

# Navigating Higher Education: Factors Contributing to Former Foster Care Youth's Graduation from Post-Secondary Education

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Article abstract

This study identifies factors contributing to the success of foster care alumni (FCA) who graduate from post-secondary education (PSE), despite institutions devoting little effort to making PSE accessible to FCA. Nine FCA PSE graduates were interviewed about their success. Responses were analyzed using an exploratory method to identify themes related to factors deemed critical to their graduation from PSE. Ferguson's (2019) conceptual model of a Student Development Pathway was used to organize findings; success factors were analyzed accordingly to their role in the Preparation, Awareness, Engagement, Transition, and Persistence phases. Findings suggest the role of coaching and caring adults was most notable in the Preparation, Engagement, and Transitional phases to PSE. Determination factored predominantly during the Persistence phase, and Resistance was most associated with the Preparation and Persistence phases. Findings also indicated numerous untapped opportunities and initiatives that could make PSE more accessible and achievable for FCA.

# NAVIGATING HIGHER EDUCATION: FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO FORMER FOSTER CARE YOUTH'S GRADUATION FROM POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

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## Abstract

This study identifies factors contributing to the success of foster care alumni (FCA) who graduate from post-secondary education (PSE), despite institutions devoting little effort to making PSE accessible to FCA. Nine FCA PSE graduates were interviewed about their success. Responses were analyzed using an exploratory method to identify themes related to factors deemed critical to their graduation from PSE. Ferguson's (2019) conceptual model of a Student Development Pathway was used to organize findings; success factors were analyzed accordingly to their role in the Preparation, Awareness, Engagement, Transition, and Persistence phases. Findings suggest the role of coaching and caring adults was most notable in the Preparation, Engagement, and Transitional phases to PSE. Determination factored predominantly during the Persistence phase, and Resistance was most associated with the Preparation and Persistence phases. Findings also indicated numerous untapped opportunities and initiatives that could make PSE more accessible and achievable for FCA.

**Keywords:** foster youth, foster care alumni, student success, post-secondary education

## Résumé

Cette étude définit les facteurs contribuant à la réussite d'anciens jeunes pris en charge titulaires d'un diplôme d'études postsecondaires (DEPS), malgré le fait que les établissements ont consacré peu d'efforts à rendre les études postsecondaires accessibles aux jeunes et anciens pris en charge. Neuf anciens jeunes pris en charge titulaires d'un DEPS ont été interrogés au sujet de leur réussite. Les réponses ont été analysées par une méthode exploratoire pour identifier les thèmes liés aux facteurs jugés critiques pour l'obtention de leur DEPS. Le modèle conceptuel de « Parcours de développement étudiant » (Student Development Pathway) Ferguson (2019) a été utilisé pour organiser les résultats. Les facteurs de réussite ont été analysés en fonction de leur rôle dans les phases de préparation, de sensibilisation, d'engagement, de transition et de persévérance. Les résultats suggèrent que le rôle de l'encadrement et la présence d'adultes bienveillants sont les plus importants dans les phases de préparation, d'engagement et de transition vers les études supérieures. La détermination a joué un rôle prédominant durant la phase de persévérance, et la résistance a été le plus souvent associée aux phases de préparation et de persévérance. Les résultats indiquent également de nombreuses occasions et initiatives inexploitées qui pourraient rendre les études postsecondaires plus accessibles et réalisables pour les jeunes anciens pris en charge.

**Mots-clés :** jeunes pris en charge, anciens jeunes pris en charge, protection de la jeunesse, réussite scolaire, études postsecondaires

## Introduction

Despite recent efforts to increase the diversity of the student population in post-secondary education (PSE), for-

mer foster care youth remain the least likely candidates to attend PSE, never mind join the ranks of graduates. In fact, although 84% of foster care alumni (FCA) express an interest in PSE (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014),

less than 44% of Ontario foster youth complete high school compared to 81% of their peers (Kovarikova, 2017). Fewer still enroll in PSE; research from the United States indicates that only 20% enroll in PSE (Unrau et al., 2012), and a British Columbia-based study found that youth in care were 31% less likely to enroll in PSE than non-foster care youth (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2018). Success in post-secondary is rarer still; American research indicates that only 2–11% of FCA actually complete any kind of PSE (Courtney et al., 2011; Emerson & Bassett, 2010; Ferguson, 2019; Salazar, 2012). Despite general agreement that education is a basic human right, foster youth have been called an “invisible population on most college campuses” (Medlin & Jaeger, 2021, p. 154), a reflection on the unlikelihood of FCA engaging with this right. The purpose of this study is to consider lessons that can be learned from FCA who have succeeded in their goals to complete PSE, thereby identifying means by which higher education can become more accessible to other FCA.

Without doubt, many FCA experience significant emotional and mental health repercussions from childhood trauma related to abuse, neglect, violence, and family dysfunction (Salazar et al., 2013). According to some studies, 75% of FCA exhibit serious behavioural or mental health problems requiring ongoing support (Pecora et al., 2009; Medlin, 2019). However, ongoing support of any nature is seldom available, given that foster youth “age out” of the governmental child welfare system at age 18, and thereby lose access to formal supports including housing, health care, counselling, and financial assistance (Medlin, 2019). At a time when most young adults are considering career pathways through PSE, many foster youths are prematurely trying to address the basic needs of food, shelter, and income. If FCA are additionally burdened by lack of access to higher education, they will be at further risk for homelessness, criminal behaviour, dependence on public assistance, and increased psychological distress (Merdinger et al., 2005).

To reduce this risk, post-secondary institutions (PSIs) should consider their role in making higher education accessible to this population. However, historically, educational institutions have devoted little effort to attracting or supporting FCA, likely influenced by their drive to meet and maintain enrolment targets. If PSIs are influenced by the negative, deficit-focused narrative imposed upon FCA, they may see FCA as unlikely candidates for PSE, and therefore unworthy of their recruitment efforts. Trends in research support this deficit narrative, given that “existing research

tends to focus on negative outcomes and barriers to access and degree attainment, rarely focusing on those foster care alumni who enroll and persist in higher education” (Medlin & Jaeger, 2021, p. 154).

In this study, we interviewed FCA graduates of PSE to explore factors influencing their success at Ontario’s PSIs, for the purpose of advancing our understanding of how to make higher education more accessible to FCA. Resilience theory, resistance theory, and Ferguson’s (2019) Student Development Pathway framework are used to inform and frame how some FCA succeed beyond traditional expectations. Findings serve as signposts to institutions, advocates, and policy makers in reversing the mindset of anticipatory failure and paving the path to success for more FCA to enroll in PSE programs.

## Literature Review

As noted by Moyer & Goldberg (2019) and Ferguson (2019), little research exists that identifies barriers for FCA within PSE, or that explores conditions, strategies, or qualities that foster success for FCA in PSE. Research tends to locate the problems within FCA and focuses on their high rates of trauma (Moyer & Goldberg, 2019), mental illness (Courtney et al., 2005), and lack of academic preparation for PSE (Salazar, 2012; Unrau et al., 2012). Within the last three years, however, there have been at least eight doctoral dissertations on FCA’s successful pursuit of PSE. For example, Sarubbi (2019) conducted participant-based research related to the role of resilience and external supports in FCAs’ success in PSE. Medlin (2019) documented key qualities and developmental tasks that supported success in FCA. Similarly, Newell (2018) conducted a phenomenological study of a community of foster youth to document the key role of relationships, and internal and external motivators in PSE success. This recent shift to a more positive and solution-focused approach demonstrates a growing interest in how FCA can overcome barriers experienced within a post-secondary setting.

Albeit preliminary, a consistent picture is emerging about both internal and external factors that support FCAs’ success in PSE. Regarding internal factors, in a small-scale study with 11 successful graduates, Neal (2017) noted that all FCA were educationally gifted students who demonstrated tenacity, fortitude, resilience, and a strong resistance to negative stereotyping and low expectations. In a study with 10 FCA, Newell (2018) also noted the role of ambition to achieve their goals, to survive and overcome stereotypes.

Medlin (2019) framed key characteristics as fortitude, self-reliance, compassion, optimism, and high motivation. Finally, in another small-scale study, Sarubbi (2019) identified the significance of combatting stereotypes as critical to FCAs' determination to succeed in PSE. Despite the use of different terms to describe these characteristics, it appears that all FCA in these studies shared the common characteristics of a deep motivation to achieve a new life trajectory through education, and a drive to resist the negative stereotypes and low expectations they experienced as foster youth.

Regarding external supports, in a study to evaluate a campus-based college support program for foster care students, Unrau et al. (2017) identified coaching, financial aid, and housing assistance as key factors to support success in PSE. In their study, housing support intersected with financial assistance (i.e., providing room and board) and coaching from caring adults (i.e., as might be offered by a family landlord). Notably, some of these FCA had 24-hour access to a coach with specialized trauma-informed training. Having help from this coach was rated as very important by the participants in this study. These results are consistent with findings from numerous other sources, including Day et al. (2012), Newell (2018) and Medlin (2019), all of whom reported emotional support and educational advocacy from supportive people as critical to the success of FCA.

## Theoretical Considerations

Johnson's (2019) extensive review of research on FCA concludes that most of the literature demonstrates an "absence of theoretical perspectives guiding the research. In fact, 37 out of the 46 studies made no explicit mention of their guiding conceptual/theoretical framework or perspective, specifically as it relates to the phenomenon under exploration or factors being tested" (p. 9). Notably, since Johnson's (2019) article, some research does incorporate a thorough consideration of theoretical frameworks (e.g., Ferguson, 2019; Medlin, 2019; Medlin & Jaeger, 2021), all of which consider resilience theory as explanation for the success of some FCA in PSE.

There is considerable debate within the literature as to a precise definition of resilience, but most agree that resilience involves leveraging protective factors against adverse life events, be they short-term and acute, or chronic (van Breda, 2018). According to Zimmerman (2013), protective factors can be internal assets, such as the deep motivation to achieve a new life trajectory through education, as

described above, or external, such as a supportive network of friends and family. As noted above, coaches may provide some of the socio-emotional supports and practical advice that non-FCA students receive from their families. In the absence of family privilege (defined by Seita as "benefits, mostly invisible, that come from membership in a stable family" [2001, p. 131]), many FCA students miss out on the support that comes from having consistent adults to care for them into their young adult years. Changes in both living arrangements and the adults appointed to caregiving disturb the developmental process of iterative learning. However, evidence from studies by Unrau et al. (2017), Newell (2018), Medlin (2019), and Day et al. (2012) clearly suggest FCA who connect with other supportive adults benefit from an educational perspective. Resilience theory therefore offers a particularly useful framework from which to understand the academic success of FCA, given the inherent presence of adverse life events for foster youth, and the growing body of research that suggests FCA attribute their success to both internal factors, such as drive and determination spurred on in response to adverse experiences, and external factors, such as supportive adults.

Given the prevalence of a deep need to combat negative stereotyping and low expectations among FCA, we contend it may be useful to also consider resistance theory within this context. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to provide a full analysis of how resistance has been conceptualized over the ages, resistance theory relates to power struggles and one's opposition to domination (Kim, 2010). From an educational psychology perspective, resistance to perceived oppressive practices within a problematic environment allows one to achieve a sense of agency or control over the influence of that environment (Robinson & Ward, 1991). To date, studies on FCA—except for Neal (2017)—tend not to consider theories of resistance, despite the growing number of studies that identify resistance to negative stereotypes and low expectations as something critical to FCAs' academic success. Certainly, the prevalence of negative stereotyping and low expectations directed toward foster youth is well documented. For example, Dworsky and Pérez (2010) found that foster youth were rarely encouraged to pursue PSE by people within the child welfare system, perhaps in a misguided effort to minimize expectations for those whose lives are already riddled with barriers. Similarly, a report by Ontario's Provincial Advocate Office for Children and Youth identifies stigma entrenched within our community systems as one of the most significant ways in which we limit the success of foster youth

(Kovarikova, 2017). Ferguson (2019) noted the same experience in her sample of foster youth, especially from those tasked with overseeing their care, prompting the following comment:

If social workers expect little of FY, or do not discuss PSE with FY, what influence does that have on a young person's educational pathway? How does a young person build educational aspirations and expectations for themselves if they are not being encouraged by those around them, or worse, told they are not a fit? (p. 41)

Given the emerging trend that suggests resistance to these experiences is a key factor in achieving PSE goals, resistance theory may help to explain the power of one's efforts to resist stigma and stereotyping.

However, notably absent in the literature is an in-depth analysis of the more precise role of these factors at different points throughout one's academic journey. Based on a 2019 analysis of barriers and success factors identified by child welfare workers, advocates, experts, and FCA PSE students, Ferguson proposed that an FCA's journey through PSE could be framed within five stages of experiential learning that include (1) Preparation, (2) Awareness, (3) Engagement, (4) Transition, and (5) Persistence. According to this framework, in the Preparation stage, FCA have early experiences and opportunities that impact the likelihood of their success in PSE. During the Awareness stage, youth learn of potential PSE opportunities. During the Engagement stage, FCA participate in any processes and procedures required for registration and enrolment. During the Transition stage, students officially enter PSE and begin their program of study. Persistence is the final stage and refers to the time during which students progress to program completion.

Ferguson's Pathway framework may be a particularly useful framework to extend understandings of how and when various factors related to student success impact an FCA's journey through PSE. As noted in the literature review, recent studies have identified some of the factors related to FCAs' successful completion of PSE. However, by mapping these factors onto Ferguson's Pathway framework, we highlight the role that each of these factors play in an FCA's journey through PSE. In keeping with phenomenological research design (Creswell & Poth, 2018), this study aims to describe FCAs' lived experience of their journey through PSE, specifically focusing on the factors to which FCA attribute their success, and to consider these factors as they

relate to Ferguson's Pathway framework. To the best of the authors' knowledge, this is the first phenomenological study to interview a relatively large number of FCA PSE graduates in Ontario, and to consider how factors related to success fit within a student developmental pathway framework.

## Method

### Positionality

Although the researchers approach this study from a position of privilege (being White, middle-class professionals in higher education), one of the authors is a former FCA who successfully completed two post-secondary degrees. This journey was not without challenges and influenced this author's interest in the topic. More specifically, the absence of research highlighting pathways to success in PSE motivated this specific study. Notably, sharing the author's identity as an FCA appeared to embolden research participants to disclose more details regarding their educational journey.

### Participants

Nine FCA who had graduated from Ontario colleges, universities, or apprenticeships participated in this research (three identified as male, six as female, and ranged in age from their early 20s to 40s). Because Canada's educational systems and child welfare management jurisdiction are handled provincially, only participants who completed PSE education in the province of Ontario were included in order to reduce the complications of comparing varying systems. During the interviews, participants were asked to identify and reflect on success factors that marked their experience in PSE. Seven out of the nine participants completed more than one credential, and seven out of the nine were in the midst of completing additional credentials in higher education at the time of the study. This included college diplomas, as well as undergraduate- and graduate-level university degrees.

### Data Collection

Potential participants were identified through promotional presentations and agency meetings at the Child Welfare Political Action Committee, educational programs, higher education advisory committees, and Child Welfare agencies. Each participant engaged in an exploratory, semi-struct-

tured online interview with one of the authors that lasted approximately 45–60 minutes. Each participant answered approximately 15–20 questions related to their academic journey, thereby allowing the researchers to generate a life story about each participant’s educational pathway. Questions related to challenges and supports experienced by the participants prior to and during PSE. Secondary questions focused on the impact of relationships, motivating factors, advice from others, insights, and tips for future FCA. When permission was granted, interviews were recorded and transcribed, providing the researchers with 585 pages of interview notes and transcriptions to be codified and analyzed for general themes.

### Analysis

Transcripts were analyzed using a constant comparison method (Boeije, 2002). During the first cycle, the researchers attached approximately 60 descriptive phrases to units of text. In the second phase, initial codes were collected under two categories, which included internal and external factors supporting success. During the third cycle, a thematic analysis of responses was mapped onto the student development pathway themes. Three broad thematic codes were identified: “positive relationships,” “determination,” and “resistance” (defined below). Each theme was then mapped upon the five phases of the Student Development Pathway framework to determine if some themes figured more predominately than others within each phase.

At every stage, the researchers compared the thematic coding to the original transcript to ensure the codes reflected the information and ideas shared during the interview. To protect the participants’ identity, pseudonyms have been used, and any other identifying information has been omitted here. This research was conducted with permission from the Research Ethics Board (REB) of the researchers’ university.

## Findings

### Overview

In this first-of-its-kind phenomenological analysis and mapping of factors that support post-secondary success among FCA in the province of Ontario, three major themes emerged regarding factors attributed to the participants’ success in PSE. First, FCA described *caring, coaching adults*, such as teachers, social workers, school staff, a friend’s parent, foster parents, athletic coaches, or church pastors, who offered belief, inspiration, hope, acceptance, and encouragement toward and throughout PSE. Second, FCA described *determination*, an inner drive that propelled them into and through PSE. Even when their confidence waned or when they lacked a vision or clear goals, participants described their resolve to succeed “come hell or high water” (Lucy). Third, participants described their *resistance* to the expectation that they would repeat the lives of their own biological parents, and their resistance to negative stereotypes or stigmatization (i.e., whereby many expect failure from FY). Although related to determination, resistance was seen as distinct in that it was specific to a fight against negative expectations, rather than a more general quality related to the resolve to succeed.

The comments associated with each theme were then mapped onto Ferguson’s (2019) Student Development Pathway framework, to highlight the significance of these factors in the Preparation, Awareness, Engagement, Transition, and Persistence phases of PSE. This mapping exercise indicated that the FCA in this study experienced coaching and caring adults as most dominant in the Preparation, Engagement, and Transitional phases to PSE. In contrast, determination was tied most often to the Persistence phase. Resistance factored most dominantly in the Preparation and Persistence phases.

**Table 1**

*Distribution of Comments Related to Success in PSE and Phase of Academic Journey (n = 9)*

Themes	Preparation	Awareness	Engagement	Transition	Persistence
Caring, coaching adults	9	1	6	7	2
Determination	2	3	3	0	8
Resistance	5	3	2	3	6

### ***The Role of Caring, Coaching Adults in Preparation for, Engagement with, and Transitions to PSE***

Despite the common thread among participants of experiences of neglect, abuse, and abandonment by any number of adults, participants described the impact of other caring adults as being one of the strongest success factors in their preparation for, engagement with, and transition to higher education. In what Ferguson frames as the Preparation phase, many participants commented on the support they received as students in elementary and secondary school that created possibilities for a PSE. For example, Jesse attributed much of her success to an elementary teacher who helped initiate the assessment of a visual disability, thereby creating conditions for her to be successful in school: “He accepted my assertion that I could not really see, and he took action to help me to get glasses. He fueled my love of learning and helped me with my capacity.” Other supportive adults were more directly involved in helping the FCA plan their future. For example, Brittany shared her memory of a junior high teacher who motivated her to complete high school and encouraged her to expand her interests in arts and athletics.

Caring, coaching adults also played a significant role in the Engagement phase. However, participants’ description of this help clearly indicates the value of their role beyond concrete assistance with specific tasks. For example, Julia stated that college staff at an academic upgrading program helped her with the application process. However, she went on to state,

When I went home, I didn’t have anyone to go to and they [teachers] were there for me. I’ve seen them outside the college, and they were happy for me. I buy them roses just because I want to. One of my teachers says that I am like their other daughter they didn’t have. She inspired me.

Similarly, Peter talked about the emotional support he received from staff at an alternative high school program that gave him “a glimmer of hope to reconsider post-secondary education.” When staff helped him transfer his credits for a college academic upgrading program to accelerate his success, his hope for a college diploma materialized.

Caring and coaching adults were equally important in the actual Transition to PSE phase. Jesse relayed how staff from her former group home stayed in touch with her and told her she would have a place to go on holidays when she

started PSE: “That meant a lot to me. One of my close social workers had high expectations for me. She believed in my future and what I could accomplish. She was my cheering squad.” Peter described the role of his first group of professors at PSE. He stated that some professors had specific insight into social work, counselling, and student advising, and were very understanding of his background and challenges. He came away feeling that if “[he] needed something, they were there to help.” John described his immediate connection to a specific program at post-secondary, and noted that

the supportive people within Indigenous studies really helped me to succeed. I learned about the systematic issues faced by Indigenous people especially the residential schools and many other pains that were very similar. I saw that my past traumas were very similar, and I was given opportunity to work through trauma and pain. It changed my future.

All FCA described the significance of this exposure to support in the initial phases of their post-secondary journey, especially as a boost to their confidence that they could achieve their goals.

### ***The Role of Determination in the Persistence Phase of PSE***

Several participants reflected on an inner drive that helped them persist in PSE. Interestingly, none of the participants could identify the exact source of their tenacity, but all connected their refusal to give up as driven by a powerful need to escape the conditions of their childhood and create a new life trajectory for themselves. Sam described this by stating “Completing PSE on my own was incredibly challenging BUT what is the alternative? Going back? That was not an option!” Similarly, Lucy said, “People could judge, make assumptions, hurt my confidence and doubt me, but I would just keep persevering and be confident that I would achieve it—come hell or high water.” Julia also described her drive as key to succeeding in PSE and securing a career: “I am looking at Julia down the road, and I don’t want to let Julia down.” Like the other participants, Brittany also noted there was “something inside me that wanted me to keep going.” Interestingly, none of the participants described this asset as a quality they used to help them succeed in elementary or secondary school, in their efforts to learn about PSE, or in their efforts to apply and begin a new program at PSE.

### ***The Role of Resistance in the Preparation and Persistence Phases in PSE***

All participants in this study spoke of experiences of discouragement, dissuasion, and low expectations regarding PSE. However, many also spoke of their resistance to these negative stereotypes and expectations as key to their success. Prior to even thinking about PSE (i.e., during the Preparation phase), as a younger child, Brittany came to understand the stigma associated with being a foster child. Brittany described an annual event in her hometown, in which the foster children sang in a program to raise money. She perceived that the event created pity among attendees to encourage them to give more money, but it taught her that these children, including herself, were not considered normal. This fuelled a desire in Brittany to not be “a statistic” of another foster kid failure, but to be like the “normal” non-foster youth. Other participants described even more direct efforts to dissuade them from higher education. Sam said:

[Education was] not supported by my foster home. At one point, I was told to stop studying and go watch TV. We lived in poverty and had food insecurity. When I realized I had to go to medical school, I knew I had to go against what was familiar.

As a second example, Tom described a conversation about his interest in social work with a high school guidance counsellor, who told him that “people with his background do not normally handle those kind of career aspirations well.” Tom offered this as both an example of the stereotyping he faced, but also as an example of an experience that fueled his resistance to failure: “I think it [his success] came back to my drive [of] not wanting to be like my parents. I just didn’t want to go there.”

Many of the participants in this study also described the role of resistance in the Persistence phase of PSE. While in post-secondary, Jesse stated that “many people dissuaded me and asked, ‘are you sure you can do this?’” However, Jesse found this “very annoying” and used it as fuel for her efforts to go against expectations people set for her. Similarly, Sam stated that throughout his time in post-secondary “there was the fear of failing and not having anything to show for it. If you fail, you would prove everyone right. If you don’t have that fight in yourself, you won’t make it. Either you’re rebellious or really resilient.” Finally, in describing how she persisted in PSE, Lucy described the expectation that she would lead her mother’s life and stated “I didn’t want to be

my mother. She was not educated and didn’t have choices. This was my number one driver. I wanted to be in control and achieve success.”

### **Discussion**

The analysis of findings reveals that participants in this study attributed their success in PSE in Ontario to the influence of caring, coaching adults, and their inner qualities of determination and resistance. However, by mapping these themes onto Ferguson’s (2019) Student Development Pathway framework, we are able to more precisely state that coaching, caring adults played a particularly important role in the Preparation, Engagement, and Transition phases of PSE. In contrast, determination was particularly important to the Persistence phase, and resistance factored most dominantly in the Preparation and Persistence phases. These findings serve to highlight how and when participants made use of external and internal resources available to them, but may also indicate missed opportunities. For example, few FCA indicated they had access to a caring, coaching adult in the Persistence phase, although most speculated on how such a person might have helped them complete their studies.

Many findings from this novel phenomenological research are consistent with recent studies working with FCA to determine factors supporting success in PSE, especially regarding the importance of a caring adult (e.g., Day et al., 2012; Medlin, 2019; Neal, 2017; Newell, 2018; Unrau et al., 2017). However, the results of our study extend these findings in the sense that although participants also identified caring, coaching adults as extremely important to their success, these adults were generally only available to them in the Preparation, Engagement, and Transition phases. Notably, none of the FCA in this study spoke of a caring adult to help them learn about options within higher education (i.e., during the Awareness phase). Many researchers have commented on the pervasive stigma and negative stereotyping attached to foster youth (e.g., Dworsky & Pérez, 2010; Ferguson, 2019; Kovarikova, 2017); findings from this study suggest that expectations are set so low for foster youth that adults in their lives do not even consider providing information about PSE. Neither did any of the FCA in this study speak of a caring adult to help them persist in their program, although most participants speculated about how such a person would have helped them complete their studies. Significantly, none of the FCA in this study spoke of any kind of formal post-secondary program to assist with housing, tuition, finances, or mentorship, which may explain the ab-



sence of caring adults in the Persistence phase of PSE. Despite recent announcements regarding tuition waivers for FCA at Ontario universities (Gahagan, 2021), it may be that Ontario is far behind the United States in terms of programs to help FCA persist in PSE (see *Fostering Success*, 2022), thereby denying FCA easy access to mentorship, one of the most significant forms of support noted by FCA.

The quality of determination, or inner drive, is less commonly noted in the literature, although Neal (2017) described her sample of FCA as marked by tenacity and fortitude, Newell (2018) noted the role of ambition to achieve their goals and ambition to survive, and Medlin (2019) framed a key characteristic as fortitude. Similarly, Samuels and Pryce (2008) refer to survivalist self-reliance as a key quality that helped the foster care youth overcome adversities, and Ferguson (2019) reported that determination was an integral quality that allowed for the kind of self-advocacy that participants needed to persist in their educational goals. In the current study, FCA spoke of determination specifically within the Persistence phase of PSE. Given the few studies that have considered qualities related to determination, it would be helpful for future researchers to come to a consensus regarding how to describe this trait, and to explore this quality as it impacts all stages in the journey through PSE.

Similarly, although there is also a paucity of theoretical frameworks that specifically consider the quality of resistance to negative expectations and stereotyping, this quality emerged as meaningful in our findings, and consistent with the few studies on this trait (e.g., Drapeau et al., 2007; Neal, 2017; Newell, 2018; Sarubbi, 2019). Participants in the current study indicated that resistance to negative expectations and stereotypes propelled them toward success, especially during the Preparation and Persistence phases. Clearly, negative expectations and stereotyping were pervasive forces in the FCAs' early lives, given that almost all participants spoke of experiences of educational discouragement and dissuasion that began in childhood. Resistance to these experiences also emerged as an important factor in completing high school, thereby making PSE a possibility. However, resistance also emerged as important in the Persistence phase, thereby suggesting that the stigma encountered prior to PSE pursued FCA throughout their advanced studies.

## Implications for Practitioners

Implications from this study for child welfare agencies, educators, educational institutions, and child welfare ad-

vocates are two-fold. First, foster youth may benefit when opportunities are created to nurture the qualities of determination and resistance. Anyone supporting the education of foster youth should engage in a critical self-reflection of intentional and unintentional efforts to dissuade or discourage current and future educational prospects, but it is unlikely that this mindset can be eradicated entirely. Therefore, practitioners may best equip youth by nurturing qualities like determination and resistance, thereby providing them with the tools they need to counter these experiences. The ongoing roles of caring adults in the lives of foster youth must also be considered, especially if that person can be a champion for the youth's educational ambitions.

Second, Ferguson's (2019) Pathway framework is particularly important to practitioners because it highlights that success in PSE involves moving through several different phases, beginning in elementary school and continuing until graduation from PSE. Finding ways to promote success at every individual and unique phase will encourage a holistic approach that relies on deliberate, effective, and evidence-based strategies. Certainly, this study suggests that these resources are not equally available to FCA throughout all phases of their PSE journey, thereby indicating more precise ways in which we can build success. For example, in considering the absence of caring and knowledgeable adults in his life, John noted that his "foster and adoptive families did not encourage PSE. I was ill-informed. I didn't know the differences between one degree or another, and I didn't have someone to tell me." Clearly, an advocate during the Awareness phase would have been an asset. Many others also commented on the role a caring adult might have played during the Persistence phase. As Sam explained, "social support is important. If you don't have family to go to for Thanksgiving or if you had a problem at school, you cannot go back to family. You don't have the social support to help."

Similarly, how the qualities of determination and resistance might have aided FCA in the Awareness, Engagement, and Transition phases must be considered. The FCA in this study were well aware of the barriers they encountered during these phases, but may not have been as cognizant of the extent to which they would need to rely on determination and resistance to overcome these barriers. For example, Sam stated "teachers were barriers and [thought] because of my situation, I wouldn't be able to do post-secondary education. My ability to get out of my situation was not shared by my teachers." If PSE is to be universally accessible, systemic barriers that fuel such low expectations

must be removed, and foster youth must be helped to see those negative responses for what they are so they can make use of their own strengths to resist their influence.

## Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study is not without limitations, especially regarding the decision to restrict potential participants to those who completed PSE in Ontario, given the distinct differences in the college and university sectors in each province. Differences exist in funding formulas and respective tuition waiver incentives, such that housing and financial supports might factor differentially in participants' ideas about reasons for their success. Second, given the paucity of research with FCA who completed PSE, we chose to use a phenomenological approach that would allow us to develop a clear understanding of participants' educational journey. However, ideally, this study would be replicated with a much larger, pan-Canadian representative sample size to determine if findings are generalizable. Third, time and funding limitations necessitated limiting our target population to FCA. By including teachers, social workers, child welfare advocates, and educators from PSE, we could develop a much broader understanding of external factors perceived to promote successful completion of PSE. Fourth, although theories of resilience and resistance help explain the process by which some FCA succeed in PSE, additional research is required to clarify the differences between resilience/determination and resistance. Furthermore, neither theory accounts for why only some FCA access and leverage both internal and external factors in response to adversity or hostile environments. Although beyond the scope of this study to compare the experiences of FCA who do and do not pursue PSE, this research might shed light on critical differences.

Regardless of the exact nature of future research, foster youth should be engaged as participant researchers to ensure this invisible group has a voice in advocating for their needs, and the needs of future generations. When FCA are enabled to participate as first-voice advocates, positive youth development is promoted through civic engagement and social justice advocacy (Day et al., 2012). In this study, many described their participation in research and advocacy for change as their duty.

## Final Conclusions

As noted previously, few FCA enter PSE, and fewer still complete their program of study. However, a growing body of research suggests there are consistent success factors cited by FCA who completed PSE. The participants in this study all experienced significant trauma and loss, all referred to internal struggles, and all talked about people who discouraged, dissuaded, or otherwise eroded any aspirations they might have to a life beyond what they knew. However, despite so many negative relationships, many also spoke of an adult who played a key role in their success in PSE. Despite the trauma and loss, many spoke of an inner drive or a determination to forge ahead. Despite the discouragement, many spoke of their resistance as a key factor in their ability to succeed. This group represents a seldom-heard voice of what is possible given the right conditions. None of our findings suggest their journey was easy; in fact, all participants also spoke about missing supports at every step of their journey. However, PSE is clearly not an impossible dream for FCA. These findings serve as a signpost for practitioners and future researchers as to what can become more probable, with the removal of barriers and the presence of effective supports.

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