persist in college so far. Amber and Pam also expressed being a bit unsure of themselves. Pam’s feeling came from the new situation of increased autonomy and expectations. She shared,

I did not feel prepared at all... At first when I graduated high school, I was like I'm going to college. I'm going to do this. I'm going to be out in just a second. And then I got there and said I don't know how prepared I am for doing this. And I was just not prepared. Not academically, just the whole transition of being on your own and stuff I think that that was the hardest part.

Transitioning to college meant another type of move for the students. Most of the youth in this study moved from one place to another, but the foster homes and the system had a framework of rules and expectations that gave students little choice. Starting college actually gave them autonomy and the ability to make their own self-directed choices for which they assumed full personal responsibility.

Part of the struggle for emancipating youth is having limited knowledge and experience about what to expect in college. All of the participants in this study are first
generation college students. Like other first generation college students, they lacked the cultural capital to help prepare them for the college experience. Amber shared, 

I was kind of prepared, but I wasn't... I don't think I was fully prepared for the experience [of] being [in college] that I was kind of... I didn't really know much about the whole college experience at the time.

These feelings of uncertainty about their personal capacity to cope with college plagued the participants. After the initial exhilaration of getting into college, participants found themselves trying to figure everything out. Participants realized they would have to take the initiative to develop themselves in personal responsibility, scholarship, and good decision-making. As a part of their transition, students also had to work to tackle academic expectations and requirements.

Participant's arrived at college without habits conducive to college academic success. As they started college, participants specifically struggled with their academic work and found they lacked skills to perform academically. Among shortcomings, participants struggled with procrastination and general study habits. Donny spoke about being "a big procrastinator in high school". He mentioned, "I still kind of do procrastinate a lot. It kind of caught up with me a lot my first semester." He elaborated, 

And most of my transitioning happened when I was still used to my high school ways of putting things off 'til like the last-minute then somehow miraculously getting them done and getting everything right on them. With college, the assignments were a lot longer and more difficult, which made procrastinating like that a lot harder. A lot of times I didn't get most of my work done.
The lack of time management skills and preparing ahead to complete multiple course assignments occurred concurrently with the move to a college environment that held less structure than high school. Debby also spoke about having to adjust her academic habits.

Well, when I started I thought was really prepared and then after I got into it, I seen there were some things I had to change...like reading books.... Besides not wanting to read my books, I do everything I have to do, I've only made like two Cs since I've been in college and have a GPA of 3.25. And I work really hard and I'm studying really hard so I can make it.

Pam also discussed how she had to work to manage the greater academic expectations for college academics. Her difficulties stemmed from the increased flexibility and responsibility students have in college to manage deadlines and assignments. She couched it in terms of freedom stating,

I was overwhelmed by how much freedom I had. I think freedom was the [most overwhelming part] .... The teachers would say you have something due ....the day before, when you've got to panic and cram it together.

Pam found it challenging to keep up with the syllabus requirements without the constant reminders by faculty members that were typical in high school classes. Without the skills of time management and planning, she dreaded being reminded in class by the professor the day before an assignment was due. Planning ahead and remembering deadlines involved different skills then those the participants were accustomed to from high school.

On the one hand, the new found freedom was a signal of moving to adulthood. On the other hand, the participants did not have scaffolding to build these skills in their
youth. Shea reflected on the trials of managing this increased flexibility and responsibility. She noted,

[The transition to college] was kind of okay…. I was kind of shocked because we have so much freedom. They don't say stop texting on your phone or pay attention. They'll say “I'm lecturing.” If you don't get it, you don't have it.

The first reaction to the freedom of college was shock and apprehension. As the academic year continued, students acquired more skills in handling the different academic demands due to practice and to the support offered by peers, faculty, and the Great Expectations counselor.

As students conquered their initial apprehensions, and worked to learn to manage their academics and new circumstances, they spoke about skills, attitudes, and beliefs that helped them to be successful. Learning good study skills and prioritizing academic assignments helped participants. Additionally, recognizing their inherent skills and ability to handle college occurred. Michael shared,

At first, I was a little full of myself. But now after first semester, I stopped and said if I really want to do this I gotta really strap down and get myself together.

After that, I basically motivated myself.

Michael moved from not considering himself college material to working independently to be successful. Students discovered new things about themselves that will continue to help them in college and beyond. Participants faced uncertainty and self-doubt. Nevertheless, they worked to overcome those feelings of inadequacy and develop strategies to help them through their first semester.
Participants confront daily trails that can make it difficult to persist. Challenges that made their transition particularly difficult include increased responsibility, meeting financial needs, addressing issues of transportation, and having minimal off-campus support. Jewel found that she felt a number of areas lacking as she started college. Jewel noted a long list of needs, stating she required “money, the books, college smartness, support, [more] self-esteem.” She, along, with many of the other youth, felt an increase in independence and corresponding responsibility. Prior to starting college, youth had a foster parent, or group home that maintained some responsibility to assure the youth attended school. With the exception of Michael, youth could take the school bus or walk to high school. College, viewed as optional by foster families and the state, really introduced a new level of responsibility that required students to address issues with the college going process, but also with their basic needs of housing, board, and transportation.

Transportation was a major challenge for participants who no longer had an easy means to get to college. In high school, students had transportation supplied by the school district with busing or lived within walking distance the school. The college transition meant no guaranteed transportation. Most of the students in this study were dependent upon public transportation. Only one of the participants, Alice, alone mentioned owning a vehicle. Jewel, Michael, and William all noted how they take the public bus to college. When asked specifically about challenges she faces in her transition to college, Jewel talked about bus transportation. She stated,
Well, the transportation. I actually take the city bus.... And just more about transportation in general. I was coming out of class and I was leaving early because my ride couldn't pick me up until then. And that messes with your attendance. So even if you leave early, it affects your attendance. I had to learn how to take the bus and go from here to home and that interrupted everything but school is more important.

Reliance on mass transportation systems provided some predictability relative to arranging to car pool. Yet, Michael spoke about the challenges in taking the city bus. Sometimes, it's transportation cause I don't feel like I have the energy to get up in the morning and walk seven blocks to the bus stop. It gets tiresome because I got to sit on the bus, ride the bus, walk here. But I have to. It's something I just deal with. I've been smoothing it out some more because I don't have a car, that's why I have to ride the bus. But if I had my license I could drive. My foster mother wouldn't have a problem with me using the car to get to class and coming right back home. If I had it like that, that would be a whole lot of stress off of me because I wouldn't have to get up to three hours before class even starts, getting dressed, and walking, getting here early and then waiting for an hour for classes to start and then getting the class and being tired. Instead of just waking up getting dressed, drive to class and going on about my business.

Half of the participants had not obtained a driver's license at the time of the interview.

Not having the ability to drive or direct their own transportation takes valuable time when
they could be working or taking care of personal needs. Taking the bus, although
time consuming, was often better than walking.

Two of the participants routinely get to school by walking. Jerry shared about the
walk he and Imad (brothers) make to get to school.

The place that we have been staying at, it's like it's in town. There's like only
three exits for our town exit 14, 17, 19 and like we live a little bit off of 19 and the
college’s on exit 14. It's a nice little historical town, like it's at least a fun walk.

But most of the time it gets cold.

The interview with Jerry was completed in December of a particularly cold winter, thus
underscoring just the difficulty of his daily walk. Jerry went on to relate why the walking
to and from school is a hardship.

With rides and stuff we got rides but we got to school we got here seven o'clock
in the morning, even though we didn't have a class until like noon. We'd sit up
here and wait all day for classes, and then if we were going to get picked up, we
had to wait sometimes until like six or seven. I just got to the point where I was
like, me I'm not worried to walk to school anymore, even if there's a blizzard
outside, I will walk through it.

Jerry’s response demonstrates both a determination and his self-dependence. Jerry along
with the other participants lacking stable transportation did not have parental aid or
reliable transportation daily to school that did not conflict with attendance at school and
work.
Despite the challenges facing them with transportation and their dependence on public transportation, car-pooling, or walking to get to school, the participants did find ways to make it to school each day. In addition to worrying about their academics, the students had to get over the first hurdle facing them in going to college and that was literally getting to the college campus. The students noted how they make getting to classes a priority; they are determined to get to school. Once they made it to school, they found a support system ready to help them succeed. The next section will explore further how participants developed skills to assist them in exploring their potential as college students.

**Personal Growth and Development.** College served as a new beginning, a way for youth to move beyond their past, including their life circumstances, bad academic habits, and feelings of limited self-worth. Participants noted how they experienced increased levels of self-esteem when they went to college. Their transition allowed them to discover more about themselves and their capacity to accomplish academically. When she started college, Debby learned “that I'm not stupid like most people said I was, but I can do it if I try to.” Determining her own self-worth reputed the ways others had categorized her abilities. Michael also found he could move beyond others’ negative perceptions of his capabilities. He reflected,

I was always the type of person that was looked at as “He'll never get anywhere; he's just another statistic.” But, I'm like no. I'm trying to prove them wrong and I know I’m a very smart person. But, sometimes it's hard work and I would say and I would say sometimes I'm lazy too because sometimes the work is too hard
for me and I don't feel like doing it. But like I said, if it's something that I
want to do, I will get it done. Basically, I have a strong will. If I don't feel like
doing something I won't, but if I want to do something I'm going to do it. And so
I just try to make that a positive.

For Michael, his development occurred due to intrinsic motivation and heightened self-
awareness. He began to recognize his ability to succeed, but was also conscious of how
he still retained some bad habits that could derail his progress.

Growth academically meant that students were being rewarded by getting better
grades. Shea spoke about discovering how she could improve her ability as a student.

I've learned that I'm very intelligent.... That I don't – that I haven't always
applied myself in the past. That's why I haven't been getting the grades I'm
getting now. My expectations for myself before were very low, but now they are
extremely high because if I get a B, I'm like what? What is this? So, I've learned
I'm capable of a lot and I just want to be able to live up to that now I don't want to
waste a lot of time but I want to be able to do that now.

For Shea, recognizing her potential opened the door to self-confidence and higher
expectations. It also pushes her to want to make the best of this college opportunity.

Jewel also developed a heightened sense of self-esteem. Jewel commented on a
change in her perception about herself:

I am proud of myself. I might not say it to a lot of people. I'm just not used to
being so happy. For this whole year just doing good – I'm not used to it. I guess I
was always afraid to be happy, so when it was time to be happy I ended up doing
something stupid. But yeah, I'm happy... You know people were like "You're going to college?" And I just said "Yeah I'm going to college." But, I am happy inside. You just can't see.

Jewel sees her transition to college as a turning point in her life. A way to move beyond the past and her unhappiness, being able to do well in college, which is something she never thought she'd be able to do, meant that college was a way to prove the old labels wrong. She relates her new found happiness to her accomplishments in college.

With college work and more freedom, students found themselves thinking differently about themselves as a result of their experience in college. Participants started to believe they could be successful at college and the result was an increased self-confidence. They could begin to use preparation, initiative, follow through, and the new skills they were developing to face the many challenges facing them, both in school and in life. Yet, challenges remain.

**College Support**

An essential component in the participant’s college transition came through the academic and social support offered in the Great Expectations Program, which is designed to cater to the students’ individual needs. The Great Expectations Program (GEP) at each of the colleges in this study employs a coach on site to assist students with social, emotional, and academic issues. The counselor’s primary responsibility is to develop relationships with former foster youth and to serve as their primary contact for anything students may need on campus. There is one counselor on campus at both Metropolitan and Pastoral campus. Counselors go above and beyond to help youth by
providing tutoring, grade monitoring, one-on-one conversations, recognition, and even provide bus tickets. They are the “go to” person for foster youth for any kind of personal concern. The counselors consider themselves coaches. The GEP coach at Pastoral College supervised close to 20 youth, while the counselor at Metropolitan College coached over 60 students. Although the coaches help with recruitment, admissions, financial aid, and academic advising their roles can be distilled to two main categories, namely individual support and academic support.

From the perspective of the participants, the coaches most important role is providing individual support. Coaches provide students’ support during the recruitment and admissions process, as well as throughout the school year once admitted. For Amber, the support of the coach began before enrollment. Amber found her coach’s willingness to help get her enrolled in college to be an essential positive factor in going to college.

[The coach] helped with those different parts of the application process. … I felt more secure here once I was in the program…. I think Great Expectations should be a national thing. I think I'd be really lost in college if it wasn't for that program, so I am really thankful that I'm here and that I’m in this program.

As participants started the college decision-making process, from applying to enrolling, they found the college process to be a bit overwhelming. Youth noted how the coaches engendered feelings of belonging and how they helped with problems or concerns. Counselors helped students adjust to college by teaching them time management skills, explaining how to register for class, and providing them with resources for academic
support. Most importantly, the counselors imparted to the students their belief that they could be successful. They helped students navigate campus offices and processes to address the feelings of being lost and not knowing about college.

The multi-campus location of Metropolitan College makes it difficult to locate, administrative offices, classrooms, and faculty offices. Here, the counselor acts as a navigator for students and lends help in providing links to other campus offices (i.e., financial aid, academic support, tutoring, and registrar) and professors. The counselor facilitates relationships between the students and with other administrators, personally walking students over to other office, and helps students to understand their responsibility (including paperwork, prompt submission, and making appointments during hours students were on campus). All of the participants discussed the importance of the GEP and their gratitude for being a part of it. Jochelle animatedly shared her thoughts on the Great Expectations Program. “Oh my God, Great Expectations is a lifesaver.... I was excited about college, but I was really lost.... And now I have Ms. [name] helping me, so I am more confident in going to college.” Having a dedicated counselor to address areas of concern provided a stable source of information and created a conduit for the students into the complex operations of the college that addressed the students’ lack of knowledge about how college works.

Participants expressed feelings of being unprepared, not knowing what to expect, and being disoriented. Alice noted, “When I first started off, I was really lost. My mom was helping me but... I needed an advisor.” All of the participants located this type of advisement, encouragement, and support on campus with their Great Expectations
counselor. The counselor served in this role along with directing youth to other administrators on campus who could help with specific individual student concerns.

Whereas participants may have felt lost, timid, or afraid of the college processes, the coaches provided a place they could feel at home or call home on campus. Jewel noted a feeling of safe harbor when commenting,

Well, it helped me a lot especially when it comes to waiting in those long lines on the first floor for financial aid. For advice and stuff like that I can always go to [the coach] when I need something or have a question about something. Going to conference every year, meeting others in foster care so I know now I’m not the only one that's going through this experience.

The coaches helped the students manage the higher education bureaucracy and red tape and helped students to develop community among others in the program. Most importantly, the counselors helped the students feel like they belonged in college. The program office on campus for Great Expectations provided a place to meet and a place where not only the coach but fellow students on campus understand their experiences.

Like other commuter students, the participants’ connection to college campus was limited to class. Participation and involvement with campus clubs and sports was limited. Only two participants, Donny and William, had actively sought to participate in a college club or organization. Due to their financial circumstances and need to work, students only came to campus for class. The GEP counselors informed students about opportunities to interact with other students in the program, but as Shea shared, “[GEP coach] asked me if I want to go to some of things that she had [like retreats or fun outings.
with other students]…. I would go, but I usually would be working and don’t have enough time to go….” The chance to interact with other foster care students created opportunities for connection, but students could not always take advantage of these events.

Coaches serve in a quasi-parental role for the students by monitoring attendance, grades and overall GPA, and taking stock of their personal well-being. Providing a community and a sense of belonging gives youth a “home” or “home-base” on campus. The physical location of a space on campus provided support for the participants that was different than support available for other first-generation or low-income students. The GEP program lent support to students to help overcome the obstacles and challenges facing them in their transition to college.

The academic support provided by the counselors through access to various program offices on campus proved invaluable to students, particularly due to their limited preparation as they started college. Great Expectations counselors guided students to tutoring and academic support services on campus. They helped students find the tutoring services they needed, and sometimes even helped to tutor students themselves. Counselors provide personal attention to the students. According to Shea,

[The coach] is great actually. She always makes sure that my grades are good…. And she told me about the tutoring just in case I need it. She informs us about things that are happening [campus programming and deadlines] and about things that can help me [academic support] here so I’m not walking around the dark.
The counselors also worked with students to follow up about academic triumphs or trials. By interacting with youth to ask about assignments and test, to monitor grades, and to help youth incorporate good study stills and time management, the coaches were deeply invested in participant’s academic progress and continuance. Jerry articulated more about his experiences in the program. He said,

I needed help to figure things out that and it was really, really comforting to know that I had something like that [GEP] to keep me on track I guess is the way to say it. And that's basically all it's done is help me stay on track and well it help me get back on track after I got off track because I thought I was on track but I wasn't.

Jerry struggled at times during his first year. He was working the overnight shift and was having difficulty academically, with time management, and even class selection. However, his coach helped him to avoid being discouraged or apathetic and helped to make some changes to support his transition to college. Jerry obtained tutoring and he left the job where he had no control over the schedule. These adjustments to his scheduled allowed him to perform better in his college classes and alleviated stress. Imad addressed the important role the GEP counselors had in supporting the transition to college, he commented how his counselor “helped me set up my classes, schedules, and stuff.” Amber confirmed the important role of the counselor stating, “She makes us understand what our GPA is and what we need to do to bring it up.” Coupled with other supportive factors and strategies, the Great Expectations Program helps participants succeed. One the counselor’s essential roles is helping students to adjust to their college
experience and to understand the expectations of college through explanation, advising, and cajoling, more importantly taking the time which each individual youth to develop a relationship as a coach, a confidant, and an accountability partner. The coaches worked with youth closely and although they know some of their past, and present battles the support you in focusing on the present and what they can change. The coaches served as a touch point where youth vent and manage their frustrations and disappointments but also where they received correction to destructive behaviors, college guidance, good advice on how to transition to college, and a celebration of their accomplishments.

At Metropolitan College, at the conclusion of each semester the coach organizes a celebratory banquet where a former student of the GEP program comes to share their story and how college helped them. University administrators attend and the foster youth can invite guardians, friends, or foster families/parents to attend. Each current student received a certificate and had a chance to share their experiences. The Great Expectation Program was instrumental in helping youth in their transition to college. The program serves as a stable place students could expect any kind of assistance they needed. The counselors developed relationships with participants and served as administrators and advisors who take the time to interface with other college offices on their behalf.

**Becoming Adults**

Despite how they started college, most of the participant had developed a commitment to finishing. However, in addition to adjusting to college and maintain good academic progress, participants faced other significant responsibilities competing with
college. The participants must deal with adult responsibilities and decision-making, which include emancipation and securing stable and safe housing, and employment. Unlike their college peers, the participants were required to address adult responsibilities early in life.

**Emancipation.** Based on their age, all of the participants face impending emancipation from state custody. If the participants had not been in college, they would have been emancipated or aged-out of the foster care system at age 18. Emancipation for youth in the foster care system means they will be released from the state’s custody. Provided that they remain in college, students can remain in the foster care system until age 21. For most youth, emancipation means complete independence, and a loss of important resources, including health care coverage. For youth still living with foster families, all payments from the state to aid in their support will cease when they turn 21. At 21, youth become fully responsible for their education, finances, employment, housing, physical and mental health, transportation, and life skills. Successful emancipation and transition to independent living takes preparation, but is fraught with unknowns. Where will youth live? What can they afford? How will they make enough income to be independent? Housing and financial security head the list of concerns for youth leaving state care. Jewel describes emancipation by saying “I guess because I'm too old, they don't really talk about it [school] too much when you turn 21, well because at 20 they start aging you out. They don't pay you any mind.” The most pressing issue for the participants was not whether they can transfer to a four-year college, but how they will survive and live on their own when the financial support of social services ends.
Despite having academic potential and the grades necessary to transfer into a bachelor's degree program, both Shea and Debby are 20, and quickly approaching the cut-off age of 21, the age at which they lose eligibility for foster care support and for their tuition benefits. Shea addressed not continuing her education at the time of emancipation, as she needed focus on housing. She stated,

Right now, my focus is just to get a good enough job right now to make sure that I can take over the lease on my apartment…. Well I went to the rental office to see how much my bills would be and everything like that. Just calculating ahead of time so that when I get a job, I'll know what I'll need to be making. …After that I'll focus more on school….

The issue of meeting personal needs of housing and food are paramount for the participants upon emancipation. Even now, Jerry, at 19, contemplates going to part-time status due to money concerns. He added,

I am actually thinking about becoming a part-time student. It may take me longer, maybe a total of like three years to graduate from here, but I'm trying to get me some money put back so I have some money put away for in case of emergencies and stuff that. I like have no money in a bank account or anything. Anyways when I can get [a bank account] up and running and stuff but after that I'm hoping to get like to Radford or James Madison or something because those are two music programs I know of that least. Well I know JMU has a really good music program.
Thinking ahead for the participants means having a back-up plan for their living arrangements and some financial security; however, these plans come at the expense of school. When asked about continuing on to a four-year degree, Debby responded by saying, “No, I have to have a job by the time I get out of foster care, because I won’t have any money. I won’t be able to support myself.” As noted, aging out at 21 creates new issues for participants. Central to students is having fiscal resources to support themselves.

Participants face significant financial challenges, but currently and at the time of emancipation. Alice talked about every day expenses that weigh heavily on her, “And like, I pay for my own car, I pay for my own gas. And I have to balance all that for school, and I have to pay for school too, so, I have to worry about making enough money to cover everything.” She was not alone in feeling stressed about money. William added, “Sometimes I feel like [his foster family] forget I’m in college especially when asking for that $200 a month. I’m like, I had to cut my hours back so I’m not making as much as I was making.” Though his foster family is receiving support from the state, William provides the money to his foster mother because he feels obligated to help with the household necessities since he lives there. Alice works at a grocery chain and William works at two fast food places to try to meet every day needs. Jerry had experiences similar to William and Alice. He too tries to make a contribution toward his living expenses. Jerry commented,

There’s an apartment complex and there are a few apartments in the district. We came up short with the rent to try to get one of those, so we’ve been currently
staying with our brother and his roommate, which you know is close to where I have my job and stuff. I've sent him a little bit of money every month for gas for food and bills.

Despite some support from being in the foster care system, students still faced financial demands and the need to work.

The need for money goes hand in hand with the need for housing. Housing represents a critical need for participants. Finding and maintaining a residence is stressful for some of the participants. The participants live in varying types of housing and under a range of circumstances. Participants live in independent living facilities, foster homes, group homes, or with relatives. By far the majority of the participants live with an adoptive (Amber and Jochelle) or foster family (Donny, Debby, Alice, William, and Michael). The other five participants lived in a varied of types of housing. Pam lives with her boyfriend, while Jerry and Imad split time between friends' homes and their older brother's apartment. Jewel currently lives in a state run group home for foster youth and Shea lives in a state run independent living facility. The worry of housing affects participants in college because of the cost of paying for rent and utilities, but more importantly, housing often represents having a permanent and stable place to go. Imad talked hopefully about finding a place for himself and his brother to live that will be their own. Imad stated,

I think we'll be able to find a nice little place because there's a lot of little efficiencies in town and I got to go in one before because when my friend lived in one and it was the coolest thing ever. It's like the sink is right beside the fridge is
right beside the toilet is right beside like the shower is right beside your bed.

It’s like having a little dorm room.

Having a place to call home provides youth with a sense of stability, thus, housing remains a top priority for them. Worries about finding and paying for a home compete with participants’ ability to focus on college work.

Employment. Due to the need for money, another factor competing with college is work. Employment is a constant necessity for participants. Working is an extensive part of their experience as young adults and college students. Eight out of twelve worked at least 20-35 hours or more per week. For the other four, one works seasonally, two work in unpaid jobs on a farm and as an in-home attendant, and one is seeking employment. Pam talked about her job,

Yes, I am working at Arby’s. I’ve been working there for four and a half long, painful years [laughter]. Usually I will work 35 to 40, but since the economy has been crappy I will work 35 – 40 one week and then it's been 20, 25 another week.

They know I don't have kids so I'm the first one to get off of the schedule.

The number of hours worked was a tension. On the one hand, the students needed the money for housing and other expenses. On the other hand, the long hours took away from their school work and personal lives. As Alice related, “and I have to work for everything, so you have to balance it against that. And I have to pay for housing, so I have to work to pay for that. And it's just it's a struggle every day.” Like other college students, the participants worked while attending classes. What differs for the students in this study is that they have no safety net of family to rely upon financially.
Youth also fear repercussions of not working. For social services in some counties in the Commonwealth, employment is required in order to forgo emancipation and stay in care after age 18. So, Jerry, affected by this county regulation, tried to manage a difficult work schedule and early morning classes. He commented, “And I put up with [working the graveyard shift] for the longest time, I didn't want to lose the job and get kicked out of foster care.” Work was a necessity for multiple reasons, but did take a toll on the students.

For many of the participants, their days are filled with school, work, and little else. William and Imad spoke about their school and work schedules. Imad said,

If I'm not at college, I'm usually at work. Like, I'm not home until almost about 10 o'clock every night. I hate it. Oh my gosh, I hate it. But, well I've been scheduled for a lot more hours and stuff. But they need more people in the store. I was working 20 or 25 hours a week before, now I'm working 34 to 38 a week. And I have classes all day on Tuesdays and Thursday, and I have class on Monday and Wednesday.

Long days were common for the participants. Though most of our participants worked in service and fast food, they were still good-natured about their jobs. Imad saw the positive aspects such as having additional responsibility and learning to manage time effectively. He added,

But you know I'm figuring out a way to do this. So try to do my homework ahead one night like Monday night most of homework for Wednesday so didn't have any left over. I can do the rest on Tuesday night to have it done for Wednesday. In a
way, it [having a job] helped me a little bit with responsibility. Because I
don't know, I feel like if I don't get my job done, the same way with work I get
fired and if I don't get my job done in college you know I fail and get kicked out.

Though there are positive outcomes for working, it does conflict with college. Jochelle
shared that "Sometimes work conflicts with my college schedule. . . . I don't have time to
do homework because I'm constantly working but other than that everything else is
okay." Though working remains a necessity, participants see it as a major hindrance to
school. William synthesizes the wish of most of the participant when it comes to college
and work when commenting:

Balancing work and school, sometimes I feel like I wish I could just go to school
and not have to work and the balance of just time, time. Time goes by so fast.
Had to use my time wisely because before I know it, it's time to go to work and I
can't do school work on my job. . . . And then missing the bus – if I miss the bus –
that sets me back 30 minutes. So basically just timing everything and maybe I
need to come up with a budget because sometimes I might spend a bit too much.
I guess basic principles that you learn when you become an adult, things you have
to master.

In addition to working and employment, participants must meet the requirements of
social services and meet the family expectations and rules where they live. The family
expectations can range from simple chores and household responsibilities to required
attendance at meetings in-group homes. These expectations serve as another factor
competing with college for participants.
**Expectations.** Typical chores and personal relationships all seem important to participants, but took a back seat to work, school, and other more concrete responsibilities. Shea and Debby were approaching imminent emancipation. Both expressed an uncertainty of what lies ahead, however, they had started thinking ahead and planning for the future. Shea currently lives in independent living. The independent living program gives Shea a one-bedroom apartment in a building where she lives with other emancipating women. The residents have to check in with a coordinator and have curfew and other rules to follow. She spoke about trying to balance the many expectations and requirements she currently faces.

When I tried to explain to them [independent living administrators] you know I have homework, I have classes, I have to work; cleaning up all the time is not my top priority. My priority is to do my class work, to go to work, to sleep and I don't think that [social services/independent living coordinators] truly understand that. Of course you may have already been there, done that, but just imagine how you were feeling when you were doing it. Just understand that I have more than one class where you're asking me to do the things that you need all day, I have things to do.

Though independent living is providing her a place to live and a chance to experience a graduated emancipation, the staff is not providing a sense of understanding or encourage of her academic pursuits. Shea is the sole participant in the study in a physical living facility run by and part of social services working with youth. Most of the participants still live with a foster family or with other family or partners.
Amber and William expressed that their foster families held expectations for them that competed with their academic work. Amber spoke about trying to balance the expectations from home, school, and work.

I wanted... my mom and I wanted my job to understand what I was doing as well. I know my mom... because I always took my education very seriously, and sometimes we kind of bumped heads about it because there some things she thinks are more important than just going to school that I don't agree with. Like yeah, housework is the main thing we have to do regardless of if we're in school or taking a full load or not. Sometimes, I get home late. I'm trying to do work so by the time I get home I'm pretty much tired, dead to the world, so I just want to go to sleep and sometimes she doesn't think that's a good idea.

In this case, though Amber does not like having to do chores, her mother is helping her to develop adult skills. In addition to family, youth also faced demands from friends in providing advice or diversions from their goals. William commented about having to prioritize activities and his desire to make good choices. He stated,

Peer pressure, you know because some time people will be like “You want to go out and club?” And I'll have to say no, I have work to do and stuff like that. They said, “You should move out to your own apartment.” And I say it's no point, I'm about to transfer and this time I saved my money and they also say, “Your mom is taking all your money!” But I'm just trying to help her out with the house because I know things is getting hard now.... So just like sometimes-selfish thoughts
trying not to let other people persuade me the wrong way. Sometimes I just have to stop and think.

William was making choices that would impact his future, both in school and in life. His focus on longer-term goals displays how he approached life choices from an adult perspective versus focusing on the short term fun that may be more typical of college students.

Participants noted having to sacrifice friends and social time for school and work. Amber reflected this choice when stating,

It becomes a challenge sometimes. But I tend to try to make it work so I try to sacrifice other things like I don't hang out with my friends as much as I should. And they say "You never have time for me anymore." I was like, well I'm sorry I have to do school first and then when it comes down to a work, I know my job now, I do pretty much everything there. It becomes pretty difficult at times.

Participants have to practice willpower, prioritization, and time management in order to handle their responsibilities that compete with college. Participants manage many day-to-day responsibilities and expectations that compete with their time to focus on college academics. For the most part, they have found ways to balance all of their responsibilities.

**Looking Forward**

Most of the participants did not plan too far into the future. Yet, they were hopeful and positive about their current progress and where they want to go. Having thought a bit about his future, Donny commented about the notion of transfer. He stated,
Not yet, I mean like I've looked into ITT tech a little bit. I mean I thought about it but not really looked into much about. The Art Institute, Viewpoint University... and a few other places where I'm not really sure and can't really remember them right now. I looked at a lot of different places based on what I wanted to do. And some of them didn't seem like they would help. [And] some of them seem tremendous. Like, the Art Institute seems great almost like everything I am into. I've only heard hearsay about [Viewpoint] University, but I heard they have a Master's in game design, which would be pretty cool. But I haven't actually looked on the Internet or about it or anything. ITT Tech I always see commercials about them.

Donny recognized that he wanted more specific education beyond the community college, but he has not set a plan of action to help achieve these goals. Those nearing emancipation felt more pressure to think about the immediate future. Debby who is 21, and facing imminent emancipation, reflected about her career aspirations.

My career goal right now is that I want to be a social worker. Because I want to help kids so that they don't do the same thing that I've gone through. Some social workers, they don't.... I mean, some are there for you, but then not really there for you when you need them and they don't... it seems like they're just in it for the money. It's as if they understand you but they really don't because they haven't been through it.
Debby’s experiences in care influenced her thinking about a future career. Other participants have career plans to work in teaching, dentistry, engineering, veterinary science, and public relations.

The participants realized that the Great Expectations Program provided them with different options for their future and allowed them to attend college. Their current employment served as a way to develop responsibility and to learn to be financially self-reliant, often beyond what might be expected for the typical college student. Though a necessity, working competed with academic responsibilities. The participants noted both supports and challenges along their transition pathway to college. The time demands of work, school, and responsibility for living arrangements often meant that students had more adult responsibilities thrust upon them at an earlier age. The participants exhibited resiliency in facing challenges, both personal and academic, but also recognized that they were not alone on their journey despite not having “real” family support.

Conclusion

Twelve participants, 12 experiences, 12 different stories. Even though each story is unique, several common themes emerged. They share in common their experience in the foster care system, their motivation to go to college, and meeting the challenges in their transition to college from the foster care system. Youth have come a long way from their early foster care placements and public school days. Participants found encouragement through siblings, educators, and foster families who helped them see their potential as a college student. As youth transition into college, they face many of the typical accomplishments and challenges often found with new college students. Yet,
their foster care experiences resulted in a different starting point. The youth had unstable family experiences, faced abuse and neglect, and often did not have an adult to nurture and care for them. Along the way, however, they discovered support from teachers, through the Great Expectations Program, from siblings, and within themselves. They found in themselves a new confidence and self-concept and an ability to develop strategies to cope and handle academic, work, and life.
CHAPTER VI

Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the complex life issues and circumstances facing youth who are emancipating from foster care and transitioning to enrollment in Virginia Community Colleges. A total of 12 former and emancipating foster youth were interviewed about their transition to college and the influence of their current or impending exit of the foster care system on their transition.

Participants were traditionally-aged college students (19-21), who were recruited from two community colleges, one urban and one rural. The students’ stories illuminate their difficult pasts and personal histories in foster care, as well as their present experiences in college. All of the participants shared lively and descriptive accounts of their past and the happenings in their lives at the time of their decision to enroll in college. They also described events and significant people in their lives who contributed to their college decision and their development as individuals.

This study investigated the following questions: How do students who are emancipating from foster care describe their transition to enrollment at one of the Virginia Community Colleges?

1. What challenges do students who are emancipating from foster care face in the transition to college?

2. What types of support do these students require to successfully transition to college?
This study adds to the literature related to the pathways of vulnerable populations and how members of one such population make college decisions and then transition into college. Interviews with participants highlight the perspectives and life experiences of former foster care youth. Of the 12 students interviewed, six were black, one was bi-racial, and the remaining participants were white. Eleven were employed or working without pay, with work hours ranging from 15 to 40 hours per week. Though this research is limited to 12 participants and the state of Virginia, the participants in this study provided valuable knowledge and information that may inform leaders in Virginia high schools and colleges about how former foster youth transition to community college.

The portrait created from the perspectives of the participants includes many commonalities across their experiences, shared observations that suggest ways to better support foster care youth seeking college attendance. Key findings include the importance of a support office on campus, the influence of P-12 teachers’ encouragement, and the value of talking with youth from foster care early regarding college attendance. The findings align with the conceptual framework components of situation, self, support, and strategies. Participants identified three distinct factors regarding their college transition experiences: the influence of their experience in the foster care system on their motivation and decision-making to attend college, their transition to college, and their ability to navigate college. The findings serve as a starting point for evaluating the effectiveness of state policy, financial aid, and college decision making by taking into account the perceptions of former foster care youth.
This chapter begins with a discussion of the major categories and themes generated by the data. The participants’ experience from entering into foster care through college choice and enrollments will then be traced. The lens of the conceptual framework and previous literature on students at-risk will be used to further discuss and situate the findings. Implications of the study for current policy and practice, and recommendations for future research are also included. The chapter concludes with a summary of the central lessons learned in this study.

**Foster Care Experiences**

Previous literature on experiences of youth in foster care includes reasons for entering care (Cheng, 2010), experiences while in foster care (Avery, 2010; Dunn et al., 2010; Mech, 1994; Samuels & Pryce, 2008; Strolin-Goltzman, Kollar, & Trinkle, 2010), and variation in educational experiences in both secondary and post-secondary education (Cooper et al, 2008; Courtney et al, 2007; Davis, 2006; Dworsky & Perez, 2009; Merdinger et al., 2006; Pecora et al., 2007). The experiences of participants in this study support the central findings of this previous research. Even though participants had varied experiences in foster care, there were several unifying characteristics influencing their college transition. Participants in this study lived for many years in the foster care system. Although not all of them provided precise reasons for their entrance into the system, their mere placement in foster care influenced college decision-making and their transition to college. Participants perceived their early life experiences such as suffering loss and getting into trouble at school as having a distinct bearing on who they are now and why they chose community college.
While in the foster care system, youth in this study faced social, emotional, and financial challenges, and they do not identify with their experience in a positive way. Paradoxically, participants noted that without their foster care experience they would not be in college. Foster care placement moved youth into healthier living arrangements, and the participants expressed a sense of understanding of how much better off they are having spent time in the foster care system. Amber was glad she “was able to get out” of [her abusive home]. She shared that had she not left that situation, “God knows where I would've been, I mean who knows I could've been dead.” In congruence with the literature, the youth in this study tended to share their experiences from their time in care as a deficit, specifically remembering the times they moved as a time of loss. They also tended to remember the more negative aspects of having new foster family placements. Unrau, Seita, and Putney (2007) interviewed adults formerly placed in foster care and found that they perceived profound and significant loss in relation to placement moves in foster care. Participants in this study spent an average of 7.9 years in the child welfare system, which represents the bulk of their time in primary and secondary school. Half of the participants spoke specifically of repeatedly changing schools as another disruptive and challenging area in their lives. Donny represented one of the extremes as he attended four different high schools. Participants talked about their social and emotional struggles with changing schools, including difficulty in making and keeping friends and the feeling that they lagged behind their peers academically.

Placement in foster care and multiple living arrangements not only affected the participants emotionally, but also educationally. Research affirms that when compared to
Before participants could begin to consider college, they worked at overcoming educational deficits.

**Educational Experiences**

The participants in this study faced difficult circumstances throughout their primary and secondary schooling experiences. From their perspective, the difficulties in school stemmed from their challenges related to their being in foster care. The participants also came from low-income families and attended schools in low-income communities. Further, changing schools, experiencing low academic achievement, and having difficulty managing their own behavior presented challenges for the participants as they moved simultaneously through the child welfare and the public school system.

The educational deficits of the young adults of this study were challenges to be overcome in their striving to attend college. Similar to other foster youth, the young people in this study exhibited low levels of academic achievement, were older than the traditional age for their grade level, had failed and repeated grades, and were more likely than their non-foster care peers to be placed in a special education classroom (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003; McKellar, 2007; Smithgall, et al., 2004; Zetlin, 2006). Indeed, a quarter of the participants in this study repeated a grade and one-third of participants spent time in special education classes or were diagnosed with some form of learning disability. According to Zetlin (2006), almost a third to one-half of the foster population receives special education services, while only 10% of the general school population is placed in
special education, (Zetlin, 2006). In this study, Amber, Jochelle, and Debby’s stories described the impact of non-mainstream classes on educational pathways. Their placement in special education removed them from the college-preparatory, required re-entry into mainstream classes, and presented them with the need to catch up on a significant workload in relation to their peers. These young women navigated their way past learning disabilities and special education. Other participants found that their major challenges in high school involved difficulty managing their behavior, such as attending class regularly, interacting appropriately with others, following through on tasks, and establishing good study habits. All of these challenges resulted in disruption of education and delays in academic achievement.

Although participants’ experiences in foster care varied, all participants did perceive that the time in care influenced their transition to college. Life in the foster care system puts foster youth at risk of missing the academic, social, and familial support networks that help students prepare, access, and make decisions about college (Cochrane & Szabo-Kubitz, 2009). Many of the participants possessed limited knowledge about the college-going process and lacked support from social services and adults within their previous and current living arrangements. Additionally, several of the participants recounted situations related to their foster care experience that hindered their academic performance, thus resulting in a lack of preparation for college. Jochelle provided a broad view of the influence of her time in foster care as it relates to college. She stated:

I guess, in general, being in foster care does have a big impact on you going to college....Actually education in general, you have a lot of emotional things
attached to your life that can that sometimes make life hard, ….because you’ve been through so much.

She associated foster care with difficult circumstances that negatively affected not only her primary and secondary education, but also her present experience of college.

Jochelle’s account supports other research findings (Merdinger et al., 2005) that youth from care face substantial emotional and financial challenges. Being in foster care also affects college choice and entry simply because students have minimal to no financial resources such as personal savings or a college plan. Youth in this study also struggled with the financial aid process. All of the participants discussed how they needed adult help to complete the process. Between the FASFA paperwork, court records, and social services documentation needed to procure the tuition waiver, participants needed support in gaining admission to college. Though the state tuition waiver enabled students’ college pursuits, it did not cover other costs related to college attendance.

Participants moved through their early lives without stability and with many challenges. They handled school challenges including educational deficits, poor grades, and behavior problems. As the participants considered what would happen after high school, they needed encouragement and support in seeing college as an option.

College Decision-Making

When nearing their late high school years, participants had a choice to make about attending college. For participants in this study, the decision to apply to college was not perceived as an entitlement. Participants envisioned college abstractly. They did not
readily foresee college as an option for them based on their previous experiences in school, in particular given their low academic achievement and limited belief in themselves to succeed academically. Though their non-foster youth peers may face some of these same challenges, other students tend to have other support in making the decision to go to college namely, their parents or family, school, and community (Perna & Titus, 2004). Perna’s (2006) college choice model considers multiple levels of context to aid understanding of reasons for enrollment. According to Perna and Titus (2005), the likelihood of enrolling in college is directly related to the volume of resources accessed by students through parental involvement, family income, parental education, and parental educational expectations at the school the students attend.

For the young people in this study, a common occurrence was delayed decision-making, planning, and limited advising regarding college attendance. Their later attention to college applications resulted in limited options regarding their college choice. Courtney and colleagues (2010) reported that the main barriers for higher-education access among foster youth were a lack of financial resources, the need to be in full-time employment, parenting responsibilities, and a lack of transportation. Several of these barriers were evident for the participants in this study, including the lack of fiscal resources, the need to be in full-time employment, and challenges in transportation. Absent as a challenge for the participants in this study was parenthood.

Participants had limited preparation and forethought in considering financial aid, admissions requirements, or college life. Despite their lack of college planning, several factors influenced the participants’ decision to attend college. First, the majority of the
participants in the study received reinforcing messages from educators about their potential to succeed in college. Often, these messages were delivered informally. Second, the timing of their decisions to apply and the availability of financial aid to fund college influenced the college decision-making process. Students mentioned thinking about or wanting to go to college, but they did not take any steps to prepare or start the admissions process until late in their high school years. One-quarter of the respondents decided to go to college once they graduated from high school. Research highlights that late decision-making and enrollment in college contributes to the likelihood of dropping out of college without completing the degree (Goodwin, 2006). Debby exemplifies this situation. She commented:

I guess what would've helped me, if I would've known about it sooner. I mean I knew college was there, but I didn't know I’d get kicked out of the foster care system if I didn't go to college until I graduated [from high school].

Though not ideal, Debby did receive a push to go to college. When she considered her alternatives, college provided a better option because funding was available to support her attendance.

Participants did not anticipate going to college and lacked knowledge about the college-going process or necessary skills required to be successful in college. Michael was concise in his assessment of his pre-college preparation. He stated: “They say high school [is] supposed to prepare you for college; my high school did not prepare me for college at all.” Several of the participants mentioned remedial coursework. They needed to develop study skills, and they had a general sense of being overwhelmed with the
academic coursework, which resulted in subpar grades. The experiences expressed by the participants are similar to those of other populations entering community colleges (Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

Financing college presented another hurdle for participants. Davis (2006) found that foster youth who attend college are a low-income group. The students in this study faced financial challenges stemming from meeting the costs of college to meeting personal financial needs. The single most important factor students noted as contributing to their ability to attend college was financial aid. This factor corresponds to Perna and Titus’s (2004) previous research that determined state and policy context can influence college enrollment due to state appropriations to public colleges, tuition rates, availability of a college near to students’ homes, and student financial aid. Financial resources available to the students, over all other factors, almost singlehandedly determined college enrollment for the participants. The financial support they received from the state waiver enabled them to enroll in the community college. Foster youth in Virginia are eligible for a community college tuition waiver if they were in foster care after age 14. The late decision-making process noted by the participants, however, illustrates the fact that they lacked awareness of this funding opportunity earlier in their high school career. Most of the participants discovered the tuition waiver through the Great Expectations Coaches. The youths’ caseworkers through social services communicated the college benefits poorly to participants. This lack of communication could be due to the participants’ limited academic achievement and other behavior in high school. The pipeline for foster youth transition to college is leaky with many students opting out before completing high
school. Of course, not having a high school diploma immediately truncates the path to college irrespective of available tuition waivers.

Throughout the study, the participants reinforced the importance of working and the importance of financial aid. Fried (2008) found that with the assistance of federal and state funding, foster youth are finding their way to higher-education institutions in increasing numbers. The participants strongly stated that without financial aid they would not be in college. However, the lack of knowledge about the financial aid process created a sense of frustration as several offices and processes were involved, including the help of social services, the need for official court documents, and the requirement of detailed financial information that is difficult to obtain for these students.

The experiences of most of the participants included limited knowledge about college and minimal family support regarding attending college. Rather than family support, respondents' motivation to achieve related to the desire to prove to family members they could succeed. Respondents reported being determined not to repeat the past. Alice reflected:

Well, I just, I don't want to be anything like my parents were. You know they were uneducated and they did drugs and stuff. And I just want to prove to myself that I'm better than that. And that everyone that thought I wouldn't make anything of myself, I'll prove them wrong. I'm just a very driven person. I'm opinionated, stubborn at times but, I'm going to be successful.
The sense of self that Alice noted gets to the heart of Schlossberg’s (1984) transition model. Here, resiliency and intrinsic motivation spurred Alice to make the transition to college.

Similar to other first-generation students, youth from care were motivated to attend college to improve their social and employment standing, to gain professional and financial achievement, to meet personal aspiration, and to acquire upward mobility (Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Tym et al., 2004). Shea typified this perspective:

That's when I realized that my education was very important and if you don't take the opportunity you're given then you either end up in good living or bad living; and you know, I was like I'd rather... I don't have to struggle forever. I'd rather just pay attention and get it together now. And that's what I did.

Self-awareness helped the participants achieve their goals of college attendance.

One of the essential components of Perna’s (2006) model is parental involvement. Previous research suggests that parental encouragement and involvement is a critical factor affecting students’ decisions to become prepared for college, to apply, and then to attend institutions of higher education (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000a, 2000b, 2001). In the absence of this type of influence, participants found support in their college decision-making through secondary educators, through outreach from institutions of higher education, and through their own self-determination.

**College Transition**

Upon making the decision to attend college, foster youth entering college must meet many competing challenges. Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1989) used their
transition model to illustrate how students assess and cope with their changing situations and selves using a variety of supports and strategies as they move into higher education environments. Their model suggests these factors influence how each student undertakes the learning process, college challenges, and life situations (Chickering & Schlossberg, 1995; Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006). Schlossberg and colleagues’ Transition Theory (1995, 2006) provides a framework for understanding diverse individual experiences of transition.

In the present study, the students are experiencing many significant life processes concurrently, including emerging adulthood, emancipating from foster care, undergoing the college decision-making process, and transiting into a community college. The transition to college involves changing identities and facing new situations emerging from attending college. This section explores the college transition starting with the role of self and identifying the challenges experienced by participants, which include academic concerns, lack of family support, and financial concerns.

Going to college was just one transition point for the participants. Emancipating youth from care face multiple transitions as they enter adulthood. Sim, Emerson, O’Brien, Pecora, and Silva (2008) suggested that the sudden transition from foster care to independent living status is difficult for most foster youth, but those youth who also seek to continue their education or training may find additional demands. This sentiment was reflected across the participants’ stories. When asked what she needed as Pam started college, finances remained at the top of the list.
First off, money because I didn't know I needed it. I needed money and as bad as this sounds, I needed money, and I needed a job. I know that sounds obvious. …I felt like I needed to have a job and I still feel like I need to have a job that is because I kind of feel like I have to suffer to feel I have done something well. I know that sounds horrible, but that's just how I feel. I feel like the moocher if I don't actually work and I don't like being a moocher.

Youth aging out of foster care struggle more than other young adults across a number of important lifespan-developmental domains including academics and education, finances and employment, housing, physical and mental health, social relationships and community connections, personal and cultural identity development, and life skills (Casey Family Programs, 2006). Throughout their transition to college, participants found themselves beset with challenges.

**Challenges**

Youth in this study faced many of the challenges identified above as a result of their transition to college. The types of challenges youth face as a part of the system can hinder their pursuit of college, for example, they did not possess money management skills or a savings accounts. They lacked a driver’s license, copies of essential paperwork required for college admissions, and fiscal support. Youth in this study faced obstacles in their transition to college, particularly regarding obtaining information about required processes, dealing with financial difficulties, and acquiring stable housing. Unrau, Font, and Rawls (2011) studying youth from care who were freshman at a 4-year college found similar challenges as those identified by participants in this study, including lack of
family privilege, the premature launch into independence and adulthood, financial difficulties, housing instability, and lack of access to health care. These ranked among the significant barriers that students from foster care must confront beyond the normal stresses of college life.

The findings from this study showed participants faced academic challenges during their transition such as feeling unprepared, feeling inundated, and feeling stressed. Students talked about the amount of academic work required, the method of pedagogy used in class, and the difficulty of time management as significant stressors. Many of the students expressed a sense of feeling lost and felt a lack of preparation. Participants discussed being overwhelmed with homework, the volume of academic work required for each class, and even class expectations. Eight out of twelve of the participants mentioned not feeling prepared for college academic work. Michael noted some of his early feelings:

And so we didn't really learn [in high school]... like I seen how they were learning [in college]. It's not like high school stuff.... [In college] with papers due every week, you gotta read these two books and do this project and I'm like whoa, what's all this?

Students had difficulty with the college expectation of self-directed learning. At least five participants talked about the structure of class lectures and professors' expectations that students pay attention and take notes. In addition, at least three-fourths of the participants missed the structure of high school classes in which most notes were written.
on the board and they received frequent reminders of assignments due rather than needing to refer to their syllabi often to achieve deadlines.

Overpowered, underprepared, and not ready for college were the dominant ways participants described feeling as they made the transition into college. With the exception of one participant, all of the students in this study were economically disadvantaged. Overall, the participants shared experiences similar to those reported in previous research on low-income students who entered college lacking academic preparation. Like the students in this study, Thayer (2000) explained that the participants in his research on low-income students did not always receive the help required from their secondary schools to effectively prepare them for college life and specifically to meet academic expectations.

Another risk factor for the participants was that they all identified as first-generation college students. According to Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998),

Not only do first-generation students face the standard upheaval of social and academic adaptations that face all college-bound students, but that they must also face cultural adaptations. Integration and cultural transformations are critical for first-generation students, but poor academic preparation, family responsibilities, and full-time work ... can pose severe challenges to a student’s ability to integrate into postsecondary life. (p. 2)

This finding aptly describes the participants in this study. Students in the study worked hard to learn to prioritize their academic work. Several of the participants discussed limiting social time with peers and friends in order to focus on academic requirements
and employment responsibilities. Though most first-generation students who attend community colleges typically enroll part-time, the majority in this study had full-time student status. The tuition waivers provided by the state to attend the community college helped students attend full-time, though as noted, most students also held down jobs to help meet their living expenses and in some cases, support their foster families. Similar to other first-generation students, the youth in this study had significant work and family responsibilities in addition to their school obligations (Tym et al., 2004). Youth from care struggled with competing priorities like academic work, work responsibilities, and limited support. A major challenge youth from foster care faced was lack of family support and family privilege.

**Lack of Familial Support.** Seita (2001) defined “family privilege” (p. 131) as a way to describe the social capital difference between foster youth and youth who come from intact families, arguing that family privilege provides young adults a set of advantages over foster youth in college along with advantage in the social, political, and economic arenas. Seita (2005) described family privilege as a currency of human capital that compounds benefits over time and includes an invisible package of assets, pathways, and invisible benefits; however, most foster youth (especially those emancipating) function without supportive family or extended family. Not having a family and the privilege it affords, is what separates foster youth from their non-foster youth peers. Seita (2001) argued that the invisible privileges of family are comprised fundamentally of unconditional love, parental expectations, safety, food, shelter, and a sense of belonging. Moreover, families often provide high support, discipline, boundaries, extended family,
and opportunities for development of talents, social skills, and advocacy for children throughout their development into adulthood. Youth from this study defined family broadly, as an amalgamation of people who have supported them throughout their lives both by relation and through foster care. Despite trying to reconfigure notions of family, the participants still acutely felt a lack of support. Imad described this feeling as follows:

Being in foster care, it's always kind of like hard to figure out where you want to go [to college], and how you can get the money, and how you can get everything figured out, and you know if you can move out or if you can stay, stay with your foster parents or not.

Young people from foster care are less able to depend on family members for shelter, adult guidance, and financial support after high school than non-foster youth (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Rapp, 2010; Iglehart, 1995). Even the youth in this study who had “family” support through a foster family felt that they still had a financial responsibility within the household or they did not want to be a burden to the foster family. William typically helped contribute to his foster family, but when he had to cut back his work hours due to the time required for classes, he felt pressed to keep up his financial contribution to the family.

Family privilege (Seita, 2001) also manifests in the form of social and human capital. Foster youth lack the complex social mechanisms that parents garner to advance their children’s chances of success in life (Avery & Freundlich, 2009; Courtney, 2009). This missing family component that offers encouragement, support, and privilege directly
impacts youth in their college transition, both financially and in helping to navigate the college-going process.

**Employment & Financial Management.** Like first-generation students, youth from care expressed the need to be able to work while attending school more often than other groups. For the students in this study, employment was a big part of their transition experience. Though the participants received the tuition waiver, they still needed money for books, personal needs, and transportation. The majority of participants worked. Alice commented on the burden of having to work:

And like, I pay for my own car. I pay for my own gas. And I have to balance all that for school, and I have to pay for school too, So, I have to worry about making enough money to cover everything.

Alice lost her waiver due to her poor grades during her first semester in college, so now the burden of payment is entirely her responsibility. Students also expressed a strong need for personal financial preparation as a concern throughout their college transition. Youth in this study felt the immediate need to better prepare themselves financially for their present and future, including opening a checking or savings account, and setting aside some money for emergencies. Most youth also had a focus on the responsibility of locating a place to live and the cost of this housing. Being able to pay rent, to pay a security deposit, and to pay housing-related expenses required savings and a steady income. Another cost directly related to managing finances but essential to their transition to college is funding their transportation.
Transportation. The majority of the participants found transportation to be a major hurdle in their transition to college. In order to get to school, five of the participants must walk or rely on public transportation. Two of the participants (from College A) routinely walked to college because public transportation is unavailable. Three of the students (from College B) regularly use public transportation, because walking is not an option. Yet, these options often required a tight balancing act with timing of classes, waiting for transportation, and rushing to arrive on time for competing duties. Participants used a variety of strategies to navigate these challenges.

Supports & Strategies

Participants developed various ways of handling difficulties, whether personal or academic, during their transition to college. Schlossberg (1989) defined actions taken by the student or actions influencing the student to make the transition successful as strategies (Evans, 1995; Schlossberg et al., 1995). All of the participants spoke of balancing school, work, and personal lives. They noted how they overcame difficult circumstances in their move from care, including managing their emotions, managing their procrastination, and managing their frustrations. The participants’ essential support and strategies included self-management, support, and encouragement from siblings and secondary educators. The basis of all their strategies, however, emanated from self.

Self. Upon admission to college, participants felt a sense of accomplishment, motivation, excitement, and possibility. The findings illustrated that while moving through the transition to college, the participants in this study developed commitment, a greater self-efficacy, and coping skills. Hernandez and Naccarato (2010) hypothesized
that the transition to college for foster youth raised questions about identity, class, self-efficacy, self-actualization, and goal attainment. Schlossberg’s (1984) description of self encompasses personal and demographic factors along with psychological resources (Evans, 1998) and provided a lens through which to analyze the data. Rather than emphasizing demographics, this study sought to discover what supports and challenges youth encountered on their transition from care to college. Evans (1998) described the psychological factors of self-efficacy and coping and strategies employed during periods of transition.

In terms of personal well-being, participants consistently sought reasons for hope and optimism, and recognized they needed to work to maintain this approach in their lives. College helped in giving participants a sense of excitement and motivation. Shea stated: “I want so many things now that I'm in school. I can see all the possibilities of what I can do and I just want to do everything.” Acceptance into college provided affirmation of self and helped students see a different set of options for their future.

Students found a sense of hope, pride, and excitement in the transition to college. Participants strove for a sense of fulfillment, purpose, and a direction for their future. They developed a sense of goal attainment in employment and in college. Five of the participants found college gave them an alternative to idleness. The male participants specifically recognized the alternative to attending school as doing nothing. Donny expressed it this way: “At least with college, I'd be able to have a longer more interesting day and actually to hang out with people.” Michael and Jerry, too, talked about not
sitting around doing nothing. They stressed the importance of being able to take care of themselves and their families. Michael talked about how he saw his future:

I just want to do something with my life. I want to live the life of having maybe 4-5 cars, house being paid off, a wife and kids. Nothing too extravagant, but where I can live comfortably and not worry about, well am I have enough for this bill to be paid off, the roof gotta leak in it. I don't want to be stressing over stuff like that. I just want to make money and take care of my family.

Michael described the traditional American dream, one that bypasses most youth in foster care.

Although most presented a hopeful outlook, two of the participants saw college and life as a struggle every day, and viewed going to college just as something they have to get through. All of the students expressed the sentiment of not letting foster care limit them. The participants saw college attendance as an opportunity to improve their future. Participants articulated the desire for better employment, better financial situations, and a better quality of life. Most perceived college as a way to ensure a better quality of life.

Some of the participants reported that ongoing therapy remained important, necessary, and effective in helping them deal with life circumstances. The majority of the participants also expressed a sense of hope and optimism because of their ability to face difficulties, disappointments, and challenges. Imad said:

No matter what, challenges VSS [Virginia Social Services] has thrown at us or foster family has thrown at us or just life in general has thrown at us we always
find a way to turn around and make it into a learning experience and then use it for something better. You know we never really let anything bring us down.

These words demonstrate another one of the strong supports identified in this study. Sibling relationships provided a central form of support for the sibling participants as they navigated and coped with the foster care and educational system. This support provided a different layer of backing and relationship that aided participants in moving through foster care and into college.

**Role of Siblings.** The siblings who remained together within the foster care system provided an additional perspective from which to understand time in foster care and transition to college experience. Participants in this study included two sets of siblings (Amber and Jochelle, Jerry and Imad) who remained together in their foster care experience. Sibling groups that remain together maintain a positive, sibling relationship as a result of joint foster care placement (Drapeau, Simard, Beaudry, & Charbonneau, 2000). For those in this study, the sibling relationships supplied a built-in support that was of benefit to these participants. When children are removed from the home due to maltreatment, the sibling bond is strengthened, ultimately benefiting relationship integrity and adjustment outcomes (Drapeau et al., 2000; Linares, et al., 2007). Both sets of siblings demonstrated this type of relationship and bond throughout their lives and during their time in college. Amber noted how much she relies on her sister:

Another thing I need to probably improve on is actually trying to separate myself from my sister because my sister cannot be there forever. We’re going to have to
separate eventually but I know we're so close, she is like the only thing I have in the world.

Findings from this study illustrate the strong influence of siblings placed together during their time in the system and as they transition into college. The siblings in this study found a significant source of encouragement in making the decision for and in transition to college. The sisters and brothers serve as a sounding board, provide good examples, and present constant reminders of support to see the transition through. The siblings in this study noted minimal drawbacks to their relationship, in fact noting instead that they may be too reliant on their sibling's support and presence. In addition to sibling support, secondary educators provided another source of support.

**Influence of K-12 educators.** For the participants in the study, individual teachers at the middle and high school levels introduced them to the possibility of college. Professionals influence youth in care through guidance, helping them aspire or even prepare for higher education (Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005; Osterling & Hines, 2006). Davis (2006) found students growing up in foster care receive few encouraging messages from educators, social workers, and other adults regarding the pursuit of a college education. Yet, the data in this study illustrate that teachers in secondary and middle schools do provide support and encouragement. Participants reported that there were teachers who took a vested interest in them and noted how they maintain their relationships with these teachers even now when they are in college. What is noteworthy about teacher involvement is that even minimal interaction highly influenced students. Jerry noted the influence of one teacher:
I think that alone [help from teacher] is really important in helping a student get to college because she would deal with each individual student she needed to and help them no matter how busy it made her. She would do anything she could to make sure you had everything you needed done.

Jerry spoke about this middle school teacher's willingness to help him and to take a personal interest in him. Merdinger, Hines, Lemon, and Wyatt (2002) found that almost half of their respondents reported that a significant person in their lives, a teacher or counselor, did something that kept the student on a path to college. Recent studies indicate that youth who have at least one positive and significantly naturally occurring mentoring relationship fare better in the transition to adulthood (Ahrens, Dubois, Richardson, Fan, & Lozano, 2008; Drapery, Saint-Jacques, Lepine, Begin, & Bernard, 2007; Hines et al., 2005). Those who most frequently served as sources of encouragement to youth in this study were former teachers. In addition to introducing the notion of entering college, teachers also helped to instill confidence and build esteem in the participants.

Individual educators also pushed students to recognize their potential, to recognize their self-worth, and to recognize their own self-determination. It was often teachers who helped students see and realize their potential as college-going students. However, with the encouragement as an essential component, these students grew to believe that college was an option for each of them. Despite many of the documented negative outcomes of youth from care who do not attend college, findings from this study show emancipated youth can choose to apply to college and successfully transition from
foster care. In addition to personal support before the transition, institutional support was also important.

**Great Expectations.**

Oh my God, Great Expectations is a lifesaver… I was excited about college, but I was really lost… (Jochelle).

The Virginia Community College system strives to provide both personal and institutional supports. Colleges are starting to take notice of the needs of emancipating foster youth as evidenced by the growing number of campus programs designed to provide financial, academic, and other supports to these students (Casey Family Programs, 2010a; Dworsky & Perez, 2010). The Great Expectations programs (GEP) located at Pastoral College and Metropolitan College focus on youth from foster care attending community college. The foundation-funded program staffs one office at both Pastoral College and Metropolitan College. This office serves as a hub on campus for youth from care attending the college. It provides a safe space on campus where students can be understood and feel like they belong. The on-site counselor initiates contact as early as high school and actively seeks out students to offer services. The counselors work with participants on factors that help support their college success. They helped students make institutional, academic, personal, and peer connections, which the students reported mitigated their sense of feeling out of place and their apprehension about being in college. The Great Expectations office serves as a place for youth to come for assistance with any academic, social, financial aid, or other college concern.
The counselor serves as a point person for each of the individual participants in relation to any question or concern that arises as he or she begins college and throughout college attendance at a Virginia Community College. The counselor and program provide personal and individual connections as well as peer connections. In alignment with other studies of institutional programs designed to help youth from care, student connection was found to be a key priority for the programs (Dworsky & Perez, 2010). Jochelle noted her connection with the counselor at her college:

[My Great Expectations Counselor], she'll sit down and explain everything to you, actually take you to the place that you need to go, and she'll talk to one of the people and they'll say okay and they will sit down and talk to us.

There was much praise expressed by participants in this study for their Great Expectations counselor. All of the participants significantly recognized the aid and encouragement from the various aspects of this program. The Great Expectations counselor interwove encouragement, college knowhow, and general information throughout each youth’s transition experience.

Great Expectations is similar to the ten programs studied by Hernandez and Naccarato (2010), which applied commitment to advocacy for youth both inside and outside of the institution. The GEP serves youth before enrollment, through enrollment and transition, and during the college years. The program offers access to financial aid, and academic and social support. The coaches have developed close one-to-one relationships with each participant. This outcome too correlated with Hernandez and Naccarato’s (2010) research that found approachability and accessibility to college
personnel, with a student driven focus, provides students an environment in which they feel comfortable accessing services. The coaches exemplified the premise offered by Wells and Zunz's (2009) that advocacy can help to mitigate academic challenges and lack of traditional family support. The coaches serve as a sounding board, tutor, and go-to person for any academic or social concerns.

**Implications for Practice**

Leaders and policymakers in Virginia over the last ten years recognized the need for avenues to college for youth from care. Part of this process included legislation to provide financial aid to youth from care who may not have traditional supports. The Virginia Community College system also demonstrated a commitment to youth through the creation of the Great Expectations program. The implications for practice include the need for enhanced educational policy and practice in primary and secondary education to address the needs of youth in foster care. Several implications for practice derived from this study could prove helpful to youth from foster care in making the transition to college.

**Educational Policy.** The findings from this study demonstrated that one person can make a difference in the lives of youth in foster care, particularly during their secondary education. How can teachers better realize their influence with youth in care? Policies regarding the content of education programs for pre-service teachers, counseling staff, and educational leadership programs to mandate knowledge and proficiency about diverse student populations, including the experiences of foster youth, can improve the experiences of foster care youth. Likewise, policies that encourage coordination of
services and collaboration of personnel serving foster care youth can avoid students falling through the gap.

**Social services and Child welfare policies & Practice.** There was not a clear link for participants between social services and educators, nor a commitment to secondary academic success. According to the participants, many of their teachers seemed unaware of their time in foster care or their current living circumstances. Since educators have such a strong potential influence on decisions to enroll in college, information about students in foster care must be communicated to them. In addition, professionals in child welfare should receive additional training. This training should focus on how to provide more information to youth about post-secondary options and financial aid resources. Educating child welfare and college professionals about the unique educational obstacles faced by youth from foster care can give these professionals a better perspective on how to engage this unique student group (Lovitt, Emerson, & National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, 2008).

**Educational Practice.** In addition to enhanced policymaking, educational practices could also enhance college attendance among youth from care by including further training about working with this population of students, and proactive identification of these students can alert educators to their special needs. The influence of caring teachers in primary and secondary settings cannot be overstated. Participants in this study spoke strongly of the influence of one teacher who cared about them. Providing in-service or training opportunities for teachers who work in counties with high foster youth populations can give teachers and educators additional information and
remind them to think about behavior or learning concerns that could be stemming from their experiences in the system. The identification of youth in foster care raises concerns about confidentiality and privacy, however if educators could work to directly meet the needs of youth in foster care, these students may be less likely to be retained, labeled, or misunderstood.

**Higher Education Practice.** Institutions of higher education can also benefit from further knowledge about what best supports youth from care when transitioning to college. Additional training, education, and knowledge about financial aid programs can provide college personnel with resources to support their students. Both 4-year and community colleges can benefit from the matriculation of youth from care. All types of higher education institutions can be intentional within orientation programs and support structures to provide a welcome and caring introduction and environment for emancipated youth. Early engagement with foster youth in college is critical since foster youth may possess greater confidence than competence to engage in the college environment (Unrau, Font, & Rawls, 2011). Because foster youth share similar experience to first-generation and low-income students, institutions can provide targeted services to help students towards continuation, and completions.

The Great Expectations program provides a model for all types of higher education institutions. The program addresses ongoing student concerns and needs and it celebrates student’s milestones and achievements. The counselor and the program provide structure and consistency that help students manage new demands and more difficult course work. A best practice that emerges from the Great Expectation program
is the identification of one professional trained as the point person to work with youth from care and to act as a resource and a guide to help students gain knowledge about the college experience.

**Future Research**

The results of this study point to several areas for future research to aid in helping youth from foster care in their college decision making and transition to college. The status of foster youth within the educational system, especially at the post-secondary level, is difficult to ascertain and assess due to lack of quantitative data (Barth et al., 2006; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Pecora et al., 2006). This is true in Virginia and the nation in general. Though research has increased significantly over the past five years, little is known about foster youths' level of readiness to engage in college beyond their comparison to first-generation and low-income students. Further, even less information is known about persistence or completion of a community college or 4-year degree by students from foster care. Though collecting data remains a challenge for social services, it has the potential to provide a clearer picture of where emancipating foster youth stand in relation to college attendance. Knowing more about the college going patterns of emancipating foster youth can provide data to address college readiness, predictors for college success, and factors of support for college completion. A more complete data set would allow for comparison with non-foster care peers, and with other low-income or first-generation students. Longitudinal studies that follow youth from care through community college and beyond are needed. Findings from these studies may identify mechanisms that ensure that these students receive optimal support. Finally, additional
conceptual perspectives could be considered when investigating youth from care. In particular, traditional student development theories as well as positive psychology provide a platform for study because they might provide a model that describes the experience of youth from care that would serve as a blueprint for continuance and completion of community college and baccalaureate degrees.

Conclusion

This qualitative constructivist study explored factors that lead emancipating foster youth in Virginia to a transition to a Virginia Community Colleges. The theoretical framework proposed that youth emancipating from foster care were affected by social and psychological factors that supported their college attendance. The review of the literature indicated that external policies and foster care realities influence college attendance choice among youth who were emancipated from foster care. According to the 12 participants interviewed in this study, both state policy and foster care experiences affected college choice. The participants' personal psychological characteristics and sense of self influenced the students' transition process. While perspectives varied among individual participants, the interview data in this research study indicate that emancipated youth's transition from high school to college is influenced by the type of support and encouragement received within their secondary experience and upon arrival at the college campus. This type of support is needed to increase the number of emancipated youth who decide to make the transition from high school to college. The findings produced three essential conclusions that revealed college choice and transition
influences for youth from foster care: importance of influence of one secondary educator; importance of financial assistance; and importance of campus/institutional support.

Participants found value and self-confidence in encouragement from a middle school or high school teacher. This support directly related to participants’ interest and desire to go to college. Even small interactions with a teacher made a significant difference to the participants in this study. Just as participants needed support before college to make their college decision, once arriving on campus participants required even more support.

An on campus support administrator or office proved instrumental in helping participants to navigate college transition upon arriving to campus. The on-campus administrator helped the emancipated foster youth to achieve a sense of belonging on campus and helped them to navigate campus life. Participants found great value in having a resource and support in a counselor dedicated to their needs. One of the ways the counselor best helped participants was assisting them with the financial aid process, which is significant since most participants are first-generation and low-income college students.

Finally, the importance of financial aid cannot be overstated for youth from care. Tuition waivers and legislation specifically designed to create access for youth from care actively encourage college decision making, enrollment, and matriculation. Participants in this study would not be able to attend college without these supports in place. These
types of support increased the chance of success for transition of youth from foster care to college.
Appendix A: Introductory Letter

Dear (Program Director):

I am conducting a study about emancipating foster youth and their transition to Virginia community Colleges. This research is for my doctoral dissertation at the College of William & Mary. The focus of this research on the complex life issues and circumstances facing emancipating youth from care through their transition to enrollment in Virginia Community Colleges guided the construction of the research questions.

A portion of my research involves speaking with students who meet the above criteria and I would like to request your help in spreading the word about this opportunity. Attached is text that you may use in an email format for students. I have also attached a flyer that I would like to request you to post in an area in which students congregate. Participant involvement would consist of one personal interview of approximately 90 minutes focusing on your life history and enrollment in college.

Your support and encouragement to participants would be appreciated, as you are a key gatekeeper to the participants who are a focus for my research. Document and understanding more about the emancipated foster youth transition experience to higher education would contribute significantly to the development of new knowledge relative to the pathways of youth from care to Virginia Community Colleges. Thank you for your consideration and assistance. Should you have any questions or if you would like additional information, please contact Shylan Scott (sesco2@wm.edu).
RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

Study Title: Former Foster Youth Transition to Community College

If you meet the following description, you are eligible to participate.

- Between 18 and 25 years old
- Currently enrolled at a Virginia Community College
- Emancipated or emancipating from foster care in Virginia
- Willing to share your story through an in person interview and/or online focus group

Participation is voluntary and your confidentiality and anonymity will be protected. Participants will receive a transcript of the interview and the opportunity to offer feedback.

Time Commitment: 90-180 minutes
Compensation: $25 Visa Gift Card

To participate in this study or learn more contact:
Shylan Scott. sesco2@wm.edu. 757.221.3193
Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

College of William & Mary

The general nature of this study entitled “Emancipated Foster Youth Transition to Enrollment in Community College in Virginia” conducted by Shylan Scott has been explained to me. I understand that I will be asked to participate in one 90-minute interview focusing on my life story, including familial relationships, secondary educational experiences, experience leading to my enrollments and your current education program in Virginia Community College System, and my personal perceptions about your life story. I will be asked questions about my life story, my history, and relationships.

In the process of being interview about my life, it is possible that some sensitive information will emerge and cause some stress. The researcher will seek to minimize any stress and if you do experience emotional stress or discomfort, I will provide you a referral to counseling. I have the right to stop the research at any time or not respond to questions that cause you discomfort. The possible benefits of my participation in this study include contribution to the knowledge base of understanding the experiences of youth in care and their pursuit of postsecondary education. My participation in this study should take a total of about 150 minutes maximum. The interview will be transcribed. After the completion of the interview, I will receive a full transcript for my review with the opportunity to provide changes, deletions or additions.

I understand that my responses will be confidential and that my name will not be associated with any results of this study. I know that I may refuse to answer any question asked and that I may discontinue participation at any time. Potential risks resulting from my participation in this project have been described to me. I am aware that I may report dissatisfactions with any aspect of this experiment to the Chair of the Protection of Human Subjects Committee, Dr. Michael Deschenes, 757-221-2778 or mrdesc@wm.edu. I am aware that I must be at least 18 years of age to participate. My signature below signifies my voluntary participation in this project, and that I have received a copy of this consent form.

____ I give permission to have my interview audiotaped

____ I do not give permission to have my interview audiotaped

__________________________________________  ________________________________
Date                                               Signature

Print Name

THIS PROJECT WAS FOUND TO COMPLY WITH APPROPRIATE ETHICAL STANDARDS AND WAS EXEMPTED FROM THE NEED FOR FORMAL REVIEW BY THE COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS COMMITTEE (Phone 757-221-3966) ON 2010-10-15 AND EXPIRES ON 2011-10-15.
EDIRC-2010-10-14-6938
Appendix D: Interview Protocol

At the beginning of the interview, I will review the informed consent to make sure they understand their rights as research participants. Additionally, each participant will be assured of the precautions that will be taken to protect his/her identify and confidentiality. At the conclusion of the interview, I will arrange for when copy of transcript will be sent to the interviewee.

Questions will provide focus while at the same time remaining as open-ended as possible, to urge participants toward extending their responses in whatever direction they find meaningful. Stories are important. I am interested in hearing your stories about the role of education in your life, messages about education, and about your approach to college and learning.

Interview Questions & Prompts

- I am interested in your story about what experiences contributed to your enrolling in a community college, and the impact your foster care experience may have had and/or may continue to have as it relates to your educational experiences.
- Please share with me your story about what led you to enrolling in college.
- What colleges did you consider attending?
- Why did you eventually decide to go to attend this college?
- Tell me about the admission process.
- How did you figure out how to fund enrolling in the community college? How would you describe the role of education in your life?
- Tell me about your experiences in elementary school/middle school/high school.
- What is important to you about your enrollment at the community college? How would you describe the role of community, family, and friends in your story about education?
- Did you have a particular mentor(s)? What types of experiences, resources, or people have been supportive in your decision to enroll in college?
- Did one of these people encourage/discourage you when you discussed enrolling in college?
- Did anyone in your family go to college? What challenges did you face getting into college? How did you get beyond the challenges?
- Were there challenges in figuring out how to fund college?
- Did you face academic challenges? (i.e., low high school grades, need for developmental remediation?)
- How has your previous school experience, the community, or the state aided your decision to enroll in college?
- Describe for me your transition experiences now that you are enrolled at the community college.
- How do you see your time in foster care contributing to this transition?
- What supports have you found in this transition?
- What challenges have you found in this transition?
- Is there anything else I should know to better understand your experience as you transitioned into enrollment at the community college?
## Appendix E: Crosswalk Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Conceptual Framework</th>
<th>Framework</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do emancipating students from care describe their transition to enrollment at one of the Virginia Community Colleges?</td>
<td>What challenges do students who are emancipating from foster care face in the transition to college?</td>
<td>Transition Theory</td>
<td>Multilevel Model of College Enrollment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Please, share with me your story about becoming a college student.</td>
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<td>What colleges did you consider attending? Why did you eventually decide to go to attend this college?</td>
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<td>How would you describe the role of education in your life?</td>
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<td>How would you describe the role of community, family, and friends in your story about education? What types of experiences, resources, or people have been supportive in your decision to enroll in college?</td>
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<td>What challenges did you face getting into college? How did you get beyond the challenges?</td>
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<td>Is there anything else I should know to better understand your experience as you transitioned into enrollment at the community college? How have you or your situation changed in the process of transitioning into college?</td>
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<td>How have you or your situation changed in the process of transitioning into college?</td>
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<td>How has your experience in foster care related to your transition to college?</td>
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Appendix F: Coding

A priori codes

- Transition
  - Self
  - Support
  - Strategies
  - Situation

- Resources
  - School
  - Community
  - Policy

- Foster Care Experiences

Emergent Codes

- Location
- Academic
  - P-12 Education
  - Higher Education
- Challenges
  - Social
  - Conduct
  - Financial
- Great Expectations
- Employment
Appendix G: Participant Thank You Letter

Dear Participant,

I wanted to thank you for helping me with my dissertation research. I enjoyed meeting you, and I appreciate your sharing your experiences in care and the impact of this experience on your enrollment in community college. Your experience offers valuable insight into environments that can promote the success of a diverse body of students seeking access to and attending college.

Attached below is a transcript of our interview. Please review it for accuracy. Write me back if there are any corrections or any information you would like to add. At the completion of my study, I will also forward to you a summary of my findings.

Thanks you so much for you participation in my research.

Sincerely,

Shylan Scott
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EDUCATION
College of William & Mary; Williamsburg, VA
Ph.D. in Higher Education, Policy, Planning, & Leadership 2012
Dissertation: Emancipated Foster Youths Transition from Care to Virginia Community Colleges
Virginia State University; Ettrick, VA
M.A. of Interdisciplinary Studies, Education & Public Policy 2002
University of Virginia; Charlottesville, VA
B.A. in Psychology 1998

RELATED EXPERIENCE
College of William & Mary; Williamsburg, VA
Assistant Director for Fraternity & Sorority Housing July 2011 – present
Responsible for daily management, administration, and operation of 24 residence hall facilities, 18 fraternities and sororities.

College of William & Mary; Williamsburg, VA
Area Director July 2005 – June 2011
Responsible for the daily management, administration, and operation of 25 residence halls.

Binghamton University; Binghamton, NY
Resident Director 2003-2005
Managed daily operation of a 300 bed co-ed suite style residence hall.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE
Binghamton University; Binghamton, NY
Instructor – First Year Experience 2004
Developed syllabus and overall course structure, and administered all grades.

Teaching Assistant to Professor Bob Covert in “Multicultural Education” 1998
Collaborated on class assignments and facilitated discussion; met with students upon request; and review written work.

MEMBERSHIPS
Association of College and University Housing Officers International
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