

## Getting Out and Getting In: Assets in Transitioning from Foster Care to Higher Education

### Abstract:

Students in foster care have substantially lower rates of high school graduation, college entry, and college graduation than their same-grade peers (Day, Dworsky, & Feng, 2013; Okpych & Courtney, 2020). The objectives of this study were to identify factors that influence the successful transition of students in foster care to higher education and, based on responses from foster students and parents, to explore how community and schools can support foster students as they pursue education beyond high school. Focus groups (6) and in depth interviews (12) were conducted with a total of 31 participants, consisting of youth in foster care (n=12), young adults who had been in foster care (n=2) and caregivers of youth in foster care (n=17). Findings emerged from both youth and caregivers regarding strengths and assets available to support transition aged youth in the foster care system who wish to pursue post-secondary education. The assets reported by participants fell into six broad categories: community, school, family, individual/personal, financial, and direct experiences. Suggestions for building on these assets and for future research are provided.

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Ursula Davis is part of the Georgia Health Policy Center's [Center of Excellence for Children's Behavioral Health](#) team. She brings with her experience in child welfare, mental health, program management, training, and strategic planning.

Davis is currently a Ph.D. candidate in advanced human behavior at Capella University. She also holds a license in professional counseling and has provided individual and group counseling in a clinic setting for adults and adolescents.

Her primary projects at the center include serving as the project manager for the [Georgia Beck Initiative](#). This is a collaborative clinical, educational, and administrative partnership to disseminate Recovery-Based Cognitive Therapy training and consultation through the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities provider network. She also serves as a technical assistance provider for the [APEX project](#) supporting clinical grantees in providing school-based mental health services to children and adolescents across the state.

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In this role and across other projects at the center, Nelson-Graham's work in technical assistance and program implementation, monitoring, and evaluation focuses on youth and young adult experiences with systems of care. Additionally, she co-leads the [Interagency Directors Team's](#) School-based Mental Health Workgroup, which convenes dozens of state and nongovernmental child and family-serving agencies who support communities' behavioral health needs. Her monthly facilitation supports the workgroup's mission of designing and implementing an integrated approach to systems of care, as aligned with school-based mental health action items in the System of Care State Plan.

Jeniece (Jay) Cordova is a research associate II with the Center of Excellence for Children's Behavioral Health. They bring expertise in working with youth to promote mental health and social well-being in school and community settings. Cordova also brings research interest in systems thinking and health disparities among historically marginalized groups.

Cordova currently assists with the [Georgia Apex Program](#).

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**keywords: foster care, higher education, transition, post-secondary education, qualitative research**

## **Introduction**

According to the U.S. Administration for Children and Families, there were an estimated 442,995 children involved in the foster care system in 2017, with approximately 23% of these aged 14–20 (US Department of Health and Human Services & US Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). Literature has well documented barriers and the negative outcomes youth in the foster care system may experience. Considering that the foster care system is meant to be a temporary solution, many youth experience transitioning to different homes until they are placed in a permanent home (Thomas 2022). However, many older youth age out before they can be placed in a permanent home. As of 2017, an estimated 20,711 youth exited foster care through emancipation, either by aging out of the system or running away (US Department of Health and Human Services & US Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). Youth that age out of foster care experience many adverse adult outcomes, such as poverty or homelessness, that youth that exit the foster care system in other ways may not experience (Rosenberg and Abbott, 2019).

The Federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (2008) (the FCA or Fostering Connections Act) gave states the ability to extend services to youth past the age of 18, through their 21st birthday. Youth must be enrolled in high school or post-secondary education, employed or enrolled in a job training program, or have a documented disability. Studies show that youth who receive extended foster care services after they turn 18 experience better outcomes than those who do not (Rosenberg & Abbott, 2019). Still, a study that interviewed young people who had transitioned out of the system reported that seeking help means relying on the system that is connected to a painful past, (Pryce et al., 2017).

While many studies on youth involved in the foster care system discuss high school completion rates, little research has focused on youth's experiences and success with pursuing and navigating post-secondary education (Rios & Rocco 2014). Seven out of 10 youth in the foster care system say they want to attend college, but only 6% of youth who age out of the system will attend a post-secondary education and only about 50% of those who attend will graduate (McMillen et al., 2003). A major barrier to staying enrolled in a post secondary education program is related to financial aid needs and stable housing (Rosenberg & Kim, 2017; et al., 2019).

Other studies have looked at how trauma has negatively impacted foster care youth's experience with higher education. Many youth in the foster care system experience trauma related to instability of the system, lack of access to resources, and further abuse (Riebschleger et al., 2015). Youth who have not experienced trauma may navigate the world with curiosity and wanting new experiences, while youth with a history of trauma may navigate life with fear. The trauma experienced by youth may decrease their confidence and aspirations to obtain education (Morton, 2018). Trauma may also lead to mental health challenges, as many college students previously involved in the foster care system report having greater mental health distress than peers not involved in the system (Unrau et al., 2017).

Transition age youth may greatly benefit from supports that encourage and sustain postsecondary enrollment. Transition from youth to adulthood is difficult, but the majority of youth have a supported transition that allows them to explore their new independent identity with a safety net (Kools, 1997). Transition age youth in the foster care system lose all support once out of the system with no transitional period (Rios & Rocco, 2014). Services provided by college campuses are a good replacement that can help youth with navigating their new independent responsibilities with financial aid, housing, healthcare, securing employment and food security (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Kinarsky, 2017). The completion of a postsecondary education has been found to have a positive effect on health and wellbeing outcomes related to less economic hardship, and healthier life choices in the general population (Wang & Conwell, 2022). Foster youth who have a disproportionate risk of unemployment and negative health outcomes have a greater benefit from completing a post secondary education than their general population counterparts (Okpych & Courtney, 2014).

While the system has made efforts to implement resources to improve outcomes for transitional age youth, youth continue to face negative outcomes and resources continue to be underutilized. From 2015 to 2018, youth who utilized educational financial assistance fell from

23% to 15% (Annie E Casey Foundation, kids count data center, 2020). Identifying the resources and assets available to transition age youth in the foster care system that may facilitate their pursuit of higher education is an important step in trying to identify how to support these youth and where the gaps in resources may be.

Thus, the goal of this study is to identify and describe the strengths and assets available to support youth involved in the foster care system. Utilizing focus groups and in depth interviews with both youth in foster care and caregivers, the present study sought to address the following main research question:

What are the strengths and assets available to support transition aged youth in the foster care system who wish to pursue post-secondary education?

## Research Design and Methods

The current study utilized a qualitative methods approach (focus groups and in depth interviews) with purposive sampling of transition age youth in foster care, their caregivers, and young adults currently attending post-secondary education to learn more about their experiences in seeking post secondary education. Three specific aims guided this study: 1) Identify **factors** that influence the transition of students in foster care successfully into higher education. 2) Determine **community and school assets** that are available to support students in the foster care system who wish to pursue higher education and 3) Identify **perceived barriers** that may inhibit foster care youth from pursuing higher education. The current manuscript focuses on results for the first two aims of the study related to factors and assets that facilitate foster youth pursuing their post secondary education goals. Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval was obtained from Augusta University Medical School; Georgia State University received IRB approval through an official Reliance with Augusta University. Funding to support this research was awarded through an internal Augusta University and Georgia State University SEED grant.

## Participants

Focus groups (6) and interviews (12) were conducted with a total of 31 participants, consisting of youth in foster care (n=12), young adults who had been in foster care (n=2) and caregivers of youth in foster care (n=17). Participants were recruited with the help of a community partner who works closely with youth in foster care and their families in our local areas. Data were collected in urban, suburban, and rural areas over the course of three months. Please see Tables 1, 2, and 3 for the demographics of each participant group.

**Table 1**

*Demographics: Foster Case Youth (Self-Report Survey)*

| Variables | Foster Care Youth<br>(n = 12) | Percentage of Foster Care<br>Youth Sample |
|-----------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
|-----------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|

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| Age in Years |   |       |
|--------------|---|-------|
| 15           | 1 | 8.3%  |
| 16           | 1 | 8.3%  |
| 17           | 3 | 25.0% |

|                                            |    |       |
|--------------------------------------------|----|-------|
| 18                                         | 5  | 41.7% |
| 19                                         | 2  | 16.7% |
| Gender*(these rounded percentages = 99.9%) |    |       |
| Female                                     | 7  | 58.3% |
| Male                                       | 4  | 33.3% |
| Other/Prefer not to say                    | 1  | 8.3%  |
| Hispanic or Latino Ethnicity               |    |       |
| Yes                                        | 1  | 8.3%  |
| No                                         | 11 | 91.7% |
| Race                                       |    |       |
| Asian                                      | 0  | 0%    |
| Black/African American                     | 8  | 66.7% |
| Native American                            | 0  | 0%    |
| Other/Mixed Race                           | 0  | 0%    |
| White                                      | 4  | 33.3% |
| Setting                                    |    |       |
| Urban                                      | 4  | 33.3% |
| Rural                                      | 3  | 25.0% |
| Suburban                                   | 5  | 41.7% |
| Grade/Level of Education                   |    |       |
| 9                                          | 1  | 8.3%  |
| 10                                         | 1  | 8.3%  |

|                                                          |   |       |
|----------------------------------------------------------|---|-------|
| 11                                                       | 2 | 16.7% |
| 12                                                       | 4 | 33.3% |
| High School Graduate                                     | 3 | 25.0% |
| Pursuing GED                                             | 1 | 8.3%  |
| Years in Foster Care (these rounded percentages – 99.9%) |   |       |
| 0-3 years                                                | 1 | 8.3%  |
| 4-6 years                                                | 4 | 33.3% |
| 7-9 years                                                | 3 | 25%   |
| 10+ years                                                | 3 | 25%   |
| Unknown                                                  | 1 | 8.3%  |

**Table 2**

*Demographics: Former Foster Care Youth/Young Adults Currently in Higher Education*

*(Self-Report Survey)*

| Variables    | Former Foster Care<br>Youth/Young Adults<br>Currently in High Education<br>( <i>n</i> = 2) | Percentage of Former Foster<br>Care Youth/Young Adults in<br>Higher Education Sample |
|--------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Age in Years |                                                                                            |                                                                                      |
| 20-22        | 1                                                                                          | 50%                                                                                  |
| 23-25        | 1                                                                                          | 50%                                                                                  |

|                                |   |      |
|--------------------------------|---|------|
| Gender                         |   |      |
| Female                         | 2 | 100% |
| Male                           | 0 | 0%   |
| Other/Prefer not to say        | 0 | 0%   |
| Hispanic or Latino Ethnicity   |   |      |
| Yes                            | 0 | 0%   |
| No                             | 2 | 100% |
| Race                           |   |      |
| Asian                          | 0 | 0%   |
| Black/African                  | 1 | 50%  |
| American                       | 0 | 0%   |
| Native American                | 0 | 0%   |
| Other/Mixed Race               | 1 | 50%  |
| White                          |   |      |
| Setting                        | 0 | 0%   |
| Urban                          | 0 | 0%   |
| Rural                          | 0 | 100% |
| Suburban                       |   |      |
| Year in College/Classification | 0 | 0%   |
| 1 <sup>st</sup> year/Freshman  | 0 | 0%   |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> year/Sophomore | 2 | 100% |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> year/Junior    | 0 | 0%   |
| 4 <sup>th</sup> year/Senior    |   |      |

|                      |   |     |
|----------------------|---|-----|
| Years in Foster Care | 0 | 0%  |
| 0-4 years            | 1 | 50% |
| 5 years              | 1 | 50% |
| 6 years              |   |     |

**Table 3**

*Demographics: Caregivers (Self-Report Survey)*

| Variables    | Caregivers ( $n = 17$ ) | Percentage of<br>Caregivers Sample |
|--------------|-------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Age in Years |                         |                                    |
| 24-44        | 9                       | 52.9%                              |
| 45-65        | 1                       | 5.9%                               |
| 66+          | 7                       | 41.2%                              |

Gender\*

|                         |    |       |
|-------------------------|----|-------|
| Female                  | 7  | 41.2% |
| Male                    | 10 | 58.8% |
| Other/Prefer not to say | 0  | 0%    |

Hispanic or Latino Ethnicity

|     |    |      |
|-----|----|------|
| Yes | 0  | 0%   |
| No  | 17 | 100% |

Race

|                        |    |       |
|------------------------|----|-------|
| Asian                  | 0  | 0%    |
| Black/African American | 14 | 82.4% |
| Native American        | 0  | 0%    |
| Other/Mixed Race       | 0  | 0%    |
| White                  | 3  | 17.6% |

Setting

|          |   |       |
|----------|---|-------|
| Urban    | 8 | 47%   |
| Rural    | 0 | 0%    |
| Suburban | 9 | 52.9% |

Marital Status

|          |    |       |
|----------|----|-------|
| Married  | 15 | 88.2% |
| Divorced | 1  | 5.9%  |
| Widowed  | 1  | 5.9%  |

Highest Education Level

|                                 |   |    |
|---------------------------------|---|----|
| Less than a high school diploma | 0 | 0% |
|---------------------------------|---|----|

|                              |    |       |
|------------------------------|----|-------|
| High school diploma or       | 11 | 64.7% |
| equivalent                   | 2  | 11.8% |
| Associate's Degree           | 3  | 17.6% |
| Bachelor's Degree            | 1  | 5.9%  |
| Master's Degree or Higher'   |    |       |
| Level of Household Income    | 2  | 11.8% |
| Less than \$20,000           | 2  | 11.8% |
| \$21,000 - \$30,000          | 2  | 11.8% |
| \$31,000 - \$40,000          | 0  | 0%    |
| \$41,000 - \$50,000          | 8  | 47%   |
| \$51,000 - \$60,000          | 3  | 17.6% |
| More than \$60,000           |    |       |
| Relationship to Foster Youth | 6  | 35.3% |
| Adopted Parent               | 11 | 64.7% |
| Foster Parent                |    |       |
| Years as Foster Parent       | 2  | 11.8% |
| Less than a year             | 4  | 23.5% |
| 1-5 years                    | 7  | 41.2% |
| 6-10 years                   | 3  | 17.6% |
| 11+ years                    | 1  | 5.8%  |
| unknown                      |    |       |

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## ***Procedures***

To recruit for this study, several approaches were used. Flyers were posted in various community settings in addition to word of mouth support from local child-serving community partners. Once recruited, separate focus groups were held with transition age youth in foster care, young adults previously in foster care and currently pursuing post secondary education, and caregivers of youth in foster care. Focus group discussions were held both in person or virtually depending on the needs of the participants. In instances where a participant was not able to attend a focus group, an individual in depth interview using a similar guide was conducted. Focus group discussions lasted between 15 minutes to a little over an hour.

Several data collection tools were used to facilitate the focus groups, including demographic questionnaires and the focus group/interview protocols. Assent and consent forms were emailed in advance to participants, but were also reviewed in person at the time of each focus group interview. Demographic data questionnaires were completed individually and confidentially, before joining the larger focus group. Participants were interviewed and audio recorded in a variety of private, confidential rural, urban, and virtual settings that were convenient and accessible to participants. All interviews were transcribed and the data de-identified. Participants were compensated with \$30 gift cards for their time at the conclusion of the discussion.

## ***Measures***

*Demographic Information:* Demographic surveys were administered to each participant individually in a private setting, prior to conducting the focus group or in depth interview. Information was obtained on age (years), gender, race/ethnicity, setting in which the participant lived (rural, suburban, urban), level of education achieved, year in college (if applicable), and number of years in foster care. For caregivers, additional questions were asked related to marital status, level of household income, their relationship to the youth being discussed, and number of years as a foster parent.

### *Focus Group/In Depth Interviews:*

#### *Youth*

Focus groups and in depth interviews with the youth explored their thoughts around pursuing further education at college or a technical school; how ready they felt to pursue a post secondary education and if not ready, reasons why; what they felt they needed and would be helpful to be better prepared to apply to college or technical schools and to attend if accepted; barriers to pursuing a post secondary education; and what resources and support would be most helpful to successfully graduate from college or technical school. There was also an open-ended question if youth had any additional comments they wanted to add.

#### *Young Adults in College*

For those youth who had been in foster care and were now attending college, questions were similar to the questions above for the youth but asked from the perspective of what was most helpful in pursuing college or technical school and what were some of the barriers. Specifically,

questions were asked around motivation to attend college or technical school; what resources were helpful in the application process, making the decision to attend, and enrolling in school; what barriers they may have encountered throughout the process; and what factors influenced their decision to enroll and attend. As above, an open ended question also allowed the young adults to add any other comments they wished to share around this topic.

### *Caregivers*

Focus groups with the caregivers explored whether the youth in their care talked about going to college or technical school and the types of things mentioned; resources or things that may help or have helped the youth apply and be ready to attend college or technical school; potential barriers to application and attendance at college or technical school; what may be needed to support successful graduation from college or a technical school; and any resources available in their communities to support youth in their journey to pursue post secondary education. An open ended question concluded the focus group to ensure that caregivers were able to add any additional relevant information.

### ***Data Analysis***

The researchers worked with the Qualitative Research Lab at Augusta University and used a combination of qualitative analysis methods to analyze the data including reflexive/thematic analysis, abductive approaches, and split coding. This allowed for the use of both inductive and deductive approaches when reviewing the data and generating and finalizing themes and codes that derived both organically from the data, as well as theoretical assumptions.

The analysis followed the coding and theme development strategies outlined in thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006; 2019). Our approach to the data was abductive, which means that the coding and analytical process was guided by both key insights identified in the data (bottom-up) and theoretical assumptions and predetermined objectives established by the primary research team (top-down). To improve the validity, rigor, and trustworthiness of the findings and to minimize effects of researcher biases, coding and analysis were conducted collaboratively. Using a split coding strategy, four researchers were responsible for reviewing and developing codes from the interview and focus group transcripts. Once the coding was complete, two researchers created and developed themes that were reviewed and finalized by the analysis team.

### **Results**

Findings emerged from both youth and caregivers regarding strengths and assets available to support transition aged youth in the foster care system who wish to pursue post-secondary education. The assets reported by participants fell into six broad categories: community, school, family, individual/personal, financial, and direct experiences. Assets include areas of support that foster youth and caregivers reported they use or that are available to them to help the transition into higher education. Table 4 summarizes the main themes related to these categories of assets.

### **Table 4**

### *Existing Assets Supporting Transition to Higher Education*

| Themes                             | Sub-Themes                                                                                                                    |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Community Assets                   | Agency Support (DFCS)<br>Peer Support/Social Outlets<br>Coach/Mentor                                                          |
| School-based Assets                | Counselors<br>Teachers                                                                                                        |
| Family/Caregiver                   | Foster Family<br>Biological Family                                                                                            |
| Individual/Personal Goals          | Interest in Specific Field<br>Desire to Succeed<br>Desire for Freedom and New Start<br>Desire for Community                   |
| Financial                          | Agency Support (DFCS or other organizations)<br>Family Support (foster, biological or kinship)<br>Exposure to Academic Fields |
| Direct Experiences and Connections | Inspiration from Others                                                                                                       |

### **Community Assets**

Several youth and caregivers mentioned the availability of assets within the community that could facilitate the transition to pursuing post secondary education. Support from a state agency, particularly from the Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS), was one theme that arose. Participants noted that DFCS has several resources available for those youth interested in pursuing secondary education, including referrals to community organizations who can assist youth and assess their strengths and weaknesses and provide support accordingly, and

the Independent Living Program which provides financial assistance and services to current and former foster/probation youth, 16-20 years of age, who are eligible. In addition, community agencies working with foster care youth and families were mentioned as helpful in providing resources for pursuing education including mentorship around schooling and processes, financial support and programs to assist youth with readiness and their educational needs.

A second theme that arose was that of peer support as an important factor in pursuing secondary education. Both caregivers and youth noted that having a friend to study with, check in with, prepare with and even enroll with supports this transition into secondary education. For example:

“I have a friend. We don't know if it's going to happen but we plan on enrolling in the same college. So, I think no matter how it goes, I'm just going to at least end up checking on her and her checking up on me.” (Youth in Foster Care)

Similarly, another theme that arose was in the area of mentorship/coaching and having an outside role model who has gone through the process and was able to share experiences and guidance. For example:

“So I met my mentor through the Big Brother BigSisters program. So she graduated from Georgia State and then started her own business. So some of the professors that she had took I was having to take them, so she introduced me to them, we had lunches together to make me get more comfortable with going to school in the city, stuff like that.” (Youth in Foster Care)

### **School-Based Assets**

After community assets, school-based supports were the most commonly mentioned type of resource that came out of the focus groups and in-depth interviews with both caregivers and youth from foster care. Teachers, counselors, and other school staff had made a difference in those impacted by foster care in their ability to succeed beyond high school. These school faculty believed in the students and their potential, which influenced the self-efficacy of the youth.

Counselors are often the staff in a school building who are charged with making sure students graduate and make plans for after graduation, so it is fitting that these individuals are able to support youth from foster care as long as they believe in them to accomplish what they are capable of after high school. One foster youth said this about their counselor, “He was the one that was, at first was . . . , and then once he saw that I was capable, he believed in me the whole way after that. He was like, I believe in you. You're going to graduate on time. I can't believe we're doing this. You know, you are doing this.”

Additionally, teachers came up as an important support under the theme of “School-based Assets.” Teachers spend the most time with students during the school day and have a great opportunity to influence all the students in their classrooms. It is no different for the youth from foster care in a school setting. Students often feel more comfortable with a teacher than a counselor due to the amount of time spent together and the relationships that have been built. A foster youth said this about a teacher supporting them beyond the normal duties of a classroom teacher: “I have a teacher at school who's helping me go through some of the colleges and

assessing on which career path I want to take.” This foster youth accredited this teacher to opening their eyes to the various possibilities of post-secondary education.

### **Family/Caregiver Assets**

Family and caregivers emerged as an important asset in the lives of our participants. This family theme incorporated both the foster family and the biological family. One foster youth participant spoke of how her foster family was the reason she was able to graduate high school:

I actually ended up doing my junior in... So, after I had my daughter, I dropped out in 10th grade and, no junior year, sorry. And then once I got placed with them, I did junior and senior year together. So, I ended up graduating on time.

Interviewer: Because they were able to help watch your daughter?

Young Adult 1: That, and they were definitely my biggest advocates.

This sentiment of encouragement and support from family as an asset was corroborated by the caregiver participants themselves. A caregiver participant spoke of their foster daughter making Dean’s list and said “She had it. She just needed someone there to encourage it.”

Also, we're strict parents. So if you didn't do good on your grades, well guess what? You're going to make your grades up or you're going to go to do this. Now, she does it on her own. Mom, I'm not doing good in this class. I already signed up for tutoring. So it's like just the tools for the future. What she needs.

Always praising big things. When she graduated high school, she was first I think in her family that's ever graduated. So that was a big thing. So we went out. We just had a big parties.

So basically, I would say start planning with your child, see what they're into, encourage that, and then from there, get resources. We've already lived at schools, we have already lived at all that. If you have a chance, put them actually on the work field. If you can do encouragement, a lot of that. Boundaries, structure.

So a lot of being very close-knit with them. Walk the journey with them. Don't stand in the back and wait. See what road they're taking. Interviewer: Okay. Caregiver 2: I always say parents are bumpers on the cars and we're just going to keep them on the road. Not off the road.

So actually, when I first got in foster care, I wanted to work on cars. Interviewer: That's a good thing too. Young Adult 1: But the longer I was with them, they really supported me and was like, I think you could do more than that. Interviewer: Who support... Your foster parents? Young Adult 1: Yes.

Participants also credited biological family members as supportive assets as they transitioned past high school. A youth currently in college remembered how important this mentorship was. “I have one older brother, but he's in the National Guard right now. In high school, I was really struggling with math and I spent 10 minutes with him and it was like, it was amazing. He's really smart.” Another said that when her foster mother did not understand the

high school work, she was able to call a niece who was at a University. She said “That really helped in the long run.”

### **Individual Assets/Personal Goals**

As far as finding quotes for the individual level—there are some references regarding “being smart” and “having a mindset” but these were not codes that were used to make sense of all transcripts so not everything would be coded and it would be worth a review. Below are some that were identified in the code “positive qualities”

Caregiver 2: She's so smart. She just had to know it.

Well, Chris, um, he was a very smart student. He participated in a spelling bee at school. So, he won at the school. He won on the, um, county and he won on the state competition. He went on to participate in-in three. So, uh, we always pushed and motivated him. He was, quote on quote, college material.

Antonio was really a smart, he was a smart, uh, kid.

So that ... uh, okay. So that's gonna be two things. One, [inaudible 00:21:57] definitely your mindset. You have to want to stay. You have to want ... no matter how hard it gets, you cannot give up because if you're gonna give up, then [inaudible 00:22:05] just a waste of money, and you want to be what you want to do, you know what I mean?

### **Financial Assets**

So when she graduate in high school, she got a free laptop and a printer so that helped a lot. And then of course, the ILP helps a lot. It helps pay for a college, and that's for all, (CG)

The cost of tuition, seeing you get financial aid or not. What will financial aid cover? What was I paying out of pocket? Like the room and board, the food, it was a lot. (FC Youth)

### **Direct Experiences and Connections**

Finally, several themes emerged related to youth having direct experiences with certain professions that inspired them or connections with people who served as a model for what they wanted in their lives, providing motivation for pursuing a secondary degree. One such theme was having exposure to a certain academic field, learning more about it and feeling inspired to have such an experience in their future. For example:

“I actually toured the labs at AU, at the hospital. And the first one I toured, I can't remember exactly which one it was, but they're working with preventing and fixing deafness in babies

before they're born. That was really what got me. I was like, this is amazing. I can't believe that they're working on this and that this is, could be possible. It will be possible one day.” (Young Adult).

Caregivers noted the importance of providing guidance and encouragement to their youth to seek these experiences.

“So basically, I would say start planning with your child, see what they're into, encourage that, and then from there, get resources. We've already lived at schools, we have already lived at all that. If you have a chance, put them actually on the work field. If you can do encouragement, a lot of that. Boundaries, structure.” (Caregiver)

Another theme that emerged was youth being exposed to and receiving inspiration from others around them, including exposure to individuals in college or who had pursued secondary education that served as an inspiration to these youth. For example:

“That young man graduated from Kennesaw State and it, I mean, he got a standing ovation. I, it was just incredible...He lived in the basement to create that atmosphere, like he was at college... It was just, you know, difference that motivated Nicki. Oh, my God... So, sometimes I think that, um, if we can introduce them to non, in a non-traditional way.” (Caregiver)

## **Discussion**

### **Strengths and Limitations**

### **Implications**

### **Conclusion**

Currently, half of students in the foster care population do not graduate high school, and less than 2 percent of the 10 percent who transition to college persist until graduation (Jones, S., 2021). Similarly, Day et al. (2013) found that students involved in foster care were less likely to complete postsecondary education than low-income students and first-generation students who had not been involved in the foster care system.

Our overarching goal has been to explore how foster students can best be set up for success in pursuing higher education. In this pilot exploratory study, the goal was to identify the factors that influence the success of students involved in the foster care system in higher education. Through focus groups, we have explored the ways community and school assets can be leveraged to increase the number of students from foster care who go on to pursue college, university, and trade school entry. We have begun to find out what types of resources are needed to help adolescents and young adults in foster care make it to higher education by identifying the gaps, barriers and facilitators that exist in this process.

2 - How can community and school assets be leveraged to support students in the foster care system and encourage them to successfully pursue higher education opportunities?

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