'We Need That Person That Doesn't Give up on Us': The Role of Social Support in the Pursuit of Post-Secondary Education for Youth with Foster Care Experience who are Transition-Aged

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Research shows that youth with foster care experience face significant challenges in a variety of domains, including education. Supportive relationships with caring and trusted individuals are crucial to youth pursuing postsecondary education (PSE); however, little is known about how social support is accessed and utilized by youth with foster care experience. Findings from the analysis of interviews with 15 participants revealed four overarching themes: drop-off of formal supports, high stakes of PSE programs, friendships and peer support, and self-reliance. Findings can inform policy related to child welfare funding and support.

Research shows that youth with foster care experience face significant challenges in a variety of domains, including education (e.g., Barth, 1990; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). Almost a third (28.8%) of the U.S. population obtains a four-year college degree (National Center on Education Statistics, 2018), while it is estimated that only approximately 3–5% of youth with foster care experience do so (Courtney et al., 2011; Emerson, 2006). The benefits of a college education are well established, with college graduates reporting lower rates of unemployment, higher income, and higher likelihood of having health insurance (Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2016). Among youth with foster care experience who do enroll in postsecondary education (PSE) programs, many are unprepared and struggle socially, academically, and in meeting their own basic needs (e.g., Goodkind, Schelbe, & Shook, 2011; Salazar, 2012). Unlike their same-aged peers, youth with foster care experience may not have access to a familial safety net for financial and social support as they pursue PSE and are more likely to drop out after their first year (Day, Dworsky, Fogarty, & Damashek, 2011). A number of policies and programs have been developed to provide funding and support to promote independent living skills for youth with foster care experience, including the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 and the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (1999), the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (2008), and state-level tuition waiver programs, however they often fall short of addressing the social support needs of TAY.

Barriers to Postsecondary Education Enrollment and Success

Over the last several decades, scholars have examined barriers and facilitators to PSE success among youth with foster care experience (see Geiger & Beltran, 2017a, for a review). Barriers identified are often related to the youths' experiences of maltreatment, trauma, and instability prior to and during their time in foster care (Day et al., 2011; Salazar, 2012). Youth in foster care tend to experience a number of academic,

social, and behavioral challenges during elementary and secondary school while in care, which often leads to challenges associated with readiness, access, and preparation for PSE (e.g., Berger, Cancian, Han, Noyes, & Rios-Salas, 2015). Many youth who are involved in child welfare experience multiple placements during their time in foster care, increasing the odds of school instability and difficulty establishing relationships with supportive adults, such as teachers, school administrators, counselors, foster caregivers, and service providers (Day, Riebschleger, Dworsky, Damashek, & Fogarty, 2012; Morton, 2015).

Social Support among Youth with Foster Care Experience who are Transition-Aged

Research has consistently shown that one of the most important factors leading to positive outcomes among youth with foster care experience is support from a caring adult (Collins et al., 2010; Goodkind et al., 2011; Thompson et al., 2016). Social support can take on various forms and be provided by formal (e.g., professionals) and informal (e.g., family, friends) sources. Many youth who are transition-aged and have foster care experience identify meaningful relationships with caring adults as critical in their transition to adulthood (Collins et al., 2010; Goodkind et al., 2011), and most beneficial when they are long-term, consistent, and reliable (Collins et al., 2010).

Several studies showed positive outcomes for youth who receive adequate social support, including increased resilience (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007), high school completion rates, reduced homelessness (Collins et al., 2010), and improved behavioral health outcomes (Munson & McMillen, 2009). Youth who are transition-aged often rely on non-parental adults, peers, and mentors for financial and emotional support (Antle, Johnson, Barbee, & Sullivan, 2009) and to help guide them as they make critical decisions about education, employment, and relationships. Researchers have found that elements of trust and "parent-like" roles, love, care, availability and support, respect, and authenticity were identified as positive qualities of natural mentoring

relationships (Greeson & Bowen, 2008; Munson et al., 2010). Studies have also shown that many youth leave foster care without having established such relationships with an adult (Ahrens et al., 2011; Greeson, Thompson, Ali, & Wenger, 2015), which suggests that the child welfare system is falling short in fostering relational permanence for youth in care (Greeson et al., 2015) and providing adequate programming to help with identification and promotion for mentoring relationships.

Youth who are transition-aged continue to rely on social support as they prepare for and enroll in PSE programs (Jackson & Cameron, 2012; Okpych & Courtney, 2017). In a study by Day and colleagues (2012), youth who are transition-aged identified a need for more long-term relationships with caring adults to help with identifying and accessing resources, encouraging them, believing in them, and setting high expectations for them. Consistently, scholars suggest that programs serving TAY should focus on cultivating formal and informal relationships that are supportive (Jackson & Cameron, 2012; Samuels, 2009), and helpful in assisting youth in navigating systems, accessing educational resources, and promoting resilience and empowerment (Day et al., 2012; Morton, 2015).

Despite the fact that social support has been shown to be a strong protective factor for youth in foster care as they navigate the transition to adulthood (Ahrens et al., 2011; Munson & McMillen, 2009), little is known about how social support can specifically enable or encourage PSE engagement and persistence for youth with foster care experience. This study aimed to provide an in-depth examination of the relationship between social support and PSE involvement from the perspective of youth who are transition-aged.

Methods

Sample

The study sample is comprised of 15 young adults (between the ages of 19 and 23) who had recently experienced foster care emancipation,

had signed out of foster care, or had been granted a temporary extension to policy (ETP) in New York City between January 1, 2016, and August 31, 2018. All of these young adults had been served by Court-Appointed Special Advocates in New York City (CASA-NYC) prior to their departure from or extension to foster care. CASA-NYC is one (large) location of the Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) Program, a network of approximately 1000 community-based organizations across the United States. In New York City, CASA volunteers are appointed to specific children by family court judges as "friends of the court" as opposed to guardians ad litem (GAL; Lawson & Duerr-Berrick, 2013). CASA-NYC is comprised of approximately 160 volunteers that are trained to provide case management beyond that provided by child welfare agencies and to represent the best interests of their clients in court. Each CASA-NYC volunteer serves between one and two youth at a time; the organization serves over 1000 youth annually.

CASA-NYC staff identified clients who met the above criteria and offered them a description of the study. Youth who are transition-aged and were interested in participating provided CASA-NYC permission to share their contact details with the Research Team. These youth were subsequently recruited, screened, and interviewed. At the time of recruitment, each participant was offered an opportunity to participate in three distinct individual interviews over the course of the following year (at months one, six, and 12) so that updated information could be obtained and relationships could be established. In each interview, the interviewer asked participants open- and closed-ended questions relating to that participant's experiences in a number of interrelated domains: (1) pursuit of PSE; (2) employment, housing, health, and social support; and (3) experiences with CASA-NYC.

The current study consisted of analyzing data from all sections relating to social support participants received or didn't receive as it related to PSE engagement and persistence over time. Participants received Visa gift cards in the amount of $45 upon completing the first interview and $30 upon completing the second and third interviews. Interviews were conducted by members of the research team (both the

PI and research assistants) at convenient, safe locations close to participants' homes or schools. Once each interview had been completed, it was sent for professional transcription.

Analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to identify patterns or themes within data from the interviews, which provided a structured approach to examining the shared experiences of participants. In Phase 1, coders became familiar with the data by reading, re-reading and taking preliminary notes. In Phases 2 and 3, codes began to emerge and were organized under potential themes. These themes were reviewed in Phase 4, ultimately contributing to a thematic "map" of the data. Following discussions, themes were agreed upon by two researchers and exemplary quotes were extracted to illustrate the findings. Several strategies were used to increase trustworthiness of the findings, including the use of an audit trail and reflexivity to document coding decisions and memos related to managing any bias, and triangulation by observer, which included two researchers coding and discussing themes until consensus was achieved. Researchers also employed prolonged engagement through multiple interviews over time with participants who completed two or three interviews.

Findings

Of the 15 youth who are transition-aged that participated in a single interview, nine of them participated in a second interview (approximately six months after the first) and three of them participated in a third interview (approximately six months after the second) for a total of 27 interviews. Twelve of these youth were female-identified and three were male-identified. The majority (10 out of 15) identified as African American, while two identified as Hispanic and three identified as multiracial. The average age at the time of the first interview was

21 (with a range of 18–22 years of age). Four of the participants had at least one child at the time of one of their interviews.

There were four overarching themes that emerged from the data: (1) drop-off of formal supports; (2) high stakes of full-service PSE programs; (3) friendships and peer support; and (4) self-reliance.

Drop-off of Formal Supports

Numerous participants who had PSE experience reported that their child welfare caseworkers or other child welfare professionals were instrumental in linking them with such programs. Often, these professionals knew of specialized PSE programs intended to serve youth who are transition-aged, helped them meet the enrollment requirements, and helped them secure critical PSE funding—for example, help with obtaining educational and training vouchers (ETV). Overall, the assistance and support provided by these formal supports appeared to be critically important for PSE engagement for the youth in our sample.

However, youth reported that the advocacy, information, and support that they had been receiving from their caseworkers or educational specialists in the application & enrollment processes was harder to come by once they had matriculated. One participant shared, "We started doing financial aid—when we first did it, the agency helped us get into school. The second semester, the lady could not be found." Numerous participants reported that when unexpected crises arose (the delay of financial aid, a debilitating physical injury, depression) they did not feel that their caseworkers were available or would be the appropriate parties from whom to request support.

Instead, participants reported turning to less formalized supports (family members, CASAs, mentors, and friends) who could provide immediate, personalized assistance in the wake of these crises. When asked about the help her CASA provided once she began her PSE program, one participant stated, "[with] college, she has been a big help, 'cause our agency was supposed to help us with that … at that freshman

year, they stopped, so it's like … if I had any questions, she was the first person I went to about anything." Another participant reported that her financial aid had been delayed, leaving her unable to pay for textbooks. She said, "I spent the first two semesters talking to strangers, like, 'Let me see your book?'" Her boyfriend's mother noticed, and ended up purchasing the required textbooks for this participant. "When she found out that I couldn't pay for textbooks, she offered to pay for my textbooks. That's basically how I got my textbooks this semester." Another participant had a similar experience when her financial aid was delayed after a period of academic probation:

> I tried, halfway through, to go without the books and just go to the library and see how I can do, and I would not be able to pass. My old foster mother that raised me, she actually paid for the two textbooks that I needed … and I didn't even wanna ask her. I broke down, and I asked her, and she paid for the books. It was like, God, because I didn't have no other way, and I needed to pass those classes to pass the semester.

Such assistance (i.e., the purchasing of a critical textbook) sometimes made a tremendous difference for youth who were already reporting feeling quite overwhelmed by the academic and administrative demands placed on them in these programs. Had these informal supports not been available, these youth may have felt compelled to leave the programs to which they were accepted. For example, one participant whose financial aid was so delayed that he couldn't purchase requisite textbooks in time chose to drop out of his PSE program:

> I started college. Everything was a good experience. The only thing was I didn't have—my financial aid wasn't going through, so I couldn't pay for books and do homework. That's why I had to stop. I had to get out and get a job.

This participant could not identify anyone who could provide him with the money it would take to purchase this book, reporting that he'd need to save money in order to return to a PSE program to prevent

such instances of occurring in the future. Another participant shared this perspective; he dropped out of a PSE program after feeling confused and not able to identify anyone who could help him make sense of it. "I didn't really understand a lot, so I wasn't really getting everything. It was really confusing for me, so I just stopped."

High Stakes of Full–Service PSE Programs

Over the past ten years, comprehensive PSE programs have emerged in New York that are intended to address (and alleviate) the most common reasons for PSE drop out. Such programs aim to provide an array of services such as flexible financial aid, streamlined remedial curricula, case management, tutoring, and psychotherapy. In one such program, accepted youth who are transition-aged also are provided dorm-like housing to encourage their PSE persistence.

Some of the youth in our sample had been selected to participate in full-service programs and reported feeling quite "lucky" and "privileged" to have access to this bundled service provision. One participant shared her thoughts about the program, "We get so much support, period. Tutoring. There's so many clubs, and because I'm a ward of the state, a lot of these things are free for me. This was a great thing, you know? It was one of the best things I can honestly say that ACS [the Administration for Children's Services] has done for us in a while."

They also reported, however, that if they failed to meet the criteria for these programs (minimum GPA, required meetings with service providers and no criminal activity, for example) they would not only lose their financial aid and eligibility to participate in class, but also a host of support services that they'd come to rely on (e.g., psychotherapy, tutoring, and housing). A participant provided the following response when asked if she expected to complete her school program:

> Yes. Why? Because it's not a choice. Me continuing to do what I have to do in school is helping me have a roof over my head, continue with all of these services, you know? I don't want to mess up anything at all, because this is a once in a lifetime opportunity.

These programs are advantageous for youth who are able to navigate crises, keep their grades up despite the circumstances, and refrain from any violent or delinquent behavior. For others, the pressure to persist in these programs, on top of the academic pressures associated with participating in any PSE program, may contribute to untimely drop out. When it occurs, the consequences can be devastating (i.e., homelessness), particularly if youth have formally emancipated or signed themselves out of the foster care system.

Self-Reliance

When participants were asked about sources of support, they identified relatives, friends, significant others, and professionals who provided support during their transition into adulthood and PSE experiences. Despite not being directly asked, many also described a high level of self-reliance in accessing resources, navigating systems, accomplishing tasks towards independence and enrolling, making decisions related to PSE, and being successful in school. They discussed how they "figured things out on their own" and "had to do it [themselves]" because they had learned to do it independently without relying on others before. For example, one participant describes why she doesn't seek support, "It's just because we all have these guards up, so we're all defensive, we're all careful … everyone's suffered their own trauma." Another discussed turnover in case managers and reluctance to engage with someone new, "Who are you? I don't need you. I don't need another one. I'm my own caseworker." One participant discussed her self-reliance in being able to choose the support of others:

> So depending on myself kind of just made it all right. I'm resilient where I don't need anybody. I'm stable enough mentally and emotionally where I can bring people in and out. Especially if they're not helping me or benefitting me, I can easily just push them out the door.

Several also described having pride in accomplishing tasks on their own. One participant explains her strength and contribution to her

success, "I do internalize parts of it because I'm strong because I made myself strong."

Many also discussed not knowing how to ask for help, feeling embarrassed or ashamed to ask for help, or preferring not to "burden" others with requests and help. For example, one participant stated:

> A lotta times I feel like a burden. And I do have a big support team but I'm thinkin' like oh wait, they have their own lives, and sometimes they're busy. So then you feel you know shunned without them and intentionally meaning to do that. And, so you're like 'okay, well, who do I talk to'?

Participants described how self-awareness led to their ability to assess their needs and seek out resources and support from others. Many described these efforts as an indicator of independence, an important component of the transition to adulthood. For example, one participant talked about her relationship with her grandmother, "my grandma provides me an independent support in the sense where it is like you can lean on me, but don't lean too much because we're both gonna fail."

Another described how her CASA instilled a sense of independence in her through support:

> I used to always have someone go with me. And she said, 'we're not gonna always be there, right? You wanna make sure that you have these independent skills, and you wanna make sure that you're able to do that.' She's always told me, 'I don't mind going with you, but I want you to start getting in the habit of doin' things yourself, because when were not able to be there anymore, what are you gonna do?'

Friendships and Peer Support

The majority of participants identified and described the support they received from friends, primarily "best" friends and co-workers/supervisors at work as they navigated their PSE experiences. They described these relationships as versatile, long-term, unconditional,

non-judgmental, and trusting. Participants also talked about how their friends cultivated hope in them and encouraged them to persevere. For example, when describing a friend, one participant said she provides "a little bit of everything, but all in all, she's just given me hope for going to school and me in my life. She tells me that I'm awesome and I'm beautiful and I'm important."

Another participant describes her relationship with a friend:

> [With him], it's like I can be sad, and I'll call him, and he's just silly and funny. He gives me good advice, and he just jokes … He's paid my phone bill for me before. He's really one of my best friends … when I'm down and I need to talk to somebody, he's the person I need to just talk to. I'm happy that I have that as a support to turn to.

One participant states how important her friendship is, "[you] can't begin to fathom how grateful I am to have her. If it wasn't her, I really wouldn't be sitting here right now or anywhere."

Participants also discussed their supportive relationships with peers in their classes, at work, and in their living environment. However, many participants described relationships with other youth who are transition-aged as being strained, difficult to manage, and lacking support. While describing these relationships, many talked about their struggles to "fit in," having difficulty "understanding each other," and having trouble relating to other youth with foster care experience in PSE programs and their shared/close living spaces, such as dorms.

Participants discussed how despite similar experiences of foster care, they often noticed differences in experience. For example, one participant described finding a balance in relating to others with experiences in foster care: "It's kind of challenging. Because, um, sometimes you feel like, well I can relate and then you feel like I can't relate. There's gonna be people that you can relate to and there's gonna be people that you guys are just on different levels."

Other participants discussed being aware of these differences and sometimes feeling a disconnect. For example, another participant stated:

> Everyone who has been here from foster care has went through
> other things and it's like, we can all sit down and have conversa-
> tions about certain things, but there's a lot of things that I can't
> relate to them about. I don't have parents. I didn't have anybody to
> help me get where I'm at. I had to do it by myself. I experienced a
> lot more traumatic trauma than them … I might feel weird around
> them, because it's like we don't all have the same things in common,
> and not because I think I'm better than them or they think they're
> better than me, but just because the way that everyone's life went
> on. Everyone has their own separate lives and coming together it's
> just different.

Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to better understand the sources of social
support for youth who are transition-aged, the dynamics and quali-
ties of those relationships, and how social support plays a role in how
youth access and navigate PSE settings. Participants offered insight
into how they defined social support, who they relied on for social sup-
port, and the roles supports played in their PSE experiences. It is well-
established that social support, particularly that from a caring adult, is
instrumental in the transition to adulthood in general and especially
for youth who are transition-aged (Ahrens et al., 2011; Greeson et al.,
2015). This study provides greater depth to understanding those rela-
tionships as they relate to PSE and ways this information can lead to
policy and program development for youth who are transition-aged.

Several youth in this study articulated that formalized supports pro-
vided by child welfare caseworkers and educational specialists enabled
the identification of and enrollment in PSE programs. Participants
emphasized the helpfulness of these formal supporters, but some also
described a notable shift in their availability once youth were enrolled
and had begun their programs. Informal supports (such as family mem-
bers and friends) tended to pick up the slack for some of the youth in

our sample, but others weren't always able to identify or connect with appropriate sources of informal support and were resultantly at risk of drop out.

When possible and appropriate, child welfare service administrators might consider systematically evaluating the services professionals are providing the youth they serve once they have entered PSE programs (particularly those who are still in the foster care system) to ensure a successful transition (Geiger & Beltran, 2017b; Morton, 2015). If they do not have case management "bridge" programs that are specifically intended to support youth as they transition to adulthood, child welfare administrators could enable caseworkers and specialists to provide support that is more flexible in an effort to address crises that can result in PSE drop out. Formal supporters (i.e., child welfare caseworkers, educational specialists) could be prepared to respond in a timely manner to financial, housing, and health crises. They could also work with youth who are transition-aged to co-create individualized social support plans, providing an opportunity for them to identify the people in their communities that they could reach out to should they need specific types of support when challenges arise, and how to seek that support.

The advantages of full-service PSE programs for youth who are transition-aged are clear. When available, these programs tend to target the most salient risk factors for PSE drop out. The youth in our study who were engaged in such programs saw them as advantageous and helpful. They also reported, however, that they feared making a mistake and being asked to leave the program, which is consistent with a recent study conducted by Morton (2017).

Findings from these studies illuminate the need for enhanced flexibility in such programs. Youth who are transition-aged commonly have complex lives and histories of complex trauma (Salazar, Keller, Gowen, & Courtney, 2013); they are more likely than their peers to experience poor emotion regulation (McMillen, Katz, & Claypool, 2014), engage in delinquent behaviors (Cusick, Havlicek, & Courtney, 2012) and experience poor mental and physical health (Kools et al., 2013; Havlicek, Garcia, & Smith, 2013). All of these factors may impede their ability

to meet program requirements over time. While these programs need requirements for program admission and persistence, administrators might consider slightly less conditional support or support that could persist through periods of turbulence. For example, administrators might consider providing a grace period (that includes psychotherapy and housing, for example) while students are on academic probation or need to take a semester off. Further, we also discovered that some of these programs (particularly those that are linked with dorm-style housing) are not available to youth who are transition-aged and have children. This was a barrier identified by two female participants in our study. Such programs would be accessible to a more diverse sample of youth if they were prepared to support those with children by providing high-quality childcare services and, when possible, family-appropriate housing.

Several participants described an important source of support and guidance that came from within themselves. They discussed their successes and growth resulting from their own hard work, effort, and perseverance. This theme is consistent with other studies conducted with youth who are transition-aged, in which youth described how they relied heavily on their own strengths, attributes, self-advocacy, and resourcefulness (Morton, 2017; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). For example, Samuels and Pryce (2008) described the concept of survivalist self-reliance experienced by many youth with foster care histories and while it is a source or resilience, it can also limit the development of healthy supportive relationships.

This study's findings confirm that self-reliance among youth who are transition-aged serves as a means of self-protection and pride. With this knowledge, it is important that when considering program and policy development to ensure youth voice and facilitate leadership roles, choice, and options, while also viewing self-reliance as a strength, skill, and resource. In addition, it's important for practitioners and other professionals (mentors, case workers, etc.) to acknowledge self-reliance as a possible barrier to supportive relationship development and one's ability to ask for help. In conceptualizing and developing programming, particularly in pre-college and PSE levels, it is imperative to infuse

concepts and skill development related to self-advocacy, interdependence, and help-seeking and support. This will allow youth to draw on their own resilience and promote interdependence.

Lastly, many participants in this study identified friends and peers as sources of support during their transition to adulthood and while they pursued PSE. They described the various qualities of those relationships and relied on the trusting, unconditional and flexible nature of these relationships. Participants also talked about how these friendships instilled hope, provided encouragement, and reassured the youth of their worth. Establishing long-lasting and fulfilling friendships is a key developmental process. Individuals with foster care experience often experience instability in placement, caregiving relationships, and education which makes it challenging to establish these friendships. Research exploring relational permanence for youth with foster care experience and the contributions of supportive friendships in PSE programs continues to point to a need for changes in policy and practice (Day et al., 2012; Greeson et al., 2015). Future research should explore ways that young people create and maintain friendships and how practitioners and caregivers can support the cultivation of healthy friendships, while policy makers include these relationships as a priority.

In addition, choosing, trusting, and engaging with friends is challenging for many people. It is individualized and requires vulnerability, and therefore cannot be forced. Many programs created for youth in care and for youth who are transition-aged in PSE settings often assume that they will automatically forge friendships with others who share this experience. However, our findings suggest that many youth may struggle with this assumption and not share a connection based on foster care experiences, but more on an individual level. Participants consistently shared that more times than not, they felt that their experiences were very different. This does not mean that programs for youth who are transition-aged should not exist to promote PSE access and success, but that practitioners and researchers should acknowledge the difference in experiences youth may have had (especially because such programs often have broad criteria for acceptance).

Study Limitations

Given the number of participants in the study, generalizability is limited. In addition, it is important to note that the youth in this study had all been assigned a CASA by a presiding judge, which could potentially mean that their cases were more complicated or problematic than their same-age peers with foster care experience. Because of this referral, participants may have been more likely to list their CASAs as a source of support. Additionally, there were very few male-identified participants and findings may be skewed towards the experiences of female-identified youth who are transition-aged.

Nonetheless, study findings remain critically relevant to the development and improvement of PSE programs targeting youth who are transition-aged. The emergence of these programs has unquestionably improved educational access, engagement, and persistence for these youth across the United States. That said, this persistence could be improved, increasing the likelihood of successful graduation, if social support is thoughtfully evaluated and strategically infused into such programs.

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