Designing a campus support program for foster care alumni: Preliminary evidence for a strengths framework

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A B S T R A C T

Campus support programs for foster care alumni (FCA) have emerged in an attempt to improve higher education outcomes for former foster youth. However, these programs have little empirical or theoretical literature to guide their development. We present a case study of a newly developed campus support program for FCA which utilizes a strengths perspective. We analyze quantitative and qualitative data collected before and during the first two years of program operation to explore whether a strengths perspective can be successfully applied to the unique needs of FCA in higher education. Results reveal that the strengths perspective has potential and identifies three areas in which this approach appears to effectively intersect with challenges faced by FCA, a) promoting positive identities as survivors, b) respecting autonomy, and c) mobilizing assets of resilience, perseverance, and community. We discuss the benefits and challenges of helping students address these issues. Our findings also reveal that the strengths perspective is not redundant with traditional higher education retention models, and in the three areas identified, is diametrically opposed to the students’ previous experiences with the foster care system.

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1. Introduction

Youth in foster care have educational aspirations much like youth who have not been in care, with 70–80% of foster youth reporting that they want to go to college (Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004; McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White, & Thompson, 2003). However, despite their ambition, foster care alumni are less likely to attend college and if they do attend, are less likely to graduate compared to their peers who were not in foster care (Davis, 2006; Day, Dworsky, Fogarty, & Damashek, 2011; Dworsky & Courtney, 2010; Wolanin, 2005). This discrepancy leads approximately 1–11% of foster care alumni to achieve a bachelor’s degree compared to 24% of the general population (Casey Family Programs, 2008; Courtney et al., 2004; Pecora et al., 2003, 2005; Reilly, 2003; U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). This is unfortunate as a college degree is associated with a number of improved life outcomes (Baum & Ma, 2007; Casey Family Programs, 2008; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). In addition, it can be argued that college attendance and/or completion is even more critical for former foster youth. Unlike most young adults, foster care alumni who do not attend college (or attend and drop out), typically cannot go home to their parents to regroup for a life without a college education (Emerson, 2006). Because foster care alumni do not have the safety nets that other young adults their age possess, they often end up relying on public assistance, homeless, addicted to substances, and/or incarcerated (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Dworsky, 2005). However, college can provide youth emancipated from care with the social capital they need to achieve stability and prosperity in their adult lives.

Foster care alumni face a number of barriers to post-secondary educational success (Smithgall, Gladden, Howard, George, & Courtney, 2004). First and foremost, youth in foster care are often surrounded by adults who underestimate their abilities, discourage them from pursuing their educational goals, and/or lack the experience to guide them in preparing themselves academically for college (Davis, 2006; Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005). Foster care alumni are also at an academic disadvantage. Frequent school changes and a lack of college preparatory classes affect their academic preparation, making it difficult for them to afford college (Davis, 2006; Wolanin, 2005). Finally, the majority of foster care alumni do not have the financial support that students often get from their families, making it difficult for them to afford college (Davis, 2006; Wolanin, 2005).

Fortunately, considerable attention has been paid to the obstacles faced by former foster youth. In the past decade numerous federal and institutional financial supports have emerged for foster care alumni. Currently, 20 states offer tuition and fee waivers for foster care alumni and approximately 22 additional states offer scholarship...
programs (New York State Office of Children and Family Services, 2009). In addition, the Chafee Education and Training Voucher Program (ETV) is a state administered federal program which provides foster care alumni with up to $5000 per year for postsecondary education expenses (Davis, 2006). This financial support can be received until age 23 but must be accessed by age 21. Finally, Casey Family Scholars is a national scholarship program that has provided scholarships to over 1200 foster care alumni (Casey Family Programs, 2012). In addition to financial assistance, a number of colleges and universities have developed support programs for former foster youth (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010; Texas Reach, 2012).

The movement to develop campus support programs for foster care alumni has momentum. However, existing literature on these programs is sparse. Fortunately, two recent studies shed light on this emerging support system. Dworsky and Pérez (2010) conducted interviews with ten campus support program administrators in California and Washington State and administered a web-based survey to students participating in the programs. Hernandez and Naccarato (2010) conducted a qualitative study of 12 coordinators from across the US representing programs that provide support services for foster care alumni in higher education. These programs were housed in Universities, non-profits and government agencies. These investigations produced useful information on the characteristics of campus support programs, administrative opinions on successes and unmet needs, and student satisfaction with the support provided. Both studies revealed considerable diversity in the campus programs examined. Most support programs represented their own entities (with a small but stable staff) while others incorporated foster care alumni into existing campus programs serving a more broadly defined vulnerable student population (e.g. first generation college students) (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010). Among the universities reporting that they offer support specifically for foster care alumni, all offered some form of financial assistance or helped students identify financial supports for which they were eligible. Hernandez and Naccarato (2010) found that nine of the twelve programs offered additional support services consisting of general support services, outreach to high school students in foster care, mentoring, career programs, and/or peer activities. Within these general categories a wide variety of strategies were employed to serve the students. Some programs require the students to sign agreements regarding what is expected of them as program participants (e.g. meeting regularly with program staff) (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). Other programs pair older students with younger students for mentoring, some provide financial incentives for good grades, and others assign students mentors in the community to assist them with their post graduation transition (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010).

Administrators of campus support programs for foster care alumni reported that their programs were providing a valuable service and that the assistance has helped participants to stay in school. The key strengths identified by the administrators were program accessibility, emotional/social support, financial aid, and advocacy (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). Program participants who completed a survey on their campus program agreed that campus support programs were needed, with the following receiving the highest rating for necessary services: help with financial aid, housing, academic assistance, and help choosing a major (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010). While this list tends to focus on pragmatic issues, the authors noted that open-ended comments from students suggest that social support may in fact be the most valued program offering. One student wrote, “The students get to build a family within the [campus support program]. We get to support each other and the [campus support program] staff and sponsors are our parents in school so they look after us like a family does for their children” (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010, p. 261).

Administrators identified a number of remaining obstacles to post-secondary success for foster care alumni. One concern is academic preparation (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). Some attributed this to the fact that youth in foster care are not expected or encouraged to go to college, so few received college preparatory classes in high school. Administrators also noted that it is difficult to identify foster care alumni attending college and to engage them in support programs (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). They also revealed a number of other challenges not adequately addressed by their programs, such as housing (particularly for community colleges with no on-campus housing), mental health services that can accommodate the mental health needs of foster care alumni, program sustainability, and data collection/program assessment (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). For example, while most administrators felt that their programs had been successful, no programs tracked outcomes for program participants (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010).

The literature suggests that foster care alumni need additional supports to achieve success in post-secondary education. Thus it is encouraging that campus support programs and literature describing these initiatives are emerging. However, existing support programs are diverse, in part, because there is limited empirical or theoretical literature to guide their design. We do not know whether campus programs are best developed as extensions of educational models for retaining vulnerable students or whether they should also incorporate theories of psychosocial development from social work, psychology or sociology. In addition, we have no information on whether these programs improve outcomes and if so, what sorts of programs are most effective and why. Our hope was to delve into some of these issues.

In 2008 we developed a mentoring program for foster care alumni at Texas State University, a public four-year university located in San Marcos, Texas. Foster care alumni were identified and assigned a University staff/faculty mentor who was trained by Casey Family Programs in issues relating to foster care. In 2011 we launched an expanded support program called FACES (Foster Care Alumni Creating Educational Success). This program provided a mentoring component but also offered a much wider array of direct services. The FACES program is housed in the University’s School of Social Work. In 2009 we began to gather information on the foster care alumni at Texas State in order to better understand how to develop the expanded program. Once the expanded program (FACES) was launched in 2011, we continued to gather data as part of a formative program evaluation (2011–2012). During this three-year period, as with most case studies, we gathered data from a wide variety of sources (e.g. in-depth interviews, focus groups, observations/field notes from events/mentoring activities/student organization meetings, written correspondence with students, an e-mail survey, and quantitative data on academic outcomes). Our investigation was at all times open-ended and inductive. However, our research goals evolved during these three years from broad to specific. For example, initially we merely wanted to understand how the foster care alumni felt about being offered a university support program and what they thought it should look like. Once we decided to frame the program using a strengths perspective (in part based on our initial data) we sought to examine whether the students would react positively to it and if so, how specifically to incorporate it into the program design. And finally, once students began to participate in the program, we wanted to understand if a program framed in this way would benefit the students and if so, in what way. This paper aims to provide a detailed account of how our investigation led us to initially frame the program using a strengths perspective, and once selected, to share the deeper understanding we gained about how this framework might be implemented with perceived by, and influential for former foster youth.

2. The strengths perspective

The strengths perspective emerged from the field of Social Work. Saleebey (1992, 2000) proposed that social work became entrenched
in a worldview that focused on deficits, dysfunction, and pathology. In approaching clients with a clear bias toward repairing limitations, social workers were missing an opportunity to define and utilize their strengths. Social workers were inadvertently, through labeling and the subsequent social construction of reality, undermining client success. A strengths perspective was offered as a paradigm shift for the field. With this approach social workers were encouraged to see individuals as survivors, who had developed unique skill sets and utilized a wide array of resources to help them through their struggle. It pressed social workers to recognize that those experiences produced assets that could be identified and mobilized. In order to adopt a strengths perspective Saleeby (2000) suggests that social workers engage in a number of specific practices, briefly summarized here as: a) develop a roster of resources and assets, b) celebrate lessons and successes, c) seek out survivor’s pride, d) dream for and imagine the future, e) think small but think success, f) seek out and employ the client’s theory of success, and g) look around, look ahead, but not back.

The strengths perspective appears particularly appropriate for the foster care alumni population in higher education. Foster youth are not responsible for their abuse/neglect and the state’s decision regarding removal and placement. Yet they often experience stigma and labeling as “damaged goods” with few believing in their potential (Bruskas, 2008; Kools, 1997; Whiting & Lee, 2003). Given these experiences, it is not difficult to argue that foster care alumni deserve to be approached as strong, capable survivors who should not be defined by the deficits of their pasts.

3. The initiative

FACES (Foster Care Alumni Creating Educational Success) is the initiative developed at Texas State University in 2011 with the support of a TG Public Benefits Grant. This initiative is housed in the School of Social Work and The Center for Children and Families which works collaboratively with the Vice President for Student Affairs (VPSA) Office of Retention and Management to build upon existing University retention efforts. The program offers direct services to foster care alumni at Texas State to encourage recruitment, retention, and success after graduation. FACES is staffed by a Program Coordinator (Assistant Professor of Social Work), a retention specialist from VPSA, and three Advocates (Social Work graduate students). FACES program staff provide the majority of the services, however, they rely on numerous University and community collaborators who assist with the initiative. The Department of Sociology is responsible for program evaluation.

Foster care alumni at Texas State are primarily identified by Student Business Services, which maintains records of students who use the state supported foster care tuition and fee waiver. Student Business Services identified 132 students who used the foster care tuition and fee waiver from Fall 2011 through Fall 2012. These students are the primary target of program services. However, FACES aims to serve all Texas State students who have been in foster care, not just those qualifying for the tuition and fee waiver. Thus Advocates worked to inform Texas State students about the FACES program in order to reach as many FCA as possible. These additional efforts have led to a continually expanding list of FCA receiving services through FACES.

FACES staff engaged in a number of strategies to recruit and retain foster care alumni in higher education. They worked collaboratively with community organizations to encourage youth in care to attend college and to visit Texas State specifically. For those who expressed interest, several campus tours were conducted each semester where students were given an opportunity to learn about the University and to meet the FACES staff and students. Once the students enrolled in the University, FACES staff regularly e-mailed them to provide information about available resources and opportunities (e.g. scholarships, ETV funding, employment, tutoring) and to let them know that the staff was there to offer support and assistance with any problems or concerns they might have. Consequently, students often e-mailed FACES staff, stopped by their offices, met them for coffee, etc. FACES also hosted social events/activities such as a welcome luncheon, tailgating party, community service project, ropes course, awards banquet, and Christmas party. Additional program activities included but were not limited to: matching students with mentors trained in issues related to foster care, sponsoring a FACES student organization, creating a FACES Facebook page, developing a Foster Care Advisory Council made up of students, faculty, and staff from various departments across campus, and providing career and financial literacy workshops. Several campus support programs offer these types of services (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). However, program staff also worked to frame the initiative with a strengths perspective, which was embedded in the program design in a number of ways:

• The Program Coordinator and Advocates (all from the School of Social Work) are trained in a strengths perspective and apply this framework to all of their interactions with students. For example, during the welcome event the Program Coordinator informs the students that FACES recognizes that they have already succeeded and beaten the odds by even being in college and that the program is here to celebrate their success and help them to continue it.
• FACES students are given important roles in program design and implementation. They were asked to choose the program name, one of the Advocates is a foster care alumni, a FACES student organization was sponsored, and FACES students were paid leadership stipends to help with community outreach/campus tours.
• Some of the program activities were designed to help students identify their strengths and build their sense of self-efficacy and community (e.g. low/high ropes courses, community service projects).
• FACES student accomplishments (both large and small) are formally recognized through a quarterly newsletter, the Facebook page, and an awards banquet.

As the program developed, we learned that the University retention office was an invaluable partner. Retention staff offer numerous activities to engage and support students and they are allotted considerable staff time to assist with FACES activities. However, we found that existing university retention efforts were not specifically based on a strengths perspective. In our case, and we suspect elsewhere, university retention efforts appear to reflect Tinto (1975), the most common theoretical approach in the retention literature (Borglum & Kubala, 2000; Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000; Thomas, 2000, 2002). Tinto’s model emphasizes the importance of integration, arguing that students are most likely to remain in school when they are sufficiently integrated at both the academic and social levels. Our retention office engages in activities to ensure that students interact with faculty, staff, and students in a way that fosters academic and social integration. The retention framework derived from Tinto appears to be a constructive approach for attracting and retaining not only the general student population, but foster care alumni as well. However, from our initial observations, it appeared that a strengths perspective could be a unique complement to the existing retention paradigm when serving foster care alumni.

While we theorized that the strengths approach would be novel, we did not know whether foster care alumni had been exposed to these sorts of supportive practices in their interactions with existing University retention efforts and/or the child protective system. Thus, we were unsure whether this approach would have substantive added value. We were also not clear how to apply it. Scholars have noted that the literature has not empirically documented what a strengths perspective looks like in practice (Staudt, Howard, & Drake, 2001). Because campus support programs are often developed in conjunction with Social Work Departments at universities, it is
likely that other campus support programs use a strengths approach. However, there is currently no literature describing the application of a strengths perspective to programs serving foster care alumni and/or offering evidence of its effectiveness for recruiting and retaining students. Our research was designed as an exploratory study to investigate these issues. For this case study we gathered quantitative and qualitative data from the foster care alumni at Texas State to examine a) potential applications of a strengths perspective, b) how foster care alumni respond to this approach, and c) the potential benefits and drawbacks of the framework for a campus support program for foster care alumni.

4. Methodology

Case studies are often used to generate and/or test theory (Berg, 2007), and thus we felt it was an appropriate method for exploring the potential of the strengths perspective. In addition, case studies are designed to obtain a deep understanding of a subject by “systematically gathering enough information about a particular person, social setting, event, or group to permit the researcher to effectively understand how the subject operates or functions” (Berg, 2007: p. 283). To meet these criteria we engaged in a data gathering process that spanned three years and used multiple sources of information. We gathered data until we achieved redundancy (or saturation), which is recommended for this methodology (and most qualitative investigations) (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In 2009 we met with a small group of students who were foster care alumni (n = 4) and conducted an additional 5 in-depth interviews with students who were foster care alumni to get their input into the development of the initiative. Once the FACES program was in place (2011–2012) we conducted field research to observe student reactions to the program. Our authors served as the FACES program coordinator, a FACES advocate, and program mentors. Thus we spent considerable time in the field working with the FCA. We recorded student attendance at events, solicited their feedback at the events, and observed student interactions with program staff/mentors. We also had discussions with FACES mentors and members of the FACES advisory council regarding their experiences when working with the FCA. Our field research comprised, between the three authors, hundreds of hours of observation and note taking regarding foster care alumni experiences in college and their response to the support services. However, after the first year of program operation we sought to supplement our investigation with an e-mail survey (n = 15) and a focus group (n = 4). In the survey and the group we attempted to get a deeper understanding of the foster care alumni student perspective of the FACES program. Finally, we obtained quantitative data on the foster care alumni at Texas State (students using the foster care tuition and fee waivers) from the University Office of Institutional Research. These data allowed us to better understand FCA demographic characteristics and academic performance and to measure program impact. We received IRB approval for this study.

We acknowledge that our involvement in program design and implementation gives us preconceptions that might favor a strengths perspective. However, the triangulated research allowed us to assess the application of a strengths perspective using data from a variety of sources and with complementary methodologies. In addition, as recommended by Marshall and Rossman (2006), we chose to have multiple research partners in order to confirm each author’s interpretation of the data. Our authors are trained in fields well-versed in the strengths perspective (Social Work) and fields much less familiar with this framework (Sociology). In addition, we agree with the tenets of participatory action research which posit that those being studied have a basic right to be involved in the knowledge production process about themselves (Stringer, 1999, 2004). Thus we chose as one of our co-authors a graduate student (and FACES advocate) who is an alumnus of the foster care system. Individually and collectively we engaged in reflexivity, a process recommended for qualitative researchers (Boyle, 1994; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). We regularly considered and conferred about our interpretations of the data and potential for bias. We also presented our findings, and solicited feedback from, audiences which included representatives from higher education, child protective services, foster care alumni attending other colleges, policy makers, and external funding agencies.

Reflexivity addresses (but of course does not completely alleviate) the risk of subjectivity posed by our methods. However with this risk came rewards not found with other methodologies. Geertz (1974) argued for the value of experience-near as well as experience-distant research methods. Likewise Froggett and Briggs (2012) note that there is an “urgent need” for practice-near approaches to counterbalance the disproportionate use of practice-distant methods. Practice-near methods provide the necessary time, space, and trust for depth, authenticity, and practice relevant findings to emerge. In addition, we agree with Berg who states that we have moved beyond the “facade of neutrality”, noting that researcher bias can be present in all methodologies and that what is expected of researchers is an explicit account of the benefits and limitations of their methodological choices (Berg, 2007: p. 180). The following provides additional detail on our methodology and presents the findings of our investigation.

5. Findings

5.1. Qualitative data

Our qualitative investigation assumed an iterative inductive-deductive approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In our initial interviews and focus group we explored the perspectives of foster care alumni with few parameters. We asked them about the challenges of being in college and what might help them to accomplish their educational goals. However, as evidence for a strengths perspective emerged from the data (and was consistent with the Social Work literature), we chose to guide the investigation to explore the applications, benefits, and limitations of this framework in more depth. While the later qualitative work (a focus group, e-mail survey, and field research) was more targeted, our investigation remained sufficiently inductive throughout so that we could learn as much as we could about the perspectives of former foster youth attending college. We compiled all of the information gathered from our qualitative methods and initially used an open-coding system for analysis. Once we began to see themes in the data we shifted to a focused coding approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Regardless of the type of data (e.g. in-depth interviews versus field research) our qualitative findings were clear and consistent. Results revealed that the strengths perspective was a viable and promising framework for the campus support program. More importantly, our qualitative research allowed us to understand the specific ways in which a strengths perspective fits with the needs of foster care alumni in higher education and how it might be used to improve higher education outcomes for these students. We learned that there are three key areas in which a strengths perspective aligns with the unique needs of foster care alumni; redefining identities, respecting autonomy, and utilizing assets. The following describes the information we gained in this regard. Pseudonyms are used when providing direct quotes.

5.1.1. Redefining identities

Consistent with a strengths perspective, our qualitative data suggest that deficit identities were a common consequence of growing up in the foster care system that could hinder higher education outcomes. We learned that negative self-perceptions of foster care alumni could deter their use of campus support programs, increase
their risk of dropping out of college, and even hinder them from attending college at all. Several foster care alumni told us that when they were in care, they initially did not see themselves as someone who could succeed in college. Christopher elaborated:

“I didn’t even consider myself college material until after I graduated. I’d gone out and worked and stuff for a while and then I joined the military. It wasn’t until I’d gotten a little bit of confidence from that and a little bit of life experience, that I realized that I might have a chance to do it. Actually, it probably wasn’t until I actually came to college that I really started to believe I could do it.”

Angela confirmed the sentiment, stating:

“I was in 10 different high schools growing up. I was in and out of residential treatment and I was angry and violent. No one thought I could go to college but my caseworker and my attorney believed in me. So I decided to believe in myself.”

Kim stated, “I didn’t plan on going to college when I was in the foster care system. I was just floating around, waiting for the experience to be over.” As with Angela, it was a caring adult that helped Kim to see herself in a different light and to help her overcome her perception of inadequacy. In our campus tours we saw that the youth currently in foster care have the same concerns about college that the alumni had experienced when they were in care. Thus we asked the foster care alumni to speak at all of the campus tours for youth currently in foster care. They served as powerful role models of what foster youth are capable of and the youth in care responded positively to their example. One of the foster youth in attendance stated, “If they can go to college after everything they have been through, then I can do it too.”

While foster care alumni struggled with feelings of inadequacy in terms of academic potential, we learned that experiences in foster care often undermined their sense of self in a more global way. Foster care alumni reported that they felt stigmatized by their history of involvement with the foster care system. They viewed the trauma and tragedies of their past as a defining identity of their childhood that they did not wish to follow them into adulthood. This initially made it difficult to recruit students to participate in the support program. However, it contributed to our desire to frame the program using a strengths perspective. To combat this barrier, program staff actively worked to redefine what it means to be a college student who is also an alumnus of the foster care system. Staff worked to create a survivor’s identity, to instill a sense of pride that they have made it to college, and to celebrate that identity rather than to approach the students as vulnerable, deficient individuals in need of assistance. When training faculty and staff to be mentors and when talking to students, the Program Coordinator used the quote, “Smooth seas do not make good sailors,” to demonstrate how the difficult pasts of foster care alumni may actually prove to be a resource for them in terms of their ability to navigate current challenges that they face in college.

We do not have rigorous empirical proof that celebrating the foster care identity is effective for engaging students in the program. However, we did notice that participation was discouragingly low initially. As 3 out of 73 students (4%) attended the first welcome event. However, after students were introduced to the program using a strengths perspective, participation in program activities/offerings grew considerably. By the end of the first year of program implementation, 59% of the FCA had actively participated in the program in some way (e.g. attending events, posting on the Facebook page, contacting the staff). In addition, a few students that did not participate informed staff (via e-mail) that even if they don’t actively participate, they appreciate the information and support provided and/or enjoy the Facebook page. Further, the following quotes from the foster care alumni suggest that efforts to redefine the foster care identity resonated with students and increased program participation.

“I spent my whole high school career trying not to be ‘foster care’. So I was like, why are they still bothering me? How did they know I was foster care at college??! Then I met everyone and learned that FACES is more about celebrating us. Everyone was so talkative and friendly. I want to be involved now.”

“I thought I didn’t need FACES, so I ignored you guys for a good semester.....It was running from the past......the whole stigma of being a foster kid. You always wanted to hide that. You don’t want to be known as the foster kid. So joining a group of foster kids, it’s like, ‘The Foster Kids Club’ (laughs).... But now I tell people, ‘I’m going to the foster kids club’. I love it now! It was the whole association thing that kept me. For students that don’t want to be in the foster kids club, we have to change the way they think about that.”

Chris agreed stating, “We have to show them that we are normal people”. He suggested that we advertise the program with pictures or videos of the actual meetings and events. Several others agreed that this was needed to overcome their own preconceived notions that getting together with a group of former foster youth might be a depressing experience. Some said they were worried that they would just be “dealing with the past”, that everyone was going to be “quiet or timid”. They seemed surprised to find that the tone of the events and meetings was, positive, uplifting, as one student described it “a chill environment”. Another student said he was surprised that the foster care alumni at the event were “outgoing”, “nice”, and “normal”. Another student stated that much of their perceptions about themselves and other foster care alumni come from the incredibly negative public portrayal of youth in foster care. LaShonda spoke about hearing a discouraging statistic that only 2% of foster youth obtain a college degree:

“It’s all negative. All the information for foster kids is negative. Everything that is in the news is negative. There’s nothing positive that you can see or hear regarding foster care. It (FACES) is countering. You are putting us out there in a positive light.”

Once students began to participate in the campus support program, we learned that further work on identity development could be valuable. The FACES program sponsored several events designed to help the students develop their sense of self-efficacy and sense of accomplishment. One of those events was a one-day outdoor low and high ropes course designed to promote personal development and team building. One of the FACES students reported that what she accomplished during this event was, “A very big deal”. She stated that she tried to complete one of the physical challenges but couldn’t do it. She remarked that she got to a point in the challenge where she was afraid and “I told myself I wasn’t good enough”. She stated that usually when she quits something, that is it. But she watched the other FACES students complete the challenge and with their encouragement, decided to try again. The second time, she succeeded. She said that when she got to the challenging part she was able to tell herself that she is good enough, and that with this internal dialog and the support of others, she overcame her fear and self-doubt. In our discussions with students we learned that the voice in their head that tells them they aren’t good enough, that they can’t do it, must be addressed to attend college, utilize available resources, and persevere when confronted with obstacles. Consequently, a campus support program that fosters a positive survivor identity (as proposed by Saleebey, 2000), might have an advantage in recruiting, supporting, and retaining foster care alumni.
5.1.2. Supporting autonomy

The foster care alumni informed us that when in foster care, they felt they had little control over their lives and their perspectives were given no weight. They discussed having no say, and often not even being informed about decisions regarding placements, moves, medical decisions, and sibling separation. These frustrations are revealed in Marta’s quote:

“Having decisions made at the last second for you with no forethought or fore mention. You know, nobody ever said anything. Actually, I was living in Seattle for a while with my grandparents and I came home for a court hearing. I was supposed to be there for about 2 days, here in San Antonio, and got to court and the judge was like “well, you can’t go back to Seattle” and I was in the middle of my school year and I had like stuff of my friends that I had brought with me. I didn’t even get to say goodbye, like nothing.”

Nathaniel expressed similar concerns with the lack of interest shown regarding his preferences:

“I got connected with this family where once I moved in, all the stuff I was doing before I moved in I had to stop. Like I was almost a black belt in Karate... she pulled me out of Karate. I had a job... I couldn’t work anymore.”

Many foster care alumni reported experiencing a significant amount of distress regarding the lack of attention given to their personal wants and desires while in the foster care system. They felt that this lack of respect for their opinions made existing problems considerably worse. Foster care alumni expressed a desire for those providing services to them to believe that their perspective on what is best for them is no less valid (and in many cases) more valid than those deemed to be experts in child welfare. They strive to be seen as the authority on their own lives. Program staff were moved by these desires and worked to incorporate foster care alumni perspectives into the program design. In turn, students commented that they appreciated the opportunity to name the program, that one of the advocates was a foster care alumnus, and that a student organization had been sponsored. In general, we noted that when their mantra, “Nothing about us, without us,” had been incorporated, we saw positive feedback and in the few areas where it was missing, we began to see problems. The mentoring component is where this was particularly evident.

The Office of Retention and Management began to formally incorporate foster care alumni into the existing mentoring program in 2009. The only adaptation was that foster care alumni were automatically assigned a mentor (faculty/staff) and the mentors were required to participate in a 2–3 hour training session on foster care provided by Casey Family Programs. Mentors were assigned to students automatically in order to preemptively provide support early on in students’ academic careers. The rationale for this was that if we waited for students to ask for help, it might be too late. A great deal of the information we gathered suggested that mentors could be a valuable part of a support program. The following are quotes provided by some of the foster care alumni about their mentors:

“(my mentor) is one of the most amazing people that I have been fortunate enough to have in my life. She has not only become a great mentor for me, but a great friend and support system as well. When there is nobody else I can talk to I know that I can trust in her to be there for me, critique me, and most of all give me positivity when I need it the most.”

“He was one of the main reasons why I have become a very social and interactive person here at Texas State University.”

“(my mentor) is amazing. I have been able to go to her on a day in which I am overwhelmed with life and school, simply to vent. She has provided me with answers and resources I did not know existed.”

More specifically though, we saw that mentees enjoyed instances in which the mentoring component respected their autonomy. Krystal, when asked what makes for a good mentor stated, “Someone who lets me be myself.” Likewise, Hugo stated:

“I really appreciate her willingness to never give up on me or some of the issues that we have conquered together. She allows me to make my own path, offering curbs along the side to keep me from veering away from my path and my goals”

Foster care alumni appreciated when their opinions were respected and as could be expected, they were displeased when people or the program became controlling. For example, several students did not like that they were not asked if they wanted a mentor and if so, to be given a choice about whom they were assigned. Thus, in the e-mail survey it is not surprising that when asked to rate program services, including the advocates, student organization, activities, and mentoring, that mentoring received lower ratings than the other services. Several students did not respond to their mentor’s attempts to contact them, didn’t feel comfortable with a mentor that they knew nothing about, and generally hoped to have more of a say in these assignments. Candice stated that when her mentor e-mailed her, her response was, “I don’t know you—delete”. She elaborated:

“The only thing is, do we have a choice, that would relieve a lot of tension. That’s kind of case-worker-y. It feels like, oh no, I’m assigned someone to work with me now. I think we need to alleviate that because we’re real touchy about stuff like that.”

Participants reportedly were pleased when their perspectives were valued and they were not “managed”. Thus, we are working to refine the mentoring program, to have more supervision and training of the mentors so that they understand the strengths perspective and to honor the mentees’ desire to have more of a say in the process of assigning mentors.

We learned a great deal about the importance of supporting foster care alumni while respecting their desire for autonomy. However, this freedom was not a simple thing to offer. Many students had not developed strong skills in making their own decisions (likely because their experience in this area while in foster care was limited). Several students often felt paralyzed when faced with significant challenges and put off making decisions until problems reached crisis proportions (e.g. housing, financial problems, coursework). Several students also did not tell their mentors about these problems in a timely way, despite frequent contact. We asked the foster care alumni about this and they acknowledged that it can be a challenge for mentors to respect students’ decisions when they have little experience with decision making. However, they felt that the benefit of a program that respects autonomy far outweighs a more structured and controlling approach. They helped us to brainstorm about how programs could give students the desired latitude to make their own decisions, yet incorporate an understanding that problems, deficits, and even crises are a reality to be expected and incorporated into the program design. Crystal stated,

“I think there is pressure from someone saying, ‘Hey I got your back’. I mean you don’t want to fail. There needs to be a reminder that we are all human, we all fail, we all make mistakes. It is how you handle those and how we deal with this.……. We are a proud group. We don’t want to ask for help. They want to prove that they can do it on their own. We have to show them that coming for help is not a bad thing.”
The students agreed that formal activities that resemble required training sessions they experienced while in foster care (e.g. classes in responsible decision making), are not the solution. They bristled at suggestions for program offerings that were too “structured” or “therapeutic”. We asked how a program might help students who are having difficulty managing their problems on their own. Interestingly, they did not suggest any external, authority-based intervention, rather they identified the assets they already held within, individually and collectively, as important resources to be tapped. They didn’t want activities that highlight their deficiencies. Instead they wanted the program to help them identify and utilize the assets they already possessed, another practice endorsed by the strengths perspective.

5.1.3. Utilizing assets

A core component of the strengths perspective is to help individuals to identify and utilize their assets. In our work with these students we learned that the resources they possess were deep and wide. These students were resilient, tenacious, compassionate, altruistic, articulate, intelligent, funny, creative, interesting, and dedicated. They of course were not without problems. However, it was not difficult to identify their strengths. The program highlighted these strengths and their accomplishments, in the FACES newsletter, on the Facebook page, and at the annual awards banquet. The student response to these activities and events was quite positive. Raquel stated:

“Being recognized for improving my grades in front of all those people was kind of nerve wracking, but it meant a lot to me that people even noticed that I was doing something right. It wasn’t like I made the honor roll, but FACES staff took time to just appreciate that I’m trying to make it here.”

Students were pleased that the program encouraged them to recognize that they possessed many personal assets (e.g. perseverance, determination). However, we learned that they viewed their most powerful asset to be their unique ability to support one another. While the students were incredibly generous in their praise of the program staff, advocates, and mentors, they were most enthusiastic about the opportunity to create a support network of foster care alumni. Christina stated:

“What really blew my mind was that I could come in with a group of people just like me, who had similar experiences, and that we could come together and talk in a non-threatening way and explore our pasts, and have a therapy about it, and have fun with it, and laugh about it. That’s different. I’ve done it with other people but to do it with other people who have lived what I have lived, that is very powerful. And to do it from the other side of the fence, to say yeah, we went through all of that but look where we are now? Now let’s laugh about that. That’s something that’s been able to let me reach back into the past and let some of those things go so that I can propel myself even further on my personal path.”

There was clear consensus on this issue, revealed by the quotes below about what students found most helpful about the program:

“To get with people with the same perspective. To have people who are strong is impactful”

“To help each other and support each other”

“We are all doing this together”

“Meeting people with the same background. That is what drew me in”

“That it is great to see a coherent and cohesive group”

“To meet others (foster care alumni) who have ambition, it keeps us moving to achieve a common goal”

When we asked them for suggestions for improving the program their most common responses involved further developing the community of foster care alumni and the support system that provides. Students wanted more social activities, more field trips, and more weekend activities. In addition, in reference to the previous discussion about how to help those students who are struggling, students suggested that we find ways to help them take care of each other, to help them to open up to the other foster care alumni when they are having problems so they don’t have to go to an authority figure. They wanted to guide, mentor, and support one another. They felt that because there were many foster care alumni in various stages (e.g. freshman, seniors, graduate students), that they could help guide the newer students or those struggling the most. However, they were adamant that the effort be semi-structured rather than rigid or appearing as an intervention. Rebecca clarified:

“It’s not clinical, it’s not therapy, or a program you have to go to. It is an invitation to hang out.”

In addition to helping one another, the students were also enthusiastic to help youth currently in foster care. One student mentioned that she initially didn’t want to participate in FACES but decided to come to the first welcome event. After that she became one of the most active members. She said she originally thought she didn’t need FACES because she already had a support system, but it had never occurred to her that FACES needed her. Several other students also reported that they felt good about being asked to serve. One student who received an internship with the G-Force program, a University sponsored community outreach program, stated, “I love being a G-Force mentor. It makes me feel like I’m giving back!” Another student who assisted with outreach told us “I got in there and it became almost really therapeutic to be able to work with young people and be able to say ‘well, I know what you’re going through.’” Finally, Christina, one of our most active members and panelists stated,

“We are able to show other potential FACES, look, you’re on this side of the fence, but we’re on this side of the fence. Once you get past that threshold, you’ll be just like us. You have that chance for healing, to be accepted, to be with people who truly understand you. Like that we can go out and show other foster kids that change is coming and its going to be a beautiful thing when you get here.”

5.2. Quantitative data

Quantitative data were gathered as part of a formative evaluation of the FACES program. We identified students using the foster care tuition and fee waivers from our Student Business Services Office (2003–2012) and obtained demographic and academic data on these students from the University Institutional Research Department. Table 1 provides demographic information on the students using the foster care tuition and fee waivers who attended the University at any time from Fall 2011 through Fall 2012, a period in which the FACES program was in place.

Table 1 reveals that the foster care alumni are more likely than the general student population to be male, minority, transfer, and first-generation college students. As expected, their characteristics reflect those of children and youth that enter the child protective system, characteristics which make them socially and academically vulnerable within the post-secondary education environment. Table 2
The results from the most recent cumulative measure reveal that

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<th>FCA (%)</th>
<th>All students (%)</th>
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<td>(n = 132)</td>
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<td>Male</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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| Transfer student | 31   | 13    |
| First generation |      |       |
| Parent did not attend college | 42   | 18    |
| Parent received bachelor's degree | 76   | 46    |

provide academic data on the foster care alumni. We examine how the foster care alumni compare to the general student population and any changes in their academic standing pre/post FACES program implementation.

Results reveal that foster care alumni are academically vulnerable. Foster care alumni GPAs are considerably below those of the general student population. These GPAs are also below those of other minority populations on campus (results not shown). For example, while the foster care alumni GPA for the 2010/2011 academic year (before the FACES program) was 2.35, the average for African-American students was 2.53 and 2.65 for Hispanic students (Fall 2010 only). We also noted that the discrepancy between foster care alumni GPAs and the Texas State student population was most pronounced for the freshman. Additional analyses revealed that the GPA gap was considerably smaller for non-freshman and transfer students.

Our methodology is not sufficiently rigorous to assess program impact. We only have a pre–post design, no comparison/control group and small sample sizes for most of the analyses. However, we offer these data in order to provide a preliminary exploration of where support programs such as FACES might be strong and where they might be limited. In this regard, we see that there was no improvement in foster care alumni GPAs pre/post FACES. Actually there was a slight decline in GPAs, however this mirrors the slight decline in GPA for the general student population (and is not a significant change). This could be due, in part, to efforts to retain even the most academically vulnerable FCA. It also may be due to the limited program offerings regarding academics (e.g. no tutoring services specifically for FCA). Based upon these data, FACES staff are working to develop more specific strategies for helping FCA to improve their academic performance. FCA will need to improve their academic performance in order to keep them in good academic standing, help them make progress towards their degree programs, and remain eligible for financial aid.

We also examined retention and graduation rates for foster care alumni. These findings present a different picture of the foster care alumni than is gleaned from the demographic and GPA data. Despite their demographic vulnerabilities and lower levels of academic performance, the majority of foster care alumni Freshmen return the following year (64% before and 84.3% after FACES). In addition, in the year in which FACES was implemented, the Freshmen foster care alumni retention rate exceeded the rate for the general student freshman population (84.2% versus 76.4%). While the improvement from 64% to 84% did not achieve statistical significance, we are encouraged about the magnitude of the change and the overall rate.

Table 1

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| Transfer student | 31   | 13    |
| First generation |      |       |
| Parent did not attend college | 42   | 18    |
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The majority of foster care alumni have graduated in the designated amount of time (64%). This compares favorably to the graduation rates for the general student population (56%), an unexpected finding given the existing literature which profiles foster care alumni as having poor post-secondary outcomes. The small sample sizes require that these results be interpreted with caution. However, our quantitative findings regarding demographics and academics are consistent with our qualitative data revealing that the foster care alumni population in higher education is a complex group, characterized by a need for additional support services, but with considerable internal strength to be tapped.

6. Discussion

In the present case study we find that a strengths perspective has potential as a theoretical framework for a campus support program for foster care alumni. In addition, we were able to identify three specific practices associated with the strengths perspective that align with the unique needs of foster care alumni in college. First, we learned that youth currently in foster care and foster care alumni can benefit from programs that help them to redefine their identity as a foster child. There was a clear need to shift from views of self that emphasize deficit, stigma, and shame, to one of strength, survival, and stamina. Second, we saw that foster care alumni prefer a support program that values their autonomy, allowing them to make their own decisions and to rely on each other to stay on a constructive path. Support that was perceived as structured and controlling was not well-received by these students. Finally, while we found the foster care alumni to be demographically and academically vulnerable, we also saw that they possessed considerable assets that could be utilized. For example, their dedication and perseverance were evident in their high rates of retention and graduation. We also learned that one of their most powerful assets is their potential to serve as a community of support for one another. In sum, we found that campus programs that identify, celebrate, and make use of the unique strengths of foster care alumni may have an advantage in recruiting and retaining these students. We did find challenges and limitations associated with this approach. Foster care alumni were in need of additional academic support and some struggled making critical life decisions and asking for help. However, a strengths perspective that acknowledges the existence of these problems, but focuses on the resources foster care alumni can use to confront these obstacles, appears to be a promising framework for a support program. Many foster care alumni felt that a program with this optimistic lens would help them in their post-secondary endeavors. They also suggested that it might contribute to the important work of changing the way society sees foster youth, and how these youth view themselves.
Some have been critical of the strengths approach and its empirical basis (Gray, 2011; Staudt et al., 2001). It has been suggested that a strengths perspective does not represent a paradigm shift in the field of Social Work, but is merely a semantic re-framing of existing practices (Staudt et al., 2001). Our study cannot directly address this critique, however, we believe that our findings do have some relevance for this debate. As discussed, we received positive feedback when using strategies consistent with the strengths perspective. More interestingly, foster care alumni considered these practices important specifically because they felt they had been absent in their previous experiences within the child protective system. According to our participants, the strengths approach was not merely a continuation of the service model they had encountered as children, but rather was an approach completely juxtaposed to it. Scholars who study youth in care have argued that the foster care system treats children in a way that is restrictive, lacking in respect, and focusing on the children’s pathology and deviance (Bruskas, 2008; Kools, 1997; Whiting & Lee, 2003). Our participants confirmed these assertions and educated us as to how these practices undermine foster care alumni aspirations and accomplishments.

It may be fruitful to investigate whether the strengths perspective is currently incorporated into child protection and if not, how its use might be expanded. Child protection is by definition, a paternalistic system, which may hinder service providers from seeing children as the clients in their interactions. For example, in their cross-country comparison of child protection approaches, Gilbert, Parton, and Skivenes (2011) note that child protective systems tend to fall within one of three categories, protective, family centered, and child centered. Countries characterized by protection tend to focus on immediate needs of children for safety, security, and survival, and take fewer risks regarding these issues. However, as systems move toward a family focus and then towards a child-centered focus, system processes begin to shift their emphasis to the long-term development of the child, viewing the child as a social investment. A child-centered system also focuses on children’s rights and works to incorporate their perspectives into the decisions made about their lives. As systems move toward a focus on children’s rights, it appears that they become more aligned with a strengths perspective. In their investigation, Gilbert et al. (2011) found that the US has traditionally been more protectionist than other developed countries but has begun to move towards a family centered approach in recent years. However, the US is considerably less child oriented than the comparison countries in the study. The children’s rights perspective is born out of the problems inherent in well-intended protective systems. Societies have often attempted to help vulnerable groups who do not have the intellectual, economic, and/or psychological capacity to help themselves. However, in the process, the danger of treating these groups as possessions rather than as people has become evident. Children may need protecting, but they have a basic right to see themselves as more than their situation, to have a say in decisions that involve them, and to be educated as to their collective power. The foster care alumni in our study expressed a strong desire to see more of these practices within the child protective system and felt that they were essential for improving educational (and other) outcomes for youth in care.

Our study clearly has a number of limitations. This research is an exploratory case study and thus is only able to offer hypotheses for further testing. We are unsure if our results will hold with larger and more diverse samples and more rigorous evaluation designs. We also were not able to obtain the perspectives of the foster care alumni at our University who chose not to participate in the program or the research. It is possible that their views are considerably different than those who were more actively involved. However, our program participation rate was high and our quantitative findings regarding the demographic and academic profile of foster care alumni were for all students served by the program, not merely active participants. In addition, we feel that our data are a useful contribution to the very sparse literature on post-secondary experiences of foster care alumni. Existing literature describes campus support programs but does not address the issue of theoretical framing or program effects (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). In addition, our study is one of only a few documented investigations of academic outcomes of foster care alumni in higher education (Davis, 2006; Day et al., 2011; Dworsky & Courtney, 2010). Day et al. (2011) found that foster care alumni were more likely to drop out of college before graduation than a comparison group of low-income first generation college students who had not been in foster care. In addition, Davis (2006) found that only 26% of former foster youth who attend college graduated, compared to the national average of 56%. While our analysis is limited by sample size (and that it comes from only one University), we found FCA Freshmen retention rates of 84% (versus 77% for the general student population) and a graduation rate of 64% (versus 56% for the general student population). The discrepancy between our study and previous investigations may be due to the fact that Day et al. (2011) and Davis (2006) identify former foster youth as those who self identified as having been a “ward of the court” on their financial aid application (FAFSA). We studied foster care alumni who receive the foster care tuition and fee waivers (not all FCA are eligible for the waivers). Thus the differences in graduation rates could reflect the benefits of tuition and fee waivers (which have not yet been evaluated). Our high rate of retention could also be a reflection of the waivers and/or the contribution of a strengths based campus support program. More generally, our findings raise important questions about higher education outcomes for foster care alumni and whether dramatic variations may exist across states and universities depending on the level of support provided. We hope to see additional investigations that describe foster care alumni experiences in higher education and assess state policies and campus efforts designed to improve outcomes for this group.

Finally, we would like to comment on an additional criticism of the strengths perspective offered by Gray (2011, p. 10) who states:

“While stemming from sound philosophical foundations, it (the strengths perspective) is in danger of running too close to contemporary neoliberal notions of self-help and self-responsibility and glossing over the structural inequalities that hamper personal and social development……While its strength lies in its humanizing potential, more than a focus on individual and community capacity is needed to deliver the transformative agenda it promises.”

We agree wholeheartedly with this assessment. However, we do not view this concern as an inherent limitation of the strengths perspective but rather a caution regarding the potential for a myopic misapplication of the perspective. It is generally accepted that foster care alumni outcomes are influenced by factors originating within the individual, the community, and the broader social system (Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005). We advocate for resources to be developed at each of these levels, rather than have resources at the individual-micro level be substituted for structural-macro supports. It is possible that our findings are a case study of the benefits that accrue for foster care alumni when all three levels of support are provided. We recognize the power of human agency and applaud the students we encountered for their resilience. Our study also points to the potential benefits of developing campus and community resources for these students. However, we recognize that this alone would not be sufficient. Individual agency and micro level interventions do not coalesce in a vacuum, but rather occur within a broader social context. In our case, the campus support program exists in Texas, one of only twenty states that offer tuition and fee waivers for foster care alumni. This structural support helps to level the playing field for foster youth. It is clear that socio-economic status affects college access and there is possibly no student group more
limited in their financial means than former foster youth. By removing this barrier the state creates fertile soil for growth. States without these supports essentially toss their seeds on gravel and lament the lack of success. What we believe we see here is evidence of strength and success emerging when resilient individuals exist within supportive micro and macro systems.

Acknowledgment

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References


