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Los Angeles

Breaking the Cycle Together:

Foster Youth in High School and the Impact of Adult Supporters

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

by

Darlene Neal

2015

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## **ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION**

Breaking the Cycle Together:

Foster Youth in High School and the Impact of Adult Supporters

by

Darlene Neal

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2015

Professor Christina A. Christie, Chair

Each year there are over 400,000 youth living in out-of-home placement across the nation due to alleged child abuse, neglect, the loss of a parent(s), and/or behavior problems. As a result of being removed from their homes and moving between different placements and schools, foster youth can experience high levels of stress and developmental challenges as they struggle to cope with such extreme emotional turbulence. Each year 6% of these foster youth will transition out of care, leaving them with no support in the way of family or program assistance to help with housing, job placement, or options in higher education. Of the 6% of students who age out of the system each year, 5-13% enroll in higher education institutions and only 2% will graduate and obtain a bachelor's or other advanced degree. As it is seemingly uncommon for foster youth to matriculate to postsecondary education, I examined how successful foster youth transitioned out of care and chose to further their education at an academically rigorous institution.

Through former foster youth' own accounts of their success during high school which led them to UCLA, as well as the perspectives of the adults who supported them in their educational journey, I examined common threads in what contributed to their positive educational outcomes despite the harsh realities they experienced. Using a sequential multiple methods study, former foster youth who are currently enrolled at UCLA were surveyed and interviewed to provide the context of their successful journey through K-12 and onto higher education. The adults involved in these youth' academic success were also interviewed to gain further insight into the supports needed for foster youth as they prepared and decided to pursue their studies at a university. My findings show that adult supporters provided guidance, emotional support, and stability, which allowed students to move out of their negative past experiences. Adults' willingness to assist youth and be a part of their lives provided students with a transformative academic and social emotional environment, furthering their ability to persist through high school and gain acceptance to a top-tier university.

The dissertation of Darlene Neal is approved.

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2015

## **DEDICATION**

First, this dissertation is dedicated to my family. Our experiences have made this milestone very special for me. To my mother, Jeanne, who no matter what, dedicated everything she had to make sure her daughters were safe and taken care of, always reminding us that each obstacle we faced was just a “stepping stone.” I will always admire your strength and will never forget the sacrifices you made for us. To my big sister, Andrea, whether you know it or not you are truly someone I look up to. You have the same strength as mom; you never give up and you work so hard for everything you have. To my father, James, no words can ever express the love I have for you. I hope I have made you all proud.

To my “adult supporters” during high school, who went out of their way to make my schooling experience a positive one and offered the emotional and academic encouragement I needed. This study has allowed me to reflect on my own educational journey and acknowledge the impact your support has had on me.

I also dedicate this dissertation to the participants of this study. Thank you for your openness and genuine desire to help young people who are struggling with the distress of being in foster care. Your stories are an inspiration.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### PROBLEM AND SIGNIFICANCE

As it stands, in any given year there are well over 400,000 youth living in out-of-home placement across the nation due to issues such as alleged child abuse, neglect, and/or behavior problems (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). As a result of being removed from family and unsuitable home conditions and moving between different foster homes and schools, foster youth can experience high levels of stress and developmental challenges as they struggle to cope with such extreme emotional turbulence (Pecora et al., 2003). Each year six percent of these foster youth will *emancipate* from the system because they are now considered adults and no longer eligible for state and local aid. For the majority of these youth, there is little support in the way of family or program assistance to help with housing, job placement, or options in higher education (Casey Family Programs, 2008). Research has also shown that youth leaving foster care between 18 and 20 years of age can begin to experience varying levels of stress due to the unpredictability of their immediate future. Of the six percent of students who age out of the system each year, five to 13% enroll in higher education institutions but only two percent will graduate and obtain a bachelor's or other advanced degree, compared to 24% of adults in the general population (Casey Family Programs, 2010).

The low number of students coming out of foster care and entering postsecondary education could be indicative of the K-12 system they left and the care setup for them through the state as well as varying social factors in their personal lives. In California, the state government has little information on the educational progress of students in foster care and what academic supports they have been given based on their individual needs. Due to the high number of foster care youth determined to be in need of mental and physical health services, their needs

around education and academics often remain unidentified and their educational advocates become very limited (Barrat & Berliner, 2013; Blome, 1997).

While in school, foster youth tend to have considerably higher rates of academic and behavioral issues in the form of low test scores, low grades, high dropout rates, high rates of absence and tardiness, and disproportionate placement in special education classes. Teachers, counselors, and other adults who work with foster youth, sometimes unknowingly, deem a high school diploma a satisfactory and realistic goal for foster youth, leaving higher education out of their options by limiting advanced placement and college preparatory courses (Blome, 1997). Schools also have had a difficult time retaining records on foster youth who are mostly highly mobile, causing these students to repeat courses and remain in certain grade levels far beyond the normal timeframe (Zetlin, Weinberg & Luderer, 2004). With the compound disadvantages most foster youth face while in K-12 and before they leave the foster care system, the chances of being eligible for a top-tier university such as UCLA are slim.

Every year in California approximately 3,000 youth exit the foster care system, and in the UC system overall, it is reported that approximately 150 former foster youth enroll each fall as new undergraduate students. “Since less than 3% of the foster youth population at large ever graduates from college, ensuring the success of these students is one of the University’s most critical responsibilities as an institution” (UC Office of the President [UCOP]). Similarly, according to the UCLA Newsroom, the number of incoming UCLA freshmen and transfer students who self-reported being in care was 71 in 2008, 62 in 2009, 58 in 2010, and 109 in 2011: again less than two percent of the total number of overall students enrolled (UCLA Newsroom, 2012). These numbers are especially alarming seeing as most former foster youth have little emotional, social, or financial support in their early adulthood, which further

exacerbates their growing issues around homelessness, incarceration, early parenthood, and joblessness. It is worth noting that most teens and young adults have familial support not only while still in high school but also during their transition to adulthood, which most often comes with emotional and financial stability as they determine their short and long-term goals (Blome, 1997). With this understanding, the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), particularly in Los Angeles County, has made reunification a top priority for their youth in care. Los Angeles DCFS has recognized the potential positive impact a stable family environment can provide to minors and young adults as they examine their current options nearing emancipation. For those youth who are unable to return home to their biological families, the system relies on social workers, foster homes, and other supportive adults to provide the same level of care that a biological family would to their own child and also expect the individual to become more self-sufficient given the programs and services offered through DCFS. Overall, the negative outcomes for foster youth are prevalent in research studies and dialogue around foster youth, but not nearly as much when it comes to solutions or identifying what the protective factors are that account for the few success stories there are in higher education.

### **Research Questions**

As it is seemingly uncommon for foster youth to matriculate to postsecondary education, I considered what it means to be a successful foster youth that has transitioned out of the system and made it to an academically rigorous institution. Through former foster youth' own accounts of their success during high school that led them to a university, as well as the perspectives of the adults who supported them in their educational journey, I examined common threads in what contributed to their positive educational outcomes despite the harsh realities that so many foster youth face. The adults in the lives of foster youth, from the teachers and counselors at their

school(s) to extended family and community members, provided a different lens and perspective on the larger picture of what helps get these youth into top-ranking universities.

This study examined the following research questions:

1. What do former foster youth currently enrolled in a research university identify as factors that supported or hindered their efforts to apply and enroll in a research university?
2. What factors do adult supporters identify as contributing to former foster youth's academic success?
3. What do adult supporters perceive as their role in foster youth student achievement?

Using a sequential multiple methods study, former foster youth who are currently enrolled at UCLA were surveyed and interviewed to provide the context of their successful journey through K-12 and onto higher education. The adults involved in these youth's academic success were also interviewed to gain further insight into the supports needed for foster youth as they prepared for and decided to pursue their studies at a university.

### **Definition of Terms**

Barriers are defined as obstacles identified by students that limit the achievement of their academic goals (Kenny et al., 2007).

Support is defined as a source of help in achieving academic goals and an individual's perception that those resources are available, should one need them (Baker, 1999; Elias & Haynes, 2008; Kenny et al., 2007).



The challenges related to college access refer to the social disadvantages and lack of academic preparedness that contribute to the underrepresentation of students on university campuses (EdWeek, 2011).

Protective factors are those that alter the effects of risk in a positive way (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000).

Kinship care is defined as situations where children remain in state custody while placed with relatives or other family connections (Hegar & Rosenthal, 2009).

### **Research Site/Participants**

In California, Los Angeles County has the largest percentage of foster youth in the state. With the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) being the nearest university for most of these youth, it seems plausible that the numbers of foster youth enrolled would be higher. Yet as challenging and competitive as the application process is for seniors in high school when applying to UCLA, the process can be much more difficult for youth leaving the foster care system.

UCLA is considered one of the most prestigious public universities internationally, standing in eighth place according to the London Higher Education World Reputation Rankings (Times Higher Education, n.d.). For their third consecutive year, UCLA has also been ranked in the top two among public universities in the United States, following closely behind UC Berkeley. In addition, for the past several years, approximately 100,000 freshman and transfer applications are submitted from California residents and those out of state, making it one of the most sought after colleges and therefore one of the most competitive. Freshmen applications to UCLA do offer a notation of whether the applicant is a foster youth, and application readers can

take that factor into consideration while making their decision. Yet for the nearly 4,000 freshmen who are actually admitted each year, only two percent are foster youth.

UCLA is the one of the few UCs that has a college support system for former foster youth on campus: the Bruin Resource Center (BRC). UCLA's BRC is housed on campus in the Student Activities Center and aims to provide traditionally disadvantaged college students (former foster youth, AB540 students, veterans, and new parents) with academic and emotional support that will aid them in their intellectual and social development. Specifically, the Bruin Guardian Scholars program, housed in UCLA's BRC, provides individualized mentoring that focuses on students' academics, personal development, and the foundation for career and educational goals.

From these high-achieving students I uncovered what happened in their experiences while in out-of-home care that helped them get to UCLA. Additionally, many dedicated and experienced adults step in to support these students, either as teachers, counselors, or foster parents; some even maintain their relationship once a student leaves care and graduates from high school. These students may have similar factors that are significant to their educational success, including relationships with caring adults that could prove useful in replicating services and support for the majority of foster youth who are struggling academically.

### **Research Design**

Through surveys and in-depth interviews with former foster youth students at UCLA and the supportive adults who work closely with these foster youth, participants were engaged in dialogue around the experiences they have had regarding access to college by preparing to apply to public 4-year postsecondary institutions. The BRC at UCLA works with approximately 70 former foster youth at any given time, ranging from freshmen to seniors, including students who

have transferred from a community college. Through the BRC I sent information to all students identified as former foster youth, offering the opportunity to take a survey that probed for identified factors that have been negative or positive in their journey towards higher education. In addition, I used UCLA's Registrar's Office to distribute the survey to all UCLA students self-identified as foster youth to ensure every student on campus was contacted, not just those who participate in the BRC. From there, I chose a sub sample to interview about their life stories, retracing their steps of getting into UCLA and inquiring about the adults who supported them. One to two adults who were identified by each student were then asked to participate in a brief interview in order to determine the types of support these particular foster youth received and their role in the youth's lives. After triangulation of the data, I found common themes related to the various factors that contribute to foster youth's academic success.

### **Summary and Implications of the Study**

While the majority of foster youth leaving the system at age 18 tend to experience negative life outcomes, some push forward and excel academically. Whether internal factors such as resilience and determination, or external factors such as caring teachers or caregivers, former foster youth and the adults who work with them identified the youth's significant influences toward enrollment at a research university. The results of the participant interviews should guide not only the systems in place that prepare foster youth for independence, but also the dialogue around the importance of a stable environment and its supports.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

America's foster care system is intended to create a safe and emotionally healthy living environment for children and young adults who have faced various forms of abuse and neglect in their biological homes, being placed in the system anywhere from birth through their teenage years (Davis, 2006). Once placed, foster youth are the legal responsibility of their state until they are adopted, are reunited with biological family members, or become legal adults (Davis, 2006; Wolanin, 2005).

In each state, there are differences in how the foster care system operates due to financial and state policies, leaving foster youth with different services and opportunities depending on their residence and placement type (Armstrong, Gunderson, & Mecca, 2005; Davis, 2006). California has the largest and most complex foster care system in the nation, with 58 counties and a highly diverse population (Armstrong, Gunderson, & Mecca, 2005). California emancipates more than 4,000 foster youth every year that turn age 18. Typically, this transition from foster care to adulthood comes suddenly and without support, leaving foster youth vulnerable to dropping out of high school and becoming homeless or unemployed (Armstrong, Gunderson, & Mecca, 2005).

An alternative path for nearly 60% of youth removed from their homes is kinship care, where children and young adults are placed with family members outside of their immediate biological families (Wolanin, 2005). Yet many youth in kinship care do not receive sufficient support from foster care agencies because they do not have access to the state's foster care system. This could negatively affect the ability of these youth to access college preparatory

programs and gain essential knowledge to navigate the college application and financial aid processes (Davis, 2006).

The recent passing of the California Fostering Connections to Success Act (AB12) in January 2010 extended the legal age to be in foster care beyond 18; as a result of this legislation, more young adults in California are seeking assistance with some of the mandated requirements for eligibility. AB12 requires that a youth in foster care who is between 18-21 must be enrolled in a higher education institution or vocational program unless he/she is employed full time or has a medical condition (John Burton Foundation, 2010). Though postsecondary educational attainment is a condition by which young adults older than 18 can opt to stay in the foster care system, most of the support around AB12 is focused on housing and placement options as the state realized the immediate needs of foster youth exiting the system.

The foster care system itself also faces many internal challenges with employing and keeping staff due to high caseloads, poor working conditions, and a general negative opinion of the foster care system, which ultimately impacts the way foster youth are assisted through programs and services (Chipungu & Bent-Goodley, 2004; Davis, 2006). The challenges within the foster care system, however, are not the only barriers in getting more foster youth into college. A national poll taken in 2003 by the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care found that staff at postsecondary institutions and those who are in charge of state and federal education policies are largely unaware of higher education opportunities and barriers for foster youth (Wolanin, 2005). The lack of attention to education and academic support for foster youth transitioning out of care can weaken efforts to adequately serve youth on their path towards educational attainment (Chipungu & Bent-Goodley, 2004).

Given the many challenges of the foster care system, this literature review begins with a brief exploration of its history. This chapter will then outline a conceptual framework around resistance, resilience, and theory of care that lends itself to understanding the protective factors in place for foster youth as well as the choices driven by their current circumstances and internal characteristics. Next, research and literature on the barriers to college access will be reviewed, taking into account the factors that help and hinder persistence to postsecondary institutions including high aspirations, academic self-perception, placement instability, adult support, and college knowledge. Next, the challenges of at-risk students are examined in order to understand better the behaviors and decisions that typically lead to lower rates of college-going overall. Under this notion, I will also review how healthy behaviors and racial barriers can play a part in a foster youth's transition from foster care to a university setting. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of how the shift can be made for the majority of foster youth who do not make it to higher education through examples of existing programs and social support.

### **Legislation and Historical Overview of the Foster Care System**

In the history of the United States, the child welfare system has advanced according to changing beliefs and systems in place by the government. The Children's Bureau, founded in 1912, barely considered the maltreatment of children until the 1960s. The Social Security Act of 1935, which was amended in 1962, provided money to increase child welfare services (Myers, 2009). In 1973, U.S. Senator Walter Mondale made efforts to have full-time officials assigned to the identification, prevention, and treatment of child abuse and neglect. One year later, the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) of 1974 was passed, providing funds for training, research, and the investigation and reporting of child abuse (Myers, 2009).

After the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, Congress began focusing on ethnically diverse children in the foster care system, especially Native American and African American youth who were removed from their homes at higher rates than White children (Myers, 2009). Laws banning interracial adoptions made it difficult for Native American and African American children to find permanent homes, keeping them disproportionately represented in the foster care system (Myers, 2009). It was not until 1994 that Congress passed the Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA), prohibiting agencies from using race as a factor in adoption, yet still allowing it in decisions related to foster care placements until 1996 (Myers, 2009).

With more laws in place governing intervention with and treatment of abused and neglected children, especially focusing on ethnically diverse youth, and as social awareness grew around the care of children in the child welfare system, the federal government expanded its role to give states greater accountability measures and emphasize greater positive outcomes for foster youth (Murray and Gesiriech, 2004). The Independent Living Program (ILP), implemented in 1986, came out of the growing needs of youth exiting the foster care system who were still unprepared for adulthood. During a time when youth entering the foster care system increased by nearly 75%, ILP was designed to offer financial and housing assistance, counseling, job skills training, and other support services to ensure youth ages 16 and older were prepared for independence (Murray & Gesiriech, 2004).

In addition, the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 was signed into law by President Bill Clinton to give states further funding for aiding foster youth preparing to leave the system at age 18. Federal funds doubled in support of ILP, and as each state receives a portion, they are required to provide a proposal of a program that will meet measured outcomes for youth leaving

the system. Outcome areas include educational attainment, employment, avoidance of high-risk behaviors, homelessness, and incarceration (Child Welfare League of America, n.d.).

In 2001, California passed AB 636, the Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act, which went into effect in 2004. AB 636 was designed to improve outcomes for foster youth while also holding state and county agencies accountable for those outcomes. Two of several goals of AB 636 were to ensure children in foster care had access to appropriate educational services and to ensure they were adequately prepared to leave the system and transition into adulthood (Department of Social Services, n.d.). Under this new California law, each county was to conduct an assessment of its programs and services and determine how to improve its outcomes or remove barriers to improvement. This self-assessment process included community-based groups' facilitating public input and collaboration with community partners, as well as defining the goals and next steps in moving forward.

More recently in 2012, the ILP funded by Los Angeles County's DCFS underwent another drastic change in implementation. The traditional ILP model that had been in place for over 20 years had college and education based agencies hold ILP classes on college campuses so students would be exposed to postsecondary settings while gaining information on daily living skills. In an effort to improve outcomes for foster youth as they leave the foster care system, ILP changed to a mentor-based model where individual foster youth would meet bi-monthly with a caseworker to learn about finances, transitional housing, job placement, and education either in the home or in their communities, with a 2-year window for improving outcomes (LA County ILP Online-Life Skills, n.d.).

Research on foster youth legislation and its impact points to the limited funding states receive, which inhibits flexibility around program planning and assessing the value and effect of



services. There are potentially good ideas in place, but mostly there is a disconnected blend of programming with little use of theory or evaluation (Collins, 2004). On a national level, there is no streamlined approach to the services and support that transitioning foster youth will receive and how they will receive it. The lack of national coherence on program services is due to not only to limited funding, but also inconsistent and poor research and empirical data in the field (Propp, Ortega, & NewHeart, 2003).

Limited funding to states and counties not only interferes with an agency's ability to plan for improved programs, but also decreases the number of transitioning foster youth who are able to participate in programs and receive assistance. Existing research only has information about foster youth who have accepted support, which are usually the ones who are angered by their circumstances and more likely to benefit from the services they choose to receive (Collins, 2004). As research on what works and what does not becomes one-sided, states and counties can end up with a biased view of how to develop and maintain programs, especially without the actual input of foster youth, caregivers, and support agencies. As the foster care system deals with implementing new structures in their model of preparing foster youth for adulthood, it becomes important to analyze critically the mechanisms involved. The theories and frameworks discussed subsequently will lay the foundation for such analysis to occur.

### **Conceptual Frameworks**

With the overwhelming obstacles that many foster youth face as they transition out of care and into adulthood, it is important to understand how these students are influenced through their personal experiences and relationships. In order to understand the experiences of foster youth and their decision to pursue postsecondary education, I will examine three frameworks that

will serve as a lens to view college aspirations for foster youth and the role of support: resistance, resilience, and theory of care.

### **Resistance**

Though not much research has been conducted with respect to this theory, resistance theory is built on the notion that people can determine their own life trajectory for themselves. This theory further emphasizes that people create meaning regarding their circumstances through interactions with external entities such as family, schools, and community (Abowitz, 2000; Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Resistance, then, places a student's motive for academic success within the context of how he/she views his/her life and those in it. Tara Yosso's work builds on the theory of resistance by including one's need to prove certain people wrong, arguing that students are motivated by the idea that individual change is possible and are driven to navigate through the educational system both for themselves and for others (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Resistance theory is strongly related to resilience as a response to challenging circumstances.

### **Resilience**

The experience of being in foster care, including inconsistency in placement and schooling, lack of opportunities, emotional trauma, and immediate housing and employment concerns upon emancipation, can impact foster youth's ability to succeed academically in high school (Davis, 2006; Honoring Emancipated Youth, 2009; Rassen, Cooper, & Mery, 2010). However, academically successful at-risk students display greater positive school behavior independently of family context and independently of their self-esteem or beliefs about who is responsible for their successes or failures (Finn & Rock, 1997).

Academic resilience is a construct tied to positive anomalies in educational achievement outcomes for students labeled as *at-risk* (Morales, 2008). The assumption here is that aspirations and academic success represent meaningful accomplishments for at-risk youth who must transcend a multitude of barriers to attain them; these youth are considered academically resilient (Finn & Rock, 1997; Morales, 2008). Traditional beliefs about educational attainment suggest that a student must be dedicated and work hard, and any obstacles or challenges that student faces can be overcome (Kirk et al., 2010).

Resilience is “the process by which individuals achieve adaptive functioning in the face of adversity” (Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005, p. 381). Adaptive functioning can uncover factors that guide intervention efforts and determine the level of resources needed to achieve success (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Hines, Merdinger, and Wyatt, 2005). Resilience also comes from the idea that an individual has experienced a high level of adversity and has achieved positive adaptation to his/her circumstances in spite of the difficulties he/she has faced. Hines et al. (2005) noted that “individual vulnerabilities and protective factors” can change with the development of cognitive, emotional, and social environments, which vary between cultural contexts; the individual, family, and community can all influence a person’s psychosocial development” and likelihood of developing resilience (Hines, Merdinger, and Wyatt, 2005).

### **Theory of Care**

One significant protective factor involves stepping out of one’s personal environment and into another’s, also known as care. When we care, we consider other’s needs in order to protect or enhance their well-being. In addition, the basic elements of care lie in the relationship between the one caring and the one being cared for (Noddings, 2013). As students accept the care of adults, their likelihood of academic success rises. The importance of caring for students,

particularly those in out-of-home care, is evident in the pedagogy of *warm demander*. Kleinfeld (1975) first created the idea of a warm demander after studying the communication styles of culturally responsive teachers and their development of caring relationships and high academic expectations with their students. The notion of care in education points to the growth of high aspirations, academic resilience, and high self-concept. One of the most influential manifestations of care, the role of adult supporters, will be discussed in the following section.

### **College Access: Factors and Influences**

#### **High Aspirations**

Students' educational aspirations, how much education they want to attain, can predict an array of academic outcomes while they are still in school (Boxer, et al., 2009; Mello, 2008). Seventy percent of foster youth across the nation aspire to post-secondary education, yet only 10% meet their goals and enroll in college (Rassen et al., 2010). The desire to continue on to a postsecondary institution and one's expectations for the future can impact a student's grades, academic participation, and motivational levels (Boxer et al., 2009). Similarly, students who believe they can do well in school are more likely to do so, making aspirations and expectations a critical influence on students' educational goals and life trajectory (Beal & Crockett, 2013; Boxer et al., 2009).

Other research has proposed that a student's aspirations are shaped by personal and social factors; the experiences that influence development, such as school and community environments, race and ethnicity, parental involvement and expectations, and socio-economic status all have an impact in a student's educational attainment (Bowles & Gintis, 2002; Boxer et al., 2009; Davis-Kean, 2005; C. Kirk et al., 2011a, 2011b; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). The environmental variable of parental support or family involvement, in particular, has been noted

as one of the best predictors of postsecondary educational attainment (Conklin & Dailey, 1981; Davis-Kean, 2005; C. Kirk et al., 2011a; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). Parental support and family involvement, in the form of high academic expectations and sustained encouragement, has been linked to positive academic outcomes, despite a student's perceived ability (Conklin & Dailey, 1981; C. Kirk et al., 2011b).

Although there is vast research linking the family unit with high academic aspirations and attainment among the general pool of students, there is some disagreement among researchers when it comes to the population of school-aged foster youth in out-of-home placements who are also reported to have high levels of educational aspirations (Kirk et al., 2011). Courtney et al. (2007) and Nixon and Jones (2007) found that between 70-80% of the foster youth in their local and national studies, respectively, conveyed their aspirations to obtain higher education, yet more than 62% of these students were unsuccessful in reaching their desired educational goals (McCarron and Inkelas, 2006; Kirk et al., 2011). Kirk et al. (2011) found in their quantitative study of mixed participants (two-thirds comprised of foster youth) that youth in foster care report significantly lower aspirations compared to at-risk, low-income youth who were not in the foster care system. Through their analysis the researchers discovered that for their sample, academic self-perception and parental support were central to a student's desire for educational attainment, yet the foster care experience does not allow for those provisions. Consequently, students in foster care who have been in care for an extended period of time and have had several placements may be at increased risk for lower educational outcomes.

### **Academic Self-Perception**

Students who have high self-esteem tend to do better academically. Studies indicate, however, that self-esteem is not a cause of academic success, but rather an effect (Holly, 1987).

Other research reports that if a student holds a positive self-view, he/she is more likely to exhibit positive academic behaviors that may serve as a protective factor that increases the likelihood of school success, despite being considered at-risk (Finn & Rock, 1997). Creating a cyclical pattern, students' beliefs in their ability to learn and master their academic behaviors determine their aspirations and future academic success (Bandura, 1993; Bandura et al., 1996).

Unfortunately, however, most foster youth in care have negative self-perceptions resulting from the internalization of harmful messages received in their homes and externally. These messages in turn, can influence foster youth's behaviors and reinforce both their own and others' negative perceptions (Taussig, 2002). For many foster care students, self-perception is shaped by their understanding of others' beliefs of their identity and the surroundings from which they come. It is acknowledged that neither a student's self-perception nor academic behaviors happen independently of their larger societal context: that is, family, school environment, and community (Finn & Rock, 1997).

### **Placement Instability**

Perhaps the most significant barrier to college for foster youth is the frequent interference in their education due to housing and school changes (Davis, 2006; Wolanin, 2005). Former foster youth, service providers, and school faculty have reported that the majority of educational problems that foster youth face are due to placement instability, caseworker turnover, and the subsequent numerous school transfers they experience (Davis, 2006; Unrau, Font, & Rawls, 2011; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2006).

On average, a student in foster care will change home and school placements up to three times a year, losing months of steady classroom instruction (Davis, 2006; Julianelle, 2008; Kirk & Day, 2010; McNaught, 2009). The more a student's school records are transferred, the less

likely teachers and counselors are to be aware of their skill level and educational needs, and fail to properly monitor their progress and provide additional resources. Multiple placement changes during high school also push foster youth to confront the added emotional burden of becoming familiar with their new home and school simultaneously, missing key opportunities to access college (Davis, 2006; Emerson, 2006).

An unstable placement history is also a predictor of behavioral issues for foster youth; as abandonment, abuse, and multiple separations from guardians continue, the ability to develop long-term independence decreases. As a result, it becomes highly likely that students will exhibit poor academic and social behaviors, resulting in placement in numerous foster homes and displaying lower academic standing in school (Lewis et al., 2007).

### **Adult Supporters and Kin Care**

Not all at-risk youth actually act out problem behaviors. What makes some at-risk youth act out and others succeed can be studied in the context of available supports that may enable some students to overcome the perceived barriers they face. Supports available in the family, school, and community are potential resources that youth can access to persist beyond their personal life circumstances and develop educational goals and aspirations. For many adolescents whose identities are closely tied to their homes and communities, family and extended family members may represent a crucial source of support (Kenny et al., 2007). In examining the role of adult support, social bonding theory proposes that problem behavior comes from a weak or broken connection to society (Cusick, Havlicek, & Courtney 2012). Without a solid relationship with others or involvement in external activities, individuals may have difficulty engaging in healthy decision-making for their future.

Although limited research is available on the educational and long-term outcomes of students in kinship versus foster care, the advantages of staying with a relative outweigh the disadvantages (Szilagyi, 2014). By staying with a caregiver who is a relative, students have a better opportunity for stability and an increased likelihood of maintaining a sense of belonging with their families and existing relationships within their community (Stein et al., 2014; Szilagyi, 2014). The emotional protection typically assured through kinship care points to the need for students in out-of-home care to be connected to a stable environment and caring adult relationships to deter problem behaviors and encourage higher aspirations.

### **Academic Outcomes and College Knowledge**

Researchers have contributed substantial findings in their efforts to understand the aspects involved in foster care students' academic underachievement and persistence to post-secondary education, given their individual life circumstances. Compared to the general population, foster youth are more likely than their classmates to struggle academically due to the consequences of being removed from their families and communities, as well as the common lack of oversight regarding their academic needs (Altshuler, 2003; Rassen et al., 2010; Zetlin et al., 2006). The likelihood that a student in foster care will face one or more negative educational outcomes is high, making foster youth one of the most educationally vulnerable populations in the nation (Zetlin et al., 2006).

However, school-based efforts to increase academic outcomes for foster youth tend to fall short, particularly in high school. Students in care can present a large range of concerns, such as higher rates of absenteeism and disciplinary referrals, lower standardized test scores, lower grades in core subject areas, over identification for special education services, and retention in



lower grade levels (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003; R. Kirk & Day, 2010; Parrish et al., 2001; Salazar, 2013; Unrau et al., 2011; Zetlin et al., 2006).

Even the most academically gifted youth in care may not know about college eligibility requirements and will not apply because of preconceived notions that colleges and universities being out of reach (Kirk & Day, 2010). The lack of dialogue around college-going is mostly missing between adults and foster youth, mainly due to the high turnover of DCFS staff and foster families who are unable to provide consistent college-going messages. Therefore, many foster care students find it difficult to imagine themselves at a higher education institution because their opportunity for receiving adequate educational support is reduced (Davis, 2006; Wolanin, 2005).

The lack of knowledge and responsibility related to academic support makes it difficult to identify a foster student's progress towards meeting high school graduation and college eligibility requirements (Salazar, 2013). The lack of concrete knowledge about college eligibility requirements, preparatory curricula, and the proficiencies needed to navigate the college application and financial aid processes are additional significant factors that influence college-going behaviors and decision-making for foster youth in high school (Davis, 2006).

### **Challenges of At-Risk Students**

#### **Healthy Behaviors and Decision-Making**

For students considered at-risk, the factors involved in college access are more critical and often times more difficult to achieve. The term *risk* is defined according to behavior problems that have already been displayed through truancy in school, drug and alcohol use, promiscuity, and involvement with gangs or crime in general (Resnick & Burt, 1996). Risk also implies that certain youth are more likely to be involved in at-risk behaviors than others, though

it does imply that those behaviors will necessarily occur. Earlier research suggests that environmental factors such as school, community, family, and larger social institutions have a strong impact on a youth's exposure to at-risk behaviors. For youth in high-stress environments who have also experienced negative life circumstances, the level of vulnerability to at-risk behaviors can be higher (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Resnick & Burt, 1996).

An additional definition furthers the explanation of environmental factors, asserting that youth are not at-risk because of their behaviors, but rather because of the risky environments that surround them. These environments include dangerous neighborhoods, negative adult role models, limited opportunities for academic and career advancement, and inadequate housing (Finn & Rock, 1997; McRoy, 1993; Resnick & Burt, 1996; Schorr & Schorr, 1993). Living in such environments predisposes youth to act in ways that place them at risk of future negative outcomes.

Adolescence has also been noted to be a critical time for decision-making, which can ultimately determine life outcomes and quality of life standards. Among the decisions that youth typically make, little research has been done on their educational and career choices and how those align with their overall aspirations (Galotti, Kozberg, & Gustafson, 2009). Many adolescents at risk of behavior problems lack the ability and/or opportunity to make positive decisions; instead, typical at-risk students will fail to plan for their careers or higher education, and choose to drop out of high school at rates as much as 300% higher than their peers (Galotti et al., 2009; Lerner, 1995; Solberg, Carlstrom, Howard, & Jones, 2007).

Foster youth are even less likely to make good academic decisions, furthering their potential for at risk behaviors (Taussig, 2002). These students tend to be tracked and categorized as at-risk due to their higher risk of dropping out of school, high absenteeism, poor grades, and

higher rates of disciplinary referrals. Youth in the foster care system are also more likely to have severely negative experiences in K-12 as it relates to their home lives and are more likely than other students to change schools multiple times, are in lower academic standing compared to low socio-economic status students, and are more likely to be enrolled in the lowest performing schools (Barrat & Berliner, 2013).

However, few studies have recognized the school or state's role in identifying foster youth as a distinct group with different academic and social needs and how to account for the compound disadvantages foster youth face. Though educational institutions are not solely responsible for the changes recommended to address the needs of foster youth, the insufficient support has a significant influence on the persistence to academic success and postsecondary education.

If foster youth graduated from high school at the same frequency as their non-foster care peers, nearly 100,000 additional foster youth transitioning out of care would be applying and enrolling in postsecondary institutions (Davis, 2006; Wolanin, 2005).

### **Racial Barriers**

Most foster youth in the system are children of color, a result of the long-lasting racial inequities in the United States (S. Bass, Shields, & Behrman, 2004; Davis, 2006). Although African-Americans comprise approximately 7% of California's child population, they make up 29% of youth in foster care (Armstrong et al., 2005). Assemblywoman Karen Bass (2012) has also spoken to the issue of racial disproportionality in foster care and the impact it has on Black youth. According to Bass, African-American foster youth have lower rates of adoption, less chance for residential permanency, and fewer services provided for mental health and education,

and are more likely to become vulnerable to inner city gangs, drugs, and sexual exploitation based on their placement options within large urban cities.

One major contributing factor addressing the overrepresentation of African-American children in foster care and their access to support services is the policy mandates in place that provide those services for vulnerable populations. Researchers are beginning to question the efficacy of the service model in place that is meant to improve child outcomes, as there is little representation for African-Americans in the decision-making process and therefore little awareness of culturally sensitive intervention practices (Knott & Donovan, 2010).

African-American children are placed into foster care at higher rates and remain in care longer than their peers of different racial backgrounds. Ultimately, Black students in care are given little access to college preparatory programs, gifted magnet programs, and college courses that can help them succeed in K-12 and pursue higher education. They also receive fewer visits from family and case workers, receive fewer case plans to track academic and short term goals, and undergo fewer assessments of their psychological development. The protective elements found to be a significant factor in changing the life outcomes of foster youth are mostly absent for African-American students in care (Barrat & Berliner, 2013; Chipungu & Bent-Goodley, 2004; Foster, Hillemeier, & Bai, 2011; Knott & Donovan, 2010).

Foster et al. (2011) confirmed through their study that African-American children have more out-of-home placements than their White peers and have more external problems that are linked with placement instability, but still could not explain the racial difference. The researchers noted that little inquiry has been conducted around the causes of racial inequality in permanent placement, and extant research has dealt mostly with documentation of its existence in the foster care system. The researchers also highlighted the increased risk of placement instability among

African-Americans in foster care, which can lead to difficulties in adolescent development. The researchers sought to understand the various reasons for the frequency in placement changes; one possibility is the documented higher rate of abuse and neglect among African-American children. Another possibility is the experience and duration of African-American children within the foster care system. As Foster et al. (2011) noted,

In summary, researchers have identified characteristics that are associated with placement instability, and many of these factors are disproportionately found among African-American children in the child welfare system. The question remains, however, whether increased levels of these risk factors account for African-American children's greater placement instability.

### **Existing Programs and Support Services**

Though the risk factors and challenges in the foster care system are daunting, there are potential benefits from programs and services addressing the isolated issues these youth face. A major federally funded program discussed previously is the ILP, a resource that has very little research under its belt. The goal of ILP is to ensure a successful transition from care to adulthood for youth in the system, yet precious little information is known about the impact ILPs have on the outcomes for foster youth who have left care (Lemon, Hines, & Merdinger, 2005).

Lemon et al. (2005) addressed the issues of ILPs using surveys and interviews with groups of former foster youth currently attending a 4-year university or not attending college at all, studying individuals who also went through an ILP or received no such transition service. The researchers interviewed ILP coordinators with DCFS across several counties in California to describe what an ILP is and its intended impact for foster youth. All the youth in the study were compared in terms of demographic variables, experiences in foster care and in their schools, independent living skills, and their experiences after exiting foster care. The comparative analysis showed that those who went through ILP were mostly African-American and Latino,

whereas those who did not receive this service were mostly White and Asian-American. The researchers also found that the ILP group had more placement instabilities, were less likely to have support while in care, were more likely to be in need of educational assistance (i.e., tutoring), and had higher rates of being taught independent skills due to the nature of ILPs. Three recommendations came from this study's outcomes: the establishment of a supportive connection beyond ILPs, collaboration with foster/group/kinship parents, and increased educational services that focus specifically on college attainment.

Several other independent programs and services exist; however, they lie outside the federally mandated arena for foster youth. Such programs tend to be community-based organizations or higher education outreach programs. The Seita Scholars Program in particular is an example of one such program that was designed to increase higher education opportunities for foster youth and support them in their undergraduate years. The program began in 2008 and has enrolled approximately 50 students per year, creating a community of former foster youth on the college campus. The Seita Scholars Program uses a coaching model for support where professionals with experience in foster care help students navigate the campus and go through the different challenges of beginning college. The coaches offer individualized social support to assist the youth in transitioning into adulthood as well resources for physical and mental health services. Seita hopes to level the playing field for foster youth on their campus so they have a chance to compete for scholarships, internships, and career opportunities. Though not a research study, the study pinpoints elements that are important for former foster youth in higher education, such as personalized support around academics, social relationships, and mental health services; ongoing communication with a mentor; and community connections that promote self-sufficiency (Unrau, 2011). The need exists for similar campus-based programs at

all higher education institutions in preparation for the future of foster youth college students and graduates.

Several programs also exist for foster youth not yet transitioning out of high school and foster care who are seeking educational support; one such program exists on UCLA's campus. Housed under the BRC, the Bruin Guardian Scholars Academy (BGSA) patterned itself after Cal State Fullerton's student run program beginning in 2008 (Luther, 2012). CSU Fullerton founded the first Guardian Scholars program in 1998, reaching out to college-bound students exiting the foster care system. UCLA's BGSA similarly aims to provide current and former foster youth with interactive college and career workshops, activities, and assistance, hoping to directly impact the educational outcomes of the students served (Bruin Guardian Scholars, 2010; Luther, 2012). Again, the importance of these programs all point to the positive impact of social support in the lives of foster youth at the high school and college level.

### **Summary**

Young adults in general can have a difficult time leaving home and transitioning into adulthood, where they are expected to find employment and/or pursue post-secondary education after high school. Of youth leaving the foster care system, only two to three percent will attain a postsecondary education, compared with 24% of the general population (Salazar, 2013). While the general population may have support from their families and schools to reach these goals, youth coming out of foster care without these supports tend to experience many challenges that keep them out of higher education, ultimately leading to a lower quality of life (Rupert, 2003).

Despite the various challenges foster youth face while transitioning out of care and out of high school, those few who do access college are as likely as non-foster youth to attend 4-year public universities (Davis, 2006; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2005).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2005), 29% of foster youth will enroll in a public 4-year university, compared to 30% of non-foster youth. The majority of foster youth, however, will apply to and enroll in a 2-year community college.

Through the study of foster youth and academic success, the research provides a wide array of information on the difficulties these students face that keep most from accessing educational opportunities. However, from every barrier and theory studied in this chapter emerges the notion that caring and supportive adults serve as bridges to higher levels of academic success and positive educational outcomes (Elias & Haynes, 2008).

The following chapter considers the conceptual frameworks and the role of supportive adults developed here by describing the multiple methods design used to examine the research questions. The data gathered highlight the varying experiences of academically successful foster youth and their perceptions of their academic success, including the role of positive adult relationships and how to identify factors that can be reproduced for the majority of former foster youth who do not access university level education.



## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGY**

To address academic success and college aspirations among foster youth transitioning out of foster care, I studied current university undergraduates who are former foster youth and the adults and professionals who worked with them while they were in high school. I completed a sequential multiple methods study using survey and interview data to identify challenges encountered while in high school that may hinder academic success and aspirations, and how these challenges are met by existing social and academic supports. This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What do former foster youth currently enrolled in a research university identify as factors that supported or hindered their efforts to apply and enroll in a research university?
2. What factors do adult supporters identify as contributing to former foster youth's academic success?
3. What do adult supporters perceive as their role in foster youth student achievement?

#### **Rationale for Using a Sequential Multiple Methods Design**

I used a sequential multiple methods design to study the research questions. This method involved the use of results obtained from survey data to inform the direction and implementation of subsequent stages of the research study. First, I administered surveys to former foster youth enrolled at UCLA who use the services of UCLA's BRC as well as to foster youth students identified through the Registrar's Office. The survey explored the types of activities, including academics, in which the students were involved during K-12 and the support they received, if any. I was interested in understanding the types of behaviors, events, or supports that took place,

where those supports took place (at school, through the DCFS, through foster families), and how the supports were executed. Next, I interviewed a select sample of students who took part in the survey and were willing to participate in an interview, as well as the adults who were identified by these former foster youth as having been important supports to their academic success. The interviews further explored the lived experiences of foster youth and their perceptions about preparing to attend college. These perceptions included behaviors such as resilience, academic and extracurricular involvement, motivation, and whether the supports they received had an impact in their preparation and decision to apply and enroll at UCLA.

Since the BRC had approximately 70 former foster youth identified in their program and/or receiving their services regularly, using a qualitative only design was not determined to be as useful as a widely distributed survey. I wanted to obtain as much information from this group of students as possible on their experiences. Thus, utilizing a survey allowed me to identify trends and guide the types of questions I used to investigate further during interviews.

### **Site Selection**

In the state of California, Los Angeles County has the largest percentage of foster youth. It is reasonable then that the numbers of foster youth enrolled at a university would be high or proportionate to the population. UCLA is the most highly ranked public university in Los Angeles county, yet the number of former foster youth enrolled at UCLA is proportionately low. As challenging and competitive as the application process is for seniors in high school when applying to UCLA, the process can be much more difficult for youth leaving the foster care system.

UCLA is considered one of the most prestigious public universities internationally, standing in eighth place worldwide according to the London Higher Education World Reputation

Ranking (2013). UCLA has also been ranked in the top two among public universities in the United States, following closely behind UC Berkeley (U.S. News and World Report, 2014). With close to 100,000 freshman applications submitted by California high school residents and out of state applicants, UCLA is one of the most sought after colleges in the U.S. and, therefore, one of the most competitive (UCOP, 2014). The UCLA freshmen application to UCLA has a notation of whether the applicant is a foster youth, and application readers can take that factor into consideration while making their decision. Yet according to submitted applications, of the nearly 4,000 freshmen who are admitted each year, only two percent are foster youth.

Additionally, there is a gap in the research literature as it pertains to foster youth accessing top-tier universities. The common trend in this area of study is to either focus on foster youth at the community college or California State University levels, or to study their general success after leaving foster care and how that compares to the idea of quality of life gained. My study focused on a seldom-studied population of foster youth who have matriculated to a highly selective institution.

The UCLA BRC is one of the few programs within the UC system that has a resource center for former foster youth on campus. UCLA's BRC is housed in the campus Student Activities Center and aims to provide traditionally disadvantaged college students (former foster youth, AB540 students, veterans, and new parents) with academic and emotional support that will aid them in their intellectual and social development. Specifically, the Bruin Guardian Scholars programs for former foster youth, housed in UCLA's BRC, provides individualized mentoring that focuses on students' academics, personal development, and the foundation for career and educational goals.

## **Population**

The study concentrated on former foster youth at a public research university, as well as foster parents, teachers, and other supportive adults who have worked with this group. The sample was limited to current UCLA undergraduate students identified through the BRC and the Registrar's Office as current or former foster youth. Participants varied in levels of their undergraduate career, from freshman to senior, and had either a direct path to the university from high school or came in as a transfer student from a California Community College.

I invited all students from the BRC to participate in the survey in addition to those contacted through the Registrar's Office. Approximately 23% of those contacted completed the survey. The method of selecting participants to interview was based on their voluntary offer to give their contact information to the researcher after the survey was completed. The volunteers for the subsequent interviews were narrowed down to approximately 30 students who were willing to participate in a follow-up interview. The data gathered from the survey determined if the potential participant was a good match for the study. This interview examined whether the students identified a supportive adult, the students' ability to contact the supportive adults they identified, the frequency of interactions with the adults identified, the quality of how these students perceived those interactions in terms of their academic success and pursuit of higher education, and if the adults are still important in their lives today. The sample size for the interviews was 11 undergraduate students, both male and female, in different undergraduate standings, including some transfer students. This sample size ensured that a variety of experiences and perspectives were explored.

The sample for supportive adults and staff who participated in subsequent interviews came from seven former foster youth participants who identified one or more key persons

involved in their academic success. Nine adults were identified and interviewed based on the information from the student interviews on their roles in the lives of foster youth. These supportive adults are different from traditional mentors and mentor-based programs in that the relationships between adults and youth were naturally developed through the experiences and environments that were already inherently available and not through a structured and explicit creation of a mentor relationship. It is also important to note here that none of the adult supporters identified included a social worker or any staff from DCFS. Rather, the supportive adults included K-12 teachers, foster parents, athletic coaches, and other individuals who were acknowledged as being important to these foster youth' persistence to higher education.

### **Recruiting Participants**

Since my target population is small and because former foster students may not have wanted to self-identify, the best approach was to go through UCLA's BRC and Registrar's Office to provide a link to a web-based survey. I also conducted brief presentations to the Bruin Guardian Scholars to inform former foster youth students already involved in advocacy and outreach about the research study and the opportunity to participate.

Following approval of a service request, the Registrar's Office sent out the survey link via email to all undergraduate students identified as having been in foster care. Participants who completed the survey gave their consent to participate anonymously in the research study and were fully informed of the voluntary nature and purpose of the study. By involving the Registrar's office, I did not limit my recruitment efforts to those former foster youth were actively involved with UCLA's BRC and might have been more motivated or readily accessible. As a result, my sample may be more generalizable to the target population.

My next set of participants included a range of adults in various positions that have been identified by former foster youth as being an influential support in their pursuit of higher education. Once a foster youth participant identified a supportive adult during his/her survey and interview, he/she also provided that person's name and contact information. I used the contact information for both phone and email to reach out to the adult supporters. The adult supporters were notified that a former student, a foster youth from their caseload or who they knew through other various social circumstances, has been involved in a research study examining in part, the influence that positive adults have on college access and aspirations for foster youth. The adult supporters were given the opportunity to participate in a brief phone interview designed to use retrospective reflection in considering their role in supporting particular former foster youth's academic success and college aspirations. By soliciting adults who were in the lives of former foster youth that matriculated to UCLA, the study will provide a significant understanding of the shared lived experiences of highly successful former foster youth and the role of caring adults therein.

### **Data Collection Methods**

#### **Survey**

The survey pilot was first distributed via email with the intent of gathering feedback on the language used in the survey as well as how the questions were understood or interpreted. My pilot involved colleagues with whom I work closely in my professional life, including former foster youth undergraduate students who are employed with UCLA's Early Academic Outreach Program, and coworkers involved with high school outreach and tutoring programs on campus. These colleagues have extensive knowledge and experience working with at-risk youth and felt comfortable enough with this specific population to offer feedback.

The survey included demographic information such as age, gender, ethnicity, major, and year at UCLA. I also asked about the high school attended (environment, supports/services), if the student transferred to UCLA, the frequency of support and services received through DCFS or other entities, and to what factors students attributed their academic success. The survey was designed to measure educational aspirations in the context of their high school environments, where aspirations and access were measured through several domains (social and emotional structures, knowledge and behavior, educational stability, and self-sufficiency). The survey was constructed, in part, from the California Healthy Kids Survey modules measuring resilience, equity, and social-emotional health, and from previous studies focusing on foster youth in higher education.

The survey was created using the online survey software, Qualtrics, which created a link distributed through UCLA's Registrar's Office and BRC to all self-identified former foster youth via email and social media. A paper version of the survey was also made available to students, and the data were later entered into Qualtrics. All students who completed the survey received a gift card for their participation.

**Demographic data of survey sample.** A total of 247 surveys were emailed through the Registrar's Office to all UCLA undergraduate students who self-identified as current or former foster youth. Of the 247 surveys distributed, 11 responded to the online survey. Due to students' anonymity, I was not able to encourage participation as all student email addresses were kept with the Registrar's Office. However, the BRC posted flyers on their social networking site and allowed me to make presentations to the 70 students who were actively involved with their program, some of whom also received the email from the Registrar's Office (any duplicate surveys were removed from the data). In total, 57 students participated in the survey. Tables 1-7

present the basic demographic makeup of the responding survey participants and provide an understanding of who the students are.

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the survey respondents. The sample was composed primarily of female students (81%) between the ages of 18-21 years old (72%). The percentage of females involved in the study varied significantly from the overall foster youth population at UCLA, where approximately 44% are males and 56% are female. Next, the class standing among the participants was almost evenly distributed, where the majority of students reported they were juniors (40%). The number of transfer students (32%) who participated in the survey is also very similar to the overall number of former foster youth at UCLA who transferred from a community college (28%). In addition, only 26% of the survey sample had ever been adopted, meaning the majority of participants were in out-of-home care throughout their high school experience (74%). I was especially interested in the 74% of former foster youth at UCLA that did not have an adopted parent because I wanted to investigate what happens to these students who did not have a designated guardian, an adoptive parent, as an adult supporter. In addition, none of the student interview participants were adopted.

Table 1

*Demographic Characteristics of Former Foster Youth Survey Respondents*

Male	Female	Freshman	Sophomore	Junior	Senior	Transfer	Adopted
19%	81%	25%	12%	40%	23%	32%	26%

Table 2 presents the survey respondents' self-reported high school grade point average (GPA) as well as the number of high schools attended. Most students (72%) held a 3.5 GPA and higher during high school, reflecting the competitive screening process for freshman admits to UCLA. As transfer students reported their high school GPA, 78% of them reported having a 3.0 and below in high school. In addition, 54% of survey respondents reported that they only



attended one high school, which is very similar to the interview participants' backgrounds; this may also speak to having a stable educational environment, which will be discussed in the following chapter.

Table 2

*High School Grade Point Average and Number of High Schools Attended*

2.0- 2.4	2.5- 2.9	3.0- 3.4	3.5- 3.9	4.0+	1 H.S.	2. H.S.	3+ H.S.
7%	3%	18%	33%	39%	54%	30%	16%

Table 3 presents the survey respondents' reported ethnicities. According to the Registrar's Office, just over half (57%) of the foster youth population at UCLA overall is made up of students identifying as either Latino or African-American. More than half of the survey respondents, however, identified as either Latino or African-American (80%), including those who identify with more than one of those races. These numbers are relatively similar to the foster youth population in Los Angeles County.

Table 3

*Participants' Ethnicity*

Ethnicity	<i>N</i>	%
Latino/Hispanic	23	40%
African/African-American	14	25%
Asian/Pacific Islander	6	10%
Latino and White	6	10%
Caucasian/White	5	9%
African-American and White	3	5%
Native American	0	0%

Tables 4-6 describe the placement experiences of survey respondents. As shown in Table 4, most students (79%) reported living in one to three placements throughout their time in care.

This number was also seen among interview participants, where all 11 students lived in fewer than three placements.

Table 4

*Number of Foster Care Placements*

1-3	4-6	7-9	10+
79%	7%	10%	4%

In addition, Table 5 shows that almost half of the students either entered out-of-home placement as young children between the ages of 0-5 (42%) or as young teenagers between the ages of 11-16 (37%). Youth who are teenagers when they first enter foster care often face particular challenges around emotional, educational, and financial struggles, as they tend to not receive the support they need to transition into adulthood successfully.

The survey data also showed that almost half of the students (49%) left their out-of-home placements between the ages of 17-18, similar to the overall numbers of youth exiting foster care after they turn 18 and leave high school. These data speak to the literature presented in Chapter Two, which showed that young adults leaving care at age 18 are more likely to report being homeless and unemployed than others their age or children who attained permanence. They may also find it difficult to form supportive relationships and are more likely to be incarcerated or become teenage parents before they have the means to care for them (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014). Interestingly, though the statistics remain similar, the data in Table 5 come from students who did find success after they left care. The interview data in Chapter Four will examine what made the difference for these youth.

Table 5

*Ages in Out-of-Home Placement*

	0-5	6-10	11-16	17-18
Age First Entered Foster Care	42%	19%	37%	2%
Age Exited Foster Care	16%	18%	18%	49%

According to the Alliance for Children’s Rights, an organization providing free legal services and advocacy to foster youth in Los Angeles, it is typical that kin are often caregivers, including grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, and cousins. Forty-three percent of foster children in Los Angeles County live with a relative, close to the 35% of UCLA survey respondents presented in Table 6 (Alliance for Children’s Rights, 2014).

Table 6

*Types of Placements*

	<i>N</i>	%
Group Home	2	4%
Foster Home	15	26%
Kinship Care	20	35%
Non-Relative Home	1	2%
Other	1	2%
Two Placement Types	14	24%
Three Placement Types	3	5%
Four Placement Types	1	2%

**Interviews with Former Foster Youth**

At the end of the survey, I asked any participants willing to be involved in a follow-up interview to provide their contact information. Building on the survey the participants previously completed, interviews with students focused on their perceptions of what helped them move on

to postsecondary education, especially with respect to their support systems and what challenges they faced along the way.

The interviews were conducted in person at UCLA in the Student Activities Center. Each interview was audio recorded with an iPad and a backup device, and notes were taken simultaneously. The participants gave consent for audio recording, allowing the researcher to use the recordings for data analysis. Each interview was transcribed within 24 hours of the recording and then compared to notes taken during the same timeframe.

**Demographic data of student interview sample.** The online and paper Qualtrics survey asked respondents if they would be willing to participate in an in-person interview about their experiences in high school with respect to preparing for college. Out of 57 survey respondents, 31 indicated they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview. Seventeen students were selected carefully based on their survey responses and 11 students were available to be interviewed. These students each indicated that they were in the foster care system while they were in high school and had never been adopted, and most identified an individual adult supporter to contact. I also attempted to include students who had a wide range of experiences, including those who were involved in the community college system.

In first recruiting these interview participants through presentations and over email, they noted how glad they were to help further this research around foster youth. Their immediate willingness leads me to believe that the participants are in a place emotionally and mentally where they were comfortable enough with their past experiences to be very open and candid about their life stories. As scheduling conflicts with students arose, especially around their midterm exams, some students who had originally been chosen to participate in the interview had to opt out. Eventually, I was left with all female students. In order to obtain an adequate

sample size and gain wider representation of the sampled population, I contacted additional survey participants who were willing to be interviewed, some of whom did not want to provide the contact information for the adults who supported them during high school.

Each of the student interviews averaged 30 minutes in length and began with basic demographic questions meant to verify survey information as well as allow the participants to become comfortable in the interview setting. Each participant and the individuals named in their interviews have been given a pseudonym to provide anonymity. Table 7 presents the demographic makeup of the responding student interview sample followed by a brief profile of each student. Although demographic data alone does not answer the research questions, it does provide depth to the qualitative data collected.

Table 7

## Student Interview Participant Demographics

Participant (Pseudonym)	Gender	Age	Race/ Ethnicity	Years in out of home placement	Total # of placements	Number of high schools attended	Transfer Student	Weighted High School GPA
Brooke	Female	21	African- American	4	1	1	No	3.5-3.9
Mayra	Female	23	Latino	14	1	1	Yes	3.0-3.4
Justin	Male	18	African- American	7	1	1	No	4.0 +
Andrea	Female	21	Latino/ White	2	2	1	No	4.0 +
Rachel	Female	18	Latino	4	3	2	No	4.0 +
Anthony	Male	18	Latino	1	1	2	No	3.5-3.9
Amy	Female	20	African- American/ White	7	2	1	No	4.0 +
Jean	Female	18	Asian/ Pacific Islander	3	1	1	No	4.0 +
Danielle	Female	19	African- American/ White	11	3	1	No	4.0 +
Tracy	Female	22	Latino/ White	1	1	3	Yes	3.0-3.4
Annika	Female	20	White	9	3	1	No	3.5-3.9

Brooke lived with her grandmother on and off throughout her childhood, but did not move in with her permanently until she entered high school. Though Brooke did not give details about the difficult experiences she had with her biological mother, she pointed out that she never let those challenges affect her schoolwork. Brooke described herself as someone who has always been academically motivated but explained that if it were not for certain teachers and counselors at her high school, she would not have pushed herself to attend UCLA. Brooke also attributed her motivation to attend college to a strong desire to make her grandmother proud. Brooke is currently a senior with a double major in Anthropology and African-American studies, planning on attending graduate school in the fall.

Mayra has lived in out-of-home care for 14 years. She moved in with her cousins once her biological parents could no longer care for her and her younger brother. After high school, Mayra spent four years in community college where she began doing drugs and struggled academically. Though she always liked learning and being in school, Mayra believes her cousin who has cared for her most of her life, as well as a counselor at her community college, were her biggest support systems that helped get her back on track. Her advice to students in foster care was as follows: "Take advantage of resources and actually make the effort; I wish I did." Mayra is currently a senior majoring in Gender Studies, and is planning on attending graduate school.

Justin was born in Los Angeles where he lived until the age of 10 until his mother passed away. His father could not afford to take care of him and his sister, so he moved to Northern California to live with his grandmother until he left for college. During high school Justin was in the International Baccalaureate (IB) program, which he believes prepared him to begin thinking about college and his future. Justin also believes one of his friend's parents in high school was the first person that supported him academically. This adult supporter offered guidance and put a lot of effort into maintaining their relationship. His advice to students in foster care was, "People aren't [always] going to be there to motivate you; challenge yourself and find ways of motivating yourself." Justin is currently a freshman undeclared Social Sciences major but wants to study Sociology and Mathematics with a minor in Philosophy. His goal is to become a college professor.

Due to her mother's mental illness, Andrea was raised by a single father until her junior year of high school when he passed away from cancer. She then lived under the legal guardianship of her older half-brother until she left for college. Andrea believes during high school her teachers always held high expectations of her, which supported her path to UCLA.

She also used running track as an emotional outlet and was involved with her church, which she notes was a compass to keep her internally motivated. Her advice to students in foster care is, “It gets better, it’s not always going to be [this] way; for now, try to get to college because education is the best investment you can give to yourself.” Andrea is currently a senior as a Spanish and Community and Culture Major with a minor in Labor Studies. Her goal is to enter the field of occupational and public health.

Rachel is one of Andrea’s younger sisters. Unlike Andrea, Rachel was in out-of-home placement for a total of 4 years. She left her older half-brother’s home due to the unstable environment and jumped around to family friends for approximately 3 months. Finally, Rachel found a permanent home with their older sister Marissa O. until she left for college. Though she moved several times, Rachel was heavily involved in extracurricular activities all 4 years of high school. During high school, Rachel also found motivation from Andrea’s acceptance to UCLA; she believed if Andrea could keep going, she could too. Her advice to students in foster care was, “Find out about the resources available to you. It can offer encouragement to know you are not the only one in your situation, and there are support systems available.” Rachel is currently a freshman as an undeclared Life Sciences major, with a goal of entering the medical field with a focus in Pediatrics.

Anthony was in the foster care system for 1 year, entering at the age of 17 where he began to struggle with depression. During that time, he lived with his aunt who was his adult supporter that provided encouragement and motivation. Anthony attended a small high school where he noted his counselors, teachers, and peers were aware of his home situation and thus gave him more indirect support; he also believes his school held the expectation that he would achieve in spite of his circumstances. Anthony was one of the few students that openly



acknowledged a positive relationship with his social worker who helped him during the college application process with a number of scholarships. His advice to students in out-of-home placement is, “Envision what you want to see, throw yourself in the future.” Anthony is a freshman studying biology, with plans for entering the medical field after graduation.

Amy first entered out-of-home placement after her stepmother attempted to kill her in a house fire. She then moved in with her brother who abused her as well, and again to a foster home for 2 months. Finally, she moved under legal guardianship of her cousin for 7 years until she left for college. Though she acknowledged having a very supportive high school environment, Amy struggled with depression and low self-esteem. She believes her church and the relationship she developed with her Sunday school teacher played a big role in her life during high school. Her advice to students in foster care is, “Only focus on the things that get you further in life.” Amy is currently a junior majoring in Latin-American studies, with the goal of entering into NGO work or civil rights law.

Jean has been living with her grandparents on and off since eighth grade, going back and forth between them and her mother. At the beginning of her sophomore year in high school, Jean went to live permanently with her grandparents until she moved out for college. Jean described herself as somewhat of a perfectionist when it comes to academics: someone who has always been used to getting straight As and being heavily involved in her school. She believes these traits created a supportive academic environment as others came to expect that she would be successful in school. During her senior year, Jean graduated as valedictorian and received a full scholarship to attend UCLA. Her advice to students in foster care is, “Don’t let what you’ve been through hold you back or prevent you from doing what you want in life; work hard and keep

your eye on the goal.” Jean is currently a freshman preparing to study pre-human biology and eventually enroll in medical school.

Danielle lived in Virginia and Alabama where her father raised her for the first 12 years of her life. After Danielle’s uncle witnessed her father’s addiction habits, her father gave her up. Danielle then went to live with her aunt and uncle in California until she left for college. During high school, Danielle attended a very small school and lived in a college-going home environment; there was never a question about what she was going to do after high school. She was heavily involved in school activities and graduated as valedictorian. However, she still believes her high school was not academically challenging. She attributed her success to her aunt and uncle, who always held high expectations of her. Her advice to students in foster care was, “Appreciate the people who are there, not just the people you want to be there.” Danielle is currently a sophomore studying Chinese with a minor in Global Studies. Her plans involve joining the Air Force after graduation.

Tracy attended a traditional high school until she dropped out during her 10<sup>th</sup> grade year and began doing independent study. During this time, she was living in a negative home environment with her mother and was struggling with depression. At one point Tracy was homeless and doing drugs; she was eventually arrested and put into placement at a substance abuse treatment center. After aging out, Tracy left the treatment center and went to community college for the next 3 years until she transferred to UCLA. She believes while in community college, her ILP coordinator was an important emotional support for her. Her advice to students who are struggling is, “Believe that you deserve it, whatever ‘it’ is.” Tracy is currently a junior studying biochemistry. Her future goals are centered on cancer research.

Annika was involved in the foster care system for 2 years and then placed in legal guardianship for 7 years until she aged out. She attended one high school in the Midwest where she was preparing to receive a college athletic scholarship for track. After she broke her leg, Annika began preparing for college by focusing on successfully completing more rigorous coursework. She mentioned her track coach, a former boss, her aunt, and her friend's parents as being very supportive of her while she was in high school. She further noted that if it were not for this large support system, she does not know if she would have been able to persist and make it to UCLA. Her advice to students in foster care is, "Take advantage of the people who offer to help you; let them help." Annika is currently a junior studying Microbiology, Immunology, and Molecular Genetics with a double minor in African-American and Chicano Studies.

### **Interviews with Supportive Adults**

Lastly, interviews were conducted with the adults who former foster youth participants identified as having been important influences on their academic success. The interviews were designed to explore what the professionals who work with this population feel are the qualities, circumstances, or decisions that need to be in place to lead to successful academic outcomes and higher education as well as their role in supporting those outcomes. The same colleagues who are experienced in working with at-risk populations were also asked to pilot the interview protocol for the adult supporter population. The following constructs and variables were addressed in the interviews:

- External factors - Did these factors support or hinder academic success and pursuit of postsecondary education?
  - Foster family
  - Biological family

- Other supportive adult
- K-12 factors
  - Extracurricular activities
  - Academic supports (e.g., tutoring)
  - High school characteristics
  - Teacher
  - Counselor
- Intrinsic characteristics
  - Sense of hope
  - Self-efficacy
  - Personality factors
  - Motivation
  - Resiliency

**Demographic data of adult supporter interview sample.** As mentioned previously, eight student interview participants provided contact information for one or more adults who supported their educational goals and emotional health while they were in high school. Out of 10 adults contacted, I was able to recruit nine adults for the purpose of examining their perspectives through subsequent phone interviews. Table 8 identifies who the adult supporters, followed by their subsequent profiles. Out of the nine adult interviews, eight took place over the phone, with one interview via email to accommodate scheduling. Each phone interview averaged 15-20 minutes in length and was audio recorded with one device. The interviews began with basic demographic questions, which give a basic understanding of who the adults are and allowed the

participants to become comfortable with the interviewer. Each adult supporter has been given a pseudonym to maintain anonymity.

Table 8

*Adult Interview Participant Demographics*

Participant (Pseudonym)	Gender	Student	Relationship to Student	Occupation
Kyle R.	Male	Jean	Teacher	Retired Teacher
Yvette C.	Female	Danielle	Aunt	Mental Health Counselor
Troy T.	Male	Andrea	Teacher	Coach/Teacher
Marissa O.	Female	Rachel	Older Sister	USPS
Vanessa R.	Female	Mayra	Cousin/Foster Mom	N/A
Tanya V.	Female	Mayra	Counselor	Financial Aid Tech, Foster Youth Services
David P.	Male	Amy	Sunday School Teacher	Respiratory Care Practitioner
Jim K.	Male	Annika	Parent of Friend	Marketing Manager
Lisa K.	Female	Annika	Parent of Friend	Stay at home mom

Kyle R. was a full-time high school English teacher for 34 years who retired in 2012 to become a part-time writing consultant for a charter school in his area. He partially came out of retirement to teach an occasional literature course at a local community college as well as two Advanced Placement English courses, where he met Jean as a student. In reflecting on his involvement in the lives of his students, Kyle R. noted that he has become more aware of their home situations, making it a point to find out any information from other teachers, counselors, and administration that will further his effectiveness in the classroom. He stated, “I will continue

to teach so long as I feel I am effective, and I enjoy my work. I do not think that is about to change any time soon.”

Yvette C. is Danielle’s aunt; she raised Danielle along with her biological children since Danielle was 12 years old. Yvette C. received her doctorate in general psychology with an emphasis in adolescent and child counseling. She discussed working with foster youth as a profession, including the ILP where she worked on emancipation plans with transition-age foster youth. Yvette C. noted that her knowledge base is different from typical foster parents due to her training and access to resources, which later translated into having a better understanding of how to steer Danielle away from the challenges that many foster youth face.

Troy T. was raised in Montana in a strong teaching environment where his father, uncle, and older brother were all English teachers. He has been teaching for 18 years, 8 of which have been spent at the high school where he met Andrea as a student. Prior to his profession as a teacher in his current school, Troy T. worked with the border patrol, and before that spent 7 years teaching in Arizona. Troy T. first had a relationship with Rachel, who he was coaching in basketball. When Rachel mentioned that her older sister, Andrea, needed a teaching assistant position, Troy T. opened his classroom to her and their relationship developed soon after. Troy T. mentioned during his interview that, although he is not a father himself, he has a personality that allows students to trust and confide in him; he became that person for Andrea.

Marissa O. works evenings at the post office; she is a mother of one and a grandmother of two. She described her younger siblings in terms of “batches” due to the large difference in their ages. Marissa O. is from the first batch and her younger half-sister Rachel is from the third batch. After their father passed away, Marissa O. took all of her younger siblings into her home to provide a stable living environment. In describing her growing relationship with Rachel, Marissa

O. spoke of the various conversations they've had over the years, from religion and literature to dealing with emotional stress and schooling issues. She believes she has developed the strongest bond with Rachel after becoming her support system.

Mayra's mother and Vanessa R. are cousins, making Mayra and Vanessa R. second cousins. When Vanessa R.'s own mother passed away, she took in Mayra and her younger brother as infants. At the time she took over to raise Mayra on her own, Vanessa R. was working in computer graphics but quit her job to stay home with them. She recalled being involved with the court system for a long period, causing Mayra to rebel and veer off task. However, Vanessa R. described attaching herself emotionally to Mayra, pushing her to use her negative life circumstances as motivation.

Tanya V. is a financial aid technician at a California community college, working in their foster youth support program. Tanya V. met Mayra during her first year as a student and they maintained a relationship all 4 years that Mayra was there. Tanya V. worked with Mayra to provide financial aid services and track her academic progress, developing a closer relationship as she learned of Mayra's personal life challenges. Tanya V. also noted that she was a student at the same college where she currently works. Though she was not involved in the foster care system, she was on her own at age 18, was a first generation college student, and did not have anyone to guide her to college. When Tanya V. began as a community college student, she found one mentor who she believes went above and beyond for her. She stated:

If it wasn't for that person, I probably wouldn't be sitting here having this interview with you. And so, that kind of stayed in my head and it made me want to come back to a college setting where I could do the same for others.

After graduating from high school 12 years ago, David P. became a respiratory care practitioner for a high retailing medical center. David P. has a very strong Christian faith and

used to teach Sunday school at the church Amy attended. He knew Amy all 4 years of her high school career, and their relationship developed through their church environment. David P. says he saw a lot of himself in Amy, describing her as the daughter he never had. Though their bond was strong, David P. did not know about Amy's home life until her senior year. He recalled how this was a turning point in their relationship because he could relate to the trauma Amy experienced as a young person. Though David P. did not share his personal background in this regard, he did share that he was able to show Amy how to make the best of her life circumstances.

Jim and Lisa K. live in the Midwestern region of the United States. Jim K. has his Ph.D. in Material Engineering and is a marketing manager for a high-performance manufacturing company. His wife Lisa K. is a stay at home mom, and together they have three children; their middle child has been a friend to Annika since junior high. Jim and Lisa K. opened their home to Annika during her senior year in high school after learning she had nowhere to live, giving Annika her own room after she left her grandparents' care. According to Annika, Jim and Lisa K. have kept her room as she left it, making it available to her during summer breaks or any time she needs it.

## **Data Analysis Methods**

### **Survey**

I followed Creswell (2009) when analyzing my data for multiple methods research. Using a sequential multiple methods design, the results from the quantitative portion of the study were analyzed before moving forward with the interview data. The survey data were collected and analyzed using the web-based tool, Qualtrics. Utilizing Qualtrics Survey Software, descriptive statistics were run on my survey respondents to provide means and percentages that had the



potential to better support the qualitative findings. The questions rated students' level of involvement with supportive social systems, their social/emotional well-being, and their schooling environment with respect to educational equity, resilience, and academic preparation.

## **Interviews**

Creswell (2009) identified six steps for engaging in a systematic process of analyzing textual data:

1. Organize and prepare data for analysis, which includes transcription and organizing notes.
2. Read through all the data to obtain a general sense of what the participants are saying, their tone, depth, credibility, and use of information.
3. Begin coding by organizing material into segments of text before bringing meaning to the information. Place data into categories and label those categories.
4. Use the coding process to generate a description of the themes for analysis. Involves identifying major themes that will later become headings in the findings section. These themes should be supported by diverse quotations and specific evidence.
5. Discuss how the description and themes will be represented.
6. Make an interpretation or meaning of the data derived from a comparison of the findings with the information gleaned from the proposed theories. Do the findings confirm past information or diverge from it? It can also suggest new questions that need to be asked in future studies.

In following this system of qualitative analysis, all audio recorded interviews from students and adult supporters were transcribed verbatim. Next, I read through all the transcripts several times and color-coded emerging themes and those that supported my theoretical

frameworks. Within each theme, sub-themes also emerged, which added depth to the analysis. Narrative analysis was also used to put together the larger picture of students' experiences as understood by the adults who supported them.

An independent research partner also read through the transcripts and coded for themes, which were discussed at a later time; we found that we were in agreement with the emerging themes. The discussion included why certain themes were given in order to develop reliability and what quotes from the interviews best supported them. By comparing and crosschecking data with someone else, I increased the credibility of my findings and internal validity (Merriam, 2009). In addition, I have preserved the integrity of the responses from the interviews and only removed words such as *um* and *like* that had the potential to affect clarity.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

The foundation of my research is built around how foster youth cope with negative life experiences and how the adults in their lives expose them to a caring environment. I identified and interviewed former foster youth at UCLA because I believe their experiences, especially their choices in managing their circumstances, can highlight the various resources and supports in place that can guide students towards positive educational outcomes.

Although methods of examining college aspirations and adult support may seem similar across various disadvantaged populations, there are unique differences in the experiences among the foster care population. My study was designed to examine the challenges faced by foster youth in high school and what resources and methods of support were utilized. Ultimately, my research has an orientation around the theory of care as well as resistance and resilience among students. These theories were used to guide my data analysis, comparing the findings with concepts from the literature about these theories.

## **Credibility, Validity, and Ethical Issues**

### **Credibility**

In order to ensure the credibility of my study, I carefully monitored my biases when working with students and adults involved in the foster care system. I have worked with this population for nearly 8 years and have developed close professional relationships with various individuals in DCFS. With this experience came potentially prejudicial assumptions about the processes and practices that take place in the foster care system. I took care concerning my interactions with participants and how I analyzed the data. To protect against this bias I continuously checked my findings from the data, only allowing strong arguments and claims to be backed up by what the surveys and interviews showed. I also involved a colleague who acted as an independent research partner to code the data and engage in discussion of themes, data analysis, and descriptions of the findings, ensuring inter-rater reliability and accuracy (Creswell, 2009).

Although there were issues around bias in this study, there were several positive aspects involved in leveraging previous professional relationships. Some of the benefits of having worked previously and collaborated with DCFS and UCLA's BRC include an insight and expertise in working with their programs and organizations and with the foster youth population, as well as greater access to a small group of youth and adults that may be difficult to contact otherwise.

### **Validity**

The ability to generalize the findings depended on the similarity of the accessible population and the results of the recruitment process. Sampling, recruitment, and retention can threaten the internal validity when the research is not conducted with a comparative design

(Creswell, 2009; Knight, Roosa, & Umana-Taylor, 2009). Therefore, it is important to note that this study is limited to the accessible population at UCLA: that portion of the target population that can be identified and contacted, given reasonable effort. However, as the study had a narrow set of characteristics for the participants, generalizability is not feasible for individuals who do not meet the selection criteria. Limits in access to the target population were due to factors outside of my control, yet my sampling frame (i.e., former foster youth at UCLA) increased the opportunity to obtain a representative sample for my target population.

Another aspect of a multiple methods study design involves checking the validity of both the quantitative data and the accuracy of the qualitative findings (Creswell, 2009). Strategies used to check for accuracy of the findings included triangulating data sources and detailed descriptions of thematic content.

## **Ethics**

There are three basic ethical principles identified in working with at-risk populations in research: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (Knight et al., 2009). Under the principle of respect for persons, researchers should respect people's opinions and consider them capable of determining whether to participate in the study given the appropriate information about what participation entails without coercion. Beneficence refers to research with human participants that is conducted for the general good and that maximizes benefits while minimizing any foreseeable harms. Justice refers to fairness in allowing people to participate, limiting exposure to potential harm, and offering access to the end results of the research study, which are intended to benefit the whole of the population. To reflect these ethical principles I developed an informed consent form that acknowledged the participants' rights during data collection, engaged

participants in the dissemination of the findings, and protected participants' privacy (Creswell, 2009).

In addition, there was a danger that the student participants in my study would experience discomfort while reflecting on their past experiences. Though confidentiality was ensured during the survey and interview and participation in both was voluntary, I addressed the possible difficulties students may have had in the process so they were fully aware of what to expect. To further protect students from any harm that may have resulted from participation in the survey and/or interviews, I developed an informed consent form that fully explained the purpose of the study, the research methods, and the context of the questions they were asked. I also submitted the survey tool and interview protocols to the BRC for approval before the survey was administered and students participated in the interview. Furthermore, I made available a list of mental health agencies and resources that students can access if they would like ongoing support following participation in the study, specifically UCLA's counseling and psychological services (CAPS).

### **Access and Role Management**

My current employer is UCLA and I work in the Student Affairs Department, so I have access to the BRC, which is also under the same department. To gain access to the student population that uses the BRC's services, I set up preliminary meetings with the Director of the Center. During our initial meeting I introduced my project, outlined my participation with the BRC with a stress on confidentiality issues, discussed incentives for those who take the survey and those who continue on to the interview process, and discussed the intended use and sharing of outcomes. The discussion yielded support for the project moving forward and a mutual investment in its use.

Although in my current position with UCLA I have had previous collaborations with the BRC, involving the Director and his staff to promote various resources and programs for foster youth in high schools, I operated as a researcher only for this study. My work with UCLA is not affiliated with the BRC or the undergraduate students who access its services. Additionally, by limiting my involvement in the distribution of the surveys and by making confidentiality among the participants a top priority, I created a boundary between myself as an employee and my role as a researcher.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I discussed why using a sequential multiple methods design to identify the challenges and supports experienced by foster youth was important in order to shed light on their transition to higher education. The various methods also allowed me to examine how relatives, teachers, and other supportive adults contribute to foster youth' academic success. I detailed my data collection and data analysis methods, the reasoning behind my site selection and participant sample, and how I dealt with potential threats to credibility, validity, and ethical issues. Also outlined in this chapter were the profiles of both student and adult supporters, which serves as an introduction into who the participants are. The ideal goal of this study was to allow the results to be generalized or applied to the larger population (Knight et al., 2009). Using a sequential multiple methods design allowed me to give voice to various perspectives and to understand better the experiences of high-achieving foster youth and their supporters (Creswell, 2009).

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **FINDINGS**

The purpose of this sequential multiple methods study was to explore former foster youth' own accounts of their academic success during high school that led them to UCLA, as well as the perspectives of the adults who supported them in their educational journey. This chapter presents the findings from survey data collected from 57 former foster youth who are currently undergraduate students at UCLA and interview data from 11 of those foster youth and the supportive adults they identified. Chapter Two presented the theoretical frameworks that I used as a lens to study the academic achievement of foster youth, and the survey design and interview protocols reflect those theories. My research questions asked:

1. What do former foster youth currently enrolled in a research university identify as factors that supported or hindered their efforts to apply and enroll in a research university?
2. What do adult supporters identify as factors that contributed to former foster youth's academic success?
3. What do adult supporters perceive as their role in foster youth student achievement?

#### **Survey Findings**

Prior to detailing interview findings, I give relevant characteristics of the sampled survey population. I use the survey data to draw comparisons between the larger population of former foster youth at UCLA and those students who were interviewed in order to gain an understanding of how widespread various traits and experiences are among the population. Through analysis of the survey data, the sampled population of former foster youth believe they were well supported by their schools overall, held a notion of responsibility for achieving academically, and

participated in positive activities throughout high school. There is also evidence in the survey data that there were certain protective factors in place for academically successful foster youth at UCLA, including relying on a kin network and caring adults within the school system to create positive environments in which students could excel.

Table 9 examines survey participants' perception of the challenges they faced during high school, if any. The 10 factors focus on academic preparedness, various social support systems, and housing and financial concerns. Of the 10 factors measured, over half of the students reported that most (eight) of these factors were not at all a challenge to their success in high school; those factors include lack of support from ILP coordinators (79%), lack of support from social workers (70%), lack of housing (65%), lack of support from foster placements (65%), lack of support from teachers (63%), lack of support from counselors (54%), and a lack of academic preparedness (42%).

These percentages show that most students in foster care at UCLA did not believe that a lack of support from various individuals or environments was a challenge to them during high school. Table 9 shows that students felt their surroundings were positive and supportive. The remaining students also reported that a lack of social support, in general, was either not at all a challenge or only somewhat (39% each) and a lack of emotional support (42%) was only somewhat of a challenge. The only factor where most students reported they faced a challenge that had quite an impact on their success was around financial concerns (37%). The concern about monetary stability is also seen again in Table 11.



Table 9

*Factors That Were a Challenge to Success in High School*

Factor	Not At All	Somewhat	Quite a Bit
Lack of support from ILP Coordinator	79%	4%	18%
Lack of support from social worker	70%	10%	19%
Lack of housing	65%	26%	9%
Lack of support from foster placement	65%	16%	19%
Lack of support from teachers	63%	26%	10%
Lack of support from counselors	54%	33%	12%
Lack of academic preparedness	42%	39%	19%
Lack of social support	39%	39%	23%
Lack of emotional support	28%	42%	30%
Financial concerns	28%	35%	37%

The first two factors measured in Table 10 display the perception of equity in students' high school environments, as reported by the California Healthy Kids Survey module. Similar to data from Table 9, over half of the survey participants reported that they believe their high school environment was a positive one. The first factor reported shows that overall, former foster youth feel adults at their high school treated all students with respect (71%). Equally, 71% of students believe their high schools were in proper condition. However, with respect to receiving support with the college application process, roughly half of the students reported the environment was not as helpful. Fifty-five percent of students reported they did not receive help from their counselors when it came time to apply for college. More specifically, a designated college counselor did not support students while they navigated the college application process (67%), which means students either received assistance from others or worked independently.

Table 10

*High School Environment*

	Disagree	Agree
Adults from my high school(s) treated all students with respect	30%	71%
The high schools I attended were clean and in good condition	30%	71%
I received help from my counselors when applying to college	55%	46%
My college counselor(s) was key in helping me apply to college	67%	34%

Table 11 presents the various factors that students feel were a motivation to finish high school. The largest factor reported was a sense of obligation (75%). Though the survey data did not determine if the obligation was directed toward others or themselves, students reported that they felt a responsibility to achieve academic success in order to complete their high school education. The next largest factor reported was financial stability (68%). The value of a high school diploma and attaining higher education greatly affects potential salary as adults (NCES, 2012), highlighting the need for students to avoid financial ramifications in the future and provide security. The third factor reported was self-esteem (56%), emphasizing the notion that a large part of academic success and achievement in school is influenced by a student's confidence and belief in his/her abilities.

Table 11

Motivation to Finish High School

Factor	Not At All	Somewhat	Quite A Bit
Sense of obligation	7%	18%	75%
Financial stability	7%	25%	68%
Self-esteem	7%	37%	56%
Particular job/career	21%	26%	53%
Family	16%	37%	47%
High School Teacher	35%	30%	35%
Peer support	39%	32%	30%
College Preparation Program	49%	23%	28%
Mentor	40%	32%	28%
College Counselor	56%	26%	18%
High School Coach	67%	23%	11%
Social Worker	82%	9%	9%
Therapist	74%	23%	4%

Table 12 displays the various ways in which former foster youth at UCLA respond to stress. The survey data showed that survey respondents spent time with friends (48%), participated in activities (47%), studied (40%), and exercised (38%) when they faced stressful situations while in high school. Those students who indicated “other” in the survey specified that reading/writing and participating in the church were their main outlets. These data illustrate that overall, the survey respondents found positive outlets and methods for coping with stressful situations outside of their high school environments that did not include seeking assistance from adults. The healthy behaviors in which students participated are important in understanding the students’ responses to their negative life circumstances outside of seeking help from professionals.

Table 12

*Action Taken When Faced with Stressful Situations*

Action	N	%
Spent time with friends	28	48%
Participated in extracurricular activities	27	47%
Studied	23	40%
Exercised	22	38%
Spent time with family	18	31%
Other (specify)	17	29%
Sought assistance from teachers	11	19%
Sought assistance from therapist	8	14%
Sought assistance from academic advisors	3	5%
Sought assistance from a school counselor	2	3%
Sought assistance from social worker	1	2%

Table 13 provides the data for a starting point in understanding the supportive relationships in the lives of foster youth at UCLA. Fifty-one students (89%) reported that they were connected to an adult supporter while in high school. The large number of survey respondents who experienced adult support is rare compared to the larger national and state populations of foster youth who exit care without receiving adequate support (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010). Though a small set of data, the information in this table begins to show the important influence adult supporters have in the lives of foster youth who are and have been academically successful.

Table 13

*Connected to an Adult Supporter*

	N	%
Yes	51	89%
No	6	11%

Table 14 presents the details of the relationship between the sampled survey respondents who answered *yes* to having been connected to an adult supporter during high school (51) and

those they identified as being adult supporters. Respondents were given the option to choose all the supporters that applied to their relationships during high school. The data in Table 14 show that most students identified a relative as being a supportive adult in their lives (62%), suggesting that the extended family continues to be a strong source of support despite living in out-of-home care. As the traditional nuclear family dynamic did not exist, certain networks still played an important role in creating a supportive environment for students in care. Following closely behind, the survey data also showed that half of the respondents identified a teacher who acted as a supportive adult (50%). Though teachers overall may vary in providing successful educational pathways for their students, most survey respondents believe they shared a connection with an adult in their schooling environment.

Table 14

*Adult Supporter Relationships*

		Types of Adult Supporters Identified									Total
		Foster parent	Relative	Teacher	Counselor	College Counselor	Social Worker	Therapist	Older adult who went through foster care	Other (specify)	Total
How often are you in contact with the adult supporter(s)?	Never	0	0	1	2	0	1	1	0	0	2
	Less than Once a Month	1	4	5	1	0	1	1	0	1	5
	Once a Month	1	4	4	4	3	0	1	0	2	9
	2-3 Times a Month	1	9	6	7	5	3	1	1	1	12
	Once a Week	0	2	2	1	0	0	0	0	1	3
	2-3 Times a Week	0	3	4	1	0	0	1	0	3	5
	Daily	3	10	4	2	1	0	0	0	4	15
	Total	6	32	26	18	9	5	5	1	12	51
	How important is this adult supporter(s) in your life today?	Very Important	5	30	21	13	7	1	3	0	12
Neither Important nor Unimportant		1	1	4	4	2	3	1	1	1	6
Unimportant		0	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	2
Total		6	32	26	18	9	5	5	1	13	51

In examining the amount of contact students have with their adult supporters, the data in Table 14 show that youth communicate with their supporters regularly. Twenty-eight students reported monthly communication, whereas 23 reported weekly communication, showing high participation of support figures with the responding sample of foster youth. The table further shows the current amount of contact with the identified adult supporters varied considerably among the smaller details, though the highest amount (15 students) reported they are in contact with their adult supporters daily. Ten of these 15 students report their daily contact is with the relative they identified as being a supporter, pointing again to the importance and impact of family support for students in out-of-home care. Finally, most students (44 students) largely felt these adults were still very important in their lives today, emphasizing the long-term impact that adult supporter relationships have had on these students.

Among the survey participants, involvement and support from individuals continued to be reported as substantial. Table 15 shows that survey respondents identified peers (49%), mentors (40%), teachers (37%), and family (37%) as being regularly involved in their high school experiences, further conveying the positive support systems in place in the lives of former foster youth at UCLA.

Table 15

*Levels of Support and Involvement*

	Never	Rare	Occasional	Frequent
Supportive Peers/Friends	9%	12%	32%	49%
Supportive Mentor	26%	11%	25%	40%
Supportive Family	16%	19%	30%	37%
Supportive Teachers	9%	7%	49%	37%
Supportive College Counselor	39%	19%	21%	23%
Independent Living Services (ILP)	77%	9%	4%	12%
Positive Therapist/Therapy	53%	28%	12%	9%
Supportive Social Worker	72%	16%	9%	5%

Data from the surveys highlight factors that contributed to the resilience and persistence of foster youth, the way they engaged with their environments, and the various ways these students experienced high school. According to the survey data, former foster youth at UCLA had positive feelings about their high school environment, experienced caring relationships with adults, and were also held to high expectations by their peers and teachers. In further exploring the creation and influence of positive environments during high school brought up through the survey data, there was a main through line connecting the social-emotional and academic environments at play in the lives of former foster youth at UCLA and their resulting academic achievement and persistence. The remainder of this chapter will focus on the development of these environments and the role of caring adults through analysis of interview data.

### **Interview Findings**

The results presented in this section are based on interview data from a small sample of former foster youth attending UCLA and the supportive adults they identified. The information provides a concentrated understanding of internal and external factors related to the educational experiences of former foster youth who achieved academic success in high school and community college, and the role that adults played in their lives. The primary objective of this section is to examine the processes by which youth raised in out-of-home placement achieve academic success despite very challenging experiences before and during high school.

In an overview of the major findings, four significant themes emerged. First, the interview data reveal that adults perceive intrinsic characteristics as being the reason for student's academic success and enrollment at UCLA. As the students themselves noted, they have always had a love of learning and most (nine) were competitively successful in their high school careers. Second, the interview data reveal that students' motivation for academic success



comes from seemingly negative spaces. Resistance was an important aspect of students' lives that advanced their academic achievement and college aspirations as they found ways to resist their environments, prove people wrong, and avoid ending up like their parents. Third, the interview data reveal that foster youth use external resources to support their growth and academic success. As students described their high school experiences, they spoke to the importance of being involved with the church, sports, external programs, and literature. The range of activities helped to boost self-esteem among foster youth and connect them with supportive adults outside of their school and family environments. Lastly, the interview data reveal that adult supporters fill the need for guidance, emotional support, and stability. As foster youth demonstrated a lack of self-esteem, a need for a personal outlet, or academic assistance, the adults in their lives provided that for them while also maintaining a level of high academic expectations.

The findings are organized around the larger categories defined by the research questions and the specific themes that emerged by comparing student and adult supporter interview data. The categories and themes highlight the attributes of the students interviewed and the initial challenges students faced in their personal environments such as emotional and psychological challenges. To begin, I will briefly highlight the role of the adult supporter and then move into the impact of positive social-emotional and academic environments these adults created for youth living in out-of-home care.

### **Adult Supporters**

One of the ways that extremely successful foster youth can persist through the hindrances that may occur in their lives—such as abusive home environments, homelessness, moving to different high schools, and losing a biological parent—is through the support of a caring adult.

As such, developing a relationship with a caring adult was an effective method for this group of students in supporting their efforts to attend a top-tier research university. Of the students in out-of-home care, most (nine) who were already college-bound and exhibited healthy academic behaviors displayed an increased benefit of having emotional protection and academic encouragement from different adults in their lives. David P. recalled his role in Amy's life:

When I think about Amy, I think about a basketball player...If you can think about the most talented, like Kobe Bryant, who does not necessarily need a coach. Amy is kind of like that very talented basketball player who just needed a little bit of guidance to be a champion. Who just need like, a Phil Jackson for the Lakers to get that organization over the hump to become a champion. That's all I was to Amy. She already had the talent, already had the skill. I was just blessed to be in the position to kind of coach her.

The adults in this study presented a humbled perspective of their contribution to the students' academic success and persistence to UCLA. Though many (seven) did not see their role as unique, their willingness to act in times of need was life-changing for this group of former foster youth. Again, as David P.'s metaphor suggests, the students in this study were privileged among the majority of foster youth with respect to their educational outcomes; what these adults provided was that extra push and guidance, and a sense of stability and care needed to succeed.

Examples of these acts of care and stable environments include Marissa O., Rachel's older sister, who took all of her younger siblings into her home to provide a stable living environment when their father passed away. Marissa O. not only bought a new house so everyone had their own space and could feel like it was home, but also spoke of her desire to assist Rachel with emotional stress and schooling issues. Similarly providing a great deal of support through offering a life-changing alteration, Vanessa R. took her younger cousin Mayra in and left her job to stay home and raise her. Lastly, Jim and Lisa K., the parents of Annika's long time high school friend, opened their home to Annika during her senior year in high school when she had nowhere else to go. Jim and Lisa K. offered Annika her own room, allowed her to paint

it and personalize it however she liked, and have kept the room as she left it, making it available to her during summer breaks or any time she needs it.

I asked each student at the end of their interview if he/she believed he/she would be at UCLA without the support of the adult he/she identified during high school. Each student confirmed that his/her route to post-secondary education would look considerably different if he/she did not feel supported by loved ones or have an adult who cared for him/her.

### **Intrinsic Characteristics of Educationally Resilient Foster Youth**

Intrinsic characteristics related to educational resilience and academic success include intelligence, being goal-oriented and disciplined, and having high academic aspirations. All 11 student participants exhibited these traits both in the stories they tell of their experiences in high school and through the recollections of the adults who have supported them. Though some students (five) revealed that they did not expect to come to UCLA, in each interview the student expressed how he/she enjoyed learning while in high school, wanted to take more rigorous AP and IB courses solely for the challenge, and became self-sufficient when it came to preparing and applying for college. Students also spoke of using their personal time outside of school to study independently for their SATs and AP classes, and using old dictionaries or SAT prep books from their school or local libraries to learn the necessary vocabulary and coursework. Similarly, participants revealed how they went through the college application process on their own. Though they had supportive adults to provide emotional support and guidance, some (five) had no particular individual in their school or personal lives to help them through the process. Table 10 provided similar data, showing that most students (67%) did not receive help with the college application process while they were in high school. Consequently, these students took it upon

themselves to research colleges and scholarships and prepare for exams and financial aid independently.

Attributable to these students' love of learning and capacity to achieve academically on their own, they also exhibited a core belief that college was an inevitable outcome. Jean spoke of what influenced her academic success and desire to go to college:

I was just used to getting straight As...I feel like that's just how I am. There was no specific time in my life that changed everything around and made me do well in school. From a young age, I was always like the teacher's pet, always at the top of the class, and it just stuck with me.

Jean's understanding that she would pursue post-secondary education regardless of her personal challenges from living in out-of-home placement led those around her, including her grandparents and teachers, to not offer as much direct academic encouragement because they already knew she was on a college-going track.

As adult supporters discussed the foster youth in their lives and the factors in place that led these students to a university, they believed their role as an external factor was minimal compared to the characteristics the students had within themselves. Resilience, fortitude, and tenacity were all common traits identified by adults, most (seven) noting that the students' academic success had very little to do with them. All nine adult supporters described the students as having a love of learning, always being academically inclined, and having the drive to push through their personal circumstances and succeed in school, which is why they made it to UCLA. Yvette C. spoke of her similar perception of Danielle:

[Danielle] has been very tenacious. She has wanted to succeed. She has not let anything from her past, even when she gets a little down, she will not let it stand in her way of her goals. If she gets unfocused, she'll call, we'll get her back on track and she just takes off and she does what needs to be done...Danielle has been goal-oriented since I met her at 2. She wanted it, she was gonna make sure right, wrong, or indifferent that that's what she was gonna get.

The academic performance and determination to succeed described by students and their supporters point to the fact that this sample of former foster youth are exhibiting a combination of being educationally resilient and inherently gifted students who achieve naturally in school. Though most of these students may have an exceptional skill set that allowed them to be at the top of their class during high school, it is important to understand their achievement, despite the social and institutional influences that exist for foster youth. The adults' description of these students is also telling of the seemingly humble nature of the adult supporter sample. Though it will be explored further in this chapter, it is important to note that most adults (seven) immediately expressed a modest outlook regarding their role in the students' achievement. This first finding leads to a further examination of what other factors were in place that allowed these students to realize their goal of higher education. After exiting care, many gifted students will succumb to prevailing factors and end up incarcerated, homeless, working low-end jobs, and struggling for stability, failing to demonstrate the resilience that this sample does.

### **Students' Resistance to their Environments**

The theory of resistance was not a domain covered by the survey and interviews conducted for this research. However, students repeatedly spoke of resistance as a way to achieve academically and overcome life challenges. Though every student spoke to the importance of continuing to college as a means to a better life, interview data indicate that persistence and the determination to be different from biological parents and negative home environments enabled these youth to enact resilient behavior and achieve academically. These factors led to students' conscious decision to change their environments for the better. The stories of the students in this study revealed how the negative experiences of abuse and homelessness, loss of biological parents, and tumultuous home environments, prior to and

throughout their time in out-of-home placement, affected their academic success. Consequently, 10 of the 11 students discussed using their past experiences in foster care as motivation to be at the top of their class and aspire to attend college.

Throughout the interviews, students continuously returned to the idea of escaping the negative aspects of their past in order to gain control over their lives, making a decision to not be like their parents or to prove to others that they would succeed. Students felt they had little control over the circumstances that led to their placement in foster care or the aftermath of those events and, as a result, used school and the pursuit of college as a way to get out of whatever situations in which they were placed. Rachel stated, “If I have an education I can go somewhere. It was something I could control.” These students discussed their academic achievement as being rooted in their determination to do better than those in their communities, wanting more than what they were given, and feeling that school was the only way to change their situation.

In a similar regard, students wanted to feel they could change their future prospects and the future of the families they had yet to create. The foster youth interviewed remembered instances where they were unsure of what was going to happen to them, creating a desire to change their outcomes so their children would not worry about the things they worried about, such as where they would live, whether they would have food to eat, or if they would continue to live in an abusive home environment. Although each student envisioned different dreams and ideas of future success, they all spoke of creating an opportunity to live a life different from the one they experienced growing up. Their drive for being successful in high school was based on their commitment to breaking the cycle of hopelessness they and their families had endured.

Again, resistance as a means of academic achievement was also displayed through an explicit desire to prove others wrong or to not turn out the way their biological parents did. These

students were determined to be different from their abusive families in an effort to not repeat past mistakes. In some cases, the determination to be different was directed toward a particular parent. As parents were continuously absent and unaware of their children's educational endeavors—such as maintaining high GPAs, becoming valedictorian, or seeking to receive a college education—students expressed a sense of anger and spite, further fueling their motivation to accomplish their dreams. The determination to be different and change the course of their future is crucial to resilient behavior among foster youth, even for those who took an alternate route to UCLA. Mayra described how her motivation came while she was struggling in community college:

I really hit rock bottom, where my grades were really bad, I needed a job, I had no money, I wasn't getting financial aid, I got kicked out. It was just bad until I realized, like what am I doing with my life. I'm becoming my mom, I'm becoming my dad...the parents I didn't want to become. They're supposed to be the example and I was becoming that person and that was when I hit a rock bottom and I was just like, alright I gotta change, I gotta do something about this and so I did...I wouldn't wish [to be in foster care] but I'm grateful that I went through it because I don't think I'd be here if I didn't go through the foster care system. It changed the way I look at life.

The influence of Mayra's biological parents was strong enough that even though she was not at the top of her class in high school and unsuccessful during her first 2 years of community college, she was determined to counter the series of negative life circumstances she and her family had experienced. Mayra immediately began to raise her grades, became involved in a support program on campus for foster youth where she met Tanya V., and was finally on track to transfer to a university. Vanessa R. also encouraged Mayra to use resistance as a means of getting back on track academically, constantly talking to Mayra about becoming better than her parents and breaking the cycle of failing to progress academically beyond high school. Though Vanessa R. was able to describe how she helped Mayra, she still returned to the idea that her role

in Mayra's life was minimal, stating, "I don't know how much influence [I had]. I mean [her ability to succeed] was all there in her this whole time."

Vanessa R.'s reminders about Mayra's resilience and ability to improve her life are an indication of the powerful influence that supportive adults have in the lives of foster youth, even if the adults themselves could not identify it. Though students' ability to find internal motivation to overcome their negative environments is evidence of the nature and makeup of this sample, the adults also provided the push that helped students use their negative situations for good. Like the first finding that allowed for an understanding of the types of students involved in the study, this second finding adds depth to the internal factors that supported former foster youth's efforts to enroll in a research university and the role that supportive adults play in that process. Not only does this sample have an innate academic drive and love of education, they also made a deliberate decision with the help of supportive adults to achieve high grades in school and enroll at UCLA in order to have a chance at a better future.

### **Extracurricular Environments**

Students also spoke about the positive impact of external factors, such as adult supporters, spirituality, and involvement in programs and organizations that have influenced their academic success. In addition to students' resilience and positive decision-making abilities, former foster youth utilized various external resources to overcome personal challenges and succeed in school. Interview data indicate that organizations and extracurricular programs provided protective structures that made up for shortcomings in the personal lives of these students. Andrea attributed her success to both sports and church, not because they provided direct academic support, but because they became an outlet and a means to expel negative energy. When she would run, she explained, "It helped me physically to not be a violent mess."



Besides Andrea's involvement with track during high school, she developed a strong faith and spirituality, which eventually led to the development of friendships within her church. The importance that extracurricular activities played in Andrea's life went beyond her finding a safe space to vent. When her half-brother could not provide food for Andrea and her younger siblings, she was able to turn to her fellow church members who did not hesitate to buy groceries or gift cards so they could eat. The survey data support the assertion that extracurricular involvement provides positive outlets and methods for coping with stress. Survey participants (47%) reported the use of outside activities as a means to persist through the stressful times they faced during high school (see Table 12). The healthy behaviors in which students participate highlight students' positive responses to their negative life circumstances and their ability to seek resources that may have a positive impact on their overall well-being.

Ten of 11 students interviewed also saw school and the clubs and organizations it offered, as well as outside leadership and church-based programs, as positive distractions from their home lives. The participants were involved in multiple activities during high school and community college including sports, theater, music production, business leadership, foster youth programs, internships, daycare, journalism, choir, church, college prep programs, community service, and even literature and writing. Amy reported finding solace in the many activities in which she participated inside and outside of her school. When asked about what she remembers most about her high school experience, she recalled:

Theater was a big release for me. I remember the [scholarship foundation], which was another scholarship program I'm part of [at UCLA]...that was a big part of my life senior year. Music production, I was really involved in music...that was something that really gave me a source of happiness, something I felt passionate about that raised my self-image and helped me be a happier person...[Theater] helped me bring out more of myself, who I wanted to be. It also challenged me to be more out there, extroverted. Another thing, in high school I felt like that contributed to my self-image [because] I wasn't getting a lot of what I thought was love at home.

As these students struggled to receive adequate support both financially and emotionally while maintaining balance in their academic lives, they sought activities that filled a need for a safe place to express themselves, which ultimately enhanced their high school experiences. Students revealed that the activities in which they in during high school were not just hobbies or even to look good on college applications; rather, they needed them to build their self-esteem, connect to a support system, and pursue something that was productive and took them away from the sadness and grief they experienced at home. These activities created an environment that was opposite of the negative environments they had been facing most of their lives. Even an adult supporter noted that her connection with her cousin formed from their mutual love of reading.

When asked what kept Mayra pushing through her circumstances, Vanessa R. stated:

Books. Mayra's always had her nose in a book since she learned to read. I mean there would be days during the summer when her and I would just go through book after book after book together. And that was kind of our bonding thing. Her and I both loved books. But the more she read and the more she delved into these other worlds beyond hers, it made her want more. It made her, and I think that's what kind of motivated her to get up and out...So I think books were her thing that kind of you know, pushed her and helped her push herself.

The environment that extracurricular activities created for students in out-of-home placement had a positive effect on their motivation for academic achievement. Though utilizing literature has been documented as an extracurricular activity, this finding points back to the notion of resistance as a means of motivation. Students allowed themselves to be engulfed in outside activities such as reading in order to look beyond their own "worlds" and strive for something greater: in this case, the goal of higher educational attainment.

### **Social Emotional Environments**

Supportive relationships did not only develop through organized programs, however. All students found they could rely on a particular individual in their lives to enhance their

environments and further their educational resilience. In every phase of foster youth' persistence to UCLA, from the realization and acknowledgement of their internal characteristics to their involvement in extracurricular activities, adult supporters have been present and actively reinforcing students' efforts to achieve. In spite of their self-sufficiency, subsequent decisions around resistance, and involvement in clubs, sports, and church, students were able to accept help from others and realized finding support from an individual adult was the most significant step in their ability to achieve academically and alter their personal environments. The interviews with students in this study revealed the role that supportive adults played in the persistence of foster youth while in high school. All 11 student participants identified specific individuals they believe went out of their way to provide guidance, emotional support, and stability.

Students identified relatives, teachers, parents of friends, and adults from outside organizations as people who expected them to do well academically and ultimately provided a safe place to tackle their individual emotional traumas and help them prepare further for college. Though the students interviewed exhibited educational resilience, were it not for these adult supports, every student believed his/her path to college, at least in part, would have been different.

Interview data in this study revealed how the negative and sometimes traumatic experiences of being placed in out of home care took its toll on students' confidence and self-esteem. Amy expressed those same feelings as she describes how important her Sunday school teacher became:

[David P.] was someone that I felt close to as a father figure or who felt close to a father figure. He helped me get closure, make sense of things that were going on at home and dealing with that and school and taking care of my little cousin. The ways that I experienced a love that I haven't experienced before, that helped me get through. And the principle of having peace in the midst of storms really helped me as well academically. If I didn't have peace, I wouldn't be able to focus on assignments.

Amy was one of the few students interviewed who gave more insight into the actual trauma and abuse she faced growing up that led to her poor self-esteem. Though Amy is a smart student and participated in a large number of activities in which she could spend her free time, without David P.'s support and care that gave her a sense of peace, Amy realized her academics would have inevitably suffered. The strength of this finding is supported by the survey data. When students were asked to rate their motivation to finish high school, the third highest factor reported was self-esteem (56%), highlighting the notion that academic success and achievement in school is influenced by a student's confidence and belief in his/her abilities (see Table 11).

For six of the 11 students, the importance of having a supportive adult balanced their feelings of insecurity and low self-esteem. The students believed that because they had someone to believe in them and make proud, it lessened their feelings of doubt, raised their confidence, and motivated them to do well in school. As foster youth reported feelings of loneliness and being lost during high school, a present adult who cared for them provided motivation to pursue their academic goals by making this supporter proud. Brooke brought up this same feeling of making her grandmother proud. When asked if she felt there was a relationship between her academic performance in high school and her home life, Brooke stated:

I'm just so consumed with making [my grandmother] happy and trying to be her little star and stuff. So, she really motivated me...everything I do I think of her. I think of just making her proud. So, she like helped me in that aspect, not so much as like actually being there every step of the way, helping me navigate through college or whatever the case may be, I kinda had to do all that stuff on my own, like financial wise and stuff like that. But she's definitely there, like if I ever just needed spiritual support or emotional support she's definitely there.

Brooke's sentiment points back to the fact that these students are self-sufficient and able to achieve academically on their own; what these adults provided was motivation to excel and a stable and emotionally supportive environment.

Through their consistent presence and guidance, the adults offered these youth a sense that someone cared and would always be there as they needed them. Tanya V., who works with the foster care population, spoke of the importance of providing stability. She explained that foster youth need someone else to be consistent with them, just by the nature of their circumstances of being removed from their biological parents. Tanya V. stated, “In the beginning [foster youth] are testing you. They are testing to see if you are going to fail them, if you are going to disappear.” Knowing she was a big support for many foster youth at the community college level, Tanya V. made a conscious effort to not push students out, even as they made mistakes. Vanessa R. demonstrated the same efforts that Tanya V. made about consistency in the lives of foster youth. As Mayra began failing in school, experimenting with drugs, and losing control of her academic progress while in community college, Vanessa R. attached herself to Mayra even more, letting Mayra know that even though Mayra was rebelling she was going to support her through it. The importance of consistency was brought up several times by students as well. When asked about the characteristics that foster youth need in high school to fulfill their academic goals, Danielle turned to the role of adults and spoke of her insecurities and fear of abandonment:

I don't mind moving but I need people to be consistent. Whether I live in California, Alabama, Mississippi, when I call I need you to answer the phone. A large part of it, especially after my first move, I need for you to keep me. I need for you to not get tired of me so I'm going to do really well, I promise. And you're not gonna get rid of me. Even now logically my mind knows [my aunt and uncle are] not gonna get rid of me. The illogical part of me is like, I still need to do well because I need [my aunt and uncle] to be proud of me.

Regardless of how adult supporters involved themselves with students in out-of-home placement, it is apparent that meaningful and consistent involvement was important for developing educational resilience among these students. Though Danielle worried about the people in her

life leaving her, she used that as a reason to maintain a high GPA, become valedictorian of her school, and pursue a career in the Air Force, following the path of her Uncle.

All nine adults interviewed had different relationships with the students they supported, yet each acknowledged the anger, grief, and trauma these students endured. The adult supporters went on to describe what they did with the students to counteract those challenges. As Rachel described during her interview, her confidence was lacking during high school. Marissa O. actively engaged in helping Rachel learn to love herself and gain back a sense of self-esteem. Marissa O. recalled:

I feel that what I helped [Rachel] with the most was to come to terms with her situation and her circumstances and try to get her to love herself and try to look at the good and learn herself and try to give her tips to help her be a stronger, more sincere person.

Marissa O. continued to express the importance of building a personal relationship with her younger sister Rachel and the challenges that came along with it. She remembered how once she took her siblings in to live with her and her husband, it took some time to show them she could take care of them, allowing them to be teenagers. For so long, Marissa O.'s younger siblings had to find ways to feed themselves, have shelter, and care for each other; once they found a permanent place with Marissa O., she was able to show them "someone is looking out for them or caring for them." It was then Marissa O. saw the issues with anger, bitterness, and low self-esteem began to disappear.

### **Academic Eenvironments**

Lastly, most students (six) spoke of having a positive high school experience, where there was a strong college-going culture and teachers and counselors believed in their students, which aided in their academic achievement and college aspirations. As Brooke noted, "I honestly feel like my teachers and counselors, they had higher expectations for me than I did of myself." The

expectations set forth by school personnel created an environment for Brooke and other students like her to strive for excellence in their education. Survey data also indicated that, overall, students in foster care at UCLA did not experience a lack of support from teachers or counselors and did not feel that their schooling environment was a challenge to their success during high school (see Table 9). For the remaining five students interviewed, their schooling experiences left them feeling like they were not included in a college-going culture, leaving them to find alternate means of support. Although the students' experiences differed, this section highlights the need that students felt related to having a supportive academic environment including high academic expectations from adults. The significant finding here was that academic environments are also critical in supporting educational resilience, even among high achieving foster youth.

Like other students in this study, Anthony described himself as being self-motivated and academically inclined and felt that his peers, teachers, and counselors had no question that his future involved a college education. He noted this type of indirect support, where others naturally expected him to aspire to college after high school, created a supportive academic environment where he felt comfortable thriving. Though students like Anthony and even Jean mentioned they did not need the explicit academic encouragement of others for motivation to get As and take rigorous coursework, most students (nine) revealed the important role this environment played for them. Justin recalls during his first 2 years of high school, he had nobody there to pressure him to perform academically, partly due to his experience as a first generation college-bound student. He attributed his involvement in the IB program and ability to maintain a high GPA to his love of learning and need to be around people who stimulated him intellectually. However, Justin noted that his first 2 years were lost because “no one kept me really motivated to perform...that lack of guidance there and the lack of someone telling me to prioritize my

academic performance, that was like the thing that I lost academically.” The absence of academic support created a difficult environment for Justin, as he felt unprepared for college. It was not until Justin’s senior year in high school that his friend’s parent took an interest in him. Justin’s identified adult supporter began including him on college visits and helping him with the college application process. Justin remembers how she went out of her way to build a positive relationship with him, which sparked his desire to research colleges and universities and prepare for life after high school. Similarly, Rachel felt that once her father passed away she lost the encouragement and support she needed in high school as well. When she had to move to another high school during her junior year, which was more academically challenging, Rachel remembers the difficulty she experienced in rebuilding her community and support system. Rachel felt like she did not belong at the school and was behind in her coursework; in order to remedy her academic environment, Rachel spent most of her time learning and studying independently. Marissa O. also began providing the type of encouragement Rachel needed, which Rachel explains, was a huge weight off her shoulders. It was then, with the support of her older sister, that Rachel began to thrive. For students who felt like they did not receive care or support while in high school, it was difficult for them to care about their success as well. The students’ understanding of the importance that support from a caring adult had on their academic environment intensifies the part these adults played in the students’ lives.

Yvette C. was another adult supporter who recognized the importance of having a strong academic environment, especially for students living in out-of-home care. Yvette C. pointed out that her niece Danielle, who she calls her daughter, grew up in a stable two-parent household, had positive role models all around her who were well educated and affluent, and was told at a young age that college was the only option for her. Yvette C. made sure that even before high



school Danielle was thinking about a career path and researching universities so she knew the eligibility requirements and could go into high school with the knowledge she needed to succeed. When asked what influenced her academic success, Danielle remembered, “Just the solid expectation. Like you’re going to do this and you’re going to do well. And if you’re not going to do well we’re disappointed because we know you can do well.”

A positive academic environment encouraged high achievement among the students interviewed, though not all described school or family environment as being the catalyst. Tracy’s motivation for performing well in school came from a need to change the way she felt about herself. Tracy expressed, “It makes me feel good to get A’s. I guess it’s like esteemable acts...when I do this I feel good about myself. And that’s one of my main ways for knowing how to feel good about myself.” The small, manageable academic behaviors over which Tracy had control changed her academic environment and thus changed the way she looked at herself and her life trajectory. As Tracy struggled with drugs and homelessness after dropping out of high school, the one consistent factor in her life, she remembers, were her books. Tracy’s academic focus and need to repair her self-esteem kept her from staying in a damaging environment and helped her pursue more positive goals and aspire to college. Tracy did, however, identify her ILP coordinator as someone who was important during this process because she knew this person cared and would be there if she needed help. Even though Tracy’s contact with her ILP coordinator was infrequent, the feeling that somewhere was an adult who cared, pushed Tracy through community college, into a stable and sober living arrangement, and helped her transfer successfully to UCLA.

### Mini Case Study

Though not all adults revealed a significant alteration to their lives, like Vanessa R. quitting her job to stay home and care for Mayra, or Marissa O. finding a new home so she and her siblings had a comfortable place to live, some still believed their role in these students' academic success was minimal. Most adults (seven) minimized the positive impact they had with similar phrases as Kyle R., who expressed, "I am not sure if my approach to Jean was unique or not." Jim K. and his wife Lisa K. held that same sentiment when they recalled their experience with Annika and accepting her into their home:

We were there; we were supportive. But I don't think what we did was something that was that exceptional...[Annika] needed somebody there and it was a place to stay and I don't know. She's a good kid so it was rather easy...there are other people that I think would do the same thing for somebody that's a hard worker like that.

Furthering the idea that these students made it to college because of their hard work and inherent intellect, the adult supporters exhibited a sense of selflessness and humility as they described the various ways they provided support for these foster youth. As some adult supporters did what they believe anyone in their position would do, their presence, whether intentionally tailored to the unique experiences of being in foster care or not, became life-changing for these students. What follows is a description of one such example. Troy T.'s recollection of Andrea highlights her journey from being placed in out-of-home care, her struggles in high school, and how she made it out successfully. Though Andrea's story offers a tragic and genuine glimpse into the challenges foster youth can suddenly face and their strength in persevering, what becomes prominent is Troy T.'s instinctive support as he immediately began to create more positive social-emotional and academic environments for Andrea.

Troy T. has been teaching for 18 years. He was raised in a strong teaching environment where his father, uncle, and older brother were all English teachers. In describing his classroom, Troy T. explained:

Within the first week, I make it a point to know as much as I can about every student's home environment or where they're living... With foster children, I bring it out. We talk about it in front of class. I have assignments beginning of the year; make sure they own it... Foster care, English language learners, special ed. kids. I have a huge heart for that. I have a background that gives me a bleeding heart towards kids that are at a disadvantage... I go out of my way to make sure they're included in class.

Troy T.'s efforts toward his students who experience challenges are magnified through his relationship with Andrea. Eight of Troy T.'s teaching years has been at the high school where he met Andrea during her junior year. It was through Andrea's younger sister Rachel that these two came to meet. Troy T. was Rachel's basketball coach at the time who informed him that Andrea needed a classroom to be a Teacher's Assistant for the year. Eventually, he was with Andrea every morning for an hour and their strong bond formed quickly. A year after she began working with Troy T., Andrea's life took a negative turn.

As Troy T. recalled, Andrea's father passed away the exact time she was taking advantage of becoming the school's valedictorian, applying for scholarships and filling out college applications. During this time, he tried to talk to Andrea about compartmentalizing her feelings, but knew they were empty words. As he saw the window of opportunity closing for Andrea's college career, he decided to take action. Troy T. found scholarships for Andrea and attempted to distract her from her personal grief by filling them out together, but to no avail. He described Andrea as being a robot still going through her classes and acing all of her final exams. As time grew closer to her father's death, Amanda was still completing all of her assignments and getting straight A's but was doing nothing extra for scholarships or college applications. At this point, Troy T. took it upon himself to write a "pretty intense" two-page personal statement as

if he were in Andrea's shoes. He recalls that this was something he'd never done before, but he felt Andrea had too much going on in her personal life, and a great potential could go to waste. Troy T. believes that after Andrea read the essay she began to see herself through his eyes, with all the positive qualities such as resilience and strength that she held.

Before Andrea's father passed away, Troy T. got to know her family well and describes how he became her younger sister's "godfather," invited Andrea into his home where she and his wife became friends, and their relationship developed into one that was more familial than professional. With their newfound closeness, Troy T. described the day he saw Andrea's true resilience. The day of her scholarship interview, Troy T. took off work and drove Andrea to see her father in the hospital. Andrea spent half an hour in the room alone with her father before she came out to leave for the interview. Troy T. described her as being a disaster. As she left for the interview, he remembered, "I felt like I was just sending a lamb into the slaughter." Though Andrea did not believe her interview went well, she ended up winning that scholarship and began to find motivation to keep pushing through high school and apply for more. Troy T. stated, "For a kid to leave her father dying and go interview is something that I aspire to be...she has a resiliency that not many adults have." The relationship between Troy T. and Andrea evolved even more after she began winning scholarships and started to trust Troy T. more and more.

[Andrea] and I, that's what we did. I buckled down, I found assignments to give my classes and we buckled down and turned in application after application...I think during that whole time I was also a sense of humor for her. I have a good sense of humor. She learned to laugh at some of these things, and she's not big on laughing. She still isn't. I'm very, very cynical, and sarcastic. I like to think I gave her the opportunity to laugh, even going through her father's death and on her way out to UCLA...I think I'm just kind of the privileged one because she let me in. You don't get to force your way into that. She had so much going on, and every morning she showed up. I'd say, "All right," and she'd vent and then I'd say, "All right, now we got work." There was a lot of personal time between her and I. A lot. There was a good 2 or 3-month window where she realized her potential. She did. I don't think she's ever verbalized it to me, but I know she had to be going, "Wow, I'm pretty great."

Troy T.'s support throughout Andrea's last 2 years of high school filled her need for emotional support, academic guidance, and stability. He provided a consistent space for Andrea to confide in him during her father's passing, went above his normal duties as a teacher to ensure she was well prepared for financing her college education, and at the end of his interview, still felt that Andrea "oversells" the impact he had on her life. As Andrea mentioned, Troy T.'s support was one of the few stable elements she had in her life. His recollection of Andrea's experiences in high school speaks to not only Andrea's intelligence, personal strength, and resilience, but also his selflessness as a caring adult and his ability provide a supportive environment for Andrea to succeed and finally begin to see her potential. Troy T.'s acknowledgement and support of Andrea's internal characteristics and her future endeavors at UCLA lends itself to exploring the impact supportive adults have on foster youth in the midst of challenging circumstances.

### **Summary**

The need to establish a positive relationship with an adult during high school is important in promoting positive outcomes for youth in out-of-home placement. Though the students' inherent intellect and academic success in high school was the foundation to their acceptance to UCLA, the choice to use their past experiences as motivation to move forward and accept the help of adults in their lives led them to become educationally resilient students. Although all 11 students interviewed had challenging experiences in out-of-home care, their journeys to UCLA were very different. However, the environmental themes that run through their unique experiences are all indicative of the larger protective factors in place that were created by the adults who supported them during high school and beyond.

Results from the data also reflect findings from the literature on resilient youth; students who succeed and attain positive academic outcomes despite the hardships they faced have typically been in contact with a number of social-emotional and academic protective factors that have influenced their educational resilience. Adult supporters provided the means for students to gain a positive self-image, understand and move through their painful experiences, and provide important academic resources in order to plan for college. The following chapter will provide further analysis of the findings and their potential implications for the relationships between students and caring adults to serve foster youth in high school more effectively.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **DISCUSSION**

Achieving academically in high school can be a complicated experience for foster youth due to the heavy influence of the environment in which the student is placed. More specifically, supportive adults in a student's life can affect academic aspirations and subsequent decisions and behaviors around academic success. Evidence found in the previous chapter shows that the support of an adult could have a significant impact on the educational resilience of foster youth while in high school. The data I gathered imply that with the appropriate academic and emotional supports, foster youth can move beyond their challenging life circumstances and pursue higher education.

The main goals of this research were to identify critical factors that support and hinder foster youth' persistence to a research university and to understand the role of adult supporters in their lives. This chapter reviews findings from the survey and interview components of the study. I discuss the recommendations and implications that come with my research findings, which are organized around my theoretical frameworks. Here, I present the conclusions that I have drawn from my research followed by the limitations of the study. The chapter closes with a personal reflection.

#### **Discussion of the Findings**

The findings from this study show an important connection between resilience and care. Research studies focusing on resilience reveal that it is essential for youth who are considered at-risk, especially those with involvement in the foster care system, to have a relationship with an adult supporter to compensate for the space left by their biological parents (Hines et al., 2005; Masten, Best, & Garnezy, 1990). By this definition, students in this study are considered

resilient not only because of their persistence to a research university, but also because they regularly attribute their success in high school to developing caring relationships with relative foster parents, teachers, and adults from various social environments. Each of the students in this study reported having strong relationships with adult supporters and recognized those supporters for playing a critical role in providing emotional protection and stability while in high school. Though protective factors can develop from various influences, as seen in the findings chapter of this study, emotionally responsive care from supportive adults was very important to students' academic persistence. Interestingly, as students spoke of the ways in which adults provided these supports, the adults themselves expressed their role as minimal, attributing academic success to students' intrinsic characteristics, mostly around resilience. Even though most (seven) adults did not believe they did anything exceptional for these students, they were able to offer "normal" everyday experiences that were free of the typical sadness, instability, and loneliness the students expressed feeling. It makes sense then that the adults could not see the importance of their care; what may be common actions to the adults in this study, things that anyone would do for another person in need, were transformative to the students who had come from a place of grief and anger due to the trauma of being in out-of-home care. For David P. and Yvette C., the remaining two adults who knew their care was unique, there was an understanding of the impact of childhood trauma, especially as it pertains to foster youth. Their individual care for the youth in their lives was intended to go *above and beyond* to alleviate and prevent the suffering that came with the students' personal life challenges.

Erik Laursen and Scott Birmingham's (2003) study of how at-risk youth perceive the care of adults led them to find that when challenging experiences outweigh a student's protective environment, even academically successful students need the support of a caring adult. The



researchers further discovered several characteristics of caring adults that are important in the relationships of adult supporters and students in need. Some of these characteristics include: trust, attention, empathy, availability, and affirmation. According to the perceptions of the students and some adults in this study, adult supporters and their relationships exhibited most of these characteristics. According to Laursen and Birmingham, trust is important for students, as they need to feel that adults are going to follow through with their promises. Troy T. was one adult who stated he built trust with Andrea through his display of academic support and his willingness to participate in her college preparatory activities. His actions of developing personal statements and preparing her for scholarships gave Andrea a sense of care, emotional stability and support during a time she needed it most. Troy T.'s assistance with Andrea's college preparation also demonstrated affirmation. As he wrote about Andrea's resilience and attributes for a scholarship essay, he contributed to her realization of her strengths. Adults also displayed attention and empathy by showing concern for students' well-being and exhibiting a sense of understanding. Marissa O. offered one example of this characteristic. Her constant attention to Rachel involved helping her learn how to love and believe in herself even as their father was no longer with them. Her encouragement and support brought Rachel comfort in knowing that she was not going through these hardships alone. Adult supporters also made time for students and displayed consistency in their relationships. They made themselves available to listen to students' problems and provide social and academic guidance. These acts alone can cause at-risk youth to feel important and worthy of others' time. If students feel a sense of worth, the actions of adults could lead to increased self-esteem and motivation to persist through their circumstances and achieve academically. The idea of having a relationship with a caring adult highlights the need to understand who the supporters are. These characteristics, though briefly

examined in Laursen and Birmingham's study, stress the behaviors and characteristics that adult supporters exhibit for students who need support to remain resilient.

As the literature further explains, resilience is not permanently rooted in foster youth; life circumstances and the environments to which students are exposed greatly affect resilient behavior. The environmental aspects of resilience, where strong social-emotional support systems are in place, help students gain what they need from others in order to learn how to persist (Hass & Graydon, 2008; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). If students, especially foster youth, cannot independently maintain educational resilience long enough to achieve their academic goals, it is possible that the effort and care put forth by adult supporters are required to sustain resilience. Characteristics that seem to develop from students' individual strengths may, in fact, be influenced by the relationships between the students and their environments. Joan Tronto (1993) defined caring as follows:

On the most general level, we suggest that caring be viewed as a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our "world" so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining, web. (p. 103)

By examining the concept of care in terms of the basic needs it fills to sustain and support the environments in which we live, we can begin to understand how caring relationships develop over time and the influence they have on those in need. Individuals engage in these productive activities in a response to others' needs for basic functioning, such as food, shelter, and protection from harm. The next level of care comes in response to others' development and maintenance of their social and emotional capabilities. Similar to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory, people must first have their physiological needs met in order to then move on to more

complex needs such as self-esteem, love, and sense of belonging, which are manifested in their relationships with others (Engster, 2005; Onyehalu, 1983; Tronto, 1993).

As seen in this study, when physiological and social needs are not met, even the most intelligent, motivated, and resilient student can suffer emotional pain that may act as a barrier to educational resilience and persistence. The students in this study similarly expressed their need for physical stability as they moved between various placements and experienced lack of food for themselves and their younger siblings. They also described their need for academic and social support; without the natural guidance and love of a parent, these students expressed having low self-esteem and bouts of depression. The barriers students faced in high school included the absence of emotional and academic support, lack of financial resources, and overcoming feelings of loneliness, low self-esteem, grief, and anger. With the stress experienced by being in out-of-home placement, students expressed the need for social and emotional support to enhance their self-esteem, increase perceptions of control, and strengthen their sense of security (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000).

Another trait of resilience is a student's ability to reach out and accept the help of adults and outside support systems. Researchers have demonstrated that involvement in outside activities is more beneficial for students with compound disadvantages than for those with low-risk factors (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). At-risk students, especially those in out-of-home placement, tend to experience their environments with little positive sense of well-being. The impact can be dramatic when these students are exposed to support and others' belief in their abilities and self-worth. Opportunities to participate in programs, activities, and relationships with caring adults create environments in which students can develop positive self-esteem, problem-solving skills, and healthy decision-making habits. The results of this participation can

lead students to flourish in spite of and sometimes because of their life circumstances (Hass & Graydon, 2008). The students in this study were able to build leadership skills, attain spiritual guidance, and find outlets for their negative feelings of low confidence and anger through their involvement in sports, literature, church, and various clubs and organizations on their high school campus. These external factors, in addition to the support of adults, were critical to their internal characteristics of resilience and strength.

An interesting finding in this study was that all 11 students reported feeling confident about their intellectual abilities and their love of learning, but still expressed the significant emotional challenges they faced were barriers to persistence in high school. Despite the challenges experienced before and during their time in out-of-home placement, the students in this study all displayed the ability to persist. As students struggled with the death of a parent, drug abuse, physical and emotional abuse, and homelessness, they had confidence in knowing their future would be positive because of their continuing education. This resilience was evident in the students' stories of needing to get out of their negative life circumstances and gain control, their motivation to resist the people that played a negative role in their life and did not support their academic achievement, and their desire for a better future. The protection students received from their feelings of resistance and their display of resilience again point to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory as individuals begin to fill a need for achievement. As seen in Chapter Four, Tracy was one student who noted that getting As in her coursework was the only way she knew how to feel good about herself. Though resistance for most students was a means for academic success, and resilience the catalyst, motivation to achieve inevitably generates self-esteem and emotional satisfaction (Onyehalu, 1983).

The adults in this study also attributed foster youth' academic success to the students' natural intellect, resilience, and determination to achieve their goals. These traits, coupled with access to caring adults, are crucial factors in the students' educational resilience. Factors related to educational resilience allowed students to gain control of their environments and have the opportunity to make choices about their future endeavors. Individual attributes alone, however, may not have allowed students to move out of their negative experiences. The role of adult supports in this study suggest that their willingness to assist youth and be a part of their lives provided students with a transformative academic and social-emotional environment, furthering their ability to persist through high school and gain acceptance to a top-tier university.

### **Recommendations**

This study sought to understand the effects of protective factors in the lives of educationally resilient foster youth so that meaningful support services can be developed for the majority of foster youth who do not persist to a 4-year university. Recently, efforts directed toward the educational outcomes of former foster youth have steadily increased. As cited in Chapter Two, attention to foster youth' academic success has resulted in new budget allocations to school districts and the Foster Youth Services division of DCFS to restructure their ILP and include a mentor-based learning experience. The development of new interventions that address individual empowerment, the availability of educational and financial resources, and emotional protection from caring adults are all areas of which foster youth agencies, educators, and policymakers need to be aware.

As the literature indicates, individual protective factors can change with the development of emotional and social environments, which can vary with diverse cultural backgrounds. Students' families, schooling environments, and communities can impact their ability to develop

and maintain educational resilience (Hines et al., 2005). With this understanding of resilience relative to a student's life circumstances, policymakers and practitioners need to be more aware of adopting a holistic approach to servicing the needs of foster youth. The findings from this study can prove valuable in this effort since the students provided insight about the challenges that former foster youth face in general as well as the factors for success they experienced during high school. I believe the physical and social-emotional needs of foster youth are not currently being met in ways that would encourage greater academic achievement or an early development of resilient behaviors. Though limited state and federal funding is available to provide for all the needs found in this study, the following recommendations are based on the students' experiences and perspectives identified from the interview data.

**Recommendation 1: Ensure that students living in out-of-home care are connected to a caring adult supporter.** While there may not be a special set of training that should be required to become an adult supporter, the findings suggest that being a typical caring adult can spark educational resilience and motivation for students at-risk of not succeeding academically. The importance of caring adults was seen in 2003, when AB 408 (Steinberg, Chapter 813, Statutes of 2003) became law in California, requiring social workers to ensure that no child leaves foster care without a lifelong connection to a committed and caring adult. The law specifically states that courts are to determine whether social welfare agencies (such as DCFS) have sought to find out if youth age 10 years and older who live in group homes are connected to an important adult and then take actions to support those relationships (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010). The law also mandates that youth in foster care have access to extracurricular and social activities in an effort to sustain permanency. The law,

however, does not extend to youth who are placed in traditional foster homes or those placed in kinship care.

The transition from out-of-home care can be a difficult one for any teenager, but for youth living in any out-of-home placement setting, the challenges are made more complex. As a result of experiencing emotional and physical instability, students may become disconnected from healthy and supportive relationships with the important adults in their lives. In further promoting the goals of AB 408, the aim should be for all students entering high school who are considered at-risk youth, especially those who are in state care, to be connected to a caring adult if there is not one already present. The data from this study show that even educationally resilient students living in out-of-home care benefited from having a caring adult supporter who participated in their academic success and emotional protection. The DCFS, court systems, and education systems should be responsible for making sure that all students living in out-of-home care has a consistent adult in their lives who will provide emotional support and push students toward their academic goals by helping them make healthy decisions. If natural relationships of this kind have not occurred, mentor-based programs or involvement in extracurricular activities should be encouraged. It is evident in this study that the range of relationships between adults and students lends itself to engage a broad scope of potential supporters. There was no single unique characteristic defining the adults in this study, but they were united in the role they filled for students in out-of-home care who were experiencing various levels of challenges. Despite the innate traits found in individual students, positive relationships with an adult can stimulate students' beliefs in themselves and the desire to change their academic outcomes. Schools, foster youth agencies, and programs that support at-risk youth, should identify all resources they have in order to maximize the opportunities for these caring relationships to develop. For students who

may not have a positive adult relationship in their lives, being connected to a caring adult may create an opportunity for them to receive encouragement, stability, and emotional protection, and may result in a stronger educationally resilient student.

**Recommendation 2: Comprehensive wrap-around services.** As Maslow's theory indicates, even the most basic of needs should be met to improve academic behavior and emotional stability among students. The California Department of Social Services (CDSS) defines wraparound services as the development and preparation of youth and their families with respect to strength-based improvements of family and child well being. This individualized practice is intended to help families identify and strategize on how to best meet their needs in order to allow children to experience a safe, stable, and permanent family environment (California Dept. of Social Services). Deliberate policy and practice focusing on social support and the needs of families involved in state care should be implemented in the form of comprehensive wraparound services for students who are living with relatives and may not be receiving the same level and types of support as youth who are placed in foster homes (Benard, 2004). Counselors, social workers, educators, foster parents and relative caregivers, and any other adult responsible for the upbringing and education of these youth, should also be supported to look holistically at the needs of students who are facing distressing challenges in their personal and home lives. Similar in this study is students' use of external resources to fill the need for emotional support, as well as physical and financial assistance. Students took part in organizations that promoted educational achievement and provided social development. Through these organizations and activities, students were also connected to adult supporters and like-minded peers, creating an educationally and emotionally supportive environment. These extracurricular activities can complement efforts to promote academic achievement by offering



valuable information for students and caregivers who may not have easy or reliable access to college preparatory information. By including resources from relevant agencies and organizations, students and the adults responsible for their well being can have access to information on transitional housing, health care, college requirements and support programs, academic advising and tutoring, as well as counseling services.

The fact that these students actively sought out different activities in which to participate highlights the need for integrated wraparound services. We cannot fix what by nature is an unstable and traumatic experience of being placed in out-of-home care by using isolated treatment programs and short-term plans for students. It is important to assess each need of the student in order to ensure he/she has the best opportunity to move beyond his/her challenging environments and focus on what he/she can control: academic performance. The students in the study experienced multiple protective environments that may be connected to educational resilience. As such, educators and social support programs should not treat resilience as a personal trait, but rather as an opportunity for healthy behaviors to be taught through a variety of resources. If resilience is a decision, it can be shown as an option to the thousands of youth moving through the system.

**Recommendation 3: Schools specifically should ensure extensive support services.**

The findings in this study show that a positive academic environment is important for students' persistence through high school and aspirations for higher education. A college education may not be a goal for all students, but every student should have the same opportunity to pursue one if he/she so desires. Nevertheless, given the educational outcomes for the majority of foster youth in the nation, there is a definite need for academic interventions in place so students have greater possibilities for their future. Becoming academically prepared for college acceptance and even

staying on track to graduate high school requires active academic guidance and ongoing support to ensure persistence and retention. School administration should be aware of current policies and practices of post-secondary institutions to help make college a reality for the majority of foster youth who do not make it beyond high school. Schools can then determine the expectation for higher education by establishing a college-going culture through extensive support services and by making a commitment to increase retention and graduation rates for their most at-risk populations. These services should emphasize the importance of maintaining a high GPA in high school and allowing the support needed, if any, for a more rigorous course load. Schools should also provide dedicated academic advising with an emphasis on college and career paths, psychosocial counseling services, and social development opportunities. Where possible, academic advising sessions should include the development of monthly and annual activities, noting academic requirements of various institutions and career paths, and consistent follow-up meetings to monitor academic progress and personal development. Engaging students in a mutual educational plan and supporting the transition from high school to college is important for student performance (Casey Family Programs, 2010). As students seek ways to use resistance and resilience as a means to accomplish their goals, there resources should be available to guide their decision-making processes in ways that will enhance their schooling experiences.

**Recommendation 4: Improve emancipation policies and procedures for kinship care.** As seen with the survey respondents, where the highest type of placement reported was with a relative (35%), approximately 82% of the student interview participants were placed in kinship care and not in a traditional foster family. Youth in kinship care remain in state custody but are placed with relatives or other family networks (Hegar & Rosenthal, 2009). Though not a design of the study, the majority of these students did not experience the challenges traditional

foster youth face in living with strangers and being repeatedly moved between different homes. They did, however, explain that because of their placement type the services and resources available to them became limited. Similar to the research on kinship care in Chapter Two, students did not have access to financial and medical support, and though some students still reported having a social worker, only two reported that the social workers were helpful during their time in high school. In turn, students reported being unaware of additional money that may be available to them, as well as medical and housing resources.

Included in the pool of kinship caregivers are grandparents and older siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, and close family friends. Efforts to increase support for students in kinship care should also include the outreach to relative caregivers who may need additional information on college-going resources and various financial or emotional resources that may lead to better care for these youth.

**Recommendation 5: Support foster parent, relative caregiver, and teacher involvement.** The findings of this study also showed students' explicit perception of high expectations from adult supporters, other teachers in their high schools, and their overall social and academic environments. Although these particular students experienced high levels of expectations in and outside of their home and schools, many youth in foster care and those living in out of home placements in general are not presented with the same encouragement and belief in their academic abilities. As discussed in Chapter Two, caregiver support and family involvement, in the form of high academic expectations and continuous encouragement, have been linked to positive academic outcomes even despite the perceived ability of a student (Conklin & Dailey, 1981; C. Kirk et al., 2011b). Also, students' academic aspirations are shaped by the involvement and expectations of adults in their lives, which impact self-perception and

educational attainment (Boxer et al., 2009; Bowles & Gintis, 2002; Davis-Kean, 2005; C. Kirk et al., 2011a, 2011b; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). This information should be shared with school faculty, caregivers, and pre-service teachers to convey the importance of holding high expectations for all students and not just those who seem to be college-bound. In addition, schools and service agencies should ensure that teachers, social workers, and caregivers are actively involved in the development and support of students' academic goals and not letting youth figure out their future alone. Especially important for relative caregivers, extra precaution should be taken during trainings and individual meetings to lessen any possible feelings of stigma associated with their youth being labeled or included in foster care services; these implications around academic expectations are broad enough for any student considered at-risk to benefit.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Although the findings that emerged from the data in this study may have useful implications for agencies and programs, educators, foster parents, and any other adult in the lives of foster youth, this study also has several limitations to be considered. First, it was difficult to recruit students from the survey sample, especially those who were willing to offer contact information for their identified supportive adults. Due to the initial response rate of survey participants who replied to the widely distributed email from the Registrar's Office, most of my recruitment efforts took place with the BRC during face-to-face presentations of this study. As such, there could be a biasing effect with the students who filled out the survey on the spot during their time with the BRC. The challenges of recruitment, however, did not obstruct the insight offered through the students and adults who did participate in the study. The student population studied is also heavily focused on youth who lived in kinship care. Nine out of 11

students were placed with a relative; consequently, their experiences may differ dramatically from the general foster youth population. However, the descriptions of students' experiences and the role of identified adult supporters should give readers the chance to apply the findings as they see fit to similar situations and related experiences of at-risk youth.

Another limitation was the restricted time students and adults had available to discuss the already sensitive topic of living in out-of-home care. Due to the design of the study and the time constraints of participants, students and adults were only able to share surface-level information. The initial reluctance of both survey and student interview respondents points to the need for a longer recruitment period and broader site selection. While the response rate for student participation was low, a high number of females was represented in the sample. Unfortunately, I cannot explain the reason for the gender imbalance in the study and my ability to identify and recruit students was ultimately up to students' willingness to participate.

Lastly, I began this work with an existing understanding of the challenges that foster youth face, which could influence me to misinterpret data to fit into my assumptions. In an attempt to mitigate my biases in the analysis process, I employed an outside researcher to do a secondary coding of interview data.

### **Future Research**

Despite the limitations of this study, a great deal can be learned from the individual experiences of the students in this study, as well as the findings that surfaced from the collective data. However, this is the first of several studies that can be conducted with this population in order to understand how to achieve the best positive educational outcomes for foster youth and at-risk students. As this study identified the protective factors in place that allowed highly successful foster youth to aspire to postsecondary education, the next step would be to consider

more fully the vulnerability factors in place that affect most students in care. Exposure to such trauma without the proper support systems in place could confirm the importance of caring adult relationships found in this study. Also, given the short time frame in which the study was done and the various schedules of participants, there is a need for longitudinal studies and comparison groups to gain a deeper understanding of the life experiences and choices made by students and adult supporters alike.

Not discussed in this study were the ethnic and racial implications described in the literature review. The majority of the survey respondents in this study were either Latino or African-American (80%), including those who identify with more than one of those races. The students interviewed reflected those numbers, with 10 out of 11 students identifying as non-White. As African-American and Latino youth are disproportionately represented in the foster care system, they have fewer opportunities for permanent placements, a higher chance of becoming vulnerable to inner city gangs and drugs based on their placement options, and fewer educational services provided (Armstrong et al., 2005; K. Bass, 2012). Individual protective factors may also shift with the changes in students' social environments or the cultural context in which they exist. Research then should move beyond studying anomalies through isolation of the risk and protective factors among highly successful foster youth. Future research can be expanded to understand how social structures, including race and ethnicity, influence a students' relationship to their environment and consequently impact their academic behavior and decision-making. In a broader sense, structuralism and theories about race and racial constructs can be used as a lens to examine elements of foster care and educational achievement in terms of their connection to higher, over-arching structures. Using these frameworks, efforts to understand

social phenomena can be viewed in terms of factors external to the student and their impact on educational resilience.

It would also be interesting to carry out a study that gives more focus on the adult supporters in the lives of at-risk students, especially foster youth. Key areas of focus could include the examination of adults' care and support in the context of particular external circumstances and opportunities, personal attributes such as altruism that may point to a predisposition to act selflessly on behalf of others, and their backgrounds and upbringing that may suggest their behaviors and feelings towards caring for others were learned (Oliner & Oliner, 1988).

Admittedly, many policies have been implemented to alleviate some of the challenges foster youth face, such as the extension of services beyond age 18 and priority enrollment at various educational institutions. These strategies are especially helpful for students who are college-bound and already have a plan for their future, and perhaps do not consider the underlying issues that may cause the majority of foster youth who leave care to not achieve academically and persist through high school and onto post-secondary education. The recommendations and implications for future research outlined previously advocate for a change in strategy and call for proper understanding of the issues foster youth and at-risk students face.

### **Personal Reflection**

My dissertation research stems from my personal and professional experiences with childhood trauma and environmental hardships at the school, community, and family levels. As such, I began my journey to receiving a doctoral degree in the hopes of impacting educational institutions and the policies around serving at-risk youth. My passion for social justice and educational equity led to the initial idea of conducting research on at-risk youth that would

specifically involve the academic underachievement of foster youth. I envisioned interviewing students involved in various foster youth agencies and programs, as well as the social workers and coordinators at DCFS to examine the factors that led to such daunting outcomes for foster youth on a local and national level. Finally, I arrived at my current research design involving successful students and their support systems during high school that led them to UCLA. With the help of my chair, I realized there was beneficial and significant information about highly successful foster youth who face the same challenges and horrific experiences as foster youth who do not succeed academically. In reviewing the literature around factors that lend themselves to persistence and resilience for at-risk youth, excessive focus was found on what is going wrong rather than looking at the success stories and examining ways to make these the norm. I hope that a focus on highly successful students who have experienced serious challenges in their lives will encourage other students to persist and allow schools and programs to adopt new ways of supporting their most vulnerable populations. As such, this study changed completely the way I think about resiliency. After engaging students and adults in discussions around persistence in the face of major life obstacles, I realized that resiliency is not strictly an innate characteristic and that it can in fact be instilled and encouraged among students who are struggling with various challenges.

What was most interesting in this study was speaking to adult supporters after I had the opportunity to sit down with each student that had identified them. I was moved by adults' humble accounts of the care they showed these students who expressed the impact this relationship had on the painful experiences they faced during high school. Even through brief phone interviews, I felt lucky to learn who these supporters were. I could see how their personalities and encouraging expectations that these students would create bright futures for



themselves motivated students to persist through their hardships. This study has given me better insight into and admiration for students that have transitioned out of foster care and out-of-home placements and pursued their dreams, as well as a greater respect for the adults who went beyond the scope of their responsibilities to support them on their journey.

My goal is to work with social service agencies, educators, and campus leadership to develop evaluation strategies that will help us ensure more at-risk youth and youth in care have the opportunity to pursue their dreams as well. Until at-risk students, especially those living in out-of-home placements, are given the care they deserve, and until social welfare agencies and educational institutions recognize its importance, our youth may continue to suffer from grief, depression, low self-esteem, and anger. Even students who show characteristics of tenacity and fortitude and are motivated to achieve great academic success and aspire to fulfilling careers, may still experience the need for someone to offer support in the midst of the traumatic experiences they have faced.

## APPENDIX A

### Former Foster Youth Survey Tool

1. What is your current age (as of the date the survey is administered)? \_\_\_\_\_
  
2. Please indicate your gender
  - A. Male
  - B. Female
  - C. Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_
  
3. Please indicate your ethnicity (choose all that apply)
  - A. Latino/Hispanic
  - B. African/African American
  - C. Caucasian/White
  - D. Native American
  - E. Asian/Pacific Islander
  - F. Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_
  
4. At what age did you first enter the foster care system?
  - A. 0-1 years old
  - B. 2-6 years old
  - C. 7-10 years old
  - D. 11-18 years old
  
5. How many different placements did you have?
  - A. 1-3
  - B. 4-6
  - C. 7-9
  - D. 10 or more
  
6. Were you adopted?
  - A. Yes
  - B. No
  
7. Please indicate the types of placements you had (choose all that apply)
  - A. Group Home
  - B. Foster Home
  - C. Kinship Care
  - D. Non-Relative Home

E. Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

8. At what age did you last exit the foster care system?

A. 12-15

B. 16-17

C. 18+

D. Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

9. How many high schools did you attend?

A. 1

B. 2-3

C. 4-6

D. 7 or more

10. What was your weighted high school GPA?

A. 2.0 – 2.4

B. 2.5 – 2.9

C. 3.0 – 3.4

D. 3.5 – 3.9

E. 4.0 or higher

11. What is the highest degree you want to obtain?

A. Bachelor's degree

B. Master's degree

C. Doctoral degree

D. MD

E. Juris Doctorate (JD)

F. Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

12. What is your current year at UCLA?

A. Freshman

B. Sophomore

C. Junior

D. Senior

13. Are you a transfer student?

A. Yes

B. No

14. If yes, from where did you transfer?
- A. California Community College
  - B. Cal State University
  - C. Other (specify): \_\_\_\_\_

15. Read each item below and circle the number that matches how often you were involved with these support systems throughout your high school experience.

*Never*                      *Rarely*                      *Occasionally*                      *Frequently*  
 1                                      2                                      3                                      4

1. Independent Living Services (ILP)	1	2	3	4
2. Supportive Teachers	1	2	3	4
3. Supportive Peers/Friends	1	2	3	4
4. Supportive Family	1	2	3	4
5. Supportive Mentor	1	2	3	4
6. Supportive College Counselor	1	2	3	4
7. Positive therapy sessions	1	2	3	4
8. Supportive Social Worker	1	2	3	4

16. When faced with stressful situations in your life while you were in high school, how did you deal with them? Please check up to **three** that you thought were the most effective in helping you.

- A. Exercised
- B. Spent time with family
- C. Spent time with friends
- D. Studied
- E. Participated in extracurricular activities
- F. Sought assistance from teachers
- G. Sought assistance from academic advisors
- H. Sought assistance from a school counselor
- I. Sought assistance from therapist
- J. Other (specify): \_\_\_\_\_

17. Read each item below and circle the number that matches the extent to which they were concerns and/or fears you had when you started college.

*Always True*                      *Usually True*                      *Sometimes But Infrequently True*                      *Usually Not True*                      *Never True*  
 1    2    3    4    5

1. Afraid I would fail	1	2	3	4	5
2. Concerned I had no support system	1	2	3	4	5
3. Worried about whether I could pay for college	1	2	3	4	5
4. Afraid that I would not be able to do well in my coursework	1	2	3	4	5
5. Worried about the impact of having to work while in college	1	2	3	4	5
6. Worried that school workload would be too much for me	1	2	3	4	5
7. Worried that my peers or professors would not accept me	1	2	3	4	5
8. Worried about my living situation	1	2	3	4	5
9. Other (specify):	1	2	3	4	5

18. From the following items below, which were the most important long-term goals you set for yourself while in high school? Please check the **three** you thought were most important.

- A. Graduate from college with an associate's degree or higher
- B. Obtain a professional degree (Master's degree, doctoral degree, etc...)
- C. Get a job
- D. Find a career
- E. Start a family
- F. Provide stability for yourself and/or family
- G. Other (specify): \_\_\_\_\_

19. To what extent did each of the following motivate you to finish high school?

	Not At All	A Little	Somewhat	Quite a bit
A. Mentor				
B. Obligation				
C. Self esteem				
D. Family				
E. Particular job/career				
F. Financial stability				
G. Knowledge				
H. Peer support				

I. Self confidence				
J. Teacher				
K. College representatives				
L. School coach				
M. School clubs				
N. Personal security				
O. Therapist				
P. ILP Coordinator				
Q. Social Worker				
R. College counselor				
S. Other (specify)				

20. To what extent were the following a challenge to your success in high school?

	Not At All	A Little	Somewhat	Quite a bit
A. Lack of academic preparedness				
B. Lack of social support				
C. Lack of emotional support				
D. Lack of housing				
E. Lack of support from teachers				
F. Lack of support from counselors				
G. Financial concerns				
H. Lack of support from social worker				
I. Lack of support from ILP Coordinator				
J. Lack of support from foster placement				

21. How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
A. Teachers and other adults from my high school(s) treated all students with respect				
B. Staff at my high school(s) (including teachers, counselors, other adults) encouraged me to work hard so I could be successful in college				
C. The high schools I attended were clean and in good condition				
D. I received help from my counselors when applying to college				
E. I received help from my social worker when applying to college				
F. My college counselor(s) was key in helping me apply to college				

22. Throughout high school did you take any of the following? If yes, how many? (choose all that apply)

	0-1	2-4	5-6	7+
1. Advanced Placement classes				
2. Life skills classes				
3. Honors classes				
4. Advanced math or science courses				

23. What types of colleges did you apply to (or intend to register at) while in high school?  
(choose all that apply)

- A. California State Universities
- B. University of California
- C. Private Colleges/Universities
- D. Out of State Colleges/Universities
- E. Community Colleges

24. During high school were you involved in one or more college preparatory programs?  
*\*College preparatory programs focus on increasing academic readiness, college eligibility, the college application process, and/or financial aid. Some examples of a college preparatory program include: TRIO, Upward Bound, EAOP, VIPS, AVID*

- A. Yes
- B. No

25. While in high school did you have access to a computer with Internet capability?

- A. Yes
- B. No

26. While in high school, to what extent did you use computers/technology for any of the following?

	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
1. Connecting with supportive adult(s)				
2. Connecting with social worker or caseworker				
3. Connecting with Transition Coordinator (ILP Coordinator)				
4. Getting college information				
5. Schoolwork				
6. Researching colleges				
7. Applying to colleges				
8. Researching scholarships/grants				
9. SAT/ACT Preparation				
10. Other (specify)				



27. Did you have one or more adult supporters growing up?

*\*Adult supporters refer to an adult who you went to for advice or guidance when there was a decision to make or a problem to solve, or for companionship to share personal academic achievements. This includes, but is not limited to, adult relatives, parents, teachers, social workers, or foster parents. This does not include spouses, partners, boyfriends or girlfriends. The adult must have been easily accessible to you, either by telephone, via computer, or in person.*

- A. Yes
- B. No

28. If so, who were they? (choose all that apply)

- A. Foster parent
- B. Relative
- C. Teacher
- D. Counselor
- E. College Counselor
- F. Social worker
- G. Therapist
- H. Older adult who went through foster care
- I. Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

29. How often are you in contact with this adult supporter(s)?

- A. Frequently
- B. Occasionally
- C. Rarely
- D. Never

30. How important is this adult supporter(s) in your life *today*?

- A. Very Important
- B. Important
- C. Moderately Important
- D. Of Little Importance
- E. Unimportant

31. (If applicable) Do you still have contact with the adult(s) you consider an adult supporter?

- A. Yes
- B. No

32. Are you willing to provide the contact information for your adult supporter(s) for further contact for this study?

- A. Yes
- B. No

33. Contact information for adult supporters:

Name:

Relationship:

Email:

Phone:

## APPENDIX B

### Former Foster Youth Interview Protocol

Student Name/Pseudonym \_\_\_\_\_

Male \_\_\_\_\_ Female \_\_\_\_\_

Class Standing: Freshman    Sophomore    Junior    Senior

Transfer Student? Y/N

Date of interview \_\_\_\_\_

Start time \_\_\_\_\_ End time \_\_\_\_\_

First I want to thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. The interviews will be providing important information about the supports in place for foster youth who face unique challenges as they persist through high school and strive for higher education. The interview may last about 90 minutes. Everything you discuss here is strictly confidential so please feel free to speak openly and candidly. I will be recording our conversation so I can later transcribe it accurately. The recording will not be shared with anyone else. If there are points during the interview where you would like to speak off the record or stop, please feel free to let me know. Do you have any questions before we get started? If not, let's begin.

1. Please tell me a little about yourself.

(Probes)

-Where and when were you born?

-What is your major at UCLA?

-Do you know what you want to do when you leave UCLA?

-How long were you in foster care?

-Where did you live during your high school years? (Kinship, foster, group home, non-relative placement)

-What high school(s) did you attend?

2. How did you prepare yourself in high school to come to UCLA?

(Probes)

-What do you remember most about your experience in high school?

-Do you feel that your academic performance in high school was negatively affected due to your foster care experience? How so? Or why not?

-What situations typically influenced or affected your academic success as a result of being in foster care?

-What motivated you to go to college?

- Is there anyone you think did not believe in you as someone who could go to college?
- Looking back at your time in high school, how would you describe your overall experience?
- How would you describe your level of studying while in high school?
- What types of extracurricular activities were you involved in?

3. What is the biggest factor you would attribute to your educational success and college aspirations while in high school?

(Probes)

- How well would you say the foster care system supported you academically while in high school?
- Tell me about the training you received related to college readiness; please include any assistance from your foster home, ILP, social workers, teachers, and counselors.
- Did you feel better prepared to navigate the college process as a result of the training you received?
- Did you spend any time on college campuses while you were in high school? (Provide various possibilities).

4. What do you think are the internal characteristics that enable some foster youth who leave the system to achieve their academic goals and go on to a university?

(Probes)

- Do you feel you had any of those characteristics?
- What do you think are the biggest challenges that may keep some foster youth who leave the system from applying and enrolling in college?
- Did you experience any of those challenges?
- Do you think most foster youth who leave the system want to go to college? Why?
- What advice or suggestions would you like to share with current foster youth, if any?

5. Who helped you get here?

(Probes)

- Did you have any foster siblings? If so, did they attend college?
- Who supported your educational goals?
- How well did your social worker, foster home, teachers, and counselors prepare you for college while you were in high school?
- What was your relationship like with your social worker, teacher, foster parents, and counselors?
- What can you recall about their expectations of you?
- Were they involved in your academic life? How so?
- Who was the most influential adult in your life as you began considering college as an option? Why?

- Did you receive guidance about taking exams? If so, from who?
- Did you seek extra assistance for your classes/homework while in high school?
- When and how did you find out about the process of applying to college?
- Did you receive guidance about A-G courses? If so, from who?
- How did you find out about the admission requirements for UCLA? From who or what?
- Did you have help with the application for UCLA? From who or what? Specific parts of the application?
- \*\*Can you name a specific individual who you feel was the most important in supporting you academically while you were in high school, that you provided contact information for in the survey?
- Why this individual?

6. As a final question, do you have any additional comments about the support you received or the challenges you faced in preparing to apply to college?

## APPENDIX C

### Adult Supporter Interview Protocol

RQ2: What factors are identified by Social Workers, teachers, and other supportive adults that contributed to former foster youth's academic success?

Name/Pseudonym \_\_\_\_\_

Date of interview \_\_\_\_\_

Start time \_\_\_\_\_ End time \_\_\_\_\_

First I want to thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. The interviews will be providing important information about the supports in place for foster youth who face unique challenges as they persist through high school and strive for higher education. The interview may last about 60 minutes. Everything you discuss here is strictly confidential so please feel free to speak openly and candidly. If it is okay with you, I will be record our conversation so I can later transcribe it accurately. The recording will not be shared with anyone else. If there are points during the interview where you would like to stop, please feel free to let me know. Do you have any questions before we get started? If not, let's begin.

StudentX is currently a (freshman, etc) at UCLA. He/She mentioned that you were a positive influence in their life while they were in high school.

#### For Social Workers

1. Please tell me a little about yourself.

(Probes)

- How many years have you worked with foster youth?
- How many years have you been a social worker?
- Brief description of your job responsibilities.
- Approximately how many youth are on your caseload?
- If you were to give a percentage, approximately how many of the foster youth you worked with have gone on to a four-year university?
- Why did you go into social work?

2. Please tell me about StudentX.

(Probes)

- How did you come to meet?
- How long have you known him/her?
- StudentX identified you as an important person who supported him/her academically. How would you say you were involved in the academic progress of StudentX?
- Approximately how often did you meet with StudentX annually (or monthly)?
- What happened at these meetings?

- What do you attribute to StudentX being academically successful?
- What qualities or knowledge has helped him/her?
- Who do you think has helped him/her beside yourself? Other teachers? Counselors? Peers? Someone from his/her foster care placement? Family member?
- Do you feel there are important differences in the experiences of StudentX as compared to those youth who do not go on to college? If yes, what are those differences?
- When were you last in contact with StudentX?

3. What approach do you think works best with helping foster youth go to college?

(Probes)

- What kinds of approaches in supporting foster youth's preparation to go to college do you think other social workers take?

**For Teachers**

1. Please tell me a little about yourself.

(Probes)

- How many years have you been a teacher?
- If you were to give a percentage, approximately how many of your students have gone on to a four-year university?
- Why did you go into teaching?
- Are you aware when your students are in foster care?

2. Please tell me about StudentX.

(Probes)

- How did you come to meet?
- How long have you known him/her?
- StudentX identified you as an important person who supported him/her academically. How would you say you were involved in the academic progress of StudentX?
- Did you work with StudentX outside of regular class time?
- If you did, what did most of these meetings entail?
- How important do you think going to college was for StudentX?
- What do you attribute to StudentX being academically successful?
- What qualities or knowledge has helped him/her?
- Who do you think has helped him/her beside yourself? Other teachers? Counselors? Peers? Someone from his/her foster care placement? Family member?
- Do you feel there are important differences in the experiences of StudentX as compared to those youth who do not go on to college? If yes, what are those differences?
- When were you last in contact with StudentX?

3. What approach do you think works best with helping students go to college?  
(Probes)
  - What kinds of approaches in supporting foster youth's preparation to go to college do you think other teachers take?
  - Do you feel your approach in supporting StudentX was unique compared to other teachers?

### **For Other Adult Supporters**

1. Please tell me a little about yourself.  
(Probes)
  - What is your occupation?
  - How many years have you been in your current position?
  - Brief description of your job responsibilities (if applicable).
  - Why did you go into this field (if applicable)?
  
1. Please tell me about StudentX.  
(Probes)
  - How did you come to meet?
  - How long have you known him/her?
  - StudentX identified you as an important person who supported him/her academically. How would you say you were involved in the academic progress of StudentX?
  - Approximately how often did you meet with StudentX annually (or monthly)?
  - What happened at these meetings?
  - What do you attribute to StudentX being academically successful?
  - What qualities or knowledge has helped him/her?
  - Were you aware of any educational services available to StudentX?
  - Did you discuss college with StudentX? If yes, what did these conversations entail?
  - Who do you think has helped him/her beside yourself? Other teachers? Counselors? Peers? Someone from his/her foster care placement? Family member?
  - Do you feel your approach in supporting StudentX was unique compared to other adults in StudentX's life? Why or why not?
  - Do you feel there are important differences in the experiences of StudentX as compared to those youth who do not go on to college? If yes, what are those differences?
  - When were you last in contact with StudentX?



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