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Great Expectations: An Evaluation Of A Program For Foster Youth In Higher Education

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GREAT EXPECTATIONS: AN EVALUATION OF A PROGRAM FOR FOSTER YOUTH IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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FOR FOSTER YOUTH IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all foster care youth and alumni. I hope you know how resilient and brave you are. Please know that you will always have the strength inside you to accomplish any goal. I believe in you! Believe in yourself!

Acknowledgments

Thank you to my husband, Ronnie, for the many hours that I vented to you and all the hours that you kept our daughter occupied so that I could concentrate. Zoe, I hope that you always know how loved you are and that you can accomplish anything that you want in life. Mommie, thank you and Daddy for always believing that I could be a college graduate even when I thought that I could not. Thank you for loving an angry and lost teenager! Daddy, I wish you were here to see me reach this goal. You always predicted that this doctorate was in my future. Connie, thank you for your endless supports of all kinds. I will forever treasure your guidance. Sylvia and Susan, thank you for always believing in me. Brenda and Ronald, thank you for welcoming me into your family from the very first day! Thank you for celebrating in this educational journey with me and for all of the times that you watched Zoe. Thank you to ALL of my extended family—there are too many people to name, and I would be afraid to leave someone out. Please know that I love you all and appreciate the support. Thank you to all of my teachers and faculty members in my educational career. There are too many to name them all. Dr. Royster, thank you for being one of the first to inspire me to formally write about the foster care system and the societal truths. Dr. Stronge, thank you for your constant support and endless revisions to my document. Thank you for believing in this dissertation from the beginning! Thank you to my committee members, Dr. Tschannen-Moran and Dr. Popp, for your enthusiasm on my topic from the very start! Thank you to Dr. Peggie Constantino for leading W&M's Executive Ed.D. program along with inspiring and motivating our class. Finally, thank you to my cohort for the laughs and comfort throughout this journey. I treasure our friendships and hope we remain friends for life!

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Abstract

Great Expectations is a Virginia Community College System program for youth who were in foster care after the age of 13. Foster youth enter college with multiple disadvantages, including being less academically prepared compared to their peers and often lacking social support for their education. A program evaluation was conducted at a specific community college, Virginia Community College (pseudonym), to determine if the program was being implemented with fidelity, to compare the participants' grade point averages and retention rates with other under-resourced students, and to discover the staff's views on the successes of the program and their perspectives on needed improvements of the program. It was determined that selected areas of the program were being fully implemented while other parts were only partially implemented. Compared to both Pell Grant recipients and the general student population, Great Expectations students had lower grade point averages and lower retention rates. Staff described some of their perceived successes in the program, including student engagement and access. The staff provided recommendations for the improvement of the Great Expectations program, including the hiring of a full-time Great Expectations coach/coordinator whose sole responsibility is to lead the College's Great Expectations program. Additionally, the staff advocated for consistent funding at the institutional level for the program, and noted the importance of increased promotion and publicity of Great Expectations so more parties are aware of its purpose and its opportunities for aged-out foster youth. The findings of the study suggest these improvements could lead to greater levels of academic success for Great Expectations scholars.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS: AN EVALUATION OF A PROGRAM FOR FOSTER YOUTH IN HIGHER EDUCATION

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the United States, more than 430,000 children were in foster care according to a 2018 report (Font et al., 2018). Foster youth in the United States age-out or exit the foster care system between the age of 18 and 21, resulting in about 20,000 to 30,000 young adults aging out of state foster care systems each year (Hokanson et al., 2020; Liu, 2020). The Commonwealth of Virginia, compared to other states, has one of the largest percentages of aging-out youth in the U.S. (Simmel et al., 2013). Aging-out refers to the act of a child reaching "the age of majority without obtaining a permanent family" (Font et al., 2018, p. 717). As with other young adults, many of these aged-out foster youth desire to pursue higher education. Only 1–11% of former foster care youth will graduate with a bachelor's degree in their lifetime (Mountz et al., 2023). This range is due to a variety of factors including that most of the research is "about" these youth as opposed to "with" these youth (Mountz et al., 2023, p. 271). Movement of youth across state lines also makes it challenging for researchers to track educational attainments. Okpych and Courtney (2021) stated that foster youth are also less likely than low-income, first-generation students to earn a degree. By not completing or pursuing postsecondary education, former foster youth place themselves at a great disadvantage for future employment and future wealth (Hernandez et al., 2017).

These lower graduation rates could be due to a wide variety of factors. All traditional-aged college students face challenges, including developmental and identity conflicts, financial concerns, and academic difficulties (Hallet et al., 2018). However, aged-out foster youth often

must face these challenges without familial or many social supports. Housing support can be a major concern for aged-out foster youth (Tyrell & Yates, 2017). Many aged-out foster youth are unable to purchase basic living essentials (Reilly, 2003). Many experience residential insecurity or homelessness; their social bonds might be fragmented, and their familial relations might be strained (Hallet et al., 2018). All of these issues are compounded by the daily stress of being a college student.

Funding in higher education for aged-out students varies greatly from state to state (Parker & Sarubbi, 2017). Aged-out foster youth most frequently cited money as a barrier for continuing their college education in one analysis (Courtney et al., 2007). According to Hernandez et al. (2017), 22 states possess tuition waiver programs that target current and former foster youth. In Virginia, the grants for tuition and fees are only available at the community colleges and not 4-year institutions (Hernandez et al., 2017). In the 2024 Virginia General Assembly Session, HB700 would expand resources for certain individuals in foster care to include baccalaureate public institutions. In this study of the Great Expectations program at a community college known as Virginia Community College (VCC) in this study, I assessed the quality of implementation in Great Expectations and informed college leaders about how to continue to support this program to assist aged-out foster youth in the community colleges.

Program Description

Great Expectations is a VCC System program developed by Anne Holton who is a former First Lady of Virginia, previous Virginia Secretary of Education for the Commonwealth of Virginia, and wife of Senator Tim Kaine. The program was designed to combat the problem of low graduation rates for aged-out foster youth and to help former foster youth defy the odds of graduating from college (Great Expectations, n.d.). I conducted an in-depth program evaluation

of the Great Expectations program at VCC. The purpose of this program evaluation study was to better understand the effectiveness of the Great Expectations program and how it supports students in the program in a particular community college. The following are the qualifications to participate in Great Expectations: 17 years old or older and currently in, or recently aged out of, the foster care system, or a special needs adoption, or in foster care after age 13. The first records of VCC's Great Expectations program are budget records for Summer 2013.

Context

One of Virginia's 23 community colleges is VCC. The institution serves over 25,000 students annually. About two-thirds attend part-time while 35% attend full-time. Two of the four campuses are in an urban setting, and the other two campuses are in a more suburban environment. The campuses are diverse with representation from many racial and ethnic groups. Populations from all four campuses were included in this program evaluation. Students of all ages, both traditional and non-traditional, attend this community college. The Great Expectations coach, assistant, Dean, and the Vice-President are responsible for all four campuses. This means that the Great Expectations staff must travel between the campuses and determine the best setting (campus) to host college-wide Great Expectations events that will provide access to the greatest number of students. The institution is accredited by Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges.

All 23 community colleges in Virginia offer the Great Expectations program. The program is voluntary and, thus, not all aged-out foster youth enrolled in community colleges participate in the program. Each of the participating institutions has an assigned coach for the students who serves as the point of contact for the program and as a mentor to the students. Between 4 and 21 students have participated in the Great Expectations program in recent terms

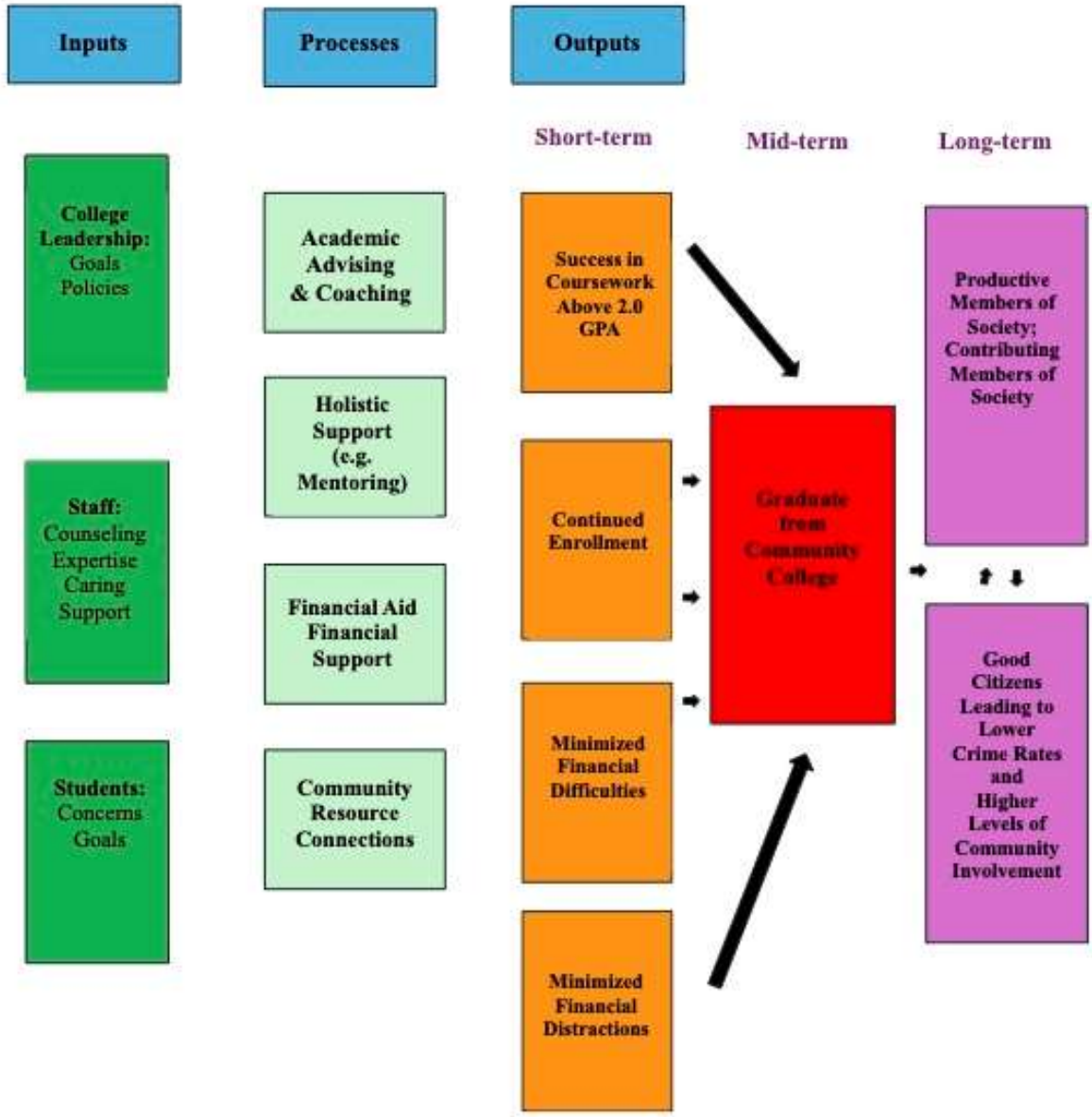
at VCC according to the Great Expectations coach. The goal of Great Expectations is to support the learning and success of aged-out foster care youth in their studies with the goal of graduation from the institution.

Description of the Program

Logic Model for the Program. Figure 1 shows the logic model of the Great Expectations program.

Figure 1

Logic Model for Great Expectations



Note: The inputs of the college leadership and staff were reviewed in this program evaluation. The processes in light green were studied to show the short-term outputs in orange. Processes such as academic advising would include all synonyms including academic coaching while mentoring would fall under the category of holistic support in the Great Expectations program. Outputs in red and purple extend beyond this program evaluation; however, they are still an important part of the overall system of the program and would require long-term study.

Overview of the Evaluation Approach

This program evaluation approach relates to the pragmatic paradigm and uses this branch of program evaluation. Mertens and Wilson (2019) note that "pragmatic" is derived from the Greek word meaning "to act," and thus through this model test the effectiveness of a program through data collection that allows for conclusions to be drawn. Stufflebeam's (2003) CIPP model provides the main theme for this program evaluation.

The CIPP model stands for "context, input, process, and product" (Mertens & Wilson, 2019, p. 88). Context examines goals; input looks at program strategies; process is "guidance for implementation"; and product provides directions on "termination, continuation, modification, or installation" (Stufflebeam, 2003, *The CIPP Models Improvement/Formative and Accountability/Summative Orientations* section). The CIPP model's underlying theme is improvement (Stufflebeam, 2003). The model was "geared toward the provisions of information that would be useful for decision makers" (Mertens & Wilson, 2019, p. 88). Out of the four purposes of the CIPP model, my purpose was to guide decisions (Stufflebeam, 2003).

Purpose of the Evaluation

The Great Expectations program is still considered a newer program in the VCC System. The current VCC Great Expectations coach found budget records for VCC's Great Expectations dating back as far as Summer 2013. Through this evaluation, greater attention was drawn to this program. Results from this study were intended to promote and provide leaders with recommendations for the continuation of this program with possible modifications in hopes of drawing more attention to this population in need of services. The main audience was the Vice President for Student Affairs and the Dean of Student Services in addition to other administrators. This formative program evaluation concentrated on program improvement.

Focus of the Evaluation

This evaluation relied on qualitative and quantitative data to determine the status and benefits of the program. Given the small cohort size of this particular program and its unique application at this one institution, results cannot be applied to the community college system as a whole. The results are specific to this program, its staff, and administrators.

Evaluation Questions

The evaluation questions were designed to measure the effectiveness of the Great Expectations program. The goal was to fully understand the effectiveness of the program for this specific population of aged-out foster youth students. Questions addressed by this evaluation:

1. To what extent is the Great Expectations program for foster students enrolled in VCC being implemented with fidelity?
2. How do Great Expectations student participants' grade point averages compare with the grade point averages of Pell Grant recipients at the institution?
3. What are Great Expectation participants' retention rates in college compared to Pell Grant recipients at the college?
4. What are the perceptions of Great Expectations program staff regarding the aspects of the program that influence the effectiveness of the program?
5. What recommendations do Great Expectations program staff have for improving the program?

Definitions of Terms

Academic advising: professional guidance on the programs and courses in which a student is recommended to follow

Aged-out foster youth: young adults who choose to no longer receive services from Department of Social Services even if they are still eligible to due to existing programming

CIPP model: a design by Stufflebeam that is geared toward program improvement and stands for "context, input, process, and product" (Stufflebeam, 2003)

Coach: a person who provides consistent guidance to another in a motivation to improve his or her life

Community resource connections: shared contacts of non-profits, departments of human services, departments of social services, and other helping organizations that can provide support to students

Fidelity: consistency in application of program's goals and intentional exactness of its application

Financial aid: federal, state, and local funds that are intended to be used for educational expenses which can include grants, scholarships, and loans

Financial support: stipends or other monies provided to assist students in their living and educational expenses

First generation: student whose parents have not completed a higher education credential and will be the first in their family to complete a degree or certificate

Foster care: standardized care through Departments of Human Services or Social Services for children who have been removed from their natural home for neglect and/or abuse

Grade point average: the cumulative average of all student's grades on a 4.0 scale in a given period of time

Great Expectations: program for aged-out or active foster youth at VCC

Holistic support: guidance and assistance that extends beyond strictly academics and encompasses the entire being of a student

Marginalized: the act of being shifted to the outskirts of society and treated as unimportant

Mattering: the idea that someone or something is being thought of and cared for with intention

Mentor: a person who provides a model of behavior to another while providing support and guidance to the same person

Pell Grant: Title IV funds that "usually are awarded only to undergraduate students who display exceptional financial need and have not earned a bachelor's, graduate, or professional degree" (Federal Student Aid, n.d.)

Postsecondary education: education that occurs after secondary or high school, may include trade schools, community colleges, colleges, and universities

Retention: the act of retaining students in a specific program or institution in a specific window of time

Success: the obtainment of one's measurable goal

Transition: moving from one stage or chapter to another in life

VCC System: system of 23 community colleges in the Commonwealth of Virginia

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

When foster youth age out of foster care, the youth find themselves at a crossroads dealing with housing, employment, and postsecondary education. Foster youth are less likely than the average student to have completed college preparatory courses, advanced placement courses, and extracurricular activities (Lovitt & Emerson, 2009). Hokason et al. (2020) found that only 58% of former foster youth "complete high school by age 19 compared to 87% of all U.S. youth" (p. 235). There is limited literature and data on the number of aged-out foster youth who attend postsecondary education and their outcomes. Research has shown that aged-out foster youth are almost twice as likely to drop out of postsecondary education compared to low-income, first-generation students (Day et al., 2011). Overall, depending on the age of attainment being measured, estimates range from 1–11% for the foster care alumni attaining college graduation (Mountz, 2023). Dumais and Spence (2021) found that their research subjects, comprised of foster care alumni, "expressed frustration with people's low expectations for them" (p. 143). Research shows that the stronger the supports for aged-out foster youth the greater the opportunity for college degree obtainment (Heath et al., 2021).

This literature review serves to provide an overview of foster care youth, foster care alumni, and their transitions into adulthood and postsecondary education. The beginning provides details of educational transitions for foster youth as they exit secondary schooling and transition out of foster care. Life outcomes and educational outcomes for foster care alumni are discussed including facilitating factors and barriers to educational success. Postsecondary

education and foster youth's experiences are detailed. Indicators of success for foster care students who transition to college including retention rates and grade point averages are included. Finally, support programs for foster youth within their college transitions are described. Financial support through legislation, examples of these support programs, and prominent factors in successful programs are featured.

Educational Transition for Foster Youth

Foster youth are at higher risk of "having poor adult outcomes in terms of educational attainment, employment, homelessness, mental and physical health, and delinquent and risky health behavior compared with their general population peers" (Ahrens et al., 2011, p. 1012). This is due to events in foster care that can range from multiple placements, multiple schools and school systems, mental health disorders, and histories of trauma (Rosenberg & Kim, 2018). The lack of postsecondary education limits the opportunity of employment and has significant effects on lifetime earning potential (Hernandez et al., 2017).

As foster youth emerge into adulthood, they may leave the foster care system without a support system that will allow for financial and emotional support as they pursue postsecondary education and independence (Rosenberg & Kim, 2018). In their research, Rosenberg and Kim (2018) found that recent homelessness decreased the likelihood of postsecondary education or employment. This research provides support for housing interventions for the foster youth population. Compared to males, female foster youth "experience higher quality housing over time" (Tyrell & Yates, 2017, p. 110). Additionally, the older the youth at time of their separation from the foster care system, the less likely they were to experience a decline in housing quality (Tyrell & Yates, 2017). College systems, themselves, recreate "a dynamic of housing instability and otherness reminiscent of their childhood experiences of frequent and unsettling movements

associated with being in foster care" (Mountz et al., 2023, p. 286). For example, foster home stays for foster youth are more often short-term and similar to possible semester-by-semester or yearly dormitory changes in college. Additionally, college housing typically closes during college breaks, leaving these youth to have to locate temporary housing.

The Virginia Foundation for Community Education (2023) reviewed a pilot initiative at Mountain Empire, Southwest Virginia, and Virginia Highlands Community Colleges. Students received $250 per month, then later $400 per month, to help with housing expenses while enrolled at the community colleges. The goal of these stipends was to increase retention and graduation rates for the recipients of the stipends, At Virginia Highlands, "100% of the students who began the fall semester of 2019, graduated, transferred, earned a credential, or re-enrolled by Spring 2022" (p. 1). In its 3 years, the stipends proved to make a positive impact on persistence rates and graduation rates (The Virginia Foundation for Community College Education, 2023).

Transitions From Foster Care

The transition of moving out of the foster care system and emerging into adulthood cause foster youth to experience the transition very differently from youth never involved in the foster care system. Many outcomes for youth exiting foster care comes from the National Youth in Transition Database where states are required to survey former foster youth at ages 17, 19, and 21 (Popp et al., 2018). While many young adults lean on parents and family for support during early adulthood as they develop their identities, begin college, and enter the workforce, aging-out foster youth often did not have this type of support (Kim et al., 2019). Youth who transition from foster care into life out of the foster care system must be either independent or "lean on supports that are tenuous, at best, including family who may have abused and/or neglected them"

(Hokanson et al., 2020, p. 234). Resilience theory is a framework that says that an individuals' traits or assets and relationships or resources can show how youth formerly in foster care can be assisted "by outweighing the impact of risk exposure" (Hokanson et al., 2020, p. 235). In contrast to some other research, Font et al.'s (2018) research suggested that youth who age-out of foster care are "no worse in terms of education and earnings than do those who are reunified with their families of origin" (p. 736). This suggests that being in foster care at all during one's childhood has an effect on one's life outcomes. The research said that this "may reflect disparities in how reunified children are supported" and may lack wraparound resources (Font et al., 2018, p. 737).

Most foster youth desired to pursue postsecondary education (McMillen et al., 2003). Kim et al. (2019) found that foster youth involved in Independent Living Services were "significantly more likely to complete high school education, enroll in postsecondary education, and work full-time in the labor market" (p. 299). Their study also showed the importance of significant adults in the aging-out foster youths' lives and the vital nature of education for transitioning youth. The transitioning youth "who received education-related services report significantly higher rates of having a postsecondary education or full-time employment" compared to the youth who did not receive these services when "adjusting for other service use and individual characteristics" (Kim et al, 2019, p. 300).

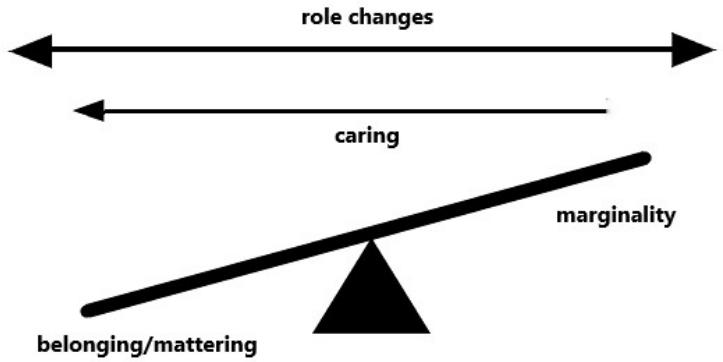
Rosenberg and Kim (2018) examined the National Youth in Transition Database to research the association between homelessness and postsecondary education and employment for foster youth. They found that "one third had or were still currently enrolled in post-secondary education at the age of 21, and 51% were either enrolled in post-secondary education or working full time" (p. 7). The National Youth in Transition Database showed that 71% of Virginia foster

youth had finished a high school equivalency by 21 years of age (Popp et al., 2018). Slightly more than one quarter of the sample had experienced homelessness between the ages of 19 and 21 (Rosenberg & Kim, 2018, p. 7). The research showed that the state of being homeless decreased the likelihood of positive outcomes in postsecondary education or employment for this age group (Rosenberg & Kim, 2018). Surprisingly, aged-out foster youth who had experienced homelessness prior to the age of 17 were positively associated with postsecondary education and/or working full-time (Rosenberg & Kim, 2018). Students experiencing homelessness have educational protections prior to high school graduation as a result of federal legislation first passed by Congress in 1987 and most recently included in the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act as Title IX, Part A, also known as the McKinney-Vento Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program. McKinney-Vento requires school systems to enroll homeless children and unaccompanied homeless youth in school even if there is a lack of proof of residency or other records and allow the student to remain in the same school even when the student moves and no longer lives in the attendance zone to ensure stability and consistency in the child's or youth's education (Crutchfield & Meyer-Adams, 2019; Wynne et al., 2014). Modeled after protections for students experiencing homelessness, the law included similar educational protections for students in foster care under Title I, Part A.

Schlossberg's (1984) theory on mattering and marginality uses a metaphor of a seesaw to describe that "every time an individual moves from one role to another or experiences a transition, the balance of the seesaw changes" (p. 38; see Figure 2). The more drastic the role change, such as transitioning to being a college student, and the less knowledge known about the situation or new role the more marginalized a student will feel (Schlossberg, 1984). Schlossberg et al. (1989) described the need for students to matter and "feel appreciated and noticed" (p. 21).

Figure 2

Diagram of Schlossberg's Seesaw of Changes



Note. Adapted from Schlossberg, N. K. (1984). *Counseling Adults in Transition: Linking Practice with Theory.* Springer.

Mattering is defined as "the beliefs people have, whether right or wrong, that they matter to someone else, that they are the object of someone else's attention, and that others care about them and appreciate them" (Schlossberg et al., 1989, p. 21). There are five items designated as part of mattering: attention, importance, dependence, ego-extension, and appreciation (Schlossberg et al., 1989). Caring is described as the "key variable" in student retention (Schlossberg et al., 1989, p. 221). In the examination of support programs such as Great Expectations, the idea that students feel a connection to or a feeling of caring from staff is important to building staff relationships which directly affects student success.

Life Outcomes

Rosenberg and Kim (2018) used the National Youth in Transition Database to study foster youth and the relationship between homelessness and the resulting levels of postsecondary education and employment. There is research that shows homelessness occurs in as high as 37%

of former foster youth (Rosenberg & Kim, 2018). Upon the age of majority or when the youth age out of foster care, they additionally face "poverty, incarceration, early pregnancy, and unstable employment" (Reilly, 2003, p. 728).

Greeson et al. (2022) conducted a study using an online survey of current and former foster youth ranging from age 18 to 23 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Survey participants were approximately half in foster care and half agedout of foster care (Greeson et al., 2022). Out of the group, 31.7% shared that COVID-19 "had some (any) negative impact on their living situation" (p. 340). Close to 18% shared that they had "very low" access to food or that they "lacked access to food" (p. 341). More than half of these youth "reported some (any) negative impact of the pandemic on their employment status" and more than half would "experience some (any) level of personal financial instability following the pandemic outbreak" (pp. 343-344). Overall, Greeson et al. (2022) showed that COVID-19 adversity "exacerbate[d] the already challenging material and financial common among members of this vulnerable community" (p. 346).

Educational Outcomes

Some foster youth never complete high school (McMillen et al, 2003). Although some foster youth complete high school after leaving the foster care system, 30% to 40% of students in foster care graduate from high school or pass a GED exam prior to leaving the foster care system (McMillen et al., 2003). This increases to 50% with the inclusion of those students who graduate after leaving the foster care system (Johnson & Strayhorn, 2019). McMillen et al. (2003) noted that many studies have been conducted that show a high percentage of foster youth expressed a desire to attend college. Their research showed that "youth with lower aspirations were male, were younger, had more negative peers, reported more of a present (versus future) orientation,

were less optimistic, and were more likely to have been in a psychiatric hospital or correctional facility" (McMillen et al., 2003, p. 483). Overall, research showed that females expressed higher aspirations than the male foster youth (McMillen et al., 2003). Dumais and Spence (2021) wrote that foster youth "develop a short-term survivalist approach to their lives, which precludes planning ahead, including for college enrollment" (p. 152). Foster youth typically are offered "inadequate guidance and support" in preparation for postsecondary education (Okumu, 2014, p. 10). Postsecondary education requires that youth advocate for themselves (Morton, 2015).

Facilitating Factors to Educational Success. Foster youth report "high levels of educational aspirations" (C. M. Kirk et al., 2013, p. 307). The difference between educational aspirations and college graduation can be attributed to several factors. Tyrell and Yates (2017) suggested that "efforts to promote educational competence among emancipated youth is one way policy makers and child welfare providers can enhance the resource base from which youth may access safe and reliable housing in the wake of foster care" (p. 110). Lovitt and Emerson (2009) interviewed former foster youth, who successfully graduated from 4-year universities and benefited from the Casey Family Programs college scholarship program. They found that these youths were involved in extracurricular activities, had told themselves that they would attend and graduate from college, that they had a plan or had "charted the course of their lives to some degree," participated in school counseling, and used support services in college (p. 20). Resilient foster care alumni appear to have an internal locus of control (Rios & Rocco, 2014).

Research by Hass and Graydon (2009) conducted a study of young adults who were former foster youth and identified a theme of social support in regard to the resiliency of these individuals. The study participants exhibited high levels of gratefulness and satisfaction, and the research suggested that "they appreciate the helpful roles others have played in their lives" (Hass

& Graydon, 2009, p. 461). The social support was identified as being derived from a variety of sources including biological family members, foster family members, as well as adults in many formal professional roles. Hass and Graydon (2009) believe that these study participants "were skilled at recruiting what they needed from other people" (p. 461). The respondents were resourceful and exhibited "a strong sense of commitment to help others and were heavily involved in their schools and communities" (p. 462). Cheung et al. (2021) studied foster care alumni located at a large university in the Southwest and found that the youth "described four internal strengths that were particularly important to their success" including "insight, self-efficacy, boundary setting, and initiative" (p. 192).

Barriers to Educational Success. Parental expectations, parents' levels of education, and teacher expectations are known factors that affect postsecondary educational attainment (C. M. Kirk et al., 2013). Results from C. M. Kirk et al.'s (2013) study suggested that rural and urban foster youth reported significantly lower aspirations and expectations compared to lower-income youth who were not in the foster care system. The data showed that academic self-perception and parental support greatly affected educational aspirations and expectations. Early interventions for increasing self-perceptions of academic ability and increasing knowledge about college funding could assist in increasing the number of foster youth obtaining post-secondary education (C. M. Kirk et al., 2013). Youth aging out of foster care were less likely to have completed college preparatory courses, have access to special programs or advanced placement courses, or have participated in extracurricular activities (Lovitt & Emerson, 2009). Horn (2020) found that many successful foster care alumni who had completed a degree avoided seeking assistance and support in college as they feared "negative preconceptions about foster youth would be confirmed," also known as stereotype threat and stigma consciousness (p. 112).

Huang et al. (2020) found that students cited "working jobs while in school and dealing with dysfunctional families" as "major sources of stress that made it difficult for students to focus on academics" (p. 61). They wrote that if schools can provide scholarships, housing vouchers, and book stipends, then this "financial support can alleviate the need for employment while in school, which can reduce the work-life balance-related stress" (p. 66). In Horn's (2020) research, the foster care alumni college graduates "described being unable to connect to campus resources because of their need to work and pursue other priorities outside the academic setting and because support was only available during regular business hours" (p. 113).

Mountz et al. (2023) shared findings on the ongoing qualitative Youth Participatory Action Research study with foster care alumni at a large public university in the Northeast. They identified many barriers for these students during college including lack of agency support, delays in financial aid and other funding, social stigma of being in foster care, mental health struggles, faculty lack of understanding of foster youth culture, lack of housing during college closures and breaks, and the dynamics of aging out of the foster care system (Mountz et al., 2023). Mentorship, programmatic support, and personal drives were all factors of success.

Rios and Rocco (2014) set out to represent the "interplay of external supports (i.e., school, [foster care], and community related), external barriers (i.e., school, foster care, and peer related), internal supports (i.e., success strengths), and internal barriers (i.e., negative emotions and behaviors)" in foster youth's educational journeys (p. 234). External barriers (restraining forces) are described as having "potential to keep the young adult from achieving the goals of high school graduation and college enrollment" (Rios & Rocco, 2014, p. 234).

Postsecondary Education and Foster Youth. Reilly (2003) examined Nevada's aged-out foster youth and also found that homelessness and education were major issues. In Reilly's (2003) study, 75% of respondents indicated that they desired a college degree; however, only 30% were attending or had attended college. Hernandez et al. (2017) reviewed 22 states that have implemented tuition waiver programs for both current and aged-out foster youth. Virginia Code Title 23-7.4:5 applies to students at community colleges only for those individuals who were in foster care at the age of 13 (Hernandez et al., 2017). There are no provisions in the law for 4-year institutions tuition waivers for foster youth or for former foster youth in Virginia. For some states' tuition waiver programs, there are restrictions for the programs that require a minimum time spent in foster care or an age limit for aged-out youth to apply (Hernandez et al., 2017).

Indicators of Success for Foster Care Students Who Transition to College

Data shows that students with unstable childhood experiences including foster youth "who utilized the campus counseling or health centers demonstrated higher academic achievement" (Seon et al., 2019, p. 21) The formal social support of greater numbers of friends also was shown to have a relationship with higher academic achievements. Some research relies on the social capital theory or a "person's social networks and relationships that promote healthy development" and the value of these relationships to explain academic achievement (Seon et al., 2019, p. 23).

Retention Rates for Foster Students. Aged-out foster youth enroll in postsecondary education at lower rates compared to their peers and even fewer graduate with a degree (Klefeker, 2009). This is an example of a retention concern. Klefeker (2009) wrote that advisors need to be more intrusive with foster care alumni through outreach and intervention. Some

research shows that only 24% of students in the U.S. earn a credential within 3 years of community college enrollment (Weiss, 2019)

Day et al. (2011) studied former foster youth in comparison to low-income, first-generation students who had never been in foster care. They found that students who had been in "foster care were significantly more likely to drop out before the end of their first year (21% vs 13%) and prior to degree completion (34% vs 18%) than low-income, first-generation students who had not been in foster care" (p. 2338). Race was not found to be "related to dropping out at the multivariate level" for former foster youth (p. 2338).

Salazar (2012) studied all of the recipients of college scholarships from the Casey Family Scholarship Program and/or the Foster Care Success's college scholarship program between 2001 and 2009. "Satisfaction with one's college, college social involvement, and social support" of a caring adult were all found to be factors that predicted college retention (Salazar, 2023, p. 159). This study did not show that high school grade point average (GPA) was a predictor of college retention. Ultimately, "whether or not they received sufficient support with certain facets of independent living such as housing and transportation" were evident of student retention (Salazar, 2012, p. 159).

Day et al. (2021) studied whether former foster youth at a large, public 4-year institution in the Midwest were more likely to stop-out of a 4-year institution in comparison to low-income, first-generation students who had never been in foster care. Stop-out is defined as when students temporarily leave or separate from an institution and later return; this separation can be a few semesters or many years. They found that former foster youth were more likely to transfer institutions, stop-out, and experience these stop-outs earlier in their college career, and had lower graduation rates (Day et al., 2021). Both stop-outs and transfers affect a community college's

retention rates. In comparison to low-income first-generational college students, foster youth also took longer to graduate. Okpych and Courtney (2021) examined three Midwestern states and found similar patterns. They found that nearly 75% of low-income first-generation students persisted through the first year; however, less than 50% of foster youth did. Okpych and Courtney (2021) discovered that foster youth were half as likely as the low-income, first-generation group to have earned a college degree within six years of their start.

GPAs for Foster Students. In Seon et al.'s (2019) study, students with unstable childhood experiences who had visited the counseling center at least one time during the academic term had significantly higher GPAs ($M = 3.5$) compared to students who had not visited the counseling center ($M = 2.92$). A similar relationship existed with students who had visited the health center compared to those who had not. The researchers also found that student participants "who had more friends in their social network had a higher cumulative GPA (Soen et al., 2019, p. 34). Interestingly, Seon et al. (2019) did not find a high correlation between high use of academic support services and high academic achievement.

Bishop et al.'s (2019) study at a Midwestern public university found that former foster youth indicated a mean of one failed class and a mean of 0.52 courses withdrawn. The mean GPA for these students was 3.08. The foster care alumni had "a relatively high level of achievement with two-thirds of the sample having a GPA of 3.0 or greater, and almost two-thirds having never failed a course" (p. 325). There was a statistically significant relationship between the experience of traumatic events and a greater number of courses withdrawn. In Bishop et al.'s (2019) study, there was not an association with GPA or failed courses with traumatic exposures.

A campus support program at Florida International University was studied by Huang et al. (2019). This support program offered former foster youth, adoptees, and homeless students

with support and preventive resources such as workshops, coaches, and mentors. Huang et al. (2019) discovered that a student's cumulative GPA decreased by 0.58 for every semester that a student delayed participating in the program. Overall, the study suggested that the longer amount of time that a student waited to join the program the lower the student's overall GPA was likely to be. The students' interview responses showed similar information that the program helped the students transition and succeed in college.

Support Programs for Foster Youth Within College Transition

Research has shown that the availability and use of "academic and career advising, first-year orientation programs, academic counseling, and other social or recreation-based resources" are beneficial to former foster youth in college although their relationship with academic achievement has not been established, according to Seon et al. (2019). They do add an opportunity for students to gain cultural and social capital. As foster care youth are "significantly more likely to enter a 4-year university as a transfer student than their non-foster care counterparts" programming that extends beyond the first year is vital for this population's success (Greiger et al., 2018). To identify aged-out foster youth more easily and "facilitate tailored interventions for them, college admissions forms might include a voluntary question allowing incoming students to self-identify as emancipated foster youth" (Okumu, 2014, p. 23). Emancipated youth are youth that have reached the age of majority or have been deemed a legal adult by a court system.

Geiger et al.'s (2018) research on programs serving foster care alumni in higher education found that word of mouth was the most common recruiting method, there were typically more female program participants than males, and the average age of student participants was approximately 20 years old. The largest challenges for these programs reported

by survey participants (in order) were financial support, student engagement, and student recruitment. Participants stated that the most challenging issues for students were housing, informal social support, and inadequate financial support (Geiger et al., 2018).

Financial Support Through Legislation

There have been several pieces of legislation over the last twenty-five years that have been created with older youth transitioning from foster care in mind. The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 established the Chaffee Foster Care Independence Program (currently called the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood), which provides funds to services for youth leaving foster care (Collins, 2020). In 2001, the Chafee Education and Training Voucher program instituted funding to states for postsecondary training and education (Collins, 2020). The Education and Training Voucher Program added by Congress to the Foster Care Independence Act in 2001 as part of the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Amendment was the first federal program "specifically created to address the post-secondary educational needs of current and former foster youth" (Day et al., 2011, p. 2338). This voucher program allows states to provide current and former foster youth with up to $5,000 per year for postsecondary education and training (Day et al., 2011).

In 2008, states were permitted to extend foster care to young adults through the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (Collins, 2020; Day et al., 2011). The College Cost Reduction Act of 2009 allows former foster youth, who were in foster care at the age of 13 or older, to "claim independent status when applying for federal financial aid" (Day et al., 2011, p. 2339). The Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018 contained an extension of "Title IV-E dollars to support financial aid and services for youth aging out as well as new data reporting requirements for states to complete" (Schelbe et al., 2019, p. 35). It expanded the

Chafee Independent Living programs by allowing "states to provide services for youth who aged out to remain eligible for services until 23 and expands the use of education and training vouchers until youth are 26" (Schelble et. al., 2019, p. 35).

Tuition waiver programs are one financial aid resource developed by states to support postsecondary education and address the low levels of college enrollment by foster care alumni. Research suggests that only a very small percentage of eligible youth utilized the tuition waiver programs; researchers found it difficult to track the number of students due to some exiting their states of residence after their separation from the foster care system (Hernandez et al., 2017). The earliest was established by Florida in 1988 (Hernandez et al., 2017). Hernandez et al. (2017) reviewed 22 states' tuition waiver programs that were designed for current and former foster care youth. The purpose was to waive the tuition and fees at public colleges and university for this foster care youth population among others. Watt et al. (2018) stated that "youth in foster care who lived in states with a legislated waiver were 12% more likely to enroll in higher education than youth in states without waivers (p. 15). In Texas, Watt et al. (2019) found relationships that indicate that waivers could improve retention rates, GPAs, and graduation rates.

In Florida, the Nancy C. Detert Common Sense and Compassion Independent Living Act "requires that the Florida Department of Children and Families collaborate with the Board of Governors, the Florida College System, and the Department of Education" (Rios & Rocco, 2014, p. 235). Florida public postsecondary institutions must provide coaching positions for on-campus support for current and former foster care youth. This support is intended to assist foster care alumni make a successful transition to independent living (Rios & Rocco, 2014).

In Virginia, the tuition waiver program was founded in 2000 under Virginia Code Title 23-7.4:5 and applies to community colleges only (Hernandez et al., 2017). In Virginia, students

must not have been previously enrolled full-time in a postsecondary institution for more than 5 years, must be no older than 25, and enrolled in a minimum of six credits per term (Hernandez et al., 2017) This benefit acts as a last dollar grant; this means that other financial aid is used prior to the application of the tuition waiver on a student's account.

In response to the COVID-19 epidemic in 2020, the Consolidated Appropriations Act provided the Supporting Foster Youth and Families through Pandemic Act (Greeson et al., 2022). This permitted "a temporary moratorium on discharges from foster care due to age or noncompliance, these protections expired September 2021" (p. 345). The authors advocated for continued resources to be distributed to older foster youth and those who have aged out of care given that their study "showed that the negative impacts of COVID-19 were significantly worse for young people who had already aged out of foster care" (p. 345).

Pell Grant Recipients. Pell Grants are another method of funding for under-resourced undergraduate students. Some but not all foster care youth may qualify for this federal financial aid. Although literature exists on Pell Grant recipients, most of it seems to focus on 4-year institutions. In one study by Yang and Mao (2021) who conducted a 4-year institutions study, they found that the rate of graduation for Pell Grant recipients was 24% lower compared to non-Pell Grant recipients. Although Park and Scott-Clayton (2018) found many comparisons with Pell Grant recipients to be statistically insignificant, they did conclude that "even small Pell Grants can have meaningful impacts on student behaviors, and outcomes, at least in the community college setting" (p. 581). This greatly differs from previous research at 4-year institutions. Schudde and Scott-Clayton (2016) found that Pell Grant recipients were held to strict Satisfactory Academic Progress federal regulations, and if a student did not meet this

requirement, they could quickly lose eligibility for Pell and possibly other financial aid linked to receipt of the Pell Grant.

Hicks et al. (2014) conducted research comparing Pell Grant recipients across the VCC system. They found that the graduation rate was "higher in rural locales compared to the overall [VCC system] graduation rate" (p. 150). From 1996-2013, VCC system Pell recipients graduated at a rate of 18% within 6 years, and Pell Grant recipients in the rural parts of the system graduated at a rate of 23% (Hicks et al., 2014)

Examples of Support Programs. An official listing or national registry of higher education programs serving foster care alumni does not exist (Schelbe et al., 2019). Additionally, there is very limited literature on the existence and evaluation of campus-based support programs (Schelbe et al., 2019). Batsche et al. (2014) reviewed a national college access campaign titled KnowHow2Go and aged-out foster youths' participation. Their study provided support for post-secondary transitional services for aged-out foster youth. One relatively simple and inexpensive practice that could be implemented by most colleges is to designate an existing student services staff member to be the primary contact for youth from foster care. This person could become the go-to person who is knowledgeable about foster care procedures such as documentation requirements for financial aid, processes for obtaining tuition waivers, scholarship opportunities and other support services available on campus (Batsche et al., 2014, p. 182)

Services for students who have experienced homelessness or foster care are vital to college success. The depth of the problem of housing for foster care alumni and homeless youth is "not well understood and is likely underestimated" (Skobba et al., 2023, p. 97). During post-secondary education, former foster youth have access to Education Training Vouchers through federal funding while homeless youth do not (Skobba et al., 2023). The Higher Education

Opportunity Act from 2008 "required the DOE to increase awareness of available financial aid for students and to develop grants for higher education institutions to provide temporary housing for students" (Crutchfield & Meyer-Adams, 2019, p. 365).

Research suggests that college support programs focus on fostering relationships (Okumu, 2014). Mentoring is another support service that can assist aged-out foster youth. Narendorf et al. (2020) studied a formal mentoring program, also known as transition coaching program, for youth aging out of foster care and found that measures of self-sufficiency were improved for the youth in areas of food security and community involvement for students participating in the mentoring program.

Katz and Geiger (2020) discussed the relationship between aged-out foster youth paired with Court-Appointed Special Advocates in New York City. Several youth stated that this relationship and support assisted them in the "identification of and enrollment in [postsecondary education] programs" (p. 157). Other participants noted themselves as a source of resilience, support, and guidance "resulting from their own hard work, effort, and perseverance" (p. 159).

Western Michigan University runs the John Seita Scholars Program for aged-out foster youth and provides support and funding for approximately 125 undergraduates each year (Klefeker, 2009; O'Donnell, 2019). These students can receive state scholarships, the full Pell Grant, and other funds to support their education in the hopes of the students graduating without any student loan debt. The program has five full-time coaches who "provide academic, social, and emotional support, training in 'soft skills' and other services that help participants graduate" (O'Donnell, 2019, p. 2). Some institutions are not as liberal with the funding for aged-out foster youth. Austin Community College combines academic advising with a specific academic advisor who works on retention and program completion for aged-out foster youth (Klefeker, 2009).

Miami University has Foster Care Liaisons who offer priority emergency advising appointments and community resource packets to any student in crisis (Klefeker, 2009).

Guardian Scholars or Renaissance Scholars are typically located on residential campuses. The Guardian Scholar program at Ball State University does not offer scholarships; however, it does offer support staff who provide programming and advocacy in housing and financial aid to foster care alumni (Klefeker, 2009). Austin Community College has the Academic Champions program on each of its seven campuses that offers a designated academic advisor "who 'champions' retention and program completion" for foster care alumni (Klefeker, 2009, p. 2). Summer bridge programs that allow students to learn about the postsecondary institution between high school graduation and the first year of college allows students to arrive on campus early and gain support earlier in their transitions to college (Horn, 2020).

Foster care alumni often experience feelings of isolation that can be exasperated by "specific institutional programs, such as family-themed weekends or residence hall closures during breaks" (Okumu, 2014, p. 21). Interim housing for this population is vital and interventions for "special sessions for emancipated foster youth during campus welcome weeks and periodic gatherings during the semester and finals period to build a community of new and returning students with shared life experiences" are also important (p. 22). College transition programs are a smart way to grant aged-out foster youth the opportunity to create relationships with other students and the campus community (Okumu, 2014).

Prominent Factors in Successful Programs.

The design of programming that permits foster care alumni to "explore, question, and engage with the quest for an integrated sense of personal identity" are important constructs of programming (Okumu, 2014, p. 22). Hernandez et al. (2017) wrote that student attrition is due to

students not becoming more integrated into the college culture based on Tinto's (2012) theory of student integration. Ahrens et al. (2011) found in their research that mentoring relationships could improve adult outcomes of foster youth. There is solid evidence that mentoring youth in the foster care system can improve the youth's life outcomes although there were some limitations that included the interpersonal skills and the understanding of the youth's background by the mentor and the ability of the youth to trust another person (Ahrens et al., 2011). Research also shows that students who have "limited social capital exhibit higher academic achievement when they engage in activities that build relationships and connectedness to the institution" (Seon et al., 2019, p. 24). There appears to be no recent research on peer mentors and foster care youth or alumni. Table 1 describes the factors of successful postsecondary programs for foster youth. Financial support, mentorship, and positive relationships can be found in VCC's Great Expectations program.

Table 1

Factors of Successful Postsecondary Programs for Foster Youth

Factors	References
Financial Support	Hass & Graydon (2009); Klefeker (2009); O'Donnell (2019)
Mentorship	Ahrens et al. (2011); Katz & Geiger (2020); Narendorf et al. (2020)
Positive Relationships	Hass & Graydon (2009); Katz & Geiger (2020); McCormick et al. (2023); Okumu (2014); Seon et al., (2019)
Trauma-informed Emotional Support	Bishop et al. (2019)
Volunteering & Community Participation	Hass & Graydon (2009)

Hass and Graydon (2009) believed that society should look at the successes of former foster youth and the relationships that these individuals have developed when establishing programming. They stated that mentoring and other similar programs that lead to these types of supportive relationships are important. Other support that was highlighted to be vital to these youth was "assistance in applying for and attaining grants, scholarships, and other sources of academic funding" (p. 462). It is important for programming designed to assist these youth incorporate these types of activities.

Narendorf et al. (2020) studied a mentoring program in a transition center for youth in a Southern state. Common interests and positive personality traits facilitated successful relationships between mentors and youth. Authenticity was another trait that was recognized to be important in the mentor-mentee relationship. Narendorf et al. (2020) indicated that "youth

seeking help or advice, mentors pushing youth to do things for the youth's benefit, and mentors turning listening into action" were also indications of successful interactions in the mentoring program (p. 223). Other measures of success included the extended length of the relationship and when the youth actively reached out to the mentor (Norendorf et al., 2020). In this particular program, education and employment scores were not higher in a statistically significant level; however, they were for food security and community involvement.

Some students look internally for support and described a high level of self-reliance in accessing college resources and their overall success (Katz & Geiger, 2020). Students also expressed that formal supporters were helpful once students were enrolled and had begun their programs while some struggled to identify informal supports such as family or friends. Katz and Geiger (2020) found that many foster youth do not "automatically forge friendships with others who share this experience" of foster care but create relationships on a more individual level (p. 160). Due to Bishop et al.'s (2019) findings about the relationship between traumatic experiences and course withdrawals, support programs should include trauma-informed emotional and behavioral support.

McCormick et al. (2023) wrote about sexual and gender minorities who had experienced time in foster care and the importance of colleges to serve and meet the needs of the "whole student" (p. 265). They wrote about the importance of "having awareness of different identities and understanding how these young people may have faced adversity and trauma can help college personnel to be particularly attuned to the needs of youth with these identities" (p. 264). They emphasized the importance of being informed about identity categories, the use of appropriate language, showing inclusivity by asking students their pronouns, using students' names, and the avoidance of invalidating language. Even unintentional or knowing language,

language that makes assumptions about an individual, or language that reminds students of a negative past, can "retraumatize and increase further revictimization" of these student populations (p. 265). It is important that all students are validated in their experiences at the institutions of learning and in their identities (McCormick et al., 2023).

Summary

> Aged-out foster youth aspire to postsecondary education and possess:
>
> a profound awareness of the desire to depend on themselves for their happiness and accomplishments, which may have stemmed from a need to reclaim a sense of stability in life that had been disrupted by multiple foster care placements and little control over personal life decisions. (Okumu, 2014, p. 22)

Females in foster care appear to have higher aspirations for higher education than their male peers. They still face many obstacles, including homelessness, to reach graduation. Many states and schools have various programs that support the education of aged out foster youth. There is not any consistency between the programs and initiatives. Some programs provide students with funding while others do not. Requirements vary from program to program. Some foster care alumni face "negative perceptions and/or misperceptions of foster care youth" and often struggle with revealing their foster care status and identity to their communities (Okumu, 2014, p. 14).

Social supports seem to be a common theme for many programs for aged-out foster youth, including mentorship opportunities. There is research that supports that the "government should raise the age of majority for youth in foster care" and that transitional programming should be given to youth beyond their discharge from foster care (Reilly, 2003, p. 743). Students should be encouraged to access resources while institutions should provide the appropriate formal and informal support services to promote student success (Seon et al., 2019). The

importance of friendships and other social supports should not be overlooked. More research is needed on the college graduation outcomes of aged-out foster youth in the United States.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

This formative program evaluation of the Great Expectations program examines the program's implementation, staff's, and administrators' perspectives. It also includes a review of Great Expectations participants' and Pell Grant recipients' retention rates and grade point averages and allows a comparison of the two under-resourced groups.

Evaluation Questions

1. To what extent is the Great Expectations program for foster students enrolled in VCC being implemented with fidelity?
2. How do Great Expectations student participants' GPAs compare with the GPAs of Pell Grant recipients at the institution?
3. What are Great Expectation participants' retention rates in college compared to Pell Grant recipients at the college?
4. What are the perceptions of Great Expectations program staff regarding the aspects of the program that influence the effectiveness of the program?
5. What recommendations do Great Expectations program staff have for improving the program?

Program Evaluation Approach

This program evaluation approach is drawn from the pragmatic paradigm and use branch of program evaluation. This model tests the effectiveness of a program through data collection that allows for conclusions to be drawn. Stufflebeam's (2003) CIPP model provides the main

theme for this program evaluation. The CIPP model's underlying theme is improvement. I wish for this program evaluation to guide administrative decisions.

Description of the Program Evaluation

I began the program evaluation by analyzing the Great Expectations Coaches' Reference Manual against current practices using a discrepancy analysis. To do so, I interviewed the Great Expectations coach, the Great Expectations administrative assistant, the Dean of Student Services, and the Vice-President for Student Affairs. I used qualitative coding and thematic analyses to evaluate staff interview answers. In the examination of GPA and retention data for student participants, I used statistical analysis. I had planned to interview as many students as possible in the 3-year period of the program; however, after every reasonable effort was made to pursue student interviews (including the use of monetary incentives), the effort had to be abandoned.

Role of the Researcher

I am a research-participant for this program evaluation. I was an employee of VCC most recently employed as an academic advisor in the Counseling & Advising Office on a suburban campus. There is a chance that I may have previously interacted with the Great Expectations students in my role as academic advisor; however, because Great Expectation students are encouraged to seek academic advisement from the Great Expectations coach, the likelihood of this being a reality is slim. I played an active role in the hiring of the program's assistant as I served on the search committee. I am also a foster care alumna; thus, I have particular empathy for the program participants. However, my undergraduate institution did not have services or a program like Great Expectations during my enrollment. I did not receive any funding or scholarships based on my foster care status or have any experiences similar to being a foster

youth in a program similar to Great Expectations. I attempted to be precise and exact in my data collection and worked conscientiously to remain objective during my evaluation of the data.

Data Sources

Coaches Reference Guide

The official Coaches Reference Guide from the Coordinator for Inclusivity & Great Expectations Program Director at the state-level was a primary source for determining program design guidelines. The Coaches Reference Guide includes the coach's duties and responsibilities, ideas for forming a college-wide advisory board, and ideas for a mentoring program. It also contains references for the coaches and sample forms such as invitation letter for students, student information sheet, Great Expectations fact sheet, participant and coach commitment form, image release form, referral form, release of information form, steps to enrollment form, career exploration activity sheet, checklists, financial aid informational guide, best practices guide for documentation by coach, outreach participation record, student activity participation record, student incentives record form, and student supplies received form. I compared details found in the reference guide to actual practice. The document was analyzed to assess the fidelity of implementation in terms of Question 1 in the program evaluation. Memos, emails, and program documents were reviewed as discovered for purposes of validation.

Data from the Office of Institutional Effectiveness

With the permission of the VP of Student Affairs, I obtained data from the Office of Institutional Effectiveness in the form of reports from the Oracle-based Student Information System used by the VCC System. I provided the Office of Institutional Effectiveness with the specific names of Great Expectations student participants for a three-year period. I received the students' GPA data and enrollment activity data. To contrast with another population that has

also come to higher education under-resourced, I requested Pell Grant students' GPA average and enrollment activity data in reports.

Interviews

Through interviews with the program coach, the program administrative assistant, the Dean of Student Services, and the Vice-President of Student Affairs, I gathered the interviewees' thoughts on the program's implementation, the program's functioning, any suggested improvements, and anything else the interviewees were willing to share through a protocol created by me. See Table 2 for interview questions for staff. Creswell and Creswell (2017) suggested preparing an interview protocol that includes an introduction and closing instructions. I transcribed the interviews through Zoom software using recorded interviews, coded them, and identified categories and themes. I counted the frequency of terms and used sample narrative passages for connecting themes. Due to an error, the Great Expectations assistant interview had to be manually transcribed.

Table 2

Specifications for Staff Interview

Interview Prompt	Research Question	Extant Research
Please describe the role you play in Great Expectations. Provide details as if I know absolutely nothing about the program.	4	Huang et al. (2019); O'Donnell (2019); Salazar (2012)
What are some of your perceived successes of the program?	4	Huang et al. (2019); O'Donnell (2019)
Are there any areas of Great Expectations that needs improvement? If so, what are your suggested improvements?	5	Huang et al. (2019); O'Donnell (2019)
Is there anything else that you would like me to know about Great Expectations?	4, 5	Huang et al. (2019); O'Donnell (2019)

Data Collection

I secured a copy of the Great Expectations Coaches' Reference Manual from Dr. Rachel Strawn, the statewide Great Expectations Program Director. I determined whether the practices were followed and if the forms provided were used. I received the Great Expectations students' and Pell Grant students' GPA data and enrollment activity data from the institution's Office of Institutional Effectiveness through the permission of the Vice-President of Student Affairs. I interviewed all staff from the administrative assistant to the Vice-President of Student Affairs. I interviewed the staff through Zoom.

Data Analysis

Question 1: To what extent is the Great Expectations program for foster students enrolled in VCC's program being implemented with fidelity?

I began the program evaluation by analyzing the Great Expectations Coaches' Reference Manual against current practices using a discrepancy analysis. I looked to the practices listed within the reference manual and determined whether the practices were followed or if the forms provided within the manual were used by staff. I detailed whether the following forms were utilized based upon the feedback provided by the Great Expectations coach: invitation letter for students, student information sheet, Great Expectations fact sheet, participant and coach commitment form, image release form, referral form, release of information form, steps to enrollment form, career exploration activity sheet, checklists, financial aid informational guide, best practices guide for documentation by coach, outreach participation record, student activity participation record, student incentives record form, and student supplies received form.

Question 2: How do Great Expectations participants' GPAs compare with the GPAs of Pell Grant recipients at the institution?

Using 3 years of data (academic years 2020-2021, 2021-2022, 2022-2023), I compared Great Expectation participants' GPAs with Pell Grant recipients' GPAs. I had three groups: Great Expectation students who receive the Pell Grant, all Great Expectation students, and non-Great Expectation participants who receive Pell. I measured these three groups to see if there was a difference between them especially in regard to Great Expectations students who received Pell and non-Great Expectation Pell recipients. I wanted to witness any patterns and evaluate any differences and similarities.

There were no preintervention or postintervention periods as the participants were (or were not in the case of Pell Grant recipients) exposed to the Great Expectations program for the duration of the academic year. I calculated Fall and Spring term GPAs for both student groups within each academic year. Additionally, I analyzed both mean GPAs and standard deviations, which gave a more accurate picture than the mean GPAs alone. I graphed the patterns over the three years to show how all Great Expectations students and Great Expectations students specifically receiving Pell Grants are both performing compared to the Pell Grant recipients.

Question 3: What are Great Expectation participants' retention rates in college compared to Pell Grant recipients at the college?

As noted in the description of Question 2, I collected 3 years of data (academic years 2020-2021, 2021-2022, 2022-2023) for both Great Expectation and Pell Grant students. This process allowed me to review the patterns of Great Expectation participants' retention rates compared to the Pell Grant students. There were no preintervention or postintervention periods; the participants were exposed to the Great Expectations program for the duration of the academic

year. I had two groups: the inclusive Great Expectation population and non-Great Expectation students who received Pell. I reviewed and analyzed these groups' graduation rates.

Question 4: What are the perceptions of Great Expectations program staff regarding the aspects of the program that influence the effectiveness of the program?

I asked the Great Expectations staff a series of interview questions. I used qualitative coding and thematic analyses to evaluate interview answers. I followed Saldaña's (2016) ideas for in vivo coding or using codes that "derive from the actual language of the participant" (p. 77). This coding relied on the categorization of actions compared to descriptive codes. I used the in vivo coding to discover the themes of the interviews. I used "meticulous attention to language and images" to identify the values and patterns of my interviews (Saldaña, 2016, p. 11). I sought to honor the staff's voices. I employed the use of pre-coding as I conducted each interview and underlined, circled, and highlighted words that seem to indicate key pieces of quotes. I created a codebook with my emergent codes listing my codes, their descriptions, and a clear example. My coding was completed manually without programming assistance. After careful and consistent coding, I created a summary based upon the themes or "subtle and tacit processes" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 12). I used diagrams to organize my data and their relationships. I conducted pre-coding prior to the conclusion of all interviews. I created a codebook for the staff interviews, and I analyzed the coding to understand the staff interview themes.

Question 5: What recommendations do Great Expectations program staff have for improving the program?

I asked the Great Expectations staff directly their recommendations for improving the program. I used qualitative coding and thematic analyses to evaluate the interview answers. Similar to research question #4, I used in vivo coding of the staff recommendations.

Additionally, I conducted pre-coding prior to the conclusion of all interviews. I created a codebook for the staff interviews, and I analyzed the coding to understand the staff interview themes. A summary of the data sources and data analysis techniques connected to the five research questions is provided in Table 3.

Table 3

Great Expectations Program Evaluation Data Analysis Plan

Evaluation Question	Data Sources	Data Analysis
1: implemented with fidelity?	Coach's Reference Guide	Discrepancy analysis
2: Great Expectations participants GPAs compared with Pell recipients	SIS data from Office of Institutional Effectiveness	Quantitative data analysis
3: Great Expectations participants retention rates compared with Pell recipients.	SIS data from Office of Institutional Effectiveness	Quantitative data analysis
4: Great Expectations perceptions of influence	Interviews	Qualitative coding and thematic analyses

Note. GPA = Grade Point Average; SIS = Student Information System

Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations

Assumptions

In this study, I assumed that all participants were honest in their answers and did not have hidden agendas and priorities in their disclosures. I assumed that staff did not view me as possessing any negative preconceived notions or negative thoughts about the interviewed staff or the program due to my previous role at the institution. I assumed that they did not come into the interviews with an agenda or ulterior motives.

Deliminations

I decided to study a 3-year time period because I believed that I would be more likely to be able to track down students for interviews when they were recently associated with the program. However, after having to eliminate student interviews from the program evaluation, the focus on the 3-year period seems to align better with practicality of having readily available data and recent staff participants to interview.

Limitations

Participation in this program was completely voluntary and there was a chance that subjects could have been unresponsive or unreachable during the period of the study. This evaluation was being conducted at only one institution, and thus, the findings are not generalizable to other schools. Other institutions might not find the data relevant to them as they implement their programs differently. It was very difficult to analyze graduation rates for community college students as students attend both part-time and full-time and are often not continuously enrolled. In comparison to 4-year institutions where students are tracked for completion within 6 years; community college students' completion of associate's degrees is measured within a 3-year time span. Stop-outs, pauses in enrollments, and transfers to other institutions all affect retention and graduation rates at a community college.

Ethical Considerations

I created an informed consent guides for participants that documents their permission. See Appendix. I kept the data and all keys on my personal, password-protected computer. At the conclusion my dissertation review, data will be securely disposed of per standards of the field. I worked with my dissertation chair to obtain approval to conduct the study from the William & Mary Education Institutional Review Committee (EDIRC). Following the EDIRC permission, I

worked with the Vice President of Student Affairs and the Office of Institutional Effectiveness to obtain institutional permissions required of VCC.

Every attempt was made to mask the identity of the staff through the pseudonym of the institution; however, given the small number of staff associated with the program as there was only one coach, administrative assistant (there were two assistants over the course of my study; however, only one could be interviewed before leaving the institution), Dean for Student Services, and Vice-President for Student Affairs, there is a chance that the individuals' identities could be divulged.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This chapter contains the findings of the research and is divided into five main sections by research questions. The sections detail the results of an artifacts review (Question 1), quantitative data provided by VCC (Questions 2 and 3), and the information gleaned from the VCC staff interviewed (Questions 4 and 5). Each section describes the findings with the absence of any interpretations or discussion of implications as these details are presented in Chapter 5.

Question 1: To what extent is the Great Expectations program for foster students enrolled in VCC being implemented with fidelity?

VCC and Related Documents Considered

Dr. Rachel Strawn, the Coordinator of Inclusivity & Great Expectations Program Director in Richmond, Virginia, provided the official Great Expectations Coaches Reference Guide. It was sent as an email attachment and included welcome information and best practices for a Great Expectations coach along with sample documents to use. It also included details on Financial Aid for the Virginia Community College System. The two main goals were listed as "student access" and "student success."

The manual included a guide for tasks that should be completed for all Great Expectations students, including the completion of their Great Expectations application, their community college application and starting term, the completion of Virginia Wizard website exercises, career planning, resumes and cover letters, the financial aid process, the Great Expectations website information, completion of an assessment, and job search/employment soft

skills. There was a Career Exploration page for students to complete with the Virginia Wizard website. There was "What's Next?" that included steps to enrolling at the community college. The manual also contained a referral form, a release of information authorization, an image release form, a Great Expectations fact sheet, and a form letter for a social worker to complete explaining a student's eligibility for the program. The manual provided a file folder checklist, a student information sheet, and a student template invitation to Great Expectations. Regarding programming, there was an effective mentoring program guideline sheet, ideas for forming an advisory board, an outline for a mentoring program, and helpful hints for outreach and building partnerships for the campus coaches along with expectations and a personal checklist for the coaches. Finally, there were forms to document student supplies received, student incentives received, student activity participation, and student outreach participation.

Overall, VCC documents are more concise and often available electronically to students compared to the statewide manual. VCC's Great Expectation Program information sheet requested student's name, phone number, housing situation, transportation situation, food status (i.e., food insecure or not), FAFSA status, tuition status, textbook situation, and asks the student directly what they need from the Great Expectations program. The program interest form was an online form. VCC does not use release forms; instead, the program coach stated that they rely on verbal release and permissions. VCC's Great Expectations had a "Next Step" flier, no Virginia Wizard forms, and VCC did not keep a hard copy folder on students. An electronic record was kept on each student without a checklist. The student sign-in sheets asked for names and a phone number instead of signatures compared to the state forms. As opposed to release forms for student incentives, school supplies, gas cards, and textbooks, VCC made copies of provided goods and had students sign for it and provide a receipt that the gift card was used as applicable

(e.g., gas receipts for convenience store gift cards to prove that gas was actually purchased at the convenience store as opposed to an unauthorized purchase such as alcohol). VCC Great Expectation's office worked with the marketing department to make the gas card application, textbook assistance form, and course assistance form available to students online. Instead of a welcome letter, students were provided an event with a PowerPoint presentation, and the VCC Great Expectations coach said that they meet students where they are and try to be adaptable. See Table 4 for a descriptive analysis.

Table 4

Table of Official Great Expectations Manual Description

Form	Manual	VCC Forms
Information Sheet	Includes Social Service information, child(ren) information, employment information, and WIA questions	Includes name, phone, housing, transportation, food, FAFSA, tuition, books, question about why student require assistance
Welcome Letter	Paper form	PowerPoint Presentation
Interest form	Paper form	Gravity/Online form
Release forms	Paper form	Verbal Release
What's Next form?	Paper form	Next Steps forms with different design but same information being explained
No paper folder record	Paper folder checklist	Students' files are electronic, not paper copies
Virginia Wizard forms	Paper form	No forms, VA Wizard being "fizzled out" according to Great Expectations coach
Assistance forms	Paper forms	Gravity/Online forms for Textbooks, bus pass, and Tuition Assistance
Records of student incentives, student supplies, & student gift cards received	Paper forms	Documented email correspondence & student signatures on photocopy of incentive received
Student Event Sign-in	Students print name and sign	Students print name and indicate best phone number

Note. VA = Virginia; FAFSA = Free Application for Federal Student Aid; VCC = Virginia Community College; WIA = Workforce Investment Act.

Fidelity of Implementation Analysis

With a careful review of the coach's manual, I created a chart listing program features and implementation responsibilities of semester by semester. The categories of program features are derived from the coaches' manual best practices chart. I indicated whether the category has been fully implemented, partially implemented, or not implemented on Table 5. I define "fully" implemented as 76–100% implementation with "partially" implemented as 50–75% implementation. Not implemented is measured as 49% and below implementation.

Table 5

Program Features Implementation

Program Feature	Implementation Status
Program Supplies	Partially, 50%
Outreach	Partially, 50%
Student Supplies	Fully, 100%
Student Activities	Fully, 80%
Student Transportation	Partially, 50%
Emergency Funds	Fully, 100%

Program supplies are categorized as partially implemented as there appeared to be very little funding for programming supplies. No receipts were provided that showed the ability to purchase supplies for Great Expectations. Outreach was also described as partially implemented as the program assistants began their employment during the study and ample time had not passed for these additional staffing resources to reflect a fully implemented outreach program.

Student supplies, student activities, and emergency funds were all fully implemented and supported by documentation of supplies, gift cards provided to students, receipts, and activity records. Finally, student transportation was indicated as partially implemented. In the manual, using a state vehicle to transport participants to a college visit was an example of this program feature. Although gift cards were provided to students for transportation purposes under student supplies, no state vehicle was used for the program. It is important to note that the Great Expectations manual distinguishes "transportation" as following the institution's travel policy for student travel and not assistance with transportation to classes, such as gift cards for gas.

Outreach is considered to be conducted at 50%. During the study, there were two assistants, who each resigned after short periods of time. As it was their main responsibility to gather the Great Expectations students in group activities and individual mentoring and coaching, their absence meant that these events could not occur. The short turnaround time in the hiring and resignation of these positions allowed little time for bonds to be created between these staff and the Great Expectations students. The Great Expectations coach stated that these resignations, coupled with the difficulty in matching the varying student schedules with an acceptable time for all students to meet, further complicated the ability for the Great Expectations students to bond with staff and their fellow students.

While the technical aspects of the manual are presented as clear and complete, the reality is that services provided to Great Expectation students demonstrated little evidence that the students were being given the support necessary for them to be successful. Thus, based on the available evidence, it is reasonable to conclude that fidelity in terms of student support is absent. There is little proof that the Great Expectations students were succeeding based on findings, such as sufficient GPAs and continued enrollment in the community college.

Question 2: How do Great Expectations student participants' GPAs compare with the GPAs of Pell Grant recipients at the institution?

I reviewed Pell Grant students, Great Expectations students with Pell, and all students in the Great Expectations program. The average GPA for the six semesters for the Pell Grant recipients was greater than 2.00; there was only one semester in which the average GPA for the Great Expectations students was greater than 2.00. Table 6 presents the findings for student grade point averages for the six semesters studied for Pell Grant recipients, Great Expectation students receiving Pell, and all Great Expectation students (Pell Grant recipients and non-Pell Grant recipients); this was a semester-by-semester analysis. The table makes clear that there are GPA differences between Great Expectations students and Pell Grant recipients. The Pell Grant recipient category had a greater number of students (over 3,500) in contrast to the Great Expectation student categories which were often single digits. General population data (excluding Great Expectations students and Pell Grant recipients) were also included for contrast and comparison purposes. For the category of all Great Expectations students (Pell and no Pell), the GPA ranged from 1.59 to 2.33 for the six terms measured. Great Expectation's students with Pell GPAs ranged from 1.57 to 2.28. Pell Grant recipients' GPAs ranged from 2.61 to 2.81. In comparison to the above groups, the general population GPA was higher, ranging from 2.66 to 3.11.

Table 6

Comparison GPA Means, Ranges, & Standard Deviations

Category of Students	Fall 2020 GPA	Spring 2021 GPA	Fall 2021 GPA	Spring 2022 GPA	Fall 2022 GPA	Spring 2023 GPA	Overall GPA
All Pell Recipients	2.79 Range: 0.0-4.0 *SD*=1.10 *N*=5,403	2.81 Range: 0.0-4.0 *SD*=1.05 *N*=5,003	2.67 Range: 0.0-4.0 *SD*=1.18 *N*=5,118	2.74 Range: 0.0-4.0 *SD*=1.10 *N*=4,453	2.61 Range: 0.0-4.0 *SD*=1.19 *N*=4,662	2.69 Range: 0.0-4.0 *SD*=1.09 *N*=4,256	2.71 Range: 0.0-4.0 *SD*=1.12 *N*=28,895
Pell with Zero (0.00) GPAs removed	3.00 Range: 0.04-4.0 *SD*=0.83 *N*=4,314	2.97 Range: 0.06-4.0 *SD*=0.84 *N*=3,999	2.93 Range: 0.08-4.0 *SD*=0.88 *N*=4,015	2.91 Range: 0.09-4.0 *SD*=0.89 *N*=3,566	2.86 Range: 0.08-4.0 *SD*=0.92 *N*=3,684	2.85 Range: 0.06-4.0 *SD*=0.90 *N*=4,017	2.92 Range: 0.04-4.0 *SD*=0.88 *N*=23,595
Great Expectation Students w/Pell	2.02 Range: 0.0-4.0 *SD*=1.09 *N*=8	1.82 Range: 0.0-3.13 *SD*=1.06 *N*=9	2.16 Range 0.90-3.77 *SD*=0.81 *N*=7	2.28 Range: 1.00-4.00 *SD*=1.06 *N*=8	1.57 Range: 0.0-3.93 *SD*=1.18 *N*=13	1.96 Range: 0.0-3.88 *SD*=1.25 *N*=12	1.94 Range: 0.0-4.0 *SD*=1.13 *N*=57
Great Expectation Students w/Pell with 0.00 GPAs removed	2.31 Range: 1.0-4.0 *SD*=0.83 *N*=7	2.05 Range: 0.50-3.13 *SD*=0.893 *N*=8	2.16 Range: 0.90-3.77 *SD*=0.81 *N*=7	2.28 Range: 1.00-4.00 *SD*=1.06 *N*=8	2.04 Range: 0.75-3.93 *SD*=0.92 *N*=10	2.35 Range: 0.80-3.88 *SD*=0.98 *N*=10	2.20 Range: 0.5-4.0 *SD*=0.94 *N*=50
All Great Expectation Students	1.80 Range: 0.0-4.0 *SD*=1.14 *N*=17	1.93 Range: 0.0-3.24 *SD*=1.01 *N*=13	1.75 Range: 0.00-3.77 *SD*=1.16 *N*=13	2.33 Range: 1.00-4.00 *SD*=0.94 *N*=11	1.59 Range: 0.0-3.93 *SD*=1.17 *N*=21	1.90 Range: 0.00-3.88 *SD*=1.29 *N*=18	1.85 Range: 0.0-4.0 *SD*=1.16 *N*=93
All GE Students with 0.00 GPAs removed	2.19 Range: 0.16-4.00 *SD*=0.86 *N*=14	2.09 Range: 0.50-3.24 *SD*=0.87 *N*=12	2.28 Range: 0.90-3.77 *SD*=0.75 *N*=10	2.33 Range: 1.00-4.00 *SD*=0.94 *N*=11	1.97 Range: 0.09-3.93 *SD*=0.98 *N*=17	2.28 Range: 0.14-3.88 *SD*=1.07 *N*=15	2.17 Range: 0.09-4.0 *SD*=0.94 *N*=79
General Population (All VCC excluding Great Expectations and Pell Grant recipients)	3.09 Range: 0.0-4.0 *SD*=0.79 *N*=554	3.11 Range: 0.0-4.0 *SD*=0.80 *N*=649	2.79 Range: 0.0-4.0 *SD*=0.98 *N*=1,026	2.75 Range: 0.0-4.0 *SD*=0.99 *N*=1,165	2.71 Range: 0.0-4.0 *SD*=0.98 *N*=825	2.66 Range: 0.0-4.0 *SD*=0.98 *N*=751	2.83 Range: 0.0-4.0 *SD*=0.96 *N*=4,970

Note. Calculation of overall averages, means, and standard deviations combined populations across 6 terms and were calculated using Excel functions. VCC = Virginia Community College, GPA = Grade Point Average.

T-tests for independent samples were performed measuring the cumulative GPA as of the last semester for students. For the 13,831 Pell Grant students, the mean GPA was 2.46 and the standard deviation was 1.237, while the 53 Great Expectations students mean GPA was 1.61

with a standard deviation of 1.208. The t-test showed a statistically significant difference between the Pell Grant group and Great Expectations group with the data favoring the Pell Grant group. For the last term GPA, t=4.991 (df = 13,882) yielded a two-sided $p < 0.001$ with a mean difference of 0.850. See Table 7.

Table 7

t-Test of Cumulative GPAs as of Last Semester Term

	Pell (N = 13,831)		Great Expectations (N = 53)		t-test
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	
Last Term (cumulative GPA of last term)	2.46	1.237	1.61	1.208	4.991*

Note. GPA = term
*two-sided $p < 0.001$

Because many students had a 0 GPA, I removed the 0 GPAs from the group to see if and how it affected the data. A 0 GPA represents students who failed all classes, withdrew from classes, or earned *unsatisfactory*, *repeat*, or *satisfactory* grades in developmental or remedial classes (courses listed below college-level). Thus, a student could technically pass all developmental-level classes but enrolled in all developmental classes and earn a 0 GPA. When the 0 GPA students were removed from the means, the means for Pell Grant students and the general population (excluding Great Expectations students) were very close to 3.0. Upon review, the *t*-tests demonstrated that removing the 0 GPA students from the groups did not result in any significant difference from the previous analysis which included the 0 GPAs in the data.

Great Expectations students had the highest average GPAs of 2.20 when they also concurrently received Pell Grants in conjunction with being participants in the Great

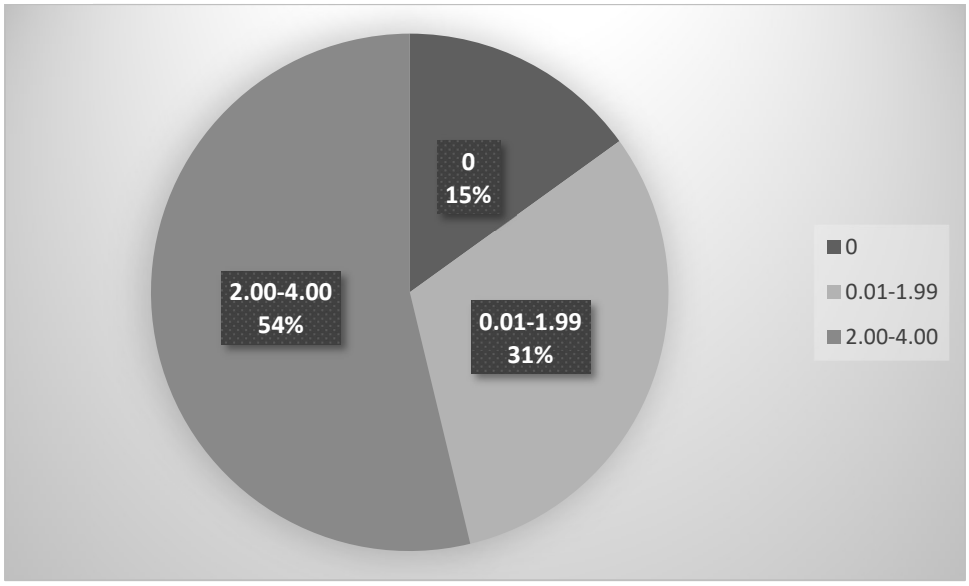
Expectations program with 0 GPAs removed. Without being a Pell Grant recipient and including the 0 GPAs, Great Expectations students had a significantly lower average GPA at 1.88. This provides support that Great Expectations coaches and assistants should be encouraged to ensure that all of their students are filing the FAFSA and ensuring that students are encouraged to investigate and research all avenues for college funding to help ensure that students stay above that all important 2.0 GPA threshold.

Great Expectations Students and Term GPAs

In calculating GPAs, we examined the 53 Great Expectations students who, as a group, were registered for 93 terms (e.g., one student might have attended one term while another attended four terms). Although the GPA average of Great Expectation students was usually less than Pell Grant recipients. This is mostly because out of the 93 Great Expectation student terms, 15% earned a GPA of a 0.0 and 31% earned below a 1.99. More positively, 54% earned above a 2.0 GPA. See Figure 3 for a visual of Great Expectations students' GPAs. The purpose of this figure is to show that although the Great Expectations students have a great deal of room for improvement, the students earned over a 2.0 GPA during at least half the terms.

Figure 3

Great Expectations GPA Terms



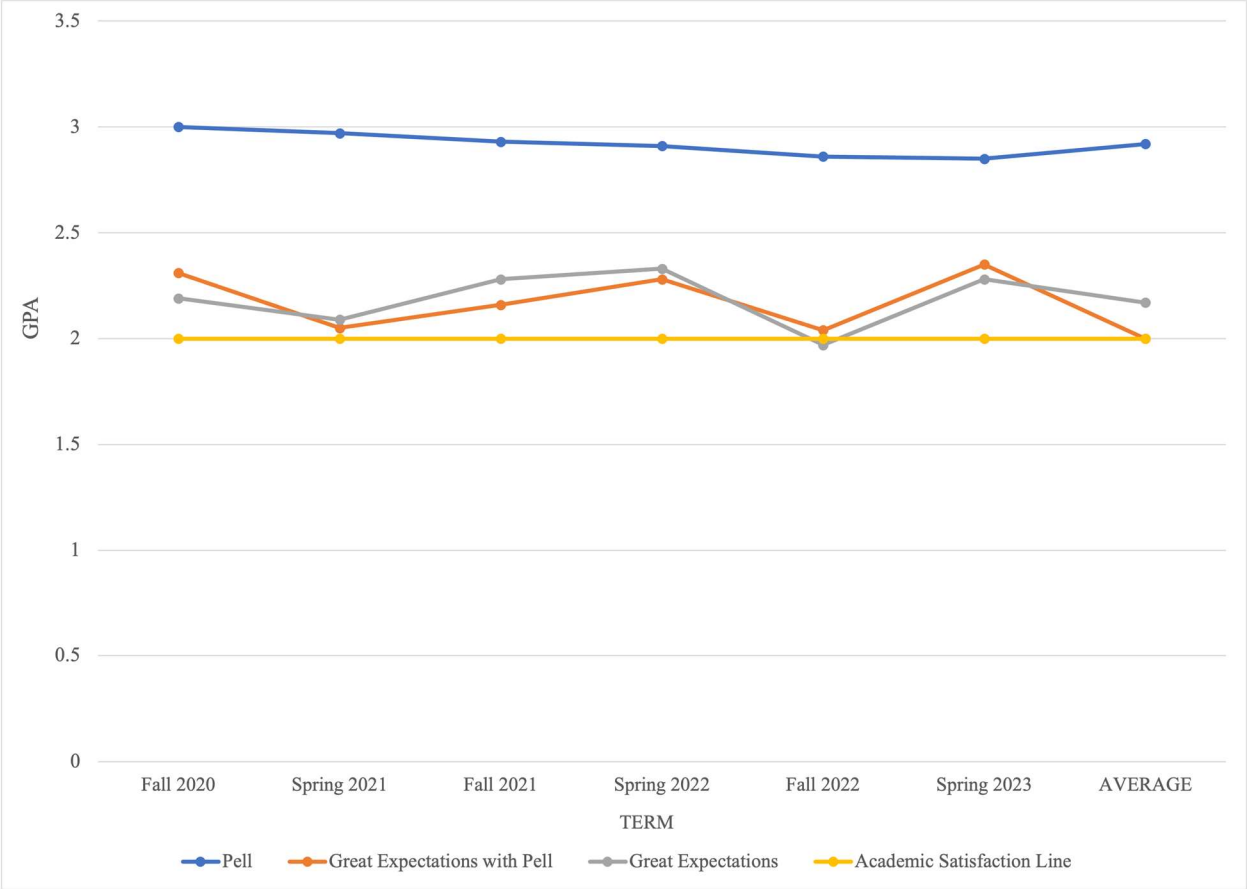
Note. Numbers represent GPAs. GPA = Grade Point Average.

VCC GPAs

It is important to note that a 2.00 GPA is a significant marker at VCC, because any student who falls below that GPA could be placed on academic probation or encounter other consequences, up to and including suspension and dismissal if the GPA does not increase in future terms. In Figure 4, this line is called the academic satisfaction line. The general student population had the highest average GPAs with the exception of the Spring 2023 term ($M = 2.66$) where both the Pell Grant recipients and Pell Grant recipients with 0 GPAs removed were respectively higher at 2.69 and 2.85. Compared with Pell Grant recipients, the Great Expectations students had the lower GPAs overall. Figure 4 provides a visual comparison of Pell students and Great Expectation students by various categories with 0 GPAs removed.

Figure 4

Pell Versus Great Expectations Populations With Zero GPAs Removed



Note. GPA = Grade Point Average.

Question 3: What are Great Expectation participants' retention rates in college compared to Pell Grant recipients at the college?

In a comparison of graduation rates, it was found that 18.1% of the Pell Grant group graduated, and 7.5% of the Great Expectations group graduated. A Chi-square test suggests that the graduation rates are significantly different. The general VCC population graduated at a rate of 28% in 2020 for the student cohort that began in Fall 2019. VCC measures the graduation rate of full-time, curricular-placed students within 150% of program time, which is three years for an

associate degree. The graduation calculations that were made using the Pell Grant groups and the Great Expectations groups cannot easily be compared to the general population cohort as these groups contain both part-time and full-time students. See Table 8 for a Chi-square analysis.

Table 8

Graduation by Group

	Graduated		Did Not Graduate		
Group	*N*	%	*n*	%	Total
Pell Grant Recipients	2507	18.1%	11,324	81.9%	13,831
Great Expectations Participants	4	7.5%	49	92.5%	53

Note. χ^2 (1, N = 13884) = 3.99, p = .046.

I originally planned to conduct an in-depth analysis of a term-by-term comparison of the groups to measure retention. After further exploration and discussion with professors, I recognized that graduation rate is truly the best way to measure success, especially at the community college level where such a high percentage of students attend for more than 4 semesters for their 2-year degree due to part-time study. At the community college, many students "stop-out" or "pause" for a semester or two. In other words, many community college students do not find their academic journeys to be one of continuous enrollment. Personal and professional reasons cause many students to take breaks in their studies before returning to the community college or transferring their academic studies to another postsecondary institution. If I completed a term-by-term analysis, I would be comparing part-time and full-time students as if

they are in the same category and this may cause an overgeneralization based on unrepresentative data.

Question 4: What are the perceptions of Great Expectations program staff regarding the aspects of the program that influence the effectiveness of the program?

Roles of Staff & Details of Great Expectations Program

Through interviews with the Vice-President of Student Affairs, Dean of Student Services, Great Expectations Coach/Coordinator, and Great Expectations assistant recorded and transcribed via Zoom, I learned their thoughts on the effectiveness and successes of Great Expectations.

Perceived Successes of Program

The Vice President of Student Affairs stated that success was seeing students graduate from VCC and "get what they need and to really focus on their education." It is important to note that across the three academic years encompassed by this study, four Great Expectations students graduated from VCC. The Dean of Student Services stated that the "engagement and partnerships are things that I believe are very [much] our pluses" and that this will allow the institution "to continue in the direction in which we're going." The Great Expectations assistant said that "the major successes of the program [is] that we have different resources in place to help our students as they move through their educational journey." When asked about the successes of the program, the Great Expectations coach exclaimed "Wow! Oh, gosh! There's a lot!" She went on to explain,

> One of them, primarily, is seeing students pass their classes. Oftentimes, students at the community college level are first generation students and by those students who are already faced with the impact that foster care has or had on their life. It's that, coupled

> with the typical barriers of not being academically prepared, lacking in the areas of time management, and just basic life skills. So [when] I see a student who is able to overcome those obstacles, that definitely is a perceived success.

The Dean mentioned that the level of student engagement with the program has increased during his tenure and stated that "engagement and partnerships are things that I believe are…our pluses," and he stated that the continuation of student engagement and partnerships will allow the school to continue in its positive direction. The Dean also cited the addition of the program's assistant as a help to the program. The Great Expectations assistant described the funding that the program provides to students as a success. She stated,

> It's a good feeling to know that if our students and when our students come to us—we may be able to provide you with some funding to kind of help you cover the cost so that you can stay in school, so that you can continue on with your education, until you're in a position to do something different.

Although these perceptions may be only partially accurate when considering the GPAs and staying-in-school performance of Great Expectations students, the statements of leadership and staff did show their value for and commitment to the program. The dean emphasized the importance of students and said, "It's just that we need to appreciate the jewels that are among us and not discount them because of, you know, perceived value."

Themes of Effectiveness

Several themes related to the effectiveness of the program emerged from the interviews. These included "engagement," also framed as "student engagement," and "engaged." As described by the interviewees, the connection made between students and staff and the related "engagement" is an important part of building the success of this program. The Dean mentioned

these terms several times when he discussed the successes of Great Expectations. The Great Expectations coach also mentioned engagement as students transform during the semester from unengaged to "seeing them resurface" and seek the program's assistance. Both the coach and assistant described Great Expectations students engaging with them to seek both scholarly advice and to apply for monetary assistance.

A second theme was partnership. The Great Expectation coach describes the connections with the students and how they grow over the semesters and over time. Many students sought out the coach as a mentor or partner in their educational journey. Access was another theme that emerged. The Vice President cited "access" as an area where the state could improve especially related to "access" to foster care youth prior to their enrollment in college although the Vice President acknowledged that she understood the lack of "access" related to "laws." She noted that the local department of social services was unable to share lists of foster care youth's names with VCC due to privacy laws. Access seems to be a success for the students already in the program.

A final theme that participants mentioned was Life Skills. The resources, such as assistance with transportation and textbooks, and the life skills training which are provided to the Great Expectations students contribute to the bones of the program when examining framework supporting student success. All of the interviewees mentioned the characteristic student resources and services that compose the Great Expectations program and how these contributed to the success of the students and subsequently the program. Table 9 shows themes of effectiveness of Great Expectations.

Table 9

Themes of Effectiveness

Theme	Definition
Engagement	Activities and plans that involve (engage) students with a particular goal
Partnership	One-on-one student-staff interaction that is the beginning of a healthy mentorship or relationship
Access	Ability for student to easily obtain resources and assistance from program
Life Skills	Learned habits that benefit students for the long-term beyond higher education alone

The coordinator was the only interviewee who used the word "holistic," and both the vice-president and coordinator mentioned the word "retention." Interestingly, only the coordinator mentioned student success by name.

Question 5: What recommendations do Great Expectations program staff have for improving the program?

Full-Time Staff

The Vice President of Student Affairs explicitly stated that the Great Expectations program needs more staff. She explained that one time there was a full-time coach/coordinator and two part-time staff. She stated that staff is needed for recruitment and to visit the high schools in specific districts and divulged that the current coach/coordinator in her position with Great Expectations is "in addition to her current role here at the college [as Interim Career Center Director]." The Vice President of Student Affairs shared that if VCC hired more staff that she believed VCC would have more students in the Great Expectations program. She shared that at the height of participation that there were as many as 40 students a year in the program, suggesting that this would require VCC staff onsite at the high schools to recruit to these

numbers once again. Along the same line of staffing needs, she also stated that the Great Expectations students need someone available to them "almost 24/7." Similarly, the Dean of Student Services mentioned needing funding for robust staffing and programing saying that the program needs the support of VCC instead of being "at the mercy of funding from another source…such as grants and special funds from the foundation." The Dean described the program as being "dormant" when he began his deanship. He also shared that VCC needs funding to have "a full-time staff person…the person we have now is has another job. She has two other jobs. So, she really…can't devote 100% of her time to the program." The Great Expectations coach echoed the Dean's thoughts when she said that VCC needs to make sure that "funding supports adequate staffing."

Funding

For the academic year studied, the Great Expectations coach shared that VCC received $52,185 from the Virginia General Assembly for the Great Expectations program for fiscal year 2023 (Coaching and Mentoring = $15,000; Housing Stipend = $10,000; Childcare Needs = $7,185; Transportation Needs = $20,000). There was no room in this budget for a full-time coach's salary at VCC. This greatly affects the program's ability to build relationships with students without a dedicated full-time staff member. The Great Expectation coach said,

> It takes a lot of elbow grease to retain, to recruit and retain students and having someone or some people dedicated to following those students. And I know we always say, you know, meet students where they are. Sometimes it takes a little extra mileage to meet those students where they are.

The coach continued by stating that the program needs to obtain "secure funding" to provide "consistent support." Secure funding means money that will be invested in Great Expectations

for the entire academic year and not removed or taken back if another department or program has a so-called need for the funds. The Dean stated that the current funding needs to match the funds that were provided at a greater amount as in past fiscal years and provide the Great Expectations students with "opportunities to soar just like everyone else."

Making Connections With Students

The Great Expectations assistant supported the coach's sentiments about support by saying that she thinks "we have more work than soldiers on the front line to reach out to all of our students and to be able to connect with all of our staff in a way that will bring a sense of community and understanding and knowing what the program's about." The coach described when she first began her role with Great Expectations how a student shared his concern with her that the program was "always changing staff." The assistant also says that one of the greatest challenges is "staying connected with our students; again, oftentimes, again our students are not only navigating education, they are getting to experience what it is like to be an adult." The Great Expectations assistant stated that the program staff must "reach out to all of our students…[so students are]…able to connect with all of our staff in a way that will bring a sense of community and understanding and knowing what the program's about."

The Great Expectation coach described that Great Expectation student difficulties are compounded academically by their lack of skills as she said, "it's that, coupled with the typical barriers of not being academically prepared. Lacking in the areas of time management, and just basic life skills." Although the Great Expectation coach described attempting to establish life skills or study skills workshops, she often either has poor attendance by Great Expectation students or is unable to find the time to host such events given the responsibilities of her other job commitments while having lack of consistent help from a program assistant. The coach

stated that the Great Expectations students are excited to begin college but struggle as the semester continued, and she said,

> Attendance or program participation is that they are normally very eager to start, but once. Reality sets in with the, you know, attending classes, working and just trying to survive in life. Once all those become a reality, they fall off the radar.

Table 10 shows themes of improvement for Great Expectations.

Table 10

Themes for Improvement

Theme	Definitions
Full-time staff	Individual who works 35 to 40 hours a week exclusively for Great Expectations program without other College responsibilities/positions outside of program
Funding	Budget or financial amounts that are dedicated to program staff (such as salaries), students, and program expenses and known in advance for planning purposes
Make connections with students via publicity and advertising	Ability to draw new students to Great Expectations program and have them join activities, advisement, and mentorship through the distribution of program knowledge to faculty, staff, and community

As explained by the interviewed staff and administrators, staffing is a major area that needs to be concentrated on for major improvement to the program. Participants asserted that staff for this program need to be a consistent, present force in the lives of Great Expectations students. They noted that the staff's attention cannot be deterred by other job titles and responsibilities; rather, staff need to be fully present and reliable to the students. Consistent funding by the administration must occur as staff of Great Expectations need to know in advance how they can financially support Great Expectations students without giving students false hope or reason to not even try to inquire about assistance.

CHAPTER 5

RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter details the summary of findings of this program evaluation study. In the chapter, I evaluate and discuss the findings. Additionally, I review implications for policy and practice. Using this information, I provide recommendations for the Great Expectations program. Finally, I offer suggestions for future research in this field.

Summary of Major Findings

Evaluation Question #1: To what extent is the Great Expectations program for foster students enrolled in VCC being implemented with fidelity?

Areas of Success. VCC's Great Expectations program is being implemented with fidelity to some degree in particular areas. The staff's performances of their Great Expectations duties and responsibilities are consistent with the program design and expectations. However, it is important to note that these duties and responsibilities have been fulfilled while they balance completely different job responsibilities in other areas of VCC. In another area of implementation, the Great Expectations program works efficiently, such as in its adaption of documentation and paperwork requirements, especially when considering the amount of time that staff has to dedicate to program responsibilities. Additionally, the use of technology to convert paper forms to electronic forms and make them available to students shows creative thought and foresight in terms of maintaining detailed program records. The State might want to consider using some of the revisions that VCC has implemented in the forms and manual processes.

Areas for Improvement. One area where the Great Expectations program can improve is in outreach activities with students at VCC and in the community. It is worth noting that the hiring of a part-time staff member while this study was being conducted contributed to additional hours of hands-on assistance in this area. Unfortunately, during the study, two part-time staff members were hired and then subsequently quit, leaving the program without part-time staff at the end of this program evaluation. The Great Expectations staff appeared to need increased levels of communication with administration regarding expected funding especially as it relates to program supplies. Student transportation should be increased to provide students with new places and experiences for their education. The Great Expectations coach said,

> I think that if the powers that be could have more of a, not necessarily bird's eye view, but up close and personal view of the program. Then I think the funding or the direction of funding would be I guess, use more appropriately, because we do have funding available in some areas, but not all students need support for some of those targets of the grants, for example, childcare.

Bishop et al. (2019), reviewed in Chapter 2, highlighted that two-thirds of foster care alumni students had a 3.0 GPA or higher after participating in a program for foster youth at a Midwestern public university. The findings of that study state that support for foster youth "should go beyond financial support and include trauma-informed emotional and behavioral support" (p. 327). This supports the idea that Great Expectations provided some help to students with the assistance of monetary stipends for gas, housing, childcare, and so forth; however, it is not the complete picture. These students need emotional and relational support that they cannot possibly be receiving through Great Expectations currently due to a lack of staff funding.

The Great Expectation scholars would greatly benefit from gaining social and cultural capital through staff support in the Great Expectations program. Schlossberg (1984) wrote about mattering and marginality in her book. The Great Expectation students are an important example of a marginalized group and the importance of the group needing to feel like they matter. This can be partially accomplished through stipends; however, to complete the full picture, Great Expectation students need support from the Great Expectations staff. Similar to Lovitt's and Emerson's (2009) work in the discussion of successful scholars who participated both in extracurricular activities but also utilized social supports. Great Expectations students need more social supports. Hass and Graydon (2009) provide evidence that social support can also help students become more resilient and successful in college. Again, staffing is needed for Great Expectations to provide this social support.

Evaluation Question #2: How do Great Expectations student participants' grade point averages compare with the grade point averages of Pell Grant recipients at the institution?

Areas of Success. Although grade point averages need to improve, Great Expectations staff have engaged in the important work of respecting the autonomy of the foster alumni scholars. A 2.0 GPA is satisfactory and passing (a benchmark), while a 3.0 GPA is seen as an aspiration. These lower grade point averages can be seen as a reflection of these students' histories and the grade point average differences frequently "parallels the observed differences in ACT and high-school GPA scores at the time of [college] admissions" (Unrau et al., 2012). This finding provides evidence that foster care alumni have to overcome a greater number of disadvantages than traditional students or overcome a larger gap to reach the higher GPA averages.

Areas for Improvement. Overall, it was very clear that Great Expectations student participant's GPAs were lower than the grade point average of Pell Grant recipients at the institution over the six terms studied (Fall 2020, Spring 2021, Fall 2021, Spring 2022, Fall 2022, and Spring 2023). The average GPAs for the six semesters for the Pell Grant recipients were all over 2.0 while the average GPA for the Great Expectations students was just under 2.0, with only one semester with an average over 2.00. It is important to note, however, that when 0 GPAs were removed, the GE students' GPA with Pell Grants rose to 2.2 and the GE students to 2.17. Both populations' GPAs were lower than the general student population (non-Pell Grant recipients and non-Great Expectations students). The Pell Grant recipients were the largest group followed by the general population with Great Expectation students being the smallest with only 53 students.

More resources need to be put into place that support academic success for the Great Expectation students, such as having dedicated staff who can invest time in them. These Great Expectations students come to VCC with little to no social capital related to postsecondary education and need Great Expectations staff to guide them in the language, relationships, and structure of a post-secondary education. Great Expectation students find themselves with a need to learn college vocabulary and post-secondary curricula and degree paths. These students need to be reminded that a college community is designed to be a place of academic rigor and curiosity, but that it should also be a safe, supportive environment where one can seek guidance and mentorship from both faculty and staff.

Evaluation Question #3: What are Great Expectation participants' retention rates in college compared to Pell Grant recipients at the college?

Areas of Success. Foster care alumni may project a "pseudo-independence developed during the time growing up in foster care," and college staff may at first overlook this as a sign

of confidence (Unrau et al., 2012). Great Expectations staff appeared to acknowledge that all Great Expectations students need support regardless of their social and academic backgrounds and continued this support throughout the Great Expectations students' time at VCC.

Areas for Improvement. The research showed 7.5% of the Great Expectations group graduated and, in comparison, 18.1% of the Pell Grant group graduated. This compared with VCCS's Fall 2019 3-year cohort's graduation rate of 28%. There are statistically significant differences among these student groups. If Great Expectations had staff and more staff time to dedicate to the Great Expectations population, then, hopefully, relationships could be built, and skills could be learned while retention and graduation rates would be positively affected.

Evaluation Question #4: What are the perceptions of Great Expectations program staff regarding the aspects of the program that influence the effectiveness of the program?

Areas of Success. The Great Expectations program staff had a great deal to discuss when it came to the aspects of the program that influence the effectiveness of the program. The idea of the program being engaging and building partnerships was a common theme in the staff interviews. The importance of resources such as textbooks, tuition, and monetary assistance for transportation were highlighted as sources of success of the program; however, more resources could still be increased to allow for greater support to students and greater reach to more students. Staff indicated witnessing student success such as students passing classes and learning time management and other life skills that were also seen as proof of the program's effectiveness.

Evaluation Question #5: What recommendations do Great Expectations program staff have for improving the program?

Areas for Improvement. Great Expectations staff had several recommendations for the program. Multiple people emphasized the need to have better staffing. Multiple interviewees stated the importance of having one full-time staff person fully dedicated to Great Expectations without having other side jobs or outside responsibilities. Staff found themselves with competing responsibilities and deadlines from their positions outside of Great Expectations. Administrators must examine these additional roles and determine how they can be refined and streamlined so the focus can be maintained on Great Expectations. Consistent funding was another recommendation, and overall, consistent support from administration was repeatedly suggested. Better awareness of the program on campus and the need for continued advertisement of Great Expectations as a student resource also were noted as areas of weakness. Greater staffing, improved funding, and more direct promotion of the program would all contribute to a stronger, more robust Great Expectations program.

Discussion of Findings

A summary of the major findings from the study are provided in Table 11. Connecting the summary findings to the established research questions and considering the thematic analysis provided in Chapter 4, three key findings emerged: (a) the importance of organizational and operational functioning of the program, (b) the vitality of the role of staff in implementing the program, and (c) the ultimate goal of supporting student success. Each of these three findings are discussed in the sections that follow.

Table 11

Summary of Findings

Findings	Recommendation	Supporting Literature
Program does not have stable, consistent funding	Administration must dedicate a significant, consistent funding amount to program	Greeson et al. (2002), Huang et al. (2020); McMillen et al. (2003); Salazar (2012)
Program scholars have lowest average GPAs compared to other groups	Hire a full-time staff with competitive salary dedicated strictly to the program	Geiger et al, (2018); Health et al. (2021), Kim et al. (2019); Lovitt & Emerson (2009); Rosenberg & Kim (2018), Schlossberg (1984); Webber et al., (2013)
Program scholars have lowest graduation rates compared to other groups	Hire a full-time staff with competitive salary dedicated strictly to the program	Geiger et al, (2018); Health et al. (2021), Kim et al. (2019); Lovitt & Emerson (2009); Rosenberg & Kim (2018), Schlossberg (1984); Webber et al., (2013)
Program does not have stable, full-time staff member dedicated strictly to the program	Hire a full-time staff with competitive salary dedicated strictly to the program	Geiger et al, (2018); Health et al. (2021), Kim et al. (2019); Lovitt & Emerson (2009); Rosenberg & Kim (2018), Schlossberg (1984)

Organization and Operation of the Great Expectations Program

As noted above, VCC implemented the State's Great Expectation Coach's Manual with fidelity with a few areas needing improvement in selected aspects of the operation of the program. The artifact review provided evidence that the State's manual requested more rigidity for each of its directives. VCC took paths that required less paperwork and were faster to document while still maintaining confidential records. VCC improved the program's implementation by making forms available to students electronically as opposed to solely paper versions. This made the forms and resources more accessible to VCC students without the students having to make unnecessary trips to campus to access forms using gas and other resources that are already limited to students. The State would benefit from speaking to current coaches from all Great Expectations programs and learn how these coaches have adapted and revised the manual material for the improvement of the program directly benefiting students.

Central Role of Staff in the Great Expectations Program

The engagement and partnerships that the Great Expectations staff recognized as being effective to Great Expectations connects to the literature. Webber et al. (2013) wrote that "students who reported more frequent engagement in academic and social activities earned higher grades and reported higher levels of satisfaction with their college experience." Supportive interactions with faculty, staff, and students were found to have positive benefits for the students (Webber et al., 2013). Wolf-Wendel et al. (2009) focused on three concepts: involvement, integration, and engagement. They defined involvement as "the responsibility of the individual student" as the student is the "one who becomes involved" (p. 425). Their concept of integration is the idea that a student feels like they belong as they "learn and adopt the norms of the campus culture" (p. 425).

The idea of engagement falls to the institution to host a campus that offers opportunities for students to participate and connect with the campus community with programs such as Great Expectations (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Wolf-Wendel et al. (2009) wrote that most recent research has focused on the institution and its engagement and responsibilities as opposed to the students. With greater staff time, study skills workshops, one-on-one mentoring and coaching, and consistency in the presence of the same staff could all contribute to improved student success, including higher student GPAs.

Great Expectation Students' Performance

These Great Expectations students came to VCC with many disadvantages. Some students did not have stable housing, many did not have their own transportation and relied on the area buses or others to give them rides to classes, and some had dependents or children of their own. These disadvantages were compounded by the lack of preparation for college from

their K-12 education. Many of the Great Expectations students moved from school to school (school system to school system) during their secondary education. Some were never placed on the "college track" by their high school guidance counselors and, thus, never received appropriate college counseling or college-track courses such as honors, International Baccalaureate, or Advanced Placement courses.

Regarding student GPAs, the average GPA for the six semesters for the Pell Grant recipients are all over 2.0 and average GPA for the Great Expectations students was just under 2.0, with only one semester with an average over 2.0. It is important to note, however, that when 0 GPAs were removed, the GE students' GPA exceeded 2.0. In examination of graduation rates, 7.5% of the Great Expectations group graduated while 18.1% of the Pell Grant recipient group graduated. Ishitani (2020) found that when a public institution's Pell Grant recipient population increased by one percent, "this resulted in decreasing their graduation rate by 0.51 percentage points, on average" (p. 16). Ishitani (2020) also discovered that the size of the institution affected Pell Grant recipients' graduation rates with the increasing size of the institution relating to increased graduation rates of Pell Grant recipients at that institution. This suggests that more students with similar backgrounds make them feel more connected to each other. Yang and Mao (2021) wrote that the improvement of Pell Grant recipients' first-year GPA contributed to their increased enrollment in math and English courses andFk12 had a positive effect on graduation. Additionally, they commented that "at that midpoint of their college career, enhanced support will increase the likelihood that they [Pell Grant recipients] will go on to eventually graduate" (p. 119).

Implications for Policy and Practice

Liu (2020) found that "post-secondary educational support service is found to be the most effective type of service for improving all outcomes [for aged-out foster youth], not only educational attainment" (p. 114). Directly, this suggests that these interventions in higher education are making a holistic difference in the students' lives. I propose three recommendations for Great Expectations. First, I recommend that the administration dedicate a significant, consistent funding amount to the program that is known to the program coach in plenty of time to be considered in planning. Second, it might be justified to recommend that the administration hire a full-time staff/coach with a competitive salary dedicated strictly to the Great Expectations program. A full-time staff member would manage the budget, plan activities for student engagement, actively mentor students, and serve in an administrative capacity for the program advocating for its continued community support. Third, Great Expectations should improve their promotion and publications related to the Great Expectations program.

Recommendation 1: Ensure Consistent Funding for Program

The first recommendation is to ensure consistent funding for the program every year. It is nearly impossible for a Great Expectations coach to plan activities or know what resources he or she has to share with students unless funds are timely allocated to the program. This may mean that the College President's Cabinet must provide greater support to the program in its annual budget practices. Additionally, the VCC System might need to allocate additional funding to the Great Expectations programs at all 23 community colleges. The $52,185 allocated from the State is not sufficient for a competitive coach's salary with benefits and important funds for student supports such as activities, supply and necessity stipends, and other student monetary supports.

Recommendation 2: Hire Full-Time Coach With Competitive Salary

The second recommendation is to hire a full-time coach with a competitive salary. A competitive salary is desirable as the program is not well served when there is a high staff attrition rate. It is important for Great Expectation students to have a consistent person in their lives. Campus support for aged-out foster youth is "a promotive factor for persistence in academic settings" (Horn, 2020, p. 115). The dedicated staff members for Great Expectations should be present to build stronger relationships with students and offer more field trips and excursions to students. Greater numbers of on-campus and off-campus activities may help to create bonds between staff and student but also student-to-student bonds, relationships, and friendships as well. Cultural exposure and visits to 4-year institutions will expand and open Great Expectations students' minds to new ideas as well as strengthen peer relationships.

Recommendation 3: Publicize and Promote the Great Expectations Program at VCC

In conducting this program evaluation, I learned that many faculty and staff did not know that VCC has the resource of the Great Expectations program. As recruitment might already be a challenge, as shared by the Vice President of Student Affairs due to privacy concerns, it is important for the entire campus community to know about this program so students can be properly referred to the resource when they disclose their foster care status to a faculty or staff member at VCC. Geiger et al. (2016) write that "it is important to raise awareness and spread the word about the mission and goals of the program." A partnership must exist between Great Expectations and both communication and marketing departments to share Great Expectation's goals and messaging. Staff can meet with the community and college partnerships and provide "concrete sources of information (flyers and pamphlets) that can be referred to long after the initial face-to-face" (Geiger et al., 2016, p. 276). The standard course syllabus that faculty

download to build their individual class syllabi could include details of Great Expectations and contact information for the program.

Recommendations for Future Research

In thinking about future research, I strongly believe that student voices need to be heard. Given the difficulty and inability to obtain student interviews for this study, if I were to conduct further research, I would ask the staff and administrators direct questions about their specific student interactions with the Great Expectation students. I would ask for examples of both positive and negative interactions—the successes and challenges—to give a greater insight into the students' stories and campus experiences. Day et al. (2012) conducted a study where they highlighted eight themes or barriers for youth making the transition from high school to college. These themes included the need for stable adult relationships outside of school to support their education, the need for caring, flexible, sensitive, and competent teachers, opportunities for extra-curricular activities, a feeling of personal safety in and out of school, appropriate mental health services, and independent living skills training for the transition from high school to college (Day et al., 2012).

A study that involved student interviews about GPA, graduation, and overall success also would be a valuable addition to the current body of research. It would be intriguing to learn how Great Expectations students feel about the program's connection to their past experiences in the foster care system. Scholars would benefit from better understanding how the Great Expectations students interpreted the Great Expectations staff relationships. Did the program participants interpret what the staff viewed as limited time and interactions in the same way as the college staff? A better understanding of the social capital, holistic support including mentoring,

academic advising and coaching that students felt they gained (or lacked) from the program would be an asset to the body of research.

It would be interesting to expand the study to include data from the other 22 Virginia community colleges. It would be intriguing to determine if the patterns of the research greatly differed from VCC. If an institution had more success (e.g., higher GPAs and higher graduation rates), it would benefit the Commonwealth's students to determine what supports and actions the more successful Great Expectations programs are implementing that differ from VCC. Because this program evaluation focused on the structural and programming side of student success, I think it is imperative for research to continue to be conducted on student personal characteristics and challenges. The investigation of psychosocial factors and personality traits, such as grit and hope, could prove to be insightful into the reasons why some students at the same institution and in the same program have different success rates (Fong et al., 2017).

Studies could also be conducted that further examine the K-12 transition to postsecondary education and the use of articulation agreements and their effectiveness. The development of early-start programs or bridge programs for foster care alumni should also be studied. These additional resources offered to foster care alumni prior to the official first semester start can be particularly advantageous to this population. One example can be found at Arizona State University where students learn to navigate campus, advisement, and employment in "Bridging Success," a week-long program dedicated to this first-year, foster care alumni group (Greiger et al., 2016). Similarly, summer camps for foster care youth that prepare them for the collegiate environment can also be studied (R. Kirk & Day, 2011).

Summary

Programs such as Great Expectations provide a great service to the under-resourced populations of foster youth and foster care alumni. Through the examination of the execution of the programming, student's GPAs, retention, and graduation rates, and interviews with staff and administrators, a great deal of data and information were collected, reviewed, and analyzed. Overall, Great Expectations is being implemented with fidelity given its current resources; however, a permanent, full-time staff member for the program is a necessity and could contribute to improved student GPAs and retention rates. Consistent funding is needed to plan programing activities and support staffing. Finally, greater awareness and marketing strategies for Great Expectations are required to attract foster care alumni to this important campus resource. My hope is that the Commonwealth of Virginia will continue to support this vital program into the future as this program is still relatively young and could benefit from more seasoned planning, greater staff support, and important levels of promotion.

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APPENDIX

CONSENT FORM FOR EMPLOYEES

I, _____, agree to participate in a research study that involves the examination of the Great Expectations program at my institution. My college name will remain confidential in this program evaluation. It is being researched whether the program is being instituted with fidelity and its effects on GPA and retention rates for participating students. Data collection will be ongoing throughout the cycle from 9/5/2023 to 9/4/2024.

I understand that the researcher/interviewer has been trained in the research of human subjects. I understand that the data will be collected through a recording on Zoom and then transcribed for analysis. Information will be safeguarded so my identity will never be disclosed.

My participation in this study is purposeful and voluntary. My answers will help the researcher understand my path and help her complete her dissertation. I am welcome to ask the researcher any questions about the study at any point. I may skip or opt out of any questioning at any time without consequence. My answers will be confidential. There is no known risk or discomfort directly involved with this study. I am free to withdraw my consent and cease participation at any time. I agree that should I choose to withdraw my consent and end my participation in the study that I will notify the researcher listed below in writing. A decision not to participate in the study or to withdraw from the study will not affect my relationship with the researcher, the College of William & Mary generally or the School of Education specifically.

If I have any questions or concerns regarding my participation in this study, I understand that I should contact Jessica Whitten, the researcher, at phone number 757-362-1156 and/or email at jgwhitten@wm.edu. I understand that I may also contact Dr. Tom Ward at 757-221-2358 or EDIRC-L@wm.edu. My signature below signifies that I have received a copy of this consent form, that I am at least 18 years of age, and that I consent to participate in this research study.

Name of Participant:

Best Phone Number:

Best Email Address:

Signature of Participant:

Date:

Signature of Researcher:

Date:

VITA

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Special Projects Coordinator
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