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Confronting college: Foster care youth deciding whether to participate in higher education programs

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Confronting College:

Foster Care Youth Deciding Whether to Participate in Higher Education Programs

by

Linda K. Herlocker

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education
Department of Adult, Career, and Higher Education
College of Education
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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother and father, Maxine and the late Reverend Edward Donner, for giving me the gift of curiosity and a love of learning; to my dear friend the late Joanna Lowe for believing in me; to Jacqueline Van Patten for stepping in to help, no matter what; and to my circle of close friends for providing me with continued guidance and encouragement. Finally, and most importantly, I dedicate this work to my best friend and life partner, Robbin Lowe, who provides me with unwavering support and unconditional love every moment of every day.

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Confronting College:

Foster Care Youth Deciding Whether to Participate in Higher Education Programs

Linda K. Herlocker

Abstract

This study's purpose was to explore the college choice process for foster care youth who are aging out of Florida's protective services system. The research methodology included three components. First, a survey of the Independent Living Coordinators throughout the state of Florida solicited data regarding participation rates and enrollment patterns among foster care youth. Next, in a meeting setting, a survey was administered to foster care youth, probing the extent to which they considered certain college choice decision factors. Finally, upon completion of the survey, participants remained for a guided focus group discussion to further explore their decision criteria.

The results of the Independent Living Coordinator survey indicated that foster care youth enrolled in higher education programs far less frequently than non-foster care youth. The survey also demonstrated that of those foster care youth who participated in postsecondary programs, more than half chose community colleges.

The survey administered to young persons transitioning out of the child welfare system indicates that, in general, these youth agreed that the four decision factors they considered most strongly when investigating higher education options were increased income potential, independence, a career goal, and the desire for respect or status. The subsequent focus group discussion confirmed that the complexity of the admissions process, one's academic preparedness, and financial considerations were important when

deciding whether to attend postsecondary education. The discussion also revealed nine choice factors that were not specifically addressed either on the survey or in the focus group discussion guide, seven of which could be considered prominent. Those factors were: the desire to be the first in the family to obtain a degree, time management challenges, the presence or absence of a partner during the academic pursuit, family members detracting from the goal, whether or not there was a break between secondary and postsecondary education, hardships as motivators, and one's age at the beginning of a postsecondary pursuit. Analysis of the data further revealed that of all the decision factors mentioned either on the survey or in the subsequent discussions, financial concerns top the list.

Chapter One

Introduction

Making the leap from secondary education to a college environment can be daunting for anyone, but for young persons who are aging out of the foster care system into independent living as an adult, the transition gap between high school and college can be a chasm. With support networks of family and friends practically nonexistent, the sheer magnitude of access issues like cost and logistics increases to seemingly insurmountable proportions. Recognizing the potential of higher education to improve the opportunities for these young adults to have a chance at a successful life, and not coincidentally to break the cycle of subsidized dependency, state and federal legislators have put programs into place to ease many of the financial and logistical issues surrounding higher education access for this population. Tuition and fee waivers, scholarships, and living subsidies make it significantly easier – at least from a financial standpoint – to attend a college or university. It must be noted, however, that for most of these youth, financial and logistical challenges have been a way of life. Programs that clear those obstacles, then, should be very attractive to this population. Still, proportionally few eligible youth choose to participate, leaving program champions to wonder, “Why?”

For these young adults, the basics of food, clothing, and shelter are only part of the problem. As they approach the end of their years in foster care, they often bring with them the emotional complications of abuse and neglect, compounded by complex

histories of transience among multiple foster and shelter placements. The influence of these deeper emotional issues on their decision whether or not to participate in higher education cannot be overlooked. As federal and state legislators continue to allocate dollars to these higher education programs, they need to look also at the deeper reasons driving participation decisions. Paulson and St. John (2002) point out that past policy research related to college choice has been limited by its focus on students of traditional age and backgrounds. “There are diverse patterns of student choice,” they write, and “policy research on college students should consider diverse groups on their own terms” (Introduction section, para. 1). Only recently have researchers heeded this advice and explored differences among various groups in the college choice decision (Perna, 2000). While there have been studies regarding a range of ethnic groups and other special populations (Perna, 2000; Paulson & St. John, 2002; Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson, & Terenzini, 2003; Ting, 1998; Trusty, Robinson, Plata, & Ng, 2000), there has been no such study regarding foster care youth. The paucity of research in this area bears significant policy implications. With a clearer understanding of the range of issues that foster care youth consider when deciding whether to participate in higher education, perhaps legislators will be able to make better informed choices regarding the use of resources.

Statement of the Problem

There are more than half a million children currently living in foster care (Kraimer-Rickaby, n.d.; Wertheimer, 2002). Collectively, these young people represent a unique segment of the population with a range of troubling issues that present challenges at even the most basic levels. Individually, each child brings a set of experiences,

personalities, and abilities that add yet another layer of complexity to an already complicated life. While there is no one “typical” foster child, there are trends within the foster care population. There are slightly more males than females in foster care, and most come from families within the lower socioeconomic strata. Although most foster children are Caucasian, minority groups—particularly African American and Hispanics—are over-represented (Duva & Raley, 1988; Wertheimer, 2002). Nearly all foster children are victims of sexual or physical abuse, neglect, or abandonment, or have a parent who is unable to care for them (Duva & Raley, 1988; Wertheimer, 2002). It is not surprising, then, that foster children are much more likely to have behavioral problems, developmental delays, emotional difficulties, or mental health issues (Office of Program Policy Analysis & Government Accountability [OPPAGA], 2005; Wertheimer, 2002). Similarly, foster children tend to lag behind their peers in academic achievement (Duva & Raley, 1988; issues (OPPAGA, 2005). A 1988 national study of foster care children showed that only 32% were reading at grade level, and only 20% were capable of performing grade appropriate math functions (Duva & Raley). The Florida Office of Program Policy Analysis & Government Accountability (OPPAGA) published a 2005 study indicating that Florida foster teens score lower than their classmates on the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (FCAT). A 2001 study conducted in the state of Washington showed that only 59% of foster youth enrolled in the 11th grade completed high school by the end of the 12th grade, as compared with 86% of non-foster care youth (Burley & Halpern, 2001). At the individual level, they demonstrate reduced levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy. They are far more likely than their peers to be aggressive, moody, and to act out (Kramer-Rickaby, n.d., para. 4).

Most foster care youth eventually return to their families, to long-term placement with relatives, or to adoptive families. But as many as twenty-five thousand of them simply “age out” of foster care each year and lose their state and federal subsidies by reaching the age of legal independence (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; National Foster Care Awareness Project, 2000; Wertheimer, 2002; Wilson & Houghton, 1999; Yeager, Vienneau, Henderson, Hutson, & Gomez, 2001). For these young people, the problems of foster care are compounded by the complexities of transitioning into independence. For these young people, the problems of foster care are compounded by the complexities of transitioning into independence. Most of them have no families to provide both emotional support and financial assistance through this process, unlike their peers who have not been through the foster care system. Duva and Raley (1988), write that, “‘Out-of-home’ status means more than simply ‘out-of-house;’ it means ‘out-of-family’” (p. 9). With very few supports to help them, their outcomes are even grimmer. Unfortunately, the following case is all too common:

Dirk, an articulate 18-year-old in a baseball cap and sneakers, is what shelter workers call a “couch surfer” – he lives with one friend and then another, staying wherever he can. An ex-foster child, he was emancipated at 16, and since then has wandered around, dealing drugs to survive and getting into skirmishes with the law... “I got kicked out of my house when I was 11, and I’ve been on my own since then” (Wilson & Houghton, 1999, p. 17).

A study conducted in the late 1980s found that of those who emancipated from foster care, 61% had no job experience, 38% were diagnosed as emotionally disturbed, 17% had drug abuse problems, 9% had a health problem, and 17% of the females were

pregnant (Cook, McLean, & Ansell, 1990). A four-year follow-up study with that same group showed that less than half had jobs, only about 40% had held a job for at least a year, 60% of the females had babies, 25% of them had been homeless for at least one night, and less than 20% were completely self-supporting (*Outcomes for youth exiting foster care*, 2001, para. 1). A 1995 study conducted in Wisconsin showed similar results. Eighteen months after leaving care, 37% still had not completed high school; 40% of the females and 23% of the males were receiving some form of public assistance; and while almost half had received mental health services while in care, only 21% received services after leaving the system (Courtney & Piliavan, 1998). A study conducted in Nevada in 2001 showed that of the 100 interviewed youth who had aged out of foster care in the previous six months, 24% had supported themselves at some time by dealing drugs, 11% had exchanged sex for money, 19% had lived on the streets and 18% had stayed in homeless shelters, 41% reported violence in their interpersonal relationships, 45% had been in trouble with the legal authorities, and 41% had been in jail (Nevada Kids Count, 2001). The only nationally representative study of youth discharged from foster care showed that 38% were emotionally disturbed, half had used illegal drugs, and 25% were involved with the legal system (Cook, Fleishman, & Grimes, 1991).

Educational outcomes for these young people are similarly bleak. The last two decades of research has consistently shown that “children in public care fall behind at school, seldom achieve good qualifications, and are much less likely than their peers to go on to further or higher education” (Martin & Jackson, 2002, abstract). A 1980 study found that two thirds of 18 year olds who emancipated from foster care between January 1987 and July 1988 had not completed high school or earned a General Educational

Development (GED) certificate by the time they left care, and only about half had succeeded in finishing high school at the time of the follow-up study four years later (Cook et al., 1990; Cook et al., 1991). Dirk explains from his point of view why it is so difficult for youth coming out of foster care to live up to educational aspirations:

I got stuck at DHS [Department of Human Services], and I believe I've been through about 13 different schools, so I didn't have enough time to get all the credits. I did all the work – I did work on my own at home you know, when I wasn't in school. But there's no way you can get enough credits; there's no way you can stay in one place. I was going from foster home to foster home. For the first year and a half that I was in DHS custody I was going from shelter to shelter – one month in each place. You lose a lot of stuff; you lose a lot of time (Wilson & Houghton, 1999, p. 17).

Unarguably, multiple placements have a direct impact on academic preparedness and achievement. Studies have shown that foster care youth score lower on average on achievement tests by as much as 15 to 20 percentile points (Burley & Halpern, 2001). But multiple placements are only part of the picture. Other research indicates that foster care youth have compromised development that often leads to emotional and behavioral problems, school adjustment difficulties, and poor physical and mental health. “This pattern [is] evident,” writes Wertheimer (2002, p. 3), “even when ... compared with an at-risk population of children living in single-parent, low-income families.” A British study conducted in 2000 in a system very similar to that of the United States found that foster care children were 13 times more likely than non-foster care children to have

special education needs (Evans, 2000). Other scholars point to the fact that almost all foster children experience a low sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy (Kraimer-Rickaby, n.d.).

Further compounding the issue is the fact that, partly because of the emotional issues that come from having dysfunctional families and partly because of multiple foster placements, children who are products of the child welfare system tend to have difficulty attaching to others. This not only contributes to their inability to complete a high school education (Menjivar, 2002), but also leads to a general mistrust of adults and often to problems interacting appropriately with their peers (*Connected by 25*, n.d.). Not surprisingly, then, they are far less likely to attach to any adults or to have a close social group of friends. This is particularly unfortunate. A recent British study in which high achieving foster care youth who had aged out of care and gone on to complete higher education goals indicated that the single most significant difference in their lives was “positive encouragement from significant others” (Martin & Jackson, 2002, p. 124). Yet most foster care youth transitioning to independence are unable to develop the personal relationships that would provide them with “significant others” who could help move them toward attaining their educational goals. Clearly there are a number of factors that come to bear on a foster youth’s decision to attend higher education or not and the multiplicity of the reasons only contributes to the complexity of the college choice conundrum.

This is not to say that foster care youth do not have high educational aspirations. In fact, in a study that tracked 141 young adults who left care in Wisconsin in the late 1990s, 79% indicated a desire to graduate high school and 63% said they hoped to

complete college. Most of those interviewed (71% and 53%, respectively) fully expected that they would attain those goals. Nonetheless, at 12 to 18 months later, only 55% of the respondents had completed high school, and only 9% had entered college (Courtney et al., 2001). In 2001, researchers in Nevada interviewed 100 youth who had aged out of foster care at least six months prior to the study. Of those interviewed, 75% said that they wanted to get a college degree, but only 30% had attended or were currently attending college (Nevada Kids Count). A study conducted in Missouri in the late 1990s interviewed 252 youth from around the state who had aged out of care. Of those interviewed, 39% had completed a high school diploma or GED, but 36% indicated that their educational progress was worse than they had expected (McMillan & Tucker, 1999). It seems that for these young people, the problem is not in the aspiration; it is in the achievement.

Certainly these young people understand that higher education can be the key to a better life. Bowen and Bok (1998) write that there is “a commonsense understanding of the advantages associated with being a college graduate” (p. 55). The specifics regarding the magnitude of the economic advantage are unambiguous (Duggan, 2001; Malveaux, 2003). In 1990, for example, the earnings differential between a college graduate and a non-college graduate was 78% for males and 99% for females (Mumper, 1996). Furthermore, a review of the evidence demonstrates that higher education offers students a range of non-economic benefits as well. In general, “college graduates have better working conditions, receive greater fringe benefits, have lower rates of unemployment, lower rates of disability, and make better investment decisions” (Mumper, 1996, p. 8). In their seminal work, *How College Effects Students* (1991), Ernest Pascarella and Patrick

Terenzini describe qualitative differences in the cognitive abilities between college graduates and non-graduates. Perhaps most significantly, they revealed that college graduates are more likely to have enhanced self-esteem and an overall sense of psychological well-being. College alumni also tend to have a more highly developed internal locus of control (Wofle & Robertshaw, 1982).

But even though these youth likely understand the advantages of higher education, they may not regard college as a viable option. Actually enrolling in college is by far the more difficult piece, especially given that the issue of cost tops the list of barriers to higher education (Mumper, 1996), and that youth in foster care are particularly vulnerable to economic hurdles. Cost is the area on which legislators have chosen to focus in order to bring higher education opportunities to these young people.

Since the Morrill Land Grant Acts of 1862 and 1890, the government has been proactive in assuring access to higher education for all citizens. The Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944, popularly known as the GI Bill, and the Basic Educational Opportunity Grant (BEOG) of 1972, later renamed the Federal Pell Grant program in 1980, are further evidence the government's commitment to bridging the financial moat that surrounds higher education for economically disadvantaged students (Rudolph, 1990). While these programs have enhanced access to higher education programs for many young people, the particular economic challenges of youth in foster care have required additional measures.

The Title IV-E Independent Living Initiative established in 1986 provided federal benefits for youth in foster care up to the age of 18. In parallel, the state of Florida also enacted legislation in 1986 to provide tuition and fee waivers at public colleges and

universities for young people exiting the child welfare system. But these tuition waivers went largely unused. According to a 2001 report to congress, the youth was released from the foster care system upon the 18th birthday, often with no skills, no support network, no employment, and frequently no option other than homelessness (US Department of Health & Human Services [DHHS]). Tuition waivers were of little help to these adults who were faced with more pressing issues of basic survival, which would not be surprising to anyone familiar with Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Shafritz & Ott, 1992).

In December of 1999, the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (hereafter referred to as the Chafee Independence Program) replaced the old Title IV-E Independent Living initiative. This new legislation made significant improvements. Perhaps foremost, it doubled the level of program funding from \$70 million to \$140 million. It also changed the budgeting formula so that allocations are now based on the proportion of children in both Title IV-E and state-funded foster care, rather than simply upon the number of children in federally funded foster care. It eliminated the minimum age eligibility requirement of 16 and expanded the upper age limit for mandatory support from 18 to 21. Previously, states had the option to include youth up to age 21, but many did not. The act also gave states the option to extend Medicaid benefits to youth transitioning out of care. Additionally, and perhaps of greatest relevance to this discussion, the act provided states with grants to facilitate the smooth transition of these youth into productive adulthood, including provisions for room and board up to the age of 21 for those attending school.

Although the specific use of Chafee funds is left largely to the discretion of the states, there are certain stipulations. It does, for example, require states to use a portion of their funds for programs specifically to help those youth aged 18 who are transitioning out of care. It also requires states to be accountable for the use of their funds and mandates that states involve the youth in the planning of their own transition process into independence.

Florida chose to use the Chafee money in a number of programs. Of greatest significance to higher education was the establishment of the Subsidized Independent Living program. Open to eligible youth 16 years of age or older, this program provides a living stipend to young people in the child welfare system who have been in the custody of the Department of Children and Families (DCF) for at least six months, who have been free from irresponsible behavior for at least six months, are employed at least part time, and who are enrolled full time in an educational program (high school, vocational, or college) with at least at 2.0 GPA. Also, on June 2, 2000, Governor Jeb Bush signed into law a companion piece of legislation for Florida that allows youth attending a post secondary educational program to remain in foster care up to the age of 23.

At the same time, the Road to Independence scholarship was established. This program provides a living stipend of \$892 per month to young adults who have exited foster care at age 18, are between 18 and 23 years old, and have been in foster care for a minimum of six months during their lifetime.¹ These scholarship recipients do not have to be employed. Instead, the stipend money is intended to replace the money they would

¹ Other eligibility criteria may apply, including full time enrollment in postsecondary education and maximum time to program completion. For a complete list of eligibility criteria, see FS 409.1451(5)(b).

earn by working 40 hours per week. They may live wherever they choose and may decide for themselves how much or how little personal interaction they wish to maintain with the DCF counselors (OPPAGA, 2004, OPPAGA, 2005).

The participation rate in higher education through these foster care access programs in Florida is difficult to assess. National studies have shown that only about 11% of youth aging out of foster care go on to college or vocational training (North American Council on Adoptable Children [NACAC], n.d.), compared with more than 60% nationally (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2002). A report published by OPPAGA in December, 2005, cited Florida Education and Training Placement Information Program (FETPIP) data from 2004 which indicate that only 21% of Florida's former foster care youth are likely to attend postsecondary schools, as opposed to 54% nationally. The Florida Independent Living Services Program staff reported that as of April 30, 2003, 439 students in Florida were receiving scholarships or subsidies for full-time school enrollment under the Chafee Independence Program (Florida Department of Children and Families, 2003). Yet the State University System of Florida Fact Book indicates that for the fiscal year 2001-2002, only 43 students used foster care fee waivers (State University System of Florida, n.d.). An increase of nearly 400 students in two years would seem unlikely. The discrepancy may be caused by several variables:

1. There might truly be a significant increase in participation rates over the last three years, especially given the relative recency of the legislation.

2. Institutions may not be appropriately crediting students in the appropriate programs. Because these students might have multiple sources of financial aid, it is questionable whether the universities' information systems would be capable of separating out as a discrete population the foster care youth using tuition waivers.
3. The bulk of the discrepancy might be comprised of students who are using their scholarship and subsidy benefits at community colleges, private institutions, or proprietary vocational schools. These institutions of higher education are not included in the State University System of Florida Fact Book.

Whether any of these factors are responsible for the discrepancies, or whether other issues might be influencing the data, will be addressed through Research Questions 1 and 2, as described later in this document.

Yet even with so many government programs in place to assuage the financial burden of cost to qualified and motivated foster care youth, proportionally few choose it. This implies that there are other factors besides awareness of higher education options and financial assistance programs that would cause a young person leaving the foster care system to opt for college. It is this missing piece that was the focus of this study.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study was three-fold. First, it was to determine what proportion of these young people compared to non-foster care youth are pursuing higher education and where. Second, it was to determine what factors these foster care youth

consider when deciding whether to attend postsecondary institutions. Finally, it was to determine what weight each of those factors has in the decision process.

The answers to these questions may have profound significance at the policy level, as is evidenced by the fact that a former Secretary of the Florida Department of Children and Families expressed a personal interest in this study. In an era of tightening budget considerations and limited resources, perhaps with a clearer understanding of these factors, legislators and child welfare policy makers will be able to make better informed decisions regarding programs for this population.

Research Questions

The specific research questions asked in this study were:

1. What proportion of eligible foster care youth in Florida are taking advantage of the state and federal higher education scholarship and subsidy opportunities, and is that proportion higher or lower than the proportion of eligible students from the non-foster care population who attend institutions of higher education?

This two-pronged question strikes specifically at the issue of the discrepancy in state-reported enrollment data. The methodology used to answer this question was intended to help bring clarity to the conflicting data found in Florida's information systems. To know whether eligible students are participating or not in these programs provided insight into the extent to which these programs are being utilized. The answer to this compound research question, when considered in conjunction with the answers to the other two research questions posed in this document, may help program managers to

make better informed decisions regarding the way they market programs to eligible students.

2. Of those foster care youth who are attending institutions of higher education in Florida, where are they attending and in what proportion?

This question was intended to unravel the mystery of reported enrollment discrepancies. Additionally, this question allows policy-makers to see whether students are attending community colleges, universities, or proprietary institutions, and gives them more data upon which to base estimates of future funding requirements to support these programs. The extent to which these young people select public colleges and universities, where tuition is waived for foster care youth, over private institutions has a significant budgetary impact. These data also provide interesting insights into the students' "comfort level" regarding different educational settings.

3. What factors do foster care youth consider when deciding whether or not to participate in postsecondary education, and how heavily does each factor weigh on the college choice process?

The answer to this question may provide policy makers with insight into what kinds of programs may be implemented, or what modifications might be made to the current Independent Living curriculum to influence foster care youth to decide in favor of higher education.

Clearly there are societal and economic benefits to having foster care youth obtain postsecondary degrees. Advanced education would help to assure economic self-sufficiency and to assuage recidivism into the social welfare system. But perhaps more importantly, as Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) remind us, college provides a whole

range of non-economic benefits that directly impact the quality of life. College graduates “change on a broad array of value, attitudinal, psycho-social, and moral dimensions” (p. 557). They “make significant advances in reasoning, thinking, and judgment; become far more interested in art and culture; and become more liberal, open-minded, self-aware, tolerant, mature, and morally sophisticated than nongraduates” (Barrett, 1994, para. 5). It could be argued that changes at such a profound level in a foster care youth could contribute directly toward breaking the cycle of abuse and neglect. If policy makers could laser in on the factors that would cause foster care youth to take advantage of higher education opportunities, then perhaps society would be closer to solving some of its most disturbing problems.

Limitations of the Study

There were limitations to this study. First, it must be noted that some of these young people, for a myriad of reasons, have a natural suspicion of adults in general and of adults whom they perceive as being part of a bureaucracy in particular. There was the distinct possibility, therefore, that it would be difficult to solicit participation from a truly representative sample of the population. It was more likely that those youth who chose to participate may have had a more positive bias toward participation in activities sponsored in part by the Department of Children and Families (DCF). Since the success of this study hinged upon the support and participation of Independent Living coordinators within or contracted by DCF, it was extremely difficult to distance the research from the bureaucracy. The impact of this limitation, however, was mitigated somewhat by the fact that the young people who ultimately took part in the study were involved with a unique foster care transition program whose Executive Director and staff strongly encouraged

their participation. As a result, the mix of participants in this study was more likely a true representation of the mix of foster care youth in the transition program.

Second, the researcher considered that the survey and focus group responses from those youth who chose to participate would be positively biased. Given the unique characteristics of foster care survivors, it was quite possible that the participants would have emotional disorders that might have caused them to respond to the survey and in the focus group setting in a manner that was either overly defensive or overly ingratiating (Duva & Raley, 1988; Burley & Halpern, 2000). Similarly, the realities of their past experiences could have interfered with the way they interacted in the focus groups. For many of these young people, for example, genuine interest in their circumstances from any adult figure might have been scarce throughout their lives. It was not unreasonable to consider, therefore, that for some of these youth, having the opportunity to be listened to and to be the center of attention was a novel enough experience that it might have invoked a desire to conciliate whomever was paying attention – in this case, the researcher.

Another limitation of the study, and perhaps the most problematic, was sample access and attrition. As has been discovered by other researchers (Duval & Raley, 1988; Burley & Halpern, 2000; Courtney, et al., 2001), a large percentage of older foster children and those who have aged out of care become runaways, end up homeless, become incarcerated, or live in a series of temporary arrangements in shelters or with friends, thus making them unavailable by mail or phone. This begs the question; can the possible rate of sample attrition for this sample be estimated?

The dilemma of sample attrition in foster care research is of such magnitude that it has been the focus of its own study. Australian researchers Gilbertson and Barber published an article aptly entitled “Obstacles to involving children and young people in foster care research” (2002). Their study revealed non-response rates in three key studies ranging from 72.5% to 82%. Reasons for the high attrition rate were broken into two broad categories: access denied at the agency level, and subject-related factors.

Despite the endorsement of the Department of Children and Families, the issue of access to the population proved to be more problematic than originally thought. While the original study design included 17-year-olds, the Institutional Review Board of the Florida Department of Health and Human Services was unwilling to allow access to minors in foster care without a court order specifically naming each minor participant. The resultant complications lead to a reconsideration of the study design that limited the research population to foster care youth who had already reached age 18. Having made that change, the researcher then faced the issue of locating a population of foster care youth over the age of 18. This proved especially challenging as this group is particularly impacted by “subject-related factors,” as defined by Gilbertson and Barber (2002).

Those subject-related factors were specifically identified as missing or transient (15.4%), subject declined to participate (13.2%), subject assessed by social worker as too distressed to participate in the research (5.5%), and subject did not keep appointments (1%) (Gilbertson and Barber, 2002). It must be noted that this study focused on Australian research; whether or not its results are generalizable to the United States, specifically to this research project, cannot be assumed.

United States studies have experienced varying levels of sample attrition. Courtney, et al. (2001), for example, experienced 30% attrition in a longitudinal study that spanned from 1995 through 2000. A study by the Annie E. Casey foundation, an organization whose members are nationally recognized as experts in the field of child welfare, identified a sample of 209 Casey foster care alumni for a 2001 study. Of the sample, 161 were located (77%) and invited to participate. One hundred and fifteen (115) ultimately participated, 55% of the original sample. While this number may seem bleak, the researchers explain that the sample still met the needs of the study:

Not surprisingly, alumni who left Casey recently were more likely to participate. Several alumni who are known to be doing well declined to participate. In contrast, alumni located in jail participated at a very high rate (100%) while alumni living in the community were less likely to finish interviews (68%). More importantly, comparing interview participants and non-participants, there is no difference in closing circumstances and overall functioning at exit [from care]. Thus, at exit, the sample represents neither the best outcomes, nor the worst. (Casey Family Services, 2001, p. 30)

Given the inherent difficulties of locating young adults who have aged out of the foster care system, finding a sample population for this study was a significant problem until the *Connected by 25* project was identified. Discussed in greater detail later in Chapter 3 of this document, *Connected by 25* is a grant-funded program that provides intensive transition support and service to young people over the age of 18 who have aged out of the foster care system. Diane Zambito, the Executive Director of *Connected*

by 25, expressed great interest in this study and offered her pool of young adults as participants (D. Zambito, personal communication, September 30, 2005). This allowed for the research to take place, but posed yet another limitation on the study as the resultant number of participants was limited to only 34. While this number was sufficiently robust to support conclusions in the qualitative portion of the study, it was insufficient to allow for statistically significant conclusions in the quantitative section. Nonetheless, even in the quantitative section, the results are believed to be of practical significance, based upon the precedent of the research assumptions of the Casey group cited earlier in this work. Because the *Connected by 25* youth are on the cusp of aging out of foster care, between the ages of 18 and 23, and represent foster care youth in varying stages of the college choice process, it may be presumed that, as with the Casey sample, this group represented neither the best nor the worst, and that the results from this small group may be generalizable to the larger population.

Definition of Terms

In order to provide clarity throughout the work, key terms are defined as follows.

Age out of foster care: the process by which foster care youth exit state dependency by achieving at least age 18 and failing to participate in additional programs to extend their eligibility for federal or state foster care programs. Foster care youth in Florida may age out as early as age 18 or as late as age 23.

College choice: the process of deciding whether or not to attend an institution of higher learning and, if the choice is to attend, then selecting which institution to attend.

Foster care: twenty-four hour substitute care for children placed away from their parents or guardians and for whom the state agency has placement and care responsibility. This includes, but is not limited to, placements in foster family homes, foster homes of relatives, group homes, emergency shelters, residential facilities, child care institutions, and pre-adoptive homes (45 CFR § 1355.20). For the purposes of this study, foster care also includes state agency placement in independent living programs, arrangements, and facilities.

Foster care youth: children receiving foster care and/or independent living benefits under federal and state child welfare programs.

Independent living: a federally mandated program designed (1) to identify children who are likely to remain in foster care until 18 years of age and to help these children make the transition to self-sufficiency by providing services such as assistance in obtaining a high school diploma, career exploration, vocational training, job placement and retention, training in daily living skills, training in budgeting and financial management skills, substance abuse prevention, and preventive health activities (including smoking avoidance, nutrition education, and pregnancy prevention); (2) to help children who are likely to remain in foster care until 18 years of age receive the education, training, and services necessary to obtain employment; (3) to help children who are likely to remain in foster care until 18 years of age prepare for and enter postsecondary training and education institutions; (4) to provide personal and emotional support to children aging out of foster care, through mentors and the promotion of interactions with dedicated adults; (5) to provide financial, housing, counseling, employment, education, and other appropriate support and services to former foster care

recipients between 18 and 21 years of age to complement their own efforts to achieve self-sufficiency and to assure that program participants recognize and accept their personal responsibility for preparing for and then making the transition from adolescence to adulthood; and (6) to make available vouchers for education and training, including postsecondary training and education, to youth who have aged out of foster care program (42 U.S.C. § 677).

Institution of higher education or institution of higher learning: any educational institution for which completion of a high school diploma or equivalent (such as a General Equivalency Diploma, or GED) is a requirement for admission, and for which students may be eligible to receive Title IV federal financial aid. This may include, but is not limited to, colleges and universities, both public and private, both for profit and non-profit; and vocational and proprietary schools.

Chapter Summary

Foster care youth aging out of the system face a future filled with far greater complexities and uncertainties than most of their peers. Their options are limited, their support systems are minimal, and their odds of making it are slight. Nonetheless, policy makers have not ignored the issue. Several programs have been put into place to help these young people transition successfully into productive adulthood. Programs aimed at higher education figure prominently in the array of services offered to foster care youth aging out of the system. Yet a high proportion of all eligible youth choose not to participate. This project explored the college choice process among these youth. It is hoped that by determining what factors foster care youth consider when planning for their

independence, appropriate new programs, or relevant modifications to existing ones, can be implemented to facilitate choices toward higher education.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

The subject of this study crosses sociological categories. The foundational information regarding foster care and foster care youth comes from social welfare. At the same time, discussion regarding the college choice process comes from scholarship centered in higher education. Finally, the language of the Carl D. Perkins Vocational-Technical Education Act of 1998 names foster care children among the groups defined as “special populations.” As various survey instruments were considered for this application in this project, similarities emerged between the foster care youth population and the special population of first generation college students. Consequently, research regarding special populations and first generation college students also inform the study.

Foster Care Youth Aging Out of Care

Foster care children in general have been the focus of research almost as long as foster care itself has been institutionalized. But most studies were small, rarely extending beyond the state level. This was largely due to the lack of a national data collection system. From the late 1940s until 1975, the federal government collected annual data from states on a voluntary basis. Between 1975 and the early 1980s, however, state-specific data collection stopped, making any kind of national research virtually impossible. In 1982, the American Public Human Services Association, previously known as the American Public Welfare Association (APWA), established and operated

the Voluntary Cooperative Information System (VCIS). The VCIS initiative was an attempt to fill the need for national information on child welfare programs.

Unfortunately, VCIS was not without limitations. First and foremost, it must be noted that the system truly was, as the name implies, *voluntary*, and indeed not all states opted to cooperate. Even among those that did, data integrity was often compromised by states using different reporting periods, defining populations inconsistently, or individual question limitations. Nonetheless, when VCIS began publishing summary reports in 1982, foster care research began to flow. Still, with the exception of a couple small state studies, most research focused on “regular” foster care, looking at outcomes for youth who had experienced some period of foster care before reaching independence. But in most of these studies, the participants had been returned to their families, to relatives, or had been adopted prior to achieving independence (Barth, 1990; Festinger, 1983; Loman & Siegel, 2000).

The paucity of research regarding the population of foster care youth who age out of care has been addressed in the literature. In general, it can be said that these young people have a particular set of circumstances that make them particularly difficult to track over time. For example, a 1983 survey of youth discharged from foster care in the mid-seventies conceded that the characteristics of the population itself created circumstances that resulted in a significant limitation to the study:

Of a potential 600 persons meeting [interview criteria], 227 had been located and agreed to participate in the study. Twenty-one possible respondents were considered too emotionally disturbed, mentally retarded, or physically impaired to be interviewed. The study shows somewhat of a bias toward those who made

successful transition [*sic*] and enjoyed a decent quality of life, since those are the respondents more likely to be located and to agree to participate. Those former foster youth who are destitute, homeless, or in prisons would be those not likely to be located or included in the study (Duva & Raley, 1988, p. 20).

Despite the inherent difficulties in researching this unique group of young people, Joy Duva and Gordon Raley (1988), published *Transitional Difficulties of Out-Of-Home Youth—a paper for Youth and America’s Future: The William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family and Citizenship*. Using VCIS data, these researchers explored the national profile of youth emancipating from foster care and of runaway youth. They also discussed some of the existing services being provided to those special populations, examined public policy and the impact on foster care youth, and recommended policy changes to help the transition from foster care to independence. Among those policy recommendations were several that have since been implemented, including the following:

- that states extend foster care services to young people beyond the age of 18 to assist with transition,
- that individual independent living plans and services be put into place for foster care youth who will age out of foster care,
- that foster care youth should have formal and informal life skills training in preparation for their independence, and
- that foster care youth be made eligible for postsecondary educational assistance (pp. 61-63).

Also among the recommendations were others that have not been so well implemented. Those recommendations include making efforts to assure that contacts with the biological family are maintained even if the youth will not return home, assuring that the young person is involved in decision-making regarding his or her own life, making every effort to minimize the number of placement changes during the child's foster care experience, and assuring that each foster care child or young adult has an individualized educational plan with specific career goals and methods to achieve them (p. 63). Although not necessarily implemented well, the conclusions and recommendations of the Duva and Raley did resonate with some of the policy changes that were under consideration at about the same time.

In 1986, federal legislation passed that established independent living programs for foster care youth in transition. Westat, Inc. was contracted by the Department of Health and Human Services to complete a national study on the effectiveness of those programs. The research involved 1,644 youth who left care during 1987 and 1988. Phase 1 of this two-phased study provided an assessment of the needs of the youth preparing to transition out of care. The researchers found that prior to enactment of the 1986 legislation, the independent living programs of most states focused very narrowly on living arrangements. After the legislation, most states, including Florida, increased the scope of their programs to include a wider continuum of services, including such benefits as life skills training, vocational education, and employment assistance. Florida's program for independent living arrangements to qualified youth, and its policy of completing needs assessments for eligible youth, were both cited in the study as best practices (Cook et al., 1990).

Phase 1 of the 1990 Westat study also provided a snapshot of outcomes for youth leaving foster care between January 1, 1987 and July 31, 1988—less than two years after enactment of the 1986 federal legislation. Despite encouraging news regarding the enlargement of state programs, the progress in terms of outcomes for these young people could be described as bleak at best. Only 48% of the 18 and 19 year olds leaving care had completed high school, which was 16% lower than the national educational attainment rate of 64% for that same year. While the study reported that as many as 60% of eligible young people had received some living service training prior to leaving state care, only 31% were enrolled in an independent living program. The researchers also learned that while 56% of men and 55% of women ages 16 to 19 held jobs in 1986, only 39% of youth exiting foster care had been employed. The authors of the study quickly point out, however, that the reported employment data are not directly comparable due to different reporting methodologies. Nonetheless, they assert that the national percentages presented may serve as “a yardstick” for comparison between the two populations (Cook, McClean, & Ansell, 1990, p. 7-7). The study also reported 38% of youth were experiencing emotional disturbance, 17% had drug problems, 17% of all females were pregnant, 9% had health problems, and 3% had no housing at the time of their exit from foster care (pp. 7-6 – 7-7).

Although these findings may seem grim, the conclusions of Phase 1 allowed for cautious optimism regarding impending improvement in outcomes for youth transitioning out of care. Cook, McLean, and Ansell, who authored the 1990 study, pointed out that the federal legislation was still young and that the independent living programs in many

states were still under development. That optimism, however, may have dimmed with the release of Phase 2.

The second phase provided follow-up on youth from the earlier study and provided some enlightening, if not disturbing details of ways in which the program left young people unprepared for their independence. The data show that 2.5 to 4 years after leaving care, “54% completed high school, 49% were employed at the time of the study interview, 35% had maintained a job for at least one year, 40% were a cost to the community at the time of interview, 60% of the young women had birthed a child, 25% were homeless for at least one night, the median weekly salary was \$205, and 17% were completely self supporting” (Cook et al., 1990, p. xiv). The authors summarize by saying that “In general, the status of older foster care youth 2.5 to 4 years post discharge is only adequate at best” (p. xiv). Clearly the long-term effectiveness of the states’ independent living programs left much to be desired. Since its publication, this comprehensive piece of research has served as the foundation for foster care youth in transition research and is often cited in major studies (Burley & Halpern, 2001; *Outcomes for youth*, 2001; Courtney et al., 2001; McMillan & Tucker, 1999; & Wertheimer, 2002).

The Westat studies (Cook, et al., 1990, Cook, et al., 1991) served as a jumping-off point for an array of studies that explored related topics such as life skills preparation and youth in transition, as well as specific aspects of independent living programs. In 1995, Edmund Mech and Robert Ayasse separately published research regarding the individual components of various independent living programs (e.g. mentoring, educational services, etc.). The resultant attention to their work initiated a flurry of similar studies, each looking at some element of the program in detail. To help keep focus, Mech then

advocated for a needs-based research agenda for independent living (Loman & Siegel, 2000). A companion study by the Workforce Strategy Center, sponsored by the Annie E. Casey foundation and published in 2000, compared 11 independent living programs from nine states² to describe programs currently being offered, to identify best practices, and to suggest additional programs and resources to enhance current programs. The study found that among these 11 programs, ten included skill building programs, eight included academic counseling and an introduction to college, seven included a career counseling component and provided work experience, five offered mentoring, four provided employment training and financial aid, and only two considered transportation needs (Promising practices: School to career and postsecondary education for foster care youth; a guide for policymakers and practitioners, p. 4).

The Chafee Independence Program of 1999 sparked new interest in the field and states began to look closely at their own programs in terms of the Chafee outcomes. Burley and Halpern (2001) examined educational attainment for youth who aged out of care in the state of Washington. They learned that 34% of those youth leaving foster care at age 18 or older had no high school diploma or GED, 38% were enrolled in educational or vocational programs, and the remaining 28% had no educational involvement (p. 6). Courtney et al. (2001) undertook a longitudinal study of foster care youth who had emancipated from Wisconsin's child welfare system in 1995 and 1996. Interestingly, in the first phase of this study, 92% of respondents were either "very optimistic" or "fairly optimistic" about their futures (p. 704). Most expressed a desire not only to graduate

² The states included in the study were Alabama, Connecticut, Maine, Maryland, Ohio, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Virginia, and Wisconsin. Connecticut and Alabama each had two programs represented in the study.

high school, but also to enter (79%) and complete (63%) college (p. 704). Most of the respondents indicated that they expected to accomplish their desired educational goals. But for many, attainment of those objectives would be particularly challenging. Thirty percent reported that they had failed to complete a grade at some time in the past, and 37% reported having been in one or more special education classes (p. 705). The second wave of interviews, conducted 12 to 18 months after these youth had exited care, illustrated the harsh reality. Although 55% had completed high school or a GED, 37% had not. Only 9% had entered college (pp. 705-706). The results for McMillan and Tucker (1999) were not much better. These researchers examined the status of foster care youth in Missouri who left the system between October 1, 1992 and September 30, 1993, without ever being returned to a family setting. In this study, only 39% of youth had completed high school or earned a GED before leaving the foster care system. Almost half (45.2%) had neither employment nor a high school diploma upon leaving care (p. 348).

More recently, Richard Wertheimer published a research brief in December of 2002 through Child Trends, Inc., that summarizes the problem of youth who age out of care. This paper, aptly entitled *Youth who 'age out' of foster care: Troubled lives, troubling prospects*, gives a descriptive snapshot of these young people juxtaposed with a research-supported view of their likely future. He concludes with a discussion of policy implications. He suggests, from a macro perspective, that the solution to the issue of transitioning foster care youth is to focus on the children before they reach the point of transition. In other words, he advocates for eliminating the problem rather than treating the solution. His approach is three-pronged. First, he asserts that policy makers must

find a way to reduce the number of children born into high risk environments in the first place. Next, he recommends that policies aimed at abuse and neglect prevention efforts would help to keep children already at risk from coming into care. Finally, he offers that for those children already in the system, the answer rests in finding them safe, permanent homes. While it would seem that this objective is at the very heart of the child welfare system, he charges that the system itself may work counter to the goal. To evidence his claim, he points out the fact that the federally imposed mandate of 12 months from the time of the abuse to the time of permanency, however well intended, is an arbitrary artificiality that might actually force expediency over best practice. Wertheimer's widely circulated document is the "Reader's Digest Condensed" version of the problem and could easily serve as a primer for anyone who needs a quick and pithy review of the issue.

The Florida perspective on the issue mirrored the national view. In December 2005, the Office of Policy Analysis & Government Accountability (OPPAGA) – an office of the Florida Legislature – published Report No. 05-61, which reviewed the plight of Florida's foster care youth transitioning out of care. The scope of the report addressed three questions:

1. What are the education and employment outcomes for foster youth?
2. To what extent are former foster youth receiving financial assistance through the program?
3. Is the [Florida] Department [of Children and Families] adequately monitoring the delivery of contracted independent living services? (p. 1)

While this study looks at all foster care youth – not just those who aged out of the system – the results are still relevant. The study found that foster care teens scored significantly lower on the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (FCAT) than did the general population (22% versus 52% for math, and 18% versus 38% for reading). The research also indicated that foster care teens were 8% more likely to be held back a grade in school, and are 31% more likely to change schools at least once. Similar results were found regarding the likelihood of having disabilities, the likelihood to have disciplinary problems, and the likelihood of being homeless. It is not surprising, therefore, that the study found that only 21% of foster care youth attend postsecondary institutions, as opposed to 54% of Florida’s general population (OPPAGA, 2005, p. 4-6).

The OPPAGA (2005) study also looked at whether Florida’s foster care youth take advantage of the state and federal programs financial assistance programs. The conclusion is disheartening. Despite the fact that nearly \$20 million has been disbursed to former foster care youth from 2003-2005, “relatively few potentially eligible youth have received this assistance,” state the authors (p. 8). A percentage of assistance awardees relative to the total eligible population cannot be provided, however, as “the Department of Children and Families has not established a method for tracking youth who qualify for assistance” (p. 8). As a result, the report was able to provide only anecdotal information regarding participation rates and possible reasons for non-participation.

The providers we contacted indicated that some former foster youth want nothing to do with the program once they reach adulthood, and that some likely made a smooth transition to independent living and reached their

educational goals without state assistance. However, some providers indicate that eligible youth are not receiving needed financial assistance. For example, one provider reported that as of July 2005, it was disbursing these funds to 103 young adults, but estimated that there were at least 125 more former foster care young adults in the county who may be eligible for assistance but were not being served. (OPPAGA, 2005, p. 8)

The researchers of the OPPAGA (2005) report hypothesize additional reasons for the low participation rates. They cite a lack of knowledge among the target population, stringent program requirements, and funding shortfalls driven by data deficiencies and funding stream restrictions. It seems that while Florida has been able to recognize that there is a problem, is it still floundering in the pursuit of a solution.

Another recent piece of research, lead by Dr. Joan Merdinger from the School of Social Work at San Jose State University explored the academic success of 216 former foster care youth attending college on 11 campuses of a large state university system. The study included a survey that was mailed to the target population, as well as to two comparison groups. It also included qualitative interviews drawn from a subsample of the survey respondents. Although targeted more broadly toward college success in general, the research methodology included questions on the survey that focused on some of the same issues presented in this study. The survey asked, for example, about the importance of seven specific items in the college decision process. Choice factors that proved most influential were information about financial aid, advisement about college, other experiences, and college preparation classes (Merdinger, Hines, Osterling & Wyaatt, 2005, p. 881). The survey also included questions regarding the respondents'

social support structure, and asked questions about the participants' employment status and financial situation. Even more to the point of personal support, the survey included a question that asked whether or not the respondent knew someone from whom he could borrow \$200, to which 75.7% of the respondents replied "yes." This piece of research, although intended to answer a breadth of questions regarding educational success, comes the closest to obtaining any depth of understanding about the college choice process for foster care youth.

A relatively new advocacy organization with research interests, the Youth Transition Funders Group (YTFG) was formed in 2001, partly in response to rising concern about the challenges of foster care youth transitioning out of care. The YTFG is actually a network of grantmakers whose mission is to help vulnerable youth make a successful transition to adulthood by age 25. The network includes such funders as the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, the Charles and Helen Schwab Foundation, and the Eckerd Family Foundation – all stand-outs among advocates for disadvantaged young people. The YTFG develops and helps to fund programs specifically for transitioning foster care youth, as well as programs for youth who have dropped out of school and young people involved in the juvenile justice system.

Connected by 25 is a foster care youth transition program that was developed and supported by the Foster Care Work Group of the YTFG. The *Connected by 25* program provides to former foster care youth ages 18-25 an array of supports and services to help assure their connectedness to society, and their ultimate success, as productive adults. Their program hinges upon five key strategies:

- Advocating and supporting educational attainment,
- Facilitating access to workforce development opportunities,
- Providing financial literacy education,
- Encouraging savings and asset development, and
- Creating entrepreneurship opportunities.

Still in its infancy, the *Connected by 25* program currently exists in two beta test sites – Alameda, California; and Tampa, Florida. Founded upon grant funding and dedicated to advocacy for disadvantaged youth, the *Connected by 25* program is underpinned by an understanding of the need for evaluation and measurement. As such, the program managers are monitoring outcomes as the program continues to grow, with the hope that the results may be used to advocate for broad policy changes, and that the project may be replicated (*Connected by 25*, n.d.). In the process, the *Connected by 25* program provides a rich field of data for researchers interested in the transition of former foster care youth into independent adulthood. *Connected by 25* proved integral to the success of this study, as will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

The College Choice Process

The construct of “college choice” emerged in higher education literature more than two decades ago. The literature in this field can be divided into two subcategories. One group of studies focuses on student characteristics that serve as predictors of the likelihood of college enrollment. For example, the effects of gender, socioeconomic status, and early academic performance (Trusty, Robinson, Plata, & Ng, 2000), ethnicity (Perna, 2000), guidance and information (Plank & Jordan, 2001), parental encouragement (Sewell & Shaw, 1968), social class and college costs (Paulsen & St. John, 2002) have all

been subjected to empirical analysis. In general, the results of these studies have proven to be fairly unambiguous. Specifically, it has been shown that certain psychological characteristics, like higher self-esteem and a positive regard for occupational status, were positively correlated with college aspirations. (Alfassi, 2003; Pajares, 1996) Family characteristics like parental expectations and higher socioeconomic status influence the child's predisposition toward higher education (Bateman & Sprull, 1996; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Paulson & St. John; Plank & Jordan, 2001; Trusty, Robinson, Plata, & Ng, 2000). School variables like high school Grade Point Average (GPA) and teachers' aspirations impact a student's likelihood of choosing to attend a postsecondary institution (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Choy (2002) asserts that having parents who went to college, having a group of friends who plan to attend college, and having parental support throughout the college application process have all been shown to impact positively on the likelihood that a young person will enter and succeed in post secondary education. The effects of demographic characteristics like race and gender have proven more elusive. Although the research has been mixed, a striking theme threaded through the literature is the tendency of race and gender to interact with other variables (Mau & Bikos, 2000). Based upon research, then, if one were to describe a composite of the young person most likely to choose to attend an institution of higher learning, it would be a middle- to upper-class white male with a good GPA, a group of peers who also plan to attend college, and parents who encourage and expect college attendance.

Studies in the second broad category of college choice literature provide analyses of the choice process itself. Beginning in the early 1980s, several models were developed (D. Chapman, 1981; R. Chapman, 1984; Jackson, 1982; and Litten, 1982), each describing various phased models of the process. Models describe anywhere from three to seven stages that a potential student moves through in the course of deciding whether and where to attend an institution of higher learning. Litten (1982) describes the college choice process as a funnel. At first, a large number of potential students consider whether to attend college enter the process, but over time, progressively fewer numbers of students move through the process until only a small proportion actually make it to matriculation. Bateman and Spruill (1996) suggest that the various lenses through which researchers consider the college choice process can be grouped into three categories. Econometric models focus on economic and academic factors, sociological models examine the role of status and prestige in the decision process, and combined models look at a mix of factors from the other two perspectives.

Plank and Jordan (2001) point out that while most of these models include as many as five or six stages (e.g. aspirations, decision to attend higher education, search, application, admission, and enrollment), it is easier to follow the model of Hossler and Gallagher (1987) and collapse those stages into just three – *predisposition*, also known as college aspiration; *search*, during which the prospective student collects information regarding postsecondary options; and *choice* wherein the student selects and enrolls in an institution. The stage relevant to this discussion is predisposition since it is at this stage that a young person's background, experience, and demographics have served to shape

his hopes, dreams, and aspirations (Mau & Bikos, 2000). Interestingly, it is this critical phase that Hossler and Gallagher (1987) assert receives the least attention in the literature.

Special Populations and First Generation College Students

With so many unique complications confounding their lives, foster care children and youth qualify as a *special population* within higher education. The term *special population*, as defined in Section 3 of the Carl D. Perkins Vocational-Technical Education Act of 1998, means:

- a. individuals with disabilities
- b. individuals from economically disadvantaged families, *including foster children*
- c. individuals preparing for nontraditional training and employment
- d. single parents, including single pregnant women
- e. displaced homemakers
- f. individuals with other barriers to educational achievement, including individuals with limited English proficiency

(Report of the California Community College, n.d., p. 2, [italics added])

Special population students have characteristics that make it inherently more difficult for them to access and persist within higher education. Recognizing that by this definition, there are groups beyond those specified in the Perkins Act that require attention, researchers and institutions alike have extended the definition of a special population to include other disadvantaged groups for which services and programs are

provided. Children of military members or public service workers and first-generation college students, for example, are often included in the consideration of targeted recruitment efforts, special scholarships, and student support programs.

The unique social and economic challenges of *first-generation college students* in particular parallel the challenges of foster care youth who are considering postsecondary education. Like foster care youth, the first generation student is likely to have less knowledge about higher education (e.g. costs, application process), to have a lower level of family income and support, to be less well academically prepared, and to have lower degree expectations (Pascarella, et al., 2003). Additionally, the range of anxieties and difficulties common to most college freshmen is, for these students, further compounded by dramatic cultural, social, and academic transitions (Rendon, 1992; Rendon, Hope & Associates, 1996; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella & Nora, 1996). Just as first-generation students see college as an alien environment, foster care youth must see their first steps into the world without state support as a walk into a frightening unknown. Moreover, it is worth noting that most foster children who go to college are also first generation college students, giving them a double dose of fears and anxieties.

Literature regarding first generation college students stretches back to the early 1980s (Billson & Terry, 1982), but research regarding this special population did not emerge as a dominant theme until nearly a decade later. Research in the 1990s found that first-generation college students “often may not have as much support from their families” (Hertel, 2002; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Terenzini et al., 1996; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). Similarly, a 1988 study on foster care youth aging out of care found that 53% of the mothers and 72% of the fathers had no visits with their children during the

last year of their placement (Duva & Raley, 1988). It can be presumed, then, that foster care youth and first-generation college students share a general lack of parental support or expectations regarding postsecondary education. At about the same time, studies like Inman and Mayes (1999) *The importance of being first: Characteristics of first generation community college students*, and Susan Choy's (2000) *Students whose parents did not go to college: Postsecondary access, persistence and attainment*, emerged. These studies found that by and large, "college enrollment rates vary considerably with parents' educational attainment" (Choy, 2001), and that parents' educational achievement has a statistically significant bearing on the children's educational outcomes, even when controlling for educational expectations, academic preparation, parental involvement, and peer influence (p. 8) – all the factors that are generally found to be lacking for foster care children aging out of care. Further, the 1999 Inman and Mayes study determined that "first-generation enrollees came from a unique socioeconomic background, were motivated by a different set of goals, and were constrained by a different set of limitations than those whose parents were college educated" (abstract). A 2002 study that looked at differences among first and second generation college students found that first generation college students were more likely to be influenced by intellectualism, whereas second generation students relied heavily on friend support (Hertel, 2002). Since most foster care youth do not have close friends, it is tempting to speculate that they, too, if motivated at all toward higher education, would be more influenced by their own love of learning than by the support of friends or family. If they were lucky enough to have a high level of intellect, then they, too, might be more likely to be positively predisposed to the challenges of postsecondary education. While some researchers

focused on what the community colleges should do to help first-generation college students (McConnell, 2000), others found that “first-generation college students have a better chance of earning a bachelor’s degree if they start postsecondary education at a four-year college rather than a two-year college” (Bui, 2002).

The Bui Study: Research specific to the college choice decision factors among first generation college students

The study conducted by Dr. Khanh-Van T. Bui (2002) offers an instrument for exploring the reasons behind the predisposition of first-generation college students toward higher education. This instrument explores 16 factors believed to be important in the decision whether to pursue higher education. Those factors include the influence of family, friends, and significant adults in the high school environment; parental expectation; the need for a degree to accomplish a career goal; the relationship between educational attainment and income; the love of learning; the desire for independence; the desire to move away from the parents’ home or out of the parents’ neighborhood; the influence of social status and family honor; the need for skills to function effectively in society; the desire to avoid immediate immersion in the job market; and the drive to improve the quality of life for one’s self and one’s children.

For her sample, Dr. Bui (2002) recruited 64 first-generation college students from the Program Leading to Undergraduate Success at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). The comparative sample came from the students taking introductory psychology courses. That group was split into those whose parents both had at least a bachelor’s degree, and those for whom both parents had some college experience but no degrees. All were freshmen. Of the reasons for pursuing higher education, Bui found

that first-generation college students placed less emphasis on the influence of siblings and other relatives and the desire to move away from the parents' home when considering college attendance. In contrast, they more heavily considered respect and status, family honor, and the desire to help the family after graduation.

The Bui survey (2002) provided clearly defined choice factors solidly founded on the literature base and underpinned by theory. It explores choice factors from several perspectives. Some of her questions addressed decision issues related to familial expectations, financial and career goals, and social considerations. Because of the multifaceted nature and the simplicity of the college choice section of Bui's survey instrument, it was selected as an appropriate tool to use with this group of foster care youth aging out of care, with the caveat that it would be modified to provide for circumstances unique to foster care youth. Dr. Bui expressed her permission for use and modification of her survey instrument (K. Bui. personal communication, February 1, 2004). The first version of the modified instrument is provided at Appendix C. A detailed discussion of the modifications to the Bui instrument, and subsequent modifications after beta testing, is provided in Chapter Three of this document.

Chapter Summary

The theoretical underpinnings for this study are three-pronged. First, the literature base of social welfare has been explored to determine what is already known about foster care youth. The few longitudinal studies that have been done, such as the Westat studies of 1990 and 1991 (Cook et al.), paint a grim profile of this population—a group with an overrepresentation of emotional and behavioral issues, with a tendency toward legal involvement and social welfare dependency, and with a reduced likelihood

of academic accomplishment. This body of literature further underscores the difficulties of researching this population, largely because of the high rate of sample attrition compounded by a natural suspicion of persons perceived to be part of a “system” or a “bureaucracy” —a profile that, unfortunately, fits many researchers.

At the center of this study are research questions related specifically to the issue of *college choice*. This issue emerged in the literature in the early 1980s. Those early studies attempted to model the decision process that potential students go through when trying to decide whether or not to attend college, and then once the decision is made, trying to decide which institution to attend. Another branch of the literature focused on student characteristics, rather than on the process. These studies examined the predictive value of such factors as gender, socioeconomic status, parental encouragement, and guidance in the college on the likelihood of college attendance. This study falls into both of these lines of inquiry. While the personal characteristics of these young people seemingly would predict a reduced likelihood of college enrollment, the study looks beyond those factors to ask specific questions about the decision process itself. Clearly both bodies of college choice literature have relevance to this study.

The study has further been informed by work in the field of *special populations*, specifically of the population of first generation college students. Since the topic of foster care youth and the college choice process is a new topic, there are relatively few instruments or studies upon which to draw. With that in mind, the researcher looked toward other populations with similar characteristics. Foster care youth, much like first-generation college students, often lack friends or family members who have personal knowledge of higher education. There is no one to help assuage concerns and confusion

regarding admissions procedures, registration processes, and financial aid complexities. This common ground allows the literature of special populations to apply as well to the foster care youth population. Further, it is the combination of social welfare literature, college choice literature, and special populations literature, then, that provides the theoretical foundation for this research.

Chapter 3

Methodology

A mixed methodology research design was used to look at the differences in the factors considered in the college choice process between eligible foster care youth who chose to participate in higher education and those who chose not to participate. The three research questions to be answered were as follows:

1. What proportion of eligible foster care youth in Florida are taking advantage of the state and federal higher education scholarship and subsidy opportunities, and is that proportion higher or lower than the proportion of eligible students from the non-foster care population who attend institutions of higher education?
2. Of those foster care youth who are attending institutions of higher education in Florida, where are they attending and in what proportion (vis-à-vis, community colleges versus universities versus proprietary institutions)?
3. What factors do foster care youth consider when deciding whether or not to participate in postsecondary education, and how heavily does each factor weigh on the college choice process?

The study was conducted in two parts. The first part allowed for collection of data relevant to research questions one and two. The second part allowed for collection of data relevant to research question three.

The success of this study hinged largely upon the support of the Independent Living Coordinators throughout the state. These professionals, less than twenty statewide and either employees of the Department of Children and Families or employees of companies subcontracted by the department, are charged with the responsibility for identifying youth eligible for independent living programs under the Chafee Independence Act, for developing programs to meet the needs of their independent living youth, for administering the resources as provided under the Chafee Independence Act and related legislatively mandated programs, for tracking those young people and their participation in various independent living programs, and for reporting back to the state on numerous identified variables related to their young people. At the time of this study, there were 17 Independent Living Coordinators in the state of Florida—each responsible for the youth in his or her region. These professionals are, for the most part, very involved with young persons in their programs. Typically their role extends beyond administration to a much more personal level. Most Independent Living Coordinators know each of their youth by name and can recount the circumstances unique to each. They often serve as mentors, counselors, and even friends to the young people they serve. They know which ones hope to pursue higher education, which have special needs, which require extra nurturing, and which are most likely to become runaways. Significantly, they also know how to get in touch with these young people by mail and by phone. If foster care young adults are likely to trust anyone in “the system,” it would be the Independent Living Coordinator. It was determined, therefore, that in order for this

project to succeed, the Independent Living Coordinators would have to serve as the link between the researcher and the sample population.

Methodology for Research Question One

Research question number one asks, “What proportion of eligible foster care youth in Florida are taking advantage of the state and federal higher education scholarship and subsidy opportunities, and is that proportion higher or lower than the proportion of eligible students from the non-foster care population who attend institutions of higher education?” It seemed that historical and current data regarding how many foster care students are attending Florida’s state institutions, which institutions they are attending, and how many have completed degrees would be most readily obtainable from the Independent Living Coordinators throughout the state. A questionnaire (Appendix A) was developed to capture this information. Since the Chafee Independent Living legislation was signed into law in December 1999, the Independent Living Coordinators were asked to provide information about foster care youth participating in higher education programs for the academic years 2001-2002, 2002-2003, 2003-2004, and 2004-2005. So that percentages could be calculated, the Independent Living Coordinators were also asked to provide the number of students eligible but not participating in higher education. In May, 2005, The questionnaire was pilot tested with a sample of six staff members from the Heartland For Children Community Based Care Lead Agency for Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF) District 14. Selected for more than just convenience, these staff members are familiar with the Independent Living program in the state of Florida. It was believed that because of their experience, they would have

the knowledge base to provide relevant feedback on the Independent Living Coordinator survey instrument, thus helping to assure that questions and instructions for providing data on the required form were clear.

The questionnaires were then mailed out on October 15, 2005, to the Executive Directors of each of the 22 Community Based Care Lead Agencies throughout the state of Florida, with a cover letter requesting that they have their Independent Living Coordinators complete and return the questionnaires in the self-addressed, stamped envelopes provided. A cover letter to the Independent Living Coorder was also included. Once the questionnaires were returned, for each of the years of data provided, the number of foster care youth participating in higher education was divided by the number of eligible foster care youth. The resulting percentages were then compared to data from the Florida Department of Education.

Methodology for Research Question Two

Research question number two asks, “Of those foster care youth who are attending institutions of higher education in Florida, where are they attending and in what proportion (vis-à-vis, community colleges versus universities versus proprietary institutions)?” This question was answered in part by the Independent Living Coordinators through the same survey instrument provided at Appendix A. The responses to these questionnaires provided information regarding foster care youth higher education participation rates in various types of institutions. For each of the years for which data were provided, the number of foster care youth attending each type of institution was divided by the total number of all youth participating in higher education. For example, if there were 12 foster care youth participating in higher education

programs in fiscal year 2003-2004, and 3 of them were attending community colleges, then the calculation to determine the proportion of community college enrollment within the attending foster care population would be 3 divided by 12, or 25.0%. Data regarding the attendance rates at institutions of higher education in the state of Florida were obtained from the Florida Department of Education.

Methodology for Research Question Three

Research question number three asks, “What factors do foster care youth consider when deciding whether or not to participate in postsecondary education, and how heavily does each factor weigh on the college choice process?” A college choice survey and focus group discussion guide, targeted toward foster care youth ages 17-23, were developed. These tools, described in greater detail later, were approved with only minor revisions by the University of South Florida Institutional Review Board (IRB). But because this study sought to include minors in the custody of the state, a submission to the Florida Department of Health and Human Services IRB was also required. That board ruled that without a court order for each minor included in the study, permission would not be granted to include 17 year olds in the research sample. It was determined, therefore, to exclude them and to limit the study to foster care youth ages 18-23. With that modification, the permission from the Florida Department of Health and Human Services was no longer required, and the research began with a beta test on February 12, 2005.

The Independent Living Coordinator of DCF District 14 was provided with brochures, which invited foster care youth who met the research criteria to attend a two hour meeting in a hotel meeting room on the evening February 12, 2005. The brochure

promised food, drinks, and prizes for all attendees. The Independent Living Coordinator invited approximately eight young people, two of whom showed up for the meeting. During that meeting, the research protocol, survey instrument, and focus group discussion guide were beta tested. To assure confidentiality and to facilitate note-taking, participants were assigned false names for the duration of the meeting. At the conclusion of the meeting, the test participants identified three areas for improvement. First, they recommended that the format be changed so that the definitions of the answers appear on each page. They also recommended that the question regarding the enjoyment derived from learning and studying be broken into two separate questions. “I like to learn,” said one participant, “But I don’t necessarily like to study.” Finally, these participants recommended that the survey be read aloud to every group of participants. Many, they explained, would likely have reading problems and may be hesitant to admit as such if merely the offer to read the survey were to be made.

After beta testing the foster care youth survey tool and discussion guide protocol, a sample population was identified. The *Connected by 25* program grew out of the Youth Transition Funders Group Foster Care Work Group. Its purpose is “to ensure that foster care youth are educated, housed, banked, employed and connected to a support system by age 25.” The program promotes economic self-sufficiency in exiting foster care youth through the following five key strategies:

- Advocating and supporting educational attainment.
- Facilitating access to workforce development opportunities.
- Providing financial literacy education.

- Encouraging savings and asset development.
- Creating entrepreneurship opportunities.

(Connected by 25, n.d.)

With grant funding, *Connected by 25* has established two test sites – one in Alameda, California, and one in Tampa, Florida – to test whether these five strategies positively influence outcomes for young people leaving foster care. The Tampa program is funded by the Eckerd Family Foundation, the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Lumina Foundation for Education, and the Casey Family Programs. The Executive Director, Diane Zambito, is also the Independent Living Coordinator for the Suncoast Region of the Department of Children and Families, serving De Soto, Hillsborough, Manatee, Pasco, Pinellas, and Sarasota counties. The *Connected by 25* program in Tampa serves more than 150 young people ages 18-25. Although the program extends support and services to young adults to the age of 25, federal and state funded education and living subsidies expire at age 23. Ms. Zambito agreed to allow her youth ages 18-23 to participate in this study, and graciously offered her staff in support (D. Zambito, personal communication, September 30, 2005).

It was decided that all the meetings would take place on one day – the first day of the month – to coincide with the date the young people would be coming into the *Connected by 25* office to pick up their monthly stipend checks. It was also agreed that four sessions would be held at varying times on that one day so that young people would be able to work around their schedules. A brochure was developed, (Appendix B) announcing the date and times of the meetings, and included an RSVP card that could be collected by the *Connected by 25* staff members.

To encourage participation, free snacks and sodas were provided to all attendees. Moreover, each attendee was promised a “goodie bag” containing \$5.00 in fast food gift certificates, and various small gifts such as pens, candies, playing cards and note pads. Also, the brochure explained that in each meeting session, there would be a drawing for a \$50.00 gift certificate to Best Buy electronic store³. It was hoped that the combination of free food, a small guaranteed reward, and the chance for a bigger prize would enhance attendance.

On November 1, 2005, one month prior to the study, the *Connected by 25* staff members handed a brochure to each young person who picked up a check in person – approximately 75 young people. At the same time, each young person was asked to complete the RSVP card as a commitment of attendance. The staff kept a list of which young people registered for which sessions. Just prior to the meeting date, the staff called the registrants to remind them of the meeting. As a result, 34 youth, out of 42 who had complete RSVP cards, participated in the study on December 1, 2005.

The survey instrument was a modified version of the one used by Dr. Bui in her 2002 study regarding first-generation college students. Her Likert-scaled instrument explored sixteen factors that influence the college choice decision process. The survey included questions related to “familial expectations, financial goals, and career goals” (Bui, 2002). Because of the multifaceted nature of this survey and its simplicity, it was selected as an appropriate tool to use with this group of foster care youth aging out of care. It was believed that the similarities between foster care youth aging out of care and

³ A \$100.00 gift certificate was awarded during the beta test, but the amount of the award was reduced to \$50.00 when the study was redesigned and the number of meeting groups was increased from three to four.

the first-generation college student population, as discussed earlier in this document, were significant enough to justify use of this instrument. The original instrument was modified from a seven point scale to a five point scale, largely because this study is intended to focus on larger effect size than could be detected by a more precise subdivision of the responses. The five point scale allowed for the following possible responses:

- Strongly Agree – I thought about it, and this is extremely important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
- Agree – I thought about it, and this is important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
- Slightly agree – I thought about it, but it is only slightly important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
- Disagree – I thought about it, but it will not have any bearing at all on my final decision.
- Neutral – This never even occurred to me.

A copy of the first version of the survey – the one that was beta tested – is provided at Appendix C. At the suggestion of the two beta test participants, both transitioning foster care youth who met the criteria for the target population, the qualifying definitions for each of the responses were reprinted at the top of each page to make it easier for the respondents to answer consistently. The inclusion of a neutral response, which had not been provided in Dr. Bui’s version, allowed for these young people to provide an appropriate answer for decision criteria for which they may have had no experience base. Some of these youth, for example, may have had few or no experiences that would allow

them to conceptualize “family honor,” and so the construct of “family honor” was a decision criterion that might not have even occurred to them for consideration.

In order to divide the sample into those respondents who decided to attend college and those who decided not to attend, four questions were added to allow for that categorization. Again, upon the advice of the two beta test participants, the question regarding how much the respondent likes to “study and learn” was restructured into two separate questions. One last question was added that asked respondents to rate, on a scale from 1 to 100 (with 100 being the most likely), how likely it is that they would choose to attend an institution of higher learning within the next two years. This question was added in order to allow for an analysis to determine how closely the decision criteria correlated to the participants’ predisposition for college attendance. Dr. Bui agreed to allow her instrument to be used for this study (personal communication, February 1, 2004). A complete version of the final instrument, including modifications and format changes suggested from the beta test participants, is available at Appendix D.

Given that the Bui instrument was used specifically for first-generation college students, it must be noted that foster care youth aging out of care might have other issues coming to bear on the college choice process. Specifically, the influence of foster care parents or other non-relative adults might have had a stronger effect on this decision process than sibling educational aspirations or biological parent expectations. This issue was easily addressed by the addition of one question to the Bui instrument, which was, “When I consider attending college, I consider that my foster family or some other significant adult aside from school or my biological family persuaded me to go to

college.” Also, it was considered that there might have been issues related to the relative stability of placement or to the length of time spent in foster care. Again, those issues were addressed by the addition of two questions at the end of the survey.

But there was also the possibility that there were unanticipated considerations to be addressed. To get at those issues and to accommodate for any limitations of the Bui instrument, the questionnaire portion of the meeting with foster care youth was followed by focus groups. The focus group methodology was determined appropriate for this purpose for a number of reasons. For example, qualitative data can add a layer of insights not possible with a survey. It can provide an inductive perspective on the data so that new concepts, hypotheses, or theories may emerge (Merriam, 1998, p. 7). In particular, the use of the phenomenological approach to qualitative data collection in this study allowed for the exploration of the “essence” of an experience. The reality of being a foster child aging out of care and having to plan for self-sufficiency certainly meets the criterion of an experience that would have a “core meaning mutually understood” (Merriam, 1998, p. 15) by anyone experiencing it. A focus group study framed by a phenomenological methodology lead to a more profound understanding of the whole experience, a more comprehensive grasp of the relationships among the experiential essences of foster care youth in that situation, and insight into the psychological processes that came to bear on the various decision points throughout the experience.

While individual interviews might also have yielded the same result, focus groups provided three decided advantages in this study. First, the group nature of this methodology revealed perspectives that were reliant on the interaction of the participants (Morgan, 1997, p. 2). Many people often believe that their experience is unique, but the

group setting lead to an understanding that others shared the same range of thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Referencing his earlier research conducted in 1993 in partnership with R. A. Krueger, David Morgan explains, “the comparisons that participants make among each other’s experiences and opinions are a valuable source of insights into complex behaviors and motivations” (Morgan, 1997, p. 15).

Second, the group discussion format was particularly appropriate for this purpose as the experience being studied – i.e. the college choice decision process – is not one that the participants are likely to have thought about in detail (Morgan, 1997, p. 11). In many instances, comments from the participants tended to build upon each other, and each thought shared with the group lead to a network of related thoughts. A discussion thread that began with the very easily identified and articulated money theme, for example, would soon meander into an exchange regarding the more psychological or emotional drives for their decision processes.

Next, the focus group provided a distinct advantage over personal interviews in terms of efficiency. Focus groups allowed for the observation of a large amount of interaction in a limited amount of time. The trade-off of the depth to which we could explore the decision process of any one participant was not significant since the object of this study was a group tendency rather than an individual case study.

Another argument for the use of focus groups for this project was that the sample population had the foster care experience in common. They were all of similar age and background; they had an understanding of state dependency and state bureaucratic systems; they shared the emotional and psychological impact of having been removed from their biological families; and they had similar interactions with social workers,

counselors, and attorneys. If these groups had been not shared such a similar experience base, then it would have been likely that the discussion would provide so many vastly different experiences that none could be explored to any level of sufficiency (Morgan, 1997, 34). The participants in these groups, however, had enough in common that the focus group setting allowed for the controlled exchange of unique perspectives on shared experiences. Finally, there is courage in numbers. This may have been especially critical for this population, given their natural suspicion of adults in general, and of bureaucrats in particular. It seemed that the interaction of the group provided individual participants with the collective sense of confidence so that they felt comfortable in sharing their experiences.

Agenda for Focus Group Meetings

The meetings began with an invitation for participants to partake of snacks and sodas to help put participants at ease, to give them an opportunity to meet and greet each other⁴, and to give them a chance to become more comfortable with the interviewer. The social part of the meeting lasted approximately 10 minutes. The Informed Consent form was then reviewed with the participants, allowing all the time necessary to explain the steps that would be taken to take to protect the confidentiality of the study. Those steps, which took about 15 minutes to complete, are summarized as follows:

1. The Informed Consent forms were kept separate from the survey forms so that no one would know which participant provided which survey.

⁴ Many of these participants already knew each other from their affiliation with *Connected by 25*.

2. Participants were informed the discussion would be audio taped, but that the researcher would refer to them according to fictitious names so that their confidentiality would be protected. Participants were further encouraged to use false names with each other as well throughout the discussion. Name cards were prepared in advance and given to each participant so that all would know how to refer to each other. The same false names were used in each session. (Participant Number One, for example, was always named either Adam or Allison; Participant Number Two was always Bill or Brittany; and so on.)
3. Participants were told that the researcher would be personally transcribing the tapes so that no one else would hear their discussion.
4. An explanation was provided regarding how the tapes and the transcriptions would be secured after the study.
5. It was explained that the note-taker would be taking notes, but that those notes would track only the non-verbal dynamics of the discussion and any physical characteristics of the evening (such as room layout, etc.), and would use only the assigned pseudonyms in reference to any individual.
6. It was explained that the hired note-taker was also fully trained in the protection of research participant confidentiality, and that she would turn over to the researcher all notes immediately after each session.
7. Participants were given an opportunity to ask any questions or to raise any concerns.

Once that portion of the meeting was complete, the survey was administered. At the suggestion of the beta test participants, the survey was read aloud to the group to mitigate the impact of reading deficiencies. The survey took approximately 30 minutes. When all had completed the surveys, the discussion began. The researcher moderated the discussion with a funneled structure. This structure provided a compromise between the very tightly structured discussion that may limit the range of insights that can be explored and the very loosely structured discussion that may yield data that are more difficult to compare from group to group. In contrast, the funnel-based discussion began with open-ended, free discussion types of questions, and then moved toward specific discussion topics targeted toward the research questions. Although perhaps more difficult to moderate than either the structured or the unstructured formats, the funnel design was believed to be the most appropriate for this group. First, since this group may still have had issues related to reluctance to be cooperative, an opened-ended question that could be answered in a more conversational style may have seemed less threatening. This also seemed to provide an easier way for participants to become engaged in the conversation, rather than putting individual members on the spot with very specific questions too soon. Then, as the discussion ensued, the researcher worked toward asking specific questions about their feelings, thoughts, and emotions throughout the decision process whether to attend a higher education institution or not. A full Focus Group Interview Guide follows in Appendix E. The discussion took approximately an hour. The whole meeting took approximately an hour and a half.

It must be noted that until this study, focus group research methodology was relatively untried with this population. The input of the two beta test participants,

therefore, was critical to the success of this study. The beta test followed exactly the agenda and the format presented in this document. Then, based upon how the group responded, appropriate adjustments were made. Of particular concern was the fact that foster care youth might react differently in group settings than their non-foster care peers. It was difficult to anticipate the amount of time that may be needed to guide a productive group discussion with this population of participants. The beta test of the funneled discussion format allowed for appropriate adjustments to the agenda and to the instrument itself.

The research meeting protocol, survey instrument, and focus group discussion guide were beta tested with two foster care youth participants who recommended minor modifications to the instrument. First, they recommended that the format be changed so that the definitions of the answers appear on each page. They also recommended that the question regarding the enjoyment derived from learning and studying be broken into two separate questions. "I like to learn," said one participant, "But I don't necessarily like to study." Finally, these participants recommended that the survey be read aloud to every group of participants. Many, they explained, would likely have reading problems and may be hesitant to admit as such if merely the offer to read the survey were to be made. These changes were incorporated into the instrument, and copy of the final tool that was used is provided at Appendix C.

The pilot test also provided enough data so that work could begin on developing the programming for the statistical analysis of the survey data. Similarly, the results from the focus group portion of the pilot was used to begin work on developing the themes necessary for the categorization and coding of the qualitative data. Finally, the pilot

study allowed the researcher to become more familiar with the research instruments and comfortable with the delivery format so that their implementation in the other three groups were more consistent.

Survey Data Analysis

When the results were received, the surveys were coded for analysis. Those answered with *strongly agree* were coded as 4, *agree* were coded as 3, and *slightly agree* were coded as 2, *disagree* were coded as 1, and *neutral* were coded as 0. Next, a variety of statistical processes were run. For each question on the survey, descriptive statistics provided frequency distribution data, mean, variance and standard deviation, skewness and kurtosis. Next, the surveys were divided by gender, and the same set of descriptive statistics was run on the gender groups. Independent *t* tests were run to determine whether there were statistically significant differences between the males and the females on the means for each question. The surveys were then divided according into two groups: those who decided or will likely decide in favor of postsecondary education (the *positively predisposed* group), and those who decided against higher education (the *not positively predisposed* group) and an analysis was conducted to determine whether there was a discernible distance. Independent *t tests* were run on each question to determine which questions offer statistically significant results.

Focus Group Data Analysis

The audiotapes from the focus groups were transcribed and any notes taken during the discussion were incorporated. Then, the transcripts were reviewed for emergent themes – words, thoughts, or phrases that seemed common across the focus group interviews. A coding system was developed for each of those themes using proven

qualitative research data interpretation methodology (Merriam, 1998, pp. 164-166; Morgan, 1997, pp. 60-62). Moreover a system was developed to track the number of times the themes emerged by gender and by predisposition to postsecondary education. This provided information regarding whether the groups experienced similar themes, whether their experiences were different in some way, and whether there were other factors not considered by the modified Bui instrument that came to bear on their decision processes.

Chapter Summary

Three research questions have been presented. The first two research questions serve to determine what proportion of foster care youth eligible for higher education programs actually participate, and of those who do participate, what types of institutions of higher education do they choose to attend. The Independent Living Coordinators were surveyed to obtain that information. Then, in the second phase of the study, four meetings were scheduled⁵ with transitioning foster care youth from the *Connected by 25* program. During those meetings, foster care youth were asked to complete a survey, patterned on an instrument used with first-generation college students, in order to determine what factors these young people consider when they are deciding whether or not to pursue education after completing high school or obtaining a GED. In addition to the survey, a guided interview format was used to elicit from these youth other possible considerations that were not addressed on the survey instrument. It proved true that that these young people had additional factors that came to bear on their decision processes

⁵ Although four meetings were scheduled, five were actually held, as will be explained in Chapter 4.

that would not even occur to non-foster care youth. The analyses of the surveys and of the focus group interviews provided valuable insight into the college choice process of foster care youth aging out of care, as discussed in Chapters 4 and 5.

Chapter Four

Results

This research study was designed to ask critical questions regarding the college choice decision process for young people transitioning out of foster care. For each of the three research questions, descriptive statistics are presented first, followed by the inferential statistics that emerged from each data set. A discussion regarding the results of the qualitative component of the study, based upon the focus group meetings and transcripts, is also provided.

Research Question One – Survey Results

The first research question asked, “What proportion of eligible foster care youth in Florida are taking advantage of the state and federal higher education scholarship and subsidy opportunities, and is that proportion higher or lower than the proportion of eligible students from the non-foster care population who attend institutions of higher education?” To answer this question, a survey was developed and mailed out to the twenty-two Community-Based Care agencies that have been contracted throughout the state to assume the responsibilities of foster care for Florida’s children and young persons under protective services. The hope was that the Community-Based Care agency would require the Independent Living Coordinator – the staff member charged with responsibility for this population of young adults – to complete the survey and return it in the self-addressed, pre-stamped envelope provided. A cover letter to the Community-Based Care agency Executive Director was mailed with the survey, as was a separate cover letter to the Independent Living Coordinator.

Of the twenty-two mailed out, only five were returned, representing four DCF Districts (1, 4a, 4b, 7, and 10)⁶ and 13 counties. While this represents nearly a 23% response rate, which would often times be seen as a great result for a mailed survey, it was somewhat disappointing as the number of surveys mailed was so small. There may be several reasons for the small return. First, the privatization of the child welfare system in Florida is relatively young, and many of the agencies contracted to manage the child welfare system are less than a few years old. The earliest years of any new business are typically unsettled as policies, procedures, and staff roles all take shape. It is not surprising, therefore, that the survey mailed to the Independent Living Coordinators did not receive a high priority.

But the first problem was further compounded. Of the five surveys that were returned, only two had data for more than one year, and even those were not able to stratify the data to the level requested. Although disappointing, this is not entirely surprising. During the transition process, it is not unusual for the original agency to retain all historical records, leaving the newly contracted agency with a “blank slate” upon which to build their own information systems. While the responsibility for the safety, permanency, and well-being for the state’s children transferred to these newly formed private agencies, the years of history and data did not.

Still, some information was received, and although it is not complete enough to meet the threshold for statistical significance, it is still of practical importance in that it provides at least some insights into the enrollment patterns for this sample population. The first question asks about the proportion of attendance rates among eligible foster care

⁶ Surveys were returned from two different agencies within District 4.

youth. District 10, which serves Broward County, was able to provide information with a breakdown by fiscal year as seen in Table 1.

Table 1

Proportion of Eligible Foster Care Youth Attending Higher Education in Broward County

| Fiscal Year (July 1 - June 30) | Eligible | Attended | % |
|-----------------------------------|----------|----------|------|
| 2001-2002 | 316 | 26 | 8.2 |
| 2002-2003 | 322 | 42 | 13.0 |
| 2003-2004 | 331 | 52 | 15.7 |
| Total | 969 | 120 | 12.4 |

Although attendance data were provided for 2004-2005, eligibility data were not, thereby precluding the percentage calculation. Based upon the available data, then, it seems that only about 12.4% of eligible foster care youth are attending postsecondary education programs. This number is well below the general population average of more than 60% (NCES, 2002). On a more optimistic note, however, if District 10 is representative, it would seem that participation rates are on the rise. Of the 15 districts in the Florida DCF organization, District 10 is considered to be one of only four that is “urban” according to the US Census Bureau and the National Center for Education Statistics. In that sense,

then, it may not be considered typical. On the other hand, District 10 is just now in the process of privatization, and it would not be atypical to see positive gains during and immediately after transition (Armstrong et al., 2005).

Research Question Two – Survey Results

The second research question asked, “Of those foster care youth who are attending institutions of higher education in Florida, where are they attending and in what proportion?” The same survey tool that was used to answer Research Question One was designed to capture the data necessary to answer Research Question Two as well. The same limitations apply here, and data are scant. Still, District 4 was able to provide rich, stratified data from which some lessons can be learned. For fiscal year 2004-2005, two other districts provided information. District 7 includes Orange, Osceola, Seminole, and Brevard counties; District 4 represents Nassau, Baker, Duval, Clay, and St. Johns counties; and the Lakeview Center serves a population in three of District 1’s four counties – Escambia, Santa Rosa, and Okaloosa. For fiscal years 2002-2003, and 2003-2004, data were also provided from a single service center in District 4. Table 2 provides the results.

Table 2

Foster Care Youth Attending Postsecondary Education, by Institution Type

| Fiscal Year (July 1 – June 30) | Community College | State University | Another type of institution | Graduated from Community College or State University |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| ^a 2001-2002 | 11 | 4 | 6 | |
| ^b 2002-2003 | 18 | 8 | 7 | 1 |
| ^c 2003-2004 | 19 | 7 | 11 | |
| ^d 2004-2005 | 42 | 13 | 19 | 1 |
| Total | 90 | 32 | 43 | 2 |

a. District 10 reporting

b. Districts 4a and 10 reporting

c. Districts 1, 4a, and 10 reporting

d. Districts 1, 4a, 4b, 7, and 10 reporting

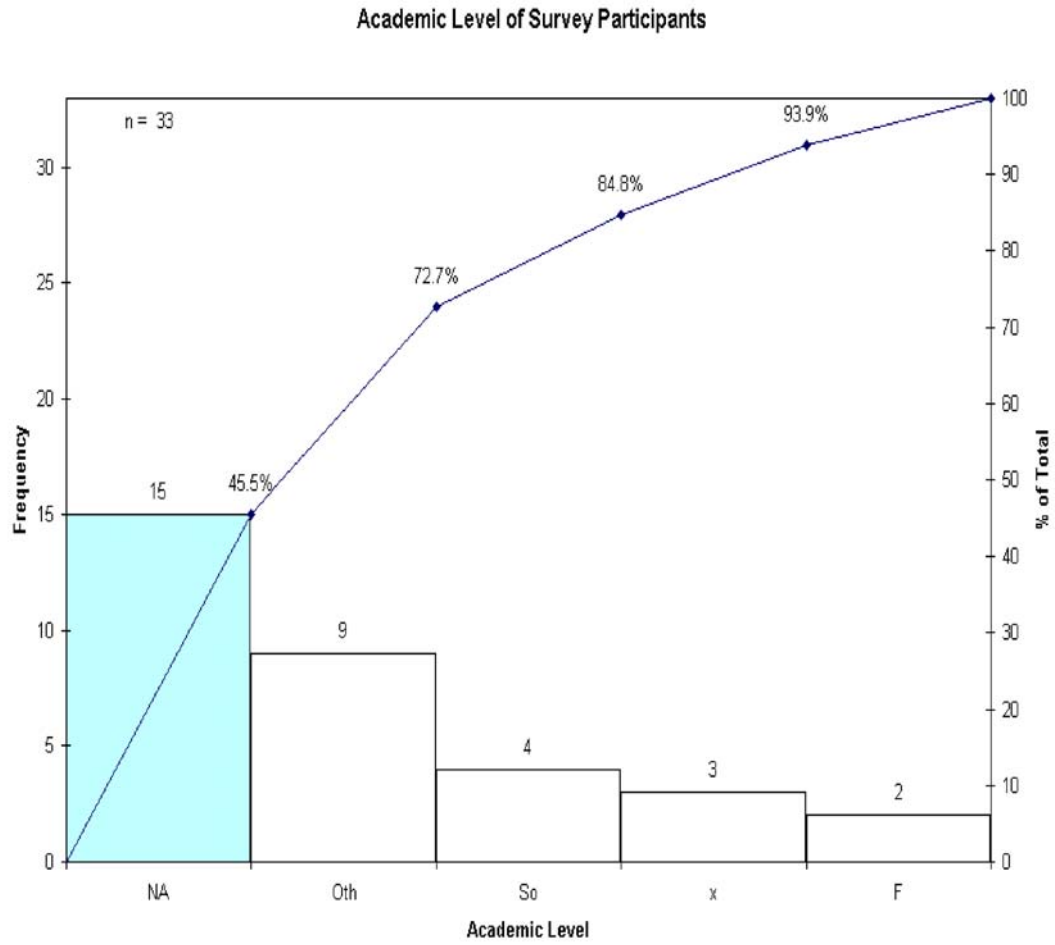
Graduation information from these sources is, not surprisingly, limited as these Community-Based Care agencies assumed control of the program within the last four years, and most young adults in their programs would not yet have had time to graduate. It must also be noted that these numbers are not unduplicated. That is, a student who was enrolled and included in fiscal year 2002-2003 might very well also be counted again in 2003-2004 if still enrolled. Still, these numbers reveal that foster care youth transitioning out of care enroll most heavily in community colleges. In fact, community college enrollments comprise 54.5% of the enrollments reported in Table 2.

Research Question Three – Survey Results

The third research question asks, “What factors do foster care youth consider when deciding whether or not to participate in postsecondary education, and how heavily does each factor weigh on the college choice process?” A survey, modified from an instrument originally designed by Dr. Khahn-Van T. Bui (2002) for first generation college students (see Appendix D), was administered to explore the extent to which these factors come to bear on the ultimate decision.

The survey was administered to 34 participants. Thirty-three completed surveys were returned. One was returned blank. There were twelve males, twenty females, and one who did not declare a gender. Fifteen indicated that they were already enrolled in some form of higher education. The Pareto chart (Figure 1) illustrates the proportion of students in each declared academic level.

Figure 1. Academic levels of foster care college choice survey participants, (n = 33).



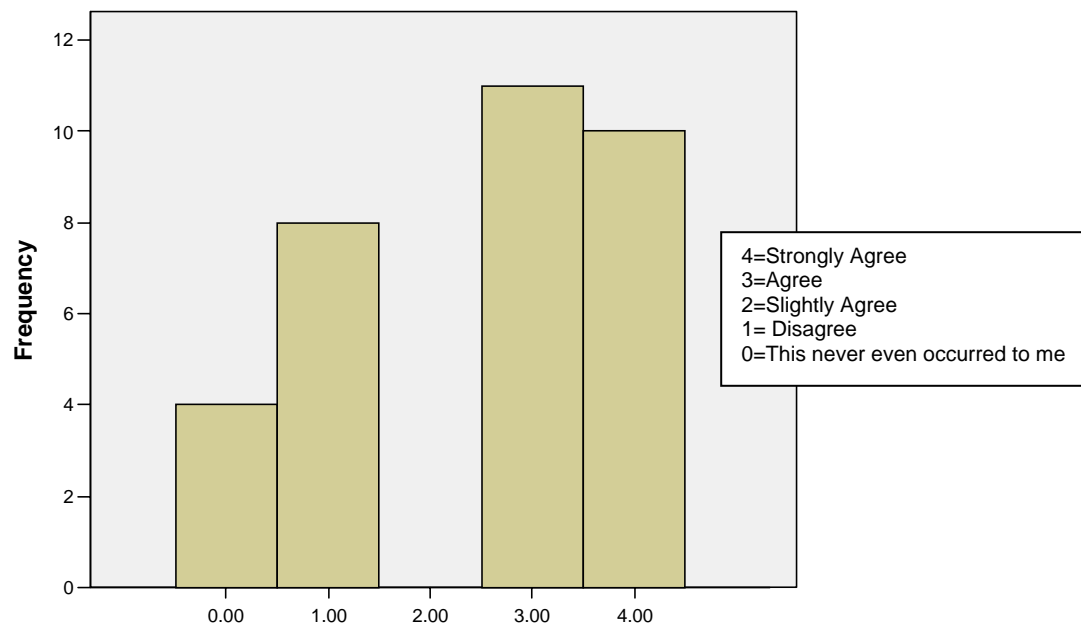
NA = Not yet enrolled in postsecondary education
Oth = Vocational or Technical Training
So = Sophomore
X = Question left unanswered
F = Freshman

Although the $n = 33$ is not sufficient to claim statistical significance, it is sufficient to be of practical significance. As other researchers have documented, former foster care children are difficult to locate, largely due to the reality of the dismal outcomes they often encounter after reaching the age of majority. As a result, it is often a practical necessity in this line of inquiry to generalize research results based upon smaller samples. It is that premise upon which this analysis was founded. It is presumed that inferences and conclusions drawn from this study may be considered largely representative of the general population of foster care youth who have aged out of care.

Descriptive Statistics

Much information regarding each of the questions can be gleaned from the frequency distributions alone. When nested within the context provided by the focus group discussions, these data become three-dimensional and provide a glimpse into the decision process – with all the ancillary emotions – for these young people facing a crucial life decision. For example, see Figure 2 depicting the results for question 3 of the survey at Appendix E.

Figure 2. Q3: When I consider attending college, I consider that my biological parents wanted or expected me to go to college, ($n = 33$).



The question asks participants to indicate how strongly they agree or disagree with the statement, “When I consider attending college, I consider that my biological parents wanted or expected me to go to college.” The bimodal distribution suggests that on this topic, foster care youth are polarized. While 21 either agreed or strongly agreed that they considered their biological parents’ expectations, 8 disagreed, and 4 said that it did not occur to them as a decision factor. From these results, it may be inferred that foster care youth have strong feelings one way or the other regarding the influence of their biological parents’ expectations regarding their future pursuits. This point was further underscored in the focus group discussion by one of the participants, Geneve. When the group was asked, “Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about your decision to attend college or not,” Geneve volunteered the following response.

In the survey you asked me did we make the decision because of our biological parents. And me, I have to say no. They never entered my mind as far as me going to college, or me telling them that I’m going to college, or any of them in my family that I’m going to college cause I really, really don’t care. I really don’t care.

The passion of her answer was intense, and was met with an equally intense challenge from another participant who was named Francesca during the discussion. Francesca speculated that if Geneve’s biological family were to ever call and make a general inquiry about her well-being, she would most likely speak proudly of being enrolled and making academic progress. Francesca’s implication was that despite her words, Geneve’s feelings were likely the opposite of “not caring” – that in fact she cared very much, so much so that she would enjoy boasting to them regarding her educational

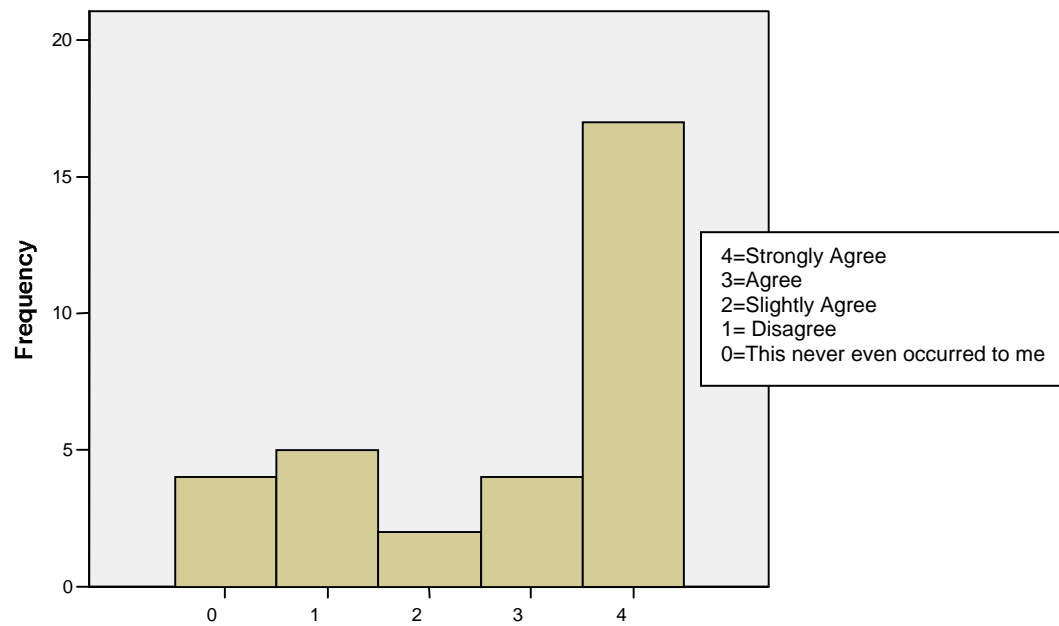
accomplishments. While Geneve did agree that, “if they ask me, then I’m going to let them know,” she also added, “but I’m going to let them know that I got this far without them, too.”

On the other end of the spectrum was Adam in Session 3. He volunteered that his mother was an instructor at a major state university and that he felt her influence in his decision to attend college. Similarly, Shaquille from the fourth session pointed to his grandmother, whom he regarded as his mother, as a catalyst for his decision.

For me, it was just pretty much how I was raised. I was required by my grandma who adopted me when I was little ‘cause when I was born, I was put in foster care. And then my grandma adopted me, so that’s who I knew as my mom. And she always said, you know, “You gotta go to college,” and stuff. And my stepdad enforced it too. What was I going to do if I don’t?

Another question related to the influence of the biological family yields a similar, although not so markedly polarized, result. Figure 3 provides the frequency distribution for question 10 of the survey at Appendix D, which addresses the notion of helping out the biological family by going to college.

Figure 3. Q10: When I consider college, I consider that I would be able to help out my biological family after college, ($n = 32$).



As with the previous question, the appearance of a slightly bimodal distribution may tempt the reader to infer that the respondents were split on this issue. But it must be noted that while the distribution is platykurtic, the kurtosis is -1.03. Also, because the survey scale provides for three “agree” responses and only one “disagree” option, the numbers are more heavily weighted toward the positive side than it may first appear. There were 23 respondents who indicated that they considered the possibility of helping out their biological families after college, while only 5 disagreed. As with the previous question, four participants did not include the potential for helping out their biological families in their college choice decision criteria. It is clear that those who hope to help their families by attending postsecondary school greatly outnumbered those who dismissed the idea.

The frequency distributions for how much the college choice process is influenced by the predilection for learning and studying can be seen in the histograms provided in Figures 4 and 5 based upon the results for questions 11 and 12.

Figure 4. Q11: When I consider attending college, I consider that I like to learn, ($n = 31$).

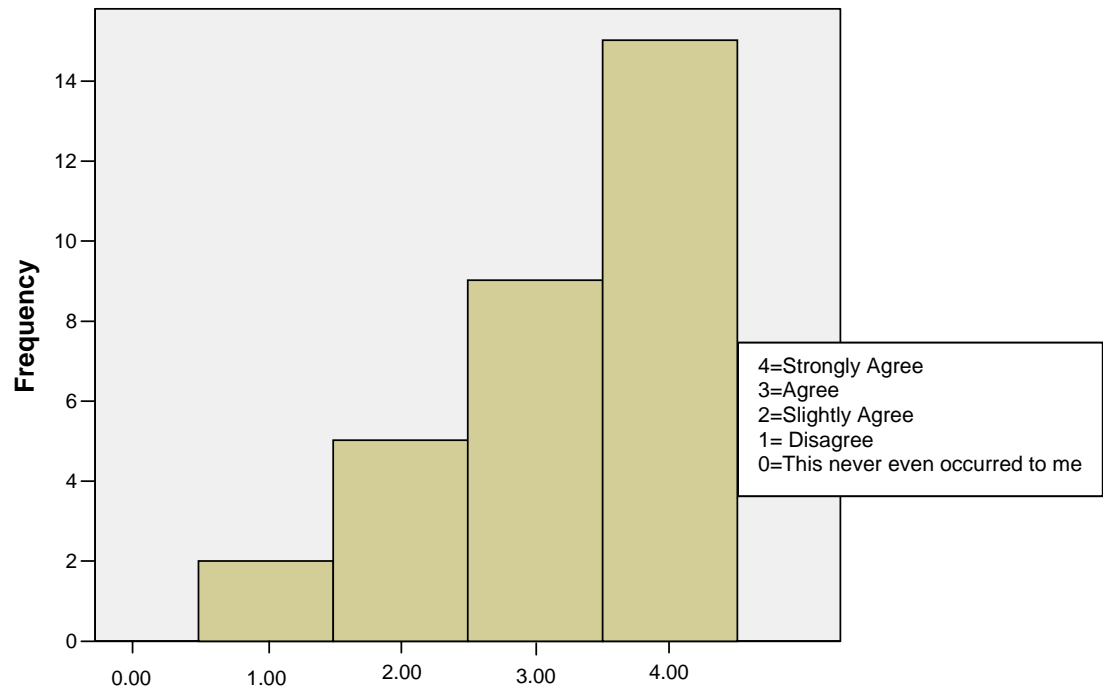
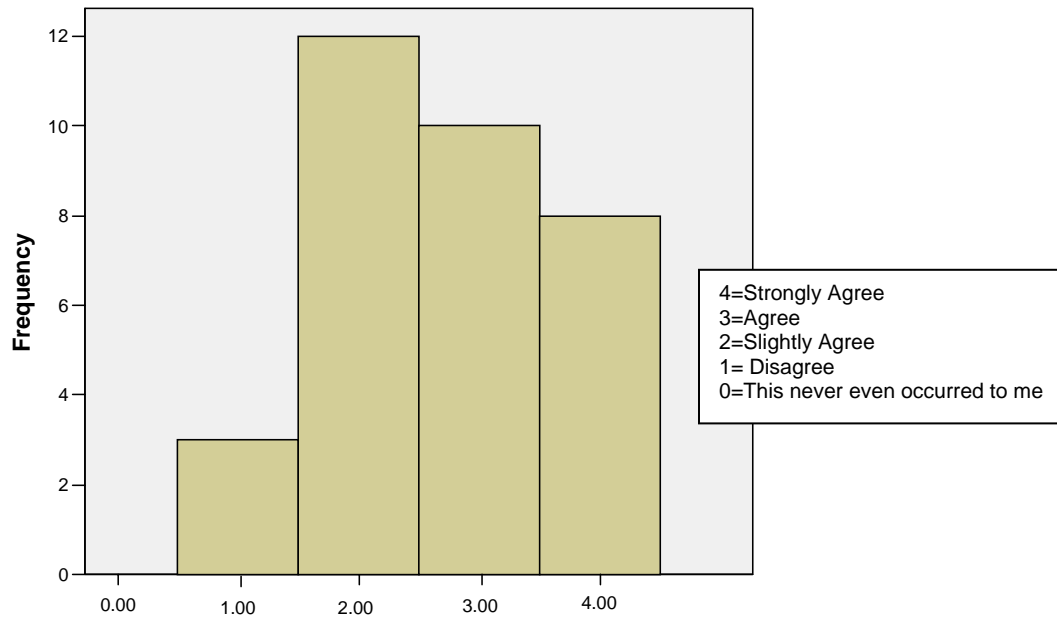


Figure 5. Q12: When I consider attending college, I consider that I like to study, ($n = 33$).



A quick glance at these two charts is enough to see that the participants of the beta test were wise to recommend that the single question that included both the love of learning and the love of studying be recast into two questions. The resultant frequency distributions are quite dissimilar. Twenty-nine respondents indicated that they considered their love of learning, and 28 indicated that they considered how much they enjoy studying. While the numbers are close, the degrees of agreement within the positive responses are not. Fifteen respondents strongly agreed that they considered their love of learning, compared with only 8 who thought about how much they like to study. Those who considered their passion for studying did so with much less enthusiasm, with 12 out of 33 only slightly agreeing that their passion for studying was a consideration in their college choice process. When the results for these two questions are viewed in tandem, they clearly echo the sentiment of the beta test participant who said that while she liked to learn, she was not so fond of studying. It would appear that most agreed with her.

Comparative Statistics

But the descriptive statistics of individual questions only begin to scratch the surface of the vein of data beneath. Much more can be learned when the data are compared and contrasted. The descriptive statistics for the sample are provided below in Table 3.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics of Foster Care Youth College Choice Decision Factors, (n = 33)

| Question: When I consider attending college, I consider ... | Mean | Variance | Standard Deviation | Skewness | Kurtosis |
|---|------|----------|--------------------|----------|----------|
| 1. whether or not my friends are going on for more school. | 1.61 | 1.50 | 1.22 | .72 | -.31 |
| 2. that my biological brothers, sisters, and other relatives are going to college. | 1.69 | 1.96 | 1.40 | .45 | -1.11 |
| 3. that my biological parents wanted or expected me to go to college. | 2.45 | 2.13 | 1.46 | -.48 | -1.32 |
| 4. that my high school teachers or my counselor persuaded me to go to college. | 1.84 | 1.68 | 1.30 | .40 | -.98 |
| 5. that my foster family or some other significant adult aside from school or my biological family persuaded me to go to college. | 2.42 | 2.00 | 1.41 | -.33 | -1.39 |
| 6. that I need a college degree to achieve my career goal. | 3.48 | .88 | .94 | -2.36 | 6.01 |
| 7. that I would likely earn a better income with a college degree. | 3.73 | .33 | .57 | -2.06 | 3.41 |
| 8. that I would gain respect or status by having a college degree. | 3.44 | .71 | .84 | -1.36 | .98 |
| 9. that I would bring honor to biological family by having a college degree. | 2.99 | 1.81 | 1.34 | -1.11 | .98 |
| 10. that I would be able to help out biological family after college. | 2.78 | 2.37 | 1.54 | -.80 | -1.03 |
| 11. that I like to learn. | 3.19 | .90 | .95 | -.92 | -.13 |
| 12. that I like to study. | 2.70 | .91 | .95 | -.03 | -.96 |
| 13. that I want to be able to provide a better life for my children. | 3.29 | 1.88 | 1.37 | -1.89 | 2.18 |

Continued on the next page

Table 3 (Continued)

Descriptive Statistics of Foster Care Youth College Choice Decision Factors, (n = 33)

| Question: When I consider attending college, I consider ... | Mean | Variance | Standard Deviation | Skewness | Kurtosis |
|--|------|----------|--------------------|----------|----------|
| 14. that I want to gain my independence. | 3.66 | .551 | .74 | -2.21 | 4.63 |
| 15. that I want to move out of current home. | 2.67 | 2.35 | 1.54 | -.67 | -1.07 |
| 16. that I want to acquire the skills I need to function effectively in society. | 3.30 | 1.16 | 1.07 | -1.62 | 2.03 |
| 17. that I want to get out of my biological parents' neighborhood. | 1.34 | 2.43 | 1.56 | .80 | -.92 |
| 18. that I did not want to work immediately after high school. | 1.79 | 1.92 | 1.39 | .41 | -1.08 |

Note. 4=Strongly Agree, 3=Agree, 2=Slightly Agree, 1= Disagree, 0=This never even occurred to me.

Here, in the context of the whole data set, interesting insights begin to emerge. Perhaps one of the most striking results is a further observation of the fact that the four choice factors with the highest means – career goal, better income, gain respect or status, and want independence – also have the lowest standard deviations and variances. Also, all four appear in the list of the top five items in terms of negative skewness. The question regarding wanting to make a better life for one’s children barely inches out respect or status for the fifth skewness slot. From this, it may be inferred that foster care youth at the decision nexus regarding higher education consider the same top four choice factors: better income, independence, career goal, and respect or status.

These four choice factors all have another thing in common in that they are egocentric, but primarily extrinsic to the individual. Each of these things serves to enhance or please the individual. None of these items speaks to pleasing family, friends, or mentors. This begs the question, “Which decision factors would statistically cluster together based upon this data set, and would themes emerge from the clusters?” Despite its limited applicability in such a small sample, a factor analysis with a varimax rotation was run. It was believed that the result from such an analysis would inform conclusions and inferences by helping to discern patterns in the data, even if not to a level of statistical significance. At the conclusion of the data run, five clusters were identified, as shown in Table 4. The bolded characters indicate to which cluster each question was most highly correlated. Correlation coefficients are provided for each item in each cluster.

Table 4

Factor Analysis of Choice Factor Questions on Foster Care Youth Survey, (n = 33)

| Question: When I consider attending college, I consider ... | Cluster 1 | Cluster 2 | Cluster 3 | Cluster 4 | Cluster 5 |
|---|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| 1. whether or not my friends are going on for more school. | .557 | .259 | .458 | -.073 | .214 |
| 2. that my biological brothers, sisters, and other relatives are going to college. | .561 | -.268 | .381 | .240 | -.100 |
| 3. that my biological parents wanted or expected me to go to college. | .595 | -.296 | .041 | .447 | -.138 |
| 4. that my high school teachers or my counselor persuaded me to go to college. | .080 | .279 | .785 | .118 | .093 |
| 5. that my foster family or some other significant adult aside from school or my biological family persuaded me to go to college. | -.223 | -.382 | .582 | -.353 | .121 |
| 6. that I need a college degree to achieve my career goal. | .603 | -.118 | -.605 | -.141 | .088 |
| 7. that I would likely earn a better income with a college degree. | .515 | .375 | -.131 | -.286 | -.086 |
| 8. that I would gain respect or status by having a college degree. | .211 | .307 | .007 | .271 | .765 |
| 9. that I would bring honor to biological family by having a college degree. | .475 | .072 | -.047 | .595 | -.090 |
| 10. that I would be able to help out biological family after college. | .387 | -.316 | .183 | .613 | -.276 |
| 11. that I like to learn. | .705 | -.448 | -.211 | -.113 | .025 |
| 12. that I like to study. | .662 | .072 | .006 | -.060 | .516 |
| 13. that I want to be able to provide a better life for my children. | .170 | .559 | .324 | -.087 | -.192 |

Continued on the next page

Table 4 (Continued)

Factor Analysis of Choice Factor Questions on Foster Care Youth Survey, (n = 33)

| Question: When I consider attending college, I consider ... | Cluster 1 | Cluster 2 | Cluster 3 | Cluster 4 | Cluster 5 |
|--|-------------|-------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| 14. that I want to gain my independence. | .653 | .033 | .200 | -.395 | -.333 |
| 15. that I want to move out of current home. | .444 | .518 | .165 | -.245 | -.106 |
| 16. that I want to acquire the skills I need to function effectively in society. | .645 | .067 | -.201 | -.434 | -.086 |
| 17. that I want to get out of my biological parents' neighborhood. | .209 | .646 | -.285 | .086 | .035 |
| 18. that I did not want to work immediately after high school. | -.063 | .620 | -.226 | .485 | -.091 |

Note. The bolded characters indicate to which cluster each question was most highly correlated.

It appears that Cluster 1, which includes questions 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 11, 12, 14, and 16, is comprised of those things that bring pleasure and enjoyment to the participant – egocentric factors. Those factors include such things as the desire for a particular career, the desire for a better income, and the love of learning. It is interesting to note, however, that the choice factors of friends, siblings, and the biological parents also cluster in this group. It may be that these persons are those who have the most direct impact on the individual's sense of well-being, and would therefore fit appropriately among those other items that seem to be most closely related personal satisfaction and happiness. A Cronbach's Alpha was conducted on these factors to determine how tightly they are correlated. The resultant .759 implies a moderate to strong correlation among the nine choice factors in this cluster.

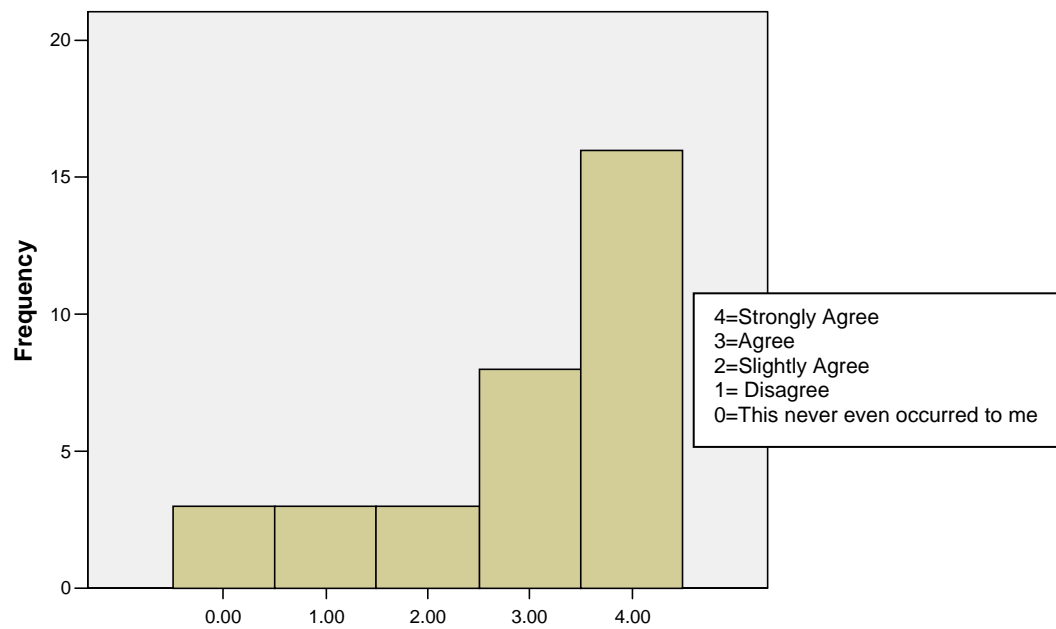
Cluster 2 includes those items that imply a state of leaving or avoidance, namely moving out of the current home, leaving the biological parents' neighborhood, and building a better life for one's children. These factors can all be seen as extricating one's self from a current situation and moving to another. The fourth question in this cluster, the desire to do something besides immediately enter the workforce upon completion of high school or a GED, is also a kind of avoidance behavior. This cluster appears to be about turning one's back on current circumstances and creating a different kind of life. With a Cronbach's Alpha of .502 – which would prove to be the weakest result of all the clusters – the factors in this cluster were considered to be moderately correlated.

Cluster 3 contains two “outsider” questions – choice factors that focus on persons outside the traditional close sphere of influence, like foster families or high school counselors. It may be somewhat surprising that responses in this cluster are not stronger.

One might have thought that because of the weakened traditional familial ties, it might be these “outsiders” who could evoke the stronger influence in the decision process. But the data do not support this conclusion. The means for these two questions are below 2.5 – hardly a strong showing. The Cronbach’s Alpha for this cluster is a .537 which is considered a moderate correlation among the factors.

Cluster 4 contains two questions relating to “payback” to the biological family – in the form of either honor or economic resources. The Cronbach’s Alpha on this cluster is a .721, a moderately strong correlation. It is not surprising that these two questions fell together as these were two questions that yielded bimodal results on their frequency distributions. What is surprising is that when the choice factors are listed in descending order according to their means, these two factors fall dead center, in position eight and nine. One might have believed that these young people would feel apathy at best, and animosity at worst, regarding their biological families, and would therefore not feel compelled to give anything back to them – the very attitude evidenced by Geneve earlier in this document. Instead, the means imply that these young people do feel a sense of wanting to return good things to the families from which they were removed. A look at the histograms may help to shed some light. Figure 6 provides the frequency distribution for “honor.”

Figure 6. When I consider attending college, I consider that I would bring honor to my biological family by having a college degree, ($n = 33$).



While this histogram is clearly negatively skewed, its kurtosis is only 0.03, with 27 participants agreeing with the statement, and only 3 disagreeing. Another look at the frequency distribution for the desire to “help the biological family” factor, shown previously in Figure 3, sheds additional insight. While there is evidence that many foster youth do in fact consider, but then dismiss the notion of helping out their biological families after college, the fact that 27 respondents awarded a “strongly agree,” “agree,” or “slightly agree” on this item pulled the mean higher than might have been expected.

Perhaps the most surprising result on the factor analysis is the emergence of a fifth cluster in which “respect or status” stands as its own group. While factor analysis methodologies may suggest that a single member cluster is not a cluster at all, the fact that this was a small sample ($n = 33$) was considered. Nonetheless, following the principles of best practices, and in order to answer potential critics, an additional analysis was run with a limit of four clusters, but the results provided no discernible pattern. It was determined, therefore, to re-examine the anomalous Cluster 5 to determine its relationship to the other clusters. While this item returns a correlation coefficient of 0.77, none of the other coefficients in this cluster even come close, ranging from -0.33 to 0.52. The 0.52 score belongs to the factor regarding how much the respondent likes to study – a construct which does not seem to connect logically to this group. Additionally, the 0.52 is anomalous as the next closest coefficient in the cluster is a 0.214 that represents the homogeneity of the “friends” choice factor. Why “respect or status” would stand as a cluster of one might be a topic for future research.

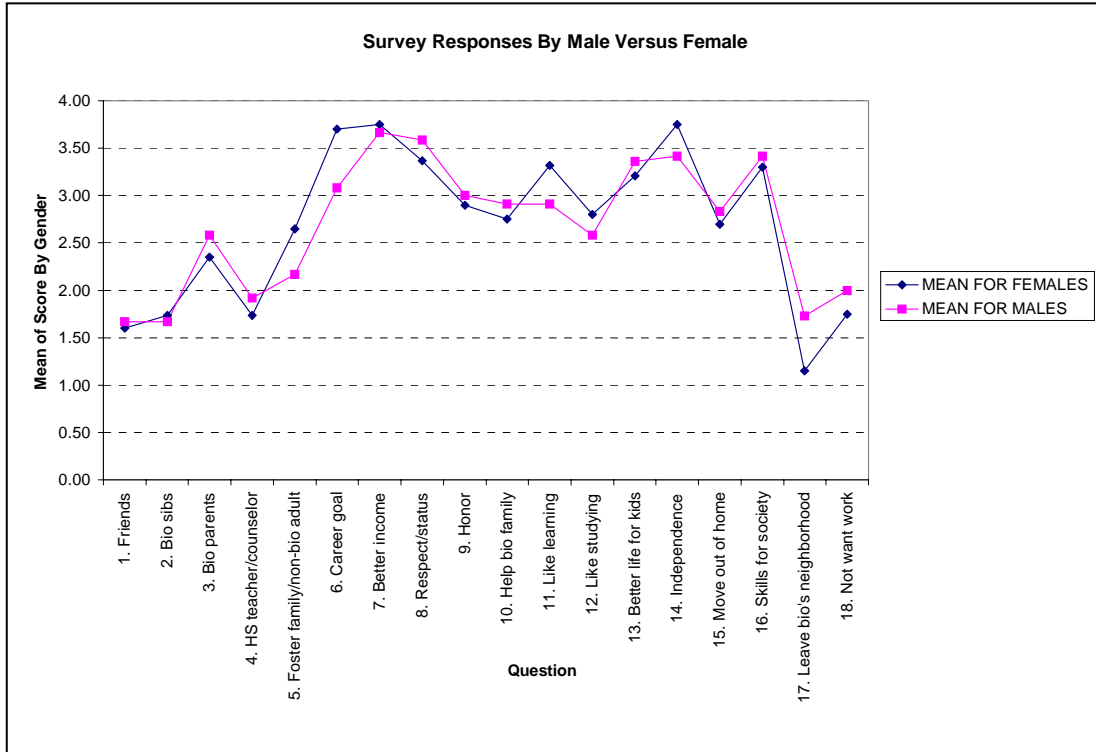
It is also worth noting which factors these young people regard as least important in their college choice process. According to the means, this population is least likely to be influenced by the following factors:

- The desire to leave their parent's neighborhood. This is likely because they have already left, or were removed earlier by the state when they were placed into protective custody.
- Whether or not their friends are going to college. For a variety of reasons, foster care youth often change placements – more than five times in eight years on average in this sample population – and therefore may not have the opportunity to make close friendships.
- Whether or not their biological siblings are attending college. Many foster care youth are not placed with their biological siblings, and as a result, may not feel close attachments that would provide for a level of influence.
- The desire to avoid entering the work force immediately. As was revealed in the focus group discussions, most foster care youth are already employed. To them, working is second nature – a matter of “survival” as one participant put it.

It is perhaps interesting to note that three of these four choice factors also emerged at the bottom of the list of influencing factors on Dr. Bui's 2002 study regarding first generation college students. The only factor that is not shared as “least influencing” between foster care youth and first generation college students is the desire to enter the work force immediately.

Despite the small size of this sample, additional insights may be gleaned by splitting or stratifying the sample for a comparative analysis. From the information provided on the surveys, there were 20 females, 12 males, and one participant who declared no gender. The survey results were divided by gender (omitting the one who was undeclared), and a line graph, Figure 7, was developed to illustrate how the means of the gender groups compared for each of the 18 questions.

Figure 7. Comparative Line Graph of Survey Results by Gender, (Males=12; Females=20).



From this graph, it appears that there is little difference between the way the males scored the survey and the way the females scored the survey. In fact, the correlation coefficient of the two groups is a 0.93. A quick calculation of Cohen's effect size results in $d = 0.00167$, thus confirming that any difference is negligible. Nonetheless, based on a visual scan of the graph, certain questions appear to have gaps between the means that may prove to be significant with further analysis. The questions regarding the desire for a particular career goal, how much the participant likes to learn, and how much the participant desires to leave the biological parents' neighborhood, for example, have gaps that could potentially be significant. To determine whether this was true, t tests were run on those three questions. It must be noted, again, that this is a small sample and the results cannot be considered statistically significant. Nonetheless, the results may be used to draw inferences that may inform conclusions or future research. The results are provided at Table 5.

Table 5
t Test Results Comparing Means by Gender for Three Survey Questions

Question 6. When I consider attending college, I consider that
I need a college degree to achieve my career goal.

| | N | Mean | SD | t | DF | p |
|--------|----|-------|------|-------|----|------|
| Male | 12 | | | | | |
| | | -0.62 | 0.33 | -1.85 | 30 | 0.07 |
| Female | 20 | | | | | |

Question 11. When I consider attending college, I consider that
I like to learn.

| | N | Mean | SD | t | DF | p |
|--------|----|-------|------|-------|----|------|
| Male | 12 | | | | | |
| | | -0.41 | 0.36 | -1.14 | 28 | 0.27 |
| Female | 20 | | | | | |

Continued on the next page

Table 5 (Continued)

t Test Results Comparing Means by Gender for Three Survey Questions

Question 17. When I consider attending college, I consider that I want to get out
of my biological parents' neighborhood.

| | N | Mean | SD | t | DF | p |
|--------|----|------|-----|-------|----|------|
| Male | 12 | 0.58 | .59 | -0.97 | 29 | 0.34 |
| Female | 20 | | | | | |

Since none of these p values approaches 0.05, these t statistics clearly do not allow for rejection of the null hypothesis. It cannot be concluded, therefore, that there is a difference between the college choice factors considered by young men and women transitioning out of foster care and facing the decision whether to participate in higher education programs.

Another split of the survey results according to the ultimate decision outcome was attempted. While there were 29 who indicated that they had already made the decision in favor of higher education, only two responded that they had decided not to attend a postsecondary institution within the next two years. Two participants said they had not yet made their decisions. These results leave only an n of 2 for comparison against a group of 29 – a distribution that hardly allows for comparisons of statistical significance. Still comparative analysis was conducted. It appeared as if the two participants who were tending toward not pursuing postsecondary education differed from their college-bound counterparts in several areas. Specifically, those who chose against postsecondary education indicated that they placed more weight on the choice factors related to wanting to make a better life for one's children, the desire for independence, wanting to move out of the current home, desiring skills to function effectively in society, and the desire to leave the biological family's neighborhood. Of particular interest is the fact that the two who ultimately decided against participating in postsecondary education are the ones who indicated the strongest influence of high school teachers or counselors – both scoring that item 4.0 (Strongly Agree) on the Likert Scale, as opposed to a mean of only 1.7 (between 1-Disagree and 2-Slightly Agree) for the positively predisposed group. All of these results provide fertile ground for future inquiry with a statically significant sample.

Research Question Three – Focus Group Interview Results

To further explore the college choice decision process, and to compensate for potential gaps in the survey's areas of inquiry, a focus group discussion component was incorporated into the study design. In each of the five research sessions, upon completion of the survey, participants were asked to remain to take part in the focus group discussion. In the fourth of the five research sessions, there were too many participants to allow all to remain for the focus group discussion. Seventeen persons were surveyed, but the focus groups were limited to no more than 10 participants. To determine which participants would stay for the discussion, a process of drawing playing cards to assure random selection of focus group participants was proposed. But before that could take place, seven of the participants decided to leave. The discussion began with ten participants, but one additional male joined the group shortly after the discussion had begun. He asked, and was allowed, to stay after completing his Informed Consent form. The second session, on the other hand, had quite a different problem in that it had only one male participant. His responses were included in the final analysis, nonetheless, as it appeared that the quality of his responses was not impacted from lack of group interaction. Table 6 provides attendance information for each session by gender.

Table 6

Focus Group Attendance by Gender

| Session Number | Males | Females | Total <i>n</i> |
|----------------|-------|---------|----------------|
| 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| 2 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| 3 | 2 | 4 | 6 |
| 4 | 3 | 8 | 11 |
| 5 | 1 | 8 | 9 |
| Total | 8 | 21 | 29 |

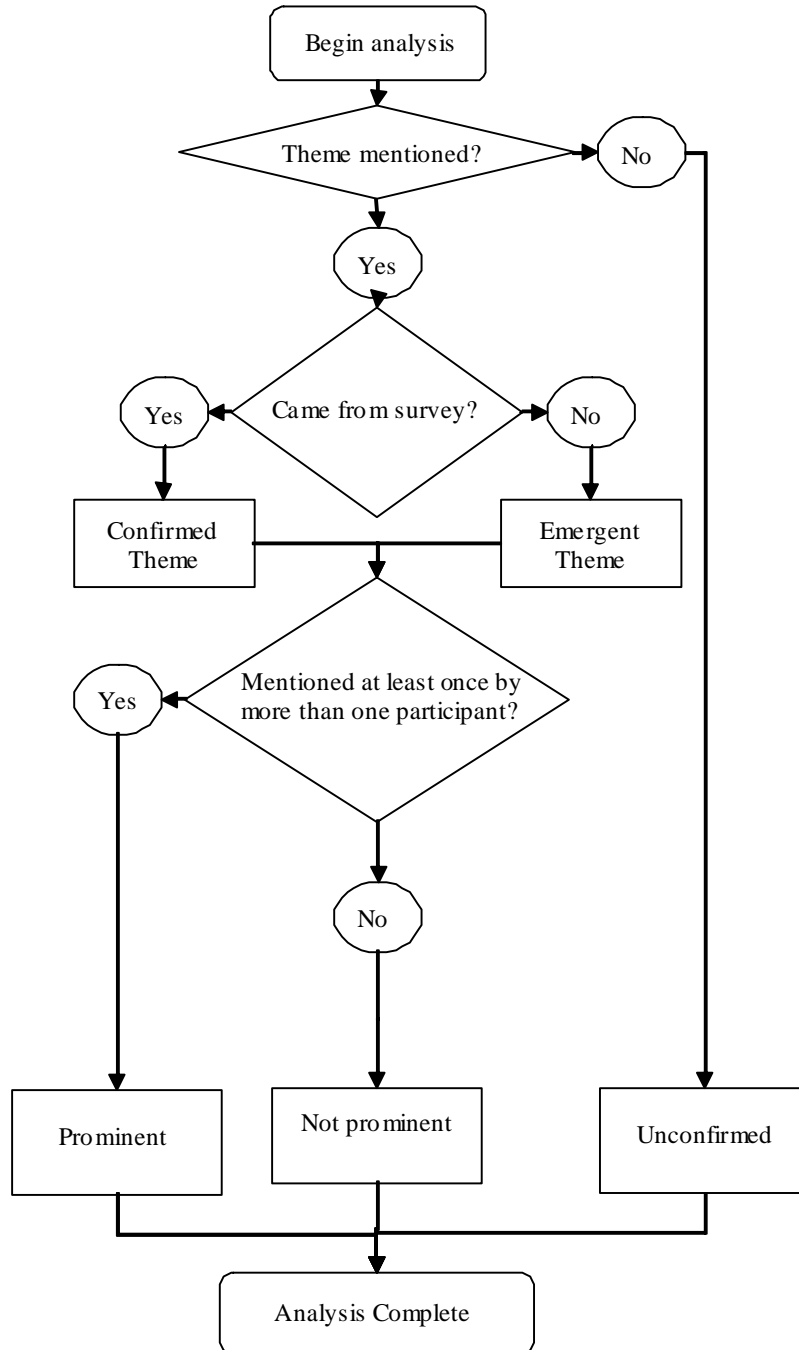
The focus group discussion followed the guide provided at Appendix E. During the session, participants were given false names to assure their confidentiality. False names were assigned alphabetically to assist note taking, and the pseudonyms were reused in each session. All names used in this document are the assigned false names.

Before data analysis could begin, response categories were identified. In keeping with accepted qualitative data analysis protocols (Merriam, 1998; Morgan, 1997), some of these categories were established in advance, while others emerged from the data during the analysis process. The process of establishing categories in advance was largely guided by the research done by Dr. Bui (2002) on the college choice process of first generation college students. These categories include the long- and short-term goals,

the influence of others (family, friends, and mentors), academic preparedness, and financial considerations. An additional category related to the applications process was also added to provide insight as to whether or not these participants felt prepared to navigate the administrative processes involved in college admissions and registration. These were the categories that lead to the development of the guided interview questions provided in Appendix E.

To provide a methodology for analysis of the focus group transcriptions, a protocol was developed. This protocol allowed for themes to be classified as *confirmed*, *emergent*, or *unconfirmed*. *Confirmed* themes are those that were identified by the survey or prompted by the focus group discussion guide, and then were either mentioned or affirmed in the focus group discussion. *Emergent* themes are those that were not identified on the survey, but rather emanated from the group discussion. For a theme to be *unconfirmed*, it must have appeared on the survey, but not been mentioned in the focus group discussion. The protocol also allowed for one additional level of classification. Themes that were determined to be *confirmed* or *emergent* could also be classified as *prominent* or *not prominent*. Themes that were deemed *not prominent* were themes that were mentioned only once during the course of the discussion. In order for a theme to be *prominent*, it must have been mentioned at least once by two or more different speakers. Figure 8 provides the logic model behind this categorization criterion.

Figure 8. Qualitative Analysis Response Categorization Protocol Logic Model.



The focus group discussion opened with an open-ended question regarding the participants' intentions regarding education and their futures. While this question was designed primarily to serve as a segue to questions more directly related to the decision factors considered in the college choice process, it also provided insight into the thought processes of these young people. Upon analysis of the "status and intentions" questions, four categories emerged:

- Career aspiration
- Intentions regarding participating in higher education
- Academic goal (degree type and level)
- Institution choice

Career aspirations ranged from wanting to open a business like Eva in the third session and Allison in session 4 who both said they wanted to open cosmetology businesses, to Heather in the last session who said she wanted to become a veterinarian, even though she admitted to not liking school. The participation in higher education category emerged through comments like, "I want to finish my degree here [at a local community college] and then transfer out to another school to bet my bachelors," which came from Shaquille in the first meeting. Brittany from the second meeting talked about how she was awaiting the results of her GED so that she could move on to community college. Some of the participants expressed their intentions in terms of terminal degree rather than in terms of the next step. "I want to go to law school," offered Geneve in the fifth meeting. Much like the "perception in higher education" category, the issue of "institution choice" emerged as participants talked about wanting to enroll in community colleges or vocational colleges.

Table 7 provides those results, by category and further broken down by responses within each category. In reviewing these results, it must be remembered that by the nature of the focus group format, not every participant answers every question. Responses in Table 7, therefore, will not necessarily tally to the total *n* of 29 (Males=8, Females=21). When responses implied answers in a series, only the terminal or highest order response was noted. So for example, if a respondent said that he intended to go to a technical school and then go to college to become an engineer, then the response was scored only once as “career with school required.” Through this practice, responses could be ascribed to mutually exclusive categories, in keeping with qualitative data analysis best practices. The following response categories all emerged from the discussion guide prompt, “Describe your plans for what you’ll do after you leave foster care.”

Table 7

Describe your plans for what you'll do after you leave foster care, (n = 29)

| Question/Category | Responses | Males | Females | Comments |
|--|--|-------|---------|--|
| 1. Career aspiration – long term goal | School, but no job mentioned | 1 | | |
| | Work, but no school mentioned | | 1 | Entertainment business |
| | Open own business, but no school mentioned | | 1 | |
| | Open business, but will also go to school | 1 | 3 | |
| | Pursue a career that requires at least a 4-year degree | 1 | 10 | |
| 2. Attend school (either enrolled or intend to enroll) – by type | Vocational | 1 | 1 | |
| | Public | 2 | 4 | 2 males who indicated public institution want to go out of state |
| | Private | | | One female indicated that she wanted to attend a private institution, but could not afford it. |

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Table 7 (continued)

Describe your plans for what you'll do after you leave foster care, (n = 29)

| Question/Category | Responses | Males | Females | Comments |
|---|-----------------|-------|---------|----------|
| <hr/> | | | | |
| 3. Achieve a degree (either enrolled or intend to enroll) – short term goal | Bachelors | 1 | 1 | |
| | Masters | | 1 | |
| | Terminal degree | 1 | 2 | |

Note. n = 29. Responses may not total 29 since respondents may not answer each question, or some respondents may provide multiple answers.

During this part of the discussion, one theme that had been addressed on the survey began to surface with intensity. Eva described how she had thought about becoming a housewife and raising a family instead of going on to college, but then reconsidered and ultimately decided that she wants to become a veterinarian. “I don’t like school,” Eva explained, “but I’m going to do it because of my kids.” The impact of one’s decisions regarding education on one’s children surfaced early in the conversation, and continued to surface in other groups and at other points of the dialogue. Adam from another session offered his insight. “That was my biggest thing, getting my GED,” he said. “My son’s nine and a half months old now, and I don’t want him growing up going, ‘Oh, you didn’t graduate high school, ... so I don’t have to.’” In still another group, Francesca offered that, “I don’t want my children growing up like I did,” to which Heather added, “That’s probably the biggest thing that everyone’s thinking.” The desire to set an example for one’s children, to create a better life for one’s children, or to assure that one’s children are spared the kind of life experienced by the young people participating in this study, resurfaced at several points throughout the discussions by multiple participants, and was therefore determined to be a *prominent confirmed* theme, as defined earlier.

One anomalous trend was noted during this part of the discussion. Only two males, in different sessions, indicated that they intended to go to a public two or four year institution, and both said that they were planning to go out of state – one to New York and one to Georgia. Shaquille in the first session explained why he was interested in going back to attend college at New York University. “I want to go somewhere up north,” he said, “because I grew up in Philadelphia, so I want to go somewhere up state.” The other male participant, Adam, stated that he wants to go to Georgia Institute of

Technology, but did not explain his reason. Although the sample was not statistically significant, the fact that both of the males had arrived at the same decision to leave the state may imply an area for further exploration.

After exploring the current status and intentions of the participants, the focus group discussion guide moved into a section of questions designed to explore what specific factors were considered in the decision process. The first question asked, “What things did you consider when making your decision about going to college?”

Respondents provided answers that hinged from family influence— “It was pretty much how I was raised,” said Shaquille “—to a more pragmatic response perhaps best articulated by Francesca, who said, “it’s because of this program. You have to be in school because of this program.”

Responses to this question were closely paralleled by a question that came much later in the discussion guide. Towards the end of the meeting, after I had already asked questions regarding specific details of the college choice process, I asked the group, “Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about your decision to attend college or not?” At this point, the respondents provided additional, and often new information regarding the factors they considered when making their decisions about postsecondary education. In order to better illustrate which responses emerged early in the discussion and which surfaced later, Table 8 provides results for these two questions. Table 8 also shows which responses confirmed themes that had been questioned on the survey.

Table 8

College Choice Decision Factors for Foster Care Youth, (n = 29)

| Decision Factor (Themes that surfaced from the discussion) | Males: “How did you decide to go to college?” | Females: “How did you decide to go to college?” | Males: “What else do you want to tell me about your decision to attend college?” | Females: “What else do you want to tell me about your decision to attend college?” | Total |
|---|---|---|--|--|-------|
| 1. Family expectation (<i>also on survey</i>) | 3 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 5 |
| 2. Want respect (<i>also on survey</i>) | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| 3. Want to be first in the family to get a degree | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| 4. Money – lack of funds for higher education | 1 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 5 |
| 5. Set an example for children, or be a role model for siblings (<i>also on survey</i>) | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 4 |
| 6. Pushed to do it by the program in which currently enrolled (<i>Connected by 25</i>) | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| 7. Fit into society (<i>also on survey</i>) | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| 8. Time to do it | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 |

Continued on the next page

Table 8 (Continued)

College Choice Decision Factors for Foster Care Youth, (n = 29)

| Decision Factor (Themes that surfaced from the discussion) | Males: "How did you decide to go to college?" | Females: "How did you decide to go to college?" | Males: "What else do you want to tell me about your decision to attend college?" | Females: "What else do you want to tell me about your decision to attend college?" | Total |
|---|---|---|--|--|-------|
| 9. Whether or not there is a partner to help | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| 10. Independence <i>(also on survey)</i> | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| 11. So children not grow up same way <i>(also on survey)</i> | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 |

Note. n = 29. Responses may not total 29 since respondents may not answer each question, or some respondents may provide multiple answers.

It was interesting to note that there were more decision factors offered in response to the question asked at the end of the interview process than in response to the question asked earlier. While only six themes were identified in response to the earlier question, the closing question elicited conversation around eight college choice factors – five of which had not previously been discussed. Perhaps the guided interview process itself triggered additional thoughts and insights about the college choice decision process for the focus group participants. It seemed that the more they talked, the more they understood about their own thought processes, and the more they shared. It was precisely for this effect that the focus group methodology was chosen.

Equally interesting was the fact that responses and themes in this section are widely dispersed with no decision factors emerging as particularly more influencing than any other. This seems to be in sharp contrast to the survey results in which participants – both male and female – clearly indicated that they were most strongly influenced by the desire for a better income, the desire for independence, the need for a degree to reach the career goal, and the desire for respect and status.

The second question in this section asked whether the decision to attend higher education programs was easy or hard, and why. Table 9 illustrates the results for this question.

Table 9

Was the decision to go to college or not easy or hard, and why? (n = 29)

| | Males | Females | Total |
|------|-------|---------|-------|
| Easy | 2 | 6 | 8 |
| Hard | 1 | 4 | 5 |
| Both | 0 | 2 | 2 |

Note. n = 29. Responses may not total 29 since respondents may not answer each question, or some respondents may provide multiple answers.

Of the eight who said it was a relatively easy decision, five (four females and one male) indicated that it was easy because they had always known where their interests lay and what they wanted to do. For example, Eva from the third session whose goal was to finish cosmetology school and open her own salon, articulated her aspiration with absolute conviction. “When I braided my wigs, I knew I wanted to be a stylist,” she said. “I just never knew hair could feel like that.” One indicated that it was easy because the program that these participants were enrolled in – *Connected by 25* – requires continuing enrollment in an education program in order to maintain eligibility. One indicated that it was both easy because of the reality of needing a degree in order to have the things one wants in the future, but also hard because of the fiscal realities and financial struggles. “You’ve got to think about staying in school, and no money, no money, no money,” she emphasized. “No school, no check...No phone, no cable. I can’t think about no cable. I want shoes on my feet.” One young woman said that it was both easy and hard –

depending upon whether or not there was a break between secondary and postsecondary school. A break between the two programs, she said, makes it more difficult.

The theme of a break between secondary and postsecondary education emerged as *prominent* in that it was raised more than once in more than one group. Another participant, Allison, attested that while the decision to return to school was an easy one for her, the reality of doing it was more difficult.

I was different because I didn't graduate from high school. I got my GED in 2002, and I didn't get back to school until March of this year [2005]. I had a long break – just BSing around. Didn't really know what I wanted to do, but then when I did get back into it, I cried for the first two months [because] it was so hard. I didn't cry at home, but I cried in school. I was crying before every time we took a test or an exam, I was crying. But I aced it, though.... It's going to pay off in the long run.

In contrast, Francesca from another session speculated during the discussion regarding academic preparedness that she would have benefited from a break. Gerard, however, disagreed. "If you take off," he asserted, "you're going to miss it."

But these participants were talking about breaks taken at their own choosing. Two other participants explained that they had breaks imposed on their educational progress by the foster care system. Adam from the second session explained that, "When you turn 18, they kick you out. It's as simple as that. When I turned 18, they basically bought me a bus ticket to find wherever my parents were and got me my crap, and dropped me off at the Greyhound station and that was it." He continued that if it had not been for his counselor who had been his counselor since he was in his early teenage

years, he did not know where he would be now. Heather from Group 5 shared that it took her a year to get into the program. Upon turning 18, her counselor failed to do what needed to be done to get her into the aftercare program. It took a year, with the support of her foster mother, to be readmitted for services after age 18. She further explained that she continued to advocate for herself because she recognized that aftercare services, specifically the education benefits, were essential for her survival. In fact, for Heather, the ordeal galvanized her long-term goal. “They don’t help you,” she commented. “I want to try to change the system.” The impact of the break in education progress was quite influential in the lives of these young people. This theme was not considered on the survey or in the focus group discussion guide, but rather emerged from the data with such frequency, in multiple groups and at various points in the discussion, that it can be considered *prominent*.

The next question asked what participants thought about the admissions process. Table 10 provides the results.

Table 10

When you think about going to college, what thoughts do you have about the application process?, (n = 29)

| | Male | Female | Total |
|------------|------|--------|-------|
| Easy | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Hard | 2 | 2 | 4 |
| Don't Know | 2 | 4 | 6 |

Note. n = 29. Responses may not total 29 since respondents may not answer each question, or some respondents may provide multiple answers.

Adjectives used to describe their thoughts on the higher education admissions process included “hectic,” “totally crazy,” “long,” and “stressful.” When the question was first posed, one young woman responded by saying, “Oh Lord!” while rolling her eyes. It was on this question, perhaps more than on any of the others, that the dynamics of the group came into play. Those that had been through the process already were very willing to share their reasons for finding the process either easy or difficult – with those willing to share their negative experiences outnumbering those who shared their good experiences by two to one. Shaquille in the first session, who had an easy experience, credited the local community college for its simplified process. “It was really simple,” he said. “You just fill out a piece of paper, and they’ll say, ‘You’re approved.’ And bring in your transcripts whenever you can. They didn’t even send me a letter and I was late, but I just brought them in.” His experience stands in sharp contrast to that of another male

participant who shared his experience with a later discussion group. “It was kind of hard. In fact, I had to come here to get a lot of paperwork filled out by [the *Connected by 25* staff], then I had to go back to the school, give them all the paperwork I filled out... And if you make mistakes, you have to start the process over again.” Because the complexity of the paperwork was echoed in several of the groups and seemed to elicit great passion in the responses, it was considered *prominent*. This result confirms the research findings of Merdinger et al., (2005). The study concluded that information about financial aid was the most important experience in the decision to go to college for former foster care youth.

One female participant – the one whose initial response to the question was, “Oh Lord!” – interpreted the question to refer to the financial aid application process. “I’m going through that process right now,” said the young woman Geneve. “I mean, why [do] they want to know my parent’s income? I don’t know their income. It doesn’t make sense, because if you don’t have parents, how are you going to fill out that form? Can’t you have a back-up person do that?” The issue she raised – the issue of the irrelevance of much of the financial aid paperwork – was acknowledged by the other group participants by affirmative nods. But the issue did not surface in any other groups, and so was not considered *prominent*, despite the fact that it is a good point that may merit further inquiry, particularly from a policy standpoint.

Another young woman said that she did not even think about the complexity of the application or admissions process. Instead, she said that she just “jumped right in” because she was watching her sister, who was already enrolled, “showing off her little good grades,” and the feeling of sibling rivalry caused her to decide to enroll. Because it

was her sister's academic success that caused her to decide to enroll, the issue raised on the survey regarding the influence of siblings' academic decisions in the college choice process could be considered *confirmed*. But as she was the only participant to offer a story related to enrolled siblings, the theme was classified as *not prominent*.

The next question related to academic preparedness for higher education. The question specifically asked whether participants felt that they were ready for the academic rigors of a higher education curriculum. Data collection on this question was complicated by the tendency of the respondents to reply in terms of the specific areas for which they felt qualified or not. Table 11 provides the results of this question.

Table 11

When you think about attending college, what thoughts do you have about your academic preparedness?, (n = 29)

| | Ready | | | | Not Ready | | | |
|---------|-------|---------|---------------|-------|-----------|---------|---------------|-------|
| | Math | Reading | Not Specified | Total | Math | Reading | Not Specified | Total |
| Males | | | 2 | 2 | 1 | | 2 | 3 |
| Females | | | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 5 |
| Unknown | 4 | 8 | | 12 | 5 | 2 | | 7 |
| Total | 4 | 8 | 4 | 16 | 7 | 3 | 4 | 14 |

Note. n = 29. Responses may not total 29 since respondents may not answer each question, or some respondents may provide multiple answers.

Three participants did not commit to an answer to this question. It did seem that the group was evenly divided on this point. Sixteen felt prepared academically, while 14 have identified that they believe they need work. For example, when asked the question, Geneve from the fifth session immediately replied, “I think I’ve got problems,” to which her co-participant offered, “and Eva’s [referring to herself in the third person] down with her.” Of those who said that they believed they might need remediation, those that believed that they lacked the math skills necessary to attempt postsecondary education

outnumbered those who identified a reading deficiency by two to one. These numbers are substantiated by the fact that of those who indicated that they do feel prepared, twice as many indicated preparedness in reading as did in math. Math, then, seems to be the greatest area of concern. The issue of academic preparedness sufficiently met the standard for the *prominent* classification.

The next discussion question asked whether participants felt personally prepared for higher education. Results are provided in Table 12.

Table 12

When you think about going to college, what thoughts do you have about your personal preparedness for college?, (n = 29)

| | Male | Female | Total |
|--------------|------|--------|-------|
| Ready | 3 | 7 | 10 |
| Not Ready | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| “In Between” | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Total | 4 | 8 | 12 |

Note. n = 29. Responses may not total 29 since respondents may not answer each question, or some respondents may provide multiple answers.

From these results, it appears that most of these young people feel personally prepared to face higher education. One male remarked that he needed to “get back in the groove,” and cited his lack of discipline regarding waking up and getting to work or class on time. He has been counted above as “Not Ready.”

Allison in the third group indicated that she, too would have to start working on waking up, “My school is five days a week,” she explained “[and] some mornings I don’t feel like even getting up out of bed. I mean I just wake up and I look at the clock for an hour.” But she did not seem to think that that would be an issue for her. Because of her confidence that this would not be a problem, she has been included in the “Ready” total in Table 8. One of the male respondents confounded personal preparedness with financial preparedness, yet he still indicated that he was ready. He has been included in the “Ready” tally in the above table.

While the “personal preparedness” question was designed to probe the participants’ feeling regarding their own character, the subsequent question was intended to explore their sense of external support in terms of friends, family, and mentors. The question asked, “When you think about attending college, what thoughts to you have about your personal support structure for college?” Table 13 illustrates the results.

Table 13

When you think about attending college, what thoughts to you have about your personal support structure for college?, (n = 29)

| | Male | Female | Total |
|-------------------------------|------|--------|-------|
| Have Support Structure | 6 | 3 | 9 |
| Have A Limited Structure | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| Do Not Have Support Structure | 2 | 4 | 6 |
| Other Supports | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Total | 9 | 11 | 20 |

Note. n = 29. Responses may not total 29 since respondents may not answer each question, or some respondents may provide multiple answers.

The results imply that more feel supported than not, especially if the “limited support” group is counted as a “yes.” This discussion thread took two interesting turns as some of the participants put their own interpretations on “personal support structure.” While the main thrust of the conversation centered around more traditional supports – such as

family and friends – two participants pointed out that these influences might not necessarily be positive. “If you’ve got family,” offered the young woman called Eva, “it’s not always true that they’re going to push you through. They can’t do it for you. You’ve got to worry for yourself.” A young man, Shaquille, echoed Eva’s thought. His girlfriend, he explained, often tried to talk him out of going to class in order to spend time with her, “Sometimes when we’re tired and I’ve got to go to class, and she’s like, ‘No, just stay home.’ [I’ll respond] ‘I can’t stay home. I’ve got to go to class. What are you talking about? I’ve already missed two classes.’ And so she’s not really a good support.” Still he would make the difficult decision to go to class despite her requests. The girlfriend’s mother, he continued, is the one who confronts the girlfriend regarding her negative influence.

Shaquille then talked about the other influence in his life – that of his absent biological mother – whom he earlier said partly influenced his initial decision to go on to postsecondary education, “even though she was drunk half the time.”

My mom always asks me, even though we don’t have really a strong relationship, she still asks me, you know, “Are you doing good in school” and everything, even though she wouldn’t know if I was doing bad. I still do good, just... not just for her, but partly for her.

This complicated blending of positive support, negative influence, and reactive positive behavior implies a complex mental process. These young people somehow manage to turn conflicting feelings into a source of motivation and support. Take the case of Geneve from Group 5, who turned her proclaimed disdain for her family into a reason to keep going. In response to the final question regarding whether there were any other

considerations regarding their college decision that we had not discussed, she offered instead a response to a different question, “What *didn’t* you think about when deciding to attend college.”

In the survey you asked did we make the decision because of our biological families. And me, I have to say no. They never entered my mind as far as me going to college, or me telling them that I’m going to college, or any of them in my family that I’m going to college ‘cause I really, really don’t care. I really don’t care.

Another participant in that group, Francesca, countered that she believed that, contrary to what Geneve said, if her family were to call and make general inquiry about her well-being, Francesca believed that Geneve would be all too happy to describe her academic accomplishments. The implication clearly was that the intensity of Geneve’s declaration of apathy decried a deeper longing for affirmation and support. While Geneve did not disagree, she did add that while she might tell them of her achievements, “I’m going to let [them] know that I got this far without [them], too.” The notion of family being a support or providing motivation through a reactive process emerged clearly as a *prominent* theme.

The second intriguing twist in the discussion surrounding personal support structure focused on resiliency and on the intrinsic motivation and support that comes from having been a “survivor.” Two participants, one male and one female, discussed the impact of their own hardships to fill in the gap for a missing support structure. “I’m probably about to sound really messed up when I say this,” said Adam in the second session, “but I think it’s better for someone to have an extremely hard life than to be

sheltered all their life. That way when something does come up, they're prepared for it.” The young women whom we called Diana in the fourth session expressed a similar sentiment. “I use everything that happened to me as motivation,” she offered. “I say, ‘Okay, this is a so-called restraint on my life, but I’m going to make it the best way I can.’” The idea of turning hardship into motivation, counted earlier in Table 13 in the “Other” column, emerged in two separate groups, sometimes even without prompting, and was therefore considered *prominent*.

The “Other” column in Table 13 also included a response from Diana, who offered that she used visions of a better life – specifically “a nice house and cars” – as her motivation. This response was intriguing in two ways. First, it underscored that often, when these young people cannot count on friends or family to help sustain them through the process of obtaining higher education, they turn inward to find deep wells of motivation to substitute for personal support. It is also noteworthy that Diana, with her brief mention of the symbols of an enhanced lifestyle, was the only one who talked about turning toward positive thoughts and the future, rather than reacting to the negative elements of the past, for a personal support substitute. Since Diana was the only one to mention this kind of motivation, the notion of “positive thoughts about the future” was regarded as an anomaly. The fact that she mentioned a nice house and car, however, did speak to the theme identified on the survey of a college degree providing greater income potential. For that reason, then, her response was enough to consider that survey item as *confirmed*, but *not prominent*.

The next question asked whether participants felt that they were financially prepared for postsecondary education. The responses are provided in Table 14.

Table 14

When you think about attending college, what thoughts do you have about your financial preparedness?, (n = 29)

| | Males | Females | Total |
|-----------|-------|---------|-------|
| Ready | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| Not Ready | 1 | 5 | 6 |
| Total | 3 | 5 | 8 |

Note. n = 29. Responses may not total 29 since respondents may not answer each question, or some respondents may provide multiple answers.

From these results, it appears that males are generally better prepared in terms of finances than females for postsecondary education opportunities. One young man in particular, Adam, emphasized that he had learned about corporate sponsorships from the *Connected by 25* Executive Director. He described how he had set a deliberate course for himself from an early age, volunteering with various civic organizations and cultivating relationships with business people in the community whom he felt certain would assure that “no matter what,” he would complete his education. It must also be noted that this same young man is currently enrolled in an adult technical training school in central Florida, and has aspirations of going to Georgia Institute of Technology upon completion of the program. He also

seemed to have a wealth of partial or misinformation that he willingly shared with the group. He explained how tuition was waived – no matter where one chose to attend, and that “the only thing the Pell Grant is doing is giving you money to pay for your books.”

A sharp counterpoint to Adam was a participant we called Brittany during the third session, whose response combined concerns about learning about financial aid programs, the window of opportunity for some programs, the long-term consequences of availing herself of loans, and the adequacy of the programs in general.

My problem is that I’m already 20, and at one point I’m going to have to find a way to pay off my college. Some people tell me that you can get grants and loans and stuff like that. When it comes to loans, you’ve got to pay that back. And sure there’s stuff out there that you can get, but you’ve got to look for it, and only God knows where it’s going to come from.

It is little wonder that in the next sentence, she characterized her feelings towards finances and financial aid in general as “stress.” Brittany was far more typical of the responses to the question about money. In fact, the theme of “money” – specifically the lack of it or concerns about not having enough of it – surfaced no less than fourteen times. The money theme clearly emerged as the *most prominent* theme considered by foster care youth deciding whether to participate in higher education.

Brittany was the first to raise another *prominent* theme: window of opportunity. In terms of academic progress, these young people are often behind their peers for a myriad of reasons, including multiple placements involving school changes, family problems leading to truancy, even physiological problems stemming from their mothers’ substance abuse issues during pregnancy. Brittany, who had just completed her GED at

age 20, is not an unusual case. “[It’s] going to be difficult,” she said, “because my problem is that I’m already 20, and at one point I’m going to have to find a way to pay off my own college.” The state and federal governments have provided various programs to help these young people move on to higher education programs. But the window of opportunity to use them closes at age 23. Given that these foster care youth will in all likelihood, according to the literature, require remediation, and given that they will in all likelihood need to work while attending school, it is very probable that they will not complete a bachelor’s degree in four years. Brittany is being a realist when she says that she will eventually have to find a way to pay for her own school after her benefits cease.

This theme of age coming to bear on the decision process emerged in other sessions as well. In the first session, in response to the final question, “Is there anything else about transitioning out of care that you want to tell me,” the young woman called Wendy raised her concerns about being 21 years old. “I’m twenty-one right now,” she said, “and the age is 23. So I’m close.” As it emerged more than once in separate groups, the theme of “age” was deemed *prominent*.

The next question asked what financial aid programs participants had heard about. In this part of the discussion, once one participant mentioned a particular program, it was not expected that others would mention the same program. For that reason, a table is not provided for this question. Nonetheless, the answers included general responses like, “grants” and “loans.” There was specific mention of “Pell Grants” in three out of five groups. Specific needs scholarships were mentioned in two groups, and one young man mentioned civic and corporate sponsorships. Because of the unique nature of the *Connected by 25* program of which all these young people were participants, the program

itself was cited more than once as a financial aid program – most often as an umbrella program through which all others were administered. Because the *Connected by 25* program requires educational enrollment, it also emerged as one of the biggest considerations in the choice process. But as the *Connected by 25* program is unique, existent in only two locations nationwide, the fact that it was mentioned as a choice factor cannot be generalized to the rest of the transitioning foster care population.

The questions then began to move away from specific subject areas to more generalized questions. The first of these questions asked if the participants had anything else they wanted to say about their college choice decision process. Two young women in two different sessions mentioned that they strongly considered whether they would have the time to do a postsecondary program. They cited the need to work and manage their own lives, coupled with the responsibilities of attending school. Because this theme emerged on two separate occasions, it was considered *prominent*. Another prominent theme that emerged was that of wanting to find a way to build a better life for their children. This topic emerged twice, both times from young women, in two different sessions, and was categorized as *prominent*. Two other young women discussed their desire to set an example or be a role model for their siblings. “When [my brother] moved in with me,” said Diane in the fourth meeting, “he said that I was the one that kept him striving to stay in school.” These women were both participants in the same conversation, so this theme was considered to have emerged only once. Still, the speakers spoke strongly about the impact of their impression on their siblings on their decision process. The responses of these women fell under a more general theme of “wanting to set an example or to be a role model.” As such, their responses were counted with those who

said they wanted to set an example for their own children, which was already identified as a *prominent* theme. One male raised an issue identified by Dr. Bui (2002) in her survey of first generation college students. He mentioned that he wanted to attend college so that he could interact in society. “The main thing,” he explained, “is just that I want to have knowledge [so that I can] have a conversation with someone who is intelligent and not look like an idiot.” As the theme was confirmed only once, it could not be classified as *prominent*.

Another young male offered a different perspective on a theme that had been anticipated and *confirmed*. While the researcher expected money to be an issue, it was presumed that it would be the lack of money that would dominate the theme. Yet Shaquille from the first group explained that a large part of his decision to return to school now and not wait was related to the fact that the financial programs and supports are in place now, whereas they will not be in the future as he ages out of care. “I mean, what have you got to lose? I mean, it will take time...but you can schedule it... And then once you get your degree, it adds so much... You can go back and do it later, but it’s so much easier to do it now while you’re in the program.” For him, it was the availability of money, rather than the lack of it, that helped to drive his decision.

Chapter Summary

The focus group discussion process was highly successful in that it provided depth to themes that were anticipated. It also revealed some new themes that helped to guide decisions, as well as recast familiar themes in a new light. Table 15 recaps the themes that were *confirmed* or *emergent*, and *prominent* or *not prominent*, according to

the protocol provided earlier in Figure 8.⁷ Themes in Table 15 are provided in order according to the 18 choice factors from the survey instrument, then according to the themes identified in the focus group interview guide. The themes that emerged from the discussion and were not previously identified either on the survey or in the discussion guide appear at the end of the list.

⁷ It is important to note that in Table 15, “confirmation” of a theme is defined as a theme previously identified from the survey that is subsequently mentioned or affirmed in the discussion. The *confirmed* theme does not reflect the quantitative survey results.

Table 15
College Choice Decision Themes Identified Through the Focus Group Process

| Theme | Confirmed, Unconfirmed, or Emergent | Prominent or Not Prominent |
|---|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Survey question: When I consider attending college, I consider... | | |
| 1. whether or not my friends are going on for more school. | Unconfirmed | Not Applicable |
| 2. that my biological brothers, sisters, and other relatives are going to college. | Confirmed | Not Prominent |
| 3. that my biological parents wanted or expected me to go to college. | Confirmed | Not Prominent |
| 4. that my high school teachers or my counselor persuaded me to go to college. | Unconfirmed | Not Applicable |
| 5. that my foster family or some other significant adult aside from school or my biological family persuaded me to go to college. | Unconfirmed | Not Applicable |
| 6. that I need a college degree to achieve my career goal. | Confirmed | Prominent |
| 7. that I would likely earn a better income with a college degree. | Confirmed | Not Prominent |
| 8. that I would gain respect or status by having a college degree. | Confirmed | Not Prominent |
| 9. that I would bring honor to biological family by having a college degree. | Unconfirmed | Not Applicable |
| 10. that I would be able to help out biological family after college. | Unconfirmed | Not Applicable |
| 11. that I like to learn. | Unconfirmed | Not Applicable |
| 12. that I like to study. | Unconfirmed | Not Applicable |
| 13. that I want to be able to provide a better life for my children. | Confirmed | Prominent |
| 14. that I want to gain my independence. | Confirmed | Not Prominent |
| 15. that I want to move out of current home. | Unconfirmed | Not Applicable |

Continued on the next page

Table 15 (Continued)
College Choice Decision Themes Identified Through the Focus Group Process

| Theme | Confirmed, Unconfirmed, or Emergent | Prominent or Not Prominent |
|--|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Survey question: When I consider attending college, I consider... | | |
| 16. that I want to acquire the skills I need to function effectively in society. | Confirmed | Not Prominent |
| 17. that I want to get out of my biological parents' neighborhood. | Unconfirmed | Not Applicable |
| 18. that I did not want to work immediately after high school. | Unconfirmed | Not Applicable |
| Focus Group Interview Guide: When you think about attending college, what thoughts do you have about... | | |
| 19. the application process | Confirmed | Prominent |
| 20. your academic preparedness | Confirmed | Prominent |
| 21. your financial preparedness | Confirmed | Prominent |
| 22. your personal preparedness | Confirmed | Not Prominent |
| 23. your personal support structure | Confirmed | Not Prominent |
| Themes that emerged without prompting: | | |
| 24. Want to be first in the family to get a degree | Emergent | Prominent |
| 25. Time to do it | Emergent | Prominent |
| 26. Whether or not there is a partner to help | Emergent | Prominent |
| 27. Money – having it right now | Emergent | Not Prominent |

Continued on the next page

Table 15 (Continued)
College Choice Decision Themes Identified Through the Focus Group Process

| Theme | Confirmed, Unconfirmed, or Emergent | Prominent or Not Prominent |
|---|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Themes that emerged without prompting: | | |
| 28. Family – as a detractor, not positive | Emergent | Prominent |
| 29. Whether or not there was a break between secondary and postsecondary | Emergent | Prominent |
| 30. Hardships as motivators | Emergent | Prominent |
| 31. Age – window of opportunity | Emergent | Prominent |
| 32. Pushed to do it by the program in which currently enrolled (<i>Connected by 25</i>) | Emergent | ^a Prominent |

a. This theme is unique to this sample; it cannot be generalized to the population

A review of this table indicates that the qualitative portion of the study confirmed, at least in part, some of the quantitative results. The six most influential decision factors identified by the survey were (listed in order of most to least influential):

1. ... that I would likely earn a better income with a college degree
2. ... that I want to gain my independence
3. ... that I need a college degree to achieve my career goal
4. ... that I would gain respect or status by having a college degree
5. ... that I want to acquire the skills I need to function effectively in society
6. ... that I want to be able to provide a better life for my children

The qualitative data collected during the focus group discussions confirmed the influence, to some extent, of the same choice elements. Surprisingly, however, the degree of influence, as evidenced by the means on the survey or by the denotation of *prominent* in the qualitative data, seemed incongruous at times. Of the top six influencers according to the survey, all were *confirmed* in the discussion, but only two – the desire for a degree in order to achieve a career goal, and the desire to provide a better life for one’s children – proved to be *prominent*.

The six items on the survey instrument that proved to be least considered during the college choice process were (listed in order of least to most influential):

1. ... that I want to get out of my biological parents’ neighborhood
2. ... whether or not my friends are going on for more school
3. ... that my biological brothers, sisters, and other relatives are going to college

4. ... that I did not want to work immediately after high school
5. ... that my high school teachers or my counselor persuaded me to go to college
6. ... that my biological parents wanted or expected me to go to college

Of those six factors, four remained *unconfirmed* in the focus group discussion.

Only the influence of siblings and the influence of the biological parents were *confirmed*, but neither was prominent. Given that foster children maintain contact with their biological families in varying degrees, the ambiguity of this result is not unexpected. Because the focus group discussion resulted in a classification of *unconfirmed* for four of the six factors identified as least influential on the survey, it can be said that since the focus group confirmed those factors that were reported as least considered on the survey.

The reasons for why the results for the survey and the focus group discussion would be more correlated for the least influencing factors rather than for the most influencing factors may be related to the fact that these are foster children. The foster care system does, to a great degree, create a similar experience base for young people in care. All experience abuse or neglect that brought them into the system in the first place, all experience some level of separation from their biological families, and most experience multiple placements that inhibit the formation of close friendships. Those who age out of care often have employment at the time they transition, although it may not be stable. It is not difficult to see, therefore, how the participants in this study could have very similar responses to questions regarding the least influential elements in their college choice processes. The realities of foster care would impose, to some extent, a set of experiences that could manifest in very similar ways among foster youth transitioning

out of care. On the other hand, as these young people navigate through their lives, they take very individualized approaches based upon their personalities and the opportunities presented to them. One youth may have maintained stronger connections with his old lives, allowing for his biological family to exert a continuing influence in his life.

Another may have had an opportunity to learn about a particular career field that became her personal goal. It is the individualized nature of these circumstances and experiences that would lead to variation among the strong influencers in the college choice process.

Between the six most influential and the six least influential decision factors on the survey, are six other choice factors. Those factors are (listed in order from most to least influential according to the survey results):

1. ... that I like to learn
2. ... that I would bring honor to my biological family by having a college degree
3. ... that I would be able to help out my biological family after college
4. ... that I like to study
5. ... that I want to move out of my current home
6. ... that my foster family or some significant adult aside from school or my biological family persuaded me to go to college

Of those six factors that scored in mid-range on the survey, all remained *unconfirmed* in the focus group discussion. There is no mention of high school teachers or counselors who might have served as mentors, nor did any participants say that they like to study or learn. There did not seem to be an interest in moving out of the current home or out of the biological parents' neighborhood. This may be attributed, however, to

the fact that many of these young people have already been removed from their parents' neighborhoods, and have already found for themselves adequate homes. It was perhaps surprising to see that the discussion failed to confirm the influence of foster parents in the college choice process. Only one participant mentioned a foster parent, and that was one young woman who described how her foster mother lobbied the system to allow the foster daughter into the *Connected by 25* program, and therefore enabled her to pursue higher education. Otherwise, on the topic of adult influences, this group was silent.

The Focus Group Interview Guide prompted responses regarding five specific areas: the applications or admissions process, academic preparedness, financial preparedness, personal preparedness, and personal support structure. Each of these factors was *confirmed* by the discussion. That is, at least one respondent affirmed that the prompted theme was, in fact, a consideration in the process. But for a factor to be considered *prominent*, it must have been affirmed by at least once by more than one participant. Of the five specific decision areas prompted by the focus group discussion guide, three were considered *prominent*. Those were the admissions process, academic preparedness, and financial preparedness. While the issues of personal preparedness or personal support structure were affirmed as considerations, they were more often than not described as posing no barrier to a decision in favor of postsecondary education. This result might be surprising considering that there are a plethora of services for these youth aimed specifically at the issues they consider *prominent*. The Florida Office of Program Policy Analysis & Government Accountability (OPPAGA) published a report in November 2004, describing the services available to transitioning foster care youth. These services include tutoring programs for academic remediation, scholarships, tuition

waivers, and living stipend programs to assuage the fiscal impact of college. Although the state mandated Independent Living curriculum does not include training regarding the postsecondary admissions process, anecdotal information suggests that Independent Living Coordinators often help their transitioning foster care youth navigate through the system. Still these are the areas identified as *prominent* by participants of this study.

On the other hand, aside from a handful of mentoring programs, and the exception of the *Connected by 25* program, the state has been less aggressive in establishing personal relationships or connections for transitioning foster care youth. The *Connected by 25* report (n.d.) states that for these young people, upon turning 18 years of age, their connection to the child welfare system terminates, and they are on their own, usually without any safety net at all (p. 10). Still, with rare exception, the participants in this study did not question their personal preparedness for higher education. Likewise, in the current state mandated Independent Living curriculum, while there are courses in parenting skills, interviewing, and credit management, there is no requirement to offer classes in “self-discipline” or “self-motivation.” Despite this hole, the participants in this study have found ways to build personal support networks that they believe are sufficient to sustain them through the pursuit of a postsecondary certificate or degree. The process of building such a network is tricky, nonetheless, as evidenced by the participants who offered that their friends and family members are occasionally more distracting than supportive.

In addition to the 18 themes mentioned on the survey, and the five choice factors that were identified in the Focus Group Interview Guide, nine other themes emerged during the focus group discussion. Those themes were:

1. the desire to be the first in the family to get a degree
2. having the time to do postsecondary education
3. whether or not there is a partner during the pursuit of higher education
4. the impact of family as a detractor, rather than as a positive, on the pursuit of higher education
5. whether or not there was a break between secondary and postsecondary education
6. the use of one's personal hardships as motivation
7. age at the time of starting postsecondary school
8. the availability of financial programs to help with education expenses until the age of 23
9. the requirement by the *Connected by 25* program to be enrolled in an educational program

Of those themes, eight emerged as *prominent*. Only the notion of the availability of financial programs, until the age of 23, was *not prominent* as only one participant mentioned it. The theme of the influence of the *Connected by 25* program was considered unique to this sample since there are only two such programs in the nation. For that reason, that theme, although *prominent* according to the protocol, was considered anomalous and was not included in the final result. More than one participant mentioned the other themes at least once. Some were mentioned with more frequency and intensity than others. Specifically, the theme of turning hardships into motivation was discussed with great passion. With remarkable frequency, these youth turned to the difficulties of their past for their inspiration for the future.

Similarly, the theme of whether or not there was a partner in the relationship during the pursuit of the academic goal elicited an intense discourse with participants divided about whether having a partner was a good thing or a bad thing. The discussion of one's family being a negative influence, rather than a positive, in the pursuit of higher education brought great emotional intensity. While the protocol did not provide for the ranking of *emergent* themes according to intensity or emotion, observation of the frequency with which themes were mentioned, the number of participants that joined in the discussion around certain themes, or word choice and inflection might provide hints into which *emergent* themes could be considered most *prominent*.

For example, the discussion thread regarding the impact of having a partner while going to school exploded into a debate that lasted several minutes and involved no less than six participants – all but one of whom were arguing that having a partner would make the pursuit of a degree more difficult rather than easier. The issue of partnership seemed to warrant classification as *prominent*. Another case in point was the issue of the negative influence of family on the decision process. Not only did several participants raise the theme, but also one participant in the last group felt so strongly about the topic that she made it a point to mention that she deliberately dismissed thoughts of her family when making her decision. Her word choice and inflection manifested anger. “They never entered my mind,” she said, “... cause I really, really don't care. I don't care.” The strength of her emotions, and her raw determination to get her defiance on the record, would have suggested that the theme deserved a *prominent* classification. And finally, the theme of wanting to set an example or create a better life for one's children or siblings also surfaced in multiple groups, but it was the words used in two separate

discussions that seemed to imply intensity. In the last session, one participant offered, “I don’t want my children growing up like I did,” to which another replied, “That’s probably the biggest thing what [*sic*] everyone’s thinking.” In a similar vein, this was the closing conversation in the fourth session.

Francesca: I was just thinking about my motivation as far as my going back to school, was my siblings.

Researcher: Are you the oldest?

Francesca: No. I’m not older, but I’m the role model.

Researcher: You’re going to be the role model?

Francesca: No, I AM the role model.

Using language like “the biggest thing,” or using emphatic inflection during this discussion thread implies that the theme of setting an example or being a role model for children or siblings could qualify as a *prominent emergent* theme.

The survey results provided a clear sense of what themes, identified by previous research, were influential to this sample of transitioning foster care youth. The focus group discussion added another layer of understanding by first, affirming the survey results, and second, by providing another layer of themes not previously identified in the literature. This research has demonstrated that although the decision to pursue postsecondary education is complicated for foster care youth, there may be patterns and common threads that link these young people together. The results have offered insight into the college choice process among foster care youth in a way that might lead policy makers to consider decisions differently. Some of those considerations will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

Chapter Five

Summary of Findings, Conclusions, and Implications for Theory, Practice, and Research

This study's purpose was to determine whether foster care youth attend postsecondary programs in the same proportion as their non-foster care peers. It also was designed to illuminate what kinds of institutions are most often chosen by foster care youth who decide to continue beyond a secondary education. Finally, the research hoped to explore the decision factors that young people aging out of state protective custody consider during their college choice process. This chapter presents a review of the methodology, followed by a summary of the findings. Next, the conclusions will be reviewed. Following the conclusions, the implications for theory, practice, and future research will be offered.

Method Summary

To answer the first two research questions, a survey was mailed out to the twenty-two Community-Based Care lead agencies contracted throughout the state by the Department of Children and Families to serve children in foster care, including those who are aging out of the state child welfare system. The survey was intended to collect information regarding participation rates among eligible foster care youth, data regarding the types of postsecondary institutions chosen by these aspiring college students, and basic demographic data. The response rate of only 5 surveys returned from 22 mailed out,

coupled with the fact that 4 of the 5 surveys were returned with incomplete data, was disappointing. Still, some inferences could be made from a review of the descriptive statistics.

To answer the third research question, a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies was used. Meetings were arranged between the researcher and small groups of young persons in the target population. In these meetings, a survey instrument was administered. This survey instrument was modeled on a tool developed by Dr. Khanh-Van T. Bui (2002) to explore the college choice decision factors considered by first generation college students. For the foster care population, the questions were slightly reworded, and one was added, to allow for a more precise measurement of factors unique to a group of young persons receiving protective services from the state child welfare system. The survey returned an $n = 33$, comprised of 12 males, 20 females, and one of undeclared gender. Although the sample was not large enough to allow for statistical significance, descriptive and comparative analyses were then applied to uncover emergent patterns in the data that may be of practical significance.

Upon completion of the survey, the participants were invited to remain for a focus group discussion. The ensuing discussion provided a context for the survey data and provided additional layers of understanding concurrent with complexity. The discussions were audio taped with the assistance of a note taker, and later transcribed. Using accepted qualitative research analysis methodologies, the data were coded and analyzed to discern whether there may be additional insights or whether the information provided new perspectives on previously identified concepts.

Summary of Findings

The research questions could only be answered through a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. The findings are presented for each of the three original research questions.

1. What proportion of eligible foster care youth in Florida are taking advantage of the state and federal higher education scholarship and subsidy opportunities, and is that proportion higher or lower than the proportion of eligible students from the non-foster care population who attend institutions of higher education?

Descriptive statistics calculated on three fiscal years' worth of data from Broward county in Florida indicated that only 12.4% of foster care youth chose to participate in higher education, as opposed to 60% in the national general population (NCES, 2002), or 54% of the Florida population (OPPAGA, 2005).

2. Of those foster care youth who are attending institutions of higher education in Florida, where are they attending and in what proportion?

Further analysis of the surveys returned from Independent Living Coordinators from four of Florida's 15 DCF districts showed that of those young people who do continue their school after completion of their high school diplomas or GEDs, more than 54.5% opt to attend a community college. Another 26.1% choose some type of institution other than community college or state university. From the information volunteered during the focus group interviews, it may be inferred that vocational institutions comprise much of that 26.1%. Among the focus group participants, 20.7% (6 out of 29) indicated that they were already enrolled or that enrollment was imminent in a public community college or state university.

3. What factors do foster care youth consider when deciding whether or not to participate in postsecondary education, and how heavily does each factor weigh on the college choice process?

Through analysis using a variety of descriptive and comparative statistics, it was determined that, with very little variance, young adults aging out the foster care system tend to consider the same four key elements:

- the hope of earning a better income in the future,
- the desire to gain independence,
- the desire for a particular career goal,
- the desire for respect and status.

It may also be inferred from the descriptive statistics that these young people are polarized around the issue of their biological families – that either they are strongly influenced by them and have a desire to help them by getting a postsecondary degree, or they discount their influence in the decision process. The focus group discussion provided yet another perspective on the issue of biological families. As they explained, in many cases, the influence of a biological family on the young person to take positive action might actually be an act of rebellion or a demonstration of triumph over the odds. This kind of response speaks to the resiliency of the young people in this unique population. The foster care postsecondary student might actually persist toward a degree in order to prove something to the biological family members – a kind of “education with attitude” form of action.

The apparent emergence of four key themes on the survey lead the researcher to question whether all of the choice factors might form homogeneous clusters. A factor

analysis was conducted on the survey results and suggested that indeed, the questions may be clustered into five distinct groups:

- egocentric factors – those factors that contribute most directly to the enjoyment or pleasure of the respondent
- leaving or avoidance factors– factors that define conditions or situations from which the respondent wishes to be removed
- outsider factors – factors defined by persons outside the immediate circle of influence
- biological family factors– those issues that relate to the respondent’s biological parents and siblings
- respect and status factor – a single-factor group that speaks to the respondent’s desire for esteem and regard

A comparative analysis of the means revealed that there is no difference between the choice of factors, and the weight each of those factors, in the college decision process between males ($n=12$) and females ($n=20$). A series of *t* tests further substantiated this conclusion. In contrast, an analysis of the means of those who chose to attend higher education versus those who chose not to go implied that there might perhaps be very different decision patterns between the two groups, although the sample was not large enough to allow for a statistically significant conclusion.

Through a guided interview process, the focus group discussion allowed for the confirmation of pre-identified themes: the admissions process, academic preparedness, financial preparedness, personal preparedness, and the existence of a personal support

structure. By considering the relative intensity of the discussion surrounding these five key themes, the first three were determined to be *prominent*.

The focus group process also allowed for themes that had not been previously identified either on the survey or in the focus group interview guide to surface. Those themes, presented according to a subjective judgment regarding how frequently or how intensely they surfaced during the discussion, are as follows:

- The desire to set an example or be a role model for their children or siblings. Not only do these young people want to provide a better lifestyle for their own families, but they also want to provide a good example in terms of character and achievement for their children and siblings. Perhaps because of the lack of role models within their own families, they seem focused on exhibiting the kinds of behaviors that contribute to success and accomplishment.
- The use of hardships as motivators. The foster care youth who chose to participate in this study seemed to be a resilient group. By virtue of the fact that they were in the *Connected by 25* program, and not part of the dismal statistics discussed in the literature about transitioning foster care youth (*Connected by 25*, n.d.; Cook et al., 1991; OPPAGA, 2005; Wertheimer, 2002), these youth have demonstrated their determination to “make it” – to rise above their history and become productive citizens. To do that, most in this study described how they called upon the darkest parts of their own experience to provide them with the inner strength and motivation to keep going.

- The fact that family may not be a positive influence in a personal support structure. Many of these young people have little or no contact with their biological families. To say that the rest of them have complicated relationships with their relatives would be an understatement. The *Connected by 25* program goes so far as to suggest that transitioning youth may well need “counseling to help them figure out how to relate to their families of origin” (*Connected by 25, n.d.*, p. 14). Several participants in this study explained how their biological families might not be supportive of their educational pursuits; others described how their families might actually provide a distraction from the academic goals. These youth have had to create for themselves supportive networks to fill in the gaps left by their dysfunctional families.
- The involvement of a partner for financial and emotional support during the education process. Although the topic of personal relationships emerged as a *prominent* theme, the participants in this study were divided on whether having a partner during the pursuit of a postsecondary education was helpful or not. The majority opinion seemed to be that having a partner was more distracting than supporting. But those who favored having a partner were strongly set in their opinion.
- The age of the respondent in relation to the window of opportunity for state and government assistance for higher education. The age limitation for state and federal education assistance for transitioning foster care youth is 23. The *Connected by 25* program with which the youth in this sample were involved

provides additional supports to the age of 25, but not educational scholarships or tuition waivers. The youth in this study, therefore, expressed a feeling of pressure to get their academic goals accomplished. This pressure was compounded by the fact that most of these youth, like the rest of the foster care population, are academically delayed. Some are just completing their GEDs at age 20, leaving them only a few years in which to accomplish their educational goals with the help of subsidies.

- The current availability of funding for higher education through special programs for foster care youth. Some participants in this study looked at the limited availability of government educational assistance as a “glass half full” rather than as a “glass half empty.” While some of their peers were concerned about the expiring eligibility for financial supports at age 23, others saw the immediate availability of those programs as all the more reason to “get on with the program.” For some, it was the fact that the money is here now, and the reality that the window of opportunity will close, that provided the sense of urgency to move as far and as fast as possible through the educational levels.
- The time management challenges of going to school while working and perhaps raising a family. Although the question was not asked either on the survey or in the discussion, a review of the discussion transcripts revealed that at least three participants were already parents. Literature suggests that this number may be understated (Cook et al. 1991; *Outcomes for youth*, 2001; Wertheimer, 2002). A study conducted during the 1980s revealed that 17% of

the females were pregnant at the time they aged out of care, and 60% of former foster care females had children within four years of turning 18 years of age (*Outcomes for youth*, 2001, para. 1). The problem of balancing parenthood along with life's other responsibilities is very real, as was evidenced by the fact that one participant even had to bring her three young children with her to the research meeting because she was unable to arrange for child care. The young people in this sample also know what is to have to work and to have children – both issues that would complicate the college choice process. Most of them are already supporting themselves through a combination of state and federal transition aid programs and part- or full-time work. When they talk about the challenges of balancing school, family, and work, they are speaking from personal experience. For them, life has been difficult for a long time, and they have no delusions that it will get easier any time in the near future.

- The impact of taking a break between completion of secondary studies and the commencement of postsecondary education. Again, the youth who participated in this study had differing opinions on this point. Yet those who favored taking a break between secondary and postsecondary education were clearly in the minority. Some expressed great frustration with the fact that the foster care system itself had imposed breaks on their educational progress.

After all the analysis of the survey data and the focus group data one theme clearly surfaced and the preeminent decision factor in the college choice process for these transitioning foster care youth: money. They talked at length about how they would have

to struggle to pay for school, even with federal and state programs in place to help them. But the issue of money was not limited to concerns about tuition costs or living expenses. Rather, economic issues underpinned many of the other themes that they identified during the focus group discussion. For example, financial considerations determined what kinds of institutions they would attend, and in turn, which career paths they would pursue. Money played a role in their concerns about time management, as they cited the need to work while attending school. Money was a consideration in their desire to provide a better life for their children. And it was the need for a financial support, even more than the desire for emotional support that drove much of the debate regarding the impact of having a partner while attending school. The fact that money and financial concerns seemed to be the *most prominent theme* cannot be denied.

Conclusions

From this study, the following conclusions may be inferred:

- A lower percentage of foster care youth participate in postsecondary education programs than their peers in the general population. This was evidenced by the results of the survey to Independent Living Coordinators. While the small sample size of this study limits generalizability, this finding does corroborate those of previous research (Cook et al., 1991; Merdinger et al., 2005; Nevada Kids Count, 2001; OPPAGA, 2005).
- Foster care youth who do opt in favor of higher education choose community colleges or vocational schools more often than traditional four-year colleges. The responses to the Independent Living Coordinator survey, although

limited, did indicate that 80.6% (133 out of 165) foster care postsecondary students from fiscal years 2001-2002 through 2004-2005 were attending community or vocational colleges.

- Foster care youth who are deciding whether to participate in higher education programs appear to consider four major choice factors: the desire for a better income, the desire for independence, the desire for a particular career goal, and the desire for respect and status. These were the decision choice factors that received the highest mean scores on the survey portion of this study.
- Foster care youth who are deciding whether to participate in higher education programs may be least influenced by the desire to leave their biological parents' neighborhood, whether or not their friends are attending, whether or not their biological siblings are attending, and the desire to avoid entering the work force immediately upon completion of high school or a GED. These four factors earned the lowest mean scores on the research survey.
- There appears to be no practical difference between male and female foster care youth transitioning out of care in the way they approach the college choice decision process. This conclusion was reached by comparing the mean survey scores for each question for males against the mean survey scores for each question for the females. That analysis revealed that the mean scores for each question, stratified by gender, had a very tight correlation. This suggested that foster care men and women transitioning out of care who are at the nexus of the college choice decision process tend to think about the same decision factors with the same amount of weight.

- Foster care youth may consider many of the same factors as first generation college students when making the decision whether to attend higher education. Those common factors include the desire for a better income, the desire to achieve a career goal, the desire for respect or status, the desire for skills to function in society, and the desire to build a better life for their children. Likewise, first generation college students and transitioning foster care youth tend to be least influenced by a desire to leave the biological parents' neighborhood, whether or not their friends have chosen to attend college, and whether or not their siblings are planning to attend college. These conclusions were inferred after comparing the results from the survey in this study to the results from Dr. Khanh-Van T. Bui's 2002 survey of first generation college students. The two studies found that the two populations share two of the top four influencing decision factors, as well as three of the four least influential decision factors.
- The focus group discussions *confirmed* 8 of the 18 choice factors presented on the survey as being considered by transitioning foster care youth during the college choice process. Those factors were⁸:
 1. ... that I would likely earn a better income with a college degree
 2. ... that I want to gain my independence
 3. ... that I need a college degree to achieve my career goal

⁸ Presented in order of influence according to the survey results.

4. ... that I would gain respect or status by having a college degree
5. ... that I want to acquire the skills to function effectively in society
6. ... that I want to be able to provide a better life for my children
7. ... that my biological parents wanted or expected me to go to college
8. ... that my biological brothers, sisters, and other relatives are going to college

Of those eight factors, only two – the factor about needing a degree to achieve a career goal, and the factor about wanting to provide a better life for one’s children – earned the designation of *prominent*.

- When making the decision whether to pursue higher education, transitioning foster care youth regard financial considerations, academic preparedness, and the admissions process as problematic, as those factors were *confirmed* by responses to the prompting questions during the focus group discussion. Given the intensity of the discussion, these three themes could further be considered *prominent*. At the same time, while these participants *confirmed* that they are also concerned about their personal preparedness or their personal support structures, they were not as intense in their responses to these concerns.
- When engaged in the college choice process, foster care youth also give weight to such matters as the desire to create a better life for one’s children; the desire to be a role model for one’s children or siblings; the desire to turn their hardships into positive outcomes; the fact that their families may exert a

negative, rather than a positive, influence on them in the pursuit of their educational goals; and whether or not they have partners to help them during their academic progress. These were the *emergent* themes that surfaced with the greatest frequency and/or intensity during the focus group discussions.

- Other college choice themes that emerged during the discussion, although perhaps with not quite the same level of intensity as those listed above, were the age of the respondent in relation to the window of opportunity for government subsidy programs, the current eligibility for education financial aid programs for transitioning foster care youth, time management, and whether or not there had been a break between secondary and postsecondary education.

Implications for Theory

This study contributes to the body of knowledge surrounding the college choice process. For example, this study showed that transitioning foster care youth facing the college choice process share two of the top four decision factors with Dr. Bui's (2002) first generation college students. In both cases, the desire for a better income and the desire to achieve a career goal appear in the top four reasons. The desire for respect or status, which appears fourth for transitioning foster care youth, is fifth on the list for the participants in Dr. Bui's study. One factor that appears on the list of four most influential for first generation college students that is not shared by foster care youth is the issue of wanting to help out the biological family upon graduation from college. While Dr. Bui's study revealed that first generation college students had a great desire to help out their families after college (with a mean score of 6.27 on a seven point Likert scale), the foster

care youth were much less likely to feel any inclination to help their relatives (with a mean score of 2.78 on a four point Likert scale). This result implies, not surprisingly, that the relationship of the biological family to the potential student is very different between first generation college students and foster care youth. Conversely, it also implies that there are great similarities between the two populations. First generation college students and young people transitioning out of foster care may have more in common than is currently understood.

The research also provides new college choice factors for consideration to the spectrum extant in the literature, especially in literature relative to non-traditional students. The five decision factors that emerged perhaps most forcefully during the open-ended focus group discussion questions were:

- the desire to create a better life for one's children
- the desire to be a role model for one's children or siblings
- the desire to turn one's hardships into positive outcomes
- the fact that one's families may exert a negative, rather than a positive, influence during the pursuit of educational goals
- whether or not one has a partner for support while attending postsecondary education

Because these themes surfaced multiple times and without a specific prompt, they may hold significance to this population that might help to reshape the decision factors historically considered in college choice theory.

Implications for Practice

Perhaps one of the most significant revelations to emerge from this study was the affirmation that financial concerns remain the most significant choice factor in the

college choice process for foster care youth aging out of care. This is despite the fact that state and federal governments spend millions each year on higher education programs aimed at this population – dollars that have historically remain underutilized. The focus group discussion has provided for an inference that while the dollars are there, these youth remain either uninformed or misinformed about them. Consider the comments of one misinformed participant who shared with the group that tuition for them would be waived no matter where they chose to attend, and that Pell Grants would only cover the cost of books. It was also striking to note how many participants, when asked what specific financial aid programs they had heard about, either responded or affirmed that *Connected by 25* (the grant-funded transition assistance program of which they were clients) was the only program about which they knew. One implication for practice, then, might be that governments may want to consider finding new resources, or reallocating some of the already allocated dollars away from direct tuition scholarships or living stipends into education programs regarding their existence and availability.

But education regarding financial aid will solve only part of the problem. Education without proper marketing often falls on deaf ears. A December 2005 report published by the Florida Office of Program Policy Analysis & Government Accountability (OPPAGA) regarding the state of transitioning foster care youth in Florida provided insight to the mindset of this unique population. “The providers we contacted,” the report stated, “indicated that some former foster care youth want nothing to do with the program once they leave adulthood” (p. 8). Anecdotal information gathered by the researcher from other providers suggests that this attitude is more typical than not. To convince these young people to voluntarily remain in “the system” in order

to complete a postsecondary degree is a hard sell, to say the least. Yet this study reveals some decision considerations unique to this population. Marketing strategies targeting these distinct choice factors might help to move the decision closer toward higher education. Perhaps a brochure, for example, that shows a young mom working on homework side-by-side with her elementary aged daughter might speak with more relevance to the related themes of wanting to create a better life, or to set an example for one's children.

Another revelation of the study is that members of the target population find the process of applying for college admission and financial aid programs confusing and somewhat daunting. When asked what thoughts the participants had about the admissions process, one respondent exclaimed "Oh, Lord!" and rolled her eyes. Another young man described the lengthy and complicated process that he had navigated to obtain admission to a vocational school. Still another participant expressed her frustration with a financial aid application process that required information that simply does not exist for young people who have aged out of foster care.

Current admissions processes in public institutions are often antiquated and daunting. The leaders of public institutions may want to take a lesson from the proprietary schools with whom they compete, and re-engineer their processes to be more user-friendly. Policy makers may also want to develop programs aimed at helping these young people navigate the systems that will give them access to the very programs that can make their educational aspirations a reality. The Executive Director of the *Connected by 25* program explained that she has dollars available to pay for a full time academic advisor to sit on the campus of a college or university to serve transitioning

foster care youth. This advisor, she explained, could not only help with the admissions and transition process, but also could provide appropriate guidance and support to foster care youth in their early college years in order to mitigate the trend toward attrition that has been identified in their research (Diane Zambito, personal communication, December 1, 2005).

Implications for Research

While this study has answered many of the questions originally posed, it has left some unanswered – fertile ground for future research. Specific areas of inquiry include:

- What percentage of foster care youth transitioning out of the child welfare system choose to participate in higher education? While this question was partially answered in this study, a definitive conclusion could not be drawn due to the small return rate of the Independent Living Coordinator survey and the incompleteness of the responses received. Two years have elapsed since the original question was posed, and privatized agencies have had time to build their databases. A subsequent study would likely meet with more success.
- Do foster care youth who have opted out of higher education after completion of their GEDs or high school diplomas weight their choice factors differently from those who have chosen to continue with postsecondary education? Again, although this research has given reason to suspect that the null hypothesis regarding the difference in the means between the two populations may indeed be true, it could not be established as such to a level of statistical significance given the small sample size. Broward County indicated that

nearly 85% of eligible foster care youth participate in higher education programs. Yet this study provided only two participants who indicated that they were leaning toward not pursuing higher education after achievement of their GEDs. Clearly the sampling limitations of this study precluded investigation of the majority of the target population. A larger sample, with a more even split of participants between those who have chosen to continue with postsecondary education and those who have chosen not to, could provide the answer to this question.

- Is “respect and status” truly a choice factor component unto itself according to factor analysis, and if so, why? The answer to this question would require a mixed methodology of quantitative and qualitative approached, but could provide a new perspective on the college decision choice process.
- Are foster care youth different from first generation college students in their college choice decision process, and if so, how? A comparison between the results in this study and the results from Dr. Bui’s 2002 survey indicated that there were indeed similarities in those factors at the extreme ends of the scale of influence. Interestingly, they shared 3 of the 4 factors with the highest means, and 3 of the 4 factors with the lowest means. But this analysis was based upon a comparison between a sample of 33 and a sample of more than 200. To conduct a sound, statistically significant comparative analysis would require a much larger sample size of transitioning foster care youth.
- Foster children often tend to develop a unique persona, defined by a bit of defiance and exaggerated self-sufficiency. This characteristic may be aligned

with alienation factors defined in some of the first generation college student literature. A research study looking at this “tough kid” image, and how that might come to bear on the decision whether to attend college, might provide a different perspective on the choice process.

- Are decision factors different if the data are further stratified, perhaps according to rural, suburban, and urban stratifications? It would not be unreasonable to assume that the experiences of foster care youth in different environments would differ. While a foster care youth raised in an urban setting, for example, might have greater opportunities to form friendships, simply because of proximity to peers, a youth raised in a rural area might have a more difficult time connecting with young people of similar age and interests. But the answer to questions regarding differences among subclassifications of foster care youth would require a much larger sample with multiple levels of stratification.
- A related follow-on question would be whether foster care youth who are earlier in the college choice process consider different decision factors, or consider known factors, differently than those included in this sample? It stands to reason that as a foster care child moves closer to the age of majority, the pressing issues of adulthood would begin to move to the forefront for consideration in all decision processes. This might result in a set of college choice criteria that change over time. Only by including younger participants, such as the seventeen-year-olds who were included in the original design to this study, could this question be answered.

- Another related question for exploration might be when the construct of “self” becomes an issue in the choice process? The factors identified as significant in this study were largely external to the individual. It would be interesting to explore when, if ever, these young people consider higher education simply for the intrinsic rewards.
- The issue of planning might prove a fruitful line of inquiry. It seems that many of these young people may have difficulty in planning their futures, or in believing that they have enough control over their futures to be able to plan. This fact may have a significant impact on their selection of institution type. They may be more inclined, for example, to select community colleges or proprietary institutions that allow admission up to the first day of classes, over universities that generally require advanced application. The planning and locus of control issue might also influence their willingness to consider taking student loans as they may harbor skepticism about the stability of their futures and their ultimate ability to repay funders.
- Are the *emergent* themes that surfaced in this group unique to this sample, or to this population? During the focus group discussions, nine previously unidentified themes emerged – five with a relatively high level of intensity and frequency. Are these factors truly unique to transitioning foster care youth, or are they factors that exist in other populations facing the college choice process? To answer this question, it would be necessary to incorporate these factors into a college choice survey and administer it to non-foster care youth. Target samples could either be a random sample drawn from the

general population, or more focused samples drawn from special populations. It would be interesting to learn, for example, whether these factors were considered by first-generation college students. It could be possible that these elements were considered, but simply not identified by Dr. Bui's 2002 research. Such research would provide insight into just how parallel these two populations really are.

- How do these issues speak to the issues of resiliency and academic persistence? It would contribute to the literature to conduct a longitudinal study to determine which of the identified choice factors prove to be good predictors of academic persistence. Can a relationship be determined, for example, between any particular choice factors and the likelihood that a former foster care adult will accomplish a college degree, or achieve a particular career goal? If such relationships could be established, then specifically targeted programs addressing those choice factors with young people either before or during decision process might be able to positively impact on academic outcomes.
- Why was the influence of a foster parent or other non-relative adult rated so low on the survey and *unconfirmed* in the focus group discussion? Given the complexity and inconsistency of the relationships among most foster youth and their biological families, it would not seem an unreasonable supposition that parental surrogates would play a bigger part in the lives of these young

people. Still, this thesis has not manifested in this study. The nature of the relationship between state-dependent children and their foster parents warrants future exploration.

In conducting future research, the researcher would be well served to bear in mind that foster care youth may not relate to terms and constructs in the same way as their non-foster care peers. In the foster youth survey, for example, one participant asked if the question relating to “honor” could be asked again, but using a different word. She had no experience base to help her understand the concept. Similarly, during the focus group discussion, several participants had difficulty in separating out the various processes involved in achieving college enrollment. In response to the question regarding the admissions process, for example, more than one participant replied with answers regarding the financial aid application process. And finally, the researcher should be prepared for foster care youth to bring different shades of interpretation and understanding to the constructs being explored. When Dr. Bui included a question on her survey about the desire to provide a better life for one’s children, it is likely that her participants would have responded to that question in an abstract way as they thought about their futures. But for the participants in this study, the necessity to build a better life for one’s children was, in many cases, an immediate need as they were already parents. The context of the questions, then, must be considered when evaluating results.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has reviewed the methodology used in this study. It has discussed the use of the survey, modified from an instrument originally used to determine college choice factors among first generation college students. It reviewed the use of a survey

instrument to collect data from Independent Living Coordinators regarding what percentage of eligible foster care youth choose to participate in subsidized higher education programs, and what types of institutions those who do participate choose to attend. The chapter also reviewed the use focus groups to glean additional information about the college choice process for transitioning foster care youth.

Next, a summary of the results was presented. The 18 choice factors that were questioned on the survey were reviewed, and the top four factors were identified. It was also demonstrated that two of the four survey questions with the highest means also ranked among the highest scoring four factors in Dr. Bui's (2002) survey to first-generation college students. Likewise, three of the four items that scored the lowest on this survey also ranked among the four lowest scoring factors on Dr. Bui's 2002 survey. A casual review of the survey results lead the researcher to believe that there might be commonalities among some of the questions. With that in mind, a factor analysis was conducted which demonstrated that there were five homogeneous clusters of questions. A description of those five clusters was presented. This chapter then presented a discussion regarding prompted themes from the focus group, followed by a recap of the themes that emerged without prompting. Finally, upon consideration of all the data collected from the survey, the focus guide prompts, and the focus group open-ended discussion, it was determined that money and financial concerns were the *most prominent* decision factor in the college choice process for transitioning foster care youth.

Following the results summary, a list of conclusions was presented. Despite the limitations of this study, the researcher was able to identify ten conclusions regarding the higher education participation decisions and the college choice process for this sample.

These conclusions lead to a discussion regarding possible implications for theory. The standard “set” of college choice decision factors, for example, may be called into question by the fact that nine additional factors emerged in this study’s focus group discussions.

This chapter also offered implications for practice. In particular, policies targeted at transitioning youth would be better founded if decision makers could be informed by this research. Dollars may be spent more efficiently on targeted programs, and behavior among young people that may enhance chances for positive outcomes might be more effectively achieved.

While much was learned from this research, it has raised as many, if not more, questions than it answered. Areas for subsequent research were suggested. While there is a body of literature regarding youth transitioning out of foster care, research targeted at the college choice process within this special population is practically non-existent. Understanding the link between education and economic self-sufficiency, and the correlation between poverty and the likelihood of child abuse and neglect, it would seem critical to explore those areas that would have the most direct impact on young people making decisions that could help them to break destructive social cycles. Research may provide insights that could lead to truly efficacious social policies.

As many as 25,000 foster care youth age out of care across the nation each year. These are young people in crisis. Many have no place to go after leaving the state child welfare system. All too often they end up homeless, drug dependent, unemployed, or in jail (*Outcomes for youth*, 2001; Duva and Raley, 1988; Wertheimer, 2002). These outcomes stand seem irreconcilable with the fact that upon transitioning from care, the

majority of these young people have academic aspirations. They leave the system with dreams and goals for their futures. They realize that education can be their ticket to a better life (Bowen and Bok, 1998). Most believe that they will go on to college (Courtney et al., 2001), but most do not (Courtney et al.2001; McMillan & Tucker, 1999). Why? Where is the disconnect?

Every year, state and federal governments invest millions of dollars in an array of services aimed at moving foster care youth who are turning 18 into transitional programs to allow them to pursue their educational goals for another several years. Florida alone spent nearly \$7 million in fiscal year 2003-2004 in Road to Independence scholarships, yet only 28% of eligible foster care youth ages 18-22 took advantage of them (OPPAGA, 2005, p. 8). Clearly the financial supports exist. What precludes eligible youth from choosing to use the programs put in place for their benefit?

Based upon this research, the answer rests in the college choice process. To be able to reverse engineer the decision process of transitioning foster care youth might reveal what factors would be most critical to influence in order to have a positive effect on the ultimate decision. It is that goal to which this research is aimed. Before effective programs can be developed, before those programs can be appropriately marketed, it is essential to know how these young people think and how they make important life decisions. Policy makers may be better informed about the choice factors that they must address in order to help these young people choose higher education. Pursuing this line

of inquiry is more than just a scholarly exercise; it is a matter of critical importance for youth who are attempting to become happy and successful adults after having been maltreated by their families and raised within a less-than-perfect child welfare system.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Questionnaire sent to DCF District Independent Living Coordinators

For each of the academic years listed below, please provide the information requested:

Academic year 2000-2001 (July 1, 2000 through June 30, 2001)

1. How many Independent Living Students in your district participated in higher education tuition/fee waivers and/or Road to Independence scholarship programs at each of the levels indicated below?
_____ Freshman
_____ Sophomores
_____ Juniors
_____ Seniors
2. How many of those who participated in higher education programs were in each of the ethnic groups listed below?
_____ Caucasian
_____ Black
_____ Hispanic
_____ Other
3. How many attended a community college? _____
4. How many attended a state university? _____
5. How many attended another type of institution? _____
6. How many Independent Living Students graduated from a community college or state university Academic Year 2000-2001? _____
7. How many Independent Living Students in your district were eligible to participate in a higher education tuition/fee waiver or Road to Independence scholarship program, but chose not to participate? _____
8. How many of those who were eligible but did not participate were in each of the ethnic groups listed below?
_____ Caucasian
_____ Black
_____ Hispanic
_____ Other

Appendix A (Continued)

Academic year 2001-2002 (July 1, 2001 through June 30, 2002)

1. How many Independent Living Students in your district participated in higher education tuition/fee waivers and/or Road to Independence scholarship programs at each of the levels indicated below?
_____ Freshman
_____ Sophomores
_____ Juniors
_____ Seniors
2. How many of those who participated in higher education programs were in each of the ethnic groups listed below?
_____ Caucasian
_____ Black
_____ Hispanic
_____ Other
3. How many attended a community college? _____
4. How many attended a state university? _____
5. How many attended another type of institution? _____
6. How many Independent Living Students graduated from a community college or state university Academic Year 2000-2001? _____
7. How many Independent Living Students in your district were eligible to participate in a higher education tuition/fee waiver or Road to Independence scholarship program, but chose not to participate? _____
8. How many of those who were eligible but did not participate were in each of the ethnic groups listed below?
_____ Caucasian
_____ Black
_____ Hispanic
_____ Other

Academic year 2002-2003 (July 1, 2002 through June 30, 2003)

1. How many Independent Living Students in your district participated in higher education tuition/fee waivers and/or Road to Independence scholarship programs at each of the levels indicated below?
_____ Freshman
_____ Sophomores
_____ Juniors
_____ Seniors

Appendix A (Continued)

2. How many of those who participated in higher education programs were in each of the ethnic groups listed below?
_____ Caucasian
_____ Black
_____ Hispanic
_____ Other
3. How many attended a community college? _____
4. How many attended a state university? _____
5. How many attended another type of institution? _____
6. How many Independent Living Students graduated from a community college or state university Academic Year 2000-2001? _____
7. How many Independent Living Students in your district were eligible to participate in a higher education tuition/fee waiver or Road to Independence scholarship program, but chose not to participate? _____
8. How many of those who were eligible but did not participate were in each of the ethnic groups listed below?
_____ Caucasian
_____ Black
_____ Hispanic
_____ Other

Academic year 2003-2004 (July 1, 2003 through June 30, 2004)

1. How many Independent Living Students in your district participated in higher education tuition/fee waivers and/or Road to Independence scholarship programs at each of the levels indicated below?
_____ Freshman
_____ Sophomores
_____ Juniors
_____ Seniors
2. How many of those who are participating in higher education programs are in each of the ethnic groups listed below?
_____ Caucasian
_____ Black
_____ Hispanic
_____ Other
3. How many attended a community college? _____
4. How many attended a state university? _____
5. How many attended another type of institution? _____
6. How many Independent Living Students graduated from a community college or state university Academic Year 2000-2001? _____

Appendix A (Continued)

7. How many Independent Living Students in your district were eligible to participate in a higher education tuition/fee waiver or Road to Independence scholarship program, but chose not to participate? _____

8. How many of those who are eligible but not participating are in each of the ethnic groups listed below?

_____ Caucasian

_____ Black

_____ Hispanic

_____ Other

Do you hold regularly scheduled meetings with your young people?
Yes No

If so, approximately how many attended last month? _____

How about the previous month? _____

When do you usually hold them? (e.g. *Third Friday of every month from 7 to 8 pm.*)

Where do you usually hold them?

How long do they usually last?

Appendix B: Focus Group Invitation Brochure

“... The right way to begin is to pay attention to the young....”

Socrates, (4th-3rd c. B..C..)



Do the RIGHT thing.

Don't hesitate.... Participate!!!

College or Not?
How did you decide?



I want to know how you think





Come provide valuable information that may have a direct impact on other foster care young people aging out of care.

Please contact me directly with any questions or concerns!!!



Linda K. Herlocker

546 Duchess Ct.
Lakeland, FL 33803
Phone: (863) 607-9755
Email: LKHherlocker@cs.com

| Details | What's in it for you? | Why? | Yes, I'd like to help! Sign me up for: (Please select a timeslot below and leave this form with the Connected by 25 representative.) |
|---|--|--|---|
|  <p>When: Thursday, December 1, 2005 Between 9:30 and 7:00 (It will take about 2 hours)</p> <p>Where: Connected by 25 Ybor City</p> <p>What: Meeting of Independent Living young people. The meeting will include a brief survey, followed by a group discussion.</p> | <p>1st (... and most important): A chance to be heard and to make a difference for other young people who will be going through what you have gone through.</p> <p>2nd (... the "good stuff"): Free snacks. Free "goodie bags," including gift certificates to a fast food restaurant. Free chance to win a \$50 gift certificate to Best Buy.</p>    | <p>I am working on a doctorate degree, and I am interested in why young people like you decide to go on to college or not. Whatever I learn from you will help me to answer several very important questions that may have a direct impact on the way programs for young people in foster care are designed in the future.</p> | <p><input type="checkbox"/> 9:30 am — 11:30 am</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 12:00 noon — 2:00 pm</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 2:30 pm — 4:30 pm</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 5:00 pm — 7:00 pm</p> |

Tear here

Appendix C: College Choice Questionnaire – Draft

Read each of the statements and select the response that best fits your personal belief. To what extent does each statement describe you?

1. When I consider attending school beyond high school or GED, I consider whether or not my friends are going on for more school. (A GED is a General Equivalency Development certificate, awarded upon successful completion of an examination and recognized as an equivalent to a high school diploma.)
 - Strongly Agree – I thought about it, and this is extremely important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Agree – I thought about it, and this is important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Slightly agree – I thought about it, but it is only slightly important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Disagree – I thought about it, but it will not have any bearing at all on my final decision.
 - Neutral – This never even occurred to me.

2. When I consider attending college, I consider that my biological brothers, sisters, and other relatives are going to college.
 - Strongly Agree – I thought about it, and this is extremely important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Agree – I thought about it, and this is important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Slightly agree – I thought about it, but it is only slightly important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Disagree – I thought about it, but it will not have any bearing at all on my final decision.
 - Neutral – This never even occurred to me.

Appendix C (Continued)

3. When I consider attending college, I consider that my biological parents wanted or expected me to go to college.
- Strongly Agree – I thought about it, and this is extremely important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Agree – I thought about it, and this is important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Slightly agree – I thought about it, but it is only slightly important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Disagree – I thought about it, but it will not have any bearing at all on my final decision.
 - Neutral – This never even occurred to me.
4. When I consider attending college, I consider that my high school teachers or my counselor persuaded me to go to college.
- Strongly Agree – I thought about it, and this is extremely important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Agree – I thought about it, and this is important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Slightly agree – I thought about it, but it is only slightly important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Disagree – I thought about it, but it will not have any bearing at all on my final decision.
 - Neutral – This never even occurred to me.
5. When I consider attending college, I consider that my foster family or some other significant adult aside from school or my biological family persuaded me to go to college.
- Strongly Agree – I thought about it, and this is extremely important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Agree – I thought about it, and this is important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Slightly agree – I thought about it, but it is only slightly important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Disagree – I thought about it, but it will not have any bearing at all on my final decision.
 - Neutral – This never even occurred to me.

Appendix C (Continued)

6. When I consider attending college, I consider that I needed a college degree to achieve my career goal.
- Strongly Agree – I thought about it, and this is extremely important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Agree – I thought about it, and this is important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Slightly agree – I thought about it, but it is only slightly important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Disagree – I thought about it, but it will not have any bearing at all on my final decision.
 - Neutral – This never even occurred to me.
7. When I consider attending college, I consider that I would likely earn a better income with a college degree.
- Strongly Agree – I thought about it, and this is extremely important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Agree – I thought about it, and this is important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Slightly agree – I thought about it, but it is only slightly important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Disagree – I thought about it, but it will not have any bearing at all on my final decision.
 - Neutral – This never even occurred to me.
8. When I consider attending college, I consider that I would gain respect or status by having a college degree.
- Strongly Agree – I thought about it, and this is extremely important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Agree – I thought about it, and this is important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Slightly agree – I thought about it, but it is only slightly important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Disagree – I thought about it, but it will not have any bearing at all on my final decision.
 - Neutral – This never even occurred to me.

Appendix C (Continued)

9. When I consider attending college, I consider that I would bring honor to my biological family by having a college degree.
- Strongly Agree – I thought about it, and this is extremely important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Agree – I thought about it, and this is important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Slightly agree – I thought about it, but it is only slightly important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Disagree – I thought about it, but it will not have any bearing at all on my final decision.
 - Neutral – This never even occurred to me.
10. When I consider attending college, I consider I would be able to help out my biological family after college.
- Strongly Agree – I thought about it, and this is extremely important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Agree – I thought about it, and this is important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Slightly agree – I thought about it, but it is only slightly important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Disagree – I thought about it, but it will not have any bearing at all on my final decision.
 - Neutral – This never even occurred to me.
11. When I consider attending college, I consider that I like to learn.
- Strongly Agree – I thought about it, and this is extremely important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Agree – I thought about it, and this is important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Slightly agree – I thought about it, but it is only slightly important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Disagree – I thought about it, but it will not have any bearing at all on my final decision.
 - Neutral – This never even occurred to me.

Appendix C (Continued)

12. When I consider attending college, I consider that I like to study.
- Strongly Agree – I thought about it, and this is extremely important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Agree – I thought about it, and this is important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Slightly agree – I thought about it, but it is only slightly important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Disagree – I thought about it, but it will not have any bearing at all on my final decision.
 - Neutral – This never even occurred to me.
13. When I consider attending college, I consider that I want to be able to provide a better life for my children.
- Strongly Agree – I thought about it, and this is extremely important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Agree – I thought about it, and this is important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Slightly agree – I thought about it, but it is only slightly important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Disagree – I thought about it, but it will not have any bearing at all on my final decision.
 - Neutral – This never even occurred to me.
14. When I consider attending college, I consider that I want to gain my independence.
- Strongly Agree – I thought about it, and this is extremely important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Agree – I thought about it, and this is important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Slightly agree – I thought about it, but it is only slightly important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Disagree – I thought about it, but it will not have any bearing at all on my final decision.
 - Neutral – This never even occurred to me.

Appendix C (Continued)

15. When I consider attending college, I consider that I want to move out of my current home.
- Strongly Agree – I thought about it, and this is extremely important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Agree – I thought about it, and this is important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Slightly agree – I thought about it, but it is only slightly important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Disagree – I thought about it, but it will not have any bearing at all on my final decision.
 - Neutral – This never even occurred to me.
16. When I consider attending college, I consider that I want to acquire the skills I need to function effectively in society.
- Strongly Agree – I thought about it, and this is extremely important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Agree – I thought about it, and this is important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Slightly agree – I thought about it, but it is only slightly important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Disagree – I thought about it, but it will not have any bearing at all on my final decision.
 - Neutral – This never even occurred to me.
17. When I consider attending college, I consider that I want to get out of my biological parents' neighborhood.
- Strongly Agree – I thought about it, and this is extremely important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Agree – I thought about it, and this is important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Slightly agree – I thought about it, but it is only slightly important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Disagree – I thought about it, but it will not have any bearing at all on my final decision.
 - Neutral – This never even occurred to me.

Appendix C (Continued)

18. When I consider attending college, I consider that I did not want to work immediately after high school.
- Strongly Agree – I thought about it, and this is extremely important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Agree – I thought about it, and this is important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Slightly agree – I thought about it, but it is only slightly important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 - Disagree – I thought about it, but it will not have any bearing at all on my final decision.
 - Neutral – This never even occurred to me.

19. On a scale from 1 to 100 (with 100 being the highest), please indicate in the box below how likely is it that you will attend school beyond high school or GED in the next two years? (If you are already attending, then you should indicate 100.)

Please write a number from 1 through 100.

20. What is your gender? Male Female
21. Have you already completed your high school diploma or GED? Yes No
22. If yes, approximately how long ago did you complete your diploma or GED?
_____ years & _____ months
23. Have you already made the decision whether or not you want to go to back to school after high school or GED? ? Yes No
24. If you have already decided, what did you decide?
- I will go back to school after high school or GED.
 - At this time, I do not plan to school after high school or GED.

Appendix C (Continued)

25. If you are currently already attending a college or university, what is your academic level?
- Freshman
 - Sophomore
 - Junior
 - Senior
 - Non-degree
 - Other (for example: vocational school or program, certificate programs, specialized degree programs, etc.)

Appendix C: (Continued)

26. Approximately how many shelter or foster placements have you had in your lifetime? (*Circle only one; provide your best guess if you are not sure.*)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 more than 10

27. Approximately how much time have you spent in either shelter or foster care in your lifetime? (*Please provide your best guess if you are not sure.*)

_____ years and _____ months

28. Why did you decide to come to this meeting this evening? (Please select only ONE reason. Choose the main reason for your decision.)

Free food.

Free give-aways.

Chance to win something.

My friends were staying.

Chance to express my opinion.

Other: _____

College Choice Questionnaire

Developed by
Linda Herlocker
March 17, 2005

Based upon:
Bui, K. (2002). First-generation college students at a four-year university: Background characteristics, reasons for pursuing higher education, and first-year experiences. *College Student Journal, 36*:1, 3-11. Retrieved December 20, 2003, from OCLC FirstSearch database.

Appendix D (Continued)

Read each of the statements and put a check mark in the column of the response that best fits your personal belief. To what extent does each statement describe you? This is what the responses mean on this scale:

- Strongly Agree – I thought about it, and this is extremely important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
- Agree – I thought about it, and this is important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
- Slightly agree – I thought about it, but it is only slightly important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
- Disagree – I thought about it, but it will not have any bearing at all on my final decision.
- Not Applicable – This never even occurred to me.

| Question | Strongly Agree | Agree | Slightly Agree | Disagree | Not Applicable |
|--|----------------|-------|----------------|----------|----------------|
| 1. When I consider attending school beyond high school or GED, I consider whether or not my friends are going on for more school. (A GED is a General Equivalency Development certificate, awarded upon successful completion of an examination and recognized as an equivalent to a high school diploma.) | | | | | |
| 2. When I consider attending college, I consider that my biological brothers, sisters, and other relatives are going to college. | | | | | |
| 3. When I consider attending college, I consider that my biological parents wanted or expected me to go to college. | | | | | |
| 4. When I consider attending college, I consider that my high school teachers or my counselor persuaded me to go to college. | | | | | |
| 5. When I consider attending college, I consider that my foster family or some other significant adult aside from school or my biological family persuaded me to go to college. | | | | | |

Appendix D (Continued)

Strongly Agree – I thought about it, and this is extremely important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 Agree – I thought about it, and this is important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 Slightly agree – I thought about it, but it is only slightly important in my decision whether to attend school after high school or GED.
 Disagree – I thought about it, but it will not have any bearing at all on my final decision.
 Not Applicable – This never even occurred to me.

| Question | Strongly Agree | Agree | Slightly Agree | Disagree | Not Applicable |
|--|----------------|-------|----------------|----------|----------------|
| 6. When I consider attending college, I consider that I needed a college degree to achieve my career goal. | | | | | |
| 7. When I consider attending college, I consider that I would likely earn a better income with a college degree. | | | | | |
| 8. When I consider attending college, I consider that I would gain respect or status by having a college degree. | | | | | |
| 9. When I consider attending college, I consider that I would bring honor to my biological family by having a college degree. | | | | | |
| 10. When I consider attending college, I consider I would be able to help out my biological family after college. | | | | | |
| 11. When I consider attending college, I consider that I like to learn. | | | | | |
| 12. When I consider attending college, I consider that I like to study. | | | | | |
| 13. When I consider attending college, I consider that I want to be able to provide a better life for my children. | | | | | |
| 14. When I consider attending college, I consider that I want to gain my independence. | | | | | |
| 15. When I consider attending college, I consider that I want to move out of my current home. | | | | | |
| 16. When I consider attending college, I consider that I want to acquire the skills I need to function effectively in society. | | | | | |
| 17. When I consider attending college, I consider that I want to get out of my biological parents' neighborhood. | | | | | |
| 18. When I consider attending college, I consider that I did not want to work immediately after high school. | | | | | |

Appendix D (Continued)

On a scale from 1 to 100 (with 100 being the highest), please indicate in the box below how likely is it that you will attend school beyond high school or GED in the next two years? (If you are already attending, then you should indicate 100.)

Please write a number from 1 through 100.

18. What is your gender? Male Female
19. How old are you? 18 19 20 21 22
20. Have you already completed your high school diploma or GED? Yes No
 If yes, approximately how long ago did you complete your diploma or GED? _____ years & _____ months
21. Have you already made the decision whether or not you want to go to back to school after high school or GED? ?
 Yes No
22. If you have already decided, what did you decide?
 I will go back to school after high school or GED.
 At this time, I do not plan to school after high school or GED.

Appendix D (Continued)

23. If you are currently already attending a college or university, what is your academic level?
 Not applicable – I am not attending a college or university
 Freshman
 Sophomore
 Junior
 Senior
 Non-degree
 Other (for example: vocational school or program, certificate programs, specialized degree programs, etc.)
24. Approximately how many shelter or foster placements have you had in your lifetime? (*Circle only one; provide your best guess if you are not sure.*)
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 more than 10
25. Approximately how much time have you spent in either shelter or foster care in your lifetime? (*Please provide your best guess if you are not sure.*)
_____ years and _____ months
26. Why did you decide to come to this meeting this evening? (Please select only ONE reason. Choose the main reason for your decision.)
 Free food.
 Free give-aways.
 Chance to win something.
 My friends were coming.
 Chance to express my opinion.
 Other: _____

Appendix E: Focus Group Interview Guide

[This tool will be used only as a general guide for the discussion. Some of these questions may be answered without prompting. Only relevant portions will be asked.]

- I'd like to start by asking you to describe your plans for what you'll do after you leave foster care. [I plan to go around the group and have everyone offer an answer, but this will depend upon the size of the group. If the group is larger than about 10, I will instead allow only for a sampling of answers from volunteers.]

[If someone mentions going to college...] That's something that I would be interested in hearing more about.

How did you decide to go to college?

Was it an easy decision, or a hard one?

What made it easy [or hard]?

What kind of college will you be attending – vocational, community college, university, or some other kind?

[If no one mentions going to college...] I would be interested in hearing why you made the decisions you did.

Did you consider other things? If so, what things?

Did you consider going to college?

- For those of you who considered going to college—even if you eventually decided not to go—what made you consider college in the first place?

[For those who ultimately decided not to go...] Why did you decide not to go?

- For those of you who were influenced by someone to go to college—who was that person?
- When you think about going to college, what thoughts do you have about:
 - ... the application process?
 - ... your academic preparedness for college?
 - ... your financial preparedness for college?
 - ... your personal preparedness for college?
 - ... your personal support structure for college, like family or friends?

[For those who said they would not consider going to college...] Can you think of anything that would make you reconsider your decision to attend college?

[If no one has mentioned the tuition waiver or Road to Independence scholarship programs...] What have you heard about financial aid programs for young people leaving foster care?

Appendix E (Continued)

- What other things did you consider when you were making your decision to attend college or not?
- Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your decision to attend college or not?
- Can you tell me what anyone could have done differently that may have caused you to decide in favor of higher education?
- Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experience of preparing to leave the foster care system?

About the Author

Linda Herlocker earned her Bachelor's Degree in English from Pennsylvania State University and her M.B.A. from National University. She served as a United States Naval officer from 1980 through 1992 when she left active duty to accept a position in higher education.

She began her higher education career as Director of the San Francisco East Bay Area Resident Center of Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University. In 1996, she moved to the main campus in Daytona Beach, Florida, to serve as Supervisor of Admissions and Evaluations, Extended Campus. In 1998, she became the Student Services Director for a vocational college in Lakeland. Two years later, she became the Assistant to the Dean of Student Services for Hillsborough Community College, Dale Mabry Campus, in Tampa.

Ms. Herlocker left higher education in 2002 for a child welfare career, accepting her current position as Quality Management Director for a Community-Based Care agency.