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This chapter describes the ways that the trauma of childhood frames the academic, social, and personal lives of many foster youth as they navigate higher education. In particular, we focus on the role of homelessness, social network fragmentation, and abuse and neglect.

A Trauma-Informed Care Approach to Supporting Foster Youth in Community College

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Individuals exiting foster care enter adulthood with challenges associated with their lived experiences. They frequently endure multiple forms of abuse during childhood, including sexual, physical, and emotional. Harmful coping strategies, such as substance abuse, may emerge. Many are placed in a group homes during high school, which means they have limited residential stability or exposure to a healthy functioning family. Former foster youth bring these realities with them as they enter community college. Understanding the trauma experienced is an important aspect of developing support structures to encourage persistence.

The instability and trauma that plays a role in the lives of most youth while in foster care frequently leads to academic challenges related to reading, writing, and math (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). Community college campuses that create support programs and coordinated services can help these students understand how to access these programs as well as serving as a respite when a challenge or crisis emerges (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010; Hallett & Westland, 2015).

Advocates and educators have worked to increase access to higher education for individuals aging out of foster care. However, the foster care system struggles to adequately transition youth to independent living, including readiness for higher education (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). While foster care programs are increasing resources for youth who are aging out of the system, including transitional housing, mental health, and independent living skills program, they still fall short of meeting the needs of these youth (Scott, 2013). Our work seeks to inform conversations about

increasing completion of community college coursework and transitioning to a four-year institution. We explore the importance of embedding a trauma-informed care approach to serving these students.

Study Design

This study focuses on the experiences of foster youth at one community college in northern California; in this chapter the college is identified by the pseudonym, Port City Community College (PCCC). We conducted interviews and collected documents for review between January 2014 and May 2016. We interviewed 15 participants: seven foster youth attending PCCC and eight stakeholders. Eighteen semistructured interviews were conducted; two foster youth and one stakeholder were interviewed twice. Interviews, lasting approximately 40–100 minutes, were digitally recorded, transcribed, and uploaded into the Dedoose data management system. Pseudonyms for the students and institution are used to protect confidentiality.

Document review included materials collected from the annual state community college foster youth programming meeting, PCCC financial aid department, transfer center, Equal Opportunity Program and Services (EOPS) program, and local county foster parent trauma-informed training materials. Constant comparative analysis was used to continuously compare data across participants and data types to form categories and themes Charmaz and Belgrave (2002).

Trauma Foster Youth Bring to Campus

The former foster youth who participated in our study had varying experiences that framed how they educationally engaged while enrolled at a community college. The reality of trauma was threaded throughout their narratives. Participants felt a constant tension between pursuing education in order to achieve long-term goals and struggling to negotiate obstacles to meeting short-term needs. The participants identified three aspects that dramatically impacted how they thought about themselves as students and framed their ability to persist. In the sections that follow we explore the multifaceted traumas that influenced their experiences as community college students. Although stakeholders supported the assertions voiced by foster youth, we focus here on the student narratives.

Residential Instability and Homelessness.   Residential insecurity and mobility framed the lives of the foster youth. The uncertainty concerning where they would be after they left the foster care system and who they would be living with created a tremendous amount of stress. To fully understand how residential instability framed the lives of participants, it is important to look at the housing history of participants before, during, and after

foster care. These histories along with their residential reality during community college help explain persistent stress of insecurity they experienced.

For many students, mobility began during childhood before they entered the foster care system. For some, this occurred while living with a parent or guardian. James moved into a homeless shelter when he was nine years old. "They stuck me in the daycare with the little kids instead of going to school," he explained, "not being homeless again was my motivation for school." Although some had a more stable residential situation before entering the foster care system, all of the participants experienced significant mobility once they were placed within the system. Raegan, for example, had 36 different placements during her four years in care. They learned as children not to depend on having a consistent, nurturing, and safe place to live. Jeff, in reflecting on his consistent placement instability, explained how foster youth are always "trying to find where you stand or where you're welcome." Many of the participants were surprised how abruptly the transition to independence occurred. Suddenly, they were considered adults who were responsible for finding their own housing. Amanda explained, "as soon as I turned 18, everybody closed the door on you and it's like a slap in the face." The lack of familial support became most evident in that moment.

Mobility and residential insecurity continued as students entered the community college. James discussed how mobility framed his community college experience, "I've lived in nine different places during the six years I've been in college." The consistent uncertainty of their residence and frequent movement made it difficult for students to fully engage in college. Jeff struggled to focus during class lectures while in community college when his priority was finding a place to live. These students ended up directing their attention toward basic needs and losing focus on their classwork. This contributed to their continued enrollment at the community college, which for some continues six years later.

The participants spoke about longing for residential stability that had eluded them most of their lives. James wanted to fully engage in the educational process, but "couch surfing and moving around makes it difficult to focus." Amanda's response helped illustrate another layer of the trauma associated with residential insecurity: "I don't have somebody I can go live with if I'm homeless, and I been homeless before and it's really scary." Many of them had learned about Maslow's hierarchy of needs and applied it to their situations. Jeff explained how "before you can even focus on school you got to be able to eliminate a lot of other factors, like hunger, financial stability in order to focus." They longed for a way to stabilize their residential situation in order to fully participate in classes because they believed that successfully completing their education could lead to future stability.

Abuse and Neglect.   The identity of foster youth often implies that the individual endured some form of abuse during childhood. Although some children are placed in foster care because of the death of a parent, the majority of youth are placed in care due to maltreatment from caregivers. The

physical, emotional, and sexual abuse many experience leaves scars these individuals carry into adulthood. Many also experienced neglect, which negatively impacts self-esteem. Assuming these individuals have resolved the traumas from their childhood is problematic; in our study, participants expressed unresolved feelings toward their caregivers and/or past experiences. We provide some context to help illustrate how these experiences impacted the participants' identity as well as their ability to fully engage in educational opportunities.

Participants discussed horrific traumas. They experienced sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional taunting and abuse, hunger, homelessness, terror, lack of schooling, were forced into drug and alcohol abuse, and forced labor or prostitution. And they consistently mentioned needing help dealing with these traumas. "I wish my instructors wanted to hear my story," James explained, "If I knew they cared, it would make all the difference in the world. I think they might see me different if they knew the real me. Hopefully they could also send me to someone that could help." James wanted to talk to a counselor. He says a "real" counselor that "could help me work through my anger and other hurts, not just talk about my school plan."

Course content could prompt an emotional trigger. Classes that focus on issues related to family or abuse may be challenging for former foster youth to endure without support. James and Andy discussed leaving the classroom during discussions about family dynamics. The students appreciated why these topics were discussed in class, but they did not know how to participate without emotionally breaking down in class. These situations could make them feel isolated because it seemed to them as though other students did not have family trauma, even though abuse and dysfunction may occur in families not involved in the foster care system. Faculty may encourage participation by sharing their own experiences in an authentic and vulnerable manner.

The students also discussed unhealthy coping mechanisms. They knew these strategies did not actually help, but they did not have the tools needed to choose different options. Andy started crying as she explained how her sexual abuse led to a crystal meth addiction, which led to additional forms of abuse and trauma. The challenges associated with complicated family and personal situations along with the pressures of college often created stress. The students often drew from the strategies that gave them comfort in the past, but those unhealthy strategies often pushed them away from college. They wanted support learning how to cope as a healthy and productive college student. Ideally, campus supports could point students to on- or off-campus counseling services.

Social Network Disruption and Fragmentation. Disruption and fragmentation was present in all aspects of the participants' social network. As a result, the participants rarely had a supportive familial network to lean on when facing difficult decisions or challenges. Jean described her biological family as "all about drama, they have a lot of issues and I am the one they

turn to for help." The constant struggle existed between being successful in school and supporting family in crisis—even if their family members had not been supportive during childhood.

The relationships formed with foster parents and group home staff seemed to evaporate as the participants became legal adults. Amanda felt shut out of her social network upon leaving foster care, saying

> …here you are living in a group home with staff for about three years and you think you have connections with them and then you become homeless. I knocked on the group home door and they're like we can't help you. I didn't make a whole lot of other friends in foster care so now it's like I got nobody.

As new students, they did not fully understand how the community college system worked. Through encouragement and connections provided through former Independent Living Program (ILP) case managers, they tried to access as many services as they could, but ended up stumbling along the way. "I was trying to go to all these appointments because I was signed up for so many programs," Andy explained, "I know they were trying to help me but I have a kid and I just couldn't make it to all these appointments. When I stopped going, I couldn't get book vouchers or anything anymore." Having a single point of contact for foster youth alumni, such as the ILP, could enable the student and campus professionals to collaborate when an issue arises that might negatively impact the students' continued success. In this situation, a point of contact may be able to check in with the student to ensure the ILP requirements were met as well as connect with the ILP office if a student inadvertently missed a meeting.

Even when institutional programing is in place, without cross-collaboration between campus programs and staff, the full benefit of resources may be untapped. Jean shared, "I don't really understand financial aid." They did not know who to seek out when a challenge emerged. In this study, even California's Foster Youth Success Initiative campus liaisons did not seem to provide direction, despite the success this initiative has had throughout the state. Several participants connected with the liaison when picking up their California Chafee grant (supportive funding for foster youth) yet, without a relationship with the liaison they were left with another campus program that did not contribute to creating a concrete and successful pathway for success. The fragmentation of both community college and off-campus social services programs proved to be additional challenges for foster youth while navigating the higher education landscape.

Moving to a Trauma-Informed Approach

The students were unable to leave the trauma they had experienced behind when they enrolled at a community college. Not only had their earlier

experiences shaped their worldview, but they often continued to endure similar traumatic experiences related to residential instability, social network disruption, and abuse while navigating community college. The stories above illustrate the importance of acknowledging these traumas while developing supports and building upon students' strengths. Nurturing the success of former foster youth requires community college officials to do more than point them toward the tutoring center or an academic advisor. The trauma leads to difficulty in meeting basic needs, engaging academic learning, and identifying relational support from institutional agents.

Getting foster youth into college is meaningless if they do not successfully earn a certificate or degree that can increase their likelihood of future stability. Andy expressed her frustrations "I know it's kind of embarrassing, me still being in school this long (five years) and sometimes I stress out I'm not going to finish (college.)" Similar to the basic needs of food and shelter, the students experienced multiple forms of trauma and felt alienated once they exited care. Amanda's fear of being homeless exemplifies this reality faced by some foster alumni, "I've been homeless before and it's scary." They needed emotional support to deal with the past trauma as well as to help create healthy new patterns that would encourage their success as adults. The following themes provide guidance for professionals in community colleges seeking to provide support for former foster youth who attend their institutions.

Additional Financial aid Support.   The participants received financial assistance while attending community college. Most initially qualified for two types of state aid: the California Community Colleges Board of Governors (BOG) Fee Waiver, which covers enrollment fees, and the California Chafee Grant, federal funds that the state uses to provide foster youth assistance with expenses such as childcare, transportation, and rent. Some also received housing support from community organizations designed to assist former foster youth in the transition to adulthood. However, some of these funding sources had term limits; after four or five years, the student was expected to complete a degree and no longer need support. The term limits may initially make sense. Providing four years of financial support for an individual pursing a four-year degree might seem appropriate. Some funding sources extend an additional year to provide a cushion, which may also seem generous. However, the lives of these young people did not fit neatly into a four-year degree plan. They experienced significant personal challenges in high school that impeded their academic engagement. Most of the students took remedial math and English classes, sometimes starting at a level that would require two or three classes before they reached college-level credit. Even in the best-case scenario, navigating remedial classes could take a full academic year. They may struggle in other classes until they acquire the skills needed to write a term paper or essay exam. The complexity of their personal lives also slowed academic progress.

The student participants spoke of continued family challenges that, at times, pulled them away from their college studies.

Completing community college requirements within two years proved unrealistic for study participants. They all planned to transfer to a four-year university in order to achieve their career goals. However, they often remained at the community college for at least four years. Their housing and tuition support ended before they could transfer. Even as they completed the academic requirements, they did not have the financial support to transfer. Further, they had assumed that the funding would last until they completed their education and were surprised when they were no longer eligible. They may also need assistance locating additional sources of financial support as they transfer to four-year institutions if they require more than two years at the community college. As a result, former foster youth may benefit from financial aid counseling to helps them budget the different sources of support and make informed decisions about when to utilize these resources.

Collaboration Between Educational and Housing Supports. The students' lack of residential stability while in foster care continued as they entered postsecondary institutions. PCCC, like most community colleges, did not provide on-campus housing for any of its students. Most of the student participants also lived in group home settings during their adolescence. These facilities function more like an institution than a home. As a result, the students had little sense of how to secure or maintain housing. Some of the younger students were connected to housing support programs for foster youth attending college. However, these programs did not collaborate with the community colleges. Participants spoke about being placed in an apartment that would require over an hour commute to campus using public transportation. The roommate situations also did not necessarily support students' academic engagement. The pairings were made without much thought about how their individual experiences may create conflict that may negatively impact educational engagement.

Community college officials could work more closely with schools and social workers in developing students' Expanded Learning Program through differentiated educational learning opportunities to meet their unique needs. Having a representative from a postsecondary institution at the meetings for future college students would allow for discussions about potential barriers. Community colleges could also develop materials for social workers and guidance counselors that explain the resources available. The collaboration would allow social workers and guidance counselors to share their knowledge of student challenges with the community college in order to assist in developing support programs.

Creating Campus Space and Tools. The participants wanted a safe and supportive space on campus. They all spoke about the shame associated with being labeled a "foster youth" and wanted to move away from that identity as they transitioned to college. However, they must identify as

a foster youth at each office in order to access the supports provided by state and federal law. For example, they had to tell the financial aid office about their status in order to negotiate the different grants and fee waivers available. This made the students uncomfortable and, at times, they would opt out of support to avoid claiming an identity that they were trying to shed. As administrators, faculty, and staff, the more we reframe the conversation around the term "foster youth," the less stigma foster youth and others may associate with this term.

Creating a space on campus, possibly within the EOPS or counseling office, would enable former foster youth to access support without fearing that they will be judged. Instead of identifying at every office, they could have the discussion with one professional in a safe space. Many of the participants felt alone on campus and thought that no one understood their struggles. A shared space would allow for networks to form between students as well as with professional staff members. In addition, these trusted professionals could point the former foster youth to other resources on campus, such as tutoring and counseling. The community college could also use these spaces to gather information from the former foster youth to find out what unaddressed areas exist that may be creating obstacles. For example, many of the participants spoke about the lack of technology skills because they could not afford computers or smart phones while in foster care. Through relationships with these students, the staff could identify these needs and find ways to address them.

Considering Triggers.   Most participants experienced trauma triggers during a class or class-related activity. James recalled a time when a discussion in a psychology class surrounding family dynamics caused him to relive the multiple times he was abandoned by his mother: "I had to get up and leave. I just remember feeling like I was going to cry in front of everyone." Jean shared that during one class when the topics of alcoholism and abuse arose, she felt like she was having a panic attack. She experienced "breaking out in sweats and feeling like I had to get out of there." Class discussions and activities will frequently broach issues that trigger an emotional response from foster youth. Safe spaces are needed to help students learn to manage these experiences. James suggests that "professors be mini counselors," seeing and sincerely caring for students. Faculty might consider incorporating into course syllabi information related to ways that students can address concerns about their academic success. In addition, personal meetings as well as written assignments could provide avenues for students to share issues related to their experiences in foster care. This would allow faculty an opportunity to counsel and direct students to institutional resources. In addition, the aforementioned safe spaces could provide opportunities for these students to process through the triggers.

Access to Counseling.   The multifaceted traumas continued as the former foster youth entered college. In addition to dealing with the issues from their past, these students still have complicated family and personal

situations as adults. They have few coping skills. Hailey confessed, "I often feel angry all the time. Like sometimes when I'm frustrated and upset about school, I yell at my daughter. And I know I shouldn't but it gets to be too much." The participants felt as though they had few institutional agents on campus that understood their lives or could offer assistance. They also needed advice when faced with complex issues as well as dealing with simple issues before they became a significant problem. While many students may rely on parents or guardians, foster youth feel isolated and ill-equipped when a problem arises. The youth had little adult guidance to navigate the transition to adulthood.

Beyond academic advising, the participants needed psychological counseling related to negotiating trauma in order to succeed as a student. Providing access to a counselor with training related to the challenges of family trauma and growing up within the foster care system could be a useful strategy. Incorporating individual and group counseling opportunities within the safe space for foster youth on campus would allow for these students to process through their trauma and acquire new skills needed to persist through college. Given the limited resources related to mental health on many campuses, the point of contact for foster youth alumni can coordinate with agencies to find additional supports that may exist within the community.

Concluding Thoughts

Former foster youth attending community college often perceive education as an essential aspect of their transition to stability as an adult. Our participants demonstrated a persistent desire to achieve their educational goals. And, in many ways, their stories exemplified what it means to be resilient in the face of significant challenges. However, they also longed for support and understanding. The trauma that defined much of their lives continues to exist as they become college students. Attending to these needs along with the academic supports has the potential to increase their educational outcomes and success.

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