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“I KNEW COLLEGE WAS IN THE CARDS FOR ME:” A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF THE
COMMUNICATIVE MESSAGES FOSTER YOUTH RECEIVE ABOUT POST-
SECONDARY EDUCATION

LaShawnda Kilgore

50 Pages

A college education is an indicator of success. Unfortunately, research shows that foster youth attend college at a very low rate. This study was conducted to better understand the messages foster youth receive about college and the impact those messages have on their post-secondary education decisions. Using qualitative interviews, I investigated the communicative messages former and current foster youth received that encouraged or discouraged them in their pursuit of a post-secondary degree. Specifically, I focused on messages former and current foster youth received from their parents/caregivers, peers, school counselors, and social workers.

Through qualitative data analysis, three message types were uncovered: 1) Foster youth reported receiving supportive/motivational messages, 2) cautionary messages, and 3) discouraging messages, as they were deciding if they would pursue a post-secondary education. Results suggest that the messages conveying support from foster parents and school counselors play a vital role in foster youths’ educational decisions. Practical implications, limitations, and suggestions for further research are discussed in detail.

KEYWORDS: college, foster youth, communicative messages, memorable messages

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COMMUNICATIVE MESSAGES FOSTER YOUTH RECEIVE ABOUT POST-
SECONDARY EDUCATION

LASHAWNDA KILGORE

A Thesis Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

School of Communication

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COMMUNICATIVE MESSAGES FOSTER YOUTH RECEIVE ABOUT POST-
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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

A college education in America is no longer a luxury for a privileged few, but a necessity for economic opportunity. An estimated 17 million Americans attend college every year (US Census Bureau, 2008). Research shows that those who have a Bachelors degree earn on average sixty-six percent more than those who just have a high school education. These individuals are less likely to face unemployment (U.S. Department of Education, 2013) and more likely to increase their opportunities for social mobility. While obtaining a college degree is recognized as being a vital component in one's economic success, it has also been proven that obtaining a college degree is now more expensive than ever, thus making college a challenge for many to pursue (Pew Research Center, 2013). There are many factors, in addition to finances, that play a major role in obtaining a college degree.

Foster youth (also referred to as "youth in care") face unique obstacles due to their experiences in foster care, as well as the typical obstacles those from the general population face while obtaining a college degree (Casey Family Programs, 2010). Research shows that former and current foster youth are less likely to attend college (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2009), and those who decide to go to college are less likely to graduate than those in the general population (Day, Dworsky, Fogarty & Domashek, 2011).

The factors that contribute to youth in care not attending or graduating college have been widely researched. While findings indicate that former foster youth are presented with more obstacles than those from the general population (Pecora, 2012), it should also be noted that many of these students still wish to obtain a post-secondary degree. Tzawa-Hayden (2004) states that 70% of foster youth have a desire to go to college but only 19% of them pursue a college degree. Statistics show that only between 3 and 11% of former and current foster youth who

begin college graduate (Casey Family Programs, 2010), yet these resilient and motivated individuals still pursue a college degree (Reilly, 2003). Studies provide an understanding as to why former and current foster youth do not finish college once they are enrolled (Bruce, Naccarato, Hopson, & Morrelli, 2010), but former foster youth who have do not pursue a post-secondary degree are not sufficiently represented in current literature.

Little is known about how influential communicative messages are on making decisions about attending college among vulnerable populations, although scholars have found that messages can influence social mobility (Lucas, 2011), decision-making, and behavior (Stohl, 1986). Nazoine et al. (2011) studied messages about navigating college life among the general population of students. Messages such as “You can do this. You have every right to try just like anyone else”, “If you get a good education you’ll get more money”, and “College is a once in a life-time opportunity” are messages that college students remember as having an impact on their college experience (Wang, 2014). These messages build the confidence of students, change their behaviors, and motivate them to perform better in school. While it has been shown that messages about college can be very influential, messages foster youth receive about higher education have yet to be studied. Communicative messages could have a great impact on a foster youths’ decision to attend college.

This study investigated the communicative messages former and current foster youth received that encouraged or discouraged them in their pursuit of a post-secondary degree. Uncovering these messages provided an understanding of the impact that they have on thoughts and decisions about college. The number of college support programs for former and current foster youth like First Start, Foster Care to Success, and Guardian Scholars are on the rise (e.g.,

Pecora, 2012), and learning the role that messages about college play in educational decisions may contribute to the development of these programs.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A college degree is one of the indications of success in a young adult's life (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Former and current foster youth are faced with many barriers in their pursuit of a college degree; regardless of those barriers, many of them still want to pursue a college degree. While those barriers are known, there is limited research that discusses why some foster youth decide to attend college and why some decide not to.

Foster Youth and College Success

In 2014 there were 415,129 children in foster care, a 4% increase since 2012 (AFCARS, 2015). Courtney, Piliavan, Kaylor and, Nesmith (2001) found that 63% of former foster youth reported their desire to complete college, yet despite high aspirations, foster care youth do not attend college at a rate comparable to people not in the foster system. High school graduation and advancement to a four-year college or university are two marks of successful achievement following emancipation from the foster care system (Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005). However, only 3-11% of them will obtain a post-secondary degree (Casey Family Programs, 2010; Reilly, 2003). Foster youth are faced with many barriers that can hinder them in their pursuit of a college degree when compared to the "average" college student, including maltreatment and placement in restrictive settings (Sheehy et al., 2001), multiple placements and associated changes in schools attended (Courtney et al., 2001), inconsistent social support, low educational expectations from caregivers and the tracking of youth into vocational rather than college education (Collins, 2001), poor quality of some group home education and "on-site" schools (Colton, Heath & Aldgate, 1995), and lack of access to educational assistance or college preparation classes and advising (Glantz & Gushwa, 2013). Unrau, Font, and Rawls (2011) found that foster care alumni in college were less academically prepared and had lower high

school and college GPA's than the general population of college students at a four-year university despite being more academically motivated and positive about the college experience. A review of the literature on high school completion rates of former foster youth indicates that they remain behind their peers in high school and GED graduation rates (Benedetto, 2005).

Factors such as a lack of family guidance and worries about younger siblings create unique challenges, which can impact the likelihood of college enrollment and completion among students from foster care (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2011; Unrau et al., 2012). Students from traumatic family environments may also face social and emotional difficulties such as anxiety, depression, stress, and lack of social support, which impede their ability to persist academically (Casey Family Services, 2003; Courtney et al., 2007).

Many former foster youth also start but drop out of college. Courtney et al. (2011) found that 26% of foster care alumni who had dropped out of college reported difficult course work as a primary reason for dropout, followed by the need to work and not being able to afford tuition or fees. Mental health has also been one of the contributing factors as to why former and current foster youth drop out of college (Pecora et al., 2005). Lovitt and Emerson (2008) found that mental health counseling to be an essential element during college to those foster youths who graduated college.

There are benefits of attending college from which former foster youth, in particular, can greatly benefit. It is increasingly necessary to complete higher education to secure a satisfactory level of economic stability, which includes adequate benefits and a level of job security (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010; Porter, 2002). Kuh (1993) found that students report growing in their personal and practical competence, cognitive complexity, academic skills, and altruism. Such individual growth can develop from encountering challenges, which are often a significant part

of college life. College can affect nearly every aspect of an individual's life, including knowledge levels, health status, social relationships, and value systems (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Successful completion of a higher education program can serve as a critical turning point for young adults as they strive to acquire credentials and skills necessary to succeed in adult life and break the cycle of poverty (Okpych, 2012; Peters, Dworsky, Courtney, & Paollock, 2009). Students who successfully complete a college degree program are likely to increase their lifetime earning potential by more than \$480,000 on average (Peters et al., 2009). Exposure to higher education creates a new trajectory of social mobility for young adults from foster care who are otherwise more likely than their peers to experience multiple out-of-wedlock births (60%), homelessness (46.7%), and drug and alcohol dependence (8%), while rates of post-traumatic stress disorder are twice that of military veterans (Casey Family Services, 2003). Despite the many social and economic advantages of higher education for former foster youth, higher education institutions have not been successful in attracting, supporting, and retaining this population of students (Day et al., 2011). In this study, I focused on the positive and negative messages that former foster youth receive about college that may impact their decision to attend, remain in, and graduate from college.

Memorable (Communication) Messages

The body of communication research focusing on important communicative messages people receive and remember centers on the idea of "memorable messages." Memorable messages are "verbal messages which may be remembered for extremely long periods of time and which people perceive as a major influence on the course of their lives" (Knapp, Stohl, & Reardon, 1981, p. 27). Memorable messages involve brief prescriptive oral commands (Knapp et al., 1981) that often come from an authority figure (Ellis & Smith, 2004). Memorable messages

have two characteristics: the individual recalls the message for a long period of time, and the individual perceives the messages as having an important influence on his or her life (Knapp et al., 1981; Stohl, 1986). The literature on memorable messages provide a useful framework for studying the messages foster youth receive about post-secondary education because memorable messages have an impact on recipients and thus may represent the most influential message foster youth receive regarding education. Memorable messages help individuals maintain or enhance personal standards (Smith & Ellis, 2001). Carver & Scheier (1982) also argue that these messages can produce action.

Memorable messages are remembered specifically due to the impact they have on receivers. Messages that foster youth receive about post-secondary education may play a vital role in closing the gap of foster youth college enrollment. For instance, Wang (2014) found that memorable messages from parents and family play a major role in the college success of first-generation college students, who have often been compared to former foster youth (Batsche et al., 2012). Batsche and colleagues found that students' experiences in Know How 2GO, a program for first-generation college students, are similar to experiences of youth who had been in foster care. First-generation college students often retain memorable messages about college, including talk about pursuing academic success, valuing school, increasing future potential, making decisions, accepting support and encouragement, counting on family, and recognizing the importance of family. However, Batsche et al.'s study focused on positive messages youth received about college, but little is known about those messages from family that discourage and even dissuade potential college students. Memorable messages can remain salient throughout students' college experiences and post college careers. Thus, messages can help to support and socialize students (Wang, 2014)

While there is no research that directly focuses on the communicative messages foster youth receive from their family, family dynamics can affect educational success. For instance, family instability is strongly associated with a host of adolescent outcomes that negatively predict college enrollment and completion, including diminished academic trajectories and performance (Cavanagh & Fomby, 2012). Foster youth are likely to experience instability within their families due to changes in foster care placement. The educational decisions of older siblings also affect the educational decisions of their younger siblings. Goodman, Hurwitz, Smith, and Fox (2016) found that younger and older siblings' college choices are very closely related. Younger siblings are more likely to follow the college choices of their older siblings. As previously discussed a family can play a major role in the educational decisions of youth. The messages from family to foster youth have not been studied, yet previous research has implications that those messages can be very important. To explore communicative messages that former foster youth receive from family members about college, the first research question was posed:

RQ1: What, if any, communicative messages have former and current foster youth received from their family members/caregivers that encouraged or discouraged them in pursuing a post-secondary degree?

Messages from teachers and school counselors can serve as determination and inspiration for students who decide to pursue their college degree (Wang, 2014). Ellis (2000) found that “the process by which teachers communicate to students that they are valuable, significant individuals motivated students to pursue a college education” (p. 265). School counselors are the primary facilitators of college transition for many students. McDonough (2005) argued that there is no professional more important to improving college knowledge than the high school

counselor. Prior research suggests that school counselors facilitate college participation by encouraging college aspirations (Holcomb-McCoy, 2010); aiding students' academic participation (Brown & Trusty, 2005); guiding students through the college application process (Bryan et al., 2011); educating parents role in college planning, and ensuring that schools possess and pursue a college mission (McDonough, 1997). While school counselors play a vital role in the college planning of the typical high school student, there is no research on the role that counselors play in former foster youth's views and decisions about college. Learning both the encouraging and discouraging messages can provide an understanding of why some former foster youth decide to pursue a college degree and why others do not. To understand college messages from school counselors, I asked the second research question:

RQ2: What, if any, communicative messages have former and current foster youth received from their school counselors or other school officials that encouraged or discouraged them in pursuing a post-secondary degree?

Furthermore, of all messages teenagers may receive about college, the messages from their peers seem to have a large impact. Communicative messages from peers can influence or deter students in their pursuit of a post-secondary education. Holland (2011) found that peers have a noteworthy impact on their friend's academic activities and their post-secondary education planning and experiences. Peers also have the potential to affect how students think about, value, and engage in academic activity. Students who have limited or sporadic access to college-educated adults may heavily rely on thoughts, opinions, and actions of their peers (Griffin, Allen, Kimra-Walsh & Yamura, 2007). Students are more likely to mirror the choices of their peers when it comes to social and academic activities. In fact, students are more likely to enroll in a four-year college or university if their friends have done the same and have similarly

encouraged them (Sokatch, 2006). To explore messages from peers about college, I posed the third research question:

RQ3: What, if any, communicative messages have former and current foster youth received from their peers that encouraged or discouraged them in pursuing a post-secondary degree?

There is no research that discusses the messages about college that foster youth receive from their social workers, but research does indicate that social workers can have an influence on the educational experiences of foster youth (Glantz & Gushwa, 2013). Social workers have the potential to positively impact foster youths' college decisions, and social workers may also have access to information that foster youth do not. Due to the lack of research on the role that social workers play in college decision-making of former foster youth, I posed the fourth research question:

RQ4: What, if any, communicative messages have former and current foster youth received from their social worker about education that encouraged or discouraged them in pursuing a post-secondary degree?

Taken holistically, these messages likely play a role in foster youths' views toward college, the decisions they make about attending college, and the likelihood they are to stay in and graduate from college, to some degree. Thus, to understand the overall role that former foster youth believe these messages play in their decisions about post-secondary education, I asked the following:

RQ5: How impactful did former foster youth believe that the communicative messages were on their decisions about pursuing post-secondary education?

CHAPTER III: METHOD

To answer the research questions, I utilized a qualitative research design. Qualitative research is the collection of extensive narrative data in a naturalistic setting (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012). Qualitative research is ideal for discovering underlying meanings and patterns of relationships and communication styles (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Collecting and analyzing qualitative data allowed me to give a voice to the current and former foster youths' experiences, which often just appear as aggregate statistical data in various reports. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, via Skype, and over the phone.

Participants

I conducted 8 interviews: five participants were young adults who identified as former or current youth in care - who decided to attend college and three decided not to attend college. The targeted population was adults between the ages of 18 and 28 who had spent some time in foster care. I chose the maximum age of 28 because individuals older than this likely started college more than 10 years ago, and their recollections of messages about college may be limited. After receiving university institutional review board approval, I recruited participants through convenience and snowball sampling. Convenience sampling refers to a method that relies on data collection from population members who are conveniently available to participate in a study (Dornyei, 2007). In other words, this sampling method involves getting participants wherever one can find them and typically wherever is convenient. Participants were recruited initially through various social and networking events sponsored by local universities geared towards creating a community for foster youth. I am a member of these groups and work with faculty members across campus with connections to the foster youth community. After some participants were initially recognized, they were encouraged to share the information about the

study and my contact information with any acquaintances they had that were former or current foster youth. Thus, I also engaged in snowball sampling. A snowball sample is one in which the researcher collects data on the few members of the target population he or she can locate, then asks those individuals to provide information needed to locate other members of that population whom they know (Babbie, 2013).

The convenience and snowball sampling process ensured some level of diversity among respondents and provided the potential to explore any demographic differences that may have existed. When participants agreed to participate in the study, I conducted semi-structured interviews to explore students' messages that either encouraged or discouraged them in pursuing a college degree. Eight interviews were conducted, five with former foster youth who attended college and three with former foster youth who decided not to attend college. The mean age of the participants was 24 with the range of 18-25 years of age. There were seven women and one male participant. Of the eight participants, 6 were African American, one was Biracial (African American and Caucasian), and 1 was Caucasian.

Procedures

Using Rubin and Rubin's (2012) guidelines for producing an interview protocol, I created a semi-structured protocol of open-ended questions (see Appendix A). Participants were questioned about their decision-making process of whether to pursue a college degree. Participants were also asked to identify the messages that encouraged and discouraged them when deciding if they would pursue a post-secondary degree from four groups: parent/caregivers, school counselors, peers, and social workers. Follow-up questions were used as needed.

To ensure each participant's level of comfort, I provided local participants in college the option of having the interview conducted at their educational institution or a private location of their choosing away from the campus (e.g., coffee shop). Participants who were not local had the option to do the interview over the phone or via Skype. Five interviews were conducted over the phone, two were face-to-face, and one was conducted via Skype. Interviews ranged in time from 30 to 45 minutes. Participants were required to consent to the study prior to the interview. Interviews were recorded using digital recorders and later transcribed. Interviews yielded a total of 62 double-spaced pages of transcripts. All names and references to schools or cities were changed to protect confidentiality. Conducting semi-structured interviews allowed me to obtain a greater depth of information and clarify statements from the research participants (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2006).

Once the interviews were complete, five respondents received an overview of the findings either by mail or email per their preference. The respondents were given seven to ten days to review the findings and return them with any corrections or clarifications via the enclosed stamped envelope or emailed tracked changes. This form of member checking provided an opportunity for respondents to offer clarification, confirm or make changes to the data, reduce bias, and verify interview content (Creswell, 2013). Participants agreed with the findings of this study; therefore, no changes were made.

To protect the confidentiality of participants, transcribed interview access was restricted to the researcher. Research data was kept in a locked file cabinet. Audio recordings, data key, and consent forms were kept in a separate secure location apart from the data in a different locked filing cabinet.

Data Analysis

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) define qualitative data analysis as “working with data, organizing them, and breaking them into manageable units, synthesizing them, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell others” (p. 153). Thematic analysis was the most appropriate method for making sense of my data, as the "coherence of ideas rests with the analyst who has rigorously studied how different ideas or components fit together in a meaningful way when linked together" (Leininger, 1985, p. 60). Themes bring together “components or fragments of ideas or experiences, which often are meaningless when viewed alone" (Leininger, 1985, p. 60). Furthermore, thematic analysis allowed me to form a comprehensive picture of participants’ collective experiences.

The specific analytic framework I used was Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six phase, step-by-step guide for conducting a thematic analysis. Phase one consists of familiarizing yourself with the data. Following this process, I transcribed the recorded interviews and read them twice, making notes in the margins on similarities and ideas that stood out. Phase two of the guide is to generate initial codes, meaning that you code interesting features of the data. To follow this step, I highlighted and separated the different messages from the interviews such as encouraging and discouraging messages from parents, peers, school counselors, and social workers. After this, I examined the messages from these categories while highlighting the patterns that occurred throughout the data. Searching for themes is the next step in conducting a thematic analysis. “This phase which re-focuses the analysis at the broader level of themes, rather than codes, involves sorting the different codes into potential themes, and collating all the relevant coded data extracts within the identified themes” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 19). Following the coding, I created a list of potential themes based on the initial codes. At the end of this phase I had a total

of six themes of messages about college. Phase four is when the researcher reviews and refines his/her list of themes. This phase consists of two steps, one in which the researcher reads all extracts from each theme and considers whether they create a coherent pattern. Once this is done, the researcher moves on to consider the validity of each theme in relation to the entire data set. Defining and naming themes is the next phase in which the researcher refines the specifics of each theme and the overall story the analysis tells; the researcher generates clear definitions and names of each theme. The six initial themes were refined into three themes. Braun and Clarke state that when naming and defining one should identify the story that each theme tells and how it fits in the overall story that the data is telling. These themes depict the types of messages foster youth received from their parents/ caregivers, peers, school counselors, and social workers. The three themes that emerged, which reflected specific message types, were supportive/motivational, cautionary, and discouraging messages.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

Three themes emerged during data analysis. I have organized the following section by the types of messages foster youth received about college, first explaining the type of message and then providing examples from interviews for each. Organizing the findings by type of message, as opposed to organizing this section by research questions, allowed me to tell the story of my participants, holistically capturing the meaning of the data. Messages from parents/caregivers, peers, school counselors, and social workers were collected for each type of message. Out of eight participants, only one participant reported having a social worker; therefore, most messages discussed below are from parents/caregivers, peers, and school counselors. The three message themes are supportive/motivational, cautionary, and discouraging.

Supportive/Motivational Messages

The first theme that emerged from the data was supportive /motivational messages. Prevalent in the data were messages that centered on motivating foster youth to attend college and messages that offered support. Foster youth who did not attend college also received supportive/motivational messages; these messages offered support of their decision to pursue other routes beside college. Supportive/ motivational messages were messages that provided encouragement and emotional support as well as stimulated interest or enthusiasm for attending college. These messages also provided foster youth with information about college. Parents/caregivers, counselors, and peers were most likely to share supportive/motivational messages. As previously stated, only one participant had a social worker, and that social worker did not provide supportive/motivational messages. There were two types of supportive/motivational messages: encouraging and informational messages.

Encouraging Messages

The first type, encouraging messages, explicitly stated support and encouragement for whichever decision participants (i.e., college or no college) made. For example, Laura a 20-year-old African American woman who attends college shared the following encouraging message given to her by her peers “Go to college and get the substance you need, use that and go into the world and do great things” (2, 81-83 – *please note: numerical notations after each excerpt reflects interview number and transcript line numbers*). Kathryn, a 19-year-old Caucasian foster youth who is currently a college student at a mid-western university, shared an encouraging message from her foster parents: “You can do it, it will be a big step. It’s a huge transition but we’re not going anywhere” (3, 41-42). This message encouraged Kathryn by reassuring her that even though college would be a big transition, she was still capable of attending. This message from her foster parents also explicitly stated their support by telling her that they would be there for her through the transition to college.

Participants who did not go to college also received encouraging messages from their parents/caregivers. Although she decided not to attend college, Rae, a 19-year-old former foster youth, shared an encouraging message about college she received from her foster parents.

Um, my parents just kind of told me to “follow my heart and do what makes me happy.”

Because I already told them I don’t think college is what I want to do and they just encouraged me to “find another path” and that’s when I found beauty school and they just supported me with that. (6, 36-39)

While she did not decide to attend college, Rae felt supported in her decision by her parents because they encouraged her to follow her heart and do what makes her happy. Although this

message did not encourage Rae to pursue college, it expressed support of her decision not to attend and encouraged her to find a path that would make her happy.

Informational Messages

The second type of supportive/motivational message was informational messages, which provided foster youth with information about college such as applying for financial aid, completing college applications, and general information about college. Parents and school counselors were most likely to send these messages to former foster youth. Kayla, a 24-year-old former foster youth who attended college shared informational support from her school counselor:

Like she was big on financial aid. And she wanted to make sure we were caught up on all available resources. Um she was my, like I went to Smith School from 7th grade to 12th so she was my 7th and 8th grade counselor so after that we went to the high school counselors. But she was still that resource for us. She would actually have us sit on our computer, type in the colleges that we were thinking about look at different resources and financial aid and what type of classes they were offering and what we would major in. she wanted us to take the initiative to see what was next to see what the next step was so we could be informed and not just jumping into the deep end without a safety jacket or something like that. (4, 96-104)

This example demonstrates that being a resource and giving information to students implicitly provides supportive messages about college. Kayla's school counselor not only provided her with information about college, but she also guided her through the process of finding a major and picking classes.

Beyond explaining how to apply for financial aid and other college-readiness behaviors, many participants gave examples of informational support related to how college would improve their lives. For instance, Sarah, a 25-year-old African American foster youth who attended college and is now pursuing her Master's degree, discussed some of the information she received about college from her aunt, who she described as being one of her caregivers. "She shared with me that she felt like by me going to college, I would have more options and it would just be best for me to continue my education" (7, 38-39). Another participant, Mario, an 18-year-old former foster youth who decided not to attend college shared an informational message he received from his peers. "You make more money once you go to college and life changes for the better" (8, 47-48). Both messages provided participants with information on the opportunities attending college would provide for them.

All five participants who attended college mentioned that they had to go to college, that they were always expected to attend college, and that they always knew that college was "in the cards" (5, 156) for them. These types of messages typically came from parents/caregivers. In fact, seven of the eight participants described supportive motivational messages from their parents/caregivers. Not only do these messages serve as support and motivation to attend college for foster youth, but they also have provided information about college and encouragement for other alternatives besides college.

Cautionary Messages

The second type of message that foster youth received was cautionary messages which warned foster youth about the repercussions of not attending college. Participants reported that these messages were forcibly delivered and very convincing. Participants often saw these messages as negative because the messages seemed to convey that they had no choice – going to

college was what they *had* to do. Kayla, for instance, recalled school counselors who warned her about school loans and debt. She recalled that “that they were just sticklers about being sure of what you wanted to do in a sense. Yea, I think it was kind of a little bit of too much pressure” (4, 113-116).

Most cautionary messages came from parents/caregivers. Participants did not recall any cautionary messages from peers or social workers. Crystal, a 22-year-old former foster youth who currently attends college shared a cautionary message her dad shared with her: “If you don’t work hard and do all you can you’re going to be a failure in life, you’re not going to go anywhere, and working at McDonalds” (5, 53-55). This message was shared to warn her that she needed to attend college if she wanted to be successful in life (using “working at McDonalds” as a sign of failure). In addition, Kayla shared some cautionary messages she received from her parents as she was making the decision to pursue college. She recalled messages like “Go to school so you don’t struggle. Go to school so you don’t end up like me [her mom]. You will have better opportunities” (4, 27-28). This message conveyed that if she did not go to college, she would lose opportunities. Sarah also received cautionary messages from both her grandmother and her school counselors about her school choice. She recalled: “I want to say for a couple of schools that I chose, I know they were kind of looking at them like ‘Oh well that’s kind of known as a party school.’ They were trying to sway my choice. But I think they were just being cautious” (7, 112-114). Although this message seemed to express concern for her school choice, their cautionary message interfered with Sarah making her own decision.

Cautionary messages were almost just as common as supportive/motivational messages. These messages warned foster youth about the consequences of not attending college, the responsibilities of attending college, and the outcomes of their school choice. Participants shared

that these messages were forcibly delivered and very convincing to them as they were making the decision to pursue or not to pursue a college education. Participants viewed cautionary messages as negative because the choice to attend college was presented as more of a demand and because college was presented to them as their only option.

Discouraging Messages

Discouraging messages are the third type of message that emerged from the data. Participants viewed these messages as unsupportive as they were deciding if they would pursue a post-secondary education. There were two types of discouraging messages: adverse and dissuading. Participants shared adverse and dissuading messages from their parents/caregivers, peers, and their school counselors. The participant with a social worker did not recall adverse or dissuading messages.

Adverse Messages

Adverse messages are blatantly negative, interpreted as mean-spirited, and can be emotionally harmful to foster youth. These messages lacked support and encouragement to foster youth as they were making the decision about college. For instance, Sarah's grandmother who adopted her conveyed this adverse message because of Sarah's choice to major in Social Work. Although Sarah still decided to attend college and pursue a degree in Social Work, she recalled the specifics of the message:

Well one thing was because you know my biological mom went to school for social work and they knew I wanted to go to school for social work. But because of her [her mom's] mental illness, I'm not trying to say they thought I wouldn't finish school but, you know its kind of like my mom started school and went down that path. My grandma would say stuff like "you're just like your momma, you're going to end up like her." I was just like

ok, you don't think I'm going to finish college or something is going to happen because we both choose the same major but she didn't finish. (7, 53-59)

Marie, a 25-year-old former foster youth, who did not attend college, recalled an adverse message from her caregiver that directly impacted her decision to not attend college. She recalled that on multiple occasions, her foster mother would tell her “you're too dumb and too stupid for college” (1, 43). Marie reflected that, “she just messed me up so bad that I started to believe that I wasn't smart enough for anything, especially college and soon I dropped out of high school” (1, 121-122). Both messages are adverse. Participants perceived these messages to be mean-spirited and emotionally harmful as they were deciding whether to attend college.

Dissuading Messages

Dissuading messages were not as harmful as adverse message and did not always explicitly include statements telling foster youth to not attend college, but overall, they were un motivating to the foster youth. The messages seemed to result in foster youth's loss of confidence and enthusiasm for pursuing a college degree. For instance, when deciding if he should take a year off after high school, Mario's dad said: “You're not going to have any money if you go to college” (8, 37). Mario's dad did not tell him to skip college but his message did not motivate him to attend college either. This message impacted Mario's decision to not attend college because Mario wanted to make money. Crystal received a similar message from one of her peers and her school counselor as she was deciding to attend college and what school she wanted to attend. “Maybe college isn't for you” (5, 101) is what one of her peers shared with her when she was struggling in a class. Her school counselors told her that she should “Be a little more realistic with your goals, come down a couple of notches” (5, 138). Although Crystal did not believe that these people were trying to hurt her by providing these messages, and these

messages did not interfere with Crystal's decision to attend college, they were not encouraging. Participants considered these messages to be dissuading because they were not supportive and even discouraged attending college. While both adverse and dissuading messages were different in form, they both overall discouraged foster youth to pursue a college degree.

Impact of Messages

During interviews, I asked participants about the impact these messages, and the people who shared these messages, had on their decisions on whether to pursue a college education. Data analysis revealed that messages impacted participants differently depending on their post-secondary education decision. Foster youth who did not attend college seemed to be most impacted by discouraging messages. Marie, who did not attend college, shared that the adverse messages she received from her foster mom had the biggest impact on her decision not to attend college:

I guess it just led me to believe that I wasn't ever going to be good for nothing. Um, the way I was treated, the way I was talked about. The way I was embarrassed, it was a lot.

Um, I'd say I take part in some of it. But I say living in a place where you get belittled all the time had an impact on what I did with my life. (1, 86-89)

Mario, who did not attend college, also shared how a discouraging message from his foster dad impacted his decision not to attend college. "I didn't want to go to college if I wasn't going to have any money, I was going to make money first then go to college. That's why I didn't go" (8, 84-85). The discouraging message he received from his foster dad impacted his decision not to attend college because he wanted to have money, as opposed to not having money while pursuing a college degree.

Foster youth who attended college seemed to consider the most impactful messages to be supportive/motivational and cautionary. Demonstrating the power of supportive/motivational messages, Crystal shared a message she received from school officials and how that encouraged her to pursue a college degree.

I mentioned I was on the debate team in high school and way before that I was picking fights in class and ready to talk about religion in social studies. So I was always debating in school. One of the messages that teachers who knew me would tell me was to “put it to use, make something of it.” So I can argue in a classroom all day long but until I get a degree in that field or work in that field, it’s really not going to do a whole lot. So them knowing me as the person I am and the things I’m interested in and then telling me and encouraging me to do something with it is one of the most positive things and that’s what really pushed me to go into my major and minor. Definitely putting my skills to use and using what I got, teachers telling me that. (5, 159-167)

This message not only impacted her decision to attend college, but it also impacted what major she would pursue in college. Kayla, who attended college, shared that the cautionary messages from her foster parents about the likelihood of her struggling if she did not attend college impacted her decision to attend college. “I guess I probably got hung up on the ‘You don’t want to be struggling’ type of messages. ‘You don’t want, I guess you don’t want to have less opportunities’” (4, 122-124).

Supportive/motivational and cautionary messages from foster parents seem to be very influential on their decisions whether to pursue a college degree. Rae said that the message from her foster parents to “follow your heart and do what makes you happy” (6, 36-37) had the biggest

impact on her decision to not attend college. Rae further explained why these messages impacted her decision not to attend college and states the importance of the supportive message:

I guess it would be the messages from my parents because they were the biggest influences in my life. So like I said just for them supporting me in doing what I wanted to do. I feel like if they weren't supportive of that it would definitely be a lot harder and maybe I would've thought about going to college more, if they weren't as encouraging. (119-123)

Similarly, Crystal shared that she was motivated and encouraged to attend college by the example her foster parents set for her:

Just seeing them (her mom and dad) and what they did. So all of them have two or more degrees. So seeing them and knowing how many degrees they got. When my mom was getting her Master's I was tagging along with her to her night classes. She would bring us dinner put us in an empty room and have us do our homework. That's how I spent a lot of time and that's what I got used to seeing. That's how I knew college was in the cards for me. (5, 151-156)

While this example did not include an explicit message, her parents were encouraging and supportive by including her in their academic activities.

Most participants who attended college shared that discouraging messages had the least impact on their decision to attend college. However, some shared that these discouraging messages actually gave them more determination to attend college. Crystal recalled being motivated by a discouraging message from her school counselors: "And what my school counselor said as far as college not being for me. That didn't really have an impact on me not going, it made me more determined to go" (5, 172-173). Similarly, Laura shared that the

discouraging messages she got from her school counselors about the cost of school did not impact her decision to attend college:

I want to say money doesn't matter but it does, I just don't let anything discourage me. A school counselor telling me about how expensive school was and how hard it is paying school loans back didn't really faze me. I look for my options and go from there.

Despite the discouragement she may have received from her school counselor, Laura was determined to attend college.

When I asked the participants at the end of their interviews if they had anything additional to add, each shared an encouraging message for others. Many of them expressed their gratitude for their support system and how important it was to have one. The following excerpt is from Crystal, who demonstrates the impact that messages about college can have on foster youth:

I have all these positive influences in my life, but I often think about if I hadn't been with my foster family, where would I be, you know. Like my biological parents didn't go to school or my biological mom went for a couple of years and then dropped out. But just don't let people say you can't, don't feel like you can't because you really can. And you know it might not be easy for everybody but it's worth it for sure. (5,216-221)

Summary of Findings

In summary, by conducting a thematic analysis on the data collected from the semi-structured interviews, three themes, which reflected message types, were discovered.

Supportive/motivational messages was the most prevalent type that participants received as they were making the decision to pursue or not to pursue a post-secondary education.

Supportive/motivational messages were supportive and encouraging of foster youth attending

college and pursuing other routes beside college. These messages also offered encouragement and information about college. Parents/caregivers and school counselors were most likely to share supportive/motivational messages. There were two types of supportive/motivational messages: encouraging and informational. Encouraging messages offered support and encouragement to foster youth who both decided to attend and not attend college. Informational messages provided foster youth with information about college such as the process of filling out applications, applying for financial aid, and deciding what college to attend.

The second type of message that foster youth received about attending college was cautionary. These messages send an explicit warning to foster youth about the consequences of not attending college and the responsibilities of attending college. Parents/caregivers and social workers were most likely to share cautionary messages.

The third type of message foster youth received was discouraging. These messages were explicitly negative and discouraging. There were two types of discouraging messages. Adverse messages were blatantly negative and could cause emotional harm. Dissuading messages conveyed a lack of support for college. Participants shared discouraging messages from school counselors, peers, and parents/caregivers.

Participants shared that messages from their parents/caregivers had the greatest impact on their post-secondary educational decision. Messages impacted foster differently depending on their post-secondary education decision. Foster youth who did not attend college were most impacted by discouraging messages. Foster youth who attended college seemed to be most impacted by supportive/motivational and cautionary messages.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to capture the messages former and current foster youth received about pursuing a post-secondary education. To date, there is no research that examines these messages; thus, this study was conducted to fill that void, and further understand the impact messages have and how foster youth perceive these messages. Five research questions guided this study. In the first research question, I asked: What, if any, communicative messages have former and current foster youth received from their caregivers that encouraged or discouraged them in pursuing a post-secondary degree? Similarly, the second, third, and fourth research questions sought to uncover the same types of messages from school counselors/school officials, peers, and social workers, respectively. Lastly, for the fifth research question, I explored the impact these communicative messages had on participants' decisions to pursue post-secondary education.

To understand these messages, I conducted a thematic analysis on the data collected from the semi-structured interviews. I found that former foster youth received three types of messages from their parents/caregivers, peers, school counselors, and social workers (although it is important to note that only one participant recalled having a social worker). Supportive/motivational, cautionary, and discouraging messages were the types of messages foster youth received. Messages from parents/caregivers had the biggest impact on their decision to pursue or not to pursue a post-secondary education. In the following section, I connect these findings to existing literature, as well as discuss the implications of these findings, limitations of the study, and areas for future research.

Implications of the Findings

This study highlights the importance of communicative messages. The literature on memorable messages states that these messages “may be remembered for extremely long periods of time” and “people perceive [these messages] as a major influencer on the course of their lives” (Knapp et al., 1981, p. 27). All participants in this study had already transitioned from high school and had either pursued college or joined the work force. Regardless of whether they attended college, all participants vividly remembered messages that they received from their parents/caregivers, peers, school counselors, and social workers as they were making decisions on whether to attend college. These messages seemed to play a role in their post-secondary education decisions.

Carver & Scheier (1982) argue that memorable messages can produce action in individuals; in the case of this study, the action was attending college or not. Regardless of whether participants attended college, these messages impacted them, albeit in different ways. Those who decided not to attend college shared that discouraging messages impacted their decision the most. For example, Mario a foster youth who did not attend college shared how the message “you’re not going make any money if you go to college” (8, 37) from his foster dad had the greatest impact on his decision not to attend college. He did not attend college because pursuing a job that would guarantee him money was more appealing to him than a college education at the time. However, research does support that people make more money after attending college than if they do not attend college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), thus it was clear from Mario’s example that the message from his father favored the short-term benefits of working (i.e., making money now as opposed to after college), and this influenced his decision to

work after high school. On the other hand, foster youth who attended college shared that supportive/motivational and cautionary messages highly motivated their decision to attend.

All but one participant did not recall having a social worker, and the only messages participants recalled receiving from peers tended to focus on college locations and whether their selected college was a “party school.” Research states that students are more likely to mirror the social and academic activities of their peers (Griffin et al., 2007), and that peers have a great impact on their friend’s educational planning (Holland, 2011). While this has been supported by research, this was not supported in the current study. Participants did mention discussing college with their peers, but their discussions were more about their chosen college’s location and culture, as opposed to their post-secondary education decisions. It may be that participants felt more comfortable discussing their educational decisions with adults such as their school counselors and parents/caregivers and only discussed certain aspects of college with their peers. It may also be that for this particular population, peers do not play as much of a role in educational decision-making as they do in other populations. Participants most often recalled messages from foster parents/caregivers and school counselors, and these messages were most impactful. I explore these findings and the implications of these findings in greater detail next.

Support from Foster Parents

The findings suggest that there is a difference in the support that foster youth who attend college and do not attend college receive, or at least that they remember receiving, from foster parents/caregivers. Foster youth who attended college recalled more supportive and encouraging messages from their foster parents/caregivers. On the other hand, those who did not pursue college recalled more discouraging messages from foster parents/caregivers. Thus, it appears that perceived support does in fact play a role in the foster youths’ educational decisions. Pecora

(2005) states that one of the many reasons foster youth do not attend college is because of the obstacles they face, therefore support is necessary when making such an important decision. These findings can help foster parents understand the role they play in supporting foster youths' decisions about their future.

When asked who or what influenced their decision to attend or not to attend college, most participants said their family members had the biggest influence. Hernandez and Naccarato (2011) conducted a study on college programs geared towards foster youth educational achievements. They concluded that a high number of foster home placements contribute to low educational outcomes of foster youth. Combined with the findings of the present study, it seems that not only stable family backgrounds but also positive messages from family about their futures impact foster youths' educational achievements. While participants did not explicitly state that their familial stability led to collegiate success, the findings do shed light on the negative impact of the lack of familial support. This finding has very important implications when considering the stability that permanency provides for foster youth. Without permanency, foster youth often move from foster home to foster home, creating a variety of developmental, social, and educational impediments (Lockwood, Friedman, & Christian, 2015). Permanency may not guarantee educational success, but it does provide foster youth with familial stability that could influence support they receive from foster parents in their educational endeavors. This could mean that the foster care placement policies could use some investigation and possibly some improvements. These findings can assist social service agencies as they are placing teenagers in foster homes and working to provide them with permanency, which could guarantee foster youth some stability (Lenz-Rashid, 2006).

Expectations from parents/caregivers can also contribute to the educational decisions of foster youth. The five participants who attended college mentioned that they felt they had to go to college because they were expected to attend and that they always knew that college was, as one participant explained, “in the cards.” The data shows that having high expectations from parents/caregivers can impact a foster youth’s decision to attend college. On the contrary, a former youth in care received negative messages from her caregiver that she was not good or smart enough for college, and she stated that she believed what she heard and these messages impacted her decision not to attend college. This finding supports Collins (2011), who argues that low expectations from caregivers is a reason many foster youth do not pursue a post-secondary degree. This finding reiterates the impact foster parents have on their foster youths’ educational decisions.

Support of School Counselors

Participants had varied experiences with school counselors and received different types of messages from them. Out of eight participants who talked about school counselors, only three shared positive views of them. Comments about school counselors included: “Oh I couldn’t stand them,” “I really didn’t like my counselors,” “They were not helpful at all,” “They were not helpful, and it was pretty bad. I hated them,” “They weren’t super encouraging from what I remember,” and “No support at all from my school counselors. There was no communication, it was not good.” This was interesting and problematic because literature states that school counselors are the primary facilitators of a college transition for college students and that there is no professional more important than school counselors in improving college knowledge (Holcomb-McCoy, 2010). Furthermore, Bryan et al. (2011) uncovered a positive relationship between school counseling and applying for college, a necessary and important precursor to

college enrollment. School counselors are important in the transition to college, and the messages they share to foster youth could impact their post-secondary education decisions.

This study is of course not a direct reflection of all school counselors, but it does suggest that counselors serve an important purpose in the lives of prospective college students, especially foster youth. School counselors have direct contact with students and the ability to offer support in ways that no other professional does. The findings of the present study show the relations between school counselors and student need to be strengthened, which could mean reevaluating the training and policies for school counselors. The impact a school counselor has should not be ignored and should be evaluated more due to the important role that professionals play in students' post-secondary success.

School counselors may not have adequate training for serving special populations such as those youth in care; therefore, they may not be aware of the different experiences foster youth have from those in the general population. Understanding these differences could mean that school counselors can provide specialized support to youth in care. Training school counselors on servicing special populations such as foster youth could have an impact on the messages school counselors share with foster youth as they are making post-secondary educational decisions.

Overall, these findings can be implemented in college support programs for foster youth. Programs such as First Star Academy, Foster Care to Success (Pecora, 2012), and Guardian Scholars (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010) are all geared towards success for foster youth as they navigate the transition from high school. These programs can use the findings of this study as they create policies for their programs to better support foster youth. These findings may also inform them of ways that are most and least helpful to foster youth in their educational decisions.

Limitations and Future Research

There were a few limitations to this study that should be noted. There was no distinction between participants who were adopted from foster care and those who aged out of care. This could have skewed the data due to the different experiences these individuals might have had. Noting which individuals were adopted and those who were not could have given more of an accurate depiction of the role communicative messages play in post-secondary education decisions. The findings also disproportionately represent experiences of foster youth who chose to attend college. Including an equal number of participants from both groups could have helped me tell a more representative story of the experiences of foster youth. The final limitation of this study is that participants were asked to *recall* important messages they *remembered* receiving, which suggests that these messages were most memorable to them; however, there may have been other messages they received that impacted them but that they did not recall during interviews. Thus, it is important to find ways to capture, perhaps through a diary study or longitudinal research, the *actual* number and types of messages foster youth receive, and from whom, to gain a more complete picture of the role that messages play in their post-secondary education decisions. Scholars should also explore experiences of foster youth in junior and high school because they are currently receiving messages about college. Also exploring messages from teachers, mentors, religious figures (e.g., pastors, priests), and siblings would help paint a fuller picture of foster youths' experiences.

There is much work to be done in area of family communication focused on people in the foster care system. More research is needed on the role that communication plays in the overall lives of foster youth – not just their educational decisions but also their physical and emotional well-being, development, and success. The influence of messages foster youth recall/receive

should be further studied to gain a better understanding of the impact these messages have on post-secondary education decisions. Programs like First Star Academy and Foster Care to Success provide valuable assistance to foster youth, and studies like this one can contribute to a more complete understanding of how to best help foster youth in their decisions to attend college and their abilities to succeed.

CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I conducted a qualitative study to understand the messages former and current foster youth receive about college. This study was conducted to understand the messages that encourage and discourage foster youth as they are making the decision to pursue or not pursue a post-secondary education. Through thematic analysis, I uncovered three types of messages that foster youth received as they were making decisions about post-secondary education. Supportive/motivational messages were the most prevalent. Parents/caregivers and school social workers were most likely to send these messages. There were two types of supportive/motivational messages: informational and educational. These were messages that encouraged foster youth in whichever route they took (i.e., between going to college or not) and provided them with information about college. These messages were also deemed as the most impactful to their post-secondary education decisions. This finding has implications when thinking about the role foster parents and counselors play in foster youth's educational decisions, and the importance and impact of supportive communication.

Cautionary messages were the second type of message uncovered. These messages also have a great impact on foster youth's educational decisions. Cautionary messages came primarily from school counselors and parents/caregivers. This shows how effective conveying caution and concern to foster youth can be in their educational decisions; however, these decisions were viewed mostly as negative because they limited foster youths' choices about college. Lastly, discouraging messages were adverse and discouraging to foster youth. Those who did not attend college mentioned this as being the most impactful type of message they received which often impacted their decision to not attend college. Some participants who attended college and received these types of messages shared that the messages motivated them to attend college.

These findings have important implications when considering the difference of perceived support (and lack of perceived support) between those who decided to attend college and those who did not attend. Studying these messages and their impact is important because the number of foster youth who attend college is rather low, between 3 and 11% (Casey Family Programs, 2011), and understanding these messages could provide insight as to why.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study on messages that encourage and discourage post-secondary education among former or current foster youth. First I'd like to ask you some background questions:

1. Your age?
2. Your ethnicity?
3. Are you currently in foster care? If not, how long ago were you in care? If so, how long have you been in care? How many foster homes have you been in?
4. Are you currently enrolled in college? If so, where do you attend college? How long?
5. What is your job status? (Unemployed, employed –part-time, employed-fulltime)

Next I will ask you a series of questions about the messages you received from various individuals about your post-secondary education decision.

1) What are some encouraging or positive messages you received from your parent or caregiver as you were making the decision to pursue or not to pursue a college degree? Why do you consider these messages to be encouraging or positive?

- Who said this message?
- What prompted the conversation that led to this message?
- Why do you think they shared this with you?

2) What are some discouraging or more negative messages you received from your parent or caregiver as you were making the decision to pursue or not to pursue a college degree? Why do you consider these messages to be discouraging or negative?

- Who said this message?
- What prompted the conversation that led to this message?

- Why do you think they shared this with you?

3) What are some encouraging or positive messages you received from your peers as you were making the decision to pursue or not to pursue a college degree? Why do you consider these messages to be encouraging or positive?

- Who said this message?
- What prompted the conversation that led to this message?
- Why do you think they shared this with you?

4) What are some discouraging or more negative messages you received from your peers as you were making the decision to pursue or not to pursue a college degree? Why do you consider these messages to be discouraging or negative?

- Who said this message?
- What prompted the conversation that led to this message?
- Why do you think they shared this with you?

5) What are some encouraging or positive messages you received from your school counselors as you were making the decision to pursue or not to pursue a college degree? Why do you consider these messages to be encouraging or positive?

- What prompted the conversation that led to this message?
- Why do you think they shared this with you?

6) What are some discouraging or more negative messages you received from your school counselors as you were making the decision to pursue or not to pursue a college degree? Why do you consider these messages to be discouraging or negative?

- What prompted the conversation that led to this message?
- Why do you think they shared this with you?

7) What are some encouraging or positive messages you received from your social worker as you were making the decision to pursue or not to pursue a college degree? Why do you consider these messages to be encouraging or positive?

- What prompted the conversation that led to this message?
- Why do you think they shared this with you?

8) What are some discouraging or more negative messages you received from your social worker as you were making the decision to pursue or not to pursue a college degree? Why do you consider these messages to be discouraging or negative?

- What prompted the conversation that led to this message?
- Why do you think they shared this with you?

Next I am going to ask you about what or who influenced your decision to pursue or not to pursue a post-secondary education.

9) What has influenced your decision to pursue (or not to pursue) a college degree?

10) Which messages would you say had the biggest impacts on your decision to pursue (or not to pursue) a post-secondary education? Why were they so important?

11) Which if any messages would you say had little or no impact on your decision to pursue (or not to pursue) a post-secondary education? Why were they not important?

Next I am going to ask you about the amount of support you felt you had from various individuals.

12) What support if any from your parents or caregivers did you have when making your decision to pursue (or not to pursue) a college degree?

13) What support if any from your school counselor (s) did you have when making your decision to pursue (or not to pursue) a college degree?

14) What support if any from your peers did you have when making your decision to pursue (or not to pursue) a college degree?

15) What support if any from your social worker did you have when making your decision to pursue (or not to pursue) a college degree?

Is there anything else you would like to add about the messages that encouraged or discouraged you to pursue or not to pursue college?