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Exploring college student identity among young people with foster care histories and mental health challenges

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Abstract

Young adults with foster care histories experience unique barriers to success in postsecondary academic settings, including higher rates of mental health challenges. This study reports the perspectives of college students with foster care histories and self-identified mental health concerns (N=18) about how these factors relate to their post-secondary academic experiences. Study participants describe managing their mental health amid other academic and life stressors, share their perspectives on campus-based support and help-seeking experiences, and highlight the need for acknowledgement of their foster care identities in conjunction with their developing college student identities. Participants make a case for programming to help with managing challenges related to overwhelming emotions in response to compounding stressors, balancing self-reliance with help-seeking when needed, and developing interpersonal relationships that reduce feelings of otherness in the campus context. Recommendations for improving student experiences include mental health services provided by people familiar with the lived experience of foster care, access to foster student-specific programs providing social, emotional, and academic support, and campus-wide efforts improve the conditions for academic success in the face of difficult personal histories and elevated mental health challenges.

Keywords

foster youth; mental health; postsecondary education; student identity

INTRODUCTION

Transitioning to a post-secondary environment can be a stressful time for any young adult, and adequate mental health support during this transition is associated with well-being and academic performance (Eisenberg, Golberstein, & Hunt, 2009; Lee, Olson, Locke, Michelson, & Odes, 2009). College campuses have responded to student mental health needs

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through campus-wide programs, counseling centers, and services like crisis management, care teams, and caseworkers (e.g., Gallagher, 2009; Watkins, Hunt, & Eisenberg, 2011). Additionally, there is growing awareness and focus on the mental health challenges faced by underrepresented student groups, such as those from minority populations or lower socioeconomic status (Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009; Lipson, Lattie, & Eisenberg, 2018). Young adults who were in foster care are one of the specific student populations increasingly known to be at risk for mental health concerns that can complicate the transition to post-secondary settings and thus impact student identity development, academic performance, and college retention.

Though the aspiration to attend college among current and former foster youth is high (e.g., Courtney, Dworsky, & Lee, et al., 2010), only 20% enroll in postsecondary education, and graduation rates vary between 3-11% (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Davis, 2006; Day, Dworsky, Fogarty, & Damashek, 2011; Pecora, 2012; Wolanin, 2005). Among those who do enroll, students with foster care backgrounds have a 34% dropout rate compared to 18% among similar low-income and first-generation students (Day et al., 2011), and this relative dropout rate was more recently reported as 28% versus 12% (Okpych & Courtney, 2018a). One challenge these students face is academic preparedness, with foster students lagging comparatively behind their peers academically as they enter postsecondary education (Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004; Pecora et al., 2006; Unrau, Font, & Rawls, 2012).

Like all college students, the mental health challenges experienced by students with foster care history range from more common psychosocial and emotional difficulties to more serious mental health disorders. Multiple studies have shown that young people with foster care histories struggle with increased mental health disorders like depression, anxiety, PTSD, or substance abuse (Havlicek, Garcia, & Smith, 2013; Keller, Salazar, & Courtney, 2010; McMillen et al., 2005; Salazar, Keller, Gowen, & Courtney, 2013). Recent studies have specifically shown that students transitioning from foster care can struggle with the psychological effects of past trauma as they move into and through post-secondary education (Morton, 2018; Okpych & Courtney, 2018b). Further, students with foster care histories have themselves identified mental health challenges during the transition from high school to college, noting the importance of access to appropriate mental health services and suggesting that mental health challenges that go unresolved could be a cause of students leaving school (Kyles, Unrau, & Root, 2016).

Some institutions have responded to the range of potential needs experienced by this population by developing specialized campus-based programs to support foster student social and emotional well-being and academic success. Specific understanding of the foster care experience is often a foundation of this kind of specialized campus-based programming, and several studies have described program development and evaluation, including the perspectives of participants on program effectiveness (Day, Riebschleger, Dworsky, Damashek, & Fogarty, 2012; Dworsky & Pérez, 2010; Geiger, Cheung, Hanrahan, Lietz, & Carpenter, 2017; Kinarsky, 2017; Salazar, Roe, Ullrich, & Haggerty, 2016; Unrau, Dawson, Hamilton, & Bennett, 2017). Further, a recent review of such programs identified comprehensive challenges faced by students with foster care histories, including the need for informal support, difficulty with academic expectations, and mental health issues (Geiger,

Piel, Day, & Schelbe, 2018). The prevalence of mental health concerns, and the potential for these to derail academic aspirations, suggests that such initiatives to support students with foster care histories would be informed by student perceptions of how mental health and academic experiences are related, especially at a time when young people are developing a new identity as a college student.

The concept of college student identity stems from Erikson's model of psychosocial development (1963), which posits eight developmental stages when individuals integrate their emergent psychological needs in relation to their social context. The fifth stage, identity versus role confusion, is associated with adolescence and involves negotiating the exploration of personal identity with the desire to "fit in" with society, where role confusion reflects not being sure of who one is or of one's place in the world (Erikson, 1968). Chickering and colleagues (Chickering, McDowell, & Campagna, 1969; Chickering and Reisser, 1993) situated and parsed this important developmental stage in the college context, where students go through a process of integrating their previously-defined selves with their emergent student identity. This involves development along seven "vectors": (1) achieving competence, (2) managing emotions, (3) moving through autonomy toward interdependence, (4) developing mature interpersonal relationships, (5) establishing identity, (6) developing purpose, and (7) developing integrity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). College students generally move through these non-linear milestones along their pathway to graduation, gaining new skills for adulthood as they establish an emergent sense of identity within society.

However, college students with foster care backgrounds may enter college with more identity or role confusion due to their unique lived experiences. Adolescents with foster care histories have described related limitations on their opportunities for typical identity development, such as disconnection from peers, family impermanence, stigma around being in foster care, and premature independence or self-reliance (Havlicek & Samuels, 2018; Kools, 1997; Mulkerns & Owens, 2008; Samuels & Pryce, 2008; Samuels, 2009). For example, some college students with foster care histories may specifically struggle with self-reliance versus support-seeking when they reach campus (Morton, 2018; Okpych & Courtney, 2018b) and may specifically have difficulty finding resources that are responsive to their unique history and needs (Watt, Norton & Jones, 2013).

Such foster care-related experiences introduce potential tensions that may make it more difficult for college students with foster care histories to develop an emergent student identity along a typical pathway or at a typical pace, or may make some developmental tasks more critical or more difficult than others. Further, such challenges would be exacerbated by mental health concerns related to foster care experiences. The current study explores foster care history, mental health, and student identity from the perspective of college students with foster care backgrounds and self-identified mental health challenges. This study seeks to better understand the integration of previously-defined identities related to being in foster care with the newly forming college student identity, including the experience of mental health stressors. We also specifically explore how and why these students use mental health services and academic supports, and suggest ways findings may inform current or future programming for these students.

METHODS

Sample

This study uses data from interviews with participants in the Project Futures intervention effectiveness study conducted at an urban public university in the Pacific Northwest. The intervention is an adaptation of the evidence-supported My Life (Geenen et al., 2013; Powers et al., 2012) and Better Futures (Geenen et al., 2015; Phillips et al., 2015) coaching models to increase self-determination among youth with foster care experience. Participants in the intervention group received bi-weekly coaching by trained and supervised “near-peer” undergraduate or graduate students with similar lived experience in foster care and/or with mental health challenges. The Project Futures intervention focused on learning and applying self-determination skills (e.g., setting goals, problem-solving, monitoring progress) to achieve student-identified education goals, including exploring academic and career interests, seeking accommodations as needed, and managing mental health challenges and other life stressors that get in the way of academic success. Near-peer coaches also provided emotional support, coached students to problem-solve around identified mental health stressors (e.g., feeling overwhelmed by school demands), and helped to connect students to mental health resources as needed (e.g., encouraging a student to seek informal support or to schedule an appointment with the campus counseling center), but did not themselves provide or coordinate mental health services.

Eligible Project Futures participants were aged 18-26, had lived experience in foster care and self-identified mental health stressors, and were attending the university conducting the study or local community colleges. Note that the use of “mental health stressors” in recruitment was intended to be broadly inclusive of students currently experiencing emotional or behavioral health challenges, which may or may not indicate a current mental health disorder or related treatment. Participants were recruited to the intervention study through messaging to child welfare agency caseworkers and the local Independent Living Program (ILP), and through university communications to students who had indicated foster care history when they enrolled. (Note that quantitative Project Futures intervention effectiveness findings are forthcoming, and will include more detailed description of the coaching program model.)

This qualitative sub-study was conducted with a subgroup of undergraduate students who were currently participating, or had recently participated, in the coaching intervention at the time the interviews were being conducted; of the 20 students who were recruited for the sub-study, 90% agreed to complete the interview. The qualitative sub-study sample includes 18 interview participants with lived experience in foster care and with self-identified mental health stressors. Interview participants were 21.63 on average, 72% identified as female, 78% identified as non-White or mixed race, and 28% identified as LGBTQIA. At the time of the interview, 66% were enrolled in local community colleges and 33% were attending the university where the study was conducted.

Data Collection

Participant interviews were conducted in person at their campuses in the spring of 2017 by the intervention study project manager and a graduate student (the first author on this manuscript), both of whom had lived experience with foster care and/or mental health stressors. The semi-structured interview protocol was developed to explore foster student identity, the experience of mental health stressors, and perspectives on available formal and informal support sources, including campus-based resources to support mental health and address other challenges students face. Interview questions included the following: 1) What are some of the positive and/or challenging parts of being a college student with foster care history and mental health stressors?; 2) What campus resources have you used to support your well-being?; and, 3) What kind of mental health resources for foster care alumni would you like to see on campuses? Additional closing questions solicited more general perspectives around supporting foster students with mental health stressors. Interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes and participants received a \$40 incentive.

Analysis

Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim by two undergraduate research interns and verified for accuracy by a third intern, and transcripts were loaded into the web-based Dedoose software program (version 8.0.35) for qualitative analysis. We conducted a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), first coding transcripts inductively at the semantic level to develop initial codes, and then organizing these codes into themes and patterns reflecting participants' experiences. Two researchers blind-coded the first seven interviews and compared results for convergence. One researcher (the first author) coded the next 11 interviews, and the second researcher checked these codes for convergence, with ongoing discussions about any discrepancies. Once consensus was reached on all of the codes and excerpts, the coders wrote about each emergent theme and met multiple times to discuss the relationships between the themes before final decisions were made. During analysis, the researchers discussed their backgrounds reflexively, including how their own positionality shaped the coding and data analysis. The research team included a diverse group of researchers and assistants, including three undergraduate interns from underrepresented groups, two of whom had personal foster care experience. Lastly, we conducted synthesized member checking (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016) with four of the participants who had been interviewed to ensure the themes resonated with their experience.

RESULTS

Four themes were developed related to the complexities of the foster student experience, to include mental health challenges and other life stressors, and their impact on developing student identity on campus. Themes also reflect participant experiences of navigating academic and mental health support and resources, and the importance of campus-wide awareness of the lived experience of foster care and related mental health stressors to promote foster student help-seeking and college success.

Feelings of Otherness

A large portion of the participants in our sample described feeling “different”, “weird”, or like they “don’t fit” as a result of having been in foster care, or talked about having experiences that generally set them apart from other students. Some related these complex feelings directly to their foster care experience, as one student described, “issues that we go through are a lot more different than probably what the average person would go through,” and another explained that foster youth “view the world differently.” Other students described these feelings as interspersed with mental health issues such as general anxiety, social stress, or academic stress, including a student who described her transition to the university as follows: “I felt a lot of anxiety of what a university [was] gonna be like compared to a college, and what was gonna be expected of me...if I was even good enough for university level stuff.” Another student expressed a similar struggle with mental health and otherness:

[I]t gives you this misconception that you’re lower; that you’re not as good as some other people cause some other people just don’t show...from what you see from them...they don’t project like any issues or, you know, anxiety...(or) any issues they may have at home or something like that.

Quite a few students talked about the general lack of knowledge about the foster care experience or misunderstandings among professors and peers that affected academic interactions. One student broadly stated that he felt “the majority of professors don’t really understand, in particular, foster students.” Another student described her perspective that “a lot” of faculty and staff members do not seek to understand the challenges students face, saying, “They’re like, ‘oh well, you didn’t get your homework done’...Can I tell you why I didn’t get my homework done? Like, maybe I’m homeless or like maybe my mom just died, or something.” While some students acknowledged that schools may need to understand more about the foster care experience, other students talked about the difficulty of having to share your story and identity, especially in front of peers. As one student recounted, “there are some people who will not tell you everything in their life, because they are scared to speak up for what they think might end up happening.” Another student described her feelings of otherness when sensitive subjects came up in class:

People are like, just get out your feelings, you know, [but] I’m not gonna explain to you what I’ve been through...it’s hard, cause you might hear something upsetting and you need to go take a break and then your professors and other students are looking at you like damn, [you] don’t want to be here.

Many of these accounts touch on stories of wrestling with identity and the fear of being singled out as different from other college students because of their lived experiences. One student expressed her initial concern going to college, saying, “at first I was hesitant because I thought people like me don’t go to school.” Another student acknowledged not wanting to “lead” with her foster care identity saying, “I don’t want to be ‘foster girl’...I want to be me and call it good.” Additional student accounts described feeling like a statistic as a former foster youth going to college, not feeling as valued as their more typical peers in the campus context, and having others feel sorry for them due to their foster care histories.

Stacking Stressors

Several students talked about the nature of ongoing stress in college as related to their developing identity as a college student and the college experience itself, but most descriptions revealed it to also be intertwined with aspects of identity related to foster care history. Participant experiences with stress were explained as various combinations of mental health stress, academic stress, and social stress that were hard to separate or pull apart, and included challenges like lack of family support or insecure finances associated with young adults with foster care backgrounds. As these stressors “stacked”, many students expressed feeling the intensity of things “piling up”, or as one student put it, being “stressed to the breaking point.”

About half of the participants relayed stories of acknowledging the compounded problems of managing school on top of other stress, including past trauma and foster care-related issues that add pressures not generally faced by their college peers who were not in foster care. One student described how her academic performance suffered from combined stressors, including mental health issues and her background in foster care:

I enjoyed all my classes because they’re the classes that I chose, but just the workload on top of being mentally ill and not being on medication, and just everything that has happened in life in general... all that [has] been hard.

Another first-generation student related these compounding stressors, saying that her dad died right before finals in her freshman year, and asking, “I was like, how can you do this? Being a first gen, how can you survive foster care and this happens?” Several students also described the combined stresses of life in addition to not having stable family support or financial assistance, as is often associated with having been in foster care. As one student detailed, “College itself is very stressful, and so when you don’t have the outside help to manage health stresses and on top of like going to school and like family stuff, and going to work...it was so much.”

Of those who related their mental health struggles more to fears and stress in college than to foster care history, one student recalled, “I didn’t even know that they existed for me until I came to [university]... because of so much stress and anxiety, I almost didn’t want to come.” In thinking about the tension of competing academic work and attending to mental health, another student realized, “It’s hard to manage college and dealing with not sleeping sometimes and depression and, just unsure feelings, but I can usually just push that aside and get my work done, when I need to.” Additionally, some students talked about the stress of other life experiences as young adults; as one participant described, “I mean it’s crazy how finances can really put a stress on your mental health, you know, and then [managing] adult relationships.” A few others questioned even going to college when stressors stacked up, considering whether just getting a job and/or dropping classes might be a better option, due to academic and mental health-related stress, whether perceived as associated with their foster care backgrounds or not.

Self-reliance versus Support-seeking

Throughout the interviews, multiple students talked about the tension between self-reliance and the potential benefits of accessing campus-based services and supports. Self-reliance was variously discussed as a default strategy, a necessity, and a mindset when it came to getting support, especially when self-reliance was in response to prior negative help-seeking attempts. One student discussed college as a place where “you’re on your own”, while others described how it’s simply hard to ask for help, with one student saying, “as young people, you kind of need to find yourself...and when you’re trying to seek help from someone else, that just makes it more stressful.” Another student expanded on the complexities of getting help when you have a history of mental health stress, saying, “you don’t tend to rely on others to make your experience better”, especially when working with people who might be “getting it all wrong” in trying to help.

More nuanced feelings of self-reliance also occurred where students expressed their perceived responsibility to work on their own mental health problems specifically, while being open to seeking support on campus for various other needs. Some students described relying on themselves by not seeking help from professors or other campus supports, even when they knew it might make a difference. For example, one student knew she was eligible for a mental health accommodation through the disability resource center, but didn’t ever use it, saying, “I know that if I had used those resources I probably wouldn’t have had such a hard time with communicating what I was going through with my instructors.”

On the other hand, one student described successfully navigating mental health-related academic accommodations, but was aware of stigma related to receiving this support:

I just think the stigma of having some sort of diagnosis...like school is easier for you or that they’re trying to make it easier for you, and that’s really not the case. They just try to help you navigate and manage it in a way that is efficient for you because...we view the world differently and if the schools are not providing those accommodations, then nobody is gonna be that successful.

Other participants recommended that college students, including themselves, should reach out for support when they need it, as it’s “better in the long run” and “sometimes it’s a lot easier to get through things when you ask for help, even if it seems like you don’t fit.” Many students also cited the importance of retaining emotionally supportive connections outside of school to help manage stress, such as close peers, community members, and parent figures.

Improving Student Experiences on Campus

Participants suggested both individualized and campus-wide strategies to improve their experience on campus in ways that promote the development of student identity among foster care alumni with mental health stressors. First, almost all of the students advocated for more campus-based mental health services, especially individualized support from people who understand their foster care identities and lived experiences. As one student described, “[O]bviously, as foster kids, like our stories are so subjective to us and they’re so diverse, so I just think having people that we could relate to in the mental health center would be super useful.” Relatedly, one student described an appointment with a campus mental health

provider who she felt could not relate to her foster care identity, prompting her not to return, and to say of the experience, “I guess this is kinda my own stairway.” Suggestions for improving the student experience on campus included more general mental health and well-being resources, such as low-barrier mental health support, text support, crisis support, and peer support groups. Some students were specific about what type of mental health support worked for them, and what they wanted more of. One student framed her thoughts about being a foster student and wanting outreach directly from campus mental health resources:

I need that sometimes...I think if we had more of that verbal, “I’m totally here to support you”...I think that we would be more inclined to strive, to better our(selves)...I don’t think we feel as though everyone is safe [to talk to].

Other students confirmed that mental health resources (including on- and off-campus counselors and therapists) were very important to students’ academic success, and these were talked about as needing to be individualized to match student needs and experiences. As one student said of therapy:

Everybody has their own shrinks for different reasons. So, I would say a lot of people who do have an anxiety, or mental health stressors, all probably have similarities of how to cope...it kind of just depends on the person [and] situations that they’ve been through.

Additionally, a few were careful to note that a variety of mental health services are useful. As one student described, “I think it’s important to understand when we talk about mental health a lot of times the answer is a therapist...but I don’t think that’s the answer for everyone.”

Participants also suggested campus-wide strategies for supporting students with foster care backgrounds and mental health challenges, in line with one student’s description of “faculty really not being considerate of those real-life situations.” One student suggested foster student panels where students can share about their lived experience and intersecting identities with faculty and staff who may not be familiar, to cultivate a campus-wide culture of acceptance around these student challenges. A few students had suggestions for improving faculty-student interactions through trauma-informed trainings and better classroom practices “so they can help, no matter if they have been a foster youth or not.” For example, one participant imagined if professors reached out to students in their classes:

I guess that’d make me feel more comfortable if professors the first day are like, “Hey, I know a lot of you have mental health problems, and you can come talk to me”... like an invitation....I feel like that might make me a little bit more active to say something.

Another student noted how happy she was to have identified an academic advisor who understood her foster care identity and her “personal life mission of improving systems” and who also cared about her academic success. Another appreciated that her academic studies included psychology and sociology courses that provided relevant insight into her own lived experiences as a foster care alumni, young woman of color, and person experiencing mental illness.

Additionally, students who used accommodations, in particular for mental health needs or to support learning disabilities, emphasized the importance of these supports. Others talked about creating more foster student-specific programming, such as welcoming physical areas, walk-in programs, or other “safe space[s] to talk about our experiences.” Lastly, one student summarized her experience, saying she wished “that people didn’t have to search so hard” for programs that meet their needs delivered by support people who understand their lived experiences.

DISCUSSION

Post-secondary academic success involves a process of integrating previously-defined selves within an emergent college student identity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). This study explores the integration of aspects of foster care histories and mental health challenges during college student identity development. Our findings reveal that foster care-related identity and experiences likely play a critical role in a students’ ability to successfully transition to college and to cultivate their emerging student identity in the campus context, especially when these are intertwined with mental health challenges that also impact academic experiences. Our themes reinforce prior findings that these students may experience persistent mental health challenges related to their foster care involvement, which may inhibit college success if not specifically addressed (Geiger et al., 2018; Hogan, 2018; Kyles et al., 2016; Morton, 2018; Okpych & Courtney, 2018b). Overall, our findings resonate most strongly with three of the seven developmental “vectors” of college student identity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993), as detailed below.

First, an important task of college student identity development is Managing Emotions, given that all students are expected to experience a certain amount of stress, fear, or anxiety during the transition to college (Vector 2; Chickering & Reisser, 1993). In this study, it was difficult to separate the independent role of mental health stress, social stress, and academic stress on emotional well-being, and students reflected that life got more “intense” as these compounded or “stacked” on top of each other. For college students with foster care histories, tensions and emotions may run especially high as these students manage typical student challenges in the atypical context of relatively limited family support, past trauma, or premature financial independence. Further, students may specifically experience what Chickering and Reisser (1993) call the “disruptive emotions” of anxiety, stress, or fear more intensely than their peers without foster care histories, inhibiting both academic performance and ongoing student identity development. For example, among students with foster care histories including trauma, experiences of overwhelming emotions in college can be barriers to attendance and academic success, such that these students specifically need support in better regulating emotional states (Morton, 2017). Students resolving the realities of their foster care past while developing a new student identity may find it particularly challenging to seek formal assistance around this process without individualized program supports or mental health providers that understand their lived experience (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Even then, some students in this study struggled to take advantage of services or supports they thought could potentially be beneficial.

In this way, our findings validate what has been called “survivalist self-reliance” (Samuels & Pryce, 2008) among young people with foster care experience, where learning to rely on oneself is both a demonstration of resilience and a risk, if a tendency to not seek support prevents capable young people from managing mental health challenges or accomplishing their academic goals (e.g., Morton, 2018; Okpych & Courtney, 2018b; Root, Unrau, & Kyles, 2018; Unrau, Conrady-Brown, Zosky, & Grinnell, 2006). This degree of self-reliance has the potential to keep students from developing new connections or engaging with campus-based services that could support their mental health or academic success. In this way, some college students with foster care backgrounds might be farther along in the developmental task of Moving through Autonomy Toward Interdependence (Vector 3; Chickering & Reisser, 1993), such that these students may already be relatively autonomous and may benefit from increased awareness of their personal inhibitions around asking for help in the college context.

Further, our study confirms both the potential tension of self-reliance versus interdependence among college students with foster care histories, as well as the related challenge of successfully finding support that attends to their specific lived experiences and present needs (Watt et al., 2013). Although institutional and social support were recognized as essential components of student success in this study and others (e.g., Skobba, Meyers, & Tiller, 2018), many participants struggled to find the right people, the right resources, and the personal capacity to implement available support. Students in this study were specifically more likely to engage with campus-based services that are individualized and provided by support people—including faculty, staff, and counselors—who understand their lived experiences and foster care background. This shared understanding may help students to feel like their foster care identity is both recognized and supported on campus, without making them feel unnecessarily “exposed” in terms of the risk of potential stigma related to their background (e.g., Steenbakkens, van der Steen, & Grietens, 2016).

Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships at the college level is another important aspect of developing student identity (Vector 4; Chickering & Reisser, 1993), and is based on a “capacity for intimacy that is enduring and nurturing” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 48). However, many former foster youth in college have had difficult relational experiences, and thus may be overly attuned to perceived differences between themselves and others, and further, may have difficulty determining if someone is “safe” to explain their personal story to or to develop a relationship with. That may explain why participants in this study described engaging with people who specifically understood their multidimensional identities, including foster care history. These findings are aligned with research showing that foster students in college feel it is important to develop positive relationships with people on campus, especially those who have been through similar struggles, and to have access to necessary mental health and emotional support to overcome challenges and tap into resiliency (Salazar et al., 2016). Students in this study specifically recommended campuses provide more support around their foster care identities through mental health services, consistent with findings from previous research on foster care alumni experiences (Hines et al., 2005; Lovitt & Emmerson, 2008; Salazar et al., 2016).

Lastly, many participants described feelings of otherness related to foster care history—including potential trauma history and related mental health challenges preceding coming to college—that may impact student self-concept in ways that inhibit developmental tasks related to Establishing Identity as a college student (Vector 5; Chickering & Reisser, 1993). As students take note of their development and the perceived differences between themselves and their peers, they may begin to have difficulty identifying as a college student when viewing themselves in relation to others on campus. In other words, they may experience academic difficulties and perceive these not as typical student challenges in acclimating to college, but rather as specifically related to whether they belong in college as a former foster youth. Additionally, perceived misunderstanding by professors and peers about what foster students might be dealing with, in addition to managing academic responsibilities, compounded this challenge of establishing a student-oriented sense of self. Our study showed a connection between these student-perceived misunderstandings and both feelings of otherness and the tendency to rely on oneself instead of seeking support from others.

Study Limitations

This study analyzed the perspectives of students who were currently participating (or had recently participated) in an intervention research study testing the effectiveness of near-peer coaching around self-determination skills and structured goal-setting (findings are forthcoming). Therefore, our participants selected into this qualitative study as well as the intervention study and may have been comparatively more likely to engage in programming or support-seeking compared to students with foster care experience who did not. Additionally, near-peer coaching and intervention participant engagement varied, which may have influenced their perspectives on campus-based supports. Relatedly, students recruited to the intervention study identified as having struggles with mental health or “mental health stressors”, which may or may not have been connected to a diagnosis, medication, or significant mental health issue. Some students had diagnosis while others were coping with more typical mental health stress as related to their experience in foster care or as a student. Thus our findings are not generalizable to all students with foster care backgrounds, or those participating in campus-based programming, or those with mental health disorders. Rather, we intend this qualitative study to contribute insights to improve support and programming for college students with foster care backgrounds, specifically as these relate to mental health.

Implications and Recommendations

Undergraduate mental health is a growing concern on campus, and the National Survey on College Health shows increased rates of mood disorders specifically, with the number of students experiencing moderate to severe anxiety nearly doubling in the past decade (Duffy, Twenge, & Joiner, 2019). College student help-seeking is generally associated with perceived mental health stigma and campus culture around mental health support, and the perceived accessibility and effectiveness of available services (Chen, Romero, & Karver, 2015; Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010; Michaels et al., 2015). Further, our study implications are aligned with those made for the broader college student population around training faculty and staff to recognize and support students with serious mental health concerns, reducing

stigma, increasing outreach, and addressing barriers to access (Mowbray et al., 2006). However, our study adds to the existing literature arguing for campus-based support programs tailored specifically to college students with foster care histories, including mental health services delivered by staff with awareness of foster care backgrounds and how these may influence mental health and academic success.

Further, this study specifically offers evidence of the ongoing need for specific programs and resources that focus on foster care identity as a contributing factor to academic and social and emotional success on campus. Foster students may have various intersecting identities with other under-represented student groups on campus, but our findings suggest that they often come to college through a complex trajectory including difficult personal histories and related mental health challenges. Thus, many students with foster care histories may feel different in ways that require individualized supports and outreach strategies that validate their foster care identity, in addition to more typical campus-based academic and mental health supports that contribute to college student development. Validating this tension and addressing the needs of the foster care identity while making room for growth around the student identity will help young people understand that integrating these experiences is a natural progression in their identity development. This study also gives guidance on the types of strategies that this population may find more engaging, including outreach and intake by someone who understands their foster student identity, so they don't have "broadcast" it when seeking support, and integrated programs that help students balance their mental health, academics and accommodations, and social and emotional well-being.

Our findings suggest that campus decision-makers review available student resources as they relate to mental health support and specific services for foster students, and consider the development of dedicated programming, including consistent direct outreach, and connections to similar peers, near-peer mentors, academic advisors, advocates, and mental health specialists. In evaluating one such dedicated college support program, 77% of student participants responded that the support provided was so helpful they "can't graduate without it" (Unrau et al., 2017). A campus-based foster student support center readily facilitates such support, as would a dedicated liaison between the public child welfare agency, local foster youth transition programs, and campus-based admissions, student services, and academic success staff. Connections between foster care service providers and college or university systems help bridge support for foster students in college, much as cross-system collaboration supports younger students in foster care to be successful (Morton, 2016).

Additionally, our findings highlight a student-perceived lack of understanding about the foster care experience on campuses overall, which could be improved through faculty and staff training, increasing trauma-informed classroom skills, and raising awareness around this underserved population of students. Improved understanding from both a whole-campus and individual staff/faculty perspective could reduce feelings of otherness and help build a supportive sense of place to cultivate students' academic identities, while also honoring the complexities and needs of their foster care identity. Combined, such approaches would help to alleviate feelings of otherness, counter mental health-related stress and typical challenges during the transition to school, and promote positive connections from the outset, which

would likely improve college persistence and academic success among young people with foster care backgrounds.

Conclusion

Studies have highlighted social support and social capital resources as necessary “make or break” factors in helping students with backgrounds including homelessness and/or foster care to succeed academically (Skobba, Myers, & Tiller, 2018). Considering academic success through the lens of developing college student identities reveals areas for new or renewed focus in supporting the integration of foster care identity and experiences, including related mental health challenges, within the larger process of emergent college student identity. The students in this study make a case for programming specific to their experiences, including improved campus-based mental health support to help manage challenges with overwhelming emotions in response to stacking stressors, balancing self-reliance with help-seeking when needed, and developing interpersonal relationships that reduce feelings of otherness in the campus context. Additionally, participants encourage increased awareness of foster care identity across campus to improve the conditions for social, emotional, and academic success in the face of difficult personal histories and elevated mental health challenges.

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