

THESIS

STILL STANDING STRONG: THE PATHWAYS, SELF-RELIANCE, AND RESILIENCY OF
INDEPENDENT STATUS STUDENTS AT COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

STILL STANDING STRONG: THE PATHWAYS, SELF-RELIANCE, AND RESILIENCY OF INDEPENDENT STATUS STUDENTS AT COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

This thesis seeks to understand the ways in which forms of adversity and resiliency operate in the lives of independent status students at Colorado State University (CSU). Specifically, this research investigates the ways in which these components have impacted students' educational experiences at CSU. Using a grounded theoretical approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with 19 students. Participants identified as having an independent status at CSU were contacted to participate in this research. The results from this thesis present several important findings. Such findings include the ways in which certain variables serve as pathways for participants to college, including: envisioning college as a reality, student's conceptualization of school, and financial assistance. Results also identify the ways in which forms of social and emotional support aid in the maintenance of participants' resiliency once they have made it college. Finally, participants' self-concept of their independent status through the idea of self-reliance is examined. In conclusion, this thesis points to three important recommendations: (1) the need for independent status students' increased access to mental health services during secondary education, and (2) continued research conducted on the impact of peer relationships for youth, especially utilizing the theoretical conceptualizations of resiliency, and (3) the need for more focus on how students' self-concept shapes their process of resiliency and the ways in which they draw on various forms of support while at college.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, my work would not exist if it were not for the students who agreed to participate in my study. My conversations with each of my participants were gifts in and of themselves. Interview after interview I walked away astonished at the incredible strength and perseverance of such humble human beings. Then when my own tragedy struck in the middle of this thesis, I could not help but to think back to these same students, some who faced very similar grief. I found strength in their resiliency. My upmost appreciation is expressed to my advisor, Tara Opsal. Having the chance to watch you, my role model, take on your own challenges headfirst, encouraged me all the more to pour my heart and soul into this thesis. Thank you for bending my boundaries, and for providing me with a safe-space to grow. I would also like to express my gratitude towards my committee members, Jeni Cross and Jody Donovan. To my professors, thank you for giving me the education to support my belief in social justice. From everyone in my cohort, to the other graduate students in my department, seeing the passion in each of you encouraged me to draw upon my own. To Katy, my editor, thank you for fixing my silly errors. You are a sister in a friend. To my father, the most thoughtful and beautiful man I know. You are my hero. Without your multiple forms of support I could not have made it through this. To my sister, Rachel, your passion as a teacher is something I hope to find as I venture on to my own career. To my aunts, you each hold a characteristic of mom within yourselves, and I thank you for capitalizing on that as you supported me during this time. Finally, to my strong, brave, and independent girlfriends, we will run the world someday. My friendships with you constantly and endlessly empower me. This is only the beginning.

DEDICATION

For my mom, Jean Marie Landrum Eman.

*Throughout this process when I struggled to understand my purpose, I remembered that you
grew me as a seed, giving me the gift of life.*

I honor you by treating the life you gave me with beauty and patience.

*This work came at a time when I was forced to recognize my own strength in order to
persevere in the face of grief.*

*You were with me when I began this journey, and you continue to be with me in spirit as I
finish it.*

You are my butterfly at the end of the tunnel.

My strength is an embodiment of yours.

I dedicate this, and the rest of my achievements yet to come, to you.

I love you to the moon and back.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
DEDICATION.....	iv
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	7
a. The System of Foster Care.....	7
b. Outcomes for Foster Youth Alumni Transitioning into Adulthood.....	12
c. Outcomes for Foster Youth Alumni in Relation to Secondary Education.....	18
d. Policies for Foster Youth.....	23
e. Foster Youth Alumni in College and Programming.....	27
f. Resiliency and Criminology.....	34
g. Theoretical Understandings of Resiliency.....	36
h. Theoretical Applications of Resiliency for Foster Youth.....	40
i. Conceptualizing Resiliency for this Thesis.....	42
j. Research Questions.....	44
III. METHODS.....	45
a. Background and Research Interests.....	46
b. Research Questions.....	46
c. Research Design: Qualitative Methods.....	47
d. Entry into the Field.....	48
e. Data Collection.....	49
i. Gaining Access and Entrée into the Setting.....	49
ii. Location.....	49
iii. Sampling.....	49
iv. Interviewing.....	56
v. Researcher Positionality and Role in Setting.....	59
f. Coding and Data Analysis.....	61
vi. Limitations.....	63
vii. Ethical Concerns.....	63
viii. Emotion Work.....	64
IV. DATA ANALYSIS.....	66
a. Pathways.....	67
i. Envisioning College as a Possibility.....	68
ii. Student’s Conceptualization of School.....	74
iii. Financial Assistance.....	78
b. Social and Emotional Support.....	80
iv. Peers.....	81
v. Mentors and Adults.....	86
vi. Mental Health.....	90
vii. University Sponsored Organizations.....	92
c. Self-Concept.....	97
viii. Self-Reliance.....	97

V. CONCLUSION.....	103
a. Summary of Academic Research.....	103
b. Results.....	106
c. Central Contributions to Future Research Directions.....	108
WORKS CITED.....	111
APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW RECRUITMENT GUIDE.....	116
APPENDIX B. FOLLOW-UP LETTER TO INVITE STUDENT PARTICIPANTS.....	117
APPENDIX C. CONSENT FORM.....	118
APPENDIX D. FIELD PROTOCOL DOCUMENT.....	120
APPENDIX E. FINALIZED INTERVIEW GUIDE.....	122
APPENDIX F. RESEARCH BUDGET.....	126
APPENDIX G. CODEBOOK.....	127

I. INTRODUCTION

Three. Two. One. The camera flashes. You are a member of a population in which the odds are stacked against you. Instead of posing for your student ID, you are posing for your mug shot. The key institutional figure that looms in your future is not college but prison. Research indicates that many at-risk youth have experienced placement in foster care. By the end of the 2014 fiscal year, there were still approximately 415,000 children in the foster care system in the United States alone; a three percent increase from 2012 (See Figure 1.1).

Preliminary FY ¹ 2014 Estimates as of July 2015 • No. 22					
SOURCE: Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) FY 2014 data ²					
Numbers At A Glance					
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Number in foster care on September 30 of the FY	404,878	398,057	397,153	400,989	415,129
Number entered foster care during FY	256,092	251,958	251,850	255,080	264,746
Number exited foster care during FY	257,806	247,607	240,987	240,392	238,230
Number waiting to be adopted on September 30 of the FY	108,746	106,561	102,058	104,493	107,918
Number waiting to be adopted whose parental rights (for all living parents) were terminated during FY	65,747	62,852	59,147	59,662	60,898
Number adopted with public child welfare agency involvement during FY	53,547	50,901	52,046	50,841	50,644

Figure 1.1 Foster Care Numbers

Source: ACFACRS data, U.S. Children’s Bureau, Administration for Children, Youth and Families

Children placed in foster care are subject to a unique set of challenges, all of which greatly impact their futures. For example, foster youth are more likely to experience contact with the criminal justice system, trauma, material hardships, homelessness, and a

variety of physical and mental health issues (Courtney et al. 2007). In a study of 544 former foster youth, 31 percent of youth reported being arrested, and 30 percent reported incarceration during their transition out of care (Courtney et al. 2007; Martinez and Wheeler 2014). In addition, many youth are unable to obtain health care and experience early pregnancies (Reilly 2003). The unique set of challenges that youth face during and after their time spent in the foster care system, contributes to bleaker outcomes than those faced by traditional youth.

As a result of these challenges, youth experience important long-term consequences as they transition into adulthood. Again, these consequences include lower levels of social support, difficulty finding stable employment, financial instability, homelessness, economic hardships, mental health impacts, and educational impacts (Courtney et al. 2007). These impacts are important to consider, especially when noting that 22,392 youth aged out of the foster care system in 2014 alone¹. Out of these challenges, education is a central area of great concern for scholars who examine the impact that the foster care system has on youth.

Education is crucial as it creates positive life outcomes and impacts other areas of individuals' lives. For example, the body of research conducted by Courtney et al. in 2007, explains how foster youth who graduate from college are less likely to experience the negative challenges listed above like economic hardship, financial instability, difficulty finding stable employment, and homelessness.

Unfortunately, many foster youth do not have a successful educational career. Courtney et al. (2007) explains that nearly one-fourth of young adults in foster care attain

¹ Foster Club. 2014. Retrieved Nov. 17, 2016. (<https://www.fosterclub.com/article/statistics-foster-care>)

their GEDs by the age of 21, while only 3 percent graduate college. Of over 400,000 youth in care in 2014, 62 percent were of school age (ages 5-17). Of these youth, few end up completing their education on a traditional track. In the state of Colorado alone, the site of this thesis, more foster youth actually earn their GED's than their high school diplomas (Clemens et al. 2014). In 2014, in the state of Colorado, "fewer than 1 in 3 students who were in foster care during high school graduated within four years" (Colorado Department of Human Services 2014).

High school graduation rates amongst former foster youth have remained low and although 84 percent of 17 and 18 year olds stated that they wanted to attend college, only 20 percent of foster youth that actually graduate high school end up attending college (Research Highlights on Education and Foster Care 2014). Additionally, only 2-9 percent of these youth complete their bachelor's degree (Research Highlights on Education and Foster Care 2014). In summary, less than 3 percent of foster youth earn a bachelor's degree².

Despite the obstacles, there is a segment of this population who have beaten the odds and made it to college—a process some researchers call "resiliency". Luthar et al. (2000:543) explains that resilience is, " a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity." Here, two conditions must exist, 1) the exposure to significant threat or severe adversity and 2) the achievement of positive adaptation despite adversity (Luthar et al. 2000). Importantly, as I explain later, I draw on this particular definition to conceptualize and understand resiliency in the context of the sample under study in this research project.

² Foster Club. 2014. Retrieved Nov. 17, 2016. (<https://www.fosterclub.com/article/statistics-foster-care>)

Researchers have begun to identify specific variables that nurture foster youth's resilience. Some research identifies individual-level variables, such as self-reliance and perceived self-efficacy; other research, though, illustrates the role of more meso-level variables like supportive relationships with others (Hines et al. 2005; Samuels and Pryce 2008; Hass and Graydon 2009; Stanton-Salazar 2011).

There is a difference between resiliency for youth who become involved with the criminal justice system and those who actually succeed in pursuing a higher education. This difference is very important to unpack, however, empirical evidence outlining these differences is largely missing from academic literature.

This thesis presents an exploration of both former foster youth as well as students who, for a variety of reasons (for example they were homeless as a child) claimed independent status while students at Colorado State University (CSU). Both groups of my sample have "beaten the odds" by escaping difficult conditions and attending college. They have succeeded in accomplishing the unexpected, by taking a picture for their college ID, and overcoming the otherwise inevitable mug shot. In specificity, the central goal of this study is to uncover the sources of resiliency that have changed the educational outcomes for these youth. To accomplish this, I draw on 19 semi-structured interviews, with former foster youth and independent appeal students attending CSU.

Before I present my methods and findings, I provide background information for the reader, regarding a number of topics. As you see here, I focus strongly on the foster care system and foster youth in my literature review. This is a function of two things. First, when I entered this project I thought I would focus my data collection effort specifically on college students who came from foster care, because, as I explain later, meeting the needs

of this specific group has been the historic mission of the program through which I gathered the sample for my thesis. However, this program has expanded in the recent years to include more than just former foster youth attending CSU. My sample of both former foster youth, and independent appeal students, therefore reflects the current state of the program. My focus on foster care youth in the literature review is also a function of the state of the literature: researchers have spent significantly more time examining youth coming out of foster care than youth with less “clear” institutional labels but who may experience similar levels of marginalization before or during college.

In my literature review, I first discuss what foster care looks like in the United States: how youth are funneled into the system; how this population looks different from their peers; and secondary educational impacts for youth. Throughout this section I provide specific data about Colorado, as this was the location of this study. Continuing with my review of literature, I also examine programs that exist for foster youth in college, as well as specific literature that evaluates such programming. Finally, I provide a comprehensive look at how sociologists and criminologists contribute to the conversation on foster youth, through the conceptualizations of resiliency. After reviewing relevant literature, I describe the research design of this thesis, including a description of the methods I used to collect and analyze the data; information about the sample population; and the methodological challenges encountered throughout this project.

The goal of this study is to provide a grounded theoretical approach to understanding the sources of resiliency for former foster youth and other similarly marginalized youth, and the ways in which these different variables have assisted youth in their post-secondary educational paths. Although the primary goal of this research is to

contribute to scholarly literature, there is also the potential for programmatic and policy contributions, as well as continued research on marginalized youth and their education. In particular, the findings in this research may enhance existing programs' capacities to determine and meet the needs of these youth as they attempt to navigate college. Further, the identified forms of resiliency for these youth, may lead to the improvement of social policies. Such improvements have the potential to impact these youth's lives by creating paths that lead to educational success, as opposed to consequential engagement in the criminal justice system.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

As I addressed in the introduction, this thesis attempts to understand the multiple sources of resiliency for foster youth that not only contribute to their path towards secondary education, but also remain, commence, and flourish, as they earn their college degrees. To set the stage for this thesis, I provide basic information about the U.S. foster care system. In particular, I review what foster care looks like in regard to the placement of youth, as well as common pathways into the foster care system. Next, I introduce research that analyzes existing college programs which attempt to help former foster youth as they navigate college. I then include a review of how sociologists, and more specifically criminologists, can contribute to the conversation on foster youth. As this thesis focuses on issues of resilience, I also include a review of literature regarding resiliency, and briefly describe its theoretical connections to the discipline of sociology. Based on the gaps in literature, I formulate four research questions that are used to guide the design and data analysis of this study.

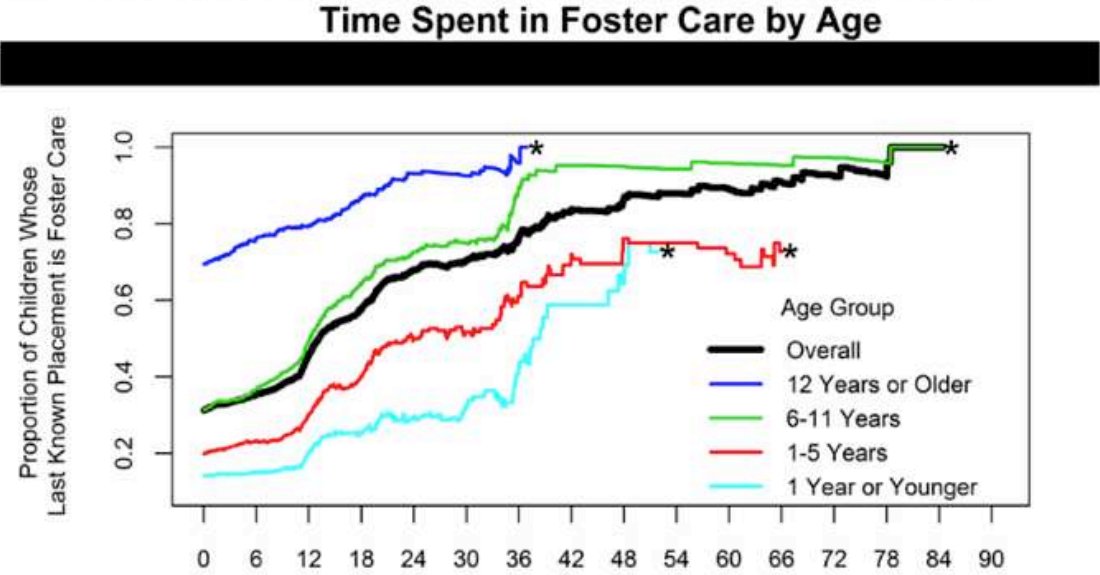
The System of Foster Care

The system of foster care may seem simple on the surface but a closer look reveals how complex and multifaceted it is. The placement of youth, including pathways to care, and the kind of youth placed into care, vary greatly and are highly contextual. There are many different types of placement settings that youth may experience. Once the Department of Human Services intervenes in a problematic situation, the possible different placements include: pre-adoptive home placement, which allows the youth to live with a family with anticipation of adoption; a foster family home with a relative; a foster family home with a non-relative, which might include a selected foster home care provider or a

family friend; a group home; an institution; supervised independent living; or a trial home visit (AFCARS data). The type of placement the child receives largely depends on the context of that child’s unique situations, such as living conditions and other factors.

Researchers have found that a “majority” of youth are placed in non-kinship foster homes, while kinship care is the second most common kind of placement for youth (ACF.HHS). Kinship care refers to the child’s placement with a member of their biological family. If a child experiences maltreatment, they are more likely to be placed in non-kin care. In addition to the type of placement, youth often face residential instability and multiple placement types. Figure 2.1 provides a visual on placement data representing the proportion of children in foster care as well as their duration in the system.

Figure 1. Proportion of children whose last known placement is foster care by time spent in care and age



Source: AFC.HHS Research Brief 19

Figure 2.1 Time Spent in Foster Care by Age

In terms of how and why youth are placed in foster care, there are several different pathways that result in state care. The most common pathways into care include domestic violence, maltreatment including neglect, and sexual and physical abuse (Kohl et al 2005; English et al. 2015). In terms of the actual placement process of foster youth, the discretion of caseworkers plays a pivotal role. In every case, a caseworker must make the decision whether or not to remove a child from their parents and place them into the system. The caseworkers' role is key, as each caseworker must consider if a youth's experience with a given form of abuse should qualify as means to remove a child. Abuse does not automatically place youth in the system. Researchers have found that caseworker's perceptions of organizational variables (i.e. the availability of resources or measures of role conflict), as well as the caseworker's own characteristics and attitudes (i.e. parenting beliefs), can impact their decision to remove a child from their home environment and place them into state care (Graham et al 2015). Other crucial variables such as family, income, race, and risk assessment also contribute to deciding whether or not a youth is placed in the foster care system (Graham et al. 2015).

Although slightly outdated, the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW), is "a national longitudinal study of the well-being of more than 6,200 children who had contact with the welfare system" (ACF.HHS). This study was conducted during 1999 and illuminates placement for youth in foster care. The study also explains the most common reason for placement in the foster care system is maltreatment. There are a multiple forms of maltreatment youth experience, including neglect, physical abuse, and sexual abuse. According to this study, of these forms of maltreatment, 41 percent of youth experience more than just one form (ACF.HHS). These youth often experience a

combination of neglect and physical and sexual abuse, causing social workers to make the decision to remove youth from the home and place them into the foster care system.

The type of placement also varies according to intersectional variables including race and ethnicity. Hispanic children are just as likely to end up in either kin or non-kin care, and all other ethnic groups are more likely to be in non-kin care. African American, non-Hispanic, and Hispanic children are less likely to be in a group care placement, such as a group home, than White children (ACF.HHS). Multiple placements of youth range from 1 to 19, with the most common number of placements at 3 (ACF.HHS).

To represent the diversity of youth in foster care, statistics from 2013 break down the demographics of youth in foster care by ethnicity, age, and gender. In 2013, 42 percent of foster youth were White, while 26 percent were Black, 21 percent were Hispanic (any race), and 9 percent were other ethnicities

(see Figure 2.2). Clearly, race and ethnic minorities are overrepresented in the foster care system (ACF.HHS). The

demographics of youth's

gender in care are split with: 52 percent male youth, and the remaining 48 percent female youth.

Additional data that highlights characteristics of foster youth indicates they are indeed a vulnerable population. As mentioned in the introduction, these youth experience

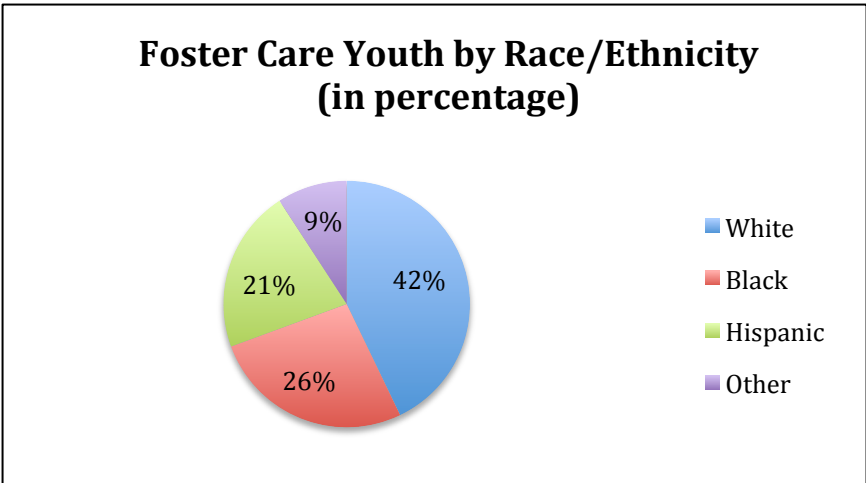


Figure 2.2 Foster Care Youth by Race/Ethnicity in 2013

both mental health and behavioral issues. These issues occur in about half of the foster youth population, yet, only one in five of the general population of youth experience mental health and behavioral issues (Ogg et al. 2015). Youth are also more likely to experience hindrances as they age out of the system and become adults; contact with the criminal justice system, trauma, material hardships, homelessness, and a variety of health issues (Courtney et al. 2007). Youth also struggle to find consistent housing, employment, and other forms of stability in their lives, due to a lack of support systems set in place for them as they transition out of state care (Courtney et al. 2007).

To further complicate this situation, resources within the foster care system are limited. Courtney et al. (2007) explain services provided by foster care, for foster youth, are significantly lacking in their ability to sustain youth's successful development. Consequences are made apparent through the foster youth's lack of completed education, and their involvement with the criminal justice system (Courtney et al. 2007).

Thus, in addition to describing the overall demographics of youth in foster care, it is important to note descriptors of education. Youth in foster care face an additional set of challenges throughout their childhoods, as compared to the average child. These challenges directly impact youth's experiences in education. Examining the educational success of foster youth is even more important when considering that over half of foster youth are of school age (Research Highlights on Education and Foster Care 2014).

Educational barriers are paramount to understanding the population of youth in foster care. These barriers consist of: the lack of vital documents or other necessary records; a lack of transportation; a lack of access to support services; prejudice and misunderstanding; family instability (Martinez and Wheeler 2014). Additional research

indicates a higher risk for foster youth dropping out of school than non-foster youth. Further, there is an increased risk of suicide, homelessness, unemployment, and teen pregnancy for foster youth (Martinez and Wheeler 2014).

Notably though, according to research conducted by Hillman (2014), many youth self-reported that the most substantial barrier to graduating high school was related to their multiple transfers through various schools. Indeed, 56 to 75 percent of youth change schools when they first enter care, and 34 percent of 17-18 year-olds have experienced more than five school changes (Research Highlights on Education and Foster Care 2014). Thus it should not be surprising that according to data compiled for a national factsheet on educational outcome of foster youth, foster youth are two times as likely to be absent from school as their peers, and twice as likely to get suspended. They are also three times as likely as their peers to get expelled during primary education. This information indicates how the placement of youth in foster care is a complex and multifaceted issue. The placement of youth, and the kind of youth placed into care, highlighted above, sets the stage for understanding the barriers that youth face as they transition out of care and into adulthood.

Outcomes for Foster Youth Alumni Transitioning into Adulthood

Youth struggle before and during their time in foster care, and they struggle once they have aged out of the system. Throughout this section, I focus on some of the outcomes associated with youth who have spent time in the foster care system. Further attention is then placed on specific outcomes for youth in the state of Colorado.

Courtney et al. published an extensive study in 2007 titled the Midwest Study, in which they compared the outcomes of former foster youth to a control group of non-foster

youth at the age of 17 and 18. In total, the researchers sampled 758 eligible youth from Iowa, Wisconsin, and parts of Illinois. In this longitudinal study, data collection took place between May 2002 and March 2003. Researchers asked youth about “their education, employment, physical and mental health, social support, relationships with family, delinquency and contact with the criminal justice system, victimization, substance abuse, sexual behavior, foster care experiences, and receipt of independent living services” (2007:9). The researchers explained the several primary outcomes related to youth’s wellbeing including health, involvement with the criminal justice system, stability, and education. I address these variables below, paying particular attention to education, as it is critical to this thesis.

One of the most significant findings from the Midwest Study is information on health and wellbeing. Young adults with a background in foster care were more likely to report having poor health, and identify themselves as having a disability. Foster youth adults were also found to have a higher risk of contracting an STD, and teen pregnancy. Regarding mental health outcomes, researchers found that youth transitioning out of care were more likely to experience depression and post traumatic stress disorder. Notably, these kinds of diagnoses were also linked to substance abuse and self-medication. In summation, young adults transitioning out of care are less likely to have stable health conditions, which impacts a number of other outcomes including obtaining satisfactory employment and housing.

Researchers also identified involvement in the criminal justice system as another significant outcome for young adults aging out of foster care (Courtney et al. 2007). Researchers discovered statistical differences between youth in foster care and youth out

of care, in terms of criminal justice involvement. In addition, these researchers noted gendered differences between male and female foster youth. Results indicated that both genders participated in gangs. However, young men were more likely to take part in a group fight, and women were more likely to deliberately damage someone's property (Courtney et al. 2007). Of the former foster youth in the study, "thirty one percent reported being arrested, 15 percent reported being convicted of a crime, and 30 percent reported being incarcerated;" the level of involvement was much higher for males than females (Courtney et al. 2007: 65). Courtney and colleagues also determined that females in the Midwest Study were more likely to be arrested than males in the control sample (2007). This is inconsistent with findings where researchers have found a gender gap in which men participate in greater numbers of crimes (Heimer 2000). This discrepancy in statistics may indicate that vulnerable populations of youth are overall more likely to participate in criminal behavior due to their marginalized status.

Stability is an additional variable that impacts the outcome of young adult foster youth. Researchers typically conceptualize stability using employment and income. Only half of the youth interviewed were employed at the time of the study, compared to 64 percent of the control group (Courtney et al. 2007). Of those employed, less than one third received more than one form of benefit (for example, health care) from their employers, with the "median earnings...just \$5,450 compared with \$9,120 among their employed" peers (Courtney et al. 2007: 35). This comparative data indicates poorer outcomes for youth who have spent time in the foster care system versus their more traditional peers who did not spend time in the system. When considering the reality of these statistics, it is

clear the population of foster youth requires special attention to address their challenges as they transition into adulthood.

As I have begun to highlight above, an unfortunate but common outcome for former foster youth is contact with the criminal justice system (Courtney et al. 2007). In terms of specific foster youth and crime in Colorado, a local newspaper recently reported on the likelihood of foster youth in Colorado receiving diplomas versus criminal records. The article highlighted the demographic differences of foster youth across the nation and explained how graduation rates for foster youth in Colorado were much lower, while crime rates for foster youth were on the rise (Wilcox 2015). The article reported, “only 28.7 percent of foster youth will graduate from high school on time, but at least 38 percent will have been incarcerated between ages 16 and 19” (Wilcox 2015:1).

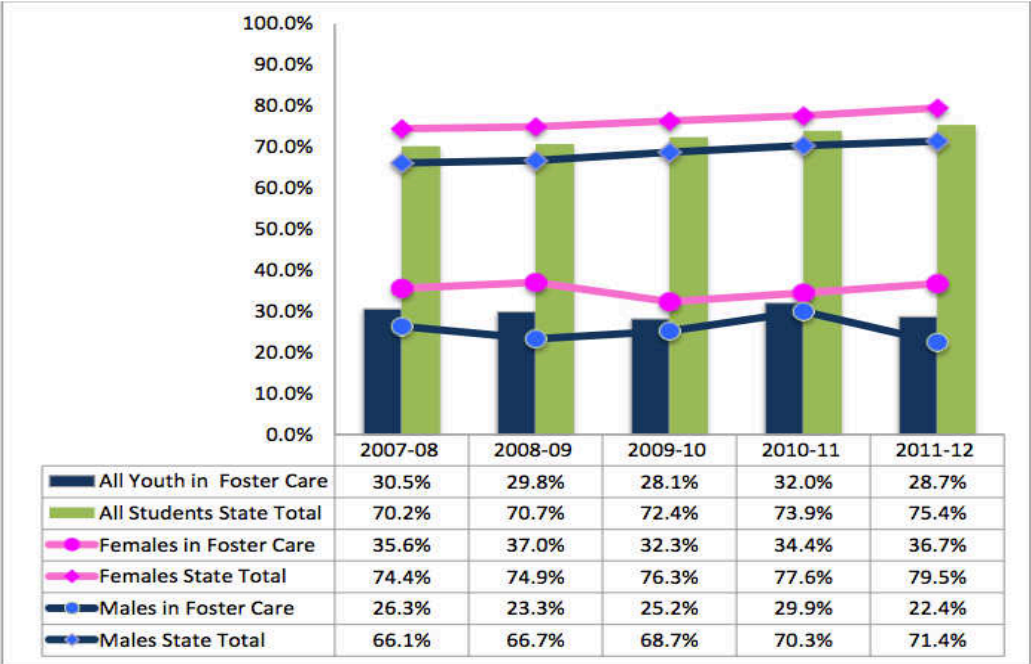
This literature review has already touched on some of the educational outcomes for former foster youth in relation to their adverse circumstances. It is critical to understand the further impacts time spent in foster care has on foster youth’s education. Continuing to report the important findings in Courtney and colleagues’ Midwest Study, foster youth adults are twice as likely to not have a high school diploma or GED, as their non-foster counterparts. Clearly, high school graduation rates feed into youth’s transition into adulthood and continued education. Roughly 1 in 11 foster youth students drop out a minimum of once, sometimes more, during their high school careers (Clemens 2014). In addition, “one in three foster youth students were identified as having a disability and eligible for special education services” (Clemens 2014:9). Furthermore, females in foster care tend to have higher high school graduation rates than males (Clemens 2014). Here, the connection between education and stability outcomes, such as employment and income,

are evident. When the educational careers of youth begin to breakdown, their stability outcomes significantly decrease as well.

Additional studies further represent unfortunate outcomes for former foster youth. Davis (2006) who examined college access, financial aid, and college success in undergraduate foster youth alumni explained that one-third of youth who have aged out of the foster care system report incomes below the poverty level. This indicates that even youth who attend college still have trouble achieving adequate income levels. The connection between these stability outcomes and educational outcomes is paramount to understanding the challenges former foster youth face as they transition into adulthood. In addition, the educational experiences of youth are of primary importance in this thesis, as they are utilized to examine youth who have transitioned out of the foster care system into adulthood and are attending college. As my thesis focuses directly on previous foster youth who have beaten the odds and made it to college, it is therefore pivotal to highlight such educational outcomes as examined above.

Narrowing the focus down to the state of Colorado, less than 1 in 3 foster youth students in Colorado will graduate high school within four years (Clemens 2014). This number indicates less than average outcomes as compared to national statistics (see Figure 2.3 on the next page). However, the state of Colorado is one of the first states to take initiatives that recognize this population as having an “invisible achievement gap” (Clemens 2014:5). The invisible achievement gap is used to describe the population of former foster youth because “they are not often identified in statewide educational datasets” (Clemens 2014:5). 2014 was the first year the Colorado Department of Education reported graduation, completion, and mobility rates for students in foster care. Using this

data, Martinez and Wheeler further broke down the statistics of foster youth and education



⁷ Trend in female graduation rates: $R^2 < .001$; male graduation rates: $R^2 = .004$

in Colorado.

Figure 2.3 Foster Care Trends and Education

Source: Clemens et al. 2014

In Colorado, about 27.5 percent of foster care youth in the system graduated from high school in 2013 (Martinez and Wheeler 2014). However the 4-year completion rate, which includes traditional graduation or attainment of a GED, was lower than expected at 41.3 percent for foster youth in the state of Colorado (Martinez and Wheeler 2014). 72.5 percent of foster youth in Colorado did not graduate in 4-years with their peers (Martinez and Wheeler 2014). This number differs from national research, which states that only half of the foster youth population completes high school by the age of 18 (Research Highlights

on Education and Foster Care 2014). It appears on the surface that Colorado is doing worse than the nation when it comes to former foster youth and successful educational outcomes. However, the state is recognizing the sense of urgency to address the differing needs of foster youth in education.

Researchers in Colorado also found that mobility rates greatly influence the educational success of youth (Martinez and Wheeler 2014). A student is considered mobile, “any time he or she enters or exits a school or district in a manner that is not part of the normal educational progression” (Martinez and Wheeler 2014:5). Foster youth in particular have one of the highest mobility rates when it comes to primary education, at 42.8 percent. (Martinez and Wheeler 2014). This is not surprising given that, as described earlier in this thesis, 34 percent of 17-18 year olds have experienced more than five school changes (Research Highlights on Education and Foster Care 2014).

Outcomes for Foster Youth Alumni in Relation to Secondary Education

Considering outcomes as they relate to college, secondary education completion rates are also lower for former foster youth than for the general population. When considering the intersection of race and gender, over half of foster youth in college are white and non-Hispanic (Davis 2006). Remember that by the end of 2013, 42 percent of youth in foster care were White, 26 percent Black, 21 percent Hispanic (any race), and 9 percent were of other ethnicities. Thus, less than half of the youth in foster care are White. This then correlates to the fact that over half of those who do make it to college are predominantly White. The resulting revelation is that, while less than half of foster youth population are White, over half of those who do make it to college are White, revealing a further disadvantage to ethnic minorities.

Overall, less than three percent of foster youth alumni obtain a bachelor's degree (Research Highlights on Education and Foster Care 2014). Lower educational completion rates greatly impact other life chances, such as income--as represented above in the Davis (2006) study. Once a member of the foster youth has transitioned out of foster care, they are legally recognized as "wards/dependents of the court," signifying that they are federally recognized as financially independent (Davis 2006:1). On the one hand, this increases the individual's eligibility for financial aid. A higher percentage of foster youth alumni receive financial aid than their peers due to their independent status (Davis 2006). Reports indicate that 85 percent of former foster youth receive financial care, including Federal Pell Grants, and state grants (Davis 2006). On the other hand, this also means that foster youth are less likely to receive financial assistance from their parents or guardians as they attempt to navigate through college, unlike traditional students (Blome 1997). This financial barrier is also reflected in the fact that young adults who age out of the system are more likely to enroll in a two-year college, and less likely to enroll in a four-year college due to tuition costs (Courtney et al. 2007). These statistics represent bleak educational outcomes for youth who were placed in the foster care system. It is important to note that there is a significant lack of specific data representing secondary graduation rates for foster youth in Colorado. This is an unexpected finding, given how many sources report Colorado's recent increase in awareness of foster youth (Clemens 2014; Martinez and Wheeler 2014).

It is notable, in considering this data on educational attainment among foster youth, that additional research indicates overall lower levels of educational aspiration and self-expectation. Data also indicates lower levels of self-perception within youth, in regard to

their self-belief that they can achieve academic success (Kirk et al. 2011). Parental support is a key component to whether or not youth succeed academically (Bernard 1991; Turner et. al 2007; Samuels and Pryce 2008) and unfortunately parental support is a key factor missing in the lives of foster youth (Kirk et al. 2011). Lack of parental support also impacts the financial stability of youth (Blome 1997). Other important literature continues to uncover the ways in which placement in foster care is related to educational outcomes for youth. Multiple studies highlight the different challenges and outcomes for foster youth in connection to education. The studies include: levels of preparedness for college (Blome 1997); barriers to attending college (Davis 2006); mental health challenges of youth in college (Geenen et al. 2015); and levels of social capital in relation to youth's educational experiences (Stanton-Salazar 2011). Blome (1997) explained that youth transitioning out of foster care lack financial support from family members, which in turn impacts their level of preparedness for secondary education. In addition, Geenen et al. (2015) identified the need for intervention groups within secondary education for former youth in foster care, as it would improve hope, self-determination, and mental health empowerment among foster youth. Stanton-Salazar (2011) found that students with lower-status, such as former foster youth, traditionally enter secondary educational institutions with lower social capital. In other words, these youth have fewer amounts of key resources and support throughout all areas of their lives. Overall, these studies exemplify the different experiences, and especially, the extra challenges that foster youth alumni face, compared to their more traditional peers.

Additional research points to other variables that shape the success of youth in college. Data indicates that foster youth are also less likely to be placed in preparatory

tracks for college, which further diminishes their educational opportunities (Blome 1997). Examining the connection to secondary education, Merdinger et al.'s (2005:878-879) research on youth's preparedness for college showed that the most important pieces propelling foster youth into college are: receiving information about financial aid (45 percent); getting advising about college (43 percent); and taking college prep classes (32 percent). The researchers used non-probability sampling methods to sample 216 emancipated foster youth, and found that, even though youth appear to have successful academic aspirations, they struggle in other vulnerable areas of living leading to a negative impact on youth's academic success, as they are simultaneously struggling with other issues. Overall, youth in this study reported needing continued support throughout their college careers in order to ensure their academic success (Merdinger et al. 2005).

Another commonly cited body of literature that identifies the risk factors of foster youth in college, is Day et al.'s (2011) study that emphasizes the importance of recognizing the different experiences of former foster youth versus traditional students in college. The researchers found that 21 percent of foster youth alumni vs. 13 percent of non-foster youth are more likely to drop out during their first year of college, while 34 percent of former foster youth vs. 18 percent non-foster youth are more likely to drop out prior to degree completion (Day et al. 2011). The importance of collegiate programming exemplifies the institutional recognition of these differences in former foster youth. This is further supported by the statistics highlighted above, and supports the idea that foster youth and emancipated students face extra challenges during their academic careers.

Although many researchers agree that there are challenges associated with foster youth in care, especially in regards to their educational outcomes, some tensions in the

literature exist. For example, Goemans and colleagues (2015) researched several bodies of literature to understand the decades of longitudinal research on the development of foster children. The researchers discovered that, “foster care does not negatively or positively affect foster children’s developmental trajectories” (Goemans et al. 2015:121). The researchers justified this conclusion by stating that since youth enter the system with pre-existing issues, research should focus on their pre-existing issues (for example, mental health), instead of attributing developmental problems to youth’s placement in foster care. However, it is important to note that this article stands alone in regards to its conclusion and that the broader body of research on foster youth indicates clearly that the foster care system is not a neutral institution, but conversely it shapes the lives of youth. In addition, Goemans and colleagues (2015) failed to consider the ways in which placement in foster care may limit youth’s abilities to get help for their preexisting conditions.

Davis’ (2006) study presents evidence that further refutes Goeman et al’s (2015) claims to illustrate how the foster care system shapes the outcome of youth. Davis (2006) reported on the barriers that foster youth face in regards to college. Davis (2006:12) explained that the “lack of discourse about post-secondary education options between foster children and their care givers” results in youth’s perception of college as a mystery and an illusion, and therefore is not considered a serious option by this group of young adults.

I have illustrated here that there are a variety of challenges foster youth experience, each of which test their educational success. With these challenges in mind, the broader question of social policies comes to mind. For example, Davis (2006) argued that the nation needs more federally funded and recognized programs geared towards assisting foster

youth as they transition out of care and into adulthood. Time spent in the foster care system contributes to a distinct set of outcomes for youth, which greatly differs from that of their traditional peers. Yet, there has been an increase over the last few decades of implemented policies that specifically focus on this vulnerable population. Many of these important new initiatives are highlighted below.

Policies for Foster Youth

There are several policies in place at the federal level in the United States that are designed to address problematic outcomes among foster youth. The policies that impact youth's educational experiences are of additional importance because education is linked to multiple outcomes, such as employment and income. One of the most well-known, and more recent, programs that address the intersection between foster youth and their educational success, is the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP). This piece of legislation encourages youth to achieve self-sufficiency, by providing grants that assist youth in many areas of their life, ultimately impacting their transition into adulthood. According to the Department of Health and Human Services Children's Bureau, CFCIP's (2012)³, "activities and programs include, but are not limited to, help with education, employment, financial management, housing, emotional support and assured connections to caring adults for older youth in foster care." In total, the law allows for 60 million dollars in payments to states and tribes, for post-secondary educational training vouchers, specifically for youth who have aged out of the system after the age of 18. These vouchers

³ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau. 2016. Retrieved Nov. 28, 2016. (<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/chafee-foster-care-program>).

are then used to provide each student with up to \$5,000 a year for post-secondary educational costs.

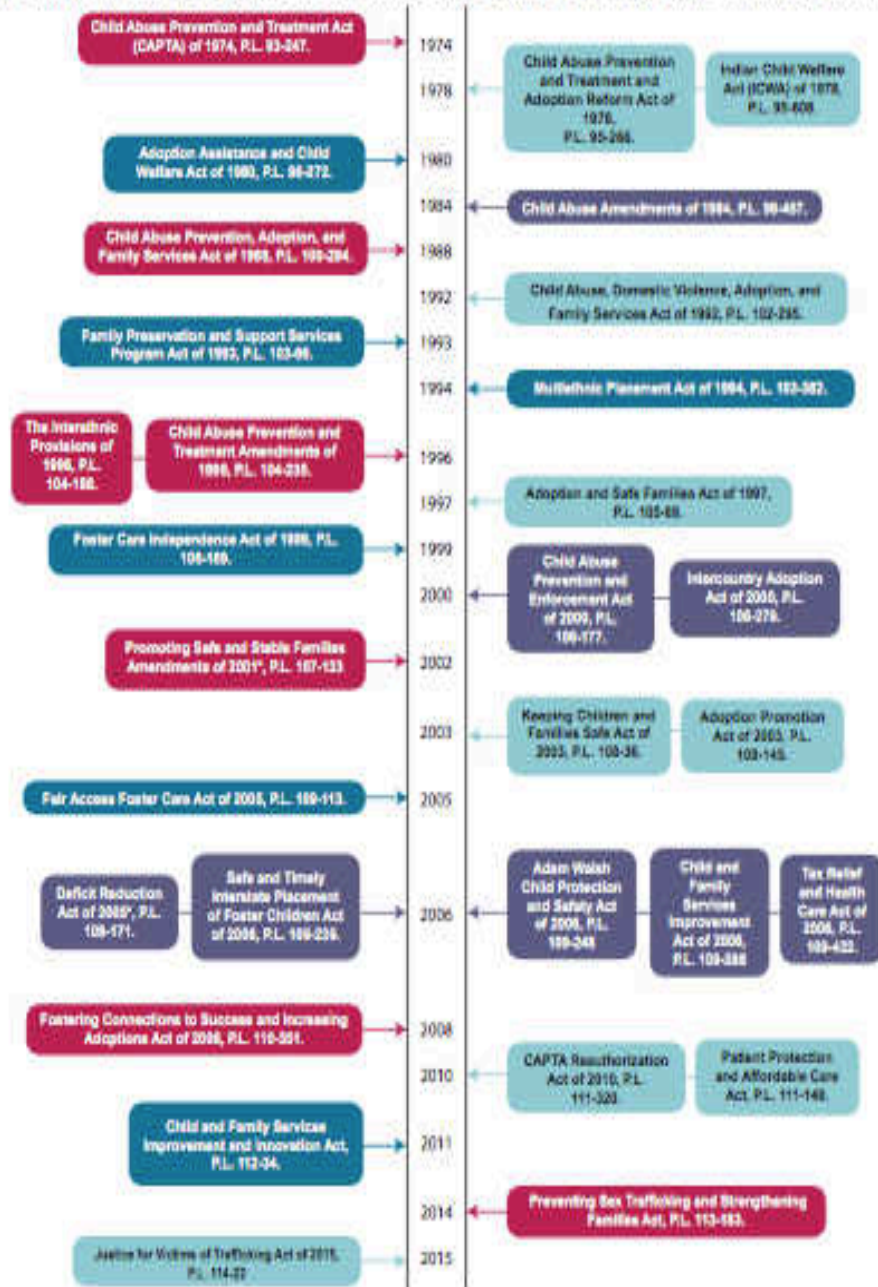
In addition to supporting youth through these types of programs, the Educational and Training Vouchers Program (ETV) was added to CFCIP in 2002; ETV provides educational resources for youth who are about to age out of the system. In total, the CFCIP program is authorized to use \$140 million towards educational programs for foster youth, with the addition of \$45 for specific ETV programs (ACF.HHS 2012). Of the program's total funding, \$60 million is authorized for payments for states and tribes to use towards post-secondary educational training and vouchers for youth (ACF.HHS. 2012). This provides youth with the potential to receive vouchers up to \$5,000 per year, to use towards their secondary education.

President Obama also signed the *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act* in 2008. This Act provides support for family connection, aid for youth in transition, adoption assistance, greater health care services, access to education, workforce development, and tribal access to funds⁴. Overall, the law created several changes to the child welfare system at the federal level, compared to the past where regulation was subject to the state level. This act set a precedent for rigorous standards in the child welfare system, focusing on challenges specific to the population of foster youth. *The Fostering Connection to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act* also hallmarks the shift in federal legislation's focus on providing additional aid to foster youth transitioning out of care (Courtney 2009). In addition to these very important policies, several pieces of Federal legislation have been passed which ensure protection, rights, and assistance to

⁴ Child Welfare Information Gateway. 2008. Retrieved Nov. 28, 2016 (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/federal/fosteringconnections/>)

foster youth. As shown Figure 2.4 on the following page, the amount of policies in place for former foster youth and education increases with each decade.

Timeline of Major Federal Legislation Concerned with Child Protection, Child Welfare, and Adoption



*Some acts were enacted the year following their introduction in Congress.

Figure 2.4 Federal Legislation Concerning Child Protection
Source: Child Welfare Information Gateway 2015

Although there are many policies in place at the federal level, each state varies when it comes to the specific implementation of legislation. For example, the State of Colorado's Department of Education (CDE) created The Foster Care Education Program in 2012. At the center of this program is the federal legislation of *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Acts of 2008*. This Act serves as the regulation of state and local agencies which promote "educational stability of students in foster care" (Martinez and Wheeler 2014:2). The program recognizes the multiple barriers to educational stability of foster care youth, and attempts to create forms of assistance for these youth as they continue their education. The program also provides several important pieces of data that allow researchers and policy makers to understand the experience of foster care youth and their education in the state of Colorado.

The connection between youth's time spent in the Foster Care system, and the likelihood of education in their future versus a criminal record, is delineated in literature. As researchers collected data that revealed these numbers, a more thorough examination of literature that further situates foster care youth and education is further addressed below. In addition, literature that implements theory and empirical evidence is to follow, as a means of properly situating this issue into the sociological perspective.

Foster Youth Alumni in College and Programming

Although many researchers have focused on the challenges that foster youth faced while *in care*, researchers have only recently begun to focus on issues surrounding the topic of foster youth transitioning out of care and into secondary education. However, researchers have identified pre-existing college programs in the United States that aim to remedy some of the challenges that foster youth alumni face during their secondary

education. Programs serve as potential solutions to the previously mentioned challenges. These programs attempt to provide resources to students, as well as encourage their success. There has recently been a rise in the number of programs at universities and colleges across the United States, that aim to help these youth succeed throughout their secondary education journey.

A majority of the research listed below examines the youth's experiences in college, via programs that recognize the additional risk factors that foster youth alumni face as they navigate college. Many of the studies also attempt to understand the challenges of these actual programs; including perspectives from both former foster youth, and faculty members of universities. Much of this thesis explores forms of resiliency youth identify, as it relates to their educational outcomes, as well as the ways in which collegiate programs can support resiliency in students. Below is a comprehensive review of three primary college programs that currently exist for former foster youth. Some of the findings presented below represent similar findings to each other, while some also provide critical areas in need of further examination. In my conclusion, I utilize the discussion to identify significant gaps in the literature, and therefore expose areas needing further examination.

A basic online search indicates that there are fewer universities with programs aimed at assisting former foster youth than one might expect. Of the programs that do exist, two of the oldest in existence are: Michigan State University's FAME program, and Washington State's Passport Program. Each institution prides itself on its ability to provide resources to this unique population, as means of ensuring all young adults' academic success. These two programs have the longest running history of providing resources for

former foster youth at the collegiate level. Therefore, I provide additional information on their goals as well as the content of their programming, which is imperative to my study.

MSU's FAME program (Fostering Academics Mentoring Excellence), is specifically geared toward providing resources for former foster youth students as well as students, who have experienced out of home placements but were not placed into the actual system of foster care. The program was originally founded by Angelique Day in 2007. Dr. John Seita is now the director of the program. The central goal of FAME is to, "provide support and resources to these students during their time at MSU to help them be successful during their collegiate experience on MSU's campus and during their transition to becoming MSU alumni."⁵ FAME provides a multitude of resources including, but not limited to individual coaching, a mentoring program, care package delivery during final exams, interactive website for service linkages, a financial assistance fund, and a student activity board. The program even extends beyond these resources by including a preparatory summer camp for incoming students that meet the program qualifications.

Also created in 2007, Washington's Passport College Promise Scholarship Program (Passport Program), offers resources to former foster youth, with a strong emphasis on financial assistance. This program strives to "help students from foster care attend and succeed in college."⁶ The three primary components of the program include a student scholarship, a partnership with the College Success Transition Program, and campus incentive funding that promotes recruitment and retention of youth. Since 2008, they have awarded their scholarship to an average of 325 students annually. In addition,

⁵ Michigan State University's FAME Program. 2016. Retrieved Nov. 28, 2016. (<http://fosteringsuccessmichigan.com/network/michigan-state-university-fame-program>)

⁶ Washington State's Passport Program. 2014. Retrieved Nov. 28, 2016. (<http://www.wsac.wa.gov/passport-foster-youth>)

the Passport program, “provides the first opportunity to obtain verifiable data on foster youth aspirations and performance in post-secondary education in Washington”⁷.

CSU has led the state in its development for secondary education assistance for foster youth. Bearing in mind that Colorado is the site of research for this thesis, additional information on this program is provided. CSU expanded their Fostering Success Program (FSP) over the years, following its formation in the fall of 2010. Historically, the program has not received institutional funding from CSU, so, throughout the years the program has evolved and grown through local donations and grants. FSP serves over 200 students who meet the requirements of independent student status at the CSU. The program was historically focused on helping former foster youth but expanded to independent status students, and now currently serves any youth who identify as independent, whether or not officially labeled by CSU. The current primary goal of FSP is to create, “a student centered community of support and belonging which enhances resiliency and self-advocacy and to create a culture of trust to promote student success.”⁸ Students who qualify for independent status, which primarily includes former foster youth, are invited to participate in FSP, which provides extra resources like care packages, family dinners, financial support, and academic resources to help ensure the educational success and retention of this small population at CSU. FSP has also received outside interest from other universities who hope to mirror the program to impact their own body of foster youth alumni. Additional information about FSP is provided in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

⁷ Washington State’s Passport Program. 2014. Retrieved Nov. 28, 2016.
(<http://www.wsac.wa.gov/passport-foster-youth>)

⁸ Colorado State University’s Fostering Success Program. 2016. Retrieved Nov. 28, 2016.
(<http://oas.casa.colostate.edu/fostering-success-program>)

In addition to the services mentioned above, some of these programs also provide waived tuition for foster youth, as well as offer other interventions, such as summer programs for youth graduating high school (Davis 2006). Although these programs, and ones similar to them, have made great strides in helping former foster youth and independent status students succeed in college, several challenges remain for universities and colleges as they attempt to implement and continue such programs. The most notable challenge reported, is the difficulty of universities locating funding for their programs. To better understand some of these limitations, studies have examined programs similar to CSU's FSP, which are noted later in this chapter.

Research on these programs is crucial in understanding the efficacy of programs. Here, I review a few of these studies in order to help understand the limitations of existing programs. Hernandez and Naccarato (2010) used their exploratory study to examine the effectiveness of 12 college programs aimed at assisting foster youth alumni who successfully transitioned from high school to college. To understand obstacles youth face during college, the researchers used convenience sampling to interview program coordinators. Hernandez and Naccarato (2010) found the greatest reported obstacles of youth's unmet needs included: academic preparation, housing, financial assistance, the need for emergency assistance, youth's personal challenges, and the need for advocacy. Many of the programs involved in the research report a lack of academic preparation for youth, including youth's lack of experience with independent living. Eight programs in the study also reported students' difficulty with financial assistance and explained that receiving financial aid, "was an important factor when foster care alumni decide to go to college" (2010:6).

Another important finding from their research included the fact that seven out of ten providers reported a lack of commitment to the program on the part of stakeholders and infrastructures, as the greatest barrier to program implementation. The lack of commitment included: the fact that there was not a financial aid staff member dedicated to foster youth's financial needs; agencies connected to the program failing to help get the name of the program out to participants; and the lack of data sharing agreements amongst stakeholders. The researchers concluded their investigation with recommendations to universities based on their results. They explained that including more connections to mentors, and making students aware of supportive services on campus, can largely mitigate the lack of needs met for former foster youth in college. This study provides further evidence that programming can impact the educational successes of foster youth.

Similarly, Dworsky and Perez (2010) used their exploratory study to understand how campus support programs help former foster youth graduate from college. The researchers conducted telephone interviews with administrators from 10 campus support programs, in both California and Washington. In addition, they created a web-based survey for program participants with a total of 98 student respondents. The researchers found that program directors mostly expressed concerns about foster youth feeling like they were not encouraged enough to attend college. The program directors also expressed concern with the ways in which FAFSA identified students as eligible "foster youth alumni," and the difficulty of locating potential students to participate in the programs. The researchers also explained that students listed, in order of importance, the services they received from the programs: financial aid along with housing assistance; leadership development; and mentoring. The most important take-away from this study was the most common forms of

support from the program identified by students, including assistance selecting classes and tutoring services. The least common forms of support provided by the program included graduate school advising and graduate school exam preparatory classes. This in-depth evaluation of existing programs identified important areas of need in the discussion regarding foster youth alumni programs in college.

Geenen and colleagues' (2015) research provides an example of how interventions for youth can make a lasting impact on their educational success. The researchers focused their study on the mental health challenges of foster youth who participated in higher education to understand how imperative interventions are to youth's success. In terms of this study, interventions followed the Better Futures Model, "which includes individualized coaching for youth around key self-determination skills while working to achieve their personally identified goals and mentoring workshops with near peers who have shared experience around foster care" (2015:5). These researchers identified 67 youth at random. They then placed half of the students into a control group, which received no services, and the other half into a group that received mental health services and intervention. The researchers discovered that students placed in the intervention groups scored higher on measurements of self-empowerment and post-secondary participation, along with improved mental health. Ultimately, this research indicated the importance of intervention, not only at the academic level, but also the social level, in regards to ensuring youth receive support during their academic experiences.

Unrau and colleagues (2011) investigated Western Michigan's Seita Scholars Program, using an exploratory cross-sectional survey, administered to 81 former foster youth admitted as college freshman, in 2009. The survey measured readiness for college

engagement and academic performance outcomes. The study provided examples of important program elements, including aid with finances, tuition, housing, and mental health. Two other important elements included connection to the community and social relationships. These program elements attempted to address the specific educational barriers highlighted in the previous bodies of literature. Overall, these researchers explained that foster youth are: more academically motivated, possess more positive attitudes towards educators, and have stronger desires to finish college than the national freshmen population. Fortunately, the use of Unrau and colleagues' research resulted in the program's opportunity to change some of their methods and include more resources for youth in college. This is a great example of how useful empirical examinations of programs are, addressing improvements that can lead to youth's educational success.

Although these projects provide important information about former foster youth's needs and challenges in college, as well as programs' abilities to meet these needs, there are some notable shortcomings. In particular, many of the studies fail to understand how youth's own resiliency, in conjunction with sociological factors, may influence these educational outcomes. The studies also fail to include an understanding of the program's overall effectiveness in regards to youth's educational successes and maintenance of resiliency. In addition, very few of these program evaluations attempt to understand the background of these individuals, including the presence of pathways to college. This information has potential to aid in determining what factors enabled foster youth to enter college. The experiences of youth, prior to entering college, have lasting impacts on their current education experiences. The lack of theoretical application is also a major concern

here. This thesis begins to fill in these gaps by bridging empirical evidence and theory focusing on “resiliency.”

Important sociological methods and theoretical concepts, such as resiliency, can greatly increase the validity of future research evaluations in order to improve the success of former foster youth in college. The next section includes a comprehensive look at theorists’ conceptualization of resiliency, as well as researchers’ operationalization of the term in regard to foster youth populations. This review of literature will contribute to narrowing the ways researchers use resiliency, and specifically connect the theoretical tool to understanding the educational experiences of former foster youth. In addition, the review of literature below leads to an important theoretical conclusion regarding the sociological application of resiliency as a theoretical tool for analysis.

Resiliency and Criminology

This thesis is most directly informed by the idea of resiliency. I have highlighted above that youth raised in foster care are more vulnerable to difficulties, especially as they transition into adulthood and continue on toward secondary education as compared to their more traditional peers (Hines et al. 2005). Luthar et al. (2000:543) explained, “work on resilience possesses substantial potential for augmenting the understanding of processes affecting at-risk youth.” Notably, resiliency is an often-used concept across the social sciences to describe beating the odds and overcoming adverse challenges. Researchers have studied resiliency across a variety of social settings including adolescents and youth (Bernard 1991; Gilligan 2000; Fergus and Zimmerman 2005; Turner et al. 2007; Hartman et al. 2009), incarcerated populations (Mitchell and Mackenzie 2006; Luther 2015) vulnerability and victimization (Diagle et al. 2010; Waklate 2011), and foster youth

(Hines et al. 2005; Drapeau et al. 2007; Samuels and Pryce 2008; Hass and Graydon 2009; Davidson-Arad and Bitton 2015).

How can the discipline of sociology contribute to academic discussions of resiliency and foster youth? In a recent article published in the *Annual Review of Sociology* Christopher Wildeman and Jane Waldfogel (2014) make a broad call to sociologists to develop more research on foster care in their article “Somebody’s Children or Nobody’s Children? How the Sociological Perspective Could Enliven Research on Foster Care.” The authors framed their argument by explaining that only 1.1 percent of articles in the top three sociology journals discuss foster care from 1973-2012 (Wildeman and Waldfogel 2014). Currently, the field of social work is responsible for most of the publications on foster youth (for example see Leathers and Testa 2006; Courtney et al. 2009; Hernandez and Naccarato 2010; Kirk and Day 2011; Unrau et al. 2012; Davidson-Arad and Navaro-Bitton 2015; Graham et al. 2015). However, Wildeman and Waldfogel pointed to the importance of a sociological approach to this topic because issues that sociologists commonly study—such as, “social welfare policies, criminal justice policies, and child welfare policies,”—intersect with the population of foster youth (2014:7). These researchers argued for the field of sociology to increase its scope and theoretical understanding on foster care in order to enhance a broader analysis of the foster care system itself.

According to Wildeman and Waldfogel (2014), sociological perspectives have the ability to bridge theoretical research, which attempts to conceptually apply theories to the world, and empirical research, which uses concrete data and evidence to support theoretical conclusions. This bridge currently divides contemporary research on foster

youth. Sociology, as a discipline, often bridges theory and empirical research for a more comprehensive analysis of society and this is ultimately why the researchers make the call to the field of sociology. Sociological literature that examines youth's ability to overcome disadvantages implement theoretical concepts like resiliency, in order to bridge this gap between the empirical and the theoretical. Thus, one way to sociologically investigate former foster youth in connection with their educational experiences, is to utilize the conceptualization and operationalization of resiliency.

Theoretical Understandings of Resiliency

There is an overwhelming amount of literature on resiliency, as well as a variety of research that represents the ways in which researchers measure and use the concept (Luthar et al. 2000). These broad, and often times conflicting conceptualizations of resiliency represent tension amongst scholars. Fergus and Zimmerman (2005) explained that the number one issue in regard to resiliency as a theoretical tool is conflicting terminology and definitions used by researchers across the discipline. Along with Fergus and Zimmerman (2005), Vanderbilt-Adriance and Shaw (2008) also emphasized the need for a narrower conceptualization of resiliency. The authors theorized, "that resilience, as a global construct, appears to be rare at the highest levels of risk, and that resilience may benefit from a narrower conceptualization focusing on specific outcomes at specific time points in development" (2008:30). These authors stressed the importance of a more refined use of resiliency to create consistency amongst social scientists. Therefore, for the remainder of this literature review, I first provide a review of how resiliency is often conceptualized, then I explain how researchers use the concept when examining foster youth, and I finish with how I am conceptualizing resiliency for the purposes of this project.

The most common way theorists conceptualize resiliency is by focusing on how people overcome difficult situations in their lives. Indeed, researchers who focus on this type of individual-level resilience frequently conceptualize resiliency as, 'beating the odds' and overcoming difficult challenges (Gilligan 2000; Turner et al. 2007). Additional theorists have included factors beyond simply beating the odds, to also, "changing the odds stacked against them" (Fitzpatrick 2011:229). Clearly then, resiliency is a theoretical concept that can be applied and examined across numerous social settings; indeed, researchers have examined the resiliency of individuals across academic success (Bernard 1991; Giligan 2000; Hines et al. 2005), incarceration (Mitchell and Mackenzie 2006; Luther 2015), and high-risk youth (Fergus and Zimmerman 2005; Turner et al. 2007).

One exemplary piece of literature contributes to the theoretical and empirical understanding of resiliency, is that of Fergus and Zimmerman (2005). These authors offered their own comprehensive conceptualization of resiliency, through the implementation of a pre-existing three-model approach to resiliency, while also offering their own adaptations to the models. This research is of importance because the authors separated the idea of resiliency from other somewhat similar critical concepts. Not only did they describe the issues of resilience-based research, but they also commented on its limitations. The researchers deduced that this issue may come from the fact that, "resilience is defined by the context, the population, the risk, the promotive factor, and the outcome," rather than a specific quality to an adolescent (Fergus and Zimmerman 2005:404).

Fergus and Zimmerman's (2005) research points to the additional importance of including the conceptualization of risk factors when attempting to define resiliency as a

theoretical concept. Time and time again, *'protective factors'* is a key term identified by many researchers, including criminologists, as potential tools for data analysis when understanding resiliency (Bernard 1991; Fergus and Zimmerman 2005; Hartman et al. 2009). For example, Hartman and colleagues (2009:249), through their criminogenic lens, focused their research around understanding the ways in which youth, "desist from or are resilient to delinquency." Through their sample of 711 youth classified as young adults, the researchers discussed protective factors that included: familial relationships, connections to religious institutions, self-worth, and more effective schooling environments. These protective factors indicated how individual and institutional level variables impact resiliency in youth. Not only did the researchers draw conclusions on different gendered experiences, they also explained that protective factors are significant for youth in promoting resiliency. In other words, the researchers suggest the accumulation of protective factors resulted in continued resilience for youth.

In another article, Bernard (1991:5), conceptualized protective factors as the "positive action strategies that build resiliency in youth." Bernard found the most important protective factors contributing to resilience development, measured by youth's support, high expectations, and encouragement of the youth themselves, included: family, school, and other community protective factors. Another study implemented protective factors and the ways in which disadvantaged adolescents were resilient to their surroundings. Smokowski and colleagues (1999) investigated resiliency within three primary conditions of risk: children's living in conditions of risk, better-than predicted conditions, and intervening processes. The researchers implemented quantitative comparisons for the first two conditions, and then autobiographical essays for the

intervening process. They found that not only internal attributes—such as, perseverance, determination, and awareness--, contributed to enhanced risk factors, but also motivational support from family members and teachers resulted in increased resiliency.

Amongst criminologists, Kate Luther contributes to a narrowed definition of resiliency. To ground her analysis of research on social support of adult children with incarcerated parents, Luther defined resiliency as, “a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant diversity” (2015: 506). By examining the cumulative effects that in turn present challenges to youth, criminologists are able to understand what turning points in youth’s lives may contribute to increased resiliency and decreased offending (Turner et. al 2007; Fitzpatrick 2011). Again, the focus on resiliency requires a sociological approach in order to address structural effects on youth’s resiliency.

In addition, many other criminologists have adopted the concept of resiliency to understand protective and risk factors that youth face in relation to delinquency (Turner et al. 2007). Examining the experiences children face is of additional importance when using the concept of resiliency to understand youth’s involvement with the criminal justice system (Gilligan 2000). Because these youth are often on a path towards the criminal justice system due to the additional risk factors that they experience, criminological methods are very important tools to understanding resiliency (Courtney et al. 2007). The overall sociological approach develops the discussion on the concept of resiliency because it bridges theoretical and empirical methods, while examining both individual level, and large, structural level variables. For example, in her own criminological work examining victimization, Waklate (2011:184) cited Gilligan to state the idea that, “resilience captures more than resistance or survival and more than pre-occupations with risk or safety.”

Waklate further explained how resiliency is often understood beyond the behaviors of individuals, to broader social conditions. She concluded that, “resilience, like vulnerability, has been understood to have inherent and structural qualities and when empirically investigated it has been done so in relation to risk.” (Waklate 2011:187). Here, the importance of a sociological approach is highlighted in order to understand resiliency through broader structural factors (for example, through institutions of education).

Many researchers have begun to take resilience-based approaches in their examinations on a variety of topics, from academic success, to employment outcomes (Gilligan 2000). I have attempted to ground theoretical conceptualizations of resiliency, and related concepts, such as protective and risk factors. Next, I examine studies that explore resiliency amongst foster youth.

Theoretical Applications of Resiliency for Foster Youth

With a basic understanding of literature that attempts to conceptualize resiliency, I now focus on research that have operationalized the concept within the context of foster youth and other marginalized youth. For example, Hass and Graydon (2009) used their study to uncover the sources of resiliency in 44 successful foster youth using protective factors. They found that youth pointed to several sources of resiliency including, “a sense of competence, goals for the future, social support, and involvement in community activities” (2009:457). These protective factors were an important conceptualization for the researchers in this study because they explained that the bulk of their subjects identified all of these factors in regards to their own educational experiences.

Davidson-Arad and Bitton (2015) broke down resiliency into three types: internal, external, and general, to understand former foster youth. The researchers pointed to a

variety of variables including: being female; being older; and having acceptance by a father all result in higher levels of resiliency for foster youth. In other words, this study suggests that youth's sense of resilience is used as a form of intervention in young people's lives, in order to help them overcome the maltreatment they may have faced. The study also emphasized the role both biological and foster parents can play in creating resilient environments for youth, a theme highlighted in other literature included in this review.

Samuels and Pryce (2008) specifically examined the ways in which adults aging out of the foster care system identified self-reliance, and the barriers they faced in regards to achieving their life goals. Using 44 interviews, the researchers concluded that self-reliance was a source of resilience in foster youth, and it also functions as a risk factor that can negatively impact youth's supportive relationships with others. The researchers also maintained that both positive and negative factors in youth can lead to some kind of impact on other pertinent variables. This provides evidence that we must include both protective and risk factors into the conversation when exploring youth's resiliency.

Another significant body of literature related to this thesis, is Hines and colleagues' (2005) work that focused on the specific forms of resiliency for 14 former foster youth currently in college. Using semi-structured interviews, they found that individual, family, and community level factors of resiliency, which impacted the academic success of foster youth. These results also indicated the importance of understanding development pathways of the youth. The studies highlighted here contributed to researchers' understandings of resiliency, by indicating specific variables that contribute to youth's ability to beat the odds.

In addition, Drapeau and colleagues (2007) used qualitative methods to examine resiliency in youth in the foster care system. The interviews with 12 boys and girls indicated three kinds of turning points for the youth, including: *action*, *relation*, and *reflection*. The researchers concluded that an increase in: perceived self-efficacy, distancing oneself from the risks, new opportunities, and the multiplication of benefits, all guided foster youth to paths of resiliency. This study highlighted the importance of turning points for youth in relation to resiliency and the role of social support in youth's lives (Luther 2015:507).

Conceptualizing Resiliency for this Thesis

Wildeman and Waldfogel's (2014) urge sociologists to broaden research concerning foster youth. The lack of research representing foster youth's forms of resiliency, and the ways in which they may or may not participate in criminal activity, presents the need for more attention on foster youth by criminologists. There is little literature implementing resiliency as a way to understand how youth are successful. Furthermore, the conceptualization of resiliency, by social theorists, needs further implementation when discovering the educational outcomes of foster youth.

The bodies of literature above provide examples of the diversity of definitions within academic literature discussing resiliency, and the ways in which academic professionals debate the precise and accurate definitions of resiliency. A combined summary of characteristics unique to resiliency includes beating the odds, and overcoming challenges (Gilligan 2000; Turner et al. 2007). Yet, many of these definitions fall short, as they come to define resiliency as an achieved goal, not an on-going process.

Fortunately, a more concise definition, provided by Luthar et al. (2000) takes the concept even further, by examining resiliency as a process, where youth positively adapt within the context of adversity. Luthar et al. expressed the concern that, “researchers must clearly explicate the approaches they select to define both adversity and competence and provide cogent justifications for choices made on both conceptual and empirical grounds” (2000:545). Theoretical uniformity is required for the progression of research done on resiliency. Thus, I argue, alongside Wildeman and Waldfogel, that a sociological approach will further progress the understandings of foster youth, specifically through utilizing the concept of resiliency as a process. Therefore, for the purposes of this thesis, I come to conceptualize resiliency using Luthar and colleagues’ (2000) theoretical discussion.

Luthar et al (2000) addressed four central criticisms of resiliency, as both an empirical concept and a theoretical construct. Consequently, the authors defined resiliency as, “a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity” (2000:543). Here, two conditions must exist, 1) the exposure to significant threat or severe adversity and 2) the achievement of positive adaptation despite adversity (Luthar et al. 2000). This definition is one of the most important addressed in prominent literature, as the authors use a variety of existing literature to narrow down the definition of resiliency. By stating that the two preconditions must be present to apply the theoretical understanding of resiliency, this definition allows other researchers to clearly operationalize this conceptualization of resiliency.

Ultimately, the inconsistent ways in which academics theorize and apply resiliency, results in significant gaps that leave researchers with more questions than answered. How can researchers use resiliency in a concise way to understand the multiple contexts of

youth who face obstacles in their lives? Additionally, much of the research on resiliency only considers the outcomes in which youth are not resilient. More research should implement the theoretical concept of resiliency to understand the ways in which youth *are* resilient and *stay* resilient. The research questions below attempt to explore how resiliency operates in connection to foster youth's educational experiences.

Research Questions

This thesis aims to address the gaps in literature, in which researchers have failed to identify the specific and contextual ways in which youth not only desist from crime, but rather pursue higher education, while using clear and accurate conceptualizations and operationalization of resiliency based on the literature above. Through the completion of the research design below, this thesis will provide more insight to the sources of resiliency of former foster youth, as well as ways in which programs can enhance youth's academic success. This thesis will also utilize four important research questions developed to address specific gaps in the literature above. Additionally, these research questions guide the research design of this thesis:

- What are the conditions of adversity that former foster youth face regarding their educational experiences?
- What are the contextual and structural protective and risk factors that former foster youth identify for themselves, especially in regards to their educational experiences?
- How might former foster youth's resiliency contribute to these factors and sustain a path towards education as opposed to a path towards incarceration?
- What are some of the major ways in which the Fostering Success program contributes to former foster youth's sense of resiliency?

In the following chapter, I describe my research methods where I highlight the qualitative nature of my research design and the implementation of grounded theory for this thesis.

III. METHODS

The goal of this thesis is to provide a grounded theoretical approach to understanding the ways in which risk, vulnerability, and resiliency operate in the lives of independent status students and the ways in which the aforesaid components have impacted students' educational experiences, with an emphasis on foster youth.

The FSP currently serves over 200 students who meet the requirements of independent student status at CSU. According to their website, the primary goal of FSP is to create, "a student centered community of support and belonging which enhances resiliency and self-advocacy and to create a culture of trust to promote student success." FSP invites students that qualify for independent status to participate in FSP and focuses on providing a range of resources to meet the aforementioned goals.

I began writing my research proposal for my thesis towards the end of September 2015, in which I focused my research approach around structured, in-depth interviews. In addition, with the oversight of my advisor, Dr. Opsal, I drafted consent forms, recruitment speeches, and interview guides to submit to the Institutional Review Board (IRB), at CSU. After completing one revision of the IRB protocol, the IRB accepted the proposal on November 12, 2015.

In this chapter, I describe my interests and positionality as a researcher in this project, as well as present my research questions. Then, I outline my research design and provide a detailed description of data collection and the sample population. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of the potential limitations and the ethical concerns I faced in the course of this research.

Background and Research Interests

The summer before entering the sociology graduate program at CSU, I worked as a research assistant for Dr. Tara Opsal. During this time, I researched existing programs that provided resources for former foster youth during their college experiences. I first created a preliminary spreadsheet and began collecting information on CSU's peer colleges. The goal of this exploratory research was to discover what programs existed for former foster youth at colleges, as well as the different resources those programs offer students. After my first year in the sociology master's program, FSP requested that Dr. Opsal and I meet with the group of people that run the FSP, where we discussed possible research designs for a program evaluation they wished to have conducted.

After the FSP's donors approved funding for the evaluation, Dr. Opsal and I discussed the possibility of using part of this project for my own thesis. Knowing my interests in vulnerable populations, and my passion for criminal justice studies, Dr. Opsal and I decided this would be the perfect opportunity for me to examine the resilience of youth who have faced extreme challenges, and their resulting ability to overcome, based on those barriers. Next, I conducted some background research on former foster youth, their educational experiences, and resiliency. During this period, gaps in the existing literature on this topic emerged. I decided this program evaluation would be an excellent chance to further address areas of weakness in existing literature surrounding foster youth and independent students.

Research Questions

Based on my academic interests and research experience, as well as my comprehensive review of literature, I developed a research design to focus on independent status students at CSU, and their educational experiences. This thesis provides deeper insight to the sources of resiliency found in former foster youth, as well as identified risk and protective factors as they relate to broader social structures. These questions were developed at the initial stages of my research to guide and focus my studies:

- What are the conditions of adversity that former foster youth face regarding their educational experiences?
- What are the contextual and structural protective and risk factors that former foster youth identify for themselves, especially in regards to their educational experiences?
- How might former foster youth's resiliency contribute to these factors and sustain a path towards education as opposed to a path towards incarceration?
- What are some of the major ways in which the Fostering Success program contributes to former foster youth's sense of resiliency?

Research Design: Qualitative Methods

For my thesis I conducted a qualitative study, examining independent status students, including former foster youth and their educational experiences in the face of unique challenges. The purpose of this study was largely descriptive. In line with the primary purposes of qualitative research, my thesis attempts to understand the experiences of human beings and the meanings subjects attribute to those experiences through methodological means (Ravitch and Carl 2016).

In addition to my overall qualitative approach, I took a grounded methodological and theoretical approach. I expand on this discussion below, however, the primary goal behind grounded theory is to construct concepts from the ground up out of the data

researchers collect (Charmaz 2006). The rigorous methodological approaches fundamental to grounded theory provide researchers with a toolkit to check, refine, and develop their ideas about the data (Charmaz 2006).

In addition, it is important to note the collaborative efforts that were an integral component to my thesis. As part of a larger project, my thesis work has required me to work side by side with Dr. Opsal on several occasions. Ravitch and Carl (2016:16) explain how “dialogical engagement is a requirement of rigorous, reflexive research and constitutes an approach to qualitative research that engenders and supports criticality.” The co-constructed research design and data collection throughout the process of my thesis created space for constant critical reflection and examination of our research decisions.

In this section, I describe the primary qualitative methods I used to collect data. I also include the ways in which I gained access to the setting, drew my sample population, the formation of my data analysis, address ethical concerns, and conclude with a discussion on emotion-work.

Entry into the Field

Due to the larger goal of the program evaluation for the overall project of which my thesis is a part of, I attended the working group meetings of the staff members from August 2015 to April 2016. During the meetings the members collaborate with each other, update the group on current events, and discuss other issues related to FSP. While I do not use these observations as data in this thesis, it is important to note that my observations allowed me to understand the inner dynamics of FSP. The working group meets every other week for approximately an hour.

Although my observations in this setting do not apply directly to the data collection of the narrowed scope of my thesis in particular, my participation in these meetings is important to note. These observations influence the ways in which I as a researcher approach the topic of FSP in my interviews, and during my data analysis. Due to the extra knowledge I received from sitting in on these meetings, I am more immersed in FSP as it connects to my data collection.

Data Collection

In this section, I explain my process of data collection, including the ways in which I gained access, a more detailed description of sampling, the location of my research, and my own positionality and role in the setting.

Gaining Access and Entrée into the Setting. As I previously mentioned, FSP first reached out to Dr. Opsal to request she conduct a program evaluation for them. As Dr. Opsal's research assistant, and a graduate student at CSU where FSP is located, I was able to receive automatic entry into the field at this time, as a result of FSP's request.

Location. Due to the specific confinements of the program evaluation at CSU, the location of my thesis and sample of the population takes place at CSU during fall semester 2015 and spring semester 2016. The interviews were all conducted on the CSU's campus with students currently enrolled at CSU.

Sampling. Due to the qualitative nature and narrow scope of my thesis, I used purposive sampling. Purposive sampling "means that individuals are purposefully chosen to participate in the research for specific reasons, including that they have had a certain experience, have knowledge of a specific phenomenon, reside in a specific location, or some other reason" (Ravitch and Carl 2016:128). To properly address my research questions, I

specifically needed students who fit the requirements of an independent status; this included their experiences as independent youth, their knowledge and experience with FSP, and their location/status as students at CSU. Therefore, my sample is directly taken from the population pertaining to my research questions.

In contrast to quantitative research designs, Marshall (1996) outlines why random sampling is not as appropriate for qualitative studies due to the lack of normal distribution found in qualitative research samples. In addition, Small (2009) also points to the fact that not all qualitative research expects to make theoretical models that are applicable to all settings. This relates back to the points stressed by Ravitch and Carl (2016) regarding the importance of context in qualitative research. Context includes a myriad of variables such as the setting of the study, where the sample is drawn from, and other relevant demographic information. Qualitative research takes all of these variables related to context into account when developing analytical conclusions.

Weiss (1994) also explains that purposive and convenience sampling may still provide some forms of generalizability including: corroboration from other studies, theory of independent qualifiers, depth, similarity of dynamics and constraints, and respondents' own assessments of generalizability. These authors who explain the unique nature of qualitative research designs and the importance of context and the secondary goal of generalizability, support my decision for and use of purposive sampling.

To begin, the FSP granted Dr. Opsal and I access to their database, which contains all students at CSU eligible for independent status. Requirements and eligibility for students to have independent status are determined by the student's individual FAFSA form, which is monitored and maintained through the Admissions Office. If a student qualifies as

independent on their FAFSA form, they are similarly acknowledged as independent at the university level. The FSP database listed students': race/ethnicity; age; address; email; and the number of FSP events they have attended. In addition to the factors of independent status qualifications of the student, the database also includes a student's GPA, academic standing, class, and major.

Recruitment began in December 2015 and occurred in waves for a period of several months whereby specific students were targeted based on theoretical sampling. Theoretical sampling allows researchers to purposely sample participants based on the belief that certain participants will contribute theoretical meaning to the data (Charmaz 2006). We started by recruiting for interviews with students who were heavily involved in FSP. Our next recruitment email focused solely on students who had no involvement in FSP. Later on, I sent out a recruitment message only to foster students. Finally, we sent out a second round of emails targeting the students who had not responded to our first round of emails. In addition to explaining the purpose of our research to students in these emails, we offered them compensation for their time of twenty dollars in RamCash, to be deposited directly into their student accounts.

We decided that emailing was the most appropriate form of initial contact with respondents, as students were more likely to frequently check their email when school is in session. Students also have lower rates of residential permanency, as such, we reserved mailing physical letters to students until our last phase of recruitment and then only as a follow-up for students we had not heard back from. When a student responded to Dr. Opsal's email, she forwarded the email to me and I followed-up with students directly, coordinating a time for the interview. After a total of eight different batches of emails were

sent, we sent what we thought was our final phase of emails at the beginning of April 2016 to all students who had not responded to the first email.

In the middle of April, an additional recruitment step came in the form of hand mailed letters sent to students' residences (see Appendix B). We decided that Dr. Opsal's role as an assistant professor would garner more serious attention from the students than my role as a graduate student. Therefore, all of the letters were composed and signed by her. I assisted by locating the students' addresses and putting together the envelopes. In August of 2016, our goal of at least 30 participants had not yet been reached. Dr. Opsal sent out the final round of emails to students who had not responded to our first and second rounds of recruitment. By the middle of August 2016, we reached our goal of exactly 30 participants.

Once the students responded to Dr. Opsal via email, she again forwarded the students' information to me and I made finalized plans to interview the students. We only had three responses to the mailed letters; the majority of our responses came from our first and second phase emails. In total, 200 students were contacted, with a response of 44 students. Of the students who responded, 30 were interviewed (N=30). This is almost a 25 percent response rate, which is considered very robust for qualitative interviewing methods.

For the purposes of my thesis, I drew a smaller sample out of our final sample of 30, using the eligibility categories that define whether or not CSU will recognize students as independent. According to the database, there are five different independent status types. The most represented in my sample is *orphan/ward of court/foster youth* (n=12). This category includes youth that have aged out of the foster care system or youth determined

as orphans, without either surviving biological parents. In addition, youth qualify for this category if they are legally determined a wards of the state. The second most common in my sample is “Independent Appeal” (n=7), followed by youth who were “Homeless” (n=5), youth who have legal guardians but are considered “Financially Independent” (n=4), and finally “Other” (n=2). “Independent Appeal” refers to the bureaucratic process students undertake when they are accepted to CSU. There is paperwork students must fill out and a number of signatures they must receive in order to qualify as independent with CSU. Homeless youth are youth who do not have legal guardians.

Finally, to ensure the database matched up with the students actual independent backgrounds we verified the information from the database with the students during the interviews. Both the information from the database and the information from the interviews were recorded on a spreadsheet.

I purposely selected respondents who qualified for “Independent Appeal” at CSU as well as students who fell under the category of “Orphan/Ward of the state/Foster youth” according to FSP’s database. My reasons for selecting this sample are twofold. First, I wanted two groups that were distinct from one another to draw out potential comparisons between qualified youth who have experienced different forms of adversity due to their upbringing--I hoped that by choosing the “Independent Appeal” group, their circumstances would differ even more in comparison to former foster youth, than the other categories of independent students. Second, the “Independent Appeal” group was the largest subgroup in the sample. This resulted in a sample size of N=19 for my thesis.

Additional demographics of the sample are important to note. The ages of students interviewed ranged from 18-25 years of age (See Table 3.1).

Table 3.1 Age of Respondents by Percentage

Age	19	20	21	22	23	24	25
Percentage of Respondents	21	16	16	16	16	0	5

In terms of gender, there were twice as many females (n=13) than males (n=6) in my sample. The sample also contained 9 White respondents, 2 Asian participants, 7 Hispanic respondents, and 1 Black respondent (see Figure 3.1 for overall percentages). According to the office of Institutional Research at CSU, 17% of all students at CSU are ethnic minorities, whereas 53% of my sample is composed of ethnic minorities. My sample therefore over-represents ethnic minorities from the overall population from which I drew my sample. However, this overrepresentation of ethnic minorities in my sample is not surprising, considering the ratio of ethnic to non-ethnic minorities involved with FSP.

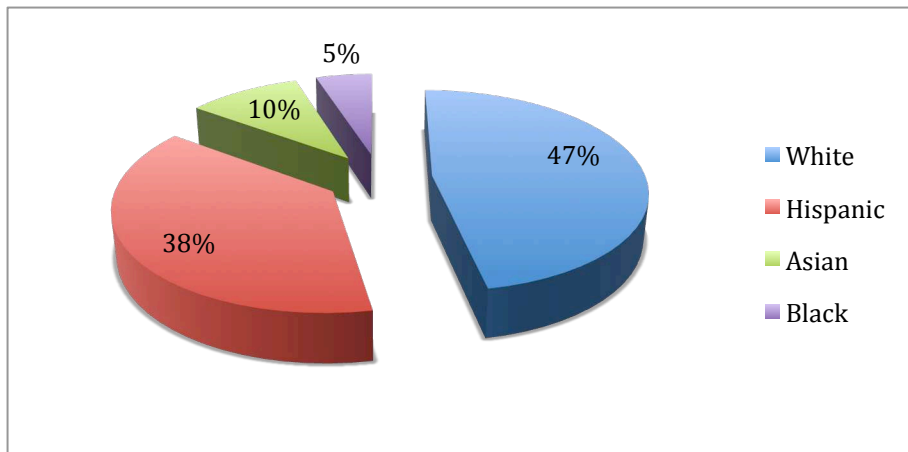


Figure 3.1 Percentage of Respondents' Race/Ethnicity

There were 6 freshman students, 4 sophomores, 3 juniors, and 6 seniors (also see Figure 3.2 for overall percentages). One of the potential reasons there is a lower response rate of upper classmen could speak to retention rates of independent status students. Data

indicates lower success rates of independent students, specifically former foster youth; only 2-9 percent of these youth attain a

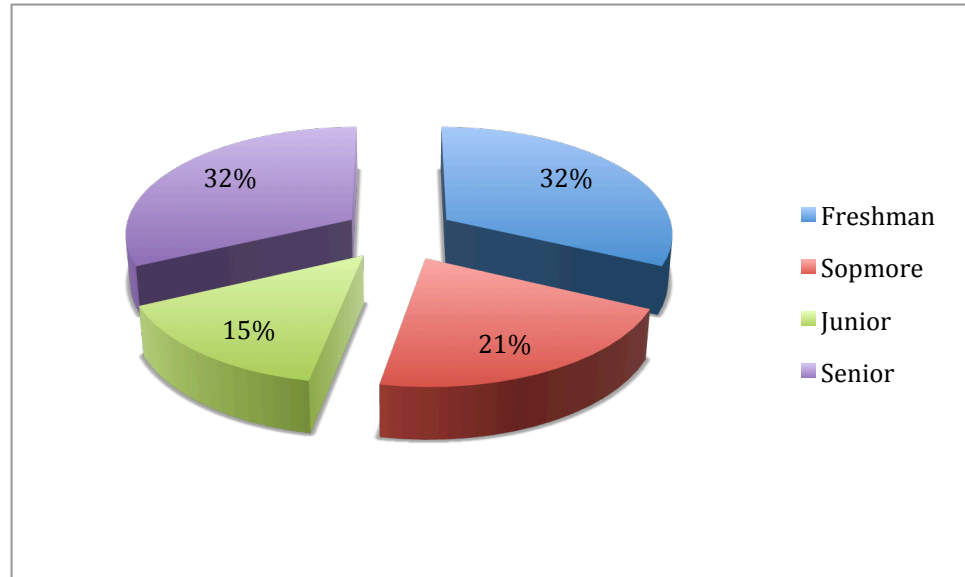


Figure 3.2 Percentage of Participants by College Class

bachelor's degree (Research Highlights on Education and Foster Care 2014). This is an important area for future research to investigate.

In addition to participants' gender, age, race/ethnicity, and year of college, I have also identified the central

forms of adversity each participant acknowledged as they informed us about their past (see Table 3.2). This table indicates how all of the participants did indeed experience adverse circumstance prior to college (exceptions are noted in parenthesis). Noting these adverse conditions allows me to state that these participants experienced adversity. This also allows me to further analyze these youth in connection to my

Table 3.2. Forms of Adversity

Participant	Type	Central Adversity
Brian	FY	Maltreatment
Jesse	FY	Maltreatment, abuse
Maggie	FY	Physical abuse
Peggy	FY	Homelessness
Judy	WC	Death of mother (during college)
Jordan	WC	Mother's drug use
Jonathan	WC	Juvenile delinquent
Emma	FY	Parental drug use, loss of father, loss of sister (during college)
Mary	FY	Sexual abuse
John	FY	Death of mother, incarcerated father
Jeff	IA	Financial independence from biological parents (during college)
Nancy	IA	Mother's prostitution, financial independence from biological parents
Zoe	IA	Death of mother
Joanie	IA	Death of mother (during college), financial independence from father
Katy	IA	Financial independence from biological parents
Ida	IA	Maltreatment, abuse
Rachel	IA	Maltreatment, sexual abuse
Zane	O	Death of biological parents
Anna	IA	Physical abuse

IA: Independent Appeal; FY: Foster Youth; WC: Ward of the Court; O: Orphan

theoretical understanding of adversity, which I unpack in Chapter 4.

Interviewing. One of the most common methods implemented for qualitative research is interviewing. Weiss (1994:1) explains that, "through interviewing we can learn about

places we have not been and could not go...we can learn what people perceived and how they interpreted their perceptions...interviewing gives us a window to the past.”

Interviewing serves as a method to collect qualitative data and it allows researchers to understand the experiences of their participants through the participants’ own understanding (Weiss 1994). Thus, I selected interviewing as the key method utilized for building my thesis as my main goal was to uncover the ways in which the students themselves define their own educational successes in relation to adversity and resiliency. It was imperative to the goals of our research to collect qualitative data from the participants themselves to make sense of how they perceive their past, present, and future, as related to the development of their perceived resiliency.

Dr. Opsal and I created a structured interview guide (see Appendix E), that covered the students’ backgrounds in order to explore resiliency and barriers they have faced, and students’ experiences at CSU, as well as different variables of social support, finances, housing, and their participation with FSP. This was included in my initial thesis prospectus and then revisited and revised after the first few interviews.

Weiss (1994) suggests using pilot interviews because they help clarify the aims and framing of our studies to constitute substantive frameworks, although this likely shifts somewhat as the study progresses. This reaches back to the reflexive and critical process of qualitative research. As mentioned above, Dr. Opsal conducted three pilot interviews, and then revisited the interview guide to make necessary changes, based on repeated items the students mentioned in their interviews, which we had not originally anticipated. We then discussed the importance of probing for ways in which students reached out to others for help. We also began to probe more for the ways in which the students could identify how

their past experiences shaped the way they experience current life on campus. We asked students how their life on campus differed from their living situations before college. Markers also aided me in refining my interview guide. Weiss (1994:77) defines a marker as “a passing reference made by a respondent to an important event or feeling state.” These markers can be critical areas for researchers to probe deeper to better understand participants’ experiences.

Beginning in December 2015, Dr. Opsal conducted our first four interviews. During her fourth interview, I observed and took notes to ascertain her methodology. After this first round of interviews, I took over as the primary interviewer. All of the interviews were conducted in a quiet and private room on campus. They were also all conducted in person one-on-one, with the exception of the interview I observed.

Before the interviews began, I went over the consent form with the students (see Appendix C for consent forms and Appendix D for field protocol document). After the students signed the papers, and gave consent for audio-recording, I began the interviews. The interviews were recorded using a digital recorder, as well as a recording application on my iPhone. I used two forms of recording in case something went wrong with one of the devices. Throughout all 30 interviews, only one student denied permission for recording. In this case, I jotted notes down throughout the interview with a pen and piece of paper. I quoted the student twice, and made sure to repeat the quote back to the student to ensure reliability. I took very detailed notes on a word document on my computer immediately following the interview.

In addition, after each interview, I took notes immediately afterwards using a separate word document, titling, and saving each one with the participant’s assigned

number to ensure confidentiality. Besides noting the location, date, and time of the interview, I tried to jot down everything I could remember from the interview, including memos, in brackets, to myself. For example, I bracketed when a topic came up in which it seemed as though students used a quote that represented some of the broader themes I had already heard from other students. I also noted more of the quantitative information received from the interviews including, how old the student was when a significant event occurred; the student's major and current age at the time of the interview; and other important demographic information.

The interviews ranged from 40 minutes to a little over 90 minutes. Due to the funding of the larger program evaluation (see Appendix F), we were able to pay for a professional transcriptionist to transcribe the interviews. This saved us copious amounts of time. However, I transcribed the third interview to familiarize myself with the overall interviewing processes.

Researcher Positionality and Role in Setting. I would like to note the role of myself in the research setting, as well as my own positionality as a researcher. Due to my outside role as a researcher conducting the program evaluation on FSP, I cannot claim an insider status to that particular group. However, my role as a student at CSU, and also my past as an undergraduate student at CSU, provided me with somewhat of an insider role with the students I interviewed.

Dwyer and Buckle (2009:50) explain that insider researchers are “when researchers conduct research with populations of which they are also members.” So too, by this definition, considering my role as a student at CSU, I am an insider to my research. However, I do not come from an independent background, therefore I cannot consider

myself a complete insider, via the above definition. My lack of experience as an independent student prevents me from fully becoming an insider since I cannot empathize with the circumstances of the interviewed students.

Dwyer and Buckle (2009) also explain there is always an embedded subjectivity within qualitative research. They explain we can no longer remain true outsiders separate from the experiences of those we study (Dwyer and Buckle 2009). This is an important issue to address when considering the grounded role of qualitative research in my thesis. The more I interviewed my participants, the more I became familiar with their experiences, which influenced the ways in which I approached my data analysis.

Positionality “is the researcher’s role and identity as they intersect and are in relationship to the context and setting of the research” (Ravitch and Carl 2016:11). In terms of my own positionality, there are two possible ways in which both my gender and age impacted the level of responses I received from participants. On the one hand, with two-thirds of my sample as female, both my gender and my age, which lies within the range of my sample, could have enhanced the depth and level of responses I received from my participants. This could be because respondents identified more closely with me. On the other hand, my gender, specifically as a female, and my similar age may have caused participants to discount the seriousness of my role as a researcher in the study. However another consideration points to gender performance that might explain how male respondents were either more or less comfortable answering the emotion-based questions because I was specifically not another man in the room.

Coding and Data Analysis

To explore my research questions, my methodology is based in grounded theory, a qualitative methodological approach that starts with data. Grounded methodology is an iterative process in which the concepts that researchers use to form their theoretical conclusions come from the empirical data itself (Charmaz 2006). Qualitative research, by nature, is reflexive, inductive, recursive, and systematic (Ravitch and Carl 2016). My continual visitation between data collection and preliminary data analysis represents the recursive process represented in classic literature and surrounds the method of qualitative research. This dynamic process allowed me to constantly revisit the techniques and processes throughout my research and speaks to the grounded approach I have chosen to take.

I developed the codes for my data analysis by first familiarizing myself with my data. I did so by manually coding the first set of my interviews from the original project (n=11). Coding is, “the “critical link” between data collection and their explanation of meaning” (Saldaña 2013:3). In my first round of coding, I focused on the ‘bigger’ picture, attempting to pull broad ideas out of the data. This aligns with exploratory methods, where I used a more holistic approach. This is also consistent with grounded theory because I did not begin my research design with pre-determined codes. These codes arose out of the data once it was already collected and the data analysis began. I then made an initial list/code book of potential themes and nodes. Next, Dr. Opsal and I each coded the same three interviews, using this initial codebook to ensure inter-coder reliability. Out of this we created our final code book (see Appendix G).

As I began the official coding process, I printed the codebook and referenced it as I coded all 30 of the interviews using Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis software. Saldaña (2011) recommends having a page of the research questions and goals in front of you during the nascent coding process. In addition, Dr. Opsal and I kept this codebook in a file in Dropbox so we could add clarifications in a collaborative effort as we continued to code for the larger project.

After I completed the first round of coding for the larger program evaluation, I identified three themes for my thesis. I coded for these themes in my final round of coding for my sample of n=19. Again, this highlights the iterative process of qualitative research and a grounded theory approach, as I used the data to develop my primary themes. The three important themes and subthemes that emerged from my data include:

- *Pathways*: the ways in which students find their way to college
 - Educational support networks
 - Conceptualization of school
 - Financial assistance
- *Social and emotional support*: the ways in which students retain their resiliency once they have made it to college
 - Peers
 - Mentors and guardians
 - Mental health
- *Self-concept*: the ways in which students perceive themselves as independent through their resiliency in relation to adverse conditions.
 - Self-reliance

These themes allowed me to begin the data analysis portion of my thesis which I highlight in Chapter 4.

Limitations

Due to the fact that my thesis has a limited scope and sample of students only attending CSU, there are several limitations. First and foremost, the amount of generalizability in my findings is confined to the narrow population of independent students at CSU. Indeed, one of the characteristics of qualitative research is that it does not focus on generalizability. However, although the methodological approach of open-ended, qualitative interviews has some limitations, all of my interviews were cross-sectional, in part retrospective, and occurred with each participant only once.

Ethical Concerns

Some of the topics the students brought up struck emotional chords, so I probed carefully during those moments. During these times, I think my participants may have felt a little uncomfortable, but I always reassured them they only had to discuss what they felt comfortable talking about. As Weiss (1994:30) explains, it is important to “establish a reliable research relationship” with participants, so I made sure the interviewees were aware of any boundaries they wished to maintain. For example, I asked the students if they felt comfortable expanding, and tried to give them time to form their thoughts before speaking again.

I found that if I gave the students enough time and space to think through and form their responses, the interview flowed more organically and in the end, provided me with richer data. I am not sure if the interviews directly impacted the interviewees, however I would like to include a quote from an interview I conducted with a 22-year-old, male participant, because I find that it represents the student’s thought process and feelings about the interview in relation to his personal hardships:

I make the personal decision not to [to seek counseling services]. I made the personal decision to come in here and explain my story, but I'm not telling you all the emotional things or the nights that happened, and I went through this and that to cope with it. I just told you the story, but there are students that are on the verge, that maybe their pride will let them explain and let their emotions out and to vent.

This quote exemplifies the impact that talking about personal experiences can have on people (Opsal et al. 2015). Here, the importance of the researcher's relationship with participants during the process of interviews is exemplified. As researchers, we have a responsibility to the wellbeing of our participants, as well as the wellbeing of ourselves. This brings me to my last discussion of emotion-work.

Emotion-Work

Dickson-Swift and colleagues (2009) explain how qualitative research can emotionally impact researchers. The authors explain that we cannot deny the fact that "qualitative research work can be emotion work" (Dickson Swift et al. 2009:67). The authors explain that we must be continuously aware of the impact research can have on our emotions. I found this to be the case in my own research.

After sitting through my first interview, I found myself surprised at how much it impacted me emotionally. The stories some of the youth share about their pasts found their way deep into my conscious and I wondered how to move on in a more positive way from their stories. Weiss (1994) also explains the effects interviews can have on both researchers and respondents. The relationship between the researcher and the interviewee should remain professional, but it is important for us as researchers to find ways to empathize with respondents when moments get tough. Ultimately, I believe the emotion-

work I experienced throughout the process of interviewing the participants only added to the authenticity and passion of my work as a researcher.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

As a reminder for the reader, the research questions that were central in guiding this project include:

- What are the conditions of adversity that former foster youth face regarding their educational experiences?
- What are the contextual and structural protective and risk factors that former foster youth identify for themselves, especially in regards to their educational experiences?
- How might former foster youth's resiliency contribute to these factors and sustain a path towards education as opposed to a path towards incarceration?
- What are some of the major ways in which the Fostering Success program contributes to former foster youths' sense of resiliency?

These questions served as a foundation for the design of my research. However, as discussed at length in Chapter 3, grounded research draws conclusions from the data itself, thus, these questions simply served as guides for my research.

In this chapter, I identify and describe central findings from my research. In particular, I provide an in-depth analysis analyzing the ways in which both groups of participants--former foster youth, as well as independent appeal students—(1) find their way to college, (2) retain their resiliency once they've made it to college, (3) and perceive themselves as self-reliant. More specifically, I first examine three central pathways to participants' involvement in secondary education. Next, I identify the various forms of social and emotional support that contribute to participants' processes of retained resiliency. I conclude by discussing the importance of self-concept in relation to participants' independent status identities.

Before I discuss my findings, it is first important to remember how I am conceptualizing resiliency as it is this concept that most centrally connects the three major

themes I describe below. I am using Luthar et al.'s (2000) theoretical understanding of resiliency, in which, "two critical conditions to the study of resilience: the exposure to significant threat or severe adversity and the achievement of positive adaptation despite adversity" must exist. As illustrated in chapter three (Table 3.2), nearly all of the participants (with the exception of three students) in the sample met this condition. Indeed, the vast majority of the participants in my sample faced adverse circumstances prior to college and often continued to face adverse circumstance while in college.

One way to gain an understanding of youth's abilities to overcome adverse situations is to use college as a proxy to understand resilience. One example of this is Luther's (2015) research on children of incarcerated parents whereby Luther uses college as a central way to conceptualize resiliency among her sample. I draw on Luther's work in this section and use the same measure—college attendance—to conceptualize resiliency. I begin by describing the central pathways participants most commonly identified as critical to their paths towards college.

Pathways

Pathways are important to examine because at-risk youth, such as foster care youth and youth with independent backgrounds, face a unique set of challenges in comparison to their peers. Indeed, there is an abundance of research on foster youth, in particular, that illustrates poor life outcomes post high school (see literature review for a thorough discussion on this). Given, though, that I am focused on the notion of what creates resiliency among this population, the question becomes, what do participants identify as central pathways to college? In this section I describe three central avenues through which college became a reality for the participants in my sample. In particular, next I describe in

detail how the youth in this study point to the importance of 1) envisioning college as a possibility, 2) their conceptualization of college as a route to future success, and 3) financial assistance such as scholarships.

The data compiled for this thesis indicates there are indeed forms of social support with which youth enter college with. The data from this thesis provides evidence of ways in which external variables, such as social relationships and financial assistance, serve as pathways to college, directly connecting youth's levels of social capital to their likelihood to attend college. These pathways to college are highlighted below.

Envisioning College as a Possibility

The first pathway to college participants in this study commonly identified as central was being able to envision college as a possibility. Notably, they typically explained that (1) relationships with adults within the educational system, as well as (2) high school academic programs were central in this process. In regards to the former group, students spoke about the importance of advisors, counselors, and teachers. In regards to the latter group, participants pointed to college preparatory classes, which included: International Baccalaureate (IB); Advanced Placement (AP); Advanced via Individual Determination (AVID); college resource centers; and finally, the opportunity to take courses at a community college that transferred credits to four year colleges. The access to these educational adults, other groups of adults, and preparatory programs enhanced participants' abilities to see college as a reality, and thus serves as the first identified pathway to college for participants. Without the presence of these factors, participants often explained they would not have understood college as a tangible possibility because of the adverse challenges they faced while growing up.

Here is data to illustrate how a counselor or teacher was important to participants' understanding of college as a possibility. Peggy, a White, female, freshman whose homeless parents struggled with drug abuse, moved in with a guardian when she was 13 which allowed her to escape the environment of homeless shelters. Peggy explained at length how her relationship with her counselor, as well as her high school's college career center impacted her decision to go to college:

We had something called the College and Career Center. There were a lot of college visits...I had a counselor named Mr. Hops...he definitely really pushed me. I sat in his office hours at a time just talking. "I don't know what to do about college and scholarships." He was just like, "Calm down. You're going to get it. Just apply for as many as you can." ...if he wasn't there, I probably wouldn't have stayed in state. He was just pretty nice. He also wrote my recommendation letters.

Not only did Peggy have access to a college career center, but she also used her relationship with her counselor as support for applying to colleges. This highlights the importance of participants' relationships with educational adults in relation to understanding college as a real possibility. In addition, this data also introduces how high school preparatory programs contributed to Peggy's ability to envision college as a reality. In summation, Peggy used the information provided by her high school and used the support she received from her counselor as a pathway to college.

Similar to Peggy, Judy identified her AVID teacher as an adult within her educational system that helped her envision college as a possibility:

I could easily say that he definitely favored me throughout the class because just of my predicament, and it was just so unique to other people. I definitely feel like he was definitely rooting for the underdog the whole time. He was kind of my main coach throughout the whole process to getting into college. If it wasn't for him I don't know first off how I'd afford it. He helped me step by step through the application to just colleges, also through the FAFSA progress, also applying for loans, also applying to scholarships. I remember he read every essay that I had.

Here, Judy's AVID teacher not only provided her with the motivation to apply to colleges, he also helped her with the actual process of applying for loans and scholarships. With his help, Judy was able to understand college was a tangible dream.

In addition to these key adults within youth's educational settings, other groups of people were foundational in participants' understanding of college as a reality. For example, several other participants mentioned the importance of social networks and how those networks connected students to apply to college thus envisioning it as a true possibility. Here is an example of how a group of people came together for the participant to see that college was possible. In our interview together, Ida described how she was introduced to the idea of college, and what made her decide to apply, Ida explained:

A number of factors [encouraged me to apply to college]. A friend of mine's grandmother, I don't know if it's actually a grandmother, she's just a really old lady, I don't know if it's her grandmother or not. She was like, "You know college." I was like, "maybe I'll go talk to some people." I went to my high school counselor who had known about my life situation. I randomly asked about CSU. That friend's grandmother drove me up here on a whim. This was in May of my senior year

Here, not only did it take the efforts of a counselor but it was also the grandmother that helped make this trip effective. Ida explained that her counselor was there to help her find out more information about CSU, while her friend's grandmother was there to physically take her to visit the university. This example illustrates how a network of people came together and helped the participant envision the possibility of going to college.

In a similar way to Ida, Mary explained that it was a network of people in her life that allowed her to envision college as a possibility. A Hispanic female, Mary was placed in the foster care system when she was 15 years old. Social services took her away from her

biological parents when people started noticing bruises on her body. Mary was physically abused by her father throughout her childhood and experienced sexual abuse starting at the age of 11. Consequently, Mary struggled with mental health throughout her childhood. She explained the importance of her therapist, as well as her social work team in the creation of her belief that college could be a reality:

Probably my therapist, she was like, “yeah you’re going to go to [college].” Because she believed in me, she did. My [social work] team was pretty good at it because they knew my potential, they just didn’t know whether I was going to make it or not because they knew I was struggling.

Mary’s discussion of her therapist and social work team illustrates the importance of a group of people working together to create a pathway to college for the participants. Similar to Ida’s group of support, the placement of both Mary’s social work team and her therapist, allowed her to see that going to college could become a reality. Thus this network of relationships with key adults and educational adults formed a pathway for these students to college.

Finally, structural aspects of various high schools’ academic programs—in particular preparatory programs—helped students envision college as a real possibility. The availability of preparatory programs is critical when determining the likelihood that youth will go to college (Mergdinger et al 2005; Blome 1997). In particular, former foster youth face a different set of challenges and outcomes in connection to education including lower levels of preparedness for college (Blome 1997). Thus, youth’s access to such programming serves as a central way in which youth envision college as a reality. The access to these resources also increases youth’s levels of social capital. For example, Mergdinger et al.’s (2005) research on youth preparedness for college shows that the most important pieces propelling foster youth into college are: receiving information about financial aid,

getting advising about college, and taking college preparatory classes. Using a sample of 216 emancipated foster youth attending a four-year university, the researchers found that even though youth appeared to have successful academic aspirations before they entered college, they struggled in other vulnerable areas of living. Their struggle led to a negative impact on their academic success, as they simultaneously struggled with other issues, even before entering college. My own data in this thesis reflects the findings in Merdinger et al.'s (2005) study.

Many participants in this study excelled in their AP, IB, and AVID courses that allowed them to obtain college credits. The availability of these classes encouraged students to believe that they had the skills to succeed in a secondary educational setting and allowed students to obtain college credits at a reduced cost. Ultimately, these courses provided in high school, set at the college level, increased participants' understandings that college could be a reality. For example, Judy's mother had a stroke when she was 12 and had to be moved into a nursing home for full time care. Judy moved in with her aunt and uncle, but was technically defined as a ward of the court. In November of 2015, Judy lost her mother. Judy entered high school while her mother was still alive, but Judy still struggled with her new housing transition. She explained how this impacted her schoolwork:

They put me in there [AVID] initially because my grades were just awful. I thought it was mostly just because to help my grades get up, not more of like a college preparatory class, which, towards the end that's really all it was, was getting into college, which was really nice because I remember filling out the FAFSA and everything was the longest process in the world because they just didn't understand why I didn't have parent information, but I also didn't have death certificates for the family. That was a really long process. I want to say if I wasn't in the program the high school probably wouldn't have helped at all. I remember I had the worst counselor also.

Here, Judy expressed how important AVID was in her ability to envision college as a possibility. The program not only helped improve Judy's grades, it also helped her with her college application processes. She added that, if it were not for the AVID program, she did not think her high school would have been helpful in enabling her to foresee college as an option.

Another participant, Brian, was placed into foster care at the age of 8. His mother struggled with mental health issues, which consequently often left Brian to take care of himself as a child. Brian, explained that his experience with IB courses helped his transition to college:

I was part of the IB program...IB definitely prepared me a lot better for college than it would've ... just regular schooling would've otherwise...I've noticed a bunch of people that have just gone through the regular schooling stuff and they're freaking out and they have no idea how to study. They have no idea how to write a paper and it comes second nature to me because I've had to do so much of it in IB. While they're stressing out and they're doing all of these unhealthy coping skills, I'm just sitting back and I'm just chilling...

Although Brian is referring to his experience of college while an undergraduate, he explained this outcome was the case because he had developed the skills necessary for college in his IB program. The availability of IB and AP classes at the high school level prepared several participants, including Brian, for college and gave them confidence in their skills, which enabled them to envision college as a tangible reality.

Ultimately, Ida, Peggy, Mary, Judy, and Brian represent the majority of participants who recognized their relationships with teachers, advisors, counselors, key adults, and involvement in preparatory programs contributed to their ability to see college as a possibility. When facing various forms of adversity, the placement of these relationships

formed critical pathways for participants as they transitioned from high school to college. However, the possibility of college did not serve as the only pathway for participants. Next, I highlight a central pathway of students' conceptualization of school.

Student's Conceptualization of School

Envisioning college as a possibility through social networks of educational adults, groups of people, and high-school preparatory programs, were key to participants' post-secondary educational tracks. However, my research also indicates that the ways in which participants came to understand their educational experiences also greatly impacted their likelihood of going to college (also see Kirk et al. 2011). Participants' conceptualization of school differs from their ability to envision college as a possibility. Particular people and programs enabled students to envision college as a possibility. This section is specifically about how students wanted to go to college because they came to conceptualize school as a way to a better life than what they had before. Student's conceptualization of school as a pathway to college is explained through the data provided here.

Research indicates lower levels of believing they can achieve academic success among youth who have faced adverse circumstances. For example, Kirk and colleagues (2011) utilized baseline data from a sample of 1,377 youth, including former foster youth, who were surveyed on their educational aspirations and expectations. The researchers found that former foster youth reported lower levels of aspirations and expectations, where self-perception and parental support for education were the strongest predictors. Thus, the importance of my sample's self-conceptualization of school is paramount when attempting to understand the pathways of former foster youth and independent students as it relates to secondary education. In other words, by understanding participants'

conceptualization of school, one can better explain youth's self-perception and belief that they can achieve academic success as Kirk et al. (2011) explains.

Participants repeatedly discussed their use of elementary and high school as an escape from the adverse conditions they faced at home. For example, Jesse and her siblings experienced multiple forms of maltreatment before Social Services removed them from their home. She and her siblings shared one small room and were forced to eat small rations of rice and beans, often going hungry. The children were only allowed to perform their chores and they were not permitted to watch television. To get through these adverse circumstances, Jesse pointed to the importance of her schoolwork and how school was a "getaway" from these difficult circumstances:

So like when I was with my dad and stuff like I guess it's just how I blocked everything out. I just focused on homework and like finished my homework, I would do like something that was due next week or something. I just always focused on like my homework. I would come home from school since I wasn't allowed to do anything I would just stay on the table and do homework all night.

Here, the school provided Jesse with the ability to focus on something else, something more productive, than the maltreatment she faced at home. Jesse was able to use the time she spent on her homework to block out her hunger and pain. Jesse's conceptualization of school as a getaway served as a critical pathway for her post-secondary educational career. A number of other participants expressed something similar to Jesse. For example, John, a junior at CSU, who is a ward of the court, lost his mother when he was six months old. On their way to visit his father in prison, John and his mother got into a car crash and she passed away. Never truly knowing his mother, and without a stable relationship with his father, John was shuffled around between various families as a child without finding

much permanency in guardianship. John explained that throughout this time when he experienced a lot of instability, school was his escape:

I think school was a getaway. School was something I was good at. I was smarter than most of the kids in my class...it was something I enjoyed. I did enjoy school.

Similar to Jesse, John described school as a “getaway;” school was something he was good at and found joy. Having experienced extreme circumstances of adversity through losing his mother and having an incarcerated father, John used his conceptualization of school as an escape, and used this informed concept of school as a pathway to college.

In addition to using school and schoolwork as an escape from adverse conditions, participants conceptualized college as an avenue through which they could achieve greater or better things. For example, Nancy, an Asian female, moved out of her mother’s house when she was 16 because her mother was trying to persuade Nancy to use her body as a form of income. As soon as Nancy moved out of her mother’s house, she became financially responsible for herself. Here she explains how she conceptualized college as a way to a better future:

I kind of thought it was the American thing to do obviously. You’ve got to go to college. The thing is, I put myself at very high standards. I know that I want to be something in my life, and I learned that at a young age. I was like, “You know what? Hard work pays off, and if you want to do this, if you want to be here, then you need to take the steps to get there...I’ve got to get a degree, because I’m not getting paid to have a high school diploma. That’s not okay. How am I going to support someone else with a high school diploma? People do do it. People make it. I’m not going to lie, but it’s just harder when you’re a minority.

Similar to Nancy, John also emphasized this point. He explained:

What you do when you wake up, what you plan on doing is what should make you the person that you are. School was something I knew I needed to pursue. It was something I knew I needed to not stop. I had a lot of momentum going. I was like, let’s go to college, let’s get it done.

Each of these narratives illuminate how participants' vision of college served as a pathway to college because as participants explained, they believed that college would be a better way for them to better their lives. John explained that, by continuing his education, he would have a better future. John and Nancy, as well as many other participants, utilized the normative discourse that school is an avenue of providing them with a better future.

Although students come to perceive themselves as self-motivators, it is evident that the high value placed on college by society is a driving force to students' conceptualization of school. In other words, students viewed themselves as self-motivators, which is strongly connected to neoliberal discourse about getting ahead. Ultimately, the cultural narrative of college as a central variable for a successful future, connected to neoliberal discourse, is exemplified through the examples above, which represent the majority of my sample.

The conceptualization of school clearly served as an additional pathway for students as they overcame adverse circumstances to improve their futures. Several participants faced challenges in their personal lives but indicated they did not allow those to negatively impact their educational experiences. Not only did participants use school as an escape, they also saw it as their key to a better future. The ways in which participants internalized the normalized cultural narrative of college as a form of success is central to understanding how participants overcame their odds and made it to college. This belief is key to understanding how participants' conceptualization of school operates as a pathway to college. Having highlighted how students come to envision college as a possibility and students' conceptualization of school, a final pathway is examined below: participants' access to aid in the form of financial assistance.

Financial Assistance

In addition to participants' educational support networks and conceptualizations of school, another central pathway to college participants in this study identified was financial assistance. Participants discussed this in two ways. First, participants identified this as a substantial barrier to going to college. Second however, participants also explained that when they did receive adequate financial assistance, it secured their motivations, beliefs, and aspirations to go to college. Thus, the access to financial assistance served as an additional pathway for participants.

Existing research (for example, Merdinger et al. 2005; Hernandez and Naccarato 2010) indicates that receiving information about financial aid can propel at-risk youth into college. My findings reflect this important conclusion. The participants in my study explained they received financial assistance in a variety of ways, including direct forms through their guardians, scholarships, grants, and even waived tuition fees. Notably, over half (n=10) explained they received substantial scholarships that were central to their decision to attend CSU.

Participants identified multiple sources of financial assistance that formed pathways to college for them. Nancy explained:

My school, because of the fact that I was on...I was on free or reduced lunch, so we would get, they would help us apply for college by giving us three or five free college application fees. They would pay for the fees. That's how I was able to apply.

Nancy, financially independent since the age of 16, expressed that getting the application fees waived allowed her to apply to college. The waived tuition fees covered by Nancy's high school reduced the financial burden many participants experienced as they applied to colleges. Another student explained the importance of scholarships "I got a ton of

scholarships and financial aid.” For this participant, as a recipient of scholarships and financial aid, her dreams of going to college could come true.

However, many participants explained that an obstacle to financial aid was the requirement of a parental signature to which a number of these participants did not have access. Here is data that illustrates this. Katy, who is already quoted above, explained how finances impeded her application process:

I felt like I did a lot of it on my own really. Sometimes if there was something I really couldn't figure out on my own I would just go ask the guidance counselor because that's who all the other seniors would ask, it was always kind of a pain when filling things out, it even is now, trying to sign leases and things like that. Everyone is always well can't your parents, you know...

Here, Katy refers to the fact that many forms for financial aid and applications for colleges required her to include information about her parents. Assuming her identity as an independent youth, she experienced barriers when it came to this. In this way, forms of financial assistance presented barriers to her path to secondary education. Katy, expanded on her difficulties with this:

They ask for your parents emails on a college application. I would just get so irritated, I'd be like we're becoming independent now. But that's how that goes. That was the biggest irritation was just they would have section of required information of your legal guardian. There was a lot of times with both financial aid and applying to college where I would have to go through and I would have to call them and say can you alter this so that I can move past it?

In this quote, it is evident that students from independent backgrounds face a similar set of challenges as former foster youth. For example, Katy specifically explained how she had to call institutions in order to waive the guardianship signatures in order to put her application through. Several other participants reported similar obstacles.

When students were denied financial assistance as they began to apply for college, due to their inability to prove their independent status, participants explained they became discouraged. In particular, the set of the independent appeal participants from this sample, rather than the former foster youth, experienced these difficult challenges at higher rates, because the state and, thus the university often did not legally recognize their independent status. However, when provided with access to such pertinent financial resources, monetary assistance served as a final and critical pathway for at-risk youth to college. The participants were able to focus more on the technical aspects of applying to college rather than getting bogged down with the logistics of finances. The provision of financial assistance also reinforced participants' ideas that college was a tangible dream.

Ultimately, financial assistance, when adequately provided for participants, served as a critical pathway to college. The recognition of this pathway, again, operates simultaneously with the other two central pathways I highlighted in this first section. All three of these variables are central to understanding youth's likelihood to attend college. In the following section, I describe the ways in which participants came to maintain the processes of their resiliency once they made it to college.

Social and Emotional Support

Significant research (for example: Samuels and Pryce 2008; Hass and Graydon 2009; Davidson-Arad and Bitton 2015) discusses factors that make foster youth resilient, but what about the retention of this resiliency? In my review of the research, it seems as though researchers tend to discuss resiliency as an accomplishment, yet the data from this thesis suggests that it is important to recognize resilience as an *ongoing process* as it

became clear that the participants *continued* to face residual forms of adversity once they made it to college due to their challenging pasts.

Much of the literature on resiliency discusses the impact that social and emotional support has on marginalized youth's resiliency (Luthar 2015; Hass and Graydon 2009). In my own data, I found that social and emotional support is central to students' ability to *stay* resilient. In this section, I describe four primary forms of social and emotional support that participants received *during* their time in college: peers, mentors and adults, additional support directly related to participants' mental health, and university sponsored programs. All of these social and emotional forms of support enhanced the wellbeing of the participants in my study, along with their mental health, which fosters participants' ability to stay resilient in college.

Peers

Social and emotional support, as my and others' research indicate, can come from a variety of sources and relationships. For example, in his examination of former foster youth, Benard (1991) explains the important role peers play in creating pathways to resiliency. In particular, he explains how resilient children tend to have more social competence, resulting in more positive relationships with their friends. Benard (1991) also credits former foster youths' ability to cope with adverse conditions to social support, such as friendships. In another study, Hines and colleagues (2005) used data from 14 in-depth interviews with former foster youth who were in college. The researchers' goal was to understand resilience in these youth as they transitioned out of care and into adulthood. Among other findings, the results of that qualitative study identify how former foster youth's relationships with peers are a contributing factor in resiliency. My research

indicates the important—perhaps central—role of peers in maintaining resiliency for former foster youth as well as independent appeal students. Peers helped the participants in my study maintain resilience by providing them with critical forms of social and emotional support.

Respondents pointed to a variety of ways in which their peers served as forms of support in connection to participants' success at CSU (and thus retention of resiliency). For example, Brian expressed how good it felt to finally have peers he could trust. Despite his past, Brian found comfort in his new college friendships:

It feels good...That's part of the reason why I'm loving it here is 'cause I have all these friends and now I know that I have friends that I can trust and that trust me as well. We share experiences. We share anger, joy, frustration. We share things together and I know they got my back and I actually like them.

Brian explained that having a great friend network was one of the main reasons he loves CSU. He emphasized “trust” and having each other’s back. Recall that Brian’s mother stopped caring for him while he was a young child, leaving Brian to fend for himself. Having a network of people in the form of peers Brian could trust was something new for him. This participant, like many others in my sample, identified his emerging relationships with peers as a central source of social and emotional support during his time at college. Thus, having this source of social and emotional support enhanced resiliency for participants, as Brian demonstrates through his comment about “loving” his time at college. By expressing his joy for college, it is apparent his resiliency was thriving at college, in part because of his connections with peers who created a trusting environment—enhancing his overall wellbeing at college.

Similar to Brian, Nancy described the importance of her relationship with her friends at college. Here, she demonstrates how she was able to draw upon various forms of social and emotional support from her friends:

Most of my friends, they don't bring me down. If you're not bringing me up, then don't stick around. We all have a mutual understanding we're going to build each other up. "Hey, I'm going to the library tonight for a couple hours. Can someone come with me?" Usually one of us are willing to go. Or, "Hey guys, we had a rough week this week. Let's all go out." I feel like they take care of everything that a friend should need in college, like, "Hey, if you need me, I'm here for you. We're going to be together." They also know when, I guess we all need our time apart, like, distance. We have to get stuff done, and we all know that about each other.

This quote stresses how important Nancy's peers are in providing her with emotional and social support. She explained that her friends are there to help meet her various social needs, whether by going out, giving each other space, or working on homework. This was crucial to Nancy's retention of resiliency because her friends supported her in ways that secured her overall mental health and wellbeing. Not only did participants like Nancy and Brian explain that they received various forms of social and emotional support from their peers, but they also received academic support from their peers. For example, Peggy explained the important role her friends played in her academic success:

...a lot of my friends are in my classes. They live on my floor, so we always get together and have this huge study group. My roommate and I are actually in 2 of the same classes so that really helps, especially when it comes to doing homework and studying.

Here Peggy expresses how her friends encouraged each other to spend their time together, doing homework and studying. The time spent with peers on schoolwork, enhanced participants' academic success and served as a form of social and emotional support, even

when consciously not recognized by the participants. These relationships with her friends helped Peggy succeed academically, contributing to her continued resiliency in college.

In addition to spending time with peers, participants also expressed how they were able to bond with friends over similar past experiences and tragedies. Joanie, a White female senior at CSU, found out her mother was diagnosed with brain cancer when Joanie was 20 years old. About a year later, while she was a sophomore in college, her mother passed away. Additionally, throughout her childhood, Joanie's relationship with her father was difficult, so when Joanie lost her mother, her father cut off all financial, emotional, and social support. Joanie explained that the commonality of struggles faced by her peers, allowed her to empathize with them. To her, her friendships came first. She expressed this as she explained her priority in being there for her friends who had also experienced traumatic life events:

I have friends who have also gone through a lot of trauma and pain in this past year or two. I've had a lot of friends who have also experienced death in this past year. I've been working very hard to be there for others as I wish others had been there for me. I really, that's how I spend my time. I don't spend my time doing volunteer work and charities so that I can check off a box. When people need me I try to be there for them. When I'm not needed, I try really hard to build myself up by studying ahead, by working ahead, by taking care of things ahead so that when someone I care about is hurt, I can just go and help them.

Joanie was able to connect with her friends who had experienced trauma due to her own past littered with adverse experiences. Joanie saw the time she spent with her friends as a priority, which provided her with a sense of accomplishment. Thus, her relationships with her peers provided Joanie with additional social and emotional support as she too struggled with grief. Joanie is an example of how students utilize peer relationships to handle not only their adverse conditions, but also the normal challenges of college.

In addition to individual friends and peer networks, some participants belonged to Greek Life and stated it was an important avenue of social, emotional, and even academic support. Within these fraternities and sororities, students form peer networks, as Emma explained:

I'm in Sigma Alpha, which is the agricultural sorority. There are parts of that organization that need work, but overall, just the group of girls that I've met and gotten to know, it's definitely making it hard for me to decide to leave because I will miss them a lot. I think being in that organization and having that many people to support me has made a big difference because I know last semester before I was officially in Sigma Alpha it was really hard because I only knew a couple other people...I didn't really talk to anyone, so I stayed in my room a lot with my roommate.

Emma grew up with her mother because her parents were divorced. Emma though continued to maintain a relationship with her father until her father died when she was a senior in high school. Additionally, and tragically, her only sibling, a sister, died when Emma was a junior in college. Similar to Joanie, Emma not only communicated the adverse conditions she faced before high school, but also the challenges she faced while in college. Emma expressed how joining her sorority not only connected her with peers that held similar interests, but it also got her out of her dorm room and more involved around campus. Struggling with grief, Emma used her sorority to stay involved and engaged, which added to her wellbeing and thus her resiliency.

Jordan, a Hispanic freshman at CSU, explained how his music fraternity provided him with a friend network: "...my friends in the fraternity place. That's my friend network, as well as through the journalism program, not nearly as much as the music." Jordan identified his friendships from his music fraternity as important sources of academic, social, and emotional support. Both Emma and Jordan expressed how their involvement in

Greek Life contributed to the formation of some of their relationships with peers, as well as the overall social and emotional support they received from these relationships. Again, the presence of these peer relationships enhanced participants' well being, which contributed to their processes of maintaining resiliency in a college setting.

The roles peers play, in relation to students' social and emotional support, is critical to understanding the ways in which youth *maintain* their resiliency throughout college. The inclusion of peers, and the forms of support they provide to each other, is crucial and requires much more attention by scholars. As evidence in my research, the social and emotional support from peers contributes to participants' mental health and overall wellbeing. In addition to support from peers, participants also recognized other significant adults in their life who provided support as they navigate their way through college.

Mentors and Adults

How do mentors and key adults contribute to participants' ability to stay resilient in college? Clearly, by virtue of the population under study in this thesis, biological parents were typically not important sources of support. Thus, in this section I explain how important adults both inside as well as outside of the university, offered notable forms of social and emotional support, which enhanced participants' overall wellbeing.

Participants pointed to a range of key adults who contributed their improved wellbeing by providing emotional and social support. For example, Judy identified a woman she met through her aunt's church as a source of emotional support. She explained:

I still talk to her, meet up with her when I visit Sedona because she'll always just ask me....She asks me how I'm doing because definitely I'm struggling with mental disorders. She's like, "How are you?" She actually cares...

Here, Judy explains that this particular adult “actually cares” and is someone she can go to when she is struggling with her mental health. The presence of this adult in Judy’s life provides her with a safe space to work through her emotions, especially considering that Judy’s mother no longer holds that role. Similarly to other participants, the relationship to a key adult was important for Judy’s ability to maintain resiliency as she experienced the challenges students face in college.

Jordan, having faced the adverse challenges that came along with his mother’s addiction to drugs, spent time living with his friend’s family before college. He explained:

They're really supportive with me and they try and always be there and they try and do the same thing ... They told me once about how they came to a football game because we're in the marching band, because that's how we met originally, and they said they both had two kids there.

Although Jordan expressed later on in the interview that he had some reservations about being considered a part of his friend’s family, he still referenced them as an important piece of social and emotional support in his life. Having had a family welcome him in, after disconnecting from his own, Jordan’s wellbeing was maintained, helping him retain resiliency.

When asked about forms of social and emotional support, participants also referred to other key mentors around campus like Resident Assistants (RA’s) and orientation leaders. One student explained how he was “lucky enough” to have “a great group, a great orientation leader who I am still in contact with, and I made great friends from that.” Mary, mentioned before, also remarked on her relationship with her RA. Mary struggled with trauma from her past sexual abuse and had often turned to drugs for self-medication. She explained how she turned to her RA for support when she was in danger of relapsing from

her drug addiction. Even a simple form of communication, such as texting, provided this participant with paramount social and emotional support:

...she's really sweet, she helps me. She's kind of like my go to person in case I ever am in danger of a relapse or anything, I text her and I just talk to her. We talk about nothing but it still stops me.

In addition to mentors, many participants pointed to the importance of their relationships with advisors, whether they were strictly academic advisors, or advisors related to other programs in which the students are involved. Participants identified the various forms of support they received from these advisors. The commonalities John found between himself and his advisors allowed him to seek more social and emotional support from adults on campus:

My advisors at ASCSU [Associated Students at Colorado State University] have been great...Even my fellow directors in the departments, great people for me because we are all very similar in our approach to school and life, very type-A and they know how to get things done. We really feed off of each other very well and I think that's good for us. I think it's good building a team around you who think similar to you but also object to you when you need to be objected to and give you that perspective you need.

Similarly, some students even identified specific professors that helped in providing guidance and support throughout their academic careers. Rachel grew up in a household with her biological parents and brother. She experienced sexual abuse around the age of 8, but her parents dismissed the seriousness of this claim. Throughout her childhood, Rachel also experienced maltreatment from her parents. Admitting that she still suffered from PTSD and depression, Rachel explained that her professor was foundational her academic success and her mental health during her freshman year. This participant was able to get emotional and social support from her professor:

I think my Japanese professor helped me a lot my freshman year. Being able to cope with being here and having someone to talk to about my situation.

The support Rachel received from her professor enhanced her overall wellbeing, and thus her ability to stay resilient.

Nancy explained how the director of the cultural center on campus provided her with social and emotional support:

One of the first people that I probably go to is Ms. Taylor. Ms. Taylor, I told her a lot of stuff that was going on in my life, especially with my mom, and those shops and everything, and my dad, the dad issues that I had. She was probably one person that when I needed help, helped me.

Here Nancy describes how she was able to go to Ms. Taylor for advice, and to talk about her familial relationships. A key adult in Nancy's life, Ms. Taylor provided this participant with emotional support, as Nancy was able to discuss the adversity from her past, a critical outlet for her wellbeing. Across all participants, students were able to identify key adults and mentors who provided them with social, emotional, and even academic support. With increased levels of social and emotional support, students maintained their resiliency because their overall wellbeing was fostered through these relationships.

Unfortunately, for some participants the availability of key adults and mentors as forms of social and emotional support was not enough. Alongside support from these key adults and peers, many participants expressed their need for further social and emotional support, specifically in relation to their mental health. I highlight this additional variable below, as it relates to participants' maintenance of resiliency.

Mental Health

In addition to support from peers, adults on campus and other key mentors, many students used professional counselors or therapists. These professionals provided participants with additional social and emotional support. This extra addition to participants' wellbeing contributed to the maintenance of their resiliency. Scholars discuss recognizing mental health as a challenge for former foster and at-risk youth (Geenen et al. 2015; Unrau et al. 2011). Unrau and colleagues (2011) use a sample of 81 college students to compare youth who have aged out of the foster care system to the national freshman population. Results identified mental health as a central variable to former foster youth's college engagement. When provided with mental health resources, former foster youth in this sample had higher levels of engagement. The researchers explained that additional recognition of this is needed when creating collegiate programs that hope to enhance students' academic success.

Several participants of my study reflect this same need for mental health support in relation to the maintenance of their resiliency. Seven participants specifically explained their use of professional mental health services, all but two of whom use the services provided by CSU. Of these seven participants, over half were female (n=5). This is not surprising, considering the fact that more females seek mental health help than males (Addis and Mahalik 2003). The pressures of hegemonic masculinity in a patriarchal society discourage men from seeking help for their mental health. Societal narratives provide the expectations that men appear strong and thus mentally stable (Addis and Mahalik 2003).

Recall that Judy lost her mother last November; throughout this difficult time, Judy credited the Health Network at CSU for the wellbeing of her mental health:

I used the CSU Health Network, the counselors over there a lot. That's been a huge one. Especially this year as I kind of grow away more from my family they've been a huge emotional support.

Here, the access to mental health services provided emotional support for Judy, especially in her first year away from her former support networks. The emotional needs met by counselors at the CSU Health Network are credited for Judy's ability to simply remain enrolled at the university. With mental health support, participants are more likely to stay resilient because the stability of their mental health is maintained. Nancy identified her struggles with recognizing when to seek help from mental health professionals. She explained that by having a third party to talk to, her emotional needs were met in ways with which her other forms of social support could not assist. The objective advice Nancy received from her counselor was central to meeting the needs of her mental health:

...counseling has helped a lot just because it's like, "I don't know you that well, but the fact that you can listen and maybe pick up some things that I need to work on, because of the fact that you don't know me. It's not like you know my whole life. It's like, "I see that this is going on," because they're looking from the outside. I build some relationships with counselors, but it's also knowing that I need help. Sometimes I don't get to that point until I'm already broken."

Unfortunately, although participants identified the need for mental health assistance, many of them mentioned the difficulties in meeting these needs. The vast majority of participants who referenced mental health expressed their concerns with how expensive the services at CSU are. Several participants also explained that the five free sessions, offered through the university health care, were simply not enough to meet their emotional needs. Brian expressed his concerns commenting that, "five sessions a semester or six is just not enough for me." When asked about using the counseling service on campus, Rachel explained:

I liked it, but I have no money, so it trumps the idea. I'm too afraid of losing the little amount of money I have, in case of emergencies, that I won't go. I'd rather just cope with it by myself.

Rachel ultimately chose more money in her pocket over the maintenance of her mental health. Moreover, both Brian and Rachel struggled to maintain their mental health because of financial barriers. The importance of providing students with ways to seek help for their mental health is critical to the maintenance of their resiliency. Recall that a total of seven respondents admitted to using professional mental health services; this is less than half of my sample. However, considering the challenges highlighted by Rachel and Brian here, it is important to question how many participants are not currently seeking help because they are discouraged by these additional monetary challenges, as well as the social stigma of seeking mental health help.

Overall, with lower levels of social and emotional support than their traditional peers, the inclusion of professional mental health support is of additional importance for former foster youth and independent appeal students in an academic setting. Meeting these mental health needs increases students' wellbeing, which greatly impacts the on-going process of maintaining resiliency. In addition to forms of mental health support that fosters the maintenance of resiliency, participants recognized one other way in which they received the majority of their social and emotional support on campus: university sponsored organizations.

University Sponsored Organizations

One additional variable that is important to note in relation to social and emotional support, are the presence of university recognized programs such as Key Communities and Explore and FSP. These programs served as mechanisms that create social and emotional

support networks for participants. Such programs mobilized opportunities for social and emotional support, which in turn enhanced respondents' maintenance of resiliency.

In my sample, a total of (n=8) participants were involved in Key Communities and Explore. According to their website (2016), Key Communities/Explore is a,

Highly diverse first and second year learning communities designed to assist students with their transition to and through the university. Based on active and experiential learning through interdisciplinary classes, service-learning, academic and career exploration, undergraduate research and leadership development, Key aims to increase retention and academic performance of participants, encourage campus and community involvement, and promote diversity awareness.

When asked about social and emotional support on campus, Judy described her experiences with Key Explore:

I was part of Key Explore. I feel like that program definitely helped me succeed because of having the mentor was a huge help because I don't think if I had somebody that was like being real with me that college was going to be hard, and failing a test doesn't mean you're stupid, just kind of being like devil's advocate and my biggest cheerleader was definitely a help, and then also having my advisor be a teacher that I met with more than once a semester was a huge help. I think that was probably why I was successful my first year and why I actually stuck with college.

Judy explained how her time with Key Explore contributed to her success on campus because they provide students with advisors that track students' success on campus. Her time with Key Explore meant the difference between staying in college and dropping out. Here, Key Explore served as a mechanism for Judy's increased levels of social and emotional support, and thus, her maintenance of resiliency.

Jeff, a Hispanic freshman, described how Key Communities were essential in his transition to campus life:

If I were to say that anything got me comfortable with campus, it would just have to be the Key Communities themselves. Being able to be in a building with the first floor of students all being undeclared but the next four floors all being a part of the same community in some sense, taking the same classes with each other, smaller class sizes. I think it was the perfect thing for someone who had never been around college in any influence before. I got lucky enough to be smart enough to join that community.

Jeff's parents cut off all communication and support in the middle of his freshman year at CSU. Without explanation, his parents told Jeff that they would no longer support him during his time in college. Left feeling abandoned, Jeff credits Key Communities as the reason he was able to form a social network on campus and also attributes his experiences with the program to his academic success. Other participants who were similar to Jeff and Judy noted the important social and emotional support role that Key played during their time in college. Participants pointed to Key Communities as a mechanism of social support that encouraged them to stick with college. Nancy recognized her advisor, a specific person within the program that encouraged her to do well. Here, we also see how the role of mentors aids in students' retained resiliency:

I feel like a lot of students don't realize that they have resources that they have until the end, but I think Key Communities, they wanted us to know, "You guys have this. You guys have this. This is what's going on here. We're going to have dinner here." Hank, my mentor, he would always try to get us together, like, "Hey, guys, we're going to have dinner here." I thought that was, I think just building that community within our majors and everything, just based on academics. I thought that was really helpful. It helped out a lot.

Nancy recognized one of her professors involved in Key Community. She explained how this professor pushed her through her academic work and also reached out to students by providing social support through the dinner her advisor held at her house at the end of the semester:

Dr. Z, she was one of our Key Community, where we were like, Key Communities had this one class that they have together. She was awesome. We went to her house at the end of the semester. I think she was just fun, and her class was based on relationships. I learned a lot from her class. The tests were hard as ever, but she was an awesome person.

The support that Nancy received from her professor not only aided her academic wellbeing, but also enhanced her social and emotional wellbeing. The placement of these forms of support greatly contributed to participants' maintenance of resiliency. In addition to participants' involvement in Key Communities and Explore, participants referenced other peer-based groups on campus. Judy mentioned her involvement with the Peer Educators on Campus program (CREWS). For her, her involvement with CREWS has expanded her educational opportunities and provided her with an avenue to educate her peers:

I also am part of CREWS, the Peer Educators on Campus...which I love just because growing up in the second household where it was like a very sheltered environment, I never really was taught anything about like sexual health, alcohol and tobacco, and drugs. It was just kind of a, "Don't touch it. Just leave it alone." Being a part of a program that aims at just educate people, like, we're not trying to persuade you to do or not to do, just to let you know the facts, I thought was very awesome. Doing that I think is awesome.

Evidently, Judy's involvement with CREWS gave her meaning and purpose. This participant was more involved with activities on campus which points to her ability to retain her resiliency while in a college setting. All of the participants who noted their involvement with university recognized programs reflected these same findings. Participants' involvement in programs increased their social and emotional relationships, thus directly enhancing their wellbeing and mental health, resulting in the ability to stay resilient.

Most participants also referenced how the FSP provided them with forms of social and emotional support. Participants identified factors such as feeling a sense of belonging

and having peers who understand their circumstances as reasons why they kept up their involvement with the program. Mary explained where she received additional forms of support around campus:

Yeah, it mostly comes from Fostering Success and the Case Management. They've [Fostering Success] helped me going ... It's like little stuff like the care packages. Nobody sends me a care package, they're the only ones who do that. Going to dinners and doing little stuff like going to events. Stuff like that, I sometimes go, that I've chosen of going over a party. It's pretty good to me.

Mary identified the care packages that she received from FSP as a form of social support. To her, because of the absence of traditional guardians, receiving something as simple as a care package provided her with a sense of normalcy. Similar to Mary, Maggie accredited FSP to her increased levels of social and emotional support.

Maggie's mother physically abused her as a child. She did not meet her father until she was 21. At the age of 13, Maggie's mother lost custody of her and Maggie moved in with her grandparents. Maggie's grandmother died when she was 17. To reduce the burden on her grandfather, Maggie moved in with her boyfriend's family after the death of her grandmother. This participant explained that even though she received social and emotional support from her friends and her boyfriend, the support she received from the peers she met through FSP was a different kind of support. Maggie was able to identify with these peers from FSP because they shared similar backgrounds and experiences:

I have a couple friends that I met through my classes and stuff, but because of my schedule, it's like I basically have a boyfriend and a couple of friends I knew from work and stuff like that. Like I said, some of them can ... My boyfriend understands and stuff, because he's been with me for a while, so he understands where I'm coming from and stuff, and he's from the same small town, but it's like a different kind of thing with the fostering success program, because all of them have been in a similar situation.

Maggie and Mary represent the consensus among many of the participants involved with FSP: the organization created a sense of belonging and a place to foster new social and emotional relationships with peers and key adults. Not only did these programs connect youth to other peers and mentors, but they also helped the participants find a sense of belonging. The role these programs played in mobilizing participants' emotional and social support demands recognition.

The various forms of emotional and social support illuminated in this section help us understand the ways in which participants stay resilient during college. Participants rely on their peers, mentors, key adults, mental health services, and university sponsored programs for social, emotional, and even academic support, which in turn enhances the overall wellbeing and mental health of the participants. With these needs met, the process of maintaining resiliency is fostered. In the final section to follow, I address the ways in which participants identify themselves as self-reliant through self-conceptualization.

Self-Concept
Self-Reliance

Once participants have succeeded in making it to college through the identified pathways, they use various forms of social and emotional support to stay resilient. How do participants come to understand themselves as independent through ideas such as self-reliance? As discussed in the literature review, Drapeau and colleagues (2007) use qualitative interviews to understand the processes that contribute to resilience among foster care youth. From their sample of 12 boys and girls, the researchers identified turning points for youth, and the processes linked to these demarcated moments in time. The researchers concluded that, through the process of perceived self-efficacy, former foster

youth form resilience. My data supports these important conclusions and reflects the primary ways in which participants expressed their ability to conceptualize themselves as self-reliant. Specifically, as I illustrate next, participants recognized the ways in which they identified themselves as self-reliant through their past experiences with adversity.

One way that participants came to understand themselves as self-reliant was through their ability to take care of themselves. Zoe lost her mother when she was 6 years old. Her father remarried when she was 14, and her relationship with her father and stepmother was rocky from that point onward. As a result, Zoe moved out and power of attorney was granted to her aunt. Zoe explained that:

I think like coming to college, like there's a lot more obstacles and stuff in the way obviously because it's very much like just on you and I have no idea what I'm doing. But I also feel like I was really really prepared, like my roommate, she has never, like her parents have everything like her whole life and she got here and she was like I don't know how to like fold and I was like okay. Where do we need to start?

Zoe's narrative illustrates that she did not have to deal with some of the new transitional changes in college as her more traditional peers. She pointed to the simple task of doing laundry and attributed her status as an independent youth to her learned behavior of these tasks. Due to her past as an independent youth, she was more prepared to rely on herself throughout her college experiences.

Similarly, Joanie explained how her success in college was in part determined by the fact that she beat the odds. This knowledge gave her the will-power and determination to complete her education. In addition, Joanie explained that by getting a degree, she would have more opportunities for a more successful future:

Everything I do I choose to do of my own volition. That's why I do better in school. I know why I'm here. I'm not here because mommy and daddy said I had to. I'm not here because society says if you don't do this you're

a freak. I do it because I want the education. I want the power that comes with that degree to get jobs and take care of my family for a long run goal.

Brian expressed this same idea as he explained that his past has forced him to be self-reliant and more responsible. This in turn, he explained, made his transition to adulthood and college easier:

I personally think that the fact that I have had to be so responsible, for me, it's made it easier, the transition into college because I don't rely on other people to get my work done. I don't rely on other people to make me feel better. I don't rely on typically other things to make me feel better. The fact that I've had to be so responsible has made me have an outlook of I need to man up and get this thing done. I know it's not a gender neutral way to say it, but that's the way I say it.

Brian not only repeated the idea that having faced adverse circumstances as a child, his maturity had increased and thus made his transition to college easier, he also further touched on the next form of participants' self-concept of self-reliance: acceptance. In addition to understanding themselves as self-reliant through their actions and abilities to smoothly transition into college, another central piece to participants' understandings of their self-reliance was through the belief that they only have themselves to rely on because of their independent backgrounds. Several participants explained how they had no choice but to accept their status as independent individuals. Nancy explained:

I rely on myself a lot of the time. It's so hard for me to depend on people, because I was let down by my mom and my dad. I was let down by a lot of people, so I have to learn to depend on myself.

Like many other participants, Nancy emphasized here how much she relied on herself and attributed this specifically to her relationship, or lack thereof, with her parents. After being let down, she came to depend on herself.

Finally, in connection with this understanding of self-reliance, participants also identified the ways in which their past had shaped their personal and social behaviors

rather than just their attitudes towards their past experiences. A number of participants explained that overcoming adverse conditions directly shaped who they became.

Here, the ways in which students have socialized themselves, in order to understand their independent status, is important. Brian clearly expressed this idea as he explained:

The other day, I was thinking about how everything sucked from my junior and senior [high school] year, and I was like, "Actually, it didn't suck because I got to find out who was really there for me. I got to build connections with this whole family that's not related to me by blood at all, but they feel like real family to me." ...somebody told me a statement like, "You choose your own family," and that's what I've done.

Brian communicated how he used the experiences in his past to understand who he is today. During his time at home with his biological mother, Brian had to take care of himself. He bought his own food, paid for his own clothes, and paid for gas to get back and forth from school. Brian overcame these adverse circumstances and created a new family with the people at college. Brian was able understand his independent status through his acceptance of his past and his ability to be self-reliant because of it.

Not only did participants attribute their positive attitudes from the adverse experiences in their past, they also explained how it has impacted their maturity and ways of thinking. Nancy expressed this idea:

I have an older mentality. I'm very young but I think like an old person. I think it's just because of, I had to grow up really fast at a young age. A lot of my experiences and things that I've seen. I think I'm just more empathetic to a lot of situations. I view life in a different way because of the fact that I've seen that. Some good. Some bad. They've, all of them have made me who I am today and made me realize a lot about my family and myself and what I want to do with my life. I've been through a lot. I think every single one of those issues, they may not have been the best, but they've all built me into the character that I am. I am still standing strong. I'm still here. Nothing has brought me down. It's taught me to persevere and endure some of the hardships that I've been through. It has made me a stronger person. I know I can get through it. Maybe that was the whole point of it all, but, yeah.

Nancy clearly related the adverse conditions she experienced as a child, to her increased level of maturity as compared to that of her peers. She explained that her life view had changed because of what she went through as a youth. She attributed her present character to the struggles she was able to overcome in her past.

Jonathan, a former foster youth who was placed into state custody when he was 16 due to juvenile offenses, explained how his adverse experiences added perspective to his life and the challenges he faced in college. The troubles he experienced in his past “shaped [his] ability to be resilient.” Here, again the idea of how the past shaped their present character and identity is central to understanding students’ self-concept.

The ways in which participants come to understand themselves as self-reliant is important to note because this allows researchers to understand how participants used their past adverse circumstances to narrate an empowered current “self.” The inclusion of participants’ self-concept through the idea of self-reliance further helps unpack how these students understand themselves as resilient.

Additionally, through this data analysis it is evident that the different statuses associated with participants, via their experiences, whether they are labeled as independent, wards of the state, or former foster youth, are less significant when determining their ability to overcome adverse situations and maintain resiliency. What is at least equally important is that the participants have beaten the odds due to the various pathways highlighted above. Furthermore, the presence of social and emotional support for the participants once they made it to college, is paramount in understanding students’ ability to retain resiliency in relation to their academic success.

In conclusion, regardless of the label applied to participants' independent status, participants still come to define their self-reliance in similar ways. This indicates the significance of ensuring that all students who have faced adverse circumstances have access to the pathways and forms of social and emotional support identified in this chapter. Participants' independent status does not define them as resilient. Instead, the adverse conditions they have overcome, their ability to remain successful throughout their collegiate experiences, and their self-concepts as self-reliant, define these participants as resilient.

V. CONCLUSION

Three. Two. One. The camera flashes. You are a part of a population where the odds are stacked against you. Yet, instead of posing for your mug shot, you are posing for your student ID. The students discussed in this thesis represent former foster and independent appeal youth who have overcome adverse challenges, made it to college, *and* are maintaining resiliency. Throughout this thesis I provided insight into the lives of 19 students who have faced adverse circumstances and managed to make their way through these challenges in a way many would define as successful. By drawing on semi-structured and open-ended interviews, I illustrate the ways in which students who have a history of foster care or come from some other set of difficult circumstances find their pathway to college, maintain that pathway while enrolled in college, and use their adverse circumstances to narrate an empowered self-concept. When viewed collectively, these stories illustrate notable resilience amongst this population. In this final section I summarize the study by identifying the central theoretical and empirical contributions I make, and identify potential areas for future research.

Summary of Academic Research

Several bodies of research explain the significance of understanding the connection between foster youth and resiliency. Specifically, the population in which I drew my sample from typically have poorer educational outcomes than traditional youth. Foster youth are more likely to experience contact with the criminal justice system, trauma, material hardships, homelessness, and a variety of physical and mental health issues (Courtney et al. 2011). These challenges make it difficult for youth to succeed educationally. In the state of

Colorado alone, “fewer than 1 in 3 students who were in foster care during high school graduated within four years” in 2014 (Colorado Department of Human Services 2014).

Unfortunately, sociologists and criminologists have been slow to study this population (Wildeman and Waldfogel 2014). Wildeman and Waldfogel (2014), make a broad call to sociologists due to the lack of this focus. They explain that sociological perspectives have the ability to bridge theoretical research, which attempts to conceptually apply theories to the world, and empirical research, which uses concrete data and evidence to support theoretical conclusions. My thesis responds to this call, by examining foster youth and independent appeal students at CSU. Notably, the central goal of this thesis was to provide a sociological, grounded theoretical approach to understand the ways in which risk, vulnerability, and resiliency operate in the lives of independent status students. To accomplish this goal, my thesis was most directly informed by the idea of resiliency.

When considering this population of youth, given the difficulty of getting to college, alongside the societal and individual costs of becoming involved with the criminal justice system, it is critical to understand how marginalized youth make it to college and retain resilience. Researchers have identified specific variables that seem to nurture foster youth resilience. Some research, for example, identifies individual-level variables like self-reliance and perceived self-efficacy; other research, though, illustrates the role of more meso-level variables like supportive relationships with others (Hines et al. 2005; Samuels and Pryce 2008; Hass and Graydon 2009; Stanton-Salazar 2011). My data suggests something similar. I found that my participants identified relationships with others as central variables to envisioning college as a possibility and the maintenance of their resilience.

Additional research explains that youth raised in foster care are more vulnerable to difficulties, especially as they transition to adulthood and continue onto secondary education as compared to their more traditional peers (Hines et al. 2005). About this, Luthar et al. (2000:543) explains, “that work on resilience possesses substantial potential for augmenting the understanding of processes affecting at-risk youth.” Notably, resiliency is an often-used concept across the social sciences to describe beating the odds and overcoming challenges. Researchers have studied the idea across a variety of social settings including adolescents and youth (Bernard 1991; Gilligan 2000; Fergus and Zimmerman 2005; Turner et al. 2007; Hartman et al. 2009) incarcerated populations (Mitchell and Mackenzie 2006; Luther 2015), vulnerability and victimization (Diagle et al. 2010; Waklate 2011), and foster youth (Hines et al. 2005; Drapeau et al. 2007; Samuels and Pryce 2008; Hass and Graydon 2009; Davidson-Arad and Bitton 2015).

I therefore come to conceptualize resiliency, for the purposes of this thesis, using Luthar et al.’s (2000:543) theoretical understanding of resiliency where: “two critical conditions to the study of resilience: the exposure to significant threat or severe adversity and the achievement of positive adaptation despite adversity” must exist. The theoretical application of resiliency is apparent in the data analysis portion of my thesis, as it connects all three of my central findings. In relation to this definition of resiliency, I use college attendance and retention to understand the outcome of resilience.

Results

This thesis provides more insight to the pathways that lead youth to college, the sources of support that enhance youth’s resiliency in college, and youth’s self-concept of their resiliency. I identify three central pathways for youth to college: envisioning college

as a possibility, student's conceptualization of school, and financial assistance. When faced with various forms of adversity, the ability to envision college as a reality through educational adults and groups of other important people aided student's pathways to college. The additional conceptualization of school served as a pathway for students as they overcame adverse circumstances to improve their futures. This pathway operated through the ways in which students internalized the normalized narrative of college as a form of success. Access to financial assistance was the final pathway participants identified as they made their way to college.

Once youth explained their ability to overcome or adapt to adversity, my data indicated the importance of participants' maintenance of resiliency in college. Social and emotional support in four different forms served as the central variable in participants' maintenance of resiliency. First, peers played an important role in students' ability to retain resiliency, especially in college. Another significant variable to students' social and emotional support was related to their relationships with mentors and key adults. Several participants lacked traditional relationships with legal guardians, thus their relationships with key adults were paramount to their maintenance of resiliency. Students also pointed to the importance of access to mental health services in regards to their social and emotional wellbeing. Finally, participation in university recognized programs such as Key Communities and Explore, CREWS, and FSP, served as mechanisms of social and emotional support for youth, enhancing their overall wellbeing and thus the maintenance of their resiliency.

The final piece to my data analysis examined students' self-concept through self-reliance. I examined the ways in which participants came to identify their own self-concept

as independent and the influences this identity had on their academic success. This piece of data analysis also allowed me to discover how participants used their past adverse circumstances to narrate an empowered current “self.” Participants came to understand their self-reliance in various ways including their ability to adapt quicker to college because of their independent backgrounds, the recognition of their increased maturity, their acceptance of the past, and their overall character attributes that formed because of the adverse conditions they faced as children.

Additionally, through this data analysis it is evident that the different statuses associated with participants, via their experiences, whether they are labeled as independent appeal, wards of the state, orphaned, or former foster youth, were less significant when determining their ability to overcome adverse situations and maintain resiliency. What is more important is that the participants have beaten the odds due to the various pathways highlighted above. Furthermore, the presence of social and emotional support for the participants once they have made it to college is paramount in understanding students’ ability to retain resiliency in relation to their academic success.

Regardless of the label applied to participants’ independent status, participants still came to define their self-reliance in similar ways. This indicates the significance of pathways and social support for marginalized youth who have overcome adverse conditions, both prior to and during college. Participants’ independent status does not define them as resilient. Instead, the adverse conditions they have overcome, their ability to remain successful throughout their collegiate experiences, and their self-concepts as self-reliant, define these participants as resilient individuals--still standing strong.

Central Contributions and Future Research Directions

I have identified central contributions for future research from the findings of this thesis. First, it is important to note the intersection of gender, race and ethnicity did not appear as determining variables within my data analysis. Although I attempted to identify the intersection of these variables, I did not find overwhelming evidence these shaped specific trends in the data. While it is possible, and likely, that gender, race, ethnicity, and other identities shaped participants' pathways and resilience, these identities did not emerge as central during my analysis. It is therefore important for future research to take on this intersectional focus as a central goal.

It is also critical to include that I focused on a very understudied population—college students who experience extreme marginalization before college but lack a formal label (i.e. they are not foster care alumni) that qualifies them for different forms of institutional support. Colleges and universities in particular need more inclusion and awareness of this population as they consider potential programs and other forms of aid for marginalized students.

In addition, I have three other central recommendations: (1) The need for independent status students' increased access to mental health services during post-secondary education, (2) continued research conducted on the impact of peer relationships for youth, especially utilizing the theoretical conceptualizations of resiliency, and (3) the need for more focus on how students' self-concept shapes their process of resiliency and the ways in which they draw on various forms of support while at college.

Throughout this study, it is apparent that students' emotional and social support is a central variable to youth's ability to maintain resilience and thus succeed in their academic

performances. Key to withstanding social and emotional support, an overwhelming amount of participants expressed their need for mental health services, however many of the participants reported they were not able to meet these needs due to financial constraints. Thus I urge stakeholders to build in funding for increased access to mental health services on college campuses. Providing independent status students with free or cost reduced mental health services could make the difference between academic failure and success and students' overall wellbeing.

In addition to focus on student's mental health needs, the need for continued research on peer relationships for former foster youth and independent appeal students is critical. This thesis provides support that a key variable in determining youth's maintenance of resiliency is their relationships with peers. Overwhelmingly, participants expressed how important these relationships were to not only their social and emotional support, but also their academic success. Currently, very little research addresses this key variable. Sociologically understanding the impact of peer relationships when exploring resiliency in at-risk youth is essential if we hope to fully unpack the ways in which youth's resiliency operates in the face of adversity.

Finally, more research must focus on how student's self-concept, as it relates to self-reliance, not only shapes the process of resiliency, but also shapes the ways in which student's draw on various forms of support during their time in college. My research indicates that the ways in which student's come to perceive themselves as self-reliant, allows them to narrate an empowered self, directly contributing to their process of resiliency. The concept of self-reliance also shapes the forms of social and emotional support students draw on, directly contributing to their ability to maintain resiliency in an

academic setting. However, due to the descriptive focus of this thesis, my data does not explore this process in great detail. Thus, I recommend that future research take on this narrowed focus of student's self-concept and the processes of resiliency and support for independent status students in college.

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APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW RECRUITMENT GUIDE (SENT VIA EMAIL)

Do you want to earn \$20 in Ram Cash? If so, please contact me about participating in a research project I am conducting. I hope you decide to participate—your input is really important!

Details on the research

- I'm conducting research on the experiences of students who have been in foster care, kinship care, group homes, or come from other independent backgrounds (and because you're receiving this email it means that you qualify!)

- Participating means talking with me for an hour or two about:
 - What life is like for you at CSU (for example: what school resources you draw on; what your social support is like; what challenges you experience)
 - What life was like for you before you came to CSU (for example: what school was like; where you lived; how you ended up in college)
 - What you know about the CSU program Fostering Success (for example: have you been involved in the organization; if you have been involved, what you've found valuable about the program as well as what you think they could improve on)

Have questions? Interested in participating? Contact me by email or phone:
Tara.Opsal@colostate.edu 970-491-5438

Thanks!
Tara Opsal
Assistant Professor
Department of Sociology

**APPENDIX B. FOLLOW-UP LETTER TO INVITE STUDENT PARTICIPANTS (SENT VIA
HAND DELIVERED MAIL)**

Dear Student,

I am a faculty member at CSU and am conducting a research project on a program at this university—Fostering Success. As you might know, the purpose of this organization is to form a support system for CSU students who have experienced foster care, kinship care, group homes, ward of court, orphan status, or other independent backgrounds. The goal of the research is to understand why some students draw on Fostering Success resources and other do not; more broadly, this important project will help Fostering Success evaluate the state of their programming so they can more effectively meet student’s needs.

A few weeks ago, I sent an email to your university email address to invite you to participate in the research; you qualify because the university recognizes you as an “independent” student. I am following up with this letter because I want to make sure that you received the invitation to participate as your ideas and experiences are invaluable to the project.

As I stated in the email, if you are interested, participating involves talking with me for one to two hours about your experiences as a CSU student, what you know (or don’t know) about Fostering Success, and your background before coming to CSU. If you choose to participate, to compensate you for your time, you will receive a \$20 gift certificate. Please email or call me if you have any questions about the research or if you would like to participate. Thank you for considering this request.

Take Care,
Tara Opsal, PhD
Assistant Professor
Department of Sociology
970-491-5438
Tara.Opsal@colostate.edu

APPENDIX C. CONSENT FORM

Consent to Participate in a Research Study Colorado State University

TITLE OF STUDY: Fostering Success: Understanding Obstacles and Creating Effective Programming through Student's Voices

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Tara Opsal, PhD, Department of Sociology
Tara.Opsal@colostate.edu, 970-491-5438

You are being invited to participate in a study conducted by Tara Opsal and her research team at Colorado State University. Generally, the purpose of this study is to understand whether or not Fostering Success is meeting the academic, social, and financial needs of students.

Why am I being invited to take part in this research?

You are being invited to participate in this study because you are a student enrolled at Colorado State University and the university defines you as an "independent student" which means that you qualify for membership to Fostering Success (although you may not participate in Fostering Success).

What will I be asked to do?

For no more than two hours, at a mutually agreed upon location (for example, a study room at CSU) we will talk about your experiences as a student at CSU, your background before coming to CSU, and, if you have had any, your involvement in Fostering Success. Remember, if you do not want to answer any of the questions that we ask just say so and we can move on. With your permission, the conversation will be audio recorded.

What are the possible risks, discomforts, or benefits of participating in this research?

There are no known risks associated with participating in this study. Although it is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, the researchers have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential, but unknown, risks. There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study.

Do I have to take part in the study?

Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Who will see the information that I give?

All of the information we talk about will be kept in the strictest confidence. We will keep private all research records that identify you, to the extent allowed by law. For this study, we will assign a code to your data (for example, a number) so that the only place your name will appear in our records is on the consent form and in our data spreadsheet which links you to your code. Only the research team will have access to the link between you, your code, and your data. The only exceptions to this are if we are asked to share the research files for audit purposes with the CSU Institutional Review Board ethics committee. In addition, for funded studies, the CSU financial management team may also request an audit of research expenditures. For financial audits, only the fact that you participated would be shared, not any research data. Additionally, there are some

circumstances in which we may have to show your information to other people. For example, the law may require us to show your information to a court or to tell authorities if we believe you pose a danger to yourself or someone else. If you disclose that you have been a victim of sexual violence while a student at CSU, I am required by law to report this information to CSU's Title IX officer whose job it is to contact you to find out if you need assistance. Finally, when we write about the study and share it with other researchers or publish the results you will not be identified; we will keep your name and any other identifying information private.

Will I receive any compensation for taking part in this study?

Participants will receive \$20 in Ram Cash for participating.

What if I have questions?

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions about the study, you can contact the primary investigator, Tara Opsal 970-491-5438. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the CSU IRB at: RICRO_IRB@mail.colostate.edu; 970-491-1553. We will give you a copy of this consent form to take with you so you have this information.

What else do I need to know?

We would also like to record the conversation we have together. We will stop recording at any time if you ask. We will keep transcripts of the recorded interviews in a locked storage box and won't share the recordings with anybody. The recordings will be destroyed after transcription is complete.

Please initial below whether you agree to have the interview recorded.

Yes, I agree to be digitally recorded _____

No, I do not agree to be digitally recorded _____

Your signature acknowledges that you have read the information stated and willingly sign this consent form. Your signature also acknowledges that you have received, on the date signed, a copy of this document containing 2 pages.

Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study

Date

Printed name of person agreeing to take part in the study

Name of person providing information to participant

Date

Signature of Research Staff

APPENDIX D. FIELD PROTOCOL DOCUMENT

Documents to print/bring prior to every interview:

- Interview Guide-Active FSP students
- Interview Guide-Non-active FSP students
- Informed consent (2 per participant)
- Contact Information
- Have participants name memorized and written down

Other materials to bring:

- Laptop and charger
- Recorder-CHARGED!
- Phone and charger
- Extra pens and pencils
- Notebook
- Couple water bottles
- Tissues
- Bag to carry everything in with extra folders for organization
- Wallet, credit cards, cash, ID
- Travel information, map, distance, time, etc.
- Full tank of gas

Before the Interview:

- Conduct at least 15 interviews with students from the University that qualify for Independent Status
 - Make sure charger is fully charged and running properly before entering field. Familiarize self with how it saves and numbers files.
 - Practice interview guide, practically memorize before conducting interview. Identify/mark areas in which you anticipate additional probes and markers.
 - Possibly conduct some research on participant (picture?)
 - Choose a quiet, private space in which the interviewee is comfortable with to conduct the interview (conference room in Clark A).
 - Make sure cell phone is on airplane mode
 - Give yourself at least 15 minutes of time alone at the meeting place before participant is supposed to arrive so that you can make sure all of your equipment is working properly. Get in the zone! Run through the interview guide one last time.
 - Greet and thank the participant for coming, let them know you appreciate their voluntary participation
 - Ask participant if they have any time constraints
 - Give the participant a chance to settle in and get comfortable, ask them how their day is going, then present them with the consent form
 - Verbally walk through each section of the consent form with the participant and explain to them that one copy is for them to keep, and the other copy is for them to sign for your own records. Also explain to the student that by

- filling out their student ID on an attached sticky note you can then submit money into their Ram Cash account following the interview.
- Clarify that you have been given permission to record the interview by double checking that the respondent has checked the appropriate box on the consent form
 - Reassure respondent of confidentiality, clarifying that no one else will hear or see any part of the interview.
 - Ask the interviewee if they have any additional questions before beginning the interview. Answer any questions they might have.
 - Turn on the recorder. If possible, use recording app on phone as well to record a back up copy. Place this in the center of the table/room to ensure quality recording.
 - Begin the interview using the interview guide, take occasional notes throughout the interview, making sure to any important markers that arise during the interview

After the Interview:

- Finish the interview, and turn off the recorder
- Thank the participant again for allowing you to conduct an interview with them. Remind them that you will get the \$20 in Ram Cash submitted to their account within the week. Closing remarks
- Immediately download and label recording (with participant number) onto computer and upload it into a drop box file for additional backup.
- Next, immediately (if time allows) take around twenty minutes to write up any notes or memos from the interview in a word document titled "Interview Notes __#__" with participant's number. Things to consider in these notes:
 - Important demographic information of the participant (major, age, independent status eligibility)
 - Important experiences of youth discussed and described
 - Important markers and how they expanded on these
 - Comments they make about FSP
 - Anything else that stood out in the interview
- Send email to Tara with student ID information for Ram Cash submission
- Send a thank you letter/email/note, etc.

APPENDIX E. FINALIZED INTERVIEW GUIDE

Thank you very much for participating in this study and agreeing to talk about your experiences. The interview today shouldn't take more than two hours however, if you'd like to talk more about some of your experiences, we don't have a time limit. We'll focus on a variety of topics including your background as well as your experiences at CSU. If there are any questions you'd rather not answer, just let me know and we can move on.

The first thing we need to go over is the consent form [Interviewer: hand them consent form]. Any person who participates in research sees paperwork like this prior to participation because it lays out all of your rights as a participant. As you can see, this form explains who is heading the study and how to contact them if you have questions; why we invited you to participate and what the study is about; that we don't know of any risks to you for participating in this research; that participating is completely voluntary and you can request to stop at any point; and that we will keep all of the information you provide us confidential—in other words your stories are disconnected from any identifying information. The last thing here consents to having your story recorded. I will not share the recording with anybody—it is only for me. What questions do you have for me? What more would you like to know? [Interviewer and Interviewee sign paperwork]

As you know, this study focuses on folks like yourself who the university defines as an “independent student”. Today, if it's okay with you, this is where I'd like to start. Can you share with me the circumstances that brought you to the university as an independent student?

Make sure to get at:

- Tell me about your different placements
 - What were they like?
 - Who was it with?
 - How long were you there for?
 - What are your distinctive memories about that place?
- Who do you consider your family today? Why?
 - What role do your biological parents have?
 - Who are your legal guardians?
- What else was your life like?

Academics

I'd like to know a little extra about how you came to CSU.

- How did (or didn't) your high school prepare you for college?
- When did you start thinking about going to college?
- What kinds of programs did you participate in a teenager that encouraged you to think about college or even just life after high school? (How did the programs shape you)
- What were the most significant barriers you faced in getting to college?

Now I'd like to hear about your time at CSU.

- What year are you here?
- What's your major?
- Before CSU, did you attend any other colleges (including community colleges)?
 - Why did you start there/transition here?
- What have you liked most and least about being a student here?
- I'll ask a number of questions about Fostering Success today, but I'm curious, when did you first learn about Fostering Success?
- Generally, how would you describe their role in your life since you've arrived at CSU? (probe this)
- How long have you been in the program?
- What made you join the program?
- What has made you stay in the program?

Great, now I'd like to hear a bit more about your time at CSU.

- What kinds of resources do you rely on (organizations, professors, friends, etc...) to help your academic performance?
- Tell me about your academic performance here at CSU. Do you think you've been successful?
- Have you taken any time off of school since your first academic semester?
 - Tell me about it (both why or why you have not taken time off)
- How has Fostering Success helped you adjust to your academic life at CSU?
 - What kind of resources do they provide that you find most important?
 - What kind of resources do you wish Fostering Success offered to help you with your academics?

Social Support

- When you have an important or difficult decision to make, who do you go to for advice?
 - Why do you go to them?
- What about when something good happens to you—who do you call first?
 - Why?
- Can you tell me about a recent time that you have only relied on yourself to get through a tough time?
- What is your friend network like at CSU?
 - How did you meet these friends?
 - What kinds of support do they provide you?
- Are there other folks that we haven't talked about that you rely on for emotional support? Who? How do they support you?
- What role has Fostering Success had in helping you form or maintain social support?
 - Have they helped you form friendships with other students? How?
 - Have they provided you with mentors to connect with? Who?
 - Do you think that Fostering Success social events have been important to your college experience?
 - Why/how?
- What other university resources have helped you form or maintain social support?

Housing

- Have you ever lived in the dorms at CSU?
 - What did you like/not like about this?
 - Where did/do you stay over holiday breaks
 - How do you make this decision?
- Have you ever lived off campus?
 - How do you find your roommates?
 - How did you find that place?
- Where are you living now?
 - What do you like/not like about this place?
- Do you feel like your current living situations provide a comfortable atmosphere that allows you to focus on your studies?
- What resources has Fostering Success provided to you in this area? Other university resources?

Finances

- How do you pay for your tuition?
 - Role of scholarships?
 - Do you draw on any money to pay for college that's available to you specifically because you spent time in the foster care system (for example, ETV funds)?
- What additional expenses do you have each month?
- How do you pay for these expenses?
 - Probe for information about: jobs; support; government support; etc...
- Do you have any problems meeting any of these or other expenses?
 - Which ones?
 - Probe specifically for: food; utilities; transportation (i.e. how they get around)
 - Do you have any specific problems meeting expenses associated with school?
 - Probe specifically for: books and school supplies
 - If so, what do you do when you have these problems?
 - Probe for: do you work more (do you skip classes as a result); do you have a person you can ask to borrow money from; etc...
- Has Fostering Success been helpful in meeting any financial needs that you have?
 - How?

Concluding Questions

- Overall, how do you believe that Fostering Success has impacted your success at CSU?
- If you could wave a magic wand and change something about Fostering Success, what would you change?
- What would you keep?
- Do you believe that Fostering Success is providing you with the resources and opportunities you need to better prepare for your life after college?

- How confident are you that you'll get through college successfully?
 - Why?
- What are your plans after you graduate college?
- Can you describe a few of your long-term goals?
- Have you heard of Fostering Success?
 - What made you decide not to participate in the program?
- Given that this study is centrally about understanding the challenges you face as well as your strengths as an independent student, is there anything else that we haven't talked about today that you'd like to discuss?

APPENDIX F. RESEARCH BUDGET

Budget Estimate

Project Expense	Cost
<i>Transcription</i> Project staff will conduct approximately 30 student interviews each lasting on average 80 minutes and 15 staff interviews each lasting on average 30 minutes. Professional transcription costs equal 1 minute at \$1.00. (3200 minutes)	\$3200
<i>Interview incentives</i> To increase rate of participation in the research as well as compensate participants for their time, participants will be provided with \$20 gift certificates. (40 gift certificates)	\$800
<i>Personnel, PI</i> Contract cost for CSU faculty member to design and carry out research.	\$2500
<i>Personnel, graduate assistant</i> Summer stipend for graduate student to assist with research (approximately 80 hours @ \$15)	\$1200
TOTAL BUDGET	\$7700

APPENDIX G. CODEBOOK

PRE-COLLEGE

(Risk and Protective Factors)

	Conceptualization	Clarifications
Housing	Descriptions of participants experience with housing arrangements prior to college—this is where they lived, who they lives with (i.e. with a friend’s family, in a group home, in a foster home, with grandparents, etc.), as well as difficulties or benefits associated with the housing arrangements	
Guardianship	Descriptions of participants experience with formal (legal) AND informal (non-legal) guardianship prior to college—this is who their guardians were, difficulties of benefits associated with these arraignment as well as positive and negative traits of those guardians (i.e. abuse participants experienced, CJ or drug and alcohol involvement of the guardian)	
Education	Participant’s pre-college educational experiences or attitudes towards education that enhanced or decreased their success in school and/or enhanced or decreased their considerations of going to college (ie: college preparatory classes; transitions to new schools; influential teachers or counselors;)	
Financial	Participant’s pre-college financial experiences that impacted their experiences and attitudes and their consideration of going to college (ie:	

	lack of finances discouraged student from going to college	
Economic Marginalization	Descriptions of participants experiences with economic hardships prior to college (ie: Food security)	
Other	Descriptions of any other identifiable risk or protective factors and experiences that the participant refers to prior to college. These include experiences that positively or negatively impacted student's pathway to college	
Z	Anything that fits in Pre-College but is not listed above that we find compelling or interesting	

COLLEGE

(Challenges and Successes)

	Conceptualization	Clarifications
Financial	Participant's impactful financial experiences or thoughts during their time in college that either support or hinder their ability to function as a student, and their belief that they will make it through college (ie: scholarships, receives money from family members, cannot pay tuition, loans)	
Being defined as independent	Participant's experiences or thoughts on being institutionally defined (specifically, by CSU or another college) as "independent"	

	<p>This also refers to how participants make sense of themselves as independent or come to understand their unique identity (specifically, their self-concept).</p> <p>(ie: filing for independent status at the college) (ie: comparison to peers, self-reliance)</p>	
How the past has shaped the present	<p>Descriptions of participant's present where they refer to their pre-college experiences. Participants may explain how their past experiences have shaped their current behaviors and choices in positive or negative ways, including how they form relationships with others, how they go about making decisions etc.</p> <p>(ie: helping others because of the help they have received; learning to ask for help)</p>	
Academics	<p>Descriptions of participant's academic experiences during their time at college, experiences transitioning to college and benefits or difficulties related to it.</p> <p>(ie: especially hard transitions during the first year)</p>	
Social and Emotional Support	<p>Descriptions of social and emotional support participant has received that provide positive or negative experiences for the participant during college</p> <p>Use interview questions that ask: -who does the participant call when they have good news -who does the participant call when they have a difficult decision to make Any time a participant refers to social and emotional support as they experience college</p>	

Other	Other identifiable challenges and success during participants time/experiences at college as well as how they impact participant's experiences.	
Z	Anything that fits in College but is not listed above that we find interesting or compelling	

FSP

	Conceptualization	Clarifications
Benefits	The benefits that participants received from the program. These may be: -material (ie: care packages-double code) -relationships (ie: mentors, peers) -sense of belonging (ie: "meeting people like me") -zero benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Specifically code care packages while double coding for materials
Magic Wand	Participant identifies areas for change/improvement within the program	
Reasons for limited/discontinued participation	Participant identifies if/why they choose to limit or discontinue their participation with the program	
Entry	Participant explains how they first gained entry into the program (ie: first contact-email, at Ram welcome week)	
Z	Anything that fits into FSP but is not listed above	