Developmental *Meaning-Making* Dynamics of Emancipated Foster Care Youth

Transitioning into Higher Education: A Constructivist-Grounded Theory

A dissertation presented to

the faculty of

The Patton College of Education of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Jacob O. Okumu

August 2013

© 2013 Jacob O. Okumu. All Rights Reserved.
This dissertation titled
Developmental *Meaning-Making* Dynamics of Emancipated Foster Youth Transitioning into Higher Education: A Constructivist Grounded Theory

by

JACOB O. OKUMU

has been approved for
the Department of Counseling and Higher Education
and the Patton College of Education by

Peter C. Mather
Associate Professor of Counseling and Higher Education

Renée A. Middleton
Dean, The Patton College of Education
Abstract

OKUMU JACOB O., PhD, August 2013, Higher Education

Developmental Meaning-Making Dynamics of Emancipated Foster Youth Transitioning into Higher Education: A Constructivist-Grounded Theory

Director of Dissertation: Peter C. Mather

This research investigates developmental meaning-making dynamics of emancipated foster care youth transitioning into higher education and the role college campus environments play in that process. Meaning-making is a constructive-developmental epistemological paradigm that conceptualizes how individuals organize their experiences in relation to their quest for a consistent self-identity and a meaningful engagement with their environments over time. It is the fundamental process by which one develops the core of one’s personal identity and purposeful living.

The study develops additional grounded theoretical conceptualizations to the college student development theoretical base that acknowledges the needs, goals and values of disenfranchised college students transitioning into higher education. It also develops mentoring tools to empower emancipated foster youth to claim the authority of their own experiences, liberate themselves from debilitating constraints and self-author their unique developmental paths as they explore their college careers.
Dedication

To the eight emancipated foster care youth who participated in this research and for the young men and women still in foster care and yet ablaze with the passionate desire to excel in the academy, this is your voice!
Acknowledgments

First, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the eight emancipated foster care youth who allowed me into the sacred space of their lives while in foster care and their transitional experiences into the various college campus environments in the United States. You taught me the spirit of fortitude and gratitude. Dr. Robert Young (Bob) - you believed in me and wholeheartedly empowered me to pursue this intellectual journey and excel in ways hitherto inconceivable. Dr. Mather - as my mentor, academic advisor and friend you chaired the dissertation committee with grace and excellence. To both of you - asanteni sana!

Dean David Descutner, PhD., you taught me what it means to multi-task without losing my mind – a trait I needed during my dissertation year! Dr. Jaylynne Hutchinson, your farsighted observations during my dissertation phase challenged me to ensure that my research questions and findings also spoke to the readership outside my functional area. Dr. Yegan Pillay, you enkindled my mind and heart with a balanced and empowering therapeutic presence. Additionally, your recollected presence and consistent invitation to integrate my personal story into this dissertation remains an invaluable piece of the final product of this research. Dr. Valerie Martin Conley - when my laptop installed with the NVIVO software crashed, you granted me a generous access to the departmental computer to complete my work. I remain wholeheartedly grateful.

This dissertation was exclusively funded by the Paul P. Fidler Grant from The National Resource Center for the First Year Experience and Students in Transition based at the University of South Carolina. The title of this dissertation also appears in the
2012-2013 Fidler Recipient Official Press Release as my research proposal title (National Resource Center, 2012). I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the Center for the financial support that enabled me to conduct data collection and data analysis with so much ease.

Access to the research participants involved in this study would have been almost impossible without the generous support of Lisa Dickson, the Communications Chair Foster Care Alumni of America Ohio chapter, Dr. Yvonne Unrau of the Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, Ms. Simone Polk from The Wright State University, and Dr. Greg Lester of Ohio University, Athens.

Sweethums Kay-Anne Darlington-Okumu and Zhiva Okumu, you are my precious angels! Thank you for creating time for daddy to spend long nights in his study! I love you more every single day! Mama – Mrs. Rose Atieno Okumu, you were the first to teach me how to proficiently speak, read, think and write in multiple languages. *Merci maman!* Papa – Johannes Okumu Opiyo – a strategic thinker and well-read professional! I know where you are up there in eternal bliss you continue to pray for us! Thank you for inculcating in me an appetite for an ongoing active engagement with intellectual discourse and diverse published literature! Now I appreciate why our family living room and our bedrooms had more bookshelves than other furniture!

Last but not least, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the College Adjustment Program (CAP) at the Ohio University, Athens for creating an opportunity for me to meet and interact with emancipated foster care youth for the first time in my life as the academic advisor and mentor!
# Table of Contents

Abstract ............................................................................................................................... 3  
Dedication ........................................................................................................................... 4  
Acknowledgments............................................................................................................... 5  
Table of Contents ................................................................................................................ 7  
List of Tables ...................................................................................................................... 9  
List of Figures .................................................................................................................... 10  
Chapter 1: Introduction ..................................................................................................... 11  
  Statement of the Problem ........................................................................................... 15  
  Purpose of the Study ................................................................................................. 16  
  Definition of Terms ................................................................................................. 20  
Chapter 2: Literature Review ............................................................................................ 22  
  Emancipated Youth and Education Success .............................................................. 22  
  Emancipated Youth and Education Attainment .......................................................... 25  
  College Outreach and Emancipated Youth ............................................................... 26  
  Emancipated Foster Youth and College Retention ................................................. 30  
  Developmental Meaning-Making Dynamics ............................................................ 32  
  College Students and Meaning-Making ..................................................................... 42  
  Concluding Remarks ............................................................................................... 44  
Chapter 3: Methodology ................................................................................................... 46  
  Constructivist Grounded Theory ............................................................................... 46  
  Grounded Theory ...................................................................................................... 49  
  Recruitment of Research Participants ..................................................................... 51  
  Data Collection. ........................................................................................................ 53  
  Data Analysis ........................................................................................................... 57  
  Constructivist Grounded Theory: Coding Process ............................................... 59  
  Concluding Remarks ............................................................................................... 69  
Chapter 4: Findings.............................................................................................................. 70  
  Participants' Meaning-Making Synopses ................................................................... 71  
  Theme Identification .................................................................................................. 128  
  Results for Research Question 1 ............................................................................. 130  
  Results for Research Question 2 ............................................................................. 154  
  Concluding Remarks ............................................................................................... 172  
Chapter 5: Conceptualizing a Constructivist Grounded Theory - A Discussion .............. 173  
  Synopsis of the study ............................................................................................... 177  
  A Constructivist Grounded Theoretical Conceptualization ..................................... 183  
  Methodological Assumptions and Scope of the Study ............................................ 201  
  Ethical Considerations ............................................................................................. 205  
  Concluding Remarks ............................................................................................... 207  
  Implications for Further Research ............................................................................ 208  
  Conclusions and Implications for Practice in Student Affairs ................................ 210
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Reflections</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A: Characteristics of Research Participants</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B: Case by Case Summary Extracted from NVIVO</td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C: Exemplar Quotes of Emerging Themes</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix D: IRB Approval</td>
<td>278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix E: IRB Periodic Review with Amendment</td>
<td>279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix F: Ohio University Consent Form</td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix G: Recruitment Letter</td>
<td>282</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix H: Interview Protocol</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 1</td>
<td>Kegan’s Levels of Consciousness</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2</td>
<td>Baxter Magolda’s Phases of the Meaning-Making Process</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3</td>
<td>Themes, Subthemes and Definitions for Research Question 1</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4</td>
<td>Frequency of Themes and Subthemes for Research Question 1</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5</td>
<td>Themes, Subthemes and Definitions for Research Question 2</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6</td>
<td>Frequency of Themes and Subthemes for Research Question 2</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures

Figure 1: Key Grounded Theory Processes used in this Study.............................................50
Figure 2: Interview Transcriptions Data imported into NVIVO .................................58
Figure 3: Example of Free Nodes created, namely Research Question 1 and 2 .............62
Figure 4: Coding Summary Report for a Single Case Research Participant Coding by
Established “Child Nodes” and Percentage Coverage Extracted from NVIVO ..........63
Figure 5: Coding Summary of Progression from Child Nodes to Emergent
Conceptualization Extracted from NVIVO .................................................................64
Figure 6: Cross Case Analysis Coding Results Summary from NVIVO ......................65
Figure 7: Example of Across Case Reference of the Emergent Theme of “Increased Self-
love” .............................................................................................................................67
Figure 8: Illustration of the number of codes and a cross-case coding references ......68
Chapter 1: Introduction

As of January 2013 it is documented that approximately over 400,540 children were under the jurisdiction of the foster care system in United States (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). Of this population at least 245,000 exit the foster care jurisdiction annually. In the fiscal year 2011, over 545,000 children were attended to in foster care settings. This is nearly 1% of the nation’s children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). Of this population, 11% were multiracial or of other races, 23% black, 21% Hispanic and 44% Caucasian (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013).

The exit statistics of emancipated foster care youth increased from 19,367 in 2002 to over 28,000 in 2010. In 2011, 14 % of the 245,260 young men and women who left foster care jurisdiction, those who aged-out into some form of independent living is estimated to be over 34,000 (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). At least 77% of those who exit foster care are diagnosed with at least one physical, emotional or mental disability (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012).

In the Fiscal Year 2011, on average at least 26,978 foster youth were discharged to emancipation mostly at age eighteen in the United States without being adopted by caring families or provided with lifelong family support networks (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). These emancipated youth have to navigate the challenges of securing stable housing, acquiring post-secondary education, finding gainful employment and becoming successful adults without structures ordinarily available and accessible to their peers without foster care experiences.
Research in the last thirteen years indicate that those who emancipate from the foster care system often present as less prepared for autonomous and productive adult life (Cook, 1994; Courtney, Dworsky, Lee & Raap, 2010; Courtney, Pilliavin, Grogan-Kaylor & Nesmith, 2001; McMillen & Tucker, 1999; Merdinger, Hines, Osterling & Wyatt, 2005). Other studies postulate that the young people with experiences from the foster care system would be more unlikely to obtain material support as well as other forms of mentorship from biological relatives as compared to the youth with no foster care experience (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Rapp, 2010).

Additional research demonstrates a preponderance of multiple foster care placement changes (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). Placement instability associated with foster care has been found to engender frequent school changes, as well as the disruption of consistent educational progress (Courtney, Terao & Bost 2004; Pecora et al., 2005; Wolanin, 2005) and personal psychosocial development (Pecora et al., 2005) rendering the foster youth inadequately prepared for the rigors of college academic and psychosocial development demands.

An estimate of only about 20% of the youth with foster care experience are reported to attain post-secondary school enrollment relative to approximately 60% of their counterparts with no foster care experiences (Wolanin, 2005). This demonstrates that the youth with foster care experience poor educational attainment relative to the general population. It has further been established that upon entering college the foster youth are more unlikely to persist in their college career through graduation (Davis, 2006).
The existing college student support services tailored for the needs of first-generation students with lower socio-economic status are not intentionally designed to specifically address the needs of emancipated foster youth transitioning into higher education (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010; Emerson, 2006; Price, 2008; Pontecorvo, El-Askari & Putnam, 2006; Schultz & Muller, 2008). Critical to this dissertation is the recent observation made by Dworsky and Pérez (2010) that there exists a gap between the emancipated youth’s perceived college transition needs and the current college student support services provided. This study subsequently explores developmental meaning-making (Kegan, 1982, 1994) dynamics of emancipated foster care youth transitioning into higher education and the role college campus environments play in that process.

One of the central tasks that living things (organisms) such as animals, plants, virus or bacteria perform is to organize (Perry, 1970). For instance, organs are a structure of tissues formed as a unit to interact in order to perform certain vital functions. Tissues however are brought together as a unit of specialized cells and substances they secrete to function in a coordinated function.

Experience is not what simply happens to us as human beings. In other words, we do not have a stand-alone experience out there that simply gets transfused to each one of us as individuals. No experience exists bereft of the meaning-making context. Experience is not what happens to us, instead it is how we engage with and process what happens to us (Kegan, 1982). This process requires a context.

As humans, we provide the meaning-making contexts through which events and experiences become realities in our lives. We organize meaning relative to our identity,
our experiences, and our interactions with our specific environment. In other words, we constantly and actively construct our view of what we experience relative to our identity and environment. This is the fundamental process by which we develop our personal identities and purposeful lives relative to our contexts.

However, the nature of this dynamic process and growth changes over time throughout different points of one’s life. In this study, this dynamic process of organizing meaning relative to our experiences is what I refer to as developmental meaning-making. The college campus environmental factors play a major role in this process. Indeed, constructive-developmental theorists such as (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Brooks & Brooks, 1999; Piaget, 1967; Kegan, 1982, 1994; King & Kitchener, 1994; Kohlberg, 1984) postulate that environments can either enhance or diminish this vital meaning-making developmental goal.

This research explores how emancipated foster care youth organize their understanding of their personal identity, their feelings, their thoughts, their interpersonal relationships and their experiences as they transition into college. The study therefore provides alternative ways of conceptualizing college student transitional experiences and promotes student developmental outcomes in ways that acknowledge students’ meaning-making abilities, individual needs, goals and values with specific reference to the experiences of the emancipated foster care youth (Baxter Magolda, 1998, 2001, 2004; Kegan, 1982, 1994; Pizzolato, 2003, 2004, 2005).
This dissertation is informed by a constructive-developmental theoretical paradigm and designed using the grounded theory research methodology. Subsequently, the following research questions guide this study:

1. How do emancipated foster care youth college students *make-meaning* of their transitional college experiences?
2. In what ways do their college campus experiences play a role in this developmental process?

**Statement of the Problem**

Extensive studies have been advanced on adverse outcomes associated with emancipated foster care youth transitioning into independent living (Collins, 2001; Courtney & Dworsky, 2005; McMillen & Tucker, 1999; Pecora et al., 2005; Reilly, 2003). However, current literature on emancipated youth transitioning into higher education has focused mostly on impact evaluation of the existing student support services (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010). I was unable to find a study attempting to integrate the emancipated foster youth college students’ developmental dynamics of *meaning-making*, their perceived college developmental needs, and the college student support services offered.

Moreover, a combined EBSCO search for “developmental meaning-making” and “emancipated foster youth” resulted in “0” hits – revealing that no published research has thus far explored the lived experiences and dynamics of meaning-making of emancipated youth transitioning into higher education.
Nonetheless, substantial documented studies chronicle the dynamics of meaning-making among college students and young adults (Abes, 2003; Baxter Magolda, 2001; Creamer and Laughlin, 2005; Hornak & Ortiz, 2004; Kegan, 1982, 1994; Lewis et al., 2005; Pizzolato, 2003, 2004; Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004; Torres & De Sawal, 2007; Salazar, 2011).

None of the literature I examined addresses emancipated foster care students’ transitional experiences into higher education with a special emphasis on questions of meaning-making dynamics and transitional experiences into higher education. The theoretical assumption guiding this study is that how college students live out their personal histories and lives - mediated by the college campus environments - provides a sense of coherence and meaning and subsequently act as an empowering rudder in their quest for personal identity, personal autonomy, meaning of their college transitional experiences and purpose in their college career and life goals.

This research therefore explores unique constructive-developmental patterns among emancipated foster care college students and proposes additional substantive theoretical foundations by which college student developmental outcomes can be effectively promoted in ways that acknowledge the needs, goals and values of disenfranchised college students in the United States.

**Purpose of the Study**

The meaning-making ability has been considered as a key component in the assessment of the overall intended college student learning outcomes. For instance, The United States National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education established the
following learning outcomes, among others, as essential to post-secondary education: the ability to demonstrate that one is able to be autonomous and self-driven, competency in autonomous thinking and creative problem-solving skills as well as the ability to demonstrate that one is able to creatively engage, interact and work with people from diverse backgrounds (Shavelson & Huang, 2003).

One of the goals in this study is to explore the extent to which emancipated foster care youth transitioning into higher education process and organize their transitional experiences in a way that either enhances or diminishes the intended learning outcomes as outlined by the Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. Meaning-making as an intended learning outcome has been conceptualized as a fundamental preferred learning outcome for higher education in the 21st Century – a learning outcome espoused in numerous colleges and divisions of student affairs in the United States (Baxter Magolda, 2004, 2007; Love & Guthrie, 1999).

Additionally, higher educational institutions have been challenged to integrate learning and student developmental goals with self-authored meaning-making developmental competency that provides an individual with life skills that are self-sustaining and empower students to process different life experiences meaningfully and take responsibility for the consequences of what the entire dynamic process entails. This self-authored meaning-making ability is believed a critical feature that nurtures the rest of personal identity, growth and development (Wildman, 2007).

This study subsequently extends the college student development discourse to include the exploration of the dynamics of developmental meaning-making as
experienced by the emancipated foster youth transitioning into higher education. The research aims at broadening the dimensions and paths along which meaning-making develops and thereby illuminating specific areas of focus that educators may utilize to help foster student development.

The concept of meaning-making is also useful for college student development discourse in that it provides a template for college student personnel and faculty with a “broader, more holistic framework for understanding and fostering student intellectual growth” (Meszaros, 2007 p. 13). This also provides faculty and college student personnel with a broader understanding of the connections and components of self-authoring ways of knowing (Baxter Magolda, 2004).

Indeed, Baxter Magolda (2008) later added that *meaning-making* ability empowers individuals to creatively navigate the responsibilities of adulthood. Subsequently, a clear grasp of the *meaning-making* process helps educators better prepare and foster relevant and more holistic intervention strategies for the ever emerging diverse college student population in our college campus environments.

In this research, I postulate that *meaning-making* competency has the ability to empower college students to further explore, question, and engage with a quest for an integrated sense personal identity. Such a pursuit complements and underscores the very core and true values of liberal and holistic education that challenges learners to engage in a quest for self-exploration and self-knowledge. Aptly put by Astin, Astin and Lindholm (2011), it is a kind of educational path that “examines learning and knowledge in relation to the exploration of self” (p. 3).
Moreover, educational experiences and interactions have been conceptualized as an opportunity to empower students to assume transformative and liberative roles in their local and wider communities. Educational experiences thus considered ought to therefore challenge students to take a stand in the quest for civic engagement and social justice (Freire, 2000; Giroux 1983; Hooks, 1994; Rhoads & Black, 1995). Subsequently self-authored meaning-making capacity has been paralleled to a dynamic self-drive that entails “extricating oneself from inherited constraints and authorizing oneself in the margins between cultures” (Maan, 2005, p. 224).

This research therefore provides additional theoretical base needed to help educators foster among the emancipated foster youth the empowering potential of self-authored meaning-making ability in order for the students to be able to claim the authority of their own experiences, liberate themselves from debilitating constraints and self-author their personal unique life paths as they engage in their college careers.

For that reason, this study develops grounded theoretical conceptualizations of the components of meaning-making as experienced by the emancipated foster care college student transitioning into higher education. Such an understanding will provide this population and other stakeholders in higher education with additional resources and tools to help in formulating systems of meanings that help inform their quest for an integral sense of identity and purpose as they pursue their college career. Subsequently, this research presents alternative ways of conceptualizing college student transitional experiences, advance theoretical understanding of the emancipated youth college
developmental process, and offer insights into how student affairs professionals and mentors can better serve their needs.

The concept of developmental meaning-making is explored within the constructive-developmental epistemological paradigm that integrates mental development, identity formation, and relationships that are interpersonal (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Kegan, 1982, 1994). Consequently by taking a constructive-developmental approach, this research explores the complexities of emancipated youth’s college transitional experiences, and investigates how different ways of understanding those experiences influence their developmental process of meaning-making, college success, and life decisions.

Definition of Terms

1. Meaning-making process is centered upon individual’s enduring philosophical paradigms, narratives of one’s experiences in life, personal life goals, viewpoints, and belief systems that shape who we are as individuals and communities, and which one mobilizes and uses to make sense of one’s own environment and experiences (Kegan, 1994, Nash & Murray, 2010; Parks 2011).

2. Self-authorship entails the ability to carry out such mental tasks autonomously and inspired from personal authority, rather than based upon external hidden agenda, formula or restrictions (Kegan, 1994; Baxter-Magolda, 2001).

3. Foster care is a system where governmental authority assumes temporary responsibility for minors who have been removed from their primary care-givers. In other words: “When birth parents or other care givers do not provide adequate
protection and nurturance, city, or state governments intervene in *loco parentis* to care for the child.” (Pecora, et al., p. 4).

4. *Emancipated foster care youth* is one who leaves court and child welfare jurisdiction, commonly at age 18 in the United States, after the foster care system has deemed it impossible to reunite the child with biological family or find an alternative permanent placement for the youth.

5. *Constructivist* epistemological paradigm views all reality as fashioned within the interaction between individuals and their environment and developed and in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and contextually developed and conveyed. (Crotty, 1998).

6. *Constructive-developmental* student theories emphasize the 'growth or transformation’ of ways people organize meaning (Kegan, 1994), relative to their lived experiences.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter I review the literature relevant to my guiding research questions. This literature sensitized and enriched the entire research process of data collection, coding, data analysis, and interpretation. It also shaped my understanding of the data, and contributed to theoretical conceptualizations within a constructivist grounded theory research paradigm (Charmaz, 2006). Indeed in this chapter, an overview of the experiences that generally enhance or impede college student success of the emancipated foster care youth is also explored. Additionally, I also examine current research on college-based programs designed for the youth aging out of foster care.

Furthermore, I also attempted to strike a balance in uncovering research that sensitized me to current theoretical concepts closely related to my guiding research questions while being cognizant of the emerging views, theories and processes relevant to the emancipated youth participating in this study. Literature review in this study also provides additional stratum that continues to inform an ongoing dynamic research process, theoretical development closely related to my overarching research questions.

Emancipated Youth and Education Success

The emancipated youth is one who has aged-out of the foster care system after attaining the statutory age as stipulated by the governing bodies in the States constituting the United States of America. These emancipated youth are the individuals who have been discharged from the state jurisdiction to independent living or to be reunified with their biological families.
Research demonstrates that some youth who have aged out of the foster care end often up being incarcerated as criminals, whereas others end up becoming hospitalized for extended periods of time in mental health facilities. Others are reported to simply disappear with no way to trace them (Child Information Gateway, 2013).

In some States such as Missouri, Illinois, Maryland and New York, the foster care youth are required to emancipate at age 21. In Wisconsin, Texas and California, the State requires foster youth to age-out from the foster care system after their eighteenth birthday or as soon as they graduate from High school (McCoy, McMillen & Spitznagel, 2008).

Considerable literature demonstrates the adverse outcomes of emancipated foster care youth (Barth, 1990; Collins, 2001; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor & Nesmith, 2001; Dworsky, 2005; McMillen & Tucker, 1999; Pecora et al., 2005; Reilly, 2003). Indeed, one could on the same note argue that emancipated foster youth, just like all other youth transitioning into college and adulthood, have to negotiate a series of similar developmental challenges (Arnett, 2000; Courtney & Dworsky, 2009).

As a case in point, research indicates that in recent times at least 28% of freshmen polled in a national survey reported distress with college transition and at least 8% reported clinical depressive symptoms (Benton & Benton, 2006). Another national survey reported that an ever growing number of college students presenting with severe emotional and mental health challenges is becoming source of concern for about 84% of counseling centers nationwide (Gallagher, 2001).

However, emancipated foster youth navigate mental health and other transition challenges without the support traditionally available for the general college student
population. Moreover, young people with foster care experience are often disconnected from stable caring adults, family and friends (Osgood, Foster, Flannagan & Ruth, 2004).

Furthermore, their previous experiences relative to foster care frequently include a history of neglect, abuse, trauma, attachment disorders, and substance abuse (Courtney et al., 2001; Pecora et al., 2003; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008). These factors have been linked to increased risks of low educational attainment (Bruce, Naccarato, Hopson, & Morrelli, 2010).

Therefore, the emancipated youth have to negotiate distinctive hurdles that may impede their access and retention within higher education. Such obstacles include having to attend preparatory/remedial classes, experience frequent school changes, contend with inexistent or weak empowering and supporting social support systems and unstable mentor or family connections, inadequate financial support as well as poor emotional and mental health (Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004; Pecora, Kessler, Williams, Obrien, Downs, English, et al, 2005).

Successful educational experiences have been associated with improved self-worth, confidence, positive student growth and development, quest for self-identity and purpose and greater earning potential and financial self-sufficiency for all young people (Redd, Brooks, & McGarvey, 2002). Emancipated foster care youth encounter unique challenges in accomplishing this goal.

In Ohio, Wisconsin, Texas, and California, the state government does not retain jurisdiction of youth with foster care experience beyond the statutory age of eighteen. Some of these young adults are subsequently let out into the community with an abrupt
termination of financial support, a disruption of interpersonal relationships propelled by multiple foster care placements, a history of abuse and loss, no place to call home, and no meaningful caring adult relationship committed to help them address personal challenges to facilitate effective transition into adulthood (Ladew & Benedetto, 2003). Such predicaments conspire against successful life and college transitions and the integral personal growth and development of the emancipated foster care young adults. Indeed it is noteworthy that current research indicates that typical young adults are hardly self-sufficient until about age 26 (Bahney, 2006).

Whereas independent living programs and other socio-economic support systems are available to the emancipated youth beyond the statutory age in and outside higher education settings, outcomes of former foster care youth are disheartening. Current emancipated transitional services into higher education do not effectively equip former foster care youth with adequate tools for life skills as well as the social support needed for them to emerge as well-functioning healthy adults (Courtney, Terao & Bost, 2004; Wolanin, 2005).

**Emancipated Youth and Education Attainment**

Recent studies show that current college transition support services for emancipated young adults focus more on financial, housing and academic services (Dworsky & Perez, 2010) and less on other developmental needs such as *meaning-making* and character formation, and developing purpose.

In order to foster college access and attainment among the foster care youth, the *Chafee Foster Care Act* of 2001 was amended by the U.S. Congress and put in place the
Education and Training Voucher Program (ETV). This was to ensure that the youth in foster care youth destined for college education were eligible for a yearly financial assistance of no less $5,000 (Kessler, 2004).

Though this initiative fosters access to education for the foster care youth, it does not address their non-financial needs. Additionally, the impact of Education and Training Voucher Program on postsecondary attainment and success among emancipated foster youth is still unknown given that a formal national wide assessment is yet to be conducted (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010).

Furthermore, the United States Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) of 2008 stipulates that the youth from the foster care system ought to be given a head start for early college preparedness, and college access through federal program initiatives such as the Talent Search, Upward Bound, Educational Opportunity Program and the TRIO initiative (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

**College Outreach and Emancipated Youth**

There exist a growing number of college student support services that endeavor to provide an assortment of academic, social and logistical support to former foster care youth transitioning into college for retention and academic success. These programs are not available nationwide and those that exist are mostly located in the states of Washington and California and typically sustained, at least in part, by well-wishers (Dworsky & Perez, 2010).

The study conducted by Pontecorvo, El-Askari, and Putnam (2006) investigated the impact of five college student support programs that targeted college students from
foster care. The findings indicated that those foster care students participating in those programs experienced higher retention and graduate rates compared to those foster youth who did not. The study however did not factor in the possible impact of other attributes and variables including but not limited to time the emancipated youth spent in foster care, the interpersonal relational dynamics with foster parents, parental style and guidance of foster parents, as well as gender and race – variables that could in part account for some of the observed outcomes of the study.

In another impact evaluation study of an additional seven college scholarship programs for emancipated foster care college students, Schultz and Mueller (2008) explored the correlation between the attributes of individual program participants as well as the services the scholarship programs offered and academic performance as well as other outcomes specific to the various program components.

Using a sample population of one thousand four hundred and forty five, the research utilized a web-based survey to gather information related to requirements for eligibility, program components, total number of scholarship recipients, demographics of the recent scholarship recipients, total expenditure of the programs, the nature of contact between the staff and scholarship awardees, and the assessment procedures of the program activities.

However, the study did not make available other relevant data related to how the programs were tracking emancipated foster care college students’ ongoing comprehensive personal development, academic assessment, grade point averages attained, credits earned or degree completion. Such additional data would provide
additional baseline for assessing the extent to which student support services comprehensively meet the goal of ensuring college success of the emancipated foster youth enrolled in our higher institutions.

A multi-level study by Cooper, Mery and Rassen (2008) examined how the educational needs of the emancipated and current foster care youth were being addressed by community colleges in California. The study not only postulated the best practices and challenges experienced in select community colleges in California, but also proposed ways by which the support services in those community colleges could be improved.

In the above study, data was mostly obtained through personal in-depth interviews with relevant stakeholders such as faculty and staff from a total number of twelve colleges and through surveys sent to the emancipated foster youth enrolled in at least 36 different community colleges in California as well as to the community college contact staff responsible for the educational needs of the emancipated foster youth in those colleges. The study revealed that community colleges lacked adequate resources to reach out and tackle the needs of the emancipated foster care college students. However, the focus of this study was mostly on the educational needs of the emancipated and current foster care youth.

Dworsky and Pérez (2010) later explored the implementation of college campus support services designed to provide emancipated foster care college students with financial, academic and other kinds of support as needed. Using telephone interviews, the study collected data from 10 program administrators within the State of Washington and California. This study employed a web-based survey characterized by close-ended
questions to gathered data from 98 predominantly female participants inquiring into how
the program helped them transition into college, whether or not it impacted their
academic success, and how the program could be tailored further to meet their perceived
or actual needs.

The 98 research participants in this study were racially and ethnically diverse, and
some of the survey questions utilized were open-ended thereby providing the participants
with an opportunity to freely express themselves in ways they found most relevant to
their situation. Additionally, this research by Dworsky and Pérez (2010) focused on the
impact of select college campus environment support programs tailored for emancipated
foster care youth transitioning into higher education. One of the critical findings of study
and relevant to this dissertation was the perceived gap between what the college campus
support services provided on one hand, and the needs that the emancipated foster care
students transitioning college felt they actually needed on the other.

Furthermore, whereas the program directors involved in the study observed that
academic support, housing and financial assistance were the most important ingredients
that ensured academic success for emancipated youth transitioning into higher education,
the emancipated foster care college students listed the sense of and connectedness to
family as well as an enduring relationship with a caring adult or role model as critical
ingredients in ensuring their success in college.

Indeed, additional research confirms that empowered emancipated foster youth
report that their academic and life success, for the most part, can be attributed to the
generous support of empowering adult mentors (Ahrens, Richardson, Lozano, Fan and Dubois, 2008).

**Emancipated Foster Youth and College Retention**

Recently, Salazar (2011) conducted a study to investigate whether or not postsecondary factors generally related to college retention and completion among student groups traditionally considered as at risk as well as the general college student population also apply for the youth with foster care experiences. The study also examined whether or not *foster-care specific* experiences play a major role in predicting emancipated foster youth college retention and completion over and above those general factors linked with retention in the traditional college student population.

The above study utilized online data collected from a survey sample of seven hundred and sixty four emancipated youth who had been scholarship recipients of Casey Family Scholarship Program as well as the Foundation of America’s Foster Care Scholarship Program. The online survey sought to explore the experiences, supports and barriers of foster youth before, through and after college life circumstances. The study demonstrated that the foster care specific experiences did account for any statistical significant difference relative to the traditional college student population with respect to college retention and completion (Salazar, 2011).

The online survey protocol focused on reporting experiences in retrospect. It is my considered contention that the post-college personal outcomes and experiences influence how the participants report their past engagement with their previous college campus environments. This is also consistent with constructive-developmental theoretical
framework in which meaning-making is relative to experiences over time and space. An experience that has in the past been interpreted as painful and stressful has a potential of becoming a bitter-sweet but empowering one in the present relative to environmental factors and personal growth and development. Additionally, such retrospective reports have been found to consist of elements of inaccurate data due to memory error (Dilillo et al., 2006).

Moreover, the foster youth selected for this particular study were all scholarship students with high academic credentials. It is possible that the barriers, strengths and support systems that predict retention among this population may not adequately reflect those of the general population of emancipated youth transitioning into college.

Again, no in-person contact was established during this online research process. As a result nothing was in place to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the central research questions, clarity of responses and emotional care if participants experienced discomfort and distress due to the nature of survey questions and the resultant emerging questions originating from the research participants.

To alleviate those limitations the current dissertation espoused a qualitative in-depth face-to-face interview approach by empowering the emancipated youth to share their story and experiences in the present as they transition into college relative to their experiences in foster care. All participants were emancipated foster care youth aged between 18 and 21 in their first or second year of studies in select residential Universities and community colleges in the United States.
In this dissertation, the research participants were identified and recruited using purposeful and theoretical sampling technique consistent with grounded theory methodology. Additionally, the participants were selected based on recommendations from student affairs professionals, Foster Care Alumni of America and the Ohio Reach Foster Care Outreach Services. To gain maximum variation and gather rich description of experiences the participants ranged in experiences, gender, age and ethnic backgrounds.

**Developmental Meaning-Making Dynamics**

*Meaning-making* as a constructive-developmental epistemological paradigm that explicates a manner by which we organize and conceptualize our experiences and personal identity, understand our environment and our place, and how we engage with our environment was initially conceptualized by Kegan (1994) then later developed through the works of Baxter Magolda (2001).

A self-authored *meaning-making* individual is one who has established a consistent manner of organizing and conceptualizing one’s experiences, understanding and positioning one’s life toward perplexing and even competing life experiences while at the same time able to maintain one’s established personal self-identity, one’s goals, beliefs as well as personal values (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Kegan, 1994, Pizzolato, 2003).

**Meaning-making: Robert Kegan.** Student developmental theories explore the psychosocial, cognitive-structural, as well as the typological growth and development of students in the context of their specific learning environments. The theories seek to examine individual student’s growth and development in relation to one’s relationship to
oneself, interpersonal relationships, and how they make meaning of their learning experiences. The goal is toward integral growth and development within the students learning environment (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998).

Kegan (1994) postulated a framework that envisioned and described how our “consciousness” (p. 4) evolves over time relative to the numerous and diverse life challenges. His epistemological framework is comprised of five meaning-making phases that individuals navigate through as they grow, develop, think and make meaning of their world, themselves, and their relationship with others. If one is to be content and successful in negotiating through those experiences one needs to have adequate capacities to handle and make meaning of those experiences. These phases of consciousness are defined in relation to a personal meaning-making process.

Meaning-making for Kegan (1994) is simultaneously a physical, social and survival activity. The levels of meaning-making process include: the initial mind that is impulsive, leading to the one that is mostly instrumental, giving way to a mind that is socialized, maturing into that which Kegan (1994) refers to as the self-authoring mind, and epitomizing with the self-transforming mind. These levels of consciousness denote the complexity by which an individual is able to make meaning of one’s experiences.

Kegan (1994) postulated that fundamental epistemological concepts in the meaning-making dynamic developmental processes mentioned above are the notions of subject and object. The term subject refers to the structure of our knowing process while notion object denotes the content of our knowing. The subject is embedded in us. For Kegan (1994) the subject constitutes “those elements of our knowing or organizing that
we are identified with, tied to, fused with, or embedded in” (p. 32). The subject is who we are. It is immediate and ultimate.

On the other hand the object is not embedded in us. Aptly put by Kegan (1994), the object constitutes: “those elements of our knowing or organizing that we can reflect on, handle, look at, be responsible for, relate to each other, take control of, internalize, assimilate, or otherwise operate upon” (p. 32). The object is what we possess. Indeed it is what we have, and it is both mediate and relative. In this epistemological paradigm, it is expected that as an individual’s meaning-making abilities advance in complexity, the subject progressively develops and transforms into the object.

In the first phase of consciousness, the Impulsive mind, Kegan (1994) postulates that the content of one’s knowing is one’s reflexes. The structure of the individual’s knowing consists of one’s perceptions and impulses. Reality in this order of consciousness is what one sees. The underlying structure of one’s meaning-making process is immediate, and single focused.

In the Instrumental mind, the content of one’s knowing are individual’s perceptions as well as impulses, the structure of one’s knowing are the needs and interests of the individual. The underlying structure of one’s meaning-making process entails durable categories. In other words, an individual operating in this realm realizes that one is happy and friendly not only because one is happy in the here and now or because one has a friend, but because there have been instances in the past when one has been happy and has had a friend. One strives to have one’s needs and interests taken care of but is aware that there is a price to pay in order to get them (Kegan, 1994).
In the *socialized mind*, the content of one’s knowing constitutes of the individual’s needs as well as interests. However, the structure of individual’s way of knowing entails interpersonal relationships and mutuality. The underlying structure of one’s *meaning-making* process is across categories. In this regard one’s identity is closely tied to one’s societal mores and way of life. This individual tends to defer to authority figures and strives to be faithful to what others prescribe as a *modus operandi*. One’s identity is subsumed in the societal one such that one’s dreaded fear is possibility of being unable to live up to societal expectations (Kegan, 1994).

The content of one’s knowing in the *Self-authoring mind* consists of interpersonal relationships and mutuality. The structure of one’s knowing is self-authoring and identity ideology. The underlying structure of one’s meaning-making process is systemic. In this order of consciousness an individual endeavors to be an independent thinker striving for authenticity. One strives to extricate oneself from societal external demands. The recurring fear is the failure to be authentic and inability to stand on one’s own feet and define life, identity, and social relations from one’s own terms (Kegan, 1994).

According to Kegan (1994), the zenith of an individual’s *meaning-making* dynamics is crystallized at the level of the *self-transforming mind*. At this level, the content of one’s knowing entails self-authoring and identity ideology. The structure of one’s knowing is however dialectic. The underlying structure of one’s meaning-making process is interdependent and multi-systemic. At this point, the individual is able to hold concurrently conflicting views about the world, but is able to reflect on and discern about what one realistically needs for one’s quest for personal identity and purpose.
Additionally, at this level, the individual is hardly troubled by seemingly contradictory personal life experiences. However, the worst fear for this individual experiencing this developmental phase is that of complacency; that is, the feeling that one knows it all and needs nothing more in life (Kegan, 1994). Table 1 provides a summary of Kegan’s levels of consciousness.

Kegan (1982) contended that “For a young person who has begun to emerge from an embeddedness in the interpersonal, the experience of going away to college can provide a new evolutionary medium that recognizes and cultures the moves toward self-authorship and psychological autonomy which characterize a new balance” (p. 185-186). Subsequently, it is in that light that this dissertation explores what that transitional college experience entails from the perspective of the emancipated foster care youth transitioning into a college.

**Meaning-making: Baxter Magolda.** Baxter Magolda (2001) extended the research began by Robert Kegan on meaning-making and applied them to higher education setting by demonstrating that self-authored meaning-making abilities empower college students with the ability to discern through and among ideas apparently in conflict and be able to conceptualize and realize innovative ones. Such ability also equips students with the ability problem solve as well as integrate their identity development such that they are better prepared to creatively engage with the demands of the post-college diverse milieu.

The study by Baxter Magolda (2001) presented meaning-making dynamics in the context of three dimensions within the developmental continuum. The first dimension is
epistemological in nature and examines the how students acquire knowledge, how they analyze knowledge, how they make meaning of that knowledge, how they make decisions and how they decide what to believe and live by. The key exploratory issue in this category is examining how individuals acquire knowledge.

Table 1

Kegan’s Levels of Consciousness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Consciousness</th>
<th>Structure of one’s knowing process</th>
<th>Content of one’s knowing</th>
<th>Meaning-making Structure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Impulsive Mind</td>
<td>Perceptions and impulses</td>
<td>Reflexes, sensations</td>
<td>Immediate, single-focused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental Mind</td>
<td>One’s needs and interests</td>
<td>Perceptions and impulses</td>
<td>Durable categories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialized Mind</td>
<td>Interpersonal relationships and mutuality</td>
<td>One’s needs and interests</td>
<td>Across-categories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Authoring Mind</td>
<td>Identity ideology, self-authorship</td>
<td>Interpersonal relationships and mutuality</td>
<td>Systemic and Complex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Transforming Mind</td>
<td>Dialectic and inter-institutional</td>
<td>Identity ideology, self-authorship</td>
<td>Interdependent, multi-systemic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Adapted from Kegan, 1994, p. 314-315 and Boes, 2006

Additionally, according to Baxter Magolda (2001, 2004), self-authoring meaning-making students demonstrate skills that suggest they recognize that while their knowledge is embedded in their life histories and context, they nevertheless have to attempt to balance such understanding with their internally personally defined established values, expectations and subsequently commit to them. In other words, self-authoring students are not only able to construct knowledge, but are also able to evaluate
knowledge claims, establish personal values and commit to those knowledge claims and values.

The underlying construct of the epistemological dimension being assessed here is problem solving skills that require the acquisition and analysis of knowledge that is domain non-specific. In that regard, Baxter Magolda (2001) therefore goes beyond an epistemological assessment that focuses only on classroom based knowing.

The second dimension is the Intrapersonal component. The Intrapersonal component of meaning-making refers to how one conceptualizes their personal identity relative to how one habitually, interacts and actively engages with one’s environment. The focus here is the ability for the student to demonstrate the extent to which one’s personal choices to commit to personal values as well as pursue relationships are driven by an enduring and consistent established unique personal identity, personal autonomy, and integrity. It responds to the question: “Who am I?” (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p.15).

The third dimension is the Interpersonal component. The Interpersonal dimension is understood by examining how an individual conceptualizes, builds, and develops one’s relationships with peers, friends, colleagues and family. It also conceptualized by exploring how an individual positions oneself in those relationships. Self-authored meaning-making individuals therefore demonstrate a sense of mutuality, collaboration and interdependence in their interaction with others without comprising their own unique identities.

Nonetheless, other studies reveal additional themes and components that constitute the structure of developmental meaning-making dynamics. For instance, over
the course of a longitudinal study, Baxter Magolda (2001) identified four transitional
meaning-making phases after conducting a longitudinal study with a group of students
from their freshman year into the post-college experiences. These phases included:
*following external formulas, the crossroads, becoming the author of one’s life,* and
*internal foundations.*

**Following external formulas.** In this phase, the moderating influences regarding
ones’ relationships, beliefs, and identity are external to the individual. Baxter Magolda
(2001) stated that since individuals operating in this phase are still unsure of their unique
personal identity and personal life purpose, they look toward the society around them and
what other people consider as success to their guiding rudder in life.

According to Baxter Magolda (2001) the *external formulas* determine behavior of
individuals navigating this phase of self-authorship as well as how they view themselves
and evaluate their success as well as failures. Recent studies acknowledge that many
students in our college campus environments function at this phase of development
(Baxter Magolda, 2001; Creamer and Laughlin, 2005; Abes and Jones, 2004; Lewis et al.,
2005; Pizzolato, 2005). In relation to Robert Kegan’s work (1982; 1994) the *external
formulas* could be equated to *subjects* rather than *objects* for the individual in this phase
of development.

On the other hand, following these *external formulas* is inadequate when it comes
to successfully transitioning into and navigating a college campus environment
characterized by numerous competing demands. The *formulas* are also insufficient if one
is to develop an autonomous personal identity and authority competent enough to ensure a successful navigation through and beyond the college career (Kegan 2002).

*The crossroads.* Competing demands of life such as adjusting to diversity and a new college campus environment can challenge the individual to reconsider previous ideas that have hitherto been taken as given (Torres & Hernandez, 2007). Such reconsideration catalyzes an individual to inject more internal self-authority in one’s decision-making process and into choosing a value system that meets long term needs and success.

This phase is referred to by Baxter Magolda (2001) as the “crossroads”. I refer to this process as “liberative desolation” or “recalibrative pitch”. Critical to this phase is the concept of engaging with competing notions of trust and discerning the right way forward. Kegan (1994) argues that trusting others is a key pillar to the third level of consciousness.

However with time, trusting others has to be outgrown by trust in oneself as a new higher orientation (Kegan, 1982). It is those moments when individuals begin to stand up for themselves and listen to their inner declarations about the kind of persons they want to be and become without any external influences.

Indeed such an experience is often a painful desolation and yet if one takes a bold move to follow their new found personal resolutions towards a personal new path, then it liberates. It is symbolically a pitch that allows one to recalculate one’s life goals and values relative to new found personal voice despite the challenges faced. This transformative experience of beginning to trust in oneself might not simply be a one-time
event. Pizzolato (2005) argues that this transformative experience might entail progressive series of experiences in a student’s college and even post-college life.

Research also indicates that college campus environments do provide experiences that potentially initiate the crossroads phase. Such experiences include but are not limited to navigating social and person identities as well as making meaning of service-learning experiences (Abes, 2003; Abes & Jones 2004; Abes, Jones & McEwen, 2007; Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004; Torres & Hernandez, 2007).

**Becoming the author of one’s life.** Individuals within this *meaning-making* continuum have already conceptualized that knowledge is constructed, that they are self-defined identities and that they have made commitment to their internal selves. At this level of growth and development, individuals begin to choose their own beliefs and values with a view to making personal commitments to their priorities and values.

Such self-definition is characterized by self-authorship, self-affirmation and mutuality. In other words, individuals now begin to engage in the self-defined process of establishing their personal values, their personal identity and the nature of their interpersonal relationships (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

However, according to Pizzolato (2005) during this phase it is critical that staff and faculty in our college campus environments recognize the importance of assessing the student’s ability to analyze a situation based on personal values and personal perspectives on one hand, and guiding the student’s action in such a way that it is consistent with self-authored reasoning on the other.
Subsequently, it is imperative that the developmental interventions employed to enhance this *meaning-making* developmental goal ought to enhance increased congruency between a student’s reasoning and the student’s action in relation to one’s internal belief, personal identity and interpersonal relationships (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

**Internal foundations.** According to Baxter Magolda (2001, 2004), an established inner value structure, personal identity, and crafting interpersonal relationships based on mutuality and interdependence are critical pillars in the establishment of an internal voice that guides, directs and authors an individual’s life. As the individual begins to experience and trust one’s personal, internal and autonomous voice, that voice becomes an internal foundation and rudder for self-authored ways of meaning-making.

For Baxter Magolda (2001), this meaning-making developmental dynamic empowers the individual to be mindful of one’s viewpoint as well as that of others in one’s personal decision making and discernment process. It also equally grants individuals the power to claim authority over their lives and their life goals. This meaning-making phase is characterized by an enduring inner strength and foundation that guides one’s feelings, thoughts, and actions. Table 2 provides a summary of the *meaning-making* process as postulated by Baxter Magolda (2001).

**College Students and Meaning-Making**

However, recent studies focusing on college students show that the attainment of self-authored *meaning-making* is not common among college students (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Abes & Jones, 2004; Torres & Hernandez, 2007).
Table 2

**Baxter Magolda’s Phases of the Meaning-Making Process**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Following external formulas</td>
<td>Authority figures exert key influence in one’s beliefs and plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The self is defined in the context of one’s external roles and interpersonal relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The goal of behavior is to seek approval from others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The crossroads</td>
<td>Accepted beliefs are questioned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conflict between societal expectations and self-identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A desired need to balance interpersonal relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becoming the author of one’s life</td>
<td>Trust in internal voice and belief system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Formulating a self-identity that is holistic and consistent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relationships include interdependence and reciprocity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal foundations</td>
<td>Depends an established inner value and belief structure and personal identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attains personal that is stable, personally defined and consistent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interpersonal relationships interdependent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Adapted from Baxter Magolda (2001).

Nonetheless, intriguing themes emerge from research on developmental *meaning-making* dynamics among college students. Pizzolato (2003, 2004) for instance, demonstrated that college students identified as first-generation, those from minority communities as well as those from lower socio-economic status, appeared to demonstrate complex ways of developmental *meaning-making* dynamics by the time they transition into college. The study demonstrated that developmental feature is probably due to provocative experiences that propel those students to commit to new internal self-defined goals relative to their experiences of marginalization.

The above observation is also echoed by Abes (2003) in the study of *meaning-making* among research participants who identified as lesbian and have traditionally been marginalized relative to their sexual orientation and/or gender. The research established
that indeed some of the research participants in that study demonstrated a developmental shift from a socialized mind towards the self-authoring mind as evinced by the way they challenged the social norms and expectations, integrated different viewpoints, and reconstructed their personal identity relative to their personal values and life goals. One may then safely assume that indeed certain experiences and environments can indeed propel college students into developing complex ways of being and meaning-making.

Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, a review of the literature relevant to my guiding research questions was conducted to inform but not cloud the processes of data collection, coding, data analysis, interpretation and the development of grounded conceptualizations from a constructivist-grounded theory research paradigm (Charmaz, 2006).

First, an overview of the factors that foster or hinder college success of the emancipated youth were explored. Next, current research on college campus interventions designed for emancipated foster care college student across the nation were also examined. Lastly, the relevant sensitizing theoretical perspectives on meaning-making were acknowledged in order to ensure that there is sensitivity to current relevant literature on the subject.

The goal was to ensure that this study is being sensitive to current relevant theoretical paradigms and while at the same time open to the emerging grounded theoretical conceptualization of the developmental meaning-making dynamics of the emancipated foster care youth transitioning into higher education.
In this chapter I also reviewed the life experiences of emancipated foster care youth in general and those transitioning into higher education in particular. I also equally explored the constructive-developmental college student development theories relative to the developmental *meaning-making* dynamics.

This literature review subsequently grounded the entire research process by providing a conceptual background to the research question and starting point for exploring the experiences of the emancipated youth transitioning into higher education. The sensitizing concepts obtained in this literature review provided this study with the relevant theoretical tools for designing the guiding research questions and developing the data collection process. This is consistent with the Grounded Theory methodology (Charmaz, 2006).

As already noted in Chapter 1, this research extends the college student development theoretical discourse by examining the dynamics of developmental meaning-making as experienced by the emancipated foster youth transitioning into higher education. The study thus attempts to broaden the dimensions and paths along which meaning-making dynamics develops and thereby illuminates specific areas of focus that educators may utilize to help foster holistic student development among diverse student populations in general and emancipated foster care college students in particular.
Chapter 3: Methodology

In this study I utilized the constructivist grounded theory research design. In constructivist grounded theory method and methodology, the researcher is actively repositioned as the interpreter of the experiences and the various levels of meaning the research participants present throughout the research process. Additionally, using this research design ensured that there was an active interaction between the research participants and the researcher with both parties contributing towards the final product of the research process (Appleton, 1997; Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Indeed, the constructivist epistemological paradigm employed in this study postulates that the way we view the world and interpret our life experiences is in part shaped by our distinct contexts and life histories (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Constructivist-Grounded Theory

In this study I employ the constructivist application to the grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2000, 2001, 2006) since it enabled me to acknowledge and maintain the balance between objectivity and bias during the entire research process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In the constructivist approach to the grounded theory, both the research participant and the researcher interactively create data together during the research process.

In light of the above, we can contend that by acknowledging the balance between objectivity and bias, being faithful to the research participants’ perspectives on how they make-meaning of their college transitional experiences, in addition to my role as the main
research instrument in data collection and analysis, ensures that emergent knowledge is indeed co-constructed (Hayes & Oppenheim, 1997; Pidgeon & Henwood, 1997).

My research epistemological paradigm propelled me to ensure that I was also being cognizant of not just the outcomes of the research but also the research process itself. Indeed, Bogdan & Biklen (1998) rightly assert that paying a close attention to the dynamics of the research process is a crucial attribute of the qualitative research methodologies of which grounded theory is a part.

This study provides an interpretative portrayal (Charmaz, 2000, Schwandt, 1994) of the emancipated foster care young adult’s transitional experiences into higher education. Furthermore, this research design also ensures that researchers are immersed in data in such a way that the research process grounds participants’ experiences and narratives in its ultimate product. Such grounding ensures that the research participants truly assume a critical role in the formulation and the reconstruction of the final substantive grounded theoretical ideas. A research process thus considered subsequently adheres to the ethical tenet that calls for researchers to endeavor to document what research participants share as faithfully as possible (Munhall, 2001).

Grounded theory is in general considered useful in the investigation of what people consider as of great significance in their lives including life adjustment and social challenges (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The social processes to which people must adjust or adapt include social psychological processes such as illness, adjustment issues or life transitions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Quint, 1967; Corbin & Strauss, 1988).
In recent times, the grounded theory approach has been used to examine how midwives help expectant mothers make informed choices (Levy, 1999). This research methodology has also been utilized to examine how the spouses of Japanese students and businessmen cope with transitioning into a new culture in the United States (Toyokawa, 2006). This dissertation explores the dynamics of developmental *meaning-making* as experienced by emancipated foster youth transitioning into higher education. The study examines how the contextual features and social processes of a college campus environment foster or hinder the developmental *meaning-making* dynamics of the emancipated foster care youth transitioning into higher education. Aptly put by Benoliel (1996):

> As an intellectual process, GT is built on assumptions that knowledge is not static; people are undergoing change; and the context functions to facilitate, to hinder, and to influence human goals and social and psychological processes. GT takes place in naturalistic settings and requires multiple sources of data to account for actual (as well as reported) interactions and the wider social context. (p. 416)

Previously, grounded theory researchers have been perceived as positioning themselves as detached research experts (Charmaz, 2001), and not involved in the restructuring of the research participants’ experiences. The constructivist grounded theory research design utilized in this study allowed me to immerse myself into the experiences of the emancipated foster youth transitioning into higher education. Subsequently this methodology was a good fit for my study in that it facilitated a close interaction with the research participants as they described how they *make-meaning* of their transitional
experiences into higher education and how those experiences shaped their transitional college experiences as well as their aspirations.

This methodology also enabled me to transcend a mere presentation of the phenomena under study and encapsulate specific grounded conceptualizations of the broader meaning-making dynamics operational during the research process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) thereby maintaining the participants’ active presence throughout the research process by way of interpreting their narratives and their perceptions. Critical to keeping the participants’ presence and perceptions throughout the research process, I utilized the memo-writing technique during every encounter with the research participants, the interview data and relevant sensitizing literature (Charmaz, 2000).

**Grounded Theory**

The grounded theory methodology has evolved over time. However, central to this research paradigm is the data collection research process that is inductive (Morse, 2001) and its goal of building substantive or conceptual theories around issues with significant import in people’s life experiences (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In other words, in grounded theory issues of importance in research participants’ lives emerge from the voices of the participants themselves and interpretations of those voices.

Additionally, although grounded theory has permutated and evolved since it emerged from the works of Glaser and Strauss in 1967, grounded theory generally entails: sampling that is theoretical in nature, constant comparative analysis, use of memo’s, coding, diagramming, identifying the core emerging themes, integrating
emerging themes and their essential properties as well as formulating emerging grounded conceptualizations and theories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; McCann & Clark, 2003). Figure 1 outlines the key processes of grounded theory that were employed in this study.

![Diagram of Key Grounded Theory Processes](image)

*Figure 1. Key Grounded Theory Processes Used in this Study*

The study also employed the grounded theory methodology for analyzing qualitative research data, identifying emergent themes and patterns as well as for developing grounded theoretical conceptualizations. In this research process, qualitative data was extensively analyzed by constant comparison method, initially case by case, data with data, followed by cross-case analysis and then by advancing to comparisons of
different interpretations and themes interpreted into codes and themes, as well as additional data obtained from follow up interviews.

This study focused on how the contextual features and social processes of college campus environments influence the form and direction of meaning-making dynamics as experienced by emancipated foster care youth transitioning into higher education. It engaged the emancipated foster care youth research participants by way of a personal one-on-one in-depth interview to ensure that the research findings are grounded on their actual reported transitional experiences. To that end the following overarching research questions guided this study:

1. How do emancipated foster care college students make-meaning of their transitional experiences into higher education?

2. In what ways do their college campus experiences play a role in this developmental process?

**Recruitment of Research Participants**

All 8 participants were emancipated foster care youth aged between 18 and 21 in their first or second year of studies in select residential 4 year public universities and 2 year community colleges in the United States. The research participants were identified and recruited using purposeful and theoretical sampling technique consistent with grounded theory methodology.

Additionally, the participants were selected based on recommendations from student affairs professionals, Foster Care Alumni of America and the Ohio Reach Foster
Care Outreach Services. To gain maximum variation and gather rich description of experiences the participants ranged in experiences, gender, age and ethnic backgrounds.

The scope of subsequent interviews was determined by the emerging research data, categories and themes. Consistent with the grounded theory tenet, the research participants were not “definite, prescribed, [or] preplanned” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967 p. 49). The subsequent research participants were nominated and follow-up questions designed based on the previous and current dynamics of the research process and emerging themes.

This research process in grounded theory has been referred to as *theoretical sampling* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This process allowed me as a researcher to not only obtain rich data but also to continue to elaborate and refine the emerging themes by seeking alternative data to either confirm or refute the emerging themes and in collaboration with the research participants (Charmaz, 2001).

Signed consents were obtained from all participants for this study. At the end of the each initial and follow up interviews, I asked the research participants for permission to use the quotes from the interviews in the final text. To track this, the code of 1 or 0 was used with the participant’s code name to enable me know whether or not interview quotes could be used.

In the final document, the researcher de-identified research data and subsequently introduced Swahili metaphorical pseudonyms that attempt to conceptualize and present the participants’ core life experiences transitioning into higher education. The Swahili metaphorical pseudonyms utilized included: *Tumaini, Anisa, Imara, Swabra, Adili,*
Shamiri, Hafidha and Nuru. The meanings of the metaphorical pseudonyms used are elaborated in chapter 4 of this dissertation.

**Data Collection**

In this study, I utilized face to face in-depth semi-structured interview process that also included follow up interviews. The interviews were “informal and conversational” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 29). The initial interview protocol therefore functioned as a general guide allowing follow up questions to include an opportunity to add prompts that empowered me to stretch the conversation and help the research participants elaborate refine, confirm or refute their responses and my interpretations to their responses relative to the overarching issues being explored as well as the emerging themes and findings (Patton, 2002).

The initial face-to-face interview took 60 to 90 minutes to ensure prolonged engagement with research participants and thick description. The follow up interviews ranged from 25-30 minutes. The initial interview protocol was designed to address the two central research questions that guided this study.

Additionally, I provided opportunities for the research process to integrate emerging unique transitional experiences and perceptions of the research participants since this research design did not have any preconceived theories to disprove or prove (Morse, 2001). In one instance during a follow up personal interview, one research participant in response to my question: “How have you been since we last met?” - immediately asked me to switch off the audio recorder and went on to talk for over an hour about her experiences in foster care and her current struggles to reframe the nature
of her relationships with her biological family. This was when the inspiration to consider crafting research participants’ metaphorical pseudonyms to capture their unique experiences and life stories became part of this research process.

Indeed the above outcome of qualitative interviewing process confirms the assertion by Tierney and Dilley (2002) who conceptualized interviewing as a key ingredient to qualitative educational research. Through this research technique the qualitative researcher obtains information about phenomena, case studies, life histories, ethnographies and specific oral histories. I also believe that through that process qualitative researchers and research participants can and do create and develop a foundational relationship that is potentially enriching and empowering to both parties.

In other words, the researcher is literally transposed into the life experiences of the research participants in a profound manner. The researcher will remain part and parcel of that research process literally for eternity. Indeed, qualitative interviewing utilized in this study also provided research participants with a safe space to process their life experiences face to face with the other. This had a profound therapeutic effect for most research participants involved in this study.

Additionally, Seidman (1998) rightly asserts that in qualitative research, the skills that embody the art of interviewing alone are not by themselves sufficient conditions that determine comprehensive responses to research questions. Qualitative research also entails inculcating comprehension skills, as well as the aptitude and competence of reflection and illustration.
As a qualitative researcher, I felt empowered to reflect on the interconnectedness of the interview process, the transcriptions and the organized excerpts and categories. In other words, this research process empowered me to weave together the connective threads of the interview process, and thereby propelling me to conceptualize how those threads correlate with one’s research question as well as relevant literature.

In addition to the above, Rubin and Rubin (2005) theorized qualitative interviewing as a quest to comprehend how research participants feel and think about their environment. The goal of the qualitative researcher, in this case, is to appreciate participant’s perceptions, and interpret how those insights compare to the researcher’s guiding research questions. The aim therefore is not only to seek the facts, but also the meaning of the facts discovered in the experiences of the research participants.

As a qualitative researcher therefore, I embraced the critical role of the need to be both a creative listener and conversationalist. That approach is consistent with the dictum that qualitative interviewing ought to aim at generating insights and concepts. Such an approach develops researchers’ understanding of the phenomenon being studied. The researcher in that regard is able to obtain the meaning of the narrative at the root of the participant’s experiences (McNamara, 2009).

Such data collection and analysis process also enabled me to chart unusual cases thereby creating a possibility to investigate exceptions to what has hitherto been regarded as the case. Last but not least, qualitative interviewing presents opportunities for validating one’s research results with other possible cases (Alasuutari, 1999).
The guiding interview protocol utilized in this study entailed outlining from the very outset research questions and issues to be explored before the interview actually begins. This procedure served as a checklist before the actual interview process. It also made the interviewing process more systematized for it delimited in advance the scope of the issues under investigation. According to Patton (2002), the open-ended informal conversational dynamic of the qualitative interviewing process enhances elasticity, spontaneity, and sensitivity to individual differences and contextual adaptations. Furthermore, in this dissertation, the initial guiding semi-structured, open-ended interview protocol constituted a critical guide for addressing the overarching objective of the research – namely - investigating how emancipated youth make-meaning of their transitional experiences into higher education.

At the conclusion of each interview process, I consistently asked the research participants what the interview was like for them, what it meant, and whether or not they had any other issues that they would feel inclined to share with me. The goal of this activity was to ensure that the entire interview process delved deeper into the participants’ experiences with a sense of focus. Nonetheless, this strategy does not negate the importance of the researcher being open to new and unexpected phenomena during the interview process.

The semi-structured interviews employed in this study provided room for clarifications and usage of relevant follow up questions to amplify emerging ideas and concepts. Interview sessions were audio recorded to ensure easier transcription and
preservation of data. I also used my background as a clinical counselor to build rapport and create trust with the research participants.

**Data Analysis**

In the research design utilized in this study, data collection and analysis were both ongoing, interrelated research processes (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This is consistent with Charmaz (2006) who conceptualized that constructivist grounded theory data analysis process ought to ensure that data be analyzed and categorized each time the transcription of individual interview process is complete.

In this study, the process entailed constant reflection on the data beginning with coding interview transcriptions. Additionally, whenever I observed a consistent theme or a new issue emerging in subsequent interviews, I revisited earlier research participants’ transcribed interviews and examined whether or not an emerging theme or category explained other experiences in their lives.

During this research process, I began to wind up the data collection and analysis at the point of what has been referred to by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as “theoretical saturation” (p. 61). Theoretical saturation was considered to have occurred when the additional sampling and coding of interview transcriptions ceased to reveal any new information or categories. It is at that point that I was confident that the emerging data was “saturated”. In other words, saturation was considered to have occurred when there was a recurrence of similar already generated categories and when additional data obtained from multiple and diverse sources confirmed the already emerging themes and categories.
I transcribed all audio-taped interviews and conducted follow up member checking with the research participants prior to coding to ensure accuracy. The transcribed interviews were then imported into NVIVO (QRS International, 2012) qualitative software for open and theoretical coding as presented in Figure 2.

*Figure 2. Interview Transcriptions Data Imported into the NVIVO Work Station*

The goal of constructivist grounded theory research design employed in this study was to *ground* findings in the researcher’s transcribed interviews and the interpretations of participants’ experiences as they transition into higher education.
In this research, the NVIVO qualitative research software and research memos were extensively utilized for coding interview transcriptions as well as for identifying emerging key themes and definitions.

The use of NVIVO provided this study with a number of analytical options. First, through the attribute function, NVIVO provided this researcher with the ability to create and store descriptive information relative to each research participant. Each participant was assigned a code already de-identified from the research participants’ actual demographic information. This attribute function in NVIVO provides an easier way of differentiation between cases based on known characteristics. It also laid a foundation that facilitated subsequent engagement with data and constant comparisons. NVIVO also enabled me to create nodes, which are storage areas for references to coded texts (Bazeley, 2007). Every time I identified an emerging concept from the interview data, I created a new node to represent and store the concept and relevant texts.

**Constructivist Grounded Theory: Coding Process**

Coding refers to attaching meaning labels to segments of the transcribed interviews or data (Charmaz, 2006). In this research process coding enabled me to explore and explain what was happening in the research process including but not limited to identifying the processes at play, how they could be defined, how the research process developed, research participants reflections on the process, and any changes observed throughout the entire research process (Hutchinson, Johnston & Breckon, 2009).

NVIVO facilitated the above process by enabling me to create nodes that provided storage areas for references to the coded texts from the transcriptions.
Consistent with the grounded theory, this process enabled me to move beyond thick descriptions to include cross case analysis of data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Figure 6 illustrates the cross case analysis coding results summary.

Additionally, as established by Strauss and Corbin (1998) coding using the NVIVO software also provided me with the analytical storage base and empowering tools for handling extensive quantities of raw data. This enabled me easily consider alternative meanings to experiences being examined on one hand, and on the other systematize the data analysis process. Coding ultimately provided this study with an extensive data bank that helped in developing and integrating emerging grounded conceptualizations.

Furthermore, “theoretical saturation” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 61) was considered to have occurred when the coding of interview transcriptions began to demonstrate recurring instances of already obtained information even in cases where I had reached out to more diverse research participants for comparison. The transcribed interviews resulted in tentative emerging issues and thematic relationships that were further clarified through member checking and subsequent interviews. The subsequent interviews and member checking were designed to stimulate additional reflection with a view to clarifying, confirming or further developing the emerging themes and thematic relationships. In grounded theory, coding is conceptual. According to Glaser (1978)

Substantive codes conceptualize the empirical substance of the area of research.

Theoretical codes conceptualize how the substantive codes may relate to each other as hypothesis to be integrated into the theory (p. 55).
In the open coding process, I began by seeking to “generate an emergent set of categories and their properties” (Glaser, 1978, p. 56) and then delineating emerging theoretical themes or categories. The underlying guiding questions during this open coding were geared towards examining what the interview data appeared to be responding to as well as presenting the categories that the experiences shared by the research participants indicated (Glaser, 1978). The goal in this analytic process was to generate the conceptual codes and not factual information from interview data.

Consistent with the grounded theory research paradigm, in this study, the open coding process utilized the three guiding questions recommended by Glaser (1978). They included examining concepts or ideas the data was attempting to reveal; delineating what categories each experience presented and exploring emerging psychosocial issues at play in each participant’s story relative to their transitional experience into higher education.

In other words, throughout this open coding process I was investigating the major developmental meaning-making dynamics of the emancipated foster care youth transitioning into higher education and how they processed those developmental experiences. At the same time, I was also examining each transitional experience, case by case - establishing emerging categories or in some cases confirming properties of already established categories or themes that those transitional experiences already indicated (Glaser, 1992).

My research goal during this analytic process was to ensure that those emerging, themes, categories and their properties were relevant to the meaning-making dynamics of emancipated foster youth transitioning into higher education. I utilized open coding
analytic process to uncover, name, and develop concepts found within the transcribed interviews and the research process notes. The open coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) process consisted of the following steps.

First, the transcribed texts were imported into NVIVO including “attributes” which indicated participant characteristics. I then divided the transcribed texts into categories or meaning units (Rennie, 2006). Meaning units in this study refers to sentences, paragraphs, or fragments of paragraphs that constitute a unit of meaning, i.e., “content shifts such as different situations, thoughts, and feelings” (Bachelor, 1995, p. 325).
In assessing the reliability of this procedure, Levitt, Butler, and Hill (2006) found that meaning units can reliably be identified. Indeed as a case in point, two raters had an agreement rate of 84% (Cohen’s Kappa = .71) across 111 units. *Meaning units* in NVIVO are created by assigning “free nodes” to the sections of a text.

The above, in effect, “articulates” to the NVIVO software that that particular section of text is a unit. Assigning “free nodes” comprises the first step of the actual analytic process of coding. Figure 3 shows the two free nodes created, namely Research question 1 and 2.

*Figure 4. Coding Summary Report for a Single Case Research Participant Coding by Established “Child Nodes” and Percentage Coverage Extracted from NVIVO.*
The *meaning units* that I created were then systematically sorted into descriptive sets centered on the meaning(s) embedded in each segment in NVIVO. In NVIVO, the “free nodes” are organized into “child nodes”. In this study, the labels for the “child nodes” selected in this way consisted of a short sentence, fragment, or word, based on the unifying meaning in the meaning units.

**Figure 5. Coding Summary of Progression from Child Nodes to Emergent Conceptualization Extracted from NVIVO**
The labels, whenever possible, were based on word choices in the meaning units because I found out that using the participants’ own words increased the likelihood of me being faithful to the intended meanings (please see Figure 4 for an example of a summary report for one participant).

Figure 6. Cross Case Analysis Coding Results Summary from NVIVO

In grounded theory, the process of grouping meaning units into categories is known as coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and was carried out in this study using the
following procedures. First, using the NVIVO, each meaning unit was compared to each “child node”, and whenever the meaning unit did not fit well into any “child node”, I established a new “child node”. Figure 5 illustrates a coding summary of the progression from child nodes, to the parent nodes to emergent grounded conceptualization from one research participant extracted from NVIVO.

Some meaning units yielded more than one meaningful “child node”, subsequently each meaning unit was scrutinized for additional meanings, even if it did fit neatly into an already established “child node”. Additionally, whenever a new “child node” was established, the previous meaning units already assigned to a “child node” were reevaluated for evidence that they might also fit into the newly established “child node”. I continued with this analytic process until I began noticing that there were no new child nodes emerging from the new meaning units (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Once the “child nodes” were established, I then analyzed the relationships between them. This step, though often part of an ongoing interrelated process including previous coding steps, is referred to as selective coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967.) I carried out this process by comparing each in turn, establishing connections between “child nodes” based on meaning and, in particular causal relationships. These meanings formed the second tier of “nodes”, also called “parent nodes”.

The “parent nodes” laid the foundation for the last step of the grounded coding process, namely theoretical coding. In other words, I made sure that my analyses were dictated by the emergent findings as well as interview data. This entailed examining
relationships between concepts case by case and across cases (Glaser, 1978; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

**Conceptualized Theme: Increased self-love**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference 1 - 2.27% Coverage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I did not talk to a lot people but coming to college was a liberating experience. I looked at myself and all other students around me and I felt so confident and happy with myself that I said to myself that if I they can do it, I can do it! It felt so empowering to be able to call people who knew me and tell them, you know what? I am in college. It was so amazing just to say that I am in college! The first one in my whole family! I am in college!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference 2 - 0.19% Coverage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Believing in myself, see others smile.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference 3 - 0.34% Coverage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I had to learn to love myself first before I could love somebody else</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference 4 - 1.13% Coverage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I had to learn how to put myself first and love myself first before somebody else even though it sounds so selfish. I had to learn self-care, taking care of me first. I have been selfish to myself by not putting myself first</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference 1 - 0.71% Coverage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I did not want people to see that… so that is what drove me away from me… and as soon as I did that my grades turned around, people started hanging around me, I was getting good grades, teachers liked me. I felt good about myself.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 7. Example of Across Case Reference of the Emergent Theme of “Increased Self-love”*

Additionally, I analyzed the data imported into NVIVO participant by participant while at the same time conducting a cross-case analysis with a view to developing grounded conceptualizations based on rich, thick, detailed, extensive interview actual interview quotes of the experiences of the research participants (Patton, 2002).
The emerging themes from each research participant were then subjected to further analysis in which I sought to explore across case themes, categories and grounded conceptualizations (Please see Figure 7 for exemplar quotes for a cross-case analysis in reference to the increased self-love them and Figure 8 for across case coding references). This has been referred to as theoretical coding (Glaser, 1978; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Much as the two previous steps are often part of a single interrelated research process, I performed this third step as part of a repeated process including one or both of the previous steps.

Figure 8. Illustration of the Number of Codes and Across Case Coding References.

Theoretical coding in grounded theory is the process of forming a focused coherent whole, or a model, out of the nodes and their relationships. Subsequently, the emerging grounded model in this study was conceptualized as a hierarchy of child and parent nodes which was in turn organized through the use of “tree nodes” in NVIVO
software, which allowed me to organize the different levels of nodes and their relationships in a coherent manner.

**Concluding Remarks**

In the *open coding* process I thoroughly reviewed the data contained within the data set before beginning to group and label concepts. During the subsequent coding processes, I reviewed raw data from the interview transcriptions and memos, pulling out concepts, and grouping concepts into themes, first based on each participant, case by case then followed by a cross case analysis.

In other words, the entire data analysis process included the following steps:

1. Reviewing all interview transcripts
2. Importing the data into NVIVO
3. Coding the data in NVIVO using open and selective coding
4. Defining the properties of the dominant themes using theoretical coding
5. Creating subthemes as needed.

As the theoretical model became dense, the rest of data were examined by searching for responses that differed from or elaborated on the emerging models. As Rosenwald (1988) asserts, each new viewpoint can add information and meaning to the understanding of the whole and therefore help elaborate the emerging grounded theoretical conceptualizations in this research process.
Chapter 4: Findings

This study sought to extend the college student development discourse to include the exploration of the dynamics of developmental *meaning-making* as experienced by the emancipated foster youth transitioning into higher education. The study thus attempts to broaden the dimensions and paths along which *meaning-making* dynamics develops and thereby illuminates specific areas of focus that educators may utilize to help foster holistic student development among diverse student populations in general and emancipated foster care college students in particular. To that end the following overarching research questions guided this study:

1. How do emancipated foster care college students make-meaning of their transitional college experiences?

2. In what ways do their college campus experiences play a role in this developmental process?

In this section I set out to delineate themes pertinent to the above research questions and as reflected in the data obtained from the interview transcriptions. Each interview was first analyzed as a single case. Common themes were then identified across the data with regard to addressing the research questions.

According to Creswell (2009), data analysis involves “making sense out of text and data… moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data” (p. 183). I subsequently searched for themes, relationships, patterns, and dimensions in the data through analysis of the transcribed interviews, coding of the data, and further analysis as themes and
patterns emerged. I began that process by presenting and interpreting the participants’ unique transitional experiences as well as their pertinent life histories.

**Participants’ Meaning-Making Synopses**

The initial personal in-depth interviews and the subsequent member checking personal interviews sought to elicit the *meaning-making* dynamics of the emancipated foster youth transitioning into higher education in the United States. The research participants’ synopses presented below provide the demographics of the research participants based on their age, gender identity, race, reason for their placement in foster care, the year in college, the type of higher educational institution attended, and their unique *meaning-making* developmental dynamic paths as they transition into higher education. In this section I use *Swahili* pseudonyms to de-identify the research participants while still remaining faithful to the emerging core *meaning-making* metaphors and personal characteristics that capture their transitional experiences into higher education.

In this section, each case is presented to highlight personal meaning-making dynamics and experiences specific to each of the 8 emancipated foster care research participants transitioning into college. I then conduct a cross case theme analysis to show common emerging themes relevant to the two research questions that guide this study. This dimension of research findings provides on one hand the context of examining participants’ unique developmental *meaning-making* dynamics and on the other hand, basis for comparative thematic analyses.
**Tumaini.** *Tumaini* is 21 year old female who self-identified as bi-racial. She has just begun her sophomore year in a large public residential university in Midwest United States. She entered into foster care after her parents’ legal rights over her were terminated due to a series of parental sexual, physical and drug abuse. *Tumaini* has had multiple foster care placements.

Due to experiences of clinical depression and difficulties in adjusting to her new foster care home, she run away from her second foster care home placement a week before her high school finals in her freshman year and subsequently did not earn any credit for the last semester of her freshman year in high school. She was out of foster care for about six months and due to what she describes as financial and interpersonal difficulties she felt compelled to reach out to the foster care system again for help and guidance. During those six months out of foster care she also missed the first semester of her sophomore year in high school.

**Motivation for college.** *Tumaini* whose name means in Swahili means inspired to succeed, observed that one of her main highlights in her life prior to entering college was the ability to put an extra effort to catch up with the rest of her high school class that she missed and able graduate on time alongside her peers after losing a year’s worth of academic credits. She explained that during her temporary experience out of foster care, she had been able to develop confidence in her academic and personal abilities due to her resolve to accomplish something in her life. Having acquired that confidence to succeed in life, she qualified to enroll in the national honor society and was able to excel in all of her remaining high school classes.
For Tumaini, her personal experiences after running away from the foster care system were a time for self-reflection and resolve for a new optimism in life. She explains:

Once I got involved with school again the second time, I joined the national honor society, I was the student of the month, I won my state’s *breaking traditions* award. I just found myself accomplishing so many things so many people had previously stated that I could not have accomplished. It made me realize that I had so much self-worth and that I was capable of doing so much more with my life and that I deserved so much more. It just took some time and some harsh experiences for me to realize it. It did not matter what people told me, you are worth more, you are worth more but until I realized it myself, it had meant nothing at all! Once I started accomplishing things that people had previously stated that I couldn’t, I realized that I suddenly was self-driven to accomplish many things that people had said I could not. I did that by coming to college and hopefully I would be doing that by graduating from college.

*Tumaini* also mentioned the positive contribution of a mentor in high school who saw in her a potential the potential to succeed academically at higher levels and was subsequently encouraged her to attend college:

I never grew up around those types of people who went to college. College was not envisioned as a goal to work towards within the environment I grew up in. I think the main reason was … it was … it was actually because of a mentor in high school I came into contact with…she was like, ‘You need to go to college!’ She
then sent me some application forms and here I am! So it was something impressed upon me but looking back it was something I needed! It was so exhilarating to suddenly realize that at last I could provide something better for myself! Yet, when I shared this with my friends, they started pulling away from me. They seemed repulsed by the idea of going to college!

Additionally, Tumaini mentioned that she was determined to go to college to inculcate in herself the sense of self-worth and achieve something more meaningful in life. She was also determined to be an inspiration for change especially among her peers who viewed the idea of college as an impossible feat to achieve.

In my first year after high school I worked two jobs even though I was basically working to be broke! I then started sharing my desire to go to college with my friends and colleagues, but shockingly, my friends and colleagues starting pulling away from me! They seemed repulsed by the idea of going to college. It was like they did not relate to the idea of going to college or the idea of me achieving something more in my life. And so I found myself in a predicament with no one to share my innermost desires in life and to support me in my life goals. It seems as if I was somewhat forced into the idea of going into college as a last resort since I had no one who shared my dreams and goals in life. I am no longer a number; people know me by name and genuinely care about me and my dreams in life. I no longer have to worry about, what if this or that… go wrong? I am in the right place, and I am the captain of my ship. I know where I want to go and I will
get myself there. I have people I can call, I have people I can depend on and above all, I know that when times are rough, they will not pull out on me.

In addition to the above, Tumaini further explained that going to college was important for her because it provided her with a concrete opportunity to demonstrate to the wider society a positive and empowering image of a foster care youth.

I wanted to come to college and build by skills and so that when I start having children, I can in turn provide them with the stability I never had. You can be everything you want to be…and not just simply a label forced upon you. It is fine to sound educated. I just wanted to be able to change the stigma of foster children. We are not ghetto. We are not hoodlums. Not all of us steal. We do not rob people. We are not angry people. We were just placed in a situation and system that we had no control over and now that I have control over my life, I want to be able to show the next generation, my own children that you can have control over your life. You just have to make those changes. You have to be committed to yourself and be committed to these changes. Sometimes we forget that we [foster care youth] can be treated as decent people! We have always been “case loads”!

We are now people, adults, and scholars, not just a case load!

**Developing meaningful interpersonal relationships.** Transitioning into college has also empowered Tumaini to reframe the nature of her interpersonal relationships in ways that resonate with her feelings and dreams as an emancipated foster care youth. As a result she has now finds herself more ready to discard those relationships that she finds
stifling while enhancing those relationships that promote “her innermost desires and dreams”.

Some of those relationships were really one sided benefits and I was not the one benefiting from it. And that goes with my biological family. They always call around refund check time. They do not call during holidays. They do not call at the end of the semester. They do not call during finals, but they will call during refund check time and say, you know send some money, *blah blah blah!* I have come to realize that it is critical to take care of me. Do things for myself before I can help anyone else. I want to be able to help take care of me before I can take care of anyone else. I am learning these skills by networking, going to speaking events. I am just really learning to branch out… hold on to people who genuinely want to hold on to me too!

*Tumaini* also expressed that letting go of stifling relationships has not been an easy feat for her. A desire to be connected to a family to have positive role model to accompany her in her college career is still her innermost desire.

Once you are emancipated [from foster care] it is like going through another death. You find yourself out there with no legal guardians. It is tough!

Additionally, I am a first generation college student and a piece of me always desire to go back to my biological parents even though their parental rights are legally terminated and ask, “Are you proud of me, are you really proud of me?” However, I just have to learn that not everyone will necessarily be proud of me and my accomplishments. I have to learn that I was not going to make everyone
proud of me…or please everyone for that matter. My relationship with my
biological parents is strained, and I am learning that I should not be begging
anyone to be proud of me. I should not have to beg for their attention. But maybe
later on, once I am where I want be then maybe we can work on our relationship.
But as of right now, I am telling them that I cannot allow [them] to be part of my
life because you are somewhat toxic. You are going to make my experience while
in college bad for me or harder for me and I do not want either.

Furthermore, as Tumaini transitioned into college, she also began to make
consistent and concrete personal decisions that guided her resolve to reframe her
interpersonal relationships in a way that resonated with her innermost dreams and desires.

Halfway through my first semester in college, I was much focused, and my goal
was to make it to the dean’s list. However, my little sister dropped out of high
school. She wanted me to come back home and work to support her to due to
some personal deep issues she was struggling with that negatively impacted her
resolve to stay in school. She was definitely looking toward sponging off me.
Even though I love my little sister, I had to realize that in order to help her more
effectively, she has to realize that very soon she will be an adult and she would
have to learn to take care of herself on her own. I had to make the right decision
and do things for me and take care of me first and realize my academic goals so
that I could later on help her more effectively.

Tumaini found this experience to be a critical phase in her meaning-making
developmental process. Several college transitional experiences were instrumental in
making this milestone possible. One of the key motivating factors was how she observed other emancipated foster care students on her college campus interact with their biological families.

We want to be connected to a family but we have hurting experiences with our biological parents and yet we do not know how to get that connectedness, and sense of belonging back! My own lesson from watching my peers and how they interact with their biological families is…some of our biological families seem not to look at us, having come from foster care, not as family but as money, as an opportunity for them to better themselves. We are not family to them. We want them to view us as family and not as money makers! I just learnt through seeing my own peers that that was not the kind of relationship I wanted with my family. I would rather have no relationship than have a toxic one.

But that was not in any way a declaration that she would not have anything at all to do with her biological family. She is working on a way to keep that relationship with her biological family more empowering that stifling:

I was attached to my biological family; perhaps just like everyone else…I mean … that is where we come from! I believe it is an important part of me, even for those who do not know for sure where their biological families are. We need that. I need it and desire to have an enduring connection with them. You have to move on at times. I believe you cannot help anyone if you cannot help yourself. And that is why I always try to remind myself that even when I want to help my biological family now and I am in a better of position than them and could help
them a little – a little is not enough for me. I want to be in a position to help them all the way, if I am going to make any major impact in their lives.

**College campus transitional challenges: Path to autonomy.** Transitioning into college had a tremendous impact on *Tumaini’s* personal, psychological, and emotional wellbeing. It also propelled her to redefine and reframe her personal identity. In relation to her psychological and emotional wellbeing *Tumaini* had to reconstruct personal meaningful and empowering ways of coping with mental and emotional health challenges.

College for me was a whole new different environment. Everything was going on so well, I had made it to college then suddenly some things started going wrong. I was diagnosed with depression. I think I had not developed sufficient skills to assess situations then make appropriate steps and changes to better my situations. I went to counseling. Counseling is not always bad. I mean you just simply need somebody to talk to…sometimes you just need some safe space to vent. It seems to me as a foster youth that we are so used to reacting before we think because we are certain that people out there aren’t going to listen to us. We have not had an experience of people who genuinely care for us and listen to us and pay attention to us in a genuine manner. And so I was used to getting whatever reaction to get those in charge within foster care to notice and pay attention to my needs. Now more and more I am beginning to learn to assess situations before reacting. I ask myself, is it worth arguing? Is it worth my anger outburst? I am learning to let
things to go and learn to hold onto what makes me safe and thrive. I am learning to discern what to fight for, which battles to fight.

Another mental and emotional meaning-making developmental milestone that Tumaini mentioned was in connection to attachment concerns. This developmental meaning-making experience and milestone is best illustrated by her experience with her personal luggage as she moved into a college campus residential hall:

Once I was transitioning from a temporary accommodation into regular housing on campus, I had all my stuff packed in laundry and garbage bags. After I had unpacked all my stuff into a luggage bag, I put the entire garbage bags together ready to trash them but somehow, I got so overwhelmed and stiffened at the prospect of letting go of the bags as trash. It was as if I had become so attached to them, they were my moving buddies, I had used them for a long time…and I suddenly realized that by throwing them away, I was throwing something that had become a major signature of my life, something I had become attached to. I think it comes from my foster care experience. You are almost always prepared to move from your placement. If a foster parent says they are not ready to have you then you have to move to another foster home…I therefore learnt to pack all my stuff in laundry bags ready to go. I had never had a luggage bag until I came into college. I did not realize that this had become an issue for me when I got a luggage bag for the first time after I moved into the regular housing on campus.

The phrase “it is time to remove the trash out” had a special personal meaning to
Tumaini in the sense that it empowered her to let go of what she described as a stifling attachment to the demands of her foster care experiences, her biological family and her close friends.

I am beginning to realize that it is time to take out the trash. My past and experiences in the foster care system is the garbage. My future is the treasure. It is time to take out the trash in my life. Once I take out the trash, I do not have to worry about anything else. I become clean and presentable. I can better myself. I can desire more that makes my life worth living. I can achieve more for myself than what the foster care system has constantly told me I cannot. I had noticed that I had developed attachment to laundry and garbage bags, something that I had not been aware of until I came into college for the transitional program then had to move into regular housing. College experience is beginning to teach me that it is time to take out the trash in my life.

Balancing autonomy and co-dependence was also found to be a major developmental meaning-making struggle for Tumaini as she transitioned into college.

Foster care life is a difficult life…we hardly know what is going to happen next... our belongings are always ready on the go if we have to move. Everything is regimented. We have no say about our values and where we would like to go! We have to learn about our needs, about what we need to make ourselves successful! As I transition into college, I do not want to be a dependent to anyone! But we love to learn what we can learn from our mentors and the college community! We do not want to feel that we are garbage anymore. If we feel like a baggage to you,
we trust you and we would like you to teach us to be independent, to realize we have a potential and capable of flying off on our own! Help us take out the trash!

**Reclaiming personal identity and autonomy.** Tumaini also felt alienated from her peers who had not had foster care experience especially in relation to family connectedness, personal identity and autonomy as she transitioned into a residential college campus environment.

A lot of us do not have families that come up to visit from time to time. I had to learn not to be envious. I kind of felt left out and it painfully reminded me of what I did not have and perhaps will never have. I had to struggle not to be jealous of people who had stable families and connection to their families. There is nothing I can do to change this practice. I am beginning to realize that I am on this college campus for a reason. I am here to better myself. I have not had a family this far and perhaps I do not need one now.

Another emerging theme that came up in my interview with Tumaini was her transitional challenge of reaching out and asking for helping:

One thing about growing up in foster care system is that when you do reach out for help, you either do not get the help you expect or you do not get any at all. And so you learn to deal with the difficult situation that you have and make the best out of it. I am beginning to learn that it is ok to reach out for help. That it is ok to acknowledge that there are some things I cannot do on my own and it is ok to reach out for help. It is ok to reach out and say, I need a little help…a little bit of support…a little bit of encouragement.
Anisa. Anisa identifies as heterosexual African-American female. She is 19 and has never met her biological father. She has been in the foster care for 9 years. Her first placement was in a group home of twelve people. Since then, she has been in 5 foster care placements. When she was born, her grandparents were designated as her legal guardians since her biological mother was deemed incapable of taking care of her by the legal and the medical system due to drug addiction. Later in her early teens her grandparents’ legal rights were also terminated after she was sexually and physically abused in her grandparents’ home. She attends a four-year large public university as a freshman. When asked why she chose to attend college she responded:

All I knew was that college was just there. College was something I always had at the back of my mind especially after I emancipated from foster care. It was kind of an ideal path. It was a place, I had to be! It was not optional for me.

Anisa whose name in Swahili means graceful grew up in a very rough neighborhood in the Midwest United States. She reported that in her first high school they were on the news for an entire week due to a number of homicides among the student body within three days of each other. Nonetheless before that, it was always outbreaks of fights and they were almost always put on lockdown due to fights among rival gangs, student related homicide or arson.

I grew up in a very...[takes a deep breath] very rough neighborhood, very violent...the neighborhood is still very rough and dangerous. There were lots of fights, deaths in school, arson in school. We were almost always being escorted
from the school due to a lockdown. It was a life and death situation. It was really tough.

**Meaning-making and college transition.** For *Anisa* the experience of positive freedom was a critical *meaning-making* dynamic as she transitioned into college as an emancipated foster care youth. She also mentioned that for once in her life she felt that she could maintain her privacy and seek and express things that she really felt passionate about and believed in. Transitioning into college offered her an empowering opportunity to realize her dreams and better the lives of others.

Entering college, I felt like life was starting all over again, being able to pursue things I was truly passionate about and be myself. Being in the foster system, there was no privacy. Your life was so exposed! We had numerous...and I mean...numerous case workers, almost a new one assigned to you every month or every other month...for my eight years in the [foster care] system...up until this past February after my emancipation...I can’t even count the number of case workers I had! You meet new case workers each time and you start your story all over again! I cannot even count the number of case workers I had on both hands. You meet this new case worker [and] they do not know anything about you! They do not read your case files! None of them seem to want to read those long documents but they still wanted you to retell your story and put you through the same traumatic experience all over again...re-live your life all over again.
Anisa stated that she was so happy that when she came to college, she no longer needed to repeat her experience in foster care all over again on numerous occasions. She expressed that she could choose her friends without being shortchanged by anyone.

I could now go out…whenever, and with whomever. I could interact with whoever I please wherever, and whenever. It was just…it was just like…I kind of felt, I had been empowered to have control over situations and things that previously was out of my hands…it was just, it was just…a whole new lifestyle…a whole life style coming to college.

Developing meaningful interpersonal relationships. Anisa also mentioned in our interviews that when she transitioned into college she felt mostly alone. Coming from the foster care system straight into a largely middle class public university, she realized that she did not know anyone she had met before or gone to the same middle or high school with. This was aggravated by the fact that she had moved into her single room. This feeling of alienation triggered previous mental health concerns encountered while in foster care.

I was with myself most of the times. I think I did not have a strong support system to help me adjust to college. I did not even know how to reach out to others! Early on I had suffered from anxiety and night terrors, panic attacks and it was difficult to get through on my own and not knowing the resources available to me for support. Being alone in a new environment triggered a lot of my previous health related challenges. When you are not able to sleep through the night, get up in the morning fresh and ready for class, not able to take care of myself well enough…it
is not easy for someone with my foster care background to adjust so easily to “normal ordinary life”. It was one thing to be exposed to college life from coming from a foster care system but to live with people from diverse backgrounds with difference races and cultures, and most of all not knowing anyone, and having to share with new people bathrooms was not easy!

On one hand, Anisa found herself empowered to reframe and redefine her interpersonal relationships in a way that had a personal positive and empowering meaning as she transitioned into college. The critical components in that regard were related to her interpersonal relationships with her peers and her biological family. She had to learn to reach out to others in ways that did not result in her vulnerability. One can indeed observe a struggle between the desire for emotional connectedness to close friends and family and the invitation to forge new ways of relating to others in the future.

When I came up here [college] I had this mindset that everyone I meet is temporary, everyone I meet is not there for me. Everyone I meet is not interested in me. They are just interested in what benefits them. And that can bring out a lot of different attitudes towards people and towards making new friends and towards just having a social life period. And so when I came up here, it was so difficult for me to open up...just personally to other people...I was open and friendly and talkative, but coming to college I deliberately wanted to be more social than personal.

On the other hand, she also sees herself beginning to be more open and trusting as she meets her peers who have proven to be helpful, trusting and friendly.
But when I realized that people can be trusting, friendly...that people can be temporary but still helpful...that’s when my attitude began to change and I did not mind being personally involved with someone or just hanging out with someone...you know and that’s pretty much how I started making the friends that I made and building that relationship that I have begun to build. And so based on my foster care experience, I learnt so much about people in general and how they interact with others, and why I didn’t interact with others before the way I do now.

*Anisa* also stated that one of the most difficult decisions she had to make as she transitioned into college was learning to pull away from those who have stifled her life goals.

I have to learn that I am still growing and that all of my life is not characterized by what I have gone through. It is not all that life has to offer. You would think that with my experience one would simply say I do not need this from you, I do not need you, I can let you go and move on with my life but sometimes you are in this situation that you realize you actually do not know what is outside the box until you get outside the box and then get back into the box and see where you are at and where you ought to go. When I came to this college I had to redefine what it meant for me to have a “family”. I had to learn that some people will never be in your life to benefit you. I had to learn to identify who those people were and a lot of times those people were not there to benefit my wellbeing and I had to decide who actually constituted family, however painful it was. I had to learn to
disconnect from family members who were no longer family and supportive to my wellbeing.

*Navigating through autonomy and dependence.* Another significant *meaning-making* experience for Anisa as she transitioned into college was that of feeling polarized emotionally between difficulty in seeking and accepting help from others on one hand and the desire to genuinely reach out for help on the other. This emotional split repeatedly undermined her personal efforts to cope with her developmental challenges as she transitioned into college.

Prior to college I had never *ever* asked anyone for help for anything…But when I came to college, I encountered new big things: like maintaining financial stability and to maintain daily college obligations and task without support systems for back up if I had questions or anything…it was just like all I knew was that I had to figure it out some way; somehow. And all I knew was I wanted to do it, I wanted to able to make my own decisions and how I was going to handle the situation and who I was going to and…that was where things started…falling apart because I did not know who to go to! I did not know how to so I tried to dodge everyone and you know kind of kept to myself and retreated back into my shell and just kind of let the situation go by and expect it…ah…or hope that I would let it go away…

*Anisa* later mentioned that it was her college campus mentor who empowered her to begin to learn how to positively reach out to others for help when needed. She stated
that she had never done it before and was more scared of asking for help than she was of
the consequences of not asking for help.

For us [foster care youth] there is nothing worse that can ever happen to us
already! We have come through much difficult situations by ourselves so far
without having had to put the burden on someone else, without putting ourselves
through shame to other people. Our experiences in the foster care system kind of
disposed us from placing ourselves in a predicament where someone could hurt us
more than we could gain from it. That’s just the way I could have thought of it
and I mean I am not sure whether or not anyone will disagree much on what I say
but I am pretty sure that’s what goes on in our mind about placement, and tough
experiences…we hardly reach out to others for help.

Nonetheless she attributes her transformation and resolve to begin reaching out
for help to her campus mentor who challenged and empowered her to engage with the
adversity of her foster care experiences in a new light while transitioning into college.

I had never asked for help before or when I did, I was always scared of what to
expect from it. I think I was more scared of asking for help than I was of the
consequences of not asking for help. In my mind, it was like; it cannot get any
worse than what I have already gone through [in foster care]. One day when my
world was falling apart, I went to talk to my [campus mentor] about it. I cannot
remember what I told my campus mentor. But, my campus mentor then asked me
to get out of the room, close the door behind me, wait for a few seconds and
knock on the door and ask for help. [My mentor] also instructed that even though
I knew that everything is going to be ok, she nonetheless insisted that I ask for help. I stared at her and asked “Are you crazy? Why would you make me ask for help now if I haven’t asked for it before?” But I couldn’t say no because she has been there for me. I trusted her. I was asking myself, what could I possible gain by stepping out, knocking at the door and asking for help. Yet, by saying the words “I need help”, feeling that whoosh, the rush, coming from my mouth, I felt the problems I faced and the stress that came with the problems I face leave when I uttered the word “help”. I just felt it… it was an amazing feeling. It was the most relieving feeling I have ever felt. That was one of my pivotal moments.

Anisa at this point in time seemed to begin to sort and sift through her experiences before and after foster care with the aim of developing what might possibly constitute her preferred personal identity. Indeed she later stated that she had not previously asked for help because she did not see a holistic understanding of the meaning of her experiences in and after foster care. However, after her encounter with her campus mentor, she was beginning to see the meaning of her life experiences through empowering lenses. She had begun to see that at times it was necessary to reach out for help when needed.

I then actually began to see a clearer picture than I had had before, it was like seeing the ok sign people look out for before they decide to walk across the street. [My campus mentors] were my ok sign. They made me see that it was ok to try when it looks safer. In the decisions I made, I always look at myself first, especially with regard to the emotional experiences I would be facing. I realized that they were not changing anything about me, they created a safe space where I
was able to give my own input...it was eventually my own decision. I wasn’t changing anything about myself; I wasn’t hurting myself in the process. And that was what was motivating for me in the entire process. It enabled me to realize that even though I was not in control of everything, it was worthwhile to aim for something better for myself. All I needed was a helping hand, a helping hand to put my hand onto a paper and rewrite and redraw my life goals.

*A mentor to her peers.* For *Anisa*, an additional challenge transitioning into college was how to be a positive and yet empowering role model for her peers who appeared inadequately equipped for independent living while transitioning into college.

I did not know how to go out with people. Normally I would start out with myself and then I would bring another or two along the way out the door during the day. At times, I may come back with people that I have bumped into along the way but when I plan my day, I do not plan for anyone to be part of it. However, as I met more and more people who would prefer to be with me rather than with others that they knew...one of my friends, because it was her first year living here, she did not know anything about buying books, just buying winter clothes – I mean I had to go through all of these different things and help her do things like that because she did not know how to get through basic stuff and where to go! I asked myself, what is this?

The above experience demonstrates a distinctive feature in the way *Anisa* engages with the world as she transitioned into college. She seems able to autonomously navigate through the world despite the adversities she experienced while in care.
Imara. Imara is an eighteen year old bi-racial male who self-identified as African-American. During this research, he was just completing his freshman year in a 4 year large public University. He was sent into the foster care system after his biological mother was deemed incapable of taking care of him due to a nervous breakdown.

His mother had been diagnosed with a dual mental health disorder earlier but had not been compliant with her medications. This made her conditions worse and she subsequently was deemed by the state legal and medical authorities incapable of taking care of him anymore. Imara has never met his biological father. He has been to 6 foster care placements in the last 8 years and has gone through five different high schools.

When asked about the reasons for going to college, this is what he said:

Aah…I never told anyone this…but when I was in high school, my foster home was in a farm in the middle of nowhere. I never hang out with my friends! You know as a senior in high school, you get invited to movies and parties and so on! I could not do any of that. You know…someone invites you out and offers to drive you in their car and then you say, wait a minute; we need to run a background check on you first! I wanted to be around people! I wanted communication and interaction with other normal people so bad. I needed that connection with my peers without background checks! I was just tired of being looked at as a commodity. In fact more than once whenever I did something that upset my foster parents, they were quick to state that you know what, we could replace you anytime, we can get somebody to sleep on that bed you are sleeping
on as soon as you leave that door! I felt like a temporary product in that house. I promised myself, that I will work hard and get out of here and go to college.

**Exclusion/ostracism.** *Imara* whose pseudonym means *steadfast* in Swahili stated that while in foster care, he attended five different schools mostly in black neighborhoods and only one in a mostly in a white neighborhood. Additionally, he stated that as a foster youth attending a mostly white school, he felt alienated not only as a foster youth but also as the only non-white student in his class.

My foster parents sent me to this school and told me it was a diverse community. I looked around and could not see anyone who looked like me. I was the only black student in my class and the only one from [foster] care. It was so tough! I was very, very quiet. There was a lot of racism in that school. I struggled a lot…mostly keeping my mouth shut so that I do not blow up on people. Being a foster youth was already tough enough. Now there was another thing that I had to deal with. Something that I was not prepared to face in my life as yet. My fellow students tended to shy away from and not interact with me because of my race. I could not even have a partner to work with in my class assignments.

Nonetheless, after experiencing being socially ostracized and excluded on the account of his race and his status as a foster youth, *Imara* made a decision to enroll in another high school and was able to graduate on time.

One day I sat on my bed and told myself that you know what no one will make things right for me, if I do not take time to work for myself and make myself successful. That was when I decided not to be angry at anyone anymore and be
somebody and be successful in my life and graduate on time because by then I
was already a year and a half behind in high school. I then got myself signed up
for summer classes and I did a whole year worth of school online for one summer
– getting mostly As and Bs. I then moved on to become the vice president of my
class.

*Imara* also experienced being excluded from freely interacting with his peers in
high school due to what he termed as some rules specific to the foster care system. He
stated that as a foster youth he was barred from getting a driver’s license until he had
aged-out of care. He was not permitted to spend a night out in his friends’ house and
neither could he take a ride in anyone’s vehicle apart from his foster parents unless they
underwent a background check. This made *Imara* begin to question his perceived sense
of identity and dignity.

You know being a senior in high school, you get invited to the movies and parties
and so on, and yet you cannot get into the car with anyone unless they undergo
some background check. This was quite frustrating all the time! You know,
someone wants to take you to the movies in their car and then you say, wait a
minute; we need to run a background check on you first! I therefore never had a
social life out of school. It was mostly over the phone or Facebook…If your
friends have to undergo a background check before they take you out in their
vehicle then you begin to question your personality and identity, who you really
are or would want to be! You begin to doubt yourself and ask yourself, why even
try?
Another experience of alienation/exclusion was related to his relationship with one of his foster parents. He stated in one of his placements who constantly referred to him as colored and not black and treated him mostly as a *commodity* and not as part of their family.

It was very sad that whenever I did something that upset them, they were quick to state that you know what, we could replace you anytime, we can get somebody else to sleep on that bed you are sleeping as soon as you leave that door! I was actually told that three different times. You just do not know how that feels. I am not sure whether I am very bitter or very sad or very angry or a little bit of all of the above. However, they made me feel very sad about where I came from. I hated myself as a foster care child. I had no stable family. I was all by myself. I felt like all life sucked. I felt, like I was not wanted. Nobody genuinely cared about me. I was just a temporary being in the house. They had to care for me simply because they were being paid to do so. The foster care system has very good intentions but who the heck actually monitors what we have to go through emotionally to make the system look cool?

**Reframing interpersonal relationships with peers.** *Imara* also mentioned that while transitioning into college he has begun to realize that most of his current friends are older. This helps him enhance the personal autonomy and independence that he has already developed. For *Imara*, by the time he arrived and interacted with his peers in college, he felt so much older. He had no parents, no guardians, and no case workers to his beck and call.
I realize that when there is an event to go to, or if we have a break, my friends tell me, “Oh you know what?” my dad will pick me up, or my mom or grandma will drop off the food and bring me stuff, send me money or pay for my books! I have never thought of anyone picking me up or someone dropping off my food! For me it was on how and when I was going to get my food, not who will bring my food! So when they were talking about these, I began to realize that oh gosh, I am not just a college student, I have to figure out on how to take care of so much stuff! No one will be there to take care of me and other stuff that I need! Everything in college was going to be on me! I know I am of legal age, but it is different when you fell like one and have to act like one! Maybe, this explains why most of my closest friends are older! I have learnt to take care of myself. I cannot afford to depend on somebody else! My closest friends are older because they get that.

The above experience is also related to Imara’s disposition on whether or not to reach out for help when needed. He states that as he transitions to college and despite the lack of a network of close family members that he could reach out to for help, he prefers to work through his transitional challenges by himself.

I do even feel very comfortable asking for help or asking for stuff. I work through stuff on my own. Even while living with my foster parents I never asked for much. I did not want them to think that I was just going to use them or something like that. I have always been afraid to ask for help or for stuff. I am afraid of people telling me no! When I really need help, I do not get help. It seems so hard to get help out there.
**Connectedness to family.** Imara also recounted that based on his experience in foster care, when a foster parent is not happy with a foster child, then one is simply bundled up and bundled out of a foster home. For him there is a sense of instability in any new foster home and one has to be ready in the event that one is to be sent to another foster care placement.

There is this sense of that you do not know how long you will last in a given foster home assigned to you. You do not choose a foster home, or foster parents, it is chosen for you but you are not assured that that is you permanent home.

Sometimes, it feels like we are a business transaction for our foster parents. If I am your child, then treat me like your child. Teach me to be loving, caring but also independent. If no one really cares about me; why struggle to make a mark for myself?

All that Imara has yearned for is a feeling and realization of truly being at home. Another *meaning-making* experience in that regard was the fact that even after being emancipated and enrolled in college, he still missed the sense of being connected to his own family.

This past holiday, I woke up and everybody was on the move, going to their parents, their folks coming to pick them up…and there I was with nowhere to go. I was the only person left in my building. I looked out in the parking lot, and there was no vehicle in sight, no one around! No one reaching out to me…no gift to expect…It was really challenging! It was so frustrating and depressing. You
suddenly feel not only alone but so lonely. No one cares! It was just a day or two but it made so lonely and so sad.

**Developing a positive sense of identity.** That experience negatively impacted Imara’s ongoing evolving process of developing a positive sense of identity. That aforementioned experience was also worsened by his perceived negative image of a foster care child in the wider community. He stated that as he transitions into college, he never tells his peers that he is an emancipated foster youth because of his negative past experiences.

In high school, whenever I told folks that I am in foster care, they would react ‘oh my gosh’ here is another pathetic troubled charity case! Some people treat us or see us like being delinquent, trouble makers, and hoodlums! As I transition into college, I know that my previous life in foster care may seem really hard but I have managed to walk around not feeling pity for myself for having been in foster care. I walk straight and say to myself that it could have been much worse. Yes, we have been hurt before but that is not what we are. We are equally smart and we can be who we want to be in life. We have made it to college just like you have!

**College campus transitions.** Imara also stated that while in foster, he had to learn to live in a highly structured environment. Everything was so structured such as when to eat, when to go to bed, when to go for therapy and when to visit with the case manager. Then you arrive into a college environment and nothing is structured at all. For me the freedom and lack of structure was so overwhelming. You get so confused
and start asking yourself what you have gotten yourself into! It is like what? I can wake up whatever time I want to wake up, I can go wherever I want to go and no one is holding me back! At first, I just looked at everything and I said, oh my God this is great! It was actually good for me. But, there were many us from the foster care who started college with me and now there are only a few of us still in college. They were all over the place, visiting their biological families all the time! They had to drop out or got kicked out due to behavioral, conduct or academic problems.

Imara further stated that his concerns transitioning into college had nothing to do with academic preparedness. He knew he was smart and that he would succeed in his college career.

I was more concerned about how to get transportation or ride to and from my classes as well as to and from the grocery store since I did not drive; the ability to have a mentor who understands what it means to be in foster care, and whether or not I will be able to stay on campus during the break! My concerns had nothing to do with academics! I knew I was smart, and that I will succeed! It was more about how to survive, feed myself, how to get to class, and where to stay during holidays!

Swabra. Swabra is a 20 year old who self-identifies as heterosexual African-American female. At the time of this interview she was beginning her sophomore year in a large predominantly white 4 year public university and has been in 5 foster care placements. She has been in foster care since she was 6 months old. At age seventeen she
learnt that she was fathered by her biological mother’s brother. At the time of the interview, Swabra divulged that she recently unsuccessfully attempted suicide and is working with her therapist to regain her life back. When asked why she decided to join college she stated:

I did not envision college at all throughout my life in foster care. That I am here is a miracle! At age seventeen while in foster care I discovered that I was pregnant! Nobody even knew that I was pregnant…up until I ended up having a miscarriage. No one even believed me when I told them my predicament up until I had to go to the hospital and put in the paperwork and all that stuff to prove to everybody that I had actually been pregnant. I never even thought about college at all while in high school! My entire life worked against entertaining any idea of ever going to college. Whenever I was with myself, even now, it is like staring out into the dark. All is dark and hopeless! I still do not have a place I can call home! Yet, I guess as an emancipated foster youth, you really do not have any other place to go and one of the options is to go out there and work a number of jobs here and there to take care of yourself. Looking back, I think, while in high school, I did not let others push me around. When my teachers started listening to my story, I realized that I was tired of being seen as a loser and destitute. I wanted to be special and different. I was tired of being thrown around from one foster home to another. It was time to get out and be a better person. College seemed to be the only way out for me!
Swabra, whose pseudonym in Swahili means *one who endures through adversity*, also went through multiple foster care and high school placements prior to transitioning into college. She stated that almost all of her teachers were substitute teachers, skipped school a lot, and did not let anyone bully her or her friends.

Being in foster care is not fun! Being in foster care is not fun! I also had to look for some other interesting things to do...just to change a boring day to day routine in foster care...Same time for meals; meetings with case workers all the time; and, repeating the story of your life over and over again. I just felt like I did not want to be there at all. I did not like the environment at all. You kind of look around and say, you know what, I cannot take this anymore. In fact there was a case in which one adopted student ran away from the same school because other kids were teasing her for not having biological parents. One day I was so mad and shouted back at those kids. They had no sense of understanding how difficult it is living without having people you could call family.

**Developing a positive sense of personal identity.** Swabra’s experience of aging-out of foster care and transitioning into college has triggered extensive personal reflection on her personal identity, autonomy and self-determination. She mentioned that she has been taking psychotropic medication since foster care. Recently, she felt so depressed and suicidal and almost committed suicide.

Sometimes, I just feel so tired of life and several times I’ve been suicidal. I do not think anyone without foster care experience can understand what I’ve gone through! Sometimes we are under so many medications that you become
completely confused! I think, I am probably going to be on medication all my life! Sometimes I wonder whether there was no other alternative to medication! When we say I am tired, I am really tired! I need something other than medication. Just be there and listen to me. Or simply show me that you care.

A month before my interview with Swabra, she reported that she felt so hopeless and fatigued to the extent that nothing on her college campus had any meaning at all. For her, such a feeling seems to have been aggravated by her experience of alienation and isolation: “With no one to lean on or to support you, no relationship with your biological family or someone you can really trust, life becomes very difficult and you simply give up hope!”

Additionally, Swabra had a miscarriage at age 17, a year before she entered college. She believes that her turbulent interpersonal relationship with her biological family, her pregnancy, her medical history and lack of support since she entered college could have contributed towards her depressive features and attempted suicide.

The experience of frequently being moved from one foster care placement to another also had a significant social and emotional impact on Swabra. “It was so frustrating having nobody stable in life you could really trust, call family, develop a relationship, and look toward for support and love!” She felt that all her teenage life, she felt like she was always being “bundled up and shipped from one foster home to another!”

**College campus transitional experiences: A path to autonomy.** The absence of a space and place she could safely call home impacted her sense of personal identity as
well as her interpersonal relationships. As she transitions into college she feels alone and isolated with no one to stretch her mind and heart and experience being connected to someone she can call family:

Even while here in college, you have no idea of how it feels to have nobody at all. No family at all. You are basically alone, on your own as an emancipated foster care youth. I do not like being around people or having people around me, especially those being visited or calling their biological parents all the time for this or that. I feel like it is fine to feel the way I feel but some of my peers say it is not normal. Well but what is normal? My life all through foster care has not been normal for so long but nothing has changed and I am used to what comes by me, one day at a time, and for me my reactions are normal and as good as it can get!

Transitioning into college from foster care was a big shift for Swabra, emotionally, mentally and socially. She mentioned that she was so surprised that whenever she shared about her foster care experience, her peers consistently told her that they were proud of her and also that they admired her strength. However for her, as she began to make personal meaning of her foster care experience, her developing personal identity and eventually aging-out and entering college, she did perceive herself as strong and worthy of admiration from her peers.

When I first arrived in college everything was so different. You need to live in foster care and rough neighborhoods for all your life then come to this college town for you to understand what I am talking about. It was a big shift, mentally and socially. Where I grew up I had to watch my back all the time! I had to shout,
howl and fight to be heard and paid attention to. I don’t have to scream and howl to be heard anymore. Everybody says, you are strong, be strong, all will be well. You know what I have been strong for myself for over 20 years now. When will someone be strong for me! I still do not have a place I can call home. When I am by myself it is like staring out into the dark.

On other hand, Swabra believes that her mentoring relationship with her campus mentor has been a nurturing ingredient in her path towards developing a positive sense of personal identity and self-confidence. She stated that her campus mentor reached out to her in an empowering way.

My campus mentor did not judge me; she did not even attempt to send me to a psych ward or something like that. She just listened to my story and helped me with ideas that gave me a sense of hope. She took me out to eat and worked with me to sort out the problems I had. I am beginning to believe in myself and seeing myself positively. She help me realize that foster care is a past I cannot change and made me see the strengths I had to help me navigate through my personal challenges while in college.

Adili. Adili is a 19 year old male who identifies as White. He emancipated at age 18. He was moved into the foster care system after the relevant legal authorities had determined that he had been repeatedly physically and sexually abused by his biological father. He attended seven different middle and high schools before coming to college. He also reports having been sexual abused while in foster care. He has been on psychotropic medications since middle school. He has just completed his freshman year in a four year
large public university. Similar to *Swabra*, during his first semester in college he unsuccessfully attempted suicide through psychotropic medication overdose. In response to the question why he decided to join college, he briefly responded:

I just wanted something different in my life. I wanted to change my life and pursue a dream I really cared about…something about aeronautics and meteorology. I wanted to map my own future.

*Adili* whose pseudonym means *one who seeks righteousness* in Swahili first become aware that something was not well with him while in middle school. He reports that while in middle he started having suicidal ideations, began to use sharp objects to inflict self-injury and indiscriminately destroyed things while living with his father. Prior to that experience, his mother had passed on soon after divorcing his father. He also reports that it is while in middle school that he was first sent to meet a mental health professional on regular basis and put on psychotropic medication. This was around the time it was established relevant legal and medical authorities that he was a survivor of physical and sexual abuse.

When children’s services decided to send me to foster care, I refused to go to a foster home because I had heard that bad things happen to children in foster care. So they sent me to a children’s home in the district in my home area. Things looked great for a while, then I had a mental breakdown and I was actually taken to a lock up unit not too far from my foster home to stabilize. After six months, I was moved out and went into a group home. Things were so difficult! While in a
group home I was raped by a group of three teenagers! I also had to take tons of medications! I was not happy at all! I was a big mess!

**Readiness for college.** Although, *Adili* experienced multiple school and foster care placements, he eventually qualified to join the National Honors society and entered college to majoring in meteorology and aeronautics.

I did change many schools. The foster home I was assigned to dictated which schools I transferred to! Being in foster care…you do not know of when you are going to move. Your case worker simply gives you a heads up and that’s it. You have to be ready to move. Sometimes it is because your foster parents simply can’t live with you. Moving into schools into different neighborhoods without a stable family was very challenging.

Nonetheless, *Adili* also asserted that living in a group home with peers from a similar background provided him with adequate skills for living independently in a college campus environment. He had to share same living arrangements with his peers and took turns to do chores and keep their house clean.

I learnt how to clean up the bathroom, do laundry…be independent. I can now clean up any kind of mess! I also began to manage my finances. I even learnt to cook and use the microwave. It was very helpful.

**College transitional experiences – Isolation and alienation.** In addition to the above, *Adili* also observed that as soon as he moved into a [residential hall] quad with other roommates he felt that he did not fit in with the rest of his peers because of his
foster care experience, his sense of maturity and the fact that he did not share the experience of being connected to family.

One thing is living with other people of my age. I share the same age with my roommates and classmates but I seem much older especially with regard to decisions and priorities I make each day. I kind of feel like I don’t fit in! I do not belong. It bothers me every single time I hear someone say or they call home to their parents and you know say something like, “Hey, I would like you to bring me some water. Bring it up”. You hear about dads’ weekend, moms’ weekend, sibs’ weekend, and parents’ weekend and you hear people calling home all the time. Almost everyone I have met here on campus has had their parents or guardians. They may not have had the best of their situation with their parents or guardians but at least they have some. This is the kind of isolation and pain I encounter all the time. It drags me down.

The feeling of alienation and isolation seems to also have been triggered by Adili’s perception that his instructors do not demonstrate a mentoring skill-set tailored for college students with diverse experiences such as his own.

Teachers on this campus come across like they are used to having students coming from well-off families, self-driven, better prepared, open to expressing who they are freely. You want to tell the teachers things but they simply have no time to listen. You want to explain why your grades are coming down. You want to tell them “this is where I came from” and “that’s why I am having so many
struggles” but there is like this big wall. Who then do I turn to? How am I supposed to relate with my teachers if I cannot share something about myself?

**Positive and negative freedom.** The nature of Adili’s college campus environment also enabled him to experience both negative and positive freedom. On one hand in his first semester, he reports that he was so thrilled to experience no more structures, and no more requirements to attend innumerable case worker meetings. However, this was short lived.

I was in a Quad with three other guys but that lasted only for about a week or two partly because, I wanted to get up in early in the morning take a shower, and get ready for class while the others wanted to sleep in after partying. They wanted to stay up late and wake up late. I went to bed early and woke up early. The situation in the [residential hall] quad with my roommates was a big challenge. I did not fit into their lifestyle; I couldn’t tell them to be quiet whenever I wanted some quiet time. I asked for a room change, so I was moved to a single.

For Adili, having lived in a structured environment and transitioning into a college campus space that had very little structure propelled him to begin the process of creating a rhythm of life that suited his new personal lifestyle as an emancipated youth. However, moving into a single did not help him balance between his need for a personal space and the need to reach out to others. It has also impacted his path towards developing a positive personal identity.

Now I realize I am more isolated than I was before. I am at peace but not at peace. With other people around you, you cannot pretend for long. They will at some
point discover who you really are. Now, I can afford to pretend that all is well out there but then go back to who I really am once I get back to my room with no one to judge me.

**Developing a positive/empowering personal identity.** Surviving a suicide attempt through medication overdose constitutes one main meaning-making experience that empowered Adili to begin to reconstruct a positive self-identity as an emancipated foster youth transitioning into college. The experience has also motivated him to reach out to the local authorities and access his foster care files to learn more about his identity, his background, as well as his experiences in foster care in order to begin a process of personal healing.

It is important so that I could confirm some memories because now as time goes by some stuff is resurfacing….Things got great when I came back from hospital after the suicide attempt and then from time to time, I feel low and depressed. I want to know what happened to me and all the other experiences that I might not be aware of. You know, while in foster care, I was constantly on some medications that I do not know what I am actually suffering from! There are some things I do not understand about myself. I need to know what to look out for!

The desire to heal his past and develop a positive self-identity has also empowered Adili to reach out to others and to consider starting a mentoring group of peers made up of college students with foster care experiences. I know that I need to get away from what others want me to be. I have always tried to fit in, wanting to be what others would like me to be. I am trying to take in
the most difficult parts of me to fit so I can become more of myself. The other one is meeting other foster youth with foster care experience, people with similar background. I have also brought a male part into a survivor advocacy program which so far has been mostly female-centered.

**Shamiri.** Shamiri self-identified as a white male. At the time of the interview he was turning nineteen and was a freshman in a two year community college in small city in the United States. He entered foster care when he was fourteen. He was placed into the foster care system after Children’s Services established that he was being sexually abused by his biological mother’s boyfriend who had moved in with them. Additionally, he reports that his biological mother was at the same time addicted to a variety of drugs. He was first placed into a psychiatric facility due to behavioral health difficulties before being placed into foster care.

*Shamiri* whose pseudonym means to flourish in Swahili, was inspired to attend college by his biological brother’s ex-girlfriend whom he maintains saw in him the potential to succeed academically and encouraged him to consider college as an option.

When my biological mother could not take care of me she was there for me. She once told me…you know what…you are really smart, you are a really smart kid and you can do anything you want and if you choose not to go to college then it is all on you…and that is your decision. But I believe that if you go to college you will make a great student and I believe you will graduate with no problems.

Similarly to the other emancipated youth who participated in this research,
Shamiri also experienced numerous foster care placements prior to college. However, in his second foster care placement, he reports that due to intermittent anger outbursts, he was subsequently placed in a juvenile detention facility for a year before being sent to a group home as a third placement. However, due to recurrent difficulties with anger management and incidences of aggravated assault, he was detained in a youth services’ facility up until his emancipation and subsequent enrollment into a community college. He never attended a public school.

I never got a chance to go to a normal public high school. I never enrolled in any of them. I went to a “school” located within the Department of Youth Services facility. We had about 80 kids on campus and we were divided into groups of ten for various learning programs. We learnt mostly practical stuff like automotive and other industrial technology courses – programs to help us get by once we were released from the facility. This is where I got interested in working with my hands and building stuff. In fact while in that facility I even skipped 11th Grade and moved from the 10th grade into the 12th Grade because I maintained very high scores. My Math scores were adequate enough to go pharmaceuticals or nursing but I opted to enroll in construction management.

Shamiri was consequently encouraged by his case worker to apply for college admission in a community college of his choice. He explained that he got accepted and: “I was so proud of myself when all of my peers said that I had proven that I could really believe in myself and make myself a better person.”
**College campus transitional challenges – path to personal autonomy.** Just like other participants in this study aging-out of care and immediately transitioning into college had a tremendous impact on Shamiri’s emotional, psychological and personal wellbeing. One critical area was how to navigate the new found freedom. He reports that he went from a highly structured environment to suddenly having to chart out his preferred rhythm of daily life as well as how to engage with a new college campus environment.

You know foster care is very structured. Time for creativity and doing your own thing is not common. I had to figure out and remind myself that it was a brand new day. I had grown up overnight. There was no going back. There was no longer a case worker to work with you through your files and plans for your next move. I had to figure out my food situation, living situation. I had no one to call and ask to meet a case worker to sort out my problems. There was no longer a case worker to work with you through your files and plan the next move with you. You are on your own.

One thing that was adversely affected was the motivation to attend all classes and stay on top of his school work. He stated “I did not even know what to do with myself with the new found freedom! You have no one to tell you, get up and go to class!” Shamiri subsequently failed most of his classes in the first semester. Additionally, he found himself reverting to alcohol addiction, a habit he had successfully overcome a year earlier. He attributed this relapse to an aging-out process that is so accelerated and
compressed and the lack of a college transitional structure for those from the foster care background.

In the follow up interview two weeks later, Shamiri mentioned that one of his academic advisors had recently reached out to him and that they were working on a consistent schedule that will help him make up for the lost time during his first semester. He has also begun meeting a mental health professional to help him with some of the psycho-social challenges he was encountering. He now states that he is determined to succeed: “I do not want to turn back to where I came from. I want to move forward and succeed.”

**Connectedness to a home and family.** Another transitional meaning-making dynamic for Shamiri was reframing what it means to be connected to a home and to a family. He stated that since emancipation the feeling of isolation and alienation is more pronounced than that of his new found freedom. He now realizes that the people who genuinely understand his personal identity and struggles are other college students with the foster care experience.

Like last night, I could not sleep and so I went the apartment of my college friends from foster care and we just goofed off the whole night, and today I feel great. There was some home I could go to, someone I could call and go there and feel at home without having to explain myself that I was in foster care and all that. They simply accepted me as I am.

This experience was so important for Shamiri because he felt accepted and socially included. At last, he had met a group of his peers who not only shared his foster
experiences but also desired to move forward and succeed in college. All he saw in his life was the desire to flourish and become a successful student. He had found a group of his peers who accepted him as he was.

My friends also happened to be people who had experienced the terrible experience of working with case workers and being on medication that we probably never needed. We simply wanted to be ourselves and become successful college students. And so we have had a good time together, enjoyed our time together and helped each realize that we have to move forward! We are smart and we can make it in life!

*Shamiri’s* relationship with his biological mother has also assumed a new dimension. He mentioned that after emancipation, his biological mother expected him to go back home, get a job and then take care of her. Nonetheless, it has become clearer for him that he does not want to pursue that path. He desires to do something new for himself, succeed in college and take care of himself: “I want to be a better person and not stuck like my own biological family”.

*Developing an empowering personal identity.* Since developing a supportive peer group with foster care experience, *Shamiri* has decided to reach out to other youth still in foster care as a mentor. He mentions that some of them already view him as a positive role model and he would like to continue reaching out to them, encouraging them and supporting them in their personal and academic endeavors.

My contact with my foster siblings and peers is very encouraging. They always ask me to come back and share with them my story and how to get to college.
Eventually I hope to get a degree in psychology so that I can go back and help other foster care youth!

Additionally, Shamiri now finds himself more and more open to sharing his foster care experience with other college students since he has realized that even those without the foster care experience have begun to accept him for who he is.

I was initially afraid that people on campus would look at me and based on my foster care background view me as a thug! In fact college has motivated me to reach out to others for help if I am to succeed!

Furthermore, in the past year, Shamiri has also continued to develop a positive sense of self by learning not to make his difficult foster care experiences dampen his spirits. He is now determined to work hard and succeed in life.

It is weird, but being raised in foster care, you begin to believe that you are nothing! But that I am here in college and completing my first year is a big deal for me! I do not care if it is not a big deal for anybody! This is a big deal for me.

In foster care, your self-esteem goes through the window….Very few people really care about your future!

**Nuru.** Nuru turned 20 around the time of this interview. She identifies as heterosexual white female. She opted to enter foster care at age 15, after discerning that she did not want to live with her biological mom anymore. Nuru reports that she got weary of being sent to the streets all the time to get drugs for her mother. She also stated that prior to entering the foster care system her mother constantly verbally and physically
abused her and even threatened to harm her if she ever contacted the authorities. *Nuru* is beginning her sophomore year in a large four year public university.

**Motivation for college.** When asked why she decided to enter college *Nuru* declared:

I have always wanted to go to college. I never really had any role models or anything like that in my life. I never even knew who my dad is! I still do not even know who he is. I think I came to college because I was tired of living in poverty. I just wanted to break that cycle of poverty I had experienced living with my biological mother. I did not want to end up like my mother, moving from house to house, from one homeless shelter to another. I decided that I could not just sit back and watch my life just go to waste!

**Readiness for college.** *Nuru* whose name means *inspirational light* in Swahili, also attended multiple foster care placements and high schools. Prior to foster care, she mentioned that as a family, they would literary move from house to house and from one homeless shelter to another looking for a place to stay. In her early teens, while she was not in school, she either took up a job working in a trailer to bring some income home or took care of her younger siblings while her mother went into the streets for drugs. At age fifteen she made a decision to leave her mother and stay with her employer who eventually helped her process her entry into foster care.

I could not just sit back and watch my mom make decisions that I felt were inappropriate and terrible. The people I was working for in a trailer home heard of my plight and offered their place so that I could live with them as long as I
needed. At the beginning of my sophomore year, I moved in with them but I 
ended up losing the entire year of school since I decided to continue working 
more hours.

*College preparedness.* At the same time, Nuru was adjusting to a new school. She 
nonetheless kept her job while taking extra school credits in order to catch up with the 
lost school year. “I was just about to turn 16 after living with this new family for almost a 
year before my case was brought to the Children and Family Services and I decided to 
enter foster care”.

Additionally, Nuru declared that while in foster care she felt that her high school 
peers seemed smarter and much more involved with school than she was. She believes 
that it was probably due to the fact that they came from a stable family background and 
from families who saw a value in education. This made her feel alienated on one hand, 
but on the other hand, it was also a motivation to work hard and make it to college.

I have been mostly really shy and not outgoing at all! I remember in high school, I 
used to go the library all the time and read a lot. I remember even reading a series 
of books way above me perhaps…One of them was entitled “*A Series of 
Unfortunate events*”. I kind of related to that series! I actually even concluded that 
my own life was in fact a series of unfortunate events! And then I discovered that 
I was not the only one in my class reading those books! It was always through 
school work that I actually made friendships while in high school!

Another concern that Nuru had as she transitioned into college was her anxiety 
and fear of whether or not she would be able to create productive interpersonal
relationships with her peers. This was especially important in view of the fact that he was
the only person from her graduating class that was applying to the college of choice. In
that year, she was the only emancipated foster youth from her county who had made it to
college. Her concerns were numerous and contributed to her feelings of isolation and
alienation even before entering college.

I did not know anyone! What if I do not make friends? My concern was that I
would not be able to meet and make friends with people who think like me and
share the same values and goals like me! People who will be able to keep me up
and keep me going in the right direction! You know I was actually almost certain
I would not meet someone with the same experiences as I have had in foster care
and with my own biological family…someone who has gone through adversity in
life since a younger age!

Nonetheless, independent living classes were of great help to Nuru prior to
college. Her case worker first made sure that her college housing arrangements were
taken care of. Both of them actually made several campus visits to get used to the new
college campus environment. However, as soon as she began college Nuru still feels that
her peers who had no foster care experiences transitioned into college and “settled in.pretty easy and quickly socially” but “simply could not get what life was all about”.

For my peers it has just been parties and going out, drinking and smoking weed! I
also find that in some of my initial classes in college, my peers simply don’t get
it! They do not get it that some families have to struggle even to get food! For, me
it is simple, I get it! I have been there! I feel like I am much more like
independent! When I hear some of my friends having problems and they just simply say, that you know what I just have to call my mom and she will fix it! And I am just like what would you do without your mom, what would you do without your parents?

Family support and alienation. Nuru stated that in spite of her strained relationship with her biological mother and previous foster care families, her immediate former foster parents have been most useful in making her understand and appreciate what having a stable family means. This family helped her with the college applications and even purchased for her all the items she needed as she transitioned into college. “They helped me with my adjustment to college, with my school work and even helped buy a car and groceries needed for college!” On the other hand, Nuru still felt that she had less family and emotional support as she transitioned into college compared to her peers who had no foster care experience. For instance, she found that her roommates could call home every day and update their families on their transitional experiences. My roommate would call her mom and tell her how her day was and all that stuff! Her mom could even find time to come down to campus with her dog and siblings and keep her company! If she needed anything, her mom would bring her little packages from time to time! I never got anything like that! There I was with no one to call! Maybe I was jealous about the kind of support they had!
This experience of alienation and exclusion triggered her memories of her life in foster care during which some of her foster parents kept her isolated from others and did not reach out to her to treat her like their own child. I just felt again that I was different and lost and that I had to learn to take care of me. It was like being thrown into a pool where everyone else seems to know how to swim pretty easy and you are left on your own.

At the same it was inspiring for Nuru to learn that in her college campus there were actually other emancipated foster care students even though there was no formal way of meeting them.

When I was preparing to enroll into this college, I went to the financial aid office and I was just in the process of filling up this financial aid form and the administrative secretary casually glanced at me and declared, ah yes, I just helped another student fill this part related to foster care! I just looked at her and just said to myself like really? I never knew there were other students on this campus with the same experience.

**Developing a positive personal identity.** Another meaning-making dynamic that stood out for Nuru as she transitioned into college is the emerging self-image of a positive personal identity. In that regard, one of the major experiences contributing to that process was her deliberate personal decision to leave her home and enter foster care at age 15.

I mean how could someone you call your mom, be so negative about life and drag you along a destructive path? I remember there were times that she would send
me down the street to get her drugs! I mean…crazy things like that! I mean what mom would sincerely do that to her little girl? She often put me down…always threatening me that If I ever contacted the authorities that she would no longer consider me as a daughter anymore. Dealing with her emotional, physical and verbal abuse were perhaps some of the most challenging things that I had to deal with! I had to leave my mom. Living with my mom was like learning how to perpetually not feel at all!

The above decision in addition to learning to be autonomous and taking care of herself in her early teenage years inculcated in her a sense of self-confidence and resilience. Nuru also learnt that her experience with her mom also empowered her to pursue things that enrich her positive self-image while transitioning into college.

This one night in our first week in college, we went out, it was like…I was so shocked….It was like….oh my God! This is not what I came to college for! We went to this like really like sketchy apartment…she just shot into the apartment refrigerator already getting a drink for herself….And I was just like…no! You should not do that! And I was like…you know what we need to get out of here like right now! We actually left and found out half an hour later that the party was busted! I was like ‘Yes that was why we should NOT have gone there in the first place!’ After, that, I was like you know what…I love you but I am not here to do things like that!

However, it has not been that easy all the time. At one time she found alcohol left by her roommates in their substance free hall. Nuru shared that she was so conflicted and
did not what action to take. Instead she decided to leave the campus and spend the rest of
the week with her foster parents. When she came back to campus, she immediately
requested for a room change.

In another incident in her college lab, Nuru reports that her lab partner had failed
to complete her portion of the lab work due to “a hangover”. As a result, she felt at odds
with what she needed to do.

One part of me was saying that this is it…I do not want to work with her
anymore! But the other part of me was saying she kind of needs someone in her
life right now and I am certain she would not have that someone in this moment
and time! I just kind of felt that she needed a second chance and it was my
birthday too! Living in a foster home has made me understand other people better.
It has made me appreciate where other people are coming from and how to work
with them based on their experiences. Whenever I interact with people different
from me, I seek to understand where they are coming from. I have learnt to set
boundaries with roommates, time management…when to go to study [pause]
….humility!

Looking back she believes that she was simply scared of confronting her
roommates and classmates. Additionally, this incident motivated her to join a faith based
peer group that shared her ideals and values for encouragement and support. Since then
she seeks college campus activities that help her to be more aware of her personal
strengths and as well as those that help her discover and foster in her the desire to be a
productive member of the society, and not end up being what she described as “like my mom and my first roommates in college”.

At the same time, Nuru reported that in her entire freshman year, the only thing that seemed consistent in her transitional experience was pushing herself self so hard to make good grades but not being happy and at peace with herself. It felt as if she was working hard to place herself at the same level with her peers. And yet:

Something was missing! I did not really comprehend what it was! Maybe I was not really doing things for me. It was all about getting grades and not getting good sleep at all. I was kind of comparing myself with everyone else and not doing what would make me happy and still be me!

It was at this time that Nuru sought counseling services offered in her college campus. However, she reports that that experience was not helpful at all in her attempt to reconstruct a meaningful and empowering self-image.

I just remember that it was in the middle of the fall semester of my freshman year and I really wanted somebody to talk to and I cannot remember what exactly was going on but I remember talking to this lady in the counseling services spilling my guts and pouring my entire heart and life out to her and she did not give me any feedback! All she was doing was nodding her head. I mean you are a counselor! I need help! I only remember her saying that you know I am really glad you came by to talk to me and if you are really interested in continuing the services you must really go through this long process and they will put you on a waiting list and you might be assigned to counselor. I mean after spilling all my heart with
you and telling me that I will have to be on a waiting list? Yah, it’s not like I am threatening to kill myself but I need a counselor now with some concrete solutions!

**Hafidha.** Hafidha is a 19-year old freshman who identifies as a heterosexual female. She entered foster care when she was in the seventh grade. Just like Nuru, she also contacted Child and Family Services and asked to be placed in foster care when she discerned that she could not live with her biological parents anymore due to their addiction to crack and cocaine. She currently attends a 4 year large public residential university located in the Mid-West. When asked about her reasons for opting to enter college, she responded:

> It is like as soon as you go through high school, it is imprinted upon you that everyone must work hard to go to college! It is what everyone in my school aspired for. I was no exception! During foster care, I went to this high school that had very high academic expectations – doing IP class, doing international baccalaureate program. College was not optional for me. I had to go to college! I think I applied to go to college during my senior year because everyone else was doing so!

**Hafidha** who name means *one who is thoughtful* in Swahili, grew up in a home and a neighborhood where many residents, including her own parents abused drugs and alcohol. “My home life was just crazy! There was never a day I saw my parents clean!” It was one of her teaches during her seventh grade that noticed that all was not well with her and helped her contact Child and Family services for help and she was subsequently
placed in foster care. She explained: “I wanted something different in my life. I wanted an alternative lifestyle. I was tired of the kind of lifestyle my biological parents lived. My teacher cared about me as person”. She also mentioned that it was the first time someone had reached out to her and showed genuine concern and interest in her wellbeing.

**College preparedness.** Unlike the other emancipated foster care youth in this study, while in foster care, *Hafidha* did not experience multiple foster home and pre-college school placements. She also had the opportunity to attend a prestigious private high school. Additionally, she enrolled in the international baccalaureate high school program, made it to the honor roll and even obtained college credits prior to starting college. Her school also had a diverse student population including international students and the drive to succeed academically was instilled throughout the entire school.

While in foster care, *Hafidha* started to develop an interest in civic engagement. She started wondering how after high school, she could do something for others and make their lives better and more rewarding.

I began thinking about being a social worker or a community organizer. I started thinking like, coming from my background of parents with drug problems, coming from an experience of neglect and abuse, coming from an unstable family; I could help others avoid what I went through in my earlier life. I have two younger siblings who are not even thinking about college at all! One of them is not doing well academically. She struggles a lot with school and homework! I also have had some of my peers who are from foster care and very poor
neighborhoods struggling with issues of neglect, drugs and abuse. For me college was to enable me become an instrument of positive social change!

However, even as she transitioned into college with a fairly good head start academically, Hafidha finds herself being forced to face challenges that she barely anticipated. As an emancipated youth, she now finds herself concerned about how to take care of her day to day challenges. These include financial needs, how to reframe her relationships with her biological family, a feeling of isolation, and how to navigate through her emerging sense of self-identity and purpose relative to foster care and her family background.

With regard to financial challenges, Hafidha observed that even though she received in-state tuition and loans, she still has to figure out where to live and what to eat: “I now have to find work to supplement my income and also figure out where to stay during the holidays. I cannot go back home. I am now on my own!”

Another meaning-making experience for Hafidha is the feeling of isolation and lack of college preparedness as an emancipated foster care youth transitioning into college in comparison to other college students without foster care experiences.

I went to a very sheltered and privileged high school that was also diverse and I kind of expected that my college peers would not find my foster care background weird! Everyone in my high school was different and so it never crossed my mind that any additional personal difference in college will have an outstanding impact for me as an emancipated youth!
The feeling of isolation and alienation has especially been salient whenever Hafidha shared with her college peers about her experiences in foster care.

Most of them seem not to understand what it’s like to have been raised in an abusive home. They have no idea of pain, hurt, and hunger. All they do is to feel pity for you! Whenever I mention that I have been to foster care, their reaction makes you feel less accomplished in life. It is like the most embarrassing thing in life!

In addition to the above, Hafidha also observed that transitioning to college has made her feel confused about a number of things related to the college expectations of one who is emancipated foster youth transitioning into college.

The college sends you this generic email or acceptance letter detailing what you need to bring and so on. Now, coming from foster care system, I did not even know where to get some of the stuff the college was asking for! I did not even have an idea of what they were talking about! The foster care system is preparing to kick you out into independent living and the college is expecting the same stuff from everyone coming to the college! There seems to be no meeting point between these two parts of your life! I wish I had contact information of a few people in college who I could easily contact and ask questions that popped up before I came over to college!

**Developing a positive self-image and personal identity.** However, Hafidha also mentioned additional specific meaning-making experiences relative to her status as an emancipated foster youth transitioning into higher education. One of the significant
moments was when she decided not to go back to her biological family after emancipation. “I had to set my priorities in life right. And I knew that if I went back home, I would not be able to become a better person. I did not want my parent’s lifestyle to take control of my life”.

Furthermore, Hafidha now believes that her experiences in foster care and with her biological family has made her become more aware of the many diverse problems that people face as well as the impact of those problems in their lives.

I am beginning to be more empathetic on people’s predicaments. Whenever I see a pregnant teen for example, I am less inclined to make a judgment. Had I not opened myself up to my teacher and children’s services, I do not know whether I would be talking to you today. I wonder how many neglected and abused children out there will ever have the same opportunity I had. You cannot simply assume that the Children’s services will do the right thing all the time! For me the question is how we can help millions of neglected and abused children out there become advocates for themselves.

**Theme Identification**

The first level of theme identification occurred during the initial review of each interview transcript. Upon receiving the transcripts, I read each transcript, analyzed the data for each interview, and then conducted open coding utilizing the NVIVO software, which is an analytic tool to facilitate the coding of qualitative data.

In the coding process I identified four primary themes. I then delineated the themes into two main areas, with each area focusing on one of the two guiding research
questions. I then further classified the four primary themes into subthemes. The findings for each research question were then summarized and exemplary quotes from the interviews were used to illustrate the themes and subthemes.

Table 3
Themes, Subthemes and Definitions for Research Question 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme/Subtheme</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adverse college experiences</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolation and estrangement</td>
<td>College experience contributed to participants feeling isolated, alone, or left out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exclusion/Ostracism</td>
<td>College experience contributed to participants feeling ostracized or “different” from others due to foster care status.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor mental health</td>
<td>College experience worsened mental health issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inability to reveal real self</td>
<td>College experience contributed to participants experiencing a loss of self or the inability to reveal the authentic self.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Positive implications for self-esteem and well-being</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased self-sufficiency</td>
<td>Attending college helped participants become more self-sufficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quest for Self-Identity and Purpose</td>
<td>Attending college helped participants self-actualize and explore or find their true self/identity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased self-love</td>
<td>Feeling as though college helped increase self-love or self-esteem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optimism/hope</td>
<td>Feeling as though college provided hope or led to optimism and a more positive outlook.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New beginning</td>
<td>Feeling as though college is a chance for a new beginning or a fresh start.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College as a catalyst</td>
<td>Feeling attending college was a catalyst for positive change.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Primary themes are bolded; subthemes are italicized.
The resulting themes are described in the summary of the research findings for research questions one and two presented below.

**Results for research question 1**

In this dissertation, my first research question set out to explore how emancipated foster care college students make meaning of their transitional experiences into higher education. In this section I summarize the two emergent primary themes related to this research question. I also include tables summarizing the definition of the identified themes, the frequency of occurrence for the themes and subthemes, as well as the number of interviewees that mentioned a specific theme and subtheme. As already reflected in the Table 3, the primary themes I identified were *adverse college experience* and *positive implications for self-esteem and well-being*.

Each of these themes was associated with several subthemes and the definitions for these subthemes are also provided in Table 3. Additionally, Table 4 shows the frequency with which the subthemes appeared across interviews and across the data.

**Adverse college experiences.** The first common theme that emerged from Research Question 1 was *adverse college experiences*. This theme was defined as negative experiences associated with transitioning into the college campus environment. Transitioning into college altered the ways in which the emancipated foster youth viewed and engaged with the college campus environment relative to their foster care experiences.

The personal interviews revealed an interconnection between their attempt to make meaning of their personal development, their sense of identity, their sense of self-
esteem, their interpersonal development, and lack of interconnectedness with the college campus community. Common subthemes emerging from the personal interviews included: (a) isolation and estrangement, (b) exclusion/ostracism, (c) persistent struggle with mental health challenges, and (d) a search for (and at times questioning what constitutes) one’s enduring sense of self or identity.

Table 4

*Frequency of Themes and Subthemes for Research Question 1*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes and Subthemes</th>
<th>Number of interviewees mentioning this theme</th>
<th>Total exemplar quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adverse college experiences</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolation and estrangement</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exclusion/Ostracism</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor mental health</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inability to reveal real self</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Positive implications for self-esteem and well-being</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased self-sufficiency</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quest for Self-Identity and Purpose</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased self-love</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optimism/hope</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New beginning</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College as an empowering catalyst</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Primary themes are bolded; subthemes are italicized.

*Isolation and estrangement.* One common subtheme that emerged was that of Isolation and Estrangement. This subtheme was defined as college experience that contributed to participants feeling isolated, alone, or left out. It was mentioned 19 times in 6 interviews. In other words, irrespective of the time spent in foster care, gender or
age, feeling isolated and alone was a common experience among the emancipated foster care youth who participated in this research.

Participants used phrases like “I had nowhere to go” “I did not know anyone” “I looked out in the parking lot, and there was no vehicle in sight, no one around” “I was among others but seemingly invisible” “I felt I did not have any common experience to share with my peers” “You suddenly feel not only alone but so lonely” “When I am by myself it is like staring out into the dark” “You know you feel isolated simply because you do not have what other students have”.

*Anisa*, an emancipated freshman completing her first year in college described her experience of isolation in her first week of college as follows:

One of the challenges for me was I did not know…*anyone* on this college campus. You kind of expect to bump into some people you already met in Middle School or High school! But coming from foster care, I did not know anyone here on this college campus. I did not bump into anyone I knew! I was lucky to have a single in my first year in college but I had to share a bathroom with two other residents. By me *being up here and not knowing anyone*…I was mostly alone. I did not know anyone.

Different explanations and interpretations abound on how college students spend their holidays. For a foster care youth transitioning into higher education with no place to legally call home, this means an additional challenge.

*Imara*, who identified as a bi-racial male went to an all-white high school during foster care placement where he had an experience of being isolated not only on the basis
of his skin color but also by the very fact that he was a foster child in his class. He states that he felt “despised and disparaged”. While in foster care he could not socialize out of school and was constantly changing schools so he could not establish lasting connections with his peers and just be himself. For Imara, the very fact that he had an experience with the foster care system already negatively impacted connectedness with his peers. In our first interview this is how explained his feelings of isolation during his first holiday experience in college:

Another experience was during my first holiday in college. This past holiday, I woke up and everybody was on the move, going to their parents, their folks coming to pick them up…and there I was with nowhere to go. I was the only person left in my building. I looked out in the parking lot, and there was no vehicle in sight, no one around! No one reaching out to me…no gift to expect…It was really challenging! It was so frustrating and depressing. You suddenly feel not only alone but so lonely. No one cares! It was just a day or two but it made me feel so lonely and so sad.

The process of making meaning out of feelings of hopelessness in a new environment especially by a person who has experienced hurt and pain can engender rich metaphors as the best way to explain the interpret their experiences relative to their environment. As a case in point, Swabra reports that she was pregnant at 16 while in foster care. Additionally she was emancipated and entered college only a few months after learning that she was fathered by her mother’s brother. This is how she conceptualized her feelings of isolation during her first week transitioning into college.
When I am by myself it is like staring out into the dark. All is dark and hopeless. There is no light in the horizon. My first week here I was mostly by myself. I did not interact with my roommates a lot. I preferred being by myself.

One could argue that her first year transitioning into college with no structured schedule outside the classroom stirred in her the reflective disposition to begin deeply re-examining aspects of her life’s journey hitherto not considered pertinent to her personal growth and development. She was beginning to engage in a meaning-making exercise with a view to learning more about herself and what her experiences in foster care and with her family meant relative to her personal identity and her sense of purpose.

On the other hand, other college transitional experiences of isolation seemed to have inculcated in some of the research participants a different way of reframing isolation relative to their concerns. For instance, Adili is a 19 year old male who identifies as White. He emancipated at age 18. He entered foster care system at age 12 after being sexually abused by his biological father. He attended seven different middle and high schools before coming to college. He also reports having been sexual abused while in foster care. He has been on psychotropic medications since middle school. He has just completed his freshman year in a large public university. In his first semester in college he unsuccessfully attempted suicide through psychotropic medication overdose.

This is how Adili explained his experiences of isolation while transitioning into college:

You can’t…can’t just…you know you feel isolated simply because you do not have what other students have. You are already struggling with your background
(as a former foster youth) and you arrive on a college campus and you encounter additional isolation. Just like today, I just overheard my peers in class, share with each other, you know what…my folks are coming over for Dads’ weekend. That is the kind of additional isolation and pain I encounter day to day. That’s the kind of stuff that drags me down. It adds to my depression. One other thing is living with other people of my age. I share the same age with my roommates and classmates but I seem much older especially with regard to decisions and priorities I make each day. Another thing is I was so concerned that my roommates will see that I had a lot of medications and so I got me a lock box to keep my medications. I also had fear of rejection, being rejected by my peers!

In a final example, Nuru, who entered foster care after she got weary of neglect, verbal abuse and being sent to the streets all the time to get drugs for her mother, described the feeling of isolation and estrangement while transitioning into college as follows:

My concern was that I would not be able to meet and make friends with people who think like me and share the same values and goals like me! People who will be able to keep me up and keep me going in the right direction! You know I was actually almost certain I would not meet someone with the same experiences as I have had in foster care and with my own biological family…someone who has gone through adversity in life since a younger age!...someone who never had an opportunity to be like other kids…free to go out with friends…making friends and not stuck in your home with a mom doing drugs … someone who had gone
through several foster care placements. Someone who had to be put on medication as a result of depression and other medical issues, and yet made it to college! I was not sure whether or not my own peers would understand my background.

**Social Exclusion.** Unlike the subtheme of isolation and estrangement mentioned above, this subtheme refers to direct college experiences that contributed to participants feeling ostracized or “different” from others because of foster care status. It was mentioned 15 times in seven interviews. This study revealed that although the research participants had expressed the desire to enter college while in foster care and worked hard to get to college, they also found that the structure of a college campus environment as well as what some members of the campus community did and said made them feel excluded and ostracized.

Subsequently some participants kept their foster care status secret to avoid being excluded or ostracized. *Imara* reflected and expressed that some members of the college campus community have an established negative image of an individual who has had an experience of the foster care system.

This negative image propels the emancipated youth transitioning into college to minimize the possibility of being excluded or ostracized from the wider campus community. An enduring sense and experience of interconnectedness with others therefore seems to be a critical component of an emancipated youth transitioning into a college campus community. *Imara* expressed the experience of exclusion and ostracism in the following manner:
I therefore do not tell my peers in college that I have been in foster care, because it is like they have a belief that people who are of have been in foster care are destitute, have no families, have been abused, or have no money! There are many reasons why people end up in foster care, and not all reasons are related to neglect or abuse! Some people treat us or see us like being delinquent, trouble makers or they think of the worse things that can ever happen to a child!

The experience of ostracism was also expressed by Hafidha who indicated that even though she attended an institution that was predominantly middle class, whenever she shared that she had been to foster care, her peers started viewing her differently and with disdain. This made her feel excluded and ostracized and she subsequently kept her foster care experience hidden. It dawned on her that to be accepted with her peers in her college community, she has to refrain from sharing about her experiences in foster care.

_Hafidha_ expressed her experiences of exclusion as follows:

My college is predominantly middle class and whenever I mention that I have been in foster care, my peers react with utter surprise! It is like someone with my experience should not make it to this college! It is like foster care is a system only for the destitute lower socio-economic individuals! The reaction is like…oh you poor thing.

The negative stereotype of the identity of a college student with foster care experience was also revealed by Adili, who at the time of the research interviews was just completing his freshman year. In the middle of his first semester in college he reports that
experiences of isolation, loneliness, and exclusion led to depressive symptoms due and a suicide attempt by way of psychotropic medication overdose as way of coping.

Just like other research participants in this study, he also felt ostracized or stereotyped negatively. *Adili* explained his deep experience of ostracism in the following manner:

I kind of feel like I don’t fit in! Just because…it bothers me every single time I hear someone say or they call home to their parents and you know say something like, “Hey, I would like you to bring me some water. Bring it up”. You hear about dads’ weekend, moms’ weekend, sibs’ weekend, and parents’ weekend and you hear people calling home all the time. Almost everyone I have met here on campus have had their parents…. And they may not have had the best of their situation with their parents but at least they have some. They have a place to go home to, to sleep at night. I don’t have that. And because I don’t, people can detect that, on campus, in the residence halls tend to detect that and my discomfort stems from that. They know they can detect differences in me compared to someone else. I figure that because of that people kind of do not want to associate with me or get close to me.

In addition to the above, *Swabra*, who attends a community college in a small town also processed with passion the significance of her adverse college transitional experiences of exclusion and ostracism relative to part of her identity as an emancipated foster youth. She therefore has a strong desire that people envision her beyond the paradigm of the negative stereotype operational in her college community. She observed:
“Some people without my kind of experience often judge me…simply based on me having been to foster care…judging me not based on my character and integrity but on what they have heard or think I am.” This very same experience of negative stereotypical remarks and ostracism was also shared by Shamiri who zealously stated that,

There are people on this college campus who look at me and based on my foster care background and hometowns simply conclude that I am a thug! This is very frustrating! I am not a thug! I might have had have some gang experience but being a thug or foster child is not my identity!

Nuru, a sophomore in a large public 4 year public university related the feelings of ostracism to a specific experience:

During the first three weeks my druggie roommate mom came to campus every week, stayed in a hotel and offered emotional support to her but I never had anything like that! I could not expect my own mom to come down and do that! It makes you feel that being in foster care, I am different! It kind of confirms that nobody really cares about me!

Nuru continued, “There will be times when you will feel like an outcast.”

Acknowledging and naming the specific negative impact of the experiences of isolation, estrangement, exclusion and ostracism while transitioning into higher education was an intense meaning-making experience among most of the research participants in this study. In the interviews, the emancipated foster youth demonstrated signs of beginning to recognize that they are actually redefining and in some cases reclaiming their unique personal identities as well as a resolve to pursue a college career amidst
personal challenges touching their very core as unique individuals in a quest for meaning after the foster care experiences. This was especially evident in all participants setting out to participate in community outreach activities and services as well as being intentional in their resolve to show their college campus community that having a foster care experience does not minimize their dignity as persons.

On the other hand, Anisa, Swabra, Adili, Imara and Tumaini specifically reported that they held leadership positions in organizations that advocate for the rights of the foster youth before and during college. Tumaini and Imara regularly travel to conferences and workshops nationwide to educate and empower other youth in foster care regarding resources and opportunities available to them after foster care. In those conferences, they report that they also seek to make the rest of the community aware of the plight and rights of foster care youth. All 8 participants indicated that they would like to take up a career that seeks to work for the wellbeing of the marginalized members of their community. They found meaning in transcending their predicaments and reaching out to others and working towards careers that enrich other people’s lives.

**Emotional and mental health challenges.** This subtheme was defined by participants mentioning that the college experience worsened their mental health issues. It was mentioned 11 times in four interviews. Several participants indicated that adjusting to college raised additional mental health issues. The mental health issues ranged from anxiety and depression to nervous breakdown and suicidal ideations. In that light it is highly likely that the stressors of college transition potentially triggered the unresolved
traumatic experiences of neglect, abuse, multiple placements negatively impacting the mental and emotional wellbeing.

The specific nature of this subtheme was the fact that its context and prevalence appeared to have been made worse by transitioning into a college environment. Additionally, half of the total number of the research participants mentioned that they were prescribed a variety of psychotropic medication while in foster care and as they transition into college, they are still taking those medications.

*Anisa* attests that coming into college as an emancipated youth with a history of abuse, neglect, mental health related changes and with no source of support during those transitions is an arduous experience of many young men and women with foster care experience. She stated:

I think I did not have a strong support system to help me adjust to college. In my first year I continued to suffer from anxiety and night terrors, panic attacks and it was difficult to get through on my own and not knowing the resources available to me for support.

For *Anisa* therefore, a meaningful change in understanding and managing her mental health challenges might have been positively impacted by an accessible, empowering and consistent social supportive structure on a college campus as she transitioned into higher education. *Adili* who had recently attempted suicide with lithium overdose also attested:

You are already struggling with your background of neglect and abuse and you arrive on a college campus and you encounter additional isolation. Just like today,
I just overhead my colleagues in class, share with each other, you know what…

my folks are coming over for Dads’ weekend. That is the kind of additional

isolation and pain I encounter day to day. That’s kind of stuff that drags me
down. It adds to my depression.

The fact that adjusting to college exacerbated existing mental health issues of

emancipated foster youth transitioning into higher education was also confirmed by

Swabra who explained:

I have been depressed and on medication for a long time since foster care. I still

keep and take lots and lots of medication. At times, I do not even know what I
take them for. When the time comes, I go for a refill. Sometimes, I just feel so
tired of life and several times I’ve been suicidal. I do not think anyone without
foster care experience can understand what I’ve gone through!

In a final example, Tumaini mentioned:

I personally had to deal with depression… you know college for me was a whole
new different environment. Everything was going on so well, I had made it to
college then suddenly some things started going wrong. I was diagnosed with
depression. I think I had not developed sufficient skills to assess situations then
make appropriate steps and changes to better my situations.

At least half of the total number of participants demonstrated that indeed mental
and emotional health problems that began in foster care can worsen while transitioning
into higher education. Aptly put by Tumaini, the challenge during this transition is how
to develop intervention programs that provide the emancipated youth with easily
accessible preventative programs that equip them with skills to help them navigate those challenges

**Inability to reveal real self.** This subtheme was the least common subtheme and it refers to the college experience contributing to participants’ inability to reveal their realistic self to others. It was mentioned eight times in only two interviews. *Adili* explained his struggle to be the kind of personality he desired to project to the rest of his peers and the college community as a whole:

> After the overdose, I then got sent to the hospital for two weeks. It is unfortunate that later I had to introduce some of the teachers to that part of me that I put everything to block out of my life, the *Adili* I do not like others to meet. It wasn’t the *Adili* I wanted people to meet, the *Adili*, in pain, isolated and neglected. I wanted them to meet an *Adili* who is forthright kind, resilient, a hard worker, self-driven…that *Adili*. But unfortunately they had already seen the other suicidal *Adili*. It was very frustrating.

*Nuru* on the other hand, explained feeling as though he was investing a lot of her energy attempting to fit in or projecting the image that she was not so much different from her peers relative to values, goals in life and the life narratives of her peers on a college campus. Although the experience of “attempting to fit in” might not be considered as a unique feature characteristic only of emancipated foster youth transitioning into higher education, it could be argued that they history of neglect and abuse and the emancipation status provides a unique challenge to this population.
This is especially unique in that after being legally emancipated, the foster youth are for the most part are on their own in their quest for self-authored personal identity, forging personal values anew, and unearthing the content and scope of their giftedness. *Nuru* conceptualized this meaning-making dynamics in relation to redefining their identity and sense of purpose in the context of transitioning into a college campus environment in the following manner:

For me, [adjusting into college] was all about getting good grades! I was not really doing things about me! It was like…I was trying to do things to place myself at the same level with my peers! It felt like I simply wanted to be like everybody else on campus! I was kind of comparing myself with everyone else and not what would make me happy and still be me! Looking back, in my entire freshman year I was not happy at all! I was just pushing myself to be like everybody else.

**Positive implications for self-esteem and well-being.** The next primary theme for Research Question 1 was *positive implications for self-esteem and well-being*. The participants of this study also demonstrated that their experiences transitioning into a college campus environment had positive implications for their self-esteem and wellbeing.

The participants attested to the fact that their experiences transitioning into a college campus environment had a liberating and empowering impetus in relation to their comfort and stability with their personal identity and their abilities as well as their confidence with their personal goals in life. In most cases, the participants saw their
experiences transitioning into college as a catalyst for personal growth, liberation from debilitating foster care experience and empowerment to pursue their dreams in life.

I further classified the theme of positive implications for self-esteem and well-being into six subthemes: (a) increased self-sufficiency, (b) quest for self-identity and purpose, (c) increased self-love, (d) optimism/hope, (e) new beginning, and (f) college as an empowering catalyst.

**Increased self-sufficiency.** Most participants in this study were unanimous in declaring that attending college helped them become more self-sufficient. This subtheme was mentioned 23 times in seven interviews. For instance, *Anisa* was very emphatic in stating that transitioning into college confirmed her long time goal of being able to make her own decisions and live by the consequences of her decisions. *Anisa* mentioned,

…when I came to college, I encountered new big things: like maintaining financial stability and to maintain daily college obligations and task without support systems for back up if I had questions or anything…it was just like all I knew was that I had to figure it out some way; somehow. And all I knew was I wanted to do it, I wanted to be able to make my own decisions and how I was going to handle the situation….

*Imara*, already cognizant of what being emancipated entailed anticipated this change in meaning-making dynamics by stating the following retrospectively:

No one will be there to take care of me and other stuff that I need! Everything in college was going to be on me! Maybe, this explains why most of my closest friends are older! Whenever we go places, he pays for himself, and I equally pay
for myself! He does not have to depend on anybody. I feel more comfortable hanging out with people older than myself…people able to take care of themselves. I do not have to depend on anybody, either! In fact I do not want to depend on anybody. I have learnt to take care of myself. I cannot afford to depend on somebody else! I do not have the resources! I feel more comfortable among people who are able to take of themselves.

_Adili_ on the other hand echoed the same sentiments by declaring that as he transitioned into higher education he “…learnt how to clean up the bathroom, laundry…be independent.”

_Shamiri_ acknowledged the potential challenges that transitioning into college as an emancipated youth entailed while still in foster care. Nonetheless, he also shared that he had to learn to conceptualize and relate with the world differently. _Shamiri_ conceptualizes the way he expanded his understanding of self-sufficiency in the following manner:

I just looked forward to living a life different from the foster care system. I was done with structures and case workers. I wanted to live my own life and be a successful student, doing my own thing in a real world. I am out here, it is hard, but I am making do with what I have. For once, I am in charge of my own life.

_Nuru_ was equally excited about being autonomous and self-directed in relation to how she wanted to live her life according to her personal chosen values. This excitement is reflected in the following interview excerpt:
For me it is simply, I get it! I have been there! I feel like I am much more like independent! When I hear some of my friends having problems and they just simply say, that you know what I just have to call my mom and she will fix it! And I am just like what would you do without your mom, what would you do without your parents? I kind of feel that I have had so much independent living skills for my experience in foster care that I can make it through college!

**Quest for self-identity and purpose.** This subtheme refers to the fact that attending college helped some participants conceptualize their quest for desired or preferred self-identity and a sense of direction in their life paths. This subtheme emerged 19 times in seven interviews. The participants felt that college helped them reclaim the kind of persons they have often desired to become and actualize.

*Anisa* shared that as soon as she emancipated and began college she discovered that her new life role as an emancipated foster youth in college was not in the very least hurting what she has always wanted to become. She stated the following poignant milestones in her meaning-making dynamics:

By beginning college, I wasn’t changing anything about myself, but, I wasn’t hurting myself in the process, either. And that was what was motivating for me in the entire process. It enabled me to realize that even though I was not in control of everything while in foster care, it was worthwhile to aim for something better for myself. All I needed was a helping hand, a helping hand to put my hand onto a paper and rewrite and redraw my life goals. College was one of the helping hands.
Nuru echoed Anisa’s sentiments by demonstrating an awareness that she was making progress in a meaning-making dynamic of achieving the power of choice and claiming her personal goals in life and engaging in shaping her personal identity, as exemplified in her claim that:

I was hoping that college would help me be more aware of myself and my surroundings…to be able to grasp and understand what was going on around me and make relevant decisions! Discovering what kind of person I really wanted to be! Discovering what I really wanted to do in life! I wanted to find out how I could be a productive member of the society – not like my mom!

Tumaini took upon herself the mission of advocating for the rest of the youth who have had foster care experience to reiterate that an emancipated youth can transcend beyond the negative stereotypes inscribed in their lives. She passionately reiterated the following sentiment:

You can be anything you want to be…and not just simply a label forced upon you. If you want to be a doctor, you can be a doctor. You do not have to be a high school dropout. You do not have to be illiterate. You do not have to sound ignorant when you speak! It is fine to sound educated. I just wanted to be able to change the stigma of foster children. We are not ghetto. We are not hoodlums. Not all of us steal. We do not rob people. We are not angry people. We were just placed in a situation and system that we had no control over and now that I have control over my life, I want to be able to show the next generation, my own children that you can have control over your life. You just have to make those
changes. You have to be committed to yourself and be committed to these changes.

Several other participants also indicated that transitioning into college helped them re-energize and rediscover their quest for self-identity and developing personal and meaningful goals in life. This is especially illustrated in Swabra’s statement:

More and more, I am beginning to believe that even though I went through foster care, foster care is not my name. My mom did not name me foster care. It is not in my birth certificate. I am Swabra! Foster care was simply an unfortunate time and period in my life that I had!

Adili’s quest for self-identity and developing purpose is evident in the following quote:

It looks like I am always what people would like me to be. In order to become more like myself, I need to make peace with some of my past, confront it if need be. I need to stop running from it. In order to do that, I need to heal parts of me…broken parts…all of the parts. That is the first step. I am trying to take in the most difficult parts of me to fit so I can become more of myself.

After explaining his quest for self-identity and developing purpose, Shamiri succinctly affirmed: “I am who I am. I do not try to be someone I am not.”

**Increased self-love.** This study also demonstrated that foster care experience altered the ways in which the research participants view themselves in relation to the world in a variety of ways. The overall finding indicates that the experiences of emancipation and transitioning into higher education together impacted how they conceptualized their intrapersonal dynamics. One emerging meaning-making subtheme
as they transitioned into their college campus environment was increased self-love or self-esteem. It was mentioned 16 times in five interviews. As a case in point, Swabra explained how attending colleges affected her self-esteem:

I did not talk to a lot of people but coming to college was a liberating experience. I looked at myself and all other students around me and felt so confident and happy with myself that I said to myself that if they can do it, I can do it! It felt so empowering to be able to call people who knew me and tell them, you know what? I am in college! It was so amazing just to say that I am in college! The first one in my whole family! I am in college!

Adili shared another example:

I did not want people to see that...so that is what drove me away from me...and as soon as I did that my grades turned around, people started hanging around me, I was getting good grades, teachers liked me. I felt good about myself.

Shamiri’s self-esteem also increased,

And I was so proud and I went and showed everyone that I had gotten accepted into college and most of them in the foster home said, you see, we knew you could do it! I was so proud of myself everyone saying that I had proven that I could really believe in myself and make myself a better person!

Tumaini expressed a similar meaning-making dynamic:

It made me realize that I had so much self-worth and that I was capable of doing so much more with my life and that I deserved so much more. It just took some time and some harsh experiences for me to realize it. It did not matter what people
told me, you are worth more, you are worth more but until I realized it myself, it had meant nothing at all!

**Optimism and hope.** The *meaning-making* dynamics of optimism and hope in this study refers to feeling as though college provided a sense of hope or led to optimism and a more positive outlook on life – a qualitatively empowering way of interpreting their life experiences. The participants demonstrated a profound awareness of the desire to depend on themselves for their happiness and accomplishments. In this study a sense of optimism and hope was mentioned 13 times in seven interviews.

*Imara* expressed optimism in the following manner: “Yes, we have been hurt in foster care but that is not what we are, we can be who we want to be in life. We can succeed in life.” *Adili* stated, “College has given me a sense of hope.” *Swabra* also expressed that she was beginning to be hopeful and optimistic as she transitioned into college by acknowledging that she was more and more encouraged and empowered to voice and meet her personal needs.

I am less negative about life. I can now sit back and relax and smile. It is just the strength of knowing I can do this. It is that sheer determination in myself that I am so proud and happy about me being in college.

On the other hand, for *Nuru*, the presence of a faith based student organization on campus also gave her hope during her transition into college. She explained that:

I got baptized at around that time. My faith became so important for me. It was something that gave me sense of hope…helped me stay focused beyond what I gone through with my mother and foster care.
Hafidha was hopeful about changing the lives of others: “A lot of what is motivating me is the desire to change some of that! I know I can do something and change the lives of a few young people in foster care.”

In a final example, Tumaini described what makes her optimistic:

We have to be able to know that I can persever; that I can be a better person; to have people you can tell, you helped me or you inspired me or that I related to you in ways that are special and empowering or you know I am glad you shared your story. That is what drives me and makes me optimistic in life.

It was therefore an indication of a growing sense of optimism and a sense of confidence that college experiences will enable their life experiences and conditions as well as those of others the lives of others to advance and improve.

A new beginning. Another emerging meaning-making theme was the awareness of a progressive self-conscious awareness that the research participants were beginning to tread a new life path in an unfamiliar college campus environment. In this study a new beginning is understood as feeling as though college is a chance for a new beginning, a fresh start or a new paradigm shift relative to their values and goals in life. The subtheme of a new beginning was mentioned nine times in four interviews.

Adili explained this new beginning in terms of an entirely new paradigm shift of reconstituting what entails a new rhythm of life. She presents it in the following manner: “When I first came to this college campus, I was thrilled! I said to myself, this is sweet… a fresh start! No more structures, no more innumerable case worker meetings, and so on!”
Shamiri declared, “then I came here for a fresh smart start orientation for all freshmen before college began. When I arrive here, it was like a relief, a fresh start.”

On the other hand, Tumaini offered her understanding of a new beginning as a culmination of a meaning-making process that she needed even though she was hardly aware of that need. As she transitioned into college, she was beginning to own and take control of a life choice unconsciously already made.

So it was kind of something forced upon me but looking back it was something I needed. It was a decision I should have taken in the first place! I just enjoyed this new experience I had never had before. I had never been to this side of the state before, until I came for orientation. I was kind of beginning to realize that it felt better to be in college and to be in a new environment. It was so exhilarating to suddenly realize that at last, I could provide something better for myself.

**College as an empowering catalyst.** This final subtheme in this section refers to feeling as though attending college was a catalyst for positive change both for themselves and others. The subtheme was mentioned five times in three interviews. The emancipated youth who participated in this study expressed that the enthusiastic desire and motivation for college began in foster care for a variety of reasons.

As a case in point, for Swabra college was a way out. She declared: “I was tired of being thrown around from one foster home to another. It was time to get out and be a better person. College seemed to be the only way out for me.” This seems to indicate that college was an invaluable opportunity to leave the foster care system and reclaim a sense
of stability in life. This is especially relevant in the light of foster care experiences of multiple placements and less control over personal life decisions.

_Hafidha_ on the other hand explained that transitioning into college was a catalyst for motivating her to pursue a career that will enable her to make a positive difference in the lives of others. She echoed that sentiment through the following remarks:

I kind of started wondering how this could be solved and I figured that if I became a community organizer or a social worker, then I could help solve some of those problems! For me college was to enable me to become an instrument of positive social change!

In the next section I describe the emerging themes and subthemes for the second research question.

**Results for Research Question 2**

In the second research question that guided this study, I set out to examine the role the research participants saw their college campus experiences playing in their transitional process. In this section I also present tables summarizing the definition of the identified themes, the frequency of occurrence for the themes and subthemes, as well as the number of the research participants that mentioned a specific theme and subtheme.

As reflected in the previous tables, the primary themes were positive role of _college campus experiences_ and adverse role of _college campus transition experiences_. Additionally, I associated each of the themes with several subthemes. I include the definitions for the latter in Table 5. Additionally, Table 6 shows the frequency with which the themes appeared across interviews and across the data.
Meaning-making dynamics: Positive role of college campus experiences. The first theme for Research Question 2 was positive role of college campus experiences. This theme further classified into the following five subthemes: (a) availability of mentorship and support, (b) coping skills, (c) financial responsibility and accountability, (d) positive freedom, and (e) stability.

Table 5
Theme, Subthemes and Definitions for Research Question 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Positive role of college campus experiences</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentorship and Support</td>
<td>College staff, programs, and others provide a variety of mentorship and support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping skills</td>
<td>College campus experiences led to the development of a variety of positive coping skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial literacy and accountability</td>
<td>College campus experiences helped participants become more financially responsible and accountable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive freedom</td>
<td>College campus experiences provided a new found freedom that was viewed positively.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stability</td>
<td>The college campus experiences provided a sense of stability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Challenges</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of support</td>
<td>There is a lack of college staff, programs, or resources provided to foster care college students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative freedom</td>
<td>The freedom encountered was difficult to adjust to.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Primary themes are bolded; subthemes are italicized.

Availability of mentorship and support. This subtheme refers to the variety of support provided by college staff, college, programs, and others. This was a very common subtheme and was mentioned 31 times in all eight interviews. The active
presence of an empowering sense of connectedness to the family and other significant others was found to be a major challenge to all research participants possibly due to the negative experiences with their families of origin as well as with their multiple foster care placements and experiences.

Table 6

*Frequency of Themes and Subthemes for Research Question 2*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme/Subtheme</th>
<th>Interviewees mentioning this theme/subtheme</th>
<th>Total exemplar quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Positive transition experiences</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentorship and Support</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping skills</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial accountability and responsibility</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive freedom</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stability</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Challenging roles</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of support</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative freedom</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Primary themes are bolded; subthemes are italicized.

Nonetheless, this study also demonstrates numerous examples of mentorship and support services that made their college transitional experiences meaningful and empowering. For instance, *Anisa* joined college straight from a foster home. However, since her emancipation in her first semester of college, she has no place she can call home.
Fortunately for Anisa’s college campus environment, the college administration provides specialized interim housing for students with foster care experience when the college is not in session. She shared the experience with regard to receiving support from staff in the following manner:

Living here on campus keeps me close with the other students in our program because all of the rooms are pretty close, so we either have our own floor, or just a hall full of the other students. The staff who volunteer and work during the breaks help to organize activities and events that all of the students can come together and participate in, and it’s just really fun and exciting. That way I’m not alone, and I have somewhere to sleep, and I have food available to me.

On the other hand Adili enrolled in a large public university with no programs directly serving the needs of the emancipated foster youth transitioning into the college campus environment. Yet, this is how he described how college staff supported him during his transition into college especially when he discerned that creating a support group of college students with similar experiences in foster care would help realize his personal goals in life. He observed:

But the women’s center on this campus is 100% behind me on it. I talked to the Dean of students and she is certainly helping me move forward with the project. The survivor advocacy center is also very supportive and I will continue pushing forward the idea of the group.

Additionally, Imara described how pre-matriculation classes were a source of support: “I took the pre-matriculation seminars seriously. There were seminars on
Swabra described receiving support from another student, “Later on I shared a room with girl who had also been in foster care. We kind of shared life experiences and she understood some of the things I went through.”

Shamiri mentioned receiving support from other students by stating, “We have created a community here, helping each, we are all good friends. I know who to go to whenever I need help.” Hafidha also received support from other students:

My friends are also very supportive. Foster care is tough! There is order and routine but very little loving care…if you actually find it. You consume a lot of negative stuff such that you become bitter and hate everyone! I decided that I did not want that to take control of my life. I decided to hang out with positive looking people!

A few participants also mentioned receiving support from people outside college. For example, Shamiri revealed:

Actually it has been the foster family from my last placement and my therapist because even though they are not physically here with me, I can still call them, connect with them and share with them my struggles, and ask for their advice and opinions related to my experiences here on campus. I send them emails; we just talk often about so many things. That keeps me going…knowing there is someone out there who genuinely cares about me and my wellbeing.
For Nuru, her former foster mother continues to be a source of support as she transitions into college:

My foster mom helped me apply and figure out the financial aid stuff. She even bought taught me how drive and bought me a car! They also paid about 75% of my out of pocket expenses as I moved into college! They made my transition into college so smooth and easy!

In a final example, Tumaini mentioned receiving general support:

And I am glad I did since I am sure I now have help with financial stability, I also have a great social support system on this campus. I am no longer a number; people know me by name and genuinely care about me and my dreams in life.

Coping skills. The next subtheme that emerged in this study was coping skills, which is defined as college campus experiences leading to the development of a variety of empowering coping skills. This study demonstrated that the emancipated foster care transitioning into higher education were actively discovering and inculcating ways of finding fulfillment and overcoming the odds in their lives despite their experiences of adversity in foster care and adjustment into college life as emancipated youth.

This is especially relevant when one takes into consideration that the emancipated youth enters college from a foster care environment that has been associated with negative developmental growth outcomes. This subtheme demonstrates that in some cases the emancipated foster youth attempts to create a life of normalcy that is positively empowering and attempts to defy negative outcomes perhaps with the goal of advancing
their chances of success in their college careers and life goals in general. This subtheme was mentioned 15 times in 6 interviews.

As a case in point, Anisa learned to cope with her transition into college by interacting with others:

I first started out by getting to meet people on a friendly basis and having different expectations of what to expect from them. But when I realized that people can be trusting, friendly, that people can be temporary but still helpful… that’s when my attitude began to change and I did not mind being personally involved with someone or just hanging out with someone…and that’s pretty much how I started making the friends that I made and building that relationship that I have begun to build. And so based on my foster care experience, I learnt so much about people in general and how they interact with others, and why I didn’t interact with others before the way I do now.

Swabra explained learning to cope by reaching out to others. In her case it was critical that she learnt to reach out to others in order to get the support and help she needed while transitioning into college. She stated:

I am also learning that I have to reach out to people if I need help and support. Nobody else knows my story except me and if I do not reach out then I continue to stare into the darkness of hopelessness.

Shamiri on the other hand explained learning to cope with his status as an emancipated youth transitioning into college by asking for help,
There are times that I have had to call people up to ask for help! Yet, there are not many people out there I could actually call for help! I kind of did not expect to call anyone for help! I am not used to calling anybody for help. I am used to sorting out problems by myself. When I’m faced with a problem, I am not one to call and ask for help! I have pride issues but college has kind of pushed me to begin asking for help. It is time to learn to get help if I’m going to succeed in my goals in college!

The sentiments expressed by Shamiri were also shared by Tumaini who also learned to cope by asking for help:

I am beginning to learn that it is ok to reach out for help. That it is ok to acknowledge that there some things I cannot do on my own and it is ok to reach out for help. It is ok to reach out and say, I need a little help…a little bit of support, a little bit of encouragement.

The above developmental meaning-making dynamic is crucial especially in the light of the transient nature of the foster care system placements already discussed in Chapter 1 of this study. It has been a common observation that from earlier on in life, the foster youth learn to protect themselves from disappointments, emotional adjustments to multiple placements and adversity by putting up a survival mode of projecting a kind of pseudo self-sufficiency. As such when an emancipated foster youth vouches that it is ok to acknowledge from time to time that they need help or a little bit of support, then it is indeed a remarkable developmental meaning-making dynamic!

On the other hand, Nuru explained learning to cope by not identifying with problems:
I just learnt how to not feel or identify with my problems. I just learnt with my mom of how not to deal with problems! Yet, I also learnt of how to forgive! With my mom, I have learnt how to forgive. If I can’t forgive my mom, I can’t forgive anyone!… maybe not forgetting…but just forgiving!

In the light of the above, it is safe to contend that this study demonstrates that whereas familial challenges of neglect and abuse led to foster care experience and additional adverse effects in personal development of the research participants, those same experiences also account for the personal strengths, as well as resilience, and positive outlook in life after emancipation and in the first years of college life. It might also mean that given different life circumstances of transitioning into a college campus environment, the emancipated foster youth demonstrates an attempt to triage and adopt the best ways to survive through college and life in general.

**Financial literacy and accountability.** The motivation to be financially literate and accountable was another common subtheme for the positive role of college campus experiences. In this study the financial literacy and accountability subtheme is defined as those college campus experiences helping participants become more financially responsible and accountable. This subtheme was mentioned eight times in four interviews. Research participants in this study learnt to become financially responsible in a variety of ways as they transitioned into college. For instance, *Imara* stated:

> When I received some money from my refund check, I bought my own laptop, paid my own phone bills. I had some money saved. Once I started college, I had to learn to be cheap, I decide not to go out every night. I got a job on campus for a
minimum wage and had to learn not to blow away the little money I had. My hair cut fee fell from $20 to $5dollars. My phone bill had to get to no more than 25 dollars a month. I had to make do with very little income coming in. I do not have a meal plan. I go to the nearest food store and by my meals…cereals, kool aid, food ready to go, and so on.

On the same note Nuru reflected, “I find myself better able to make better financial decisions!...Yeah!…I have grown so much!” Tumaini on the other hand shared the following:

Everyone in the [foster care] system was taken care of and I was suddenly thrown into this maze of life that I was not sure of what to make of it. I had to learn to pay bills, to save money [in college].

*Anisa’s* advice detailed below also reflects the need - for an emancipated youth with no additional sources of financial support compared to their peers with no foster care experience - to learn to be financially responsible and accountable when transitioning into college. She stated:

One more thing! M. O. N. E. Y management! Money is a big thing in college, whether you have it or not. So take value in what you receive, and don’t let it go to waste. Always get what you need first, and then reward yourself with what you want. Remember to save, and be aware of places to go where you can save money.

**Positive freedom.** The next subtheme was *positive freedom*, which refers to college campus experiences providing a new found freedom viewed positively. This
theme was mentioned five times in two interviews. When asked to compare foster care experience and experiences transitioning into college, Anisa explained:

Mmmmh…You get a lot of freedom here. When I first came up here, I didn’t feel my life was so exposed to people who I might not even meet for the rest of my life!… In the foster care system there was no privacy! Everything about me was so exposed!”

Anisa then continued:

A lot of the things that I couldn’t do, I could do now. I could go out…whenever, and with whoever. I could interact with whoever I please wherever, and whenever. It was just... it was just like…I kind of felt, I had been empowered to have control over situations and things that previously was out of my hands…it was just, it was just…a whole new life style...a whole life style coming to college.

Adili explained this positive freedom in the following way:

College has been an experience of freedom. For a foster care student all decisions for the most part are made for you. Everything is so structured. You are choked for the most part. Freedom is awesome but you have to learn from it.

Adili further explained:

The best experience was walking down the college campus during college festivities. I did not have to worry about me or anybody else. I just walked down being what I wanted be. I was just me happy and walking around and enjoying my
evening without having to worry about what people will ask me about who I am and what I am doing. It was complete freedom!

**Stability and personal development.** The next subtheme was *stability*, which refers to the college campus experiences providing participants with a sense of immediate or future stability. The participants tied their emancipated status and transition into college with socio-economic and personal stability. This theme was mentioned four times in three interviews. For *Anisa* it was an opportunity to begin to form a stable socio-economic foundation to support a family she never had. *Nuru* on the other hand shared:

I think I came to college because I was tired of living in poverty. I figured straight from high school that I could not make a decent pay out of the jobs I had. I just wanted to break that cycle of poverty I had experienced in my own family.

*Tumaini* stated:

I feel like the greatest way, I wanted to grow... because I have never had a stable family… I wanted to come to college and build by skills and so that when I start having children, I can in turn provide them with the stability I never had. They can look at me and say you know what, mom went to college and so we can also make it to college. I want my kid to know that you do not have to be a number, a statistic.

In the final example for this subtheme, *Anisa* shared how living on campus with students and staff provided stability and “That [this] way I’m not alone, and I have somewhere to sleep, and I have food available to me.”
The second theme for Research Question 2 was the challenging role of transitional college campus experiences. In this study his theme was further classified into two subthemes: (a) inadequate mentorship and support and (b) negative freedom. The subthemes are discussed below.

*Inadequate mentorship and support.* This subtheme refers to participants feeling as though there is a lack of college staff, programs, or resources provided to support foster care college students. All participants stated that there was inadequate resources, programs and staff that respond directly to emancipated foster youth transitioning into higher education. This concern was mentioned 37 times in all eight interviews. For instance, *Anisa* explained:

I think I did not have a strong support system to help me adjust to college.

Transitioning into college, I had suffered from anxiety and night terrors, panic attacks and was difficult to get through on my own and not knowing the resources available to me for support.

*Imara* on the other hand mentioned lack of support navigating the college process. He described his experiences transitioning into college in the following way:

I also talked about not having money being set aside for college while in foster care, subject us to have to fend for ourselves and look for scholarships and financial aid on our own. It is like being thrown out there after aging-out and we have to figure out for ourselves, about scholarships and financial aid available for us.
Imara continued,

When I really need help, I do not get help. It seems so hard to get help out there. I do not have many people that would actually reach out to help me [sad]. I have gotten pretty used to taking care of me as much as I can, since I know that if I really need help and I seek it out there, it would not come by easy!

Swabra explained her struggle with mental health issues and there being a lack of support for her:

I felt I had given up hope completely. Nothing else made sense for me! Nothing on campus and in my life had any meaning at all. With no one to lean on or to support you…no sense of connectedness to family or someone you can really trust…life becomes very difficult

Adili felt that the lack of a peer support group on campus made it difficult for the youth with foster care experience to transition smoothly into college. He stated:

It is not easy being a foster care kid. I think a group of people with similar experiences, able to meet together, relate to each other better and have a better chance of becoming friends. We don’t have that here on campus.

He also stated, “I have an academic advisor but he does not seem to understand my background! I would love to have more support groups of people who know something about my background.”

For Shamiri transitioning from a highly structured foster care environment into her college campus proved to be a difficult experience especially due to inadequate
programs to facilitate that process. This is how she explained the lack of support with transitioning from foster care to college:

Every Thursday through the weekend, there is always some party going on. Thursdays has been a big challenge since once I begin then it is a non-stop drinking fest until Monday! Coming from a structured environment in foster care, I have found it very difficult not to give in to this habit. It is difficult. I wish I had had a transitional structure to help me determine my potential problems as I became emancipated. As I said before, the transition is so accelerated and compressed! You are 18 and you are out of the door! No one really cares whether or not you have resolved your issues say of drinking or drugs or sexual abuse. You have to fend for yourself.

Nuru similarly shared,

That was really hard for me! It was beginning to dawn of me that…you know what?…to succeed in college you need some strong family, emotional and financial support! I did not have any of that. I had to figure out on my own about how to work through those challenges for the next four years! I worried about everything every day. I had to learn to take care of me throughout college without any kind of support out there! I just feel like I did not have the kind of support each of my roommates had when I came to college.

Nuru also mentioned lack of support from a staff member who was a counselor:

I just remember that it was in the middle of the Fall Quarter in my freshman year
and I really wanted somebody to talk to and I cannot remember what exactly was going on but I remember talking to this lady in the counseling services spilling and pouring my entire heart and life to her and she did not give me any feedback!

In a final example, Hafidha discussed the lack of support with transitioning to college:

Now, coming from foster care system, I did not even know where to get some of the stuff the college was asking for! I did not even have an idea of what they were talking about! The foster care system is preparing to kick you out into independent living and the college is expecting the same stuff from everyone coming to the college! There seems to be no meeting point between these two parts of your life! I did not know what an advising office was…I wish I was given specific names of people in different offices that were mentioned in my orientation letter to reach out to…I am left to figure out things by myself. I actually live on a day to day. I am here in college but I do not have where to call home. I do not have people I can really call family. Talking about such stuff with my peers do not really get anywhere. They will not understand what I am talking about!

In the light of the above, whereas some participants had previously expressed ambivalence about sincerity of anyone reaching out to help them, others cited the lack of continuous, proactive mentorship and support from their welcoming college campus as one of the barriers to successfully transitioning into a college campus environment. They also felt unsupported in transitioning to adult life after emancipation. Emancipation therefore seems to mean a transition into adulthood in less time relative to their non-
foster care peers – a transitional developmental milestone that is accelerated and compressed and with little if any of back up resources to fall back to when facing personal developmental challenges.

**Negative freedom.** This subtheme refers to participants feeling it was difficult to adjust to the freedom encountered in college. Some of the participants pointed out that adjusting to freedom while transitioning from foster care into higher education also transformed the way they conceptualized and acted upon their anxieties in relation to their personal freedom. The difficulty encountered in adjusting to freedom propelled them to start sorting and sifting through what they previously thought and lived with a view to reconstituting their personal identities and values in life. Negative freedom was mentioned six times in three interviews.

*Imara* explained feeling overwhelmed by freedom in the following manner:

For me the freedom and lack of structure was so overwhelming. You get so confused and start asking yourself what you have gotten yourself into! It is like what? I can wake up whatever time I want to wake up I can go wherever I want to go and no one is holding me back.

*Shamiri* also echoed the same sentiment of being overwhelmed by the freedom:

It was a new found freedom. This was so overwhelming! We went from a highly structured environment to suddenly being on our own! At times, we did not even know what to do or expect of ourselves! We could pretty much do whatever we wanted! It was also tough! At first it was very difficult to get up on your own and get ready to go to class!...Make your own schedule. You know foster care is very
structured….Very structured, time for creativity and doing your own thing is not common.

Finally, Hafidha stated, “It has not been easy, coming from a structured environment of foster care and then suddenly all these freedom.”

Two research questions guided this dissertation. Research Question 1 examined how emancipated foster care college students make meaning of their first year college experiences. The first primary theme for Research Question 1 was negative transitional college experiences. This theme was defined as negative experiences associated with attending college. The exemplar quotes were further classified into four subthemes: (a) isolation and estrangement, (b) exclusion/ostracism, (c) mental health challenges, and (d) inability to reveal real self.

The next primary theme for Research Question 1 was positive implications for self-esteem and well-being. The exemplar quotes were further classified into six subthemes: (a) increased self-sufficiency, (b) quest for self-identity and purpose, (c) increased self-love, (d) optimism/hope, (e) new beginning, and (f) college as an empowering catalyst.

Research Question 2 investigated the role college campus experiences play in that meaning-making process. The first theme for Research Question 2 was positive role of college campus experiences. This theme further classified into the following five subthemes: (a) mentorship and support, (b) coping skills, (c) financial literacy and accountability (d) positive freedom, and (e) stability.
The second theme for Research Question 2 was the *challenging role of* transitional college campus experiences. This theme was further classified into two subthemes: (a) lack of mentorship and support and (b) negative freedom. This chapter includes tables summarizing the definition of the identified themes and subthemes, the frequency of occurrence for the themes and subthemes, as well as the number of interviewees that mentioned a specific theme and subtheme. Exemplar quotes are also provided.

**Concluding Remarks**

This study utilized a constructivist grounded theory methodology to explore how emancipated foster care college students *make-meaning* of their transitional experiences into higher education from a college student development constructive-developmental theoretical paradigm.

Expert nominators and key research participants from eight different two and four year Midwest USA colleges and universities were identified and utilized to ensure adequate and relevant sample selection for the purposes of the study. I interviewed the research participants and used *open* and *theoretical* coding to acquire a more comprehensive understanding of the emancipated foster care young adults’ transitional experiences into higher education. I also employed the constant comparative method, triangulation, member checks, memo writing, and subsequent interviews to ensure that my interpretation of the participants’ experiences was consistent with their perceptions of those experiences.
Chapter 5: Conceptualizing a Constructivist Grounded Theory - A Discussion

The purpose of this research was to examine the developmental meaning-making dynamics of emancipated foster youth transitioning into higher education. The study sought to explore emancipated foster care youths’ experiences and the quest for a sense of efficacy, self-worth, connectedness, value and purpose as they transitioned into college. This chapter presents the summary of my findings followed by a discussion of the emerging constructivist grounded theoretical conceptualizations relative to the other emerging and present theoretical paradigms.

Meaning-making as an epistemological paradigm was initially conceptualized by Kegan (1994) and later developed by Baxter Magolda (2001). It is a developmental process that is centered upon individual’s enduring philosophical paradigms, narratives of one’s experiences in life, personal life goals, viewpoints, and belief systems that shape who we are as individuals and communities and which one mobilizes and uses to make sense of one’s own environment and experiences (Baxter-Magolda 2001, Kegan, 1982, 1994; Nash & Murray, 2010; Parks 2011; Pizzolato, 2003).

The college campus environment plays a major role in this meaning-making process since it is a learning environment. Indeed, constructive-developmental theorists (Brooks & Brooks, 1999; Baxter Magolda, 1992; Kegan, 1982, 1994; King & Kitchener, 1994; Kohlberg, 1984; Piaget, 1967) postulate that environments can either enhance or diminish this vital meaning-making developmental goal.

Brain-based research by neuroscientists demonstrate that a learning environment that provides students with the ability to personalize their learning experience, linking
what they learn with their interests and purpose, empowers students to be more active and productive learners (Edelman, 2006; Gazzaniga, 2005). Moreover, meaning-making ability is a critical developmental feature that has been demonstrated to nurture the rest of personal growth and development (Wildman, 2007).

We organize meaning relative to our identity, our experiences, and our interactions with our environments. In other words, we constantly and actively construct our view of what we experience relative to our identity and our environment. This is a fundamental process by which we develop our personal identities and purposeful lives relative to our contexts. However the nature of this dynamic process and growth changes over time throughout different points of our lives. In this study, this dynamic process of organizing meaning relative to our experiences is what is referred to the developmental meaning-making. Indeed meaning-making ability helps us see ourselves better relative to the world around us and enhances the quality of our lives (Kegan, 1982).

The concept of meaning-making is also useful for college student development discourse in that it provides a template for college student personnel and faculty with a “broader, more holistic framework for understanding and fostering student intellectual growth” (Meszaros, 2007 p. 13). This also provides faculty and college student personnel with a broader understanding of the connections and components of self-authoring ways of knowing (Baxter Magolda, 2004).

As Baxter Magolda (2008) later added, that meaning-making ability empowers individuals to creatively navigate the responsibilities of adulthood. Subsequently, a clear grasp of the meaning-making process helps educators better prepare and foster relevant
intervention strategies for the ever emerging diverse college student population in our college campus environments.

In this research, I postulate that meaning-making competency has the ability to empower college students to further explore, question, and engage with a quest for an integrated sense personal identity. Such a pursuit complements and underscores the very core and true values of liberal and holistic education that challenges learners to engage in a quest for self-exploration and self-knowledge. Aptly put by Astin, Astin and Lindholm (2011), it is a kind of educational path that “examines learning and knowledge in relation to the exploration of self” (p. 3).

Moreover, educational experiences and interactions have been conceptualized as an opportunity to empower students to assume transformative and liberative roles in their local and wider communities. Educational experiences ought to challenge students to take a stand in the quest for civic engagement and social justice (Freire, 2000; Giroux 1983; Hooks, 1994; Rhoads & Black, 1995). Subsequently self-authored meaning-making capacity has been paralleled to “political autonomy” that entails “extricating oneself from inherited constraints and authorizing oneself in the margins between cultures” (Maan, 2005, p. 224).

This research therefore provides additional theoretical base needed to help student affairs professionals foster among the emancipated foster youth the empowering potential of self-authored meaning-making ability in order for them to claim the authority of their own experiences, liberate themselves from debilitating constraints and self-author their unique paths as they explore their college careers.
My goal in this research was to explore how emancipated foster care youth organize their understanding of their personal identity, their feelings, their thoughts, their interpersonal relationships and their experiences as they transition into college. The study therefore develops alternative ways of conceptualizing college student transitional experiences and promotes student developmental outcomes in ways that acknowledge students’ meaning-making abilities, individual needs, goals and values (Baxter Magolda, 1998, 2001, 2004; Kegan, 1982, 1994; Pizzolato, 2003, 2004, 2005).

This study was informed by a constructivist-developmental theoretical framework and designed using a grounded theory methodology. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do emancipated foster care youth college students make meaning of their transitional experiences into higher education?

2. What role do they see their college campus experiences playing in this process?

This study focused on emancipated foster care students transitioning into higher education and their unique experiences settling into college. The basic assumption that guided this study is that every college student is unique and thereby conceptualizes an equally distinct meaning of their college transitional experiences. Such significant and unique meaning-making experiences shared by the emancipated foster care youth themselves will help student affairs professionals further understand how special college student populations approach, integrate and gain from their college transitional experiences.
Synopsis of the Study

The exit statistics of emancipated foster care youth increased from 19,367 in 2002 to over 28,000 in 2010. In 2011, 14% of the 245,260 young men and women who left foster care jurisdiction, those who aged-out into some form of independent living is estimated to be over 34,000 (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). At least 77% of those who exit foster care are diagnosed with at least one physical, emotional or mental disability (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012).

In the Fiscal Year 2011, on average at least 26,978 foster youth were discharged to emancipation mostly at age eighteen in the United States without being adopted by caring families or provided with lifelong family support networks (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). These emancipated youth have to navigate the challenges of securing stable housing, acquiring post-secondary education, finding gainful employment and becoming successful adults without structures ordinarily available and accessible to their peers without foster care experiences.

In States such as Ohio, Wisconsin, Texas, and California, the government does not retain jurisdiction over youth in foster care beyond the statutory age of eighteen. Some of these young adults are subsequently let out into the community with an abrupt termination of financial support, a disruption of interpersonal relationships propelled by multiple foster care placements, a history of abuse and loss, no place to call home, and no meaningful caring adult relationship committed to help them address personal challenges to facilitate effective transition into adulthood (Ladew & Benedetto, 2003).
An estimate of only about 20% of the youth with foster care experience are reported to attain post-secondary school enrollment relative to approximately 60% of their counterparts with no foster care experiences (Wolanin, 2005). This demonstrates that the youth with foster care experience poor educational attainment relative to the general population. It has further been established that upon entering college the foster youth are more unlikely to persist in their college career through graduation (Davis, 2006).

The existing college student support services tailored for the needs of first-generation students with lower socio-economic status are not intentionally designed to specifically address the needs of emancipated foster youth transitioning into higher education (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010; Emerson, 2006; Price, 2008; Pontecorvo, El-Askari & Putnam, 2006; Schultz & Muller, 2008). Critical to this dissertation is the recent observation made by Dworsky and Pérez (2010) that there exists a gap between the emancipated youth’s perceived college transition needs and the current college student support services provided. This study subsequently explores developmental meaning-making (Kegan, 1982, 1994), dynamics of emancipated foster care youth transitioning into higher education and the role college campus environments play in that process.

This study focused on how the contextual features and social processes of college campus environments influence the form and direction of meaning-making dynamics as experienced by emancipated foster care youth transitioning into higher education. It engaged the emancipated foster care youth research participants by way of a personal one-on-one in-depth interview to ensure that the research findings are grounded on their
actual reported transitional experiences. In this research, I employed a constructivist
grounded theory research design to examine how emancipated foster care college
students make meaning of their transitional experiences into higher education from a
constructive-developmental epistemological paradigm. Expert nominators and key
research participants from eight Midwest USA colleges and universities were identified
and utilized to ensure adequate and relevant sample selection.

In analysis of the data, I utilized both open and theoretical coding procedures in
order to ensure a detailed understanding of the emancipated foster care youth’s
transitional experiences into higher education. I also employed the constant comparative
method, triangulation, member checks, memo writing, and subsequent interviews for a
follow up to ensure that my interpretation of the research participant’s experiences was
consistent with their perceptions and life experiences.

Consistent with the grounded theory research paradigm, the open coding process
utilized the three guiding questions recommended by Glaser (1978). They included
examining concepts or ideas the data was attempting to reveal; delineating what
categories each experience presented and exploring emerging psychosocial issues at play
in each participant’s story relative to their transitional experience into higher education.

In that coding process I examined the major developmental meaning-making
concerns of the emancipated foster care youth transitioning into higher education and
how they processed those concerns. At the same time, I also examined each transitional
experience, case by case - establishing potential themes or in some cases confirming
properties of already established categories that those experiences indicated (Glaser, 1992).

I analyzed the data imported into NVIVO participant by participant while at the same time conducting a cross-case analysis with a view to developing grounded conceptualizations based on rich, thick, detailed, extensive interview actual interview quotes of the experiences of the research participants (Patton, 2002).

The emerging themes from each research participant were then subjected to further analysis in which I sought to explore across case themes, categories and grounded conceptualizations. This has been referred to as theoretical coding in grounded theory (Glaser, 1978; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

In the context of the NVIVO software, theoretical coding is to be understood as the process of forming a focused coherent whole, or a model, out of the nodes and their relationships. Subsequently, the emerging grounded model in this study was conceptualized as a hierarchy of child and parent nodes which was in turn organized through the use of “tree nodes” in NVIVO software - which allowed me to organize the different levels of nodes and their relationships in a coherent manner.

Subsequently, I presented the summary of my findings followed by a discussion of the emerging constructivist grounded theoretical conceptualizations in the context of other relevant theories and research. The first level of theme identification occurred during the initial review of each interview transcript. Upon reviewing the transcripts, I analyzed the data from each interview - identifying case by case emerging themes and then conducted cross-case open coding utilizing NVIVO software.
Two research questions guided this dissertation. Research Question 1 explored how emancipated foster care college students make meaning of their transitional experiences into higher education. The first primary emergent theme for Research Question 1 was *adverse transitional college experiences*. This theme was defined as negative experiences associated with attending college. The exemplar quotes were further classified into four subthemes: (a) isolation/estrangement, (b) exclusion/ostracism, (c) mental health challenges, and (d) inability to reveal real self. The next primary theme for Research Question 1 was *positive implications for self-esteem and well-being*. The exemplar quotes were further classified into six subthemes: (a) increased self-sufficiency, (b) quest for self-identity and purpose, (c) increased self-love, (d) optimism/hope, (e) new beginning, and (f) college as an empowering catalyst.

Research Question 2 examined the role they see their college campus experiences playing in this process. The first emergent theme for Research Question 2 was *positive role of college campus experiences*. This theme was further classified into the following five subthemes: (a) mentorship and support, (b) coping skills, (c) financial literacy and accountability (d) positive freedom, and (e) stability. The second theme for Research Question 2 was *challenging role of transitional college campus experiences*. This theme was further classified into two subthemes: (a) lack of mentorship and support and (b) negative freedom.

This study was guided by a constructivist application to the grounded theory research methodology. The epistemological paradigm that undergirded this study propelled me to ensure that I was also taking cognizance of not just the outcomes of the
research but also the research process itself. Indeed, Bogdan and Biklen (1998) rightly asserts that being cognizant of the dynamics of the research process is a key feature in qualitative research methodologies of which grounded theory is part.

As such, this study provides an interpretative portrayal (Charmaz, 2000, Schwandt, 1994) of the emancipated foster care young adult’s transitional experiences into higher education. Furthermore, this research design also ensures that I was immersed in data in such a way that the research process grounded participants’ experiences and narratives in my final interpretation and presentation of my research process.

Such grounding ensures that the research participants truly assume a critical role in the formulation and the reconstruction of the final substantive grounded theoretical ideas. Indeed, the research process thus considered subsequently adheres to the ethical tenet that calls for researchers to endeavor to document what research participants share as faithfully as possible (Munhall, 2001). Subsequently, extensive interview quotes from the research participants are included in this study.

Using a variety of theoretical paradigms has been found to enhance purposeful scholarship & practice in research (Chavez, 2009; Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2005; Jones, Torres & Arminio, 2006; Lincoln & Denzin, 2003) in that it provides an advanced ability to reflect on, question, analyze and develop additional theoretical bases for understanding variety of phenomena (Broido & Manning, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

The literature review conducted in this research grounded the entire research process by providing a conceptual background to the research question and starting point
for exploring the experiences of the emancipated youth transitioning into higher education. The sensitizing concepts obtained in this literature review provided this study with the relevant theoretical tools for designing the guiding research questions and developing the data collection process. This is consistent with the Grounded Theory methodology (Charmaz, 2006).

The above approach provided this study with the paradigmatic theoretical foundations from which this research developed and therefor hopes to empower my readership to interpret and be able to apply my research findings with that basic theoretical foundation in mind while at the same being able to work effectively across other theoretical paradigms (Grant, 1999; Jones et al., 2006).

The research paradigm employed in this study also empowers educators in general and student affairs professionals with additional developmental tools as they respond to the needs of the ever changing diverse demographics of the millennial college student enrolling in our college campus today.

Indeed, aptly put by Guido, Chavez, Lincoln (2010) “When paradigms are blended, value is gained from the inclusiveness and multiplicity of practices” (p. 8). Therefore, the research design guiding this study provides for a greater appreciation of other world views and meaning-making process that is deliberate and inclusive.

**A Constructivist Grounded Theoretical Conceptualization**

The findings in this study suggest that emancipated foster care youth transitioning into higher education encounter unique challenges relative to their non-foster care peers.
Those experiences impact their view of the world, of who they are and aspire to become, and the nature of their interpersonal relationships relative to their foster care experiences.

**Isolation and estrangement.** One common subtheme that emerged was that of isolation and estrangement. This subtheme was defined as college experience that contributed to participants feeling isolated, alone, or left out. It was mentioned nineteen times in eight interviews. In other words, irrespective of the time spent in foster care, gender or age, feeling isolated and alone was a common experience among the emancipated foster care youth who participated in this research.

Participants used phrases like “I had nowhere to go” “I did not know anyone” “I looked out in the parking lot, and there was no vehicle in sight, no one around” “I was among others but seemingly invisible” “I felt I did not have any common experience to share with my peers” “You suddenly feel not only alone but so lonely” “When I am by myself it is like staring out into the dark” “You know you feel isolated simply because you do not have what other students have”.

Transitioning into college with no structured schedule outside the classroom stirred in most of the research participants the reflective disposition to begin deeply re-examine aspects of their life’s journey hitherto not considered pertinent to their personal growth and development. The research participants were propelled to engage in a meaning-making exercise with a view to learning more about their self-identity and what their experiences while in foster care and the nature of their relationships with their biological families meant relative to their quest for a meaningful and consistent personal identity as well as the sense of purpose.
Different explanations and interpretations abound on how college students spend their holidays. However, for a foster care youth transitioning into higher education with no place to legally or emotionally call home, this means an additional challenge that requires specific mentoring and support programs in our college campuses.

**Social exclusion.** Unlike the subtheme of isolation and estrangement mentioned above. This subtheme refers to direct college experiences that contributed to participants feeling socially excluded or “different” from others because of foster care experiences. It was mentioned fifteen times in seven interviews. This study revealed that although the research participants had expressed the desire to enter college while in foster care and worked hard to get to college, they also found that what the structure of a college campus environment as well as what some members of the campus community did and said made them feel socially excluded and ostracized.

Subsequently some participants kept their foster care status secret to avoid being excluded or ostracized. Such negative image propels the emancipated youth transitioning into college to project their self-identity in a way that minimizes the possibility of being excluded or ostracized from the wider campus community. An enduring sense and experience of interconnectedness with others therefore seems to be a critical component of an emancipated youth transitioning into a college campus community.

The above finding echoes the observation made by Tinto (1975, 1993) relative to student integration into a college campus that individual’s prior life experience has the potential of impacting the nature of students’ engagement and subsequent integration. Subsequently, fostering empowering intervention strategies that promotes student
engagement and integration in our college campus environments is critical for the most part for all students and especially the disenfranchised student populations in higher education (Rendon, Jalomo & Nora, 2000).

Acknowledging and naming the specific negative impact of the experiences of isolation, estrangement, exclusion and ostracism while transitioning into higher education was a salient intense meaning-making experience for the research participants in this study. Indeed, in the interview process, the emancipated foster youth demonstrated signs of beginning to recognize that they were actually redefining and in some cases reclaiming their unique personal identities as well as their a resolve to pursue a college career amidst personal challenges touching their very core as unique individuals in a quest for meaning after the foster care experiences.

This was especially evident in all participants setting out to participate in community outreach activities and services as well as being intentional in their resolve to conscientize their college campus community that having a foster care experience does minimize their dignity as persons.

On the other hand, most of the research participants specifically reported that they held leadership positions in organizations that advocate for the rights of the foster youth before and during college. Others regularly travel to conferences and workshops nationwide to educate and empower other foster care youth regarding resources and opportunities available after emancipation. In those conferences, they report that they also seek to conscientize the rest of the community on the plight and rights of foster care youth. Indeed this is consistent with studies that demonstrate that peer mentorship among
and between foster youth in higher education has the potential to assist this unique college student population in fostering positive autonomy (Claydon & Stein, 2005).

Additionally, all eight participants indicated that they would like to take up a career that seeks to work for the wellbeing of the marginalized members of their community. They found meaning in transcending their predicaments and reaching out to others and working towards careers that enhance other people’s lives.

According to Baxter Magolda (2001), the Interpersonal dimension is understood by examining how an individual conceptualizes, builds, and develops one’s relationships with peers, friends, colleagues and family. It also conceptualized by exploring how an individual positions oneself in those relationships. Self-authoring meaning-making individuals therefore demonstrate a sense of mutuality, collaboration and interdependence in their interaction with others without comprising their own unique identities (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005).

In this research, the emancipated foster youth transitioning into college demonstrate a sense of mutuality and collaboration by reaching out to others. This meaning-making ability also echoes a sentiment by Newman (2004), that some of the youth with foster care experience transcend their adversities by developing ability to make a positive contribution in the lives of others and thereby making our communities, empowering and life enriching. However, Kools (1999) observes that such positive sense of self-confidence and altruism at such a tender age might indicate temporary proactive way of dealing with loss, potential rejection and disappointment that were a hallmark of their foster care experiences.
**Emotional and mental health challenges.** This subtheme was defined by participants mentioning that the college experience worsened their emotional and mental health adversities. It was mentioned eleven times in four interviews. Several participants indicated that adjusting to college raised additional mental health issues. Challenges related to mental and emotional health ranged from clinical depression to anxiety disorders as well as suicidal ideations. In that light it is highly likely that the stressors of college transition process potentially triggered the unresolved traumatic experiences of neglect, abuse, multiple placements negatively impacting the mental and emotional wellbeing.

The specific nature of this subtheme was the fact that its context and prevalence appeared to have been worsened by transitioning into a college environment. Additionally, half of the total number of the research participants mentioned that they were prescribed a variety of psychotropic medication while in foster care and as they transition into college, they are still taking those medications. At least half of the total number of participants demonstrated that indeed mental and emotional health problems that began in foster care can worsen while transitioning into higher education if proper supportive interventions are not put in place.

This study therefore confirms that contention that indeed while some emancipated foster youth demonstrate resilience relative to the impact of the experiences of neglect and abuse, other emancipated foster youth continue to exhibit emotional, behavioral and mental health difficulties that adversely impact their college careers leading to poor educational outcomes (Pecora et al., 2010).
The specific mental health difficulties found during this study include depression, substance dependence, social phobia, anxiety disorders and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Indeed additional research (McMillen, et al., 2005; Courtney et al, 2007; Keller, Salazar & Courtney, 2010) also demonstrates that emotional and mental health challenges are more prevalent in youth with foster care experiences relative to the general population.

**Inability to reveal real self.** This subtheme was the least common subtheme and it refers to the college experience contributing to participants’ inability to reveal their realistic self to others. It was mentioned eight times in only two interviews. Most of the research participants explained feeling as though they were investing a lot of their energy attempting to fit in or projecting the image that they were not so much different from the values, goals in life and the life narratives of their non-foster peers on a college campus. Indeed other studies also reveal that individuals with foster care experience are likely to hide their foster care experience for fear of being socially excluded (Kools, 1997; Hochman, Hochman & Miller, 2004).

Although the experience of “attempting to fit in” might not be considered as a unique feature characteristic only of the emancipated foster youth transitioning into higher education, the history of neglect and abuse and their emancipation status as they transition into a residential college campus environment without doubt provides a unique challenge to this population. This is especially exceptional in that after being legally emancipated the foster youth are for the most part on their own in their quest for personal
identity, autonomy, forging personal values anew, as well as discovering and fostering
the content and scope of their giftedness.

The above observation echoes what Baxter Magolda (2001) refers to as
“following external formulas” (p. 71). She argues that students operating at this phase of
the meaning-making process adopt the prescribed definition of success in their lives from
those around them since they are still unsure of their unique personal self-identity and the
resolve and commitment to a personally established purposeful life. Indeed recent
studies acknowledge that many students in our colleges operate at this phase of personal
development (Baxter Magolda, Creamer & Laughlin, 2005; Abes & Jones, 2004; Lewis
et al., 2005; Pizzolato, 2005).

On the other hand studies also demonstrate that adjusting to diversity and new
campus environment can challenge college students to reconsider previous ideas that
were hitherto taken as given (Torres & Hernandez, 2007). This study shows that
transitioning into a college campus environment also propelled the emancipated foster
youth to inject more internal self-authority into their decision-making process and into
choosing values that would foster their college careers and enhance their overall well-
being.

Positive implications for self-esteem and well-being. The next primary theme
for Research Question 1 was positive implications for self-esteem and well-being. This
study demonstrated that the experiences of emancipated foster care youth transitioning
into a college campus environment also had positive implications for their self-esteem
and wellbeing. The participants attested to the fact that their experiences transitioning
into a college campus environment had a liberating and empowering impetus in relation to their comfort and stability with their personal identity and their abilities as well as their confidence with their personal goals in life.

In most cases, the participants saw their experiences transitioning into college as a catalyst for personal growth, liberation from debilitating foster care experience and empowerment to pursue their dreams in life. I further classified the theme of positive implications for self-esteem and well-being into six subthemes: (a) increased self-sufficiency, (b) quest for self-identity and purpose, (c) increased self-love, (d) optimism/hope, (e) a new beginning, and (f) college as an empowering catalyst.

**Increased self-sufficiency.** Most participants of this study were unanimous in declaring that attending college helped them become more self-sufficient. This subtheme was mentioned twenty three times in seven interviews. Indeed some of them were very emphatic in stating that transitioning into college confirmed their long time goal of being able to make their own decisions and live by the consequences of their decisions.

**Quest for self-identity and purpose.** This subtheme refers to the fact that attending college fostered in some participants the ability to conceptualize their quest for desired or preferred self-identity and a sense of direction in their life paths. This subtheme emerged nineteen times in seven interviews.

The participants felt that college helped them reclaim the kind of persons they have often desired to become and actualize. Others took upon themselves the charge of advocating for the rest of the youth with experiences in foster care to reiterate that indeed an emancipated youth can transcend beyond the negative stereotypes imbibed in their
lives while in care. Several other participants also indicated that transitioning into college helped them re-energize and rediscover their quest for self-identity and developing personal and meaningful goals in life.

**Increased self-love.** This study also demonstrated that foster care experience altered how the emancipated foster care youth transitioning into college understood their view of themselves relative to the world around them in a variety of ways. The overall research finding in this study indicates that the experiences of emancipation and transitioning into higher education together impacted how they conceptualized their intrapersonal dynamics. One emerging *meaning-making* subtheme as they transitioned into their college campus environment was increased self-love or self-esteem. It was mentioned sixteen times in five interviews.

**Optimism and hope.** The *meaning-making* dynamics of optimism and hope in this study refers to feeling as though college provided a sense of hope or led to optimism and a more positive outlook on life – a qualitatively empowering way of interpreting their life experiences. The participants demonstrated a profound awareness of the desire to depend on themselves for their happiness and accomplishments. In this study a sense of optimism and hope was mentioned thirteen times in seven interviews. It was therefore an indication of increasing optimism and confidence that college experiences will enable their life experiences and conditions as well as those of others the lives of others to advance and improve.

**A new beginning.** Another emerging *meaning-making* theme was the cognizance of a progressive self-conscious awareness that the research participants were beginning to
tread a new life path in an unfamiliar college campus environment. In this study a new beginning is understood as the feeling as though college is a chance for a new beginning, a fresh start or a new paradigm shift relative to their values and goals in life. The subtheme of *a new beginning* was mentioned nine times in four interviews. In most of the participants, college offered them the understanding of a new beginning as a culmination of a meaning-making process that they needed even though they were hardly aware of that need prior to college, possibly due to the nature of their foster care experiences.

**College as an empowering catalyst.** This final subtheme in this section refers to feeling as though attending college was a catalyst for positive change both for themselves and others. The subtheme was mentioned five times in three interviews. The emancipated youth who participated in this study expressed that the enthusiastic desire and motivation for college began in foster care for a variety of reasons.

This seems to indicate that college was an invaluable opportunity to leave behind a seemingly unstable life patterns while in various foster care placements and reclaim stability in life. This is especially relevant in the light of foster care experiences of multiple placements, family loss and less control over personal life choices and decisions. Other research participants on the other hand explained that transitioning into college was a catalyst for motivating them to engage in careers that are people centered and life enhancing.

According to Samuels and Price (2008), foster youth have to rely on multiple agencies, case workers and mental health professionals to ensure that their basic needs are adequately met. However, that process is often long and tedious. Subsequently, it is
indeed consistent that indeed the emancipated foster youth would embrace the new found autonomy and independence with a spirit of relief.

Research Question 2 was what role does the emancipated foster care youth transitioning into higher education see college campus experiences playing in their meaning-making process? The first theme for Research Question 2 was positive role of college campus experiences. This theme was further classified into the following five subthemes: (a) mentorship and support, (b) coping skills, (c) financial literacy and accountability (d) positive freedom, and (e) stability. The second theme for Research Question 2 was challenging role of transitional college campus experiences. This theme was further classified into two subthemes: (a) lack of mentorship and support and (b) negative freedom.

**Mentorship and support.** This subtheme refers to the variety of support provided by college staff, college, programs, and others. This was a very common subtheme and was mentioned thirty one times in all eight interviews. The active presence of an empowering sense of connectedness to the family and other significant others was found to be a major challenge to all research participants possible due to the negative experiences with their families of origin as well as with their multiple foster care placements and experiences. Nonetheless, this study also demonstrates numerous examples of mentorship and support services that made their college transitional experiences meaningful and empowering.

For instance, all of the research participants joined college straight from a foster home. However since their emancipation they have no place they can call home. In some
college campus environments, the college administration provided specialized interim housing for students with foster care experience when the college was not in session. On the other hand, others enrolled in colleges with no programs directly serving the needs of the emancipated foster youth transitioning into the college campus environment.

A study by Ahrens, Richardson, Lozano, Fan and Dubois (2008) demonstrated that successful foster youth attribute their academic and life success for the most part, to the support of empowering mentors. This is consistent with the findings in extensive additional research that when educators provide empowering intervention strategies for the disenfranchised youth, then the youth in question are able to transcend their adversities and succeed (Baxter-Magolda, 2004; MacTavish, Eley & Salamon, 2006; Pizzolato, 2003, 2005; Walsh, 2002; Woolley & Bowen, 2007)

Additionally, the ecological theories as postulated by Bronfenbrenner (1992) conceptualize the critical role of varying levels and interactive nature of environmental factors in the developmental process. Therefore, the way we design and implement student development intervention strategies plays a critical role in enhancing an enriching and empowering college experience for students.

Coping skills. The next subtheme that emerged in this study was coping skills, which is defined as college campus experiences leading to the development of a variety of empowering coping skills. This study demonstrated that the emancipated foster care transitioning into higher education were actively discovering and inculcating ways of finding fulfillment and overcoming the odds in their lives despite their experiences of adversity in foster care and adjustment into college life as emancipated youth.
This is especially relevant when one takes into consideration that the emancipated youth enters college from a foster care environment that has been associated with negative developmental outcomes. This subtheme demonstrates that in some cases the emancipated foster youth attempts to create a life of normalcy that is positively empowering and that which attempts to defy negative outcomes perhaps with the goal of advancing their chances of success in their college careers and life goals in general. This subtheme was mentioned fifteen times in six interviews.

Some learned to cope with their transition into college by being proactive and yet cautious in interacting with others. Others explained learning to cope by reaching out to others for help. In that case the participants mentioned that it was critical that they learnt how to reach out to others in order to get the support and help they needed while transitioning into college. A few learnt to cope by ignoring the problems they faced.

The above developmental meaning-making dynamic is crucial especially in the light of the transient nature of the foster care system placements already discussed in Chapter one of this study. The foster youth learn to protect themselves from disappointments, emotional adjustments to multiple placements and adversity by putting up a survival mode of projecting a kind of superficial front of autonomous self and ability to be self-driven (Kools, 1999). As such when an emancipated foster youth demonstrate that it is not a sign of weakness to acknowledge from time to time that they need help or a little bit of support, then it is indeed a remarkable developmental meaning-making dynamic! This is especially relevant in the light of studies that demonstrate that the ability to be meaningfully connected to someone or reach out to someone is a constant

However the developmental challenge here is empowering the foster youth with the ability to choose a value system that meets long time needs and success. It is the ability to move towards what Kegan (1994) refers to as the *self-transforming mind*. In other words, it is the ability to hold concurrently conflicting life experiences and yet being able to reframe one’s problems as *opportunities* for personal growth and development.

In the light of the above, this study demonstrates that whereas familial challenges of neglect and abuse led to foster care experience and additional adverse effects in personal development of the research participants, those same experiences also account for the personal strengths, as well as resilience, and positive outlook in life after emancipation and in the first years of college life. It might also mean that given a different life circumstances of transitioning into a college campus environment, the emancipated foster youth demonstrates an attempt to triage and adopt the best ways to survive through college and life in general.

According to Baxter Magolda (2001, 2004), an established inner value structure, personal identity, and crafting interpersonal relationships based on mutuality and interdependence are critical pillars in the establishment of an internal voice that guides, directs and authors an individual’s life. As the emancipated foster youth begin to experience and trust their internal voice, that voice becomes a rudder for self-authored ways of *meaning-making* as their transition into a college campus environment.
Financial literacy and accountability. The motivation to be financially literate and accountable was another common subtheme for the positive role of college campus experiences. In this study we define financial literacy and accountability subtheme as those college campus experiences helping participants become more financially responsible and accountable. This subtheme was mentioned eight times in four interviews. Research participants in this study learnt to become financial responsible in a variety of ways as they transitioned into college.

Positive freedom. The next subtheme was positive freedom, which refers college campus experiences providing a new found freedom viewed positively. This theme was mentioned five times in two interviews. The research participants stated that college was an experience of freedom. Prior to emancipation, all decisions for the most part were made for them. Everything was so structured. The emancipated foster youth suddenly experience a relief of freedom. Nonetheless, this experience of freedom has also been an opportunity for the research participants to reframe their understanding of their concept of self-identity, as well as to reconstruct their daily rhythm of life and priorities.

Stability and personal development. The next subtheme was stability, which refers to the college campus experiences providing participants with a sense of immediate or future stability. The participants tied their emancipated status and transition into college with socio-economic and personal stability. This theme was mentioned four times in three interviews. For those participants transitioning into college was an opportunity to begin to form a stable socio-economic foundation to support a stable family they never had. This is a path towards developing what Baxter-Magolda (2001) refers to as internal
foundations. For an emancipated foster youth, college is an opportunity to achieve a personal identity and self that is personally defined and consistent.

The second theme for Research Question 2 was the challenging role of transitional college campus experiences. In this study his theme was further classified into two subthemes: (a) inadequate mentorship and support and (b) negative freedom. The subthemes are discussed below. These meaning-making themes are consistent with what Baxter-Magolda (2001) referred to as crossroads or snapping point (p. 116). Pizzolato (2005) refers to it as a “provocative moment” (p. 265). I refer to this experience both as a liberative desolation and as a recalibrating pitch. Critical to this developmental dynamic is the notion of engaging with competing notions of trust and discerning the right way forward in ways that are empowering and liberating. Successful college career for an emancipated youth entails being able to successful navigate through those challenges. This study re-iterates that indeed social status does influence the nature of developmental meaning-making dynamics and subsequently impacts student growth and development (Baxter Magolda, Creamer & Meszaros, 2005; Torres, 2010)

Inadequate mentorship and support. This subtheme refers to participants feeling as though there is a lack of college staff, programs, or resources provided to support foster care college students. All participants stated that there were inadequate resources, programs and staff that respond directly to emancipated foster youth transitioning into higher education. This concerned was mentioned thirty seven times in all eight interviews.
The participants felt that the lack of a peer support group on campus made it difficult for the youth with foster care experience to transition smoothly into college. Others felt that transitioning from a highly structured foster care environment into her college campus proved to be a difficult experience especially due to inadequate programs in their college campus to facilitate that process.

In the light of the above, whereas some participants had previously expressed ambivalence about sincerity of anyone reaching out to help them, others cited the lack of continuous, proactive mentorship and support from their welcoming college campus as a one of the barriers to successfully transitioning into a college campus environment. They also felt unsupported in transitioning to adult life after emancipation. Emancipation therefore seems to mean a transition into adulthood in less time relative to their non-foster care peers – a transitional developmental milestone that is accelerated and compressed and with little if any of back up resources to fall back to when facing personal developmental challenges.

**Negative freedom.** This subtheme refers to participants feeling that it was difficult to adjust to the freedom encountered in college. Some of the participants pointed out that adjusting to freedom while transitioning from foster care into higher education also transformed the way they conceptualized and acted upon their anxieties in relation to their personal freedom. The difficulty encountered in adjusting to freedom propelled them to start sorting and sifting through what they previously thought and lived with a view to reconstituting their personal identities and values in life. Negative freedom was mentioned six times in three interviews.
Methodological Assumptions and Scope of the Study

In qualitative research, the individual respondent is not considered replaceable by any other respondent but allowed to contribute in spite of the relative uniqueness of the contribution. The balance between learning new information and being able to predict and control assumes a myriad of dimensions in qualitative methodologies. In quantitative research on the other hand, the individual differences are often considered errors in measurement (Stiles, 1993) and nuisances of data-management.

However, the unique responses from research participants are valued and utilized in qualitative methodologies. Qualitative research being freed from the emphasis on prediction, subsequently considers whether those individual differences and unique responses can be understood as special contributions to the content and shape of the emerging theoretical grounded conceptualizations and theories.

In this study, each research participant was contacted for additional brief interview to evaluate emerging themes or grounded conceptualizations that were identified and coded following the first interview. Participants were then asked to reevaluate their earlier responses. The interview transcriptions were shared with the each of the research participant for review during the follow up interviews, along with a description of the emerging model. The second meeting was again audio-recorded. In one instance, the research participant asked to me to re-interview her anew.

Two areas of inquiry were the main focus in the second interview: (1) to investigate possible elaborations to participants’ earlier responses and discussions and (2) to evaluate, modify or confirm the emerging theoretical conceptualizations and models.
The second meeting was again audio-recorded; consenting procedures were followed as they were in the first interview. The second interview with the research participants lasted approximately 30 minutes and the audio recordings from the interviews were again transcribed and coded.

After confirming and clarifying concepts through the second follow up interview with the research participants, all three steps of the coding process were repeated. During this second coding process, the existence of various categories and subcategories and their interrelationships were further evaluated and refined into a more detailed interpretation of the emerging themes and grounded theoretical conceptualizations of the developmental meaning-making dynamics of emancipated foster care youth transitioning into higher education in the United States.

Maxwell (1996) indicates that potential threats to a comprehensive and complete qualitative research process include unforeseen negative feedback of the participants due to the researcher’s biased interpretations. Subsequently, Merriam and Associates (2002) stipulate that since the qualitative researchers are the principal instruments during data collection and analysis, one must therefore demonstrate that data is accurately represented and that the analysis is trustworthy.

In the light of the above, qualitative research is considered trustworthy when the findings are vivid and faithful portrayal of participant’s experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Beck, 1993). In this study, I sought to ensure that the emergent grounded theoretical ideas and conceptualizations are consistent with data and are recognizable to the research participants.
In order to foster trustworthy of a qualitative research process, Guba and Lincoln (1989) provided six techniques to ensure credibility and trustworthiness: member checks, sustained engagement, tenacious observation, peer-based probing of the findings, negative case analysis, and progressive subjectivity.

Other methodological research literature includes the use of triangulation and collaborative research as critical techniques in ensuring trustworthiness of a research project (Patton, 2002). I used the NVIVO to systematize coding of the transcribed interview data. However, as I was the only one who conducted data analysis of the transcribed interview data, inter-coder agreement was not determined.

Nonetheless, to further ensure credibility and trustworthiness, this study utilized negative case analysis, theoretical triangulation and member checks. Subsequently, this research employed negative case analysis to ensure that a reasonable number of data collected fit the appropriate categories and subcategories. Those that did not fit and merit alternative explanations were included into research limitations or recommendations for further future research. I also sought to identify converging or diverging themes by way of comparing interview transcripts across cases. This procedure ensured that emergent codes are either confirmed or refuted throughout the research process (Charmaz, 2006).

I also utilized investigator triangulation by drawing upon the dissertation Chair to review and conduct audit trail to ensure accuracy of the data presented. The interview transcriptions and data of emerging themes were provided to the dissertation chair for review. I also performed member checks by conducting followed-up interviews with
research participants for the purpose of verifying initial interpretations and analyses (Brantlinger, et al 2005).

The final research narrative contains extensive excerpts from data and participants’ actual words quoted from the transcriptions to function as an audit trail. The use of NVIVO helped facilitate the iterative grounded theory research method that conducts data collection and analysis simultaneously. The NVIVO thereby provided a transparent account of the process that enhances validity. Ultimately, the use of NVIVO helped this final project to move beyond thick descriptions and subsequently facilitated conceptualization of explanatory conceptualizations grounded in the research data (Hutchinson, Johnston & Breckon, 2009).

Audit trail entails a process by which a researcher is able to authenticate the research findings. In other words, in this study as a researcher, I also describe in detail not only how data was collected and the way themes and conceptualizations were derived, but also demonstrate that there exists sufficient evidence for readers to assess and agree with the interpretations I advanced. Dey (1993) rightly stipulates that: “while we cannot expect others to replicate our account, the best we can do is to explain how we arrived at our results” (p. 251).

One of the strengths of this research is that it is the first study of its kind to explore meaning-making dynamics of emancipated foster care youth transitioning into higher education in the United States. Additionally, the study engaged a diverse sample of research participants relative to gender, ethnicity, age from eight colleges and universities across mid-western United States.
However since the study only utilized a sample of eight research participants drawn only from Midwest United States, it raises questions of its generalizability. Nonetheless, some of the emerging meaning-making grounded interpretations and conceptualizations might be relevant to other emancipated foster youth transitioning into higher education in other parts of the United States.

On the other hand, the guiding research questions of this research were informed by a constructive-developmental theoretical paradigm. The study was also limited to the concept of meaning-making dynamics and experiences of emancipated foster care youth transitioning into higher education within a residential college campus environment.

In this research, it is also not clear how meaning-making experiences in non-residential college campus environment shape other aspects of cognitive-structural development. Additionally it would have been helpful to explore how other variables such as race, gender, foster parents, academic advisors and mentors in the meaning-making process of this population.

**Ethical Considerations**

The Ohio University Institutional Review Board officially approved this research. I also explicitly explained to the potential research participants the objectives of the study prior to participation, and the participants were required to express their consent verbally and by way of a valid signature. In the consent form the research participants were informed that participation was strictly voluntary and that they could opt out of this research process at any time. When reporting the findings, I ensured that that the data accurately represent what was observed through member checking. The interview
responses were not taken out of context. Individual and communal privacy rights as well as confidentiality were maintained throughout the research process.

The research question rendered this study to focus only to a specific population and setting, namely emancipated foster youth transitioning into higher education. Furthermore, a constructivist paradigm adopted in this research entailed a context specific interdependent and interactive relationship between and among the research participants, the research site and the researcher (Broido & Manning, 2002).

My experiences and training provided me with a perspective that informed how I engaged in this research process. Consequently, I ensured that I was cognizant of them by way of memo writing at each stage of the research process. It is therefore critical that the readers of this research appreciate that this research product was mostly interpretative and was informed by the researcher’s contextual theoretical framework.

Indeed I entered the research field with social justice contextual theoretical framework and an experience working with at-risk college students as a Professional counselor and as an academic advisor. This might have affected the outcomes of the research problem, giving it an a priori student developmental theoretical and personal contextual framework. I also participated as a graduate associate and academic advisor in at least one of the research settings. The contextual framework of a privileged status of the researcher could have nuanced the kind of responses that the research participants provided, perhaps emphasizing the negative experiences while minimizing the positive ones.
Nonetheless, this qualitative study also sought to ensure that the research product was consistent with the data collected. In order to ensure the “consistency” (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 288), between the data collected and the resultant research product, I utilized theoretical triangulation, peer debriefing, member check, audit trail and memo writing. I also provided precise research methods to be used, clear research procedures, sequence and findings linked to data collected with a clear audit trail.

The study also utilized the services of key informants working with the Ohio Reach and American Alumni Association to promote member-check and investigator triangulation. Key phrases, words and expressions were included in the final narrative. Last but not least, I used reflexivity to check on the negative impact of my contextual theoretical paradigm. I utilized my clinical counseling training skills to build rapport with the research participants in order to create trust and elicit open sharing of both negative and positive life experiences.

**Concluding Remarks**

The constructivist grounded theory of the *meaning-making* dynamics of emancipated foster youth transitioning into higher education in this study illustrates that a college campus environments has unique challenges for the emancipated foster care youth. Transitioning into higher education has significant challenges for all college students. However, all research participants in this study demonstrated that the emancipated foster care youth had a shared *meaning-making* dynamics that helped them mitigate the impact of their college transition experiences.
The first primary theme for Research Question 1 was *adverse transitional college experiences*. This theme was defined as negative experiences associated with attending college. The exemplar quotes were further classified into four subthemes: (a) isolation and estrangement, (b) exclusion/ostracism, (c) mental health challenges, and (d) inability to reveal real self. The next primary theme for Research Question 1 was *positive implications for self-esteem and well-being*. The exemplar quotes were further classified into six subthemes: (a) increased self-sufficiency, (b) quest for self-identity and purpose, (c) increased self-love, (d) optimism/hope, (e) new beginning, and (f) college as an empowering catalyst.

Research Question 2 explored what role their college campus experiences played in this process. The first theme for Research Question 2 was *positive role of college campus experiences*. This theme was further classified into the following five subthemes: (a) mentorship and support, (b) coping skills, (c) financial literacy and accountability (d) positive freedom, and (e) stability. The second theme for Research Question 2 was *challenging role of transitional college campus experiences*. This theme was further classified into two subthemes: (a) lack of mentorship and support and (b) negative freedom.

**Implications for Further Research**

1. This is the first research of its kind to explore *meaning-making* dynamics of emancipated foster care youth transitioning into higher education in the United States. However since it utilized only a sample of eight research participants drawn only from Midwest United States, it raises questions of its generalizability. It would be
helpful to conduct additional research on meaning-making and emancipated foster youth in other contexts and with a larger sample and in relation to other college student developmental outcomes.

2. The guiding research questions of this study were informed by a constructive-developmental theoretical paradigm. The study was also limited to the concept of meaning-making experiences of emancipated foster care youth transitioning into higher education within a particular setting - residential college campus environment. Further research could explore how meaning-making experiences in non-residential college campus environment shape other aspects of the cognitive-structural development.

3. Additionally it is expedient that future studies to explore how other variables such race, gender, foster parents, academic advisors and mentors impact the meaning-making process of this population. This would provide a more detailed comprehensive picture of the developmental factors and processes that foster or hinder the emancipated foster youth in their quest for meaning-making on a college campus environment. Such data would further inform student affairs professionals and educators regarding effective intervention plans.

4. Similarly, additional research on how college students without foster care navigate through the meaning-making dynamics would also provide valuable research base for comparison and highlight variety of meaning-making experiences.
5. A longitudinal study on the same research population spanning across the 2 or 4 year college experiences would also provide additional research data for comparison and development through time of individual emancipated foster care youth.

6. Additional research comparing meaning-making dynamics of emancipated foster care youth in different college campus environments such as community college versus a 4 year institution could further illuminate the role those campus environments play in the meaning-making process.

7. Post college studies of meaning-making could also be useful in exploring ways in which emancipated foster care college student’s transitional experiences shape their abilities to handle post-graduation life tasks.

Conclusions and Implications for Practice in Student Affairs

This dissertation explored developmental meaning-making dynamics of emancipated foster care youth transitioning into higher education and the role college campus environments play in that process. Subsequently, the study presents grounded conceptualizations of the developmental meaning-making dynamics of emancipated foster care college students transitioning into higher education. Meaning-making in this research entails the quest for a sense of interconnectedness and purpose by way of an ongoing interaction with disparate elements of life experiences.

The study therefore develops additional data to college student development theoretical base that acknowledges the needs, goals and values of at-risk college students. It also ultimately seeks to develop mentoring tools to empower emancipated foster youth to claim the authority of their own experiences, liberate themselves from debilitating
constraints and self-author their unique paths as they explore their college careers. It is the ultimate goal of this study that such grounded conceptualizations would inform future theoretical foundations and trends related to the college student developmental process.

Additionally, this research process provided the emancipated foster youth transitioning into college with an opportunity to process their life experiences in a safe and yet empowering environment. In one instance, one research participant stated that it was the first time since foster care for someone to show interest in learning about her life experiences. The participants found it safe to talk about what being in foster care meant for them. The emancipated youth who participated in this study were also able to process their thoughts, feelings and ideas relative to their time in foster care and how the college campus environment fostered or hindered their meaning-making process.

The emancipated foster care youth in this study encountered several challenges as they attempted to make-meaning of their transitional experiences into college campus environment. For most of the participants, it was an empowering experience. For the rest, the experience of transitioning into higher education as an emancipated foster youth propelled them to either isolate themselves or assume false personal identities in order to fit in.

Nonetheless, as the research participants sought to navigate through their new found freedom, to reconstruct their identities, to develop autonomy and to create a new life path, they were often prompted to redefine their sense of self and of purpose especially in cases where they felt socially excluded and isolated.
In some instances the presence positive role models and mentors on campus were important vehicles in assisting them with the transition in that they provided a meaningful and resourceful adult mentorship. Others noted that they were other debilitating developmental factors such as mental health diagnosis interfering with the academic work, pregnancy or parenting, concern of siblings in foster care, and relationship-related problems with their biological families.

However, it was a common concern among most of the research participants that there lacks a consistent mentoring structure in many colleges and universities through which emancipated foster youth transitioning into higher education can meaningfully explore their thoughts, feelings and their college campus environments relative to their foster care experiences. This has an adverse effect of not enhancing the holistic growth and development of this college population because such institutions of higher learning with no interventions specifically tailored to respond to the needs of the emancipated foster care youth transitioning into higher education do not meet those foster care youth where they are at developmentally.

**Implications for Practice**

1. Irrespective of the time spent in foster care, gender, ethnicity or age, feeling *isolated* and *alone* was a common experience among the research participants in this study. This research also demonstrated that although the research participants had expressed the desire to enter college while in foster care and worked hard to get to college, they also found that what the structure of some college campus environments as well as what some members of their college campus community did
and said made them fell socially excluded. Orientation programs tailored for this population ought to be provided as opportunities to build relationships with other students, faculty and staff.

2. Case workers are charged with preparing emancipated foster youth for independent living as well as staff and faculty should organize a multi-disciplinary task force for organizing such orientation programs on various college campuses. I would also recommend that college admission forms include a voluntary question that empowers incoming freshmen to freely self-identify as emancipated foster youth. This allows the orientation committee to plan and prepare for tailored orientation programs.

3. In view of the shared concern of feeling alienated or socially excluded, the freshman orientation and pre-college fairs programs for the emancipated foster youth ought to also include opportunities for them to be exposed to diverse college student populations in a safe and empowering environment. In this instance different student groups are able to learn from each other and begin the process of living together in the context of diversity.

4. Meaning-making is an ongoing developmental dynamic, therefore, mentors, staff, faculty, case workers and immediate former foster parents of emancipated foster care youth should find meaningful and creative ways of initiating and maintaining meaningful contacts with emancipated foster youth. Outreach programs in the dean of students’ office might consider reaching out by way of newsletters, electronic media, as well as one-on-one contact to immediate former foster parents, the
emancipated youth about to enter college, and case workers for the purpose of
organizing and implementing pre-college orientation programs tailored for this
population. Open communication among and between all stakeholders is critical in
order to enhance common motivation and inculcate trust (Hanleybrown, Kania &
Kramer, 2012).

5. Introduce a mentoring model for emancipated foster youth in our college campuses
with qualified full time staff to serve as liaison with the wider college campus
community. The staff ought to be knowledgeable about foster care services and
experiences and be clinically trained in social work and counseling psychology. The
staff will serve as a go to persons on campus with the ability to be on call and
available outside office hours.

6. I also recommend that the staff ought to have demonstrated expertise in conflict
transformation and crisis management. The staff needs to serve as a resourceful
bridge between the foster care case workers and the available federal funding set
aside for emancipated foster care youth transitioning into higher education.

7. The above implication for practice eliminates the need for the emancipated foster
care youth need to go to the federal and state offices to follow up on their campus
environment physical needs. The staff ought to be able to connect the emancipated
youth with the community in order to ensure that the emancipated youth is also on
track in connecting back to the community. The focus in the above suggested
mentorship and support model is to empower foster care college students to
understand what they need to know to succeed in their college career and the
interventions that their mentors need to implement and the remedial interventions needed to guarantee that the emancipated foster care youth are successful in their college careers. Other meaning-making approach that this mentorship model could serve might include enhancing mental health, campus living life and academic skills, empowering identity formation, interpersonal supportive connections and relationships and financial accountability. Pertinent developmental outcomes to be met in this proposal could include assessment of learning outcomes, assessing the ability to autonomously ask for help when needed. This will help the mentors identify the target level of intervention, areas that emancipated foster care youth need extra support and empower the mentors to plan and implement intervention areas relevant to their social and academic needs, including matching students with professional career mentors for their future career goals.

8. Emancipated foster care youth age-out, separated from siblings and biological families with no place they can call home. They have had multiple communities, homes and schools. Indeed the case worker more or less assumes a parental authority over a foster care youth. This research revealed that most of the foster care youth transitioning into higher education had poor help-seeking skills, falsified their true personal identities to fit in, lacked empowering mentors and felt like misfits in their college campus environments. Some did not even have college housing during breaks while others had poor access to mental health services. Connectedness to a space they could all home or family appears to be a crucial factor in their developmental meaning-making dynamics. Faculty and staff ought to consider
planning and developing college campus welcoming week, during semester gatherings and finals week to build a community of new and returning students of shared life experiences, and empowering ongoing programs that help facilitate meaningful college transitions, inculcate interpersonal relationship building and leadership opportunities as well as enhance professional development, network development, transition into the labor market, and holistic identity formation.

9. The above might entail designing a First Year Experience Seminar that consistently introduces to and empowers the emancipated foster care students with the available resources during their transition to college and empower them develop a sense of responsibility for their own meaning-making, education, academic and life skills towards success in their college career and professional development. Research indicates that students with foster care experience are more receptive to academic, personal and social supports on a college campus environment (Unrau, Font & Rawls, 2012). Therefore the goal proposed in this mentorship model is to pair each emancipated foster youth transitioning into college with a mentor to promote their academic, personal and social growth and development.

10. Institutional assessment and equity efforts as well as leadership and career services ought to develop programs fostering emancipated foster care college student’s experiential programs and promote meaning-making, leadership development and holistic personal development.
**Personal Reflections**

This research project was inspired by a providential encounter with an emancipated foster youth whom one late afternoon approached me as his academic advisor to offer him a ride to his doctor’s appointment 20 miles from his college campus. This was the first time in my life to encounter and actively interact with a college student who had had experiences from the foster care system in the United States. This simple ride to and from the doctor’s appointment laid a profound foundation for subsequent regular contacts in the last week of that Fall Semester and the month long winter break.

A day before the winter break, the same student had shared with me in greater detail about his experiences with his biological family, his placement into foster care and how he eventually entered college. As he was leaving my office that evening, he hesitated a bit on his way out my office door, made a 180 degrees turn to face me and asked me whether I could find him a place to stay during winter break for he had no home to go to and the university did not have any alternative housing arrangements in place. I paused for a moment, then retrieved the extra key to my apartment and asked him to get ready for a move into my apartment the next day.

On one hand, my reaction could be explained away by the fact that I was leaving town for the rest of the winter break and that his presence in my apartment would help justify my winter house bills. One the other hand, the deliberate decision to reach out to help could also have been inspired by my Ignatian formation of *faith that does justice* or by my personal philosophy of *carefrontation* and *cura personalis* in student affairs. In other words, the encounter with this particular emancipated foster care college student
challenged me to concretize the ideal that since I have personally been gifted with so much – psychosocially, emotionally, and materially then social justice demands that I share my giftedness with those less advantaged.

In addition to the above, I also entered this research process with professional training and experiences as a Licensed mental health professional, as an academic advisor, as a college instructor and as a college campus Director of Residence Life. My clinical training in motivational interviewing and diverse ways of initiating, developing and maintaining a healthy helping relationships empowered me to develop in-depth probes and follow up questions in my qualitative interviews. In one instance, one of my research participants requested to have an additional follow to process other arising issues outside the research protocol. In another instance, during a follow-up interview and after initial review of the first interview transcript, one research participant asked if we could discard the first interview and begin anew.

Assessing students’ developmental needs and implementing educational programs that positively impact their interpersonal growth and development by promoting quality education, fostering inclusive and empowering educational experiences while at the same time inculcating holistic character formation, characterize my personal philosophy of higher education and student affairs.

Mentoring college students is a passion I cherish dearly and it has been a rewarding experience because in my role as an educator, I seek to not only impart knowledge but also help equip students with the empowering skills needed to acquire and apply knowledge and make transformative life choices.
As a clinical resident with the Counseling and Psychological Services at Ohio University, I routinely consult with student affairs’ professionals on campus regarding emerging college psychosocial and constructive-developmental issues. I also help design and implement bi-weekly psychosocial and constructive-developmental educational programs to help facilitate holistic student development, retention and academic success for disenfranchised college student populations.
References


Davis, R.J. (2006). *College access, financial aid, and college success for undergraduates*


Pecora, P., Kessler, R., Williams, J., O’Brien, K., Downs, A., English, D., White, C., 
Findings from the northwest foster care alumni study. Seattle, WA: Casey Family 
Programs.


Perry, W. G. Jr. (1999). Forms of intellectual and ethical development in the college 


In N. Hayes (Ed.), Doing qualitative analysis in psychology (pp. 245-273). Hove, 
UK: Psychology Press.

college students. Journal of College Student Development, 44, 797-812. 

college in first-year, high risk students. Journal of College Student Development, 


Price, D. (2008). Campus support initiative management information system review and
recommendation. Indianapolis, IN: DVP Praxis.


## Appendix A: Characteristics of Research Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Meaning of Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender/Race</th>
<th>Type of Institution</th>
<th>Year In College</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tunaini</td>
<td>All shall be well</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>bi-racial female</td>
<td>4 year public residential,</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anisa</td>
<td>Graceful</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>African-American female</td>
<td>4 year mostly white public residential University</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imaara</td>
<td>Steadfast</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>bi-racial, gay</td>
<td>4 year public residential, HSBC</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swabra</td>
<td>One who endures through adversity</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>African-American female</td>
<td>4 year, public university in a metropolitan city</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adili</td>
<td>One who seeks righteousness</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>white male</td>
<td>Mostly white large public 4 year University</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shanuri</td>
<td>Flourishing</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>white male</td>
<td>2 year rural community college</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hafidha</td>
<td>Thoughtful</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>white female</td>
<td>4 year mostly white large public University</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nura</td>
<td>Inspirational light</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>African-American female</td>
<td>2 year community college</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B: Case by Case Coding Summary Extracted from NVIVO

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hierarchical Name</th>
<th>Coverage</th>
<th>Number Of Coding References</th>
<th>Number Of Users Coding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Document</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Internals(Anisa))</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Node</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes()Research Question 1()Negative experiences()Isolation and estrangement</td>
<td>1.51 %</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes()Research Question 1()Negative experiences()Poor mental health</td>
<td>1.67 %</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes()Research Question 1()Positive implications for self-esteem and well-being/College as a catalyst</td>
<td>0.59 %</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes()Research Question 1()Positive implications for self-esteem and well-being/Increased self sufficiency</td>
<td>3.96 %</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes()Research Question 1()Positive implications for self-esteem and well-being/New beginning</td>
<td>1.19 %</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes()Research Question 1()Positive implications for self-esteem and well-being/quest for self-identity and Purpose</td>
<td>2.71 %</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes()Research Question 2()Negative role of college campus experiences/Lack of support</td>
<td>1.36 %</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes()Research Question 2()Positive role of college campus experiences/Coping skills</td>
<td>4.46 %</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes()Research Question 2()Positive role of college campus experiences/Financial responsibility</td>
<td>0.89 %</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes()Research Question 2()Positive role of college campus experiences/Positive freedom</td>
<td>1.77 %</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes()Research Question 2()Positive role of college campus experiences/Stability</td>
<td>1.38 %</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes()Research Question 2()Positive role of college campus experiences/Support</td>
<td>10.65 %</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Internals(Imara))</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Node</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes()Research Question 1()Negative experiences()Isolation and estrangement</td>
<td>1.68 %</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes()Research Question 1()Negative experiences()Exclusion</td>
<td>4.31 %</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes()Research Question 1()Positive implications for self-esteem and well-being/Increased self-sufficiency</td>
<td>9.60 %</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes()Research Question 1()Positive implications for self-esteem and well-being/Optimism and hope</td>
<td>0.37 %</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes()Research Question 2()Negative role of college campus experiences/Lack of support</td>
<td>7.79 %</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes()Research Question 2()Negative role of college campus experiences/Negative freedom</td>
<td>0.78 %</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes()Research Question 2()Positive role of college campus experiences/Financial responsibility</td>
<td>4.02 %</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes()Research Question 2()Positive role of college campus experiences/Support</td>
<td>0.95 %</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Internals(Swabra))</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Node</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes()Research Question 1()Negative experiences()Isolation and estrangement</td>
<td>3.91 %</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes()Research Question 1()Negative experiences()Exclusion</td>
<td>0.64 %</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes()Research Question 1()Negative experiences()Poor mental health</td>
<td>1.13 %</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes()Research Question 1()Positive implications for self-esteem and well-being/College as a catalyst</td>
<td>3.72 %</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internals</td>
<td>(Adili)</td>
<td>Research Question 1</td>
<td>Positive implications for self-esteem and well-being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internals</td>
<td>(Adili)</td>
<td>Research Question 1</td>
<td>Positive implications for self-esteem and well-being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internals</td>
<td>(Adili)</td>
<td>Research Question 1</td>
<td>Positive implications for self-esteem and well-being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internals</td>
<td>(Shamiri)</td>
<td>Research Question 2</td>
<td>Negative role of college campus experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internals</td>
<td>(Shamiri)</td>
<td>Research Question 2</td>
<td>Positive role of college campus experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internals</td>
<td>(Shamiri)</td>
<td>Research Question 2</td>
<td>Positive role of college campus experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internals</td>
<td>(Shamiri)</td>
<td>Research Question 1</td>
<td>Negative experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internals</td>
<td>(Shamiri)</td>
<td>Research Question 1</td>
<td>Negative experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internals</td>
<td>(Shamiri)</td>
<td>Research Question 1</td>
<td>Negative experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internals</td>
<td>(Shamiri)</td>
<td>Research Question 1</td>
<td>Negative experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internals</td>
<td>(Shamiri)</td>
<td>Research Question 1</td>
<td>Positive implications for self-esteem and well-being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internals</td>
<td>(Shamiri)</td>
<td>Research Question 1</td>
<td>Positive implications for self-esteem and well-being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internals</td>
<td>(Shamiri)</td>
<td>Research Question 1</td>
<td>Positive implications for self-esteem and well-being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internals</td>
<td>(Shamiri)</td>
<td>Research Question 1</td>
<td>Positive implications for self-esteem and well-being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internals</td>
<td>(Shamiri)</td>
<td>Research Question 1</td>
<td>Positive implications for self-esteem and well-being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internals</td>
<td>(Shamiri)</td>
<td>Research Question 2</td>
<td>Negative role of college campus experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internals</td>
<td>(Shamiri)</td>
<td>Research Question 2</td>
<td>Positive role of college campus experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internals</td>
<td>(Shamiri)</td>
<td>Research Question 2</td>
<td>Positive role of college campus experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internals</td>
<td>(Shamiri)</td>
<td>Research Question 2</td>
<td>Positive role of college campus experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Internals(\text{(Nuru)})</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Node</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes\Research Question 1\Negative experiences\Isolation and alienation</td>
<td>2.87 %</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes\Research Question 1\Negative experiences\Inability to reveal real self</td>
<td>1.00 %</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes\Research Question 1\Negative experiences\Exclusion</td>
<td>1.86 %</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes\Research Question 1\Positive implications for self-esteem and well-being\Increased self-love</td>
<td>1.08 %</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes\Research Question 1\Positive implications for self-esteem and well-being\Increased self sufficiency</td>
<td>1.04 %</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reports\Coding Summary Report</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes\Research Question 1\Positive implications for self-esteem and well-being\Optimism and hope</td>
<td>0.45 %</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes\Research Question 1\Positive implications for self-esteem and well-being\quest for self-identity and purpose</td>
<td>0.82 %</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes\Research Question 2\Negative role of college campus experiences\Lack of support</td>
<td>5.57 %</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes\Research Question 2\Positive role of college campus experiences\Coping skills</td>
<td>1.89 %</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes\Research Question 2\Positive role of college campus experiences\Financial responsibility</td>
<td>0.20 %</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes\Research Question 2\Positive role of college campus experiences\Stability</td>
<td>0.54 %</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes\Research Question 2\Positive role of college campus experiences\Support</td>
<td>3.33 %</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Internals(\text{(Hafidha)})</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Node</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes\Research Question 1\Negative experiences\Isolation and alienation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes\Research Question 1\Negative experiences\Exclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes\Research Question 1\Positive implications for self-esteem and well-being\College as a catalyst</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes\Research Question 1\Positive implications for self-esteem and well-being\Increased self sufficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes\Research Question 1\Positive implications for self-esteem and well-being\Optimism and hope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes\Research Question 1\Positive implications for self-esteem and well-being\Quest for self-identity &amp; Purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes\Research Question 2\Negative role of college campus experiences\Lack of support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes\Research Question 2\Negative role of college campus experiences\Negative freedom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes\Research Question 2\Positive role of college campus experiences\Support</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Internals(\text{(Tumaini)})</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Node</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes\Research Question 1\Negative experiences\Exclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes\Research Question 1\Negative experiences\Poor mental health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes\Research Question 1\Positive implications for self-esteem and well-being\Increased self-love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes\Research Question 1\Positive implications for self-esteem and well-being\Increased self sufficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes\Research Question 1\Positive implications for self-esteem and well-being\New beginning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 1: Positive implications for self-esteem and well-being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 1: Quest for self-identity &amp; Purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 2: Negative role of college campus experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 2: Positive role of college campus experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 2: Positive role of college campus experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 2: Positive role of college campus experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 2: Positive role of college campus experiences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix C: Exemplar Quotes of Emerging Themes, Cross-Case Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research participant</th>
<th>Exemplar quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Anisa</strong></td>
<td>One of the challenges for me was I did not know … <em>anyone</em> (emphasis) in on this college campus. You kind of expect to bump into some people you already met in Middle School or High school! But coming from foster care, I did not know anyone here on this college campus. But I did not bump into anyone, I knew! I was lucky to have a single in my first year in college but I had to share a bathroom with two other residents. By me <em>being up here and not knowing anyone</em>… I was mostly alone. I did not know anyone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Imara</strong></td>
<td>Another experience was during my first holiday in college. This past holiday, I woke up and everybody was on the move, going to their parents, their folks coming to pick them up… and there I was with nowhere to go. I was the only person left in my building. I looked out in the parking lot, and there was no vehicle in sight, no one around! No one reaching out to me… no gift to expect… It was really challenging! It was so frustrating and depressing. You suddenly feel not only alone but so lonely. No one cares! It was just a day or two but it made so lonely and so sad.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Swabra**            | Reference 1: I felt I had given up hope completely. Nothing else made sense for me! Nothing on campus and in my life had any meaning at all. With no one to lean on or to support you,…no sense of connectedness to family or someone you can really trust life becomes very difficult….

Reference 2: When I am by myself *it is like staring out into the dark*. All is dark and hopeless. There is no light in the horizon. My first week here I was mostly by myself. I did not interact with my roommates a lot. I preferred being by myself.

Reference 3: At the moment, I mostly by myself. I do not like being around people or having people around me, especially those being visited or calling their biological parents all the time for this or that. I feel like it is fine to feel the way I feel but some of my peers say it is not normal? |
| **Adili**             | Reference 1: Friends here….. ummh…. I keep everyone away because of my experiences. I do not really have … “friends” here. But I can say that I do have sort of … acquaintances!

Reference 2: It is kind of hard question to answer. It is because the large population on this campus coming from my situation is very few… that is if there are any at all. I am yet to encounter
here on campus a group open to students with foster care experience. It is because people coming from my kind of situation have a lot of stuff, fear, anxiety – I feel like I do not belong. It is not easy being a foster care kid.  

Reference 3: I am yet to come across an individual who is ready to share similar experiences as I have in foster care. It is like you do not belong. I do not simply fit! It has been difficult perceiving yourself not only as different but as “alone” in a big crowd. I won’t be surprised if other foster care students experience similar things.  

Reference 4: You can’t … can’t just… you know you feel isolated simply because you do not have what other students have. You are already struggling with your background and you arrive on a college campus and you encounter additional isolation. Just like today, I just overhead my colleagues in class, share with each other, you know what…. my folks are coming over for Dads’ weekend: That is the kind of additional isolation and pain I encounter day to day. That’s kind of stuff that drags me down. It adds to my depression.  

Reference 5: My grades were sliding, partly because of that experience and perhaps due to my sense of isolation, living alone in a single and not having friends or at least people with similar background to reach out to.  

Reference 6: But here is the problem. I have nowhere to go. That is sad. That is really sad. This is because the university assumes that you have a place to go whenever they send you back home. But that is not the case for every college student. Most of college students would go back to their parents or whatever. But some foster care kids have nowhere to go. What do you do? I have no parents. I have no guardians. The majority of my mother’s side… she had schizophrenia … they are all gone. My aunt has cancer… I have no one else. Outside of my uncle, after I had left my father  

Reference 7: You have to learn to take care of yourself and not let anyone take advantage of you. On the other hand, I felt that I passed on a chance to learn to live with others. That was a chance to learn to get to know other people. Now I realize I am more isolated than I was before. I am at peace but not at peace. I feel completely isolated and unable to reach out to others and get to learn about them. It is kind of added to my isolation and contributed to what others want me to be.  

Reference 8: You come here on campus and see every partying enjoying their lives and I sit up and say, I need to work hard. I have to keep up with my homework. If something happens to
them, they can go back to their parents’ house. Where would I go? Even some foster care students on campus have foster parents. I do not have foster parents. They even have a little bit of leverage! Some of us do even have a branch of their family tree! We are alone and isolated! We have to fend on our own! It is a miracle I made it to college!

**Nuru**

**Reference 1**: My concern was that I would not be able to meet and make friends with people who think like me and share the same values and goals like me! … People who will be able to keep me up and keep me going in the right direction! You know I was actually almost certain I would not meet someone with the same experiences as I have had in foster care and with my own biological family … someone who has gone through adversity in life since a younger age! Someone who never had an opportunity to be like other kids,…. free to go out with friends,… making friends and not stuck in your home with a mom doing drugs. Someone who had gone through several foster care placements …. Someone who had to put in medication as a result depression and other medical issues, and yet made it to college! I was not sure whether or not my own peers would understand my background!

**Reference 2**: I never knew there were other students on this campus with the same experience? I am beginning my second year and I have yet to meet anyone who has had a foster care experience on this campus! You do not often hear about other kids who have been in foster care on this college campus! This kind of makes me feel that I am not really an outcast! There are students on this campus who have had the same experiences just like myself!

**Nuru**

**Reference 1**: They have no idea of the pain, hurt and instability of what it means to live in foster care but I cannot blame them! I do not even mention that I have been in foster care. Either they would not get it or simply conclude that I am a worst case scenario alive. When you mention foster care to your peers, it makes you feel less accomplished in life! It is like the most embarrassing thing in life! It is like you are less human than your peers.

**Reference 2**: Once, I shared in a class discussion that I had spent a whole day without food because my family could not afford it and the rest of my class could not comprehend that that was possible! If your peers do not understand your real life experiences what do you do?

**Reference 3**: It is very easy to feel out of place around this campus.
**Reference 4**: I am at pains most of the times trying to fit into any discussion among my peers related to my mom did this for me, my dad will bring me that, I will ask my dad for an opinion, my mom will sort this out for me… stuff like that. I miss that, I know I will never have that parental role model!

**Theme – Stability**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research participant</th>
<th>Exemplar quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tumaini</strong></td>
<td><strong>Reference 1</strong>: I feel like the greatest way, I wanted to grow...because I have never had a stable family…I wanted to come to college and build by skills and so that when I start having children, I can in turn provide them with the stability I never had. They can look at me and say you know what, mom went to college and so we can also make it to college. I want my kid to know that you do not have to be a number, a statistic. <strong>Reference 2</strong>: I want to be able to show the next generation, my own children that you can have control over your life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Anisa</strong></td>
<td>Living here on campus keeps me close with the other students in our program because all of the rooms are pretty close, so we either have our own floor, or just a hall full of students sharing my experiences. The staff who volunteer and work during the breaks help to make activities and events that all of the students can come together and participate in, and it’s just really fun and exciting. That way I’m not alone, and I have somewhere to sleep, and I have food available to me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nuru</strong></td>
<td>I think I came to college because I was tired of living in poverty. I figured straight from high school that I could not make a decent pay out of the jobs I had. I just wanted to break that cycle of poverty I had experienced in my own family.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Theme – College as a catalyst**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research participant</th>
<th>Exemplar quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Anisa</strong></td>
<td>College was something I always had at the back of my mind. I knew that college was somewhere that I had to be. It was kind of an ideal path. It was a place that I had to be, it was not optional for me</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Swabra**           | **Reference 1**: I was tired of being thrown around from one foster home to another. It was time to get out and be a better person. College seemed to be the only way out for me. **Reference 2**: I did not talk to a lot people but coming to college was a liberating experience. I looked at myself and all other students around me and I felt so confident and happy with myself that I said to myself that if I they can do it, I can do it! It felt so empowering to be able to call people who knew me and tell them, you know what? I am in college. It was so amazing just to say that I am in college! The first one in my whole
family! I am in college!

**Reference 3**: From day one in college, I began viewing my life differently. I started believing in myself and seeing myself in the positive light.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nuru</th>
<th>I kind of started wondering how this could be solved and I figured that if I became a community organizer or a social worker, then I could help solve some of those problems! For me, college was to enable me become an instrument of positive social change!</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<p>| <strong>Theme - Increased self-love</strong> |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Research participant</strong></th>
<th><strong>Exemplar quotes</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tumaini</strong></td>
<td><strong>Reference 1</strong>: It made me realize that I had so much self-worth and that I was capable of doing so much more with my life and that I deserved so much more. It just took some time and some harsh experiences for me to realize it. It did not matter what people told me, you are worth more, you are worth more until but until I realized it myself, it had meant nothing at all! <strong>Reference 2</strong>: In this instance, having the state acknowledge my accomplishments, getting a letter from the Governor stating explicitly that they were proud of what I had accomplished despite of having come from the foster care system was so empowering! <strong>Reference 3</strong>: I have come to realize that it is critical to take care of me. Do things for myself before I can help anyone else. I want to be a high school history teacher. I want to be able to help take care of me before I can take care of anyone else. I am learning these skills by networking, going to speaking events. I am just really learning to brand out… hold on to people who genuinely want to hold on to me too! <strong>Reference 4</strong>: I had to make a decision to make the right decision and do things for me and take care of me first and realize my academic goals so that could later on help her more effectively. <strong>Reference 5</strong>: I would rather have no relationship than have a toxic one. And so I made a conscious decision to let go of my biological parents and decided to pursue my values and dreams with a sense of determination. College was that path for me, and I wouldn’t let anything block that path for me, not even my biological family. <strong>Reference 6</strong>: I feel like I am a throw away. I am the one that no one wants, no one cares about. But this is really not who I am. I am beginning to realize that it is time to take out the trash. My past and experiences in the foster care system is the garbage. My future is the treasure. It is time to take out the trash in my life. Once I take out the trash, I do not have to worry about</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
anything else. I become clean and presentable. I can better myself. I can desire more that makes my life worth living. I can achieve more for myself that what the foster care system has constantly told me I cannot.

**Reference 7**: Take out the trash and reclaim some sense of self-worth and dignity because if you are going to carry along that stereotype even after emancipation people will see that stereotype.

**Reference 8**: And so you have to start to believe in what you can achieve. You have to learn that not everyone is going to believe that you can achieve these things and that you have to have a passion and the drive to prove these people wrong. And that is my motivation.

**Swabra**

**Reference 1**: I did not talk to a lot people but coming to college was a liberating experience. I looked at myself and all other students around me and I felt so confident and happy with myself that I said to myself that if I can do it, I can do it! It felt so empowering to be able to call people who knew me and tell them, you know what? I am in college. It was so amazing just to say that I am in college! The first one in my whole family! I am in college!

**Reference 2**: Believing in myself, see others smile.

**Reference 3**: I had to learn to love myself first before I could love somebody else

**Reference 4**: I had to learn how to put myself first and love myself first before somebody else even though it sounds so selfish. I had to learn self-care, taking care of me first. I have been selfish to myself by not putting myself first

**Adili**

I did not want people to see that…so that is what drove me away from me…and as soon as I did that my grades turned around, people started hanging around me, I was getting good grades, teachers liked me. I felt good about myself.

**Shamiri**

**Reference 1**: And I was so proud and I went and showed everyone that I had gotten accepted into college and most of them in the foster home said, you see, we knew you could do it! I was so proud of myself everyone saying that I had proven that I could really believe in myself and make myself a better person!

**Reference 2**: My friends now that I have been in foster care. I do not shy away from sharing my background with them. What strikes me is the fact that they say, you know you are a cool guy and pleasant to hang around with. No one had ever said that before in my life in foster care! It makes me feel good about myself.

**Nuru**

There is something that she said that really struck me! She had
this derogatory statement on her back pack and someone asked her whether I would put the same statement on my backpack and she responded: ‘No but the old [meaning me] would!’ That statement really hit me! It is like she has seen the transformation in my life, my old self and my new self since emancipation into college! This really makes me feel good about how much I have grown as a person… the progress I have made.

Theme – A new beginning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research participant</th>
<th>Exemplar quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tumaini</td>
<td>So it was kind of something forced upon me but looking back it was something I needed. It was a decision I should have taken in the first place! I just enjoyed this new experience I had never had before. I had never been to this side of the state before, until I came for orientation. It was kind of beginning to realize that it felt better to be in college and to be in a new environment. It was so exhilarating to suddenly realize that at last I could provide something better for myself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anisa</td>
<td>Reference 1: Entering college I felt like life was starting all over again, being able to speak about things freely and comfortably about things I was passionate about and believed in. College has kind of offered me a new and better self for me and for others. Reference 2: I am so happy that when I came to college I did not have to do that! A lot of the things I had to struggle with, I did not have to struggle with anymore!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adili</td>
<td>Reference 1: When I first came to this college campus, I was thrilled! I said to myself, this is sweet…a fresh start! No more structures, no more innumerable case worker meetings, and so on! Reference 2: I also knew that the work load would increase and expectations would increase to and that I had to prepare for it. I kind of remotely felt that I would be ready for it. It was also for me a fresh start. Turning 18, a new beginning, a new life… and … for most part it was. Reference 3: College has given me a sense of hope. Meeting new people. Starting all over.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shamiri</td>
<td>Reference 1: then I came here for a fresh smart start orientation for all freshmen before college began. When I arrive here, it was like a relief, a fresh start. Reference 2: As I mentioned earlier, I was in a big city. I had around drugs. I had been around violence and gangs! I did not want to around such environment anymore! I wanted to go to a small town where I could begin a new life…a place where no one knows me.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Reference 3:** I am convinced this is the right place. I have to take a chance all over again and start afresh rebuilding my life.

**Theme – Increased self-sufficiency**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research participant</th>
<th>Exemplar quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tumaini</strong></td>
<td>I am in the right place, and I am the captain of my ship. I know where I want to go and I will get myself there.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Anisa</strong></td>
<td><strong>Reference 1:</strong> But when I came to college, I encountered new big things: like maintaining financial stability and to maintain daily college obligations and task without support systems for back up if I had questions or anything… it was just like all I knew was that I had to figure it out some way; somehow. And all I knew was I wanted to do it, I wanted to able to make my own decisions and how I was going to handle the situation and who I was going to and … <strong>Reference 2:</strong> I always make sure I’m employed. My friends call me a “work-a-holic”. I have worked as an Accounting Assistant, Receptionist, Event Planner, Entrepreneur, and a Custodian. <strong>Reference 3:</strong> My motivating values are the relationship I have with my brother, and the ideal of being able to graduate and provide my needs for myself, and my younger brother. My skills include everything that I have learned so far in my past, and those that I will acquire in the future. My skills would include any social skills I have acquired on my own or by others, and researching to find resources that may be available to me, such as shelters (if needed), places to get food, clothes, and etc. <strong>Reference 4:</strong> For me, being successful, is finding myself in a place, or providing a place where I am financially stable, and where I can make a living for myself and provide an environment for my brother to continue to grow become independent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Imara</strong></td>
<td><strong>Reference 1:</strong> I could stay here on campus, go to my grocery shopping anytime without worrying about transportation. <strong>Reference 2:</strong> I am planning to even not to touch my refund checks in the future so that I could take save and take care of my daily expenses. I do not have a member of my family or anyone else to back me up financially, and so I have to back myself up. I have to make sure that everything is in order for me. <strong>Reference 3:</strong> Once, I got to my senior year in high school, I learnt that the state would not be paying for a lot of things and I had to figure out how to see myself through college. <strong>Reference 4:</strong> No one will be there to take care of me and other stuff that I need! Everything in college was going to be on me! Maybe, this explains why most of my closest friends are older! Whenever we go places, he pays for himself, and I equally pay</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
for myself! He does not have to depend on anybody. I feel more comfortable hanging out with people older than myself...people able to take care of themselves. I do not have to depend on anybody, either! In fact I do not want to depend on anybody. I have learnt to take care of myself. I cannot afford to depend on somebody else! I do not have the resources! I feel more comfortable among people who are able to take of themselves.

Reference 5: Being in foster care, mmmh, you get toughened up and grow up almost too quickly! You are so much... all at the same time. It is like when you arrive into college, you feel so much older! Your peers are still talking about their parents. You are more concerned about who your will make it through your first year yourself.

Reference 6: Now you have to take care of yourself, no case work, no parents, no legal guardians...

Reference 7: I learnt that people do not really care about me as a foster youth, and that to make me happy, I have to make some drastic decisions about how to make me happy and successful in life. Since then, I have learnt to be independent and not care about what others think or do. I do things for me, things that can make me happy.

Reference 8: I have gotten pretty used to taking care of me as much as I can...

Reference 9: Coming to college has made me more responsible, made me more...a lot more mature. When I was in high school, I thought that I was more mature! My peers and teachers thought that I was much more mature than my classmates! Here on campus, the lonely times... be it thanksgiving or christmas... I feel like an adult who does not need any gifts for holidays to make sense, or parents to buy me gifts and provide me with a place to stay! Not needing to ask for help.

Reference 10: Everything is on me! I know I am a legal adult, but it is different when you feel like one and have to act like one! I sometimes feel like my entire freshman or sophomore classmates still have a lot to catch up with. I feel like I am already 30 years old or something like that!

Reference 11: You come here and you have to grow faster than you think should. It is not like in foster care, where you had your foster parents to drive you wherever to all you appointments and stuff. You have to learn to walk miles to the nearest bus stop to get a ride. You have to learn how to get your own food and how to get from point A to B unlike other college students with parents and guardians! You are not prepared for all that! You have to worry about academics and you have to worry about
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Adili</strong></th>
<th>I learnt how to clean up the bathroom, do laundry … be independent. I can now clean up any kind of mess! I also began to manage my finances. I still need more guidance on that though! Things like credit cards, writing checks, keeping my accounts balanced. I learnt a lot from there. I even learnt to cook and use the microwave. It was very helpful.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Shamiri** | **Reference 1**: I saw her going to college and succeed in college, I wanted to be like her, go to college like her and reach out to others with the same problems I had. I wanted to go to college and get a decent job when I grow up. I wanted to go to college to get a decent job and be a father I never had to my own family, being there for them, support my kids and helping them be good and respectful persons. And for me going to college will provide me with those things.  
**Reference 2**: I just looked forward to living a life different from the foster care system. I was done with structures and case workers. I wanted to live my own life and be a successful student, doing my own thing in a real world. I am out here, it is hard, but I am making do with what I have. For once, I am in charge of my own life.  
**Reference 3**: I am on my own finally. I am always fearful of where I am going to get money for this and that, money for food, for laundry. You know…that I do not have any more money to get food anymore when I come back next semester. How am I going to get a job! How am going to get a ride home during the break?...Am I going to see my little sister?...it is just crazy! I am beginning to realize that I have to learn to make do with what I have.  
**Reference 4**: I had to learn how to take care of myself in college. I have just learnt how not to stuck plastic stuff in a microwave, the alarm went off! We have to learn how better persons. Since I came to college I have learnt how to take care of me. |
| **Nuru** | For, me it is simply, I get it! I have been there! I feel like I am much more like independent! When I hear some of my friends having problems and they just simply say, that you know what I just have to call my mom and she will fix it! And I am just like what would you do without your mom, what would you do without your parents? I kind of feel that I have had so much independent living skills for my experience in foster care that I can make it through college! |
| **Nuru** | I was concerned about money and how to take care of my day to day needs. Even though we have in-state tuition and loans, I still |
have to figure out where to stay and what to eat. I now have to find work to supplement my income and also figure out where to stay during holidays. I cannot go back home. I am now on my own!

### Theme – Lack of Mentorship and Support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research participant</th>
<th>Exemplar quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Tumaini**          | Reference 1: I then started sharing my desire to go to college with my friends and colleagues, but shockingly, my friends and colleagues starting pulling away from me! They seemed repulsed by the idea of going to college. It was like they did not relate to the idea of going to college or the idea of me achieving something more in my life. And so I found myself in a predicament with no one to share my innermost desires in life and to support me in my life goals. It seems as if I was somewhat forced into the idea of going into college as a last resort since, I had no one who shared my dreams and goals in life.
Reference 2: I am a first generation college student and a piece of me always desires to go back to my biological parents even though their parental rights are terminated and ask, “Are you proud of me, are you really proud of me?” However, I just had to learn that not everyone will necessarily be proud of me and my accomplishments.
Reference 3: My relationship with my biological parents is strained, and I am learning that I should not be begging anyone to be proud of me. I shouldn’t have to beg for their attention. And so, I just had to learn that there are certain people who aren’t going to learn to be proud of me. I had to let my parents go and let them understand that what they have done hurt me a lot.
Reference 4: My biggest fear, was that I was not going make myself proud, that I was going to make myself disappointed…a fear that I will have wasted my time by going to college. Nobody seemed to have cared about me and encouraged me to excel in the past. I was not worth anything to anyone…not even to my own biological family. |
| **Anisa**            | Reference 1: I think I did not have a strong support system to help me adjust to college. Early on I had suffered from anxiety and night terrors, panic attacks and was difficult to get through on my own and not knowing the resources available to me for support.
Reference 2: Normally, I do not have a place I to go to. I decide where to go when that time comes around…whenever school closes. I do not have a permanent place to go. I would love to |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Imara</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reference 1</strong>: I also talked about not having money being set aside for college while in foster care, subject us to have to fend for ourselves and look for scholarships and financial aid on our own. It is like being thrown out there after aging-out and we have to figure out for ourselves, about scholarships and financial aid available for us.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reference 2</strong>: Yes, we sometimes do lose hope in dreaming for bigger things in life, especially after experience in foster care, feeling sorry for ourselves, blaming everyone including ourselves, and even giving up on life! Yet, sometimes, it is simply because we do not even have someone whom we can look up to! Why then bother?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reference 3</strong>: You have no one to turn to! You had your caseworker, you had some people take care of your well-being and now suddenly you are on your own. You are used to having no parents! But your case worker took care of stuff! You had annual and semi-annual case reviews! Meetings, meetings, meetings all the time! I got so used to meetings for this and meeting for that. In foster care, I had a monthly allowance about 80 month and that is what I used to pay for my phone bill, my clothes, my hair cut. I was pretty much supporting myself except for food.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reference 4</strong>: I actually do not have people, I could out rightly say that I could go to them when I need help. I do even feel very comfortable asking for help or asking for stuff. I work through stuff on my own.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reference 5</strong>: When I really need help, I do not get help. It seems so hard to get help out there. I do not have many people that would actually reach out to help me [sad]. I have gotten pretty used to taking care of me as much as I can, since I know that if I really need help and I seek it out there, it would not come by easy!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reference 6</strong>: Not needing to have someone to ask for help. When I am like that I feel like I am not 18 at all! Not like my classmates and roommates, who you know… I can call my dad or mom or even grandma to bring me stuff, pick me up, send me some money or pay for my book. I cannot do all that, I have to figure out stuff and take care of me, prioritize stuff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reference 7</strong>: I am just wondering if I had more support and stability I could have had additional scholarships through college! I need scholarships to help me not only pay for my tuition but also scholarship for my books and help me buy food, pay for my phone bills, pay for my hair cut! I just wished there</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
were more scholarships than those for super smart people who do not need the scholarship in the first place! During college visitations, I was so discouraged into applying into some colleges since; I was so concerned about transportation, ability to have a mentor who understands what it means to be in foster care…

Swabra

Reference 1: When we say I am tired, I am really tired! I need something other than medication. Just be there and listen to me. Or simply show me that you care. Lately, I have been feeling as if I am done… I am at that brink of hopeless and nothing else matters.

Reference 2: I felt I had given up hope completely. Nothing else made sense for me! Nothing on campus and in my life had any meaning at all. With no one to lean on or to support you…no sense of connectedness to family or someone you can really trust life becomes very difficult….

Adili

Reference 1: But when I came here, it is all about women’s group. In fact, I remember visiting a presentation on this campus and I asked one of the lady’s working for survivor’s advocacy group: “How about a men’s group”? then the lady said, there wasn’t any!

Reference 2: It is not easy being a foster care kid. I think a group of people with similar experiences, able to meet together, relate to each other better and have a better chance of becoming friends. We don’t have that here on campus.

Reference 3: It is however difficult, the subject of my experiences is sensitive, it is swept under the rug and no one wants to stick his neck out. Outside of what I am trying to do. No one is interested in knowing where I come from.

Reference 4: When I came in there was a mix up on my Medicaid documentations and couldn’t get some of my medications on time, I couldn’t afford the $1000 medication I needed. I contacted campus care, Allen student help center and none of them could get me any help. I also contacted the County but they stated that because I am emancipated, they had closed my file and couldn’t help me - and that drove my first quarter down. Bizarrely, my social worker told me that she couldn’t have access to my life since I was already 18 and my case was officially closed.

Reference 5: But here is the problem. I have nowhere to go. That is sad. That is really sad. This is because the university assumes that you have a place to go whenever they send you back home. But that is not the case for every college student. Most of college students would go back to their parents or
whatever. But some foster care kids have nowhere to go. What do you do? I have no parents. I have no guardians. The majority of my mother’s side…she had schizophrenia…they are all gone. My aunt has cancer…I have no one else. Outside of my uncle, after I had left my father.

**Reference 6:** I think the big mistake I made is that I overdosed my prescription medication. But, I never had any specific transitional training of what I was suffering from and what I need to look out for.

**Reference 7:** I was not able to get my prescription on time during my transition into college. Many things seemed to pile up … ranging from loss of my mother, being raped by three teenage guys whom I will never know, between being sexual and physically abused at various foster care placements…horribly, to being abused and neglected by my father for all those years and suffering in silence…all of that. I just couldn’t take it anymore, I couldn’t manage. I did not have any thing or any support system to keep me stable. The combination all of these things just reached a point of no return. I could not take it anymore.

**Reference 8:** I have an academic advisor but he does not seem to understand my background. I would love to have more support groups of people who know something about my background.

**Reference 9:** We need some help with help and skills to navigate through our finances, housing, food. We need regular contact with mentors who understand where we come from.

### Shamiri

**Reference 1:** Every Thursday through the weekend, there is always some party going on. Thursdays has been a big challenge since once I begin then it is a non-stop drinking fest until Monday! Coming from a structured environment in foster care, I have found it very difficult not to give in to this habit. It is difficult. I wish I had had a transitional structure to help me determine my potential problems as I became emancipated. As I said before, the transition is so accelerated and compressed! You are 18 and you are out of the door! No one really cares whether or not you have resolved your issues say of drinking or drugs or sexual abuse. You have to fend for yourself.

**Reference 2:** Now my foster care peers and I here are virtually on our own. The only possible family time we get is during break when some family decides to invite us to their home. We do not have a home to go to, period! Someone else has to decide whether or not we are worthy to be part of their family! With emancipation you are on your own, you either grow up or
you are like a miserable sheep among the wolves!

Nuru

Reference 1: That was really hard for me! It was beginning to dawn of me that … you know what? … to succeed in college you need some strong family, emotional and financial support! I did not have any of that I had to figure out on my own about how to work through those challenges for the next four years! I worried about everything every day. I had to learn to take care of me throughout college without any kind of support out there! I just feel like I did not have the kind of support each of my roommates had when I came to college.

Reference 2: I had wanted to have the same kind family support my peers were having but I wasn’t having any!

Reference 3: My roommate used to say that I often cried in my sleep! I felt so stressed out in my freshman year in college! It was like being thrown into a pool where everyone else seems to know how to swim pretty easy and you are left on your own!

Reference 4: I just remember that it was in the middle of the Fall Quarter in my freshman year and I really wanted somebody to talk to and I cannot remember what exactly was going on but I remember talking to this lady in the counseling services spilling and pouring my entire heart and life to her and she did not give me any feedback!

She did not even encourage me to do the good things I was doing nor discouraged me for not doing the bad things I might have been doing! She was not giving me any advice! All she was doing was nod her head. I mean you are a counselor! I need help! I only remember her saying that you know I am really glad you came by to talk to me and if you are really interested in continuing the services you must really go through this long process and they will put you on a long list and you might be assigned to a permanent counselor. I was just wondering, you mean like you are a temporary person and you are not even giving me some advice to work through my problem? It was honestly the most unhelpful session.

Reference 5: It was not up until exam week, the very last week of the semester that I had a call that I had been assigned to a counselor. I mean I needed someone now not towards the end of the semester! Yah, it is not like I am threatening to kill myself but I need a counselor now! And she was like, there is a waiting list you could still come in for a walk-in session and it was like awful! I did not want to go for a walk-in session and talk to this random person each time I went. I wanted a consistent relationship with a counselor! I tried counseling services here but it just did not work out for me!
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Research participant</strong></th>
<th><strong>Exemplar quotes</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Tumaini**              | **Reference 1:** Now, coming from foster care system, I did not even know where to get some of the stuff the college was asking for! I did not even have an idea of what they were talking about! The foster care system is preparing to kick you out into independent living and the college is expecting the same stuff from everyone coming to the college! There seems to be no meeting point between these two parts of your life! I did not know what an advising office was…I wish I was given specific names of people in different offices that were mentioned in my orientation letter to reach out to.  
**Reference 2:** I kind of wish we had a group on this campus with foster care experiences, thinking together about where we come from and how we could help others coming after us! There are also certain experiences from foster care that you cannot just simply share with anyone who has not had foster care experience!  
**Reference 3:** But we need help, we do not need people to feel sorry for us, we simply need someone to be there when we are ready to seek out for help!  
**Reference 4:** I wish there was a kind of support group of some sort especially groups made up people who have had a foster care experience or at least an instructor or faculty member who understands the foster care system to bring us together as the year begins and help us in our transition.  
**Reference 5:** I am left to figure out things by myself. I actually live on a day to day. I am here in college but I do not have where to call home. I do not have people I can really call family. Talking about such stuff with my peers do not really get anywhere. They will not understand what I am talking about!  
**Reference 6:** I would need a social advisor, a mentor who helps me navigate through my social transition into college. It has not been easy, coming from a structured environment of foster care and then suddenly all these freedom and feeling awkward even to ask something as simple as how to relate, some other social etiquette that others seems to have already learned from their homes! |

| **Theme – Inability to reveal real self** |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Research participant</strong></th>
<th><strong>Exemplar quotes</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Adili**                | **Reference 1:** After the overdose, I then got sent to the hospital for two weeks. It is unfortunate that later I had to introduce some of the teachers to that part of me that I put everything to block out of my life, the Adili I do not like others to meet.  
**Reference 2:** It wasn’t the Adili, I wanted people to meet, the Adili, in pain and neglected. I wanted them to meet a Adili who |
is forthright kind, resilient, a hard worker, self-driven…that Adili. But unfortunately they saw the other Adili. It was very frustrating.

**Reference 3:** Another thing …I was very concerned that my roommates will see that I had a lot of medications and … so I got me a lock box to keep my medications. I also had fear of rejection, being rejected by everybody… or people … I wasn’t sure how my personality will blend with other people… I so I started by trying to fit in… fitting into what other people do. But the problem is that that is not truly me! I have this constant struggle of what other people would want me to be like and what I would like to be like…

**Reference 4:** I know that I need to get away from what others want me to be. But, I have always tried to fit in, wanting to be what others would like me to be. That is how my high school career was like. But, I believe that what other people wanted me to be was an escape from what happened to me and was happening to me with my father, at foster care, the issue with my mother, my uncle wanting to register me for manufacturing without my consent…it was like ammonia and bleach…a combination that is deadly…but I did not want people to see that…so that is what drove me away from me.

**Reference 5:** With other people, you can’t pretend for long. They will surely see who you really are. As for now, I can afford to pretend then recline back to who I really are once I get to my room with no know to judge me.

**Reference 6:** I see myself as a happy persona, nice upfront but lacks emotion; the other one is still locked in a box safely hidden in the basement, so guarded by so many barriers, too difficult to be reached out.

**Reference 7:** You kind of dissociate from your feelings, and you become a kind of person everyone else wants you to be.

---

**Nuru**

It was all about getting good grades! I was not really doing things about me! It was like I was trying to do things to place myself at the same level with my peers! It felt like I simply wanted to be like everybody else on campus! I was kind of comparing myself with everyone else and not what would make me happy and still be me! Looking back, in my entire freshman year I was not happy at all! I was just pushing myself to be like everybody else.

---

**Research participant** | **Exemplar Quote**
---|---
**Tumaini** | We have to be able to know that I can persevere; that I can be a better person; to have people you can tell, you helped me or you
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Summary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Imara</td>
<td>Yes, we have been hurt in foster care but that is not what we are, we can be who we want to be in life. We can succeed in life!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Swabra | **Reference 1**: She just listened to my story and helped me with ideas that gave me a sense of hope.  
**Reference 2**: I am less negative about life. I can now sit back and relax and smile. It is just the strength of knowing I can do this. It is that sheer determination in myself that I am so proud and happy about me being in college.  
**Reference 3**: I am not ashamed of what happened to me. Every struggle made me stronger person, able and willing to continue in life and not give up hope. |
| Adili  | **Reference 1**: College has given me a sense of hope.  
**Reference 2**: Others are in a hospital in a life support, I am not! We are strong! We are very strong! To reach this far we have put everything on line… we are very strong! We are committed to make life better for ourselves and others. We are dedicated to do so. |
| Shamiri| **Reference 1**: It taught me that we have to believe in ourselves because despite of our experiences in foster care, someone is already looking towards us, toward me!  
**Reference 2**: At times I have not been helpful to myself! I just have to continue believing in myself and work hard and succeed through college.  
**Reference 3**: In foster care, your self-esteem goes through the window… Very few people really cares about your future! By making it to college a lot of people look at me differently. I have gained a lot of respect from people! Based on that, I know I have to work hard! I do not want to let them down! I do not want to confirm their ideas that foster care kids are worthless kids. We are smart, we can make it to college and then we are going to do greater things in life! |
| Nuru   | I got baptized at around that time. My faith became so important for me. It was something that gave me sense of hope…helped me stay focused beyond what I gone through with my mother and foster care. |
| Hafidha| **Reference 1**: A lot of what is motivating me is the desire to change some of that! I know I can do something and change the lives of a few young people in foster care.  
**Reference 2**: We have the ability to make things different in our lives and the lives of others! We can make others feel |
empowered by the fact that we made it to college and stay in college through graduation!

### Theme – Social Exclusion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Participant</th>
<th>Exemplar quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tumaini</strong></td>
<td>However, once people find out that you have been in foster home, they will give you a weird look and tell me that you do not look like one who has been in a foster home! You look like you are just fine to me! And I will say it is because I made myself into what you see. It is something that I made myself for me. You know my mom is a drug addict and my dad is an alcoholic. Sometimes people assume that oh since you are in foster care, your parents must have been drug addicts or that your parents must have attempted to beat you to death or something like that, or oh you were homeless.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Imara**            | Reference 1: I therefore do not tell my peers that I have been in foster care, because it is like they have a belief that people who are of have been in foster care are destitute, have no families, have been abused, or have no money! There are many reasons why people end up in foster care, and not all reasons related to neglect or abuse! Some people treat us or see us like being delinquent, trouble makers, or they think of the worse things that can ever happen to a child! It is simply not true for all of us from foster care.  
Reference 2: I have heard stuff like we are thieves, that our foster care children were disowned by their families, you are an orphan, your family died, no one ever cares about you, you are a destitute and poor, you are a trouble maker, you are a criminal . . . nothing positive. And when we grow up like that, we begin to believe that that is how the society values us.  
Reference 3: ooh….I know my friends on campus, when there is an event to go to, or if we have a break, they tell me, ooh you know what, my dad’s will pick me up, or my mom will drop off the food. I have never thought of anyone picking me up or someone dropping off my food! For me it was on how and when I was going to get my food, not who will bring my food! It was also about how I was going to pay for my food, and not who was going to get my food. So when they were talking about these, I began to realize that oh gosh, I am not just a college student, I have to figure out on how to take care of so much stuff! |
| **Swabra**           | Some people without my kind of experience often judge me, judge me not based on who I am but on what they have heard or think I am. |
| **Adili**            | Reference 1: I kind of feel like I don’t fit in! Just because, it |
bothers me every single time I hear someone say or they call home to their parents and you know say something like, “Hey, I would like you to bring me some water. Bring it up”. You hear about dads’ weekend, moms’ weekend, sibs’ weekend, and parents’ weekend and you hear people calling home all the time. Almost everyone I have met here on campus have had their parents….And they may not have had the best of their situation with their parents but at least they have some. They have a place to go home to, to sleep at night. I don’t have that. And because I don’t, people can detect that, on campus, in the residence halls tend to detect that and my discomfort stems from that. They know they can detect differences in me compared to someone else. I figure that because of that people kind of do not want to associate with me or get close to me.

Reference 2: I was in a Quad with three other guys but that lasted only for about a week or two partly because, I wanted to get up in early in the morning take a shower, and get ready for class while the others wanted to sleep in. They wanted to stay up late and wake up late. I went to bed early and work up early. I had medications that were very expensive and very valuable…I asked for a room change …so I was moved to a single. You know,,,, I am not a good person to adjust to change… such kind of change.. If I am at least able to meet a group of people with experiences similar to mine, things might change for me. They will probably understand me. As it is now they did not understand me and neither do I understand them. It is a big struggle.

Reference 3: People are different in college ... a whole diversity! Foster care has a structure that seems the same all the time! I came from a group home of 6 Afro-American teens, 1 Hispanic and a couple of Caucasian teens. I find myself more and more distancing myself more from people who are different from me than those who are similar.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shamiri</th>
<th>There are people on campus who look at me and based on my foster care background and hometown simply concludes that I am a thug! This is very frustrating! I am not a thug! I did have some gang experience but being a thug is not my identity!</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nuru</td>
<td>Reference 1: during the first three weeks my druggie roommate mom came to campus every week, stayed in a hotel and offered emotional support to her but I never had anything like that! I could not expect my own mom to come down and do that! It makes you feel that being in foster care, I am different! It kind of confirms that nobody really cares about me! Reference 2: I never knew there were other students on this</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


campus with the same experience? I am beginning my second year and I have yet to meet anyone who has had a foster care experience on this campus! You do not often hear about other kids who have been in foster care on this college campus! This kind of makes me feel that I am not really an outcast! There are students on this campus who have had the same experiences just like myself!

**Reference 3**: There will be times when you will feel like an outcast.

**Hafidha**

**Reference 1**: My school is predominantly middle class and whenever I mention that I have been in foster care, my peers react with utter surprise! It is like someone with my experience should not make it to this college! It is like foster care is a system only for the destitute lower socio-economic individuals! The reaction is like …oh you poor thing!

**Reference 2**: I think sometimes when people learn that I am from foster care; they kind of lower their expectations of me and kind of look at me as a “oh poor thing”! I did not want a B paper for me to be graded as an A - simply because I had foster care experience!

**Reference 3**: I am yet to develop deep trusting friendships since I arrived here and I feel uncomfortable talking about my foster care experience even with my roommate. It seems that if you just mention foster care, there is this negative vibe.

---

**Theme – Poor Mental Health**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research participant</th>
<th>Exemplar quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tumaini</strong></td>
<td>I personally had to deal with depression… you know college for me was a whole new different environment. Everything was going on so well, I had made it to college then suddenly some things started going wrong. I was diagnosed with depression. I think I had not developed sufficient skills to assess the situation then make appropriate steps and changes to better my situation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Anisa**            | **Reference 1**: I think I did not have a strong support system to help me adjust to college. Early on I had suffered from anxiety and night terrors, panic attacks and was difficult to get through on my own and not knowing the resources available to me for support.  
**Reference 2**: So just getting through my first semester was very challenging. When you are not able to sleep through the night, get up in the morning fresh and ready for class, not able to take care of myself well enough, it is not easy for someone with my foster care background to adjust so easily to “normal ordinary life”. |
| **Swabra**           | I have been on depressed and on medication for a long time |
since foster care. Sometimes, I just feel so tired of life and
several times I’ve been suicidal. I do not thing anyone without
foster care experience understand I undergo through!

**Adili**

**Reference 1:** You can’t … can’t just… you know you feel
isolated simply because you do not have what other students
have. You are already struggling with your background and you
arrive on a college campus and you encounter additional
isolation. Just like today, I just overhead my colleagues in class,
share with each other, you know what…. my folks are coming
over for Dads’ weekend: That is the kind of additional isolation
and pain I encounter day to day. That’s kind of stuff that drags
me down. It adds to my depression.

**Reference 2:** Due to lack of medication and adjusting into
college, I got so caught up and things got really bad. I started
losing hope, giving up on life, I just snapped, I couldn’t take it
anymore and I overdosed. It was probably due to a mixture of
so many things. I had lost my mother, my experiences of being
sexually abused in the foster care, to being ignored and
neglected and abused by my father for so many years…suffering
in silence…blocking all that stuff in.

**Reference 3:** I was not able to get my prescription on time
during my transition into college. Many things seemed to pile
up … ranging from loss of my mother, being raped by three
teenage guys whom I will never know, between being sexual
and physically abused at various foster care
placements…horribly, to being abused and neglected by my
father for all those years and suffering in silence.. all of that. I
just couldn’t take it anymore, I couldn’t manage. I did not have
any thing or any support system to keep me stable. The
combination all of these things just reached a point of no return.
I could not take it anymore.

**Reference 4:** I have learnt to survive on my own, but based on
my suicide attempt; I know that I have to learn to ask for help.
It is almost always easy to ask why me? However, some people
come from my experience and self-medicate. For me it was an
experience of loss of sense of hope and I overdosed.

**Reference 5:** Suicide attempt with lithium overdose was my
worst experience transitioning into this college campus.

**Reference 6:** That is probably my most difficult decision in our
whole life. That was to decide whether or not I wanted to live or
die. I made that decision a month a half after I had entered
college.

**Reference 7:** Once I feel overwhelmed all the crap that
happened to me triggers of experiences that I cannot seem to
handle well. This is incredibly painful. I cannot function. I
cannot think. I don’t want to eat. I can’t do anything. I can’t
complete school work. I fail my exams. I sleep through my
classes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme – Quest for self-identity and purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Research participant</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Tumaini** | **Reference 1**: You can be everything you want to be.. and not just simply a label forced upon you. If you want to be a doctor, you can be a doctor. You do not have to be a high school dropout. You do not have to be illiterate. You do not have to sound ignorant when you speak. It is fine to sound educated and polished. I just want to be able to change the stigma of foster children. We are not ghetto. We are not hoodlums! Not all of us steal or are juvenile delinquents! We do not rob people. We are not just bitter people… Yes!... we are at times sad at what happened to us! We were just placed in a situation and system that we had no control over and now that I have control over my life, I want to be able to show the next generation, my own children that you can have control over your life. You just have to make those changes. You have to be committed to yourself and be committed to these changes.  
**Reference 2**: You are more than a foster child. That circumstance and experiences might make you grow into the person you want to be but it never makes you who are. You make yourself who you are and become whom you want to be. It is not a character trait. You do not have a foster child trait written on your forehead. It is a piece of you that you share with other people. It is an experience you share with others, something that you could use to your advantage and thrive through life, but it is not a character trait and your identity.  
**Reference 3**: They then hear all that I have accomplished in the community, the volunteer opportunities that I am engaged in…and they are surprised to hear that I am a former foster youth. And this is what I love – to have people jaw-dropped especially when they say, I thought all foster kids were juvenile delinquent who grow up to be nobodies…. I tell them I am an alumni and I am not a juvenile delinquent who grew up to be a nobody. As emancipated foster care youth we are more than what the foster care system and the community prescribe as our identity.  
**Reference 4**: Foster child is not my middle name. |
| **Anisa** | **Reference 1**: I began to realize that I wasn’t changing anything about myself...[pause] I wasn’t hurting myself in the process. And that was what was motivating for me in the entire process. |
It enabled me to realize that even though I was not in control of everything, it was worthwhile to aim for something better for myself. All I needed was a helping hand, a helping hand to put my hand onto a paper and rewrite and redraw my life goals.  

**Reference 2:** I have to learn that I am still growing and that all of my life is not characterized by what I have gone through. It is not all that life has to offer. You would think that with my experience one would simply say I do not need this from you, I do not need you, I can let you go and move on with my life but sometimes you are in this situation that you realize you actually do not know what is outside the box until you get outside the box and then get back into the box and see where you are at and where you ought to go.

| Swabra | **Reference 1:** More and more, I am beginning to believe that even though I went through foster care, foster care is not my name. My mom did not name me foster care. It is not in my birth certificate. I am Delta. Foster care was simply a time and period in my life that I had!  
**Reference 2:** I started believing in myself and seeing myself in the positive light. Foster care was a past that I could not change but did show me that I had the strength to navigate through life challenges. I began believing that I could make it in life just like anybody else because I have been through hell and back. College is making me become a better person.  
**Reference 3:** I am who I am today because I am determined to succeed despite the challenges I have faced in life. I am strong willed and focused. My campus coach has helped me see that the strengths and good things about me and I am more and more beginning to believe in myself.  
**Reference 4:** Now it is my turn to live my life as I deem it fit. I am beginning to realize that what is fit for me is not fit for everybody else. I want to pursue what is best for me now. |
|---|---|
| Adili | **Reference 1:** It looks like I am always what people would like me to be. In order to become more like myself, I need to make peace with some of my past, confront it if need be. I need to stop running from it. In order to do that, I need to heal parts of me… broken parts… all of the parts. That is the first step. I am trying to take in the most difficult parts of me to fit so I can become more of myself.  
**Reference 2:** I hope to get people from behind those doors, break the silence and come forth share their experiences for the better of everyone. This will make the real me come out. When I was at the hospital I participated in group therapy, we talked, shared our experiences and realized that something like that will |
help folks like me benefit from college experiences in enriching
different way. It allows us to come out and be who we are.

---

**Shamiri**
Reference 1: I did not want to go to college where I would
easily bump into someone who would say there goes that foster
kid! I wanted to be the real me and not some label someone
forced upon me. I wanted to rediscover my real life and develop
my potential.

Reference 2: I am beginning to learn since coming college that
it is the needs and not the wants that really keeps you going.

Reference 3: I am who I am. I do not try to be someone I am
not.

---

**Nuru**
I was hoping that college would help me be more aware of
myself and my surroundings… to be able to grasp and
understand what was going on around me and make relevant
decisions! Discovering what kind of person I really wanted to
be! Discovering what I really wanted to do in life! I wanted to
find out how I could be a productive member of the society –
not like my mom!

---

**Hafidha**
Reference 1: You consume a lot of negative stuff in foster care
such that you become bitter and hate everyone! I decided that I
did not want that to take control of my life. I decided to hang
out with positive looking people…folks with positive outlook in
life!

Reference 2: I have come to believe that every experience in my
life as a foster care youth is relevant in as much as I use them to
make the world a better place! I do not take any of my foster
care and college experience or my peers for granted. I have
something to learn each day that will make me a better person! I
feel empowered to give my opinion without fear! What I have
to say is my legitimate experience!

---

**Theme – Financial accountability and responsibility**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research participant</th>
<th>Exemplar quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tumaini</strong></td>
<td>Reference 1: I rather be emotionally unstable rather than being financially unstable. And so the day I graduated from high school… 15minutes later, I had shoved all my stuff in someone’s car ready to go back home and starting looking for a job in my home town.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reference 2: When I came up here, I did not have any money and so that was all I was worried about. Financial stability is a big thing for me. I spent a lot of my first few weeks here trying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
to find a job that will help me make through the first semester in college.

**Reference 3:** Everything in the [foster care] system was taken care of and I was suddenly thrown into this maze of life that I was not sure of what to make of it. I had to learn to pay bills, to save money… an all that!

**Anisa**

One more thing, M. O. N. E. Y.[ spelt aloud!] Money is a big thing in college, whether you have it or not. So take value in what you receive, and don’t let it go to waste. Always get what you need first, and then reward yourself with what you want. Remember to save, and be aware of places to go where you can save money.

**Imara**

**Reference 1:** I got some money from my refund check. I bought my own laptop, paid my own phone bills. I had some money saved. Once I enrolled in college, I had to learn to be cheap. Once a started college, I had to learn to be cheap, I decide not to go out every night. I got a job on campus for a minimum wage and had to learn not to blow away the little money I had. My hair cut fee fell from $20 to $5. My phone bill had to get to no more than 25 dollars a month. I had to make do with very little income coming in. I do not have a meal plan. I go to the nearest food store and by my meals… cereals, kool aid, food ready to go, and so on.

**Reference 2:** I am planning to even not to touch my refund checks in the future so that I could take save and take care of my daily expenses. I do not have a member of my family or anyone else to back me up financially, and so I have to back myself up. I have to make sure that everything is in order for me.

**Reference 3:** Well, I like going out to dance from time to time. I would go to the mall with some of my friends and they would be getting new outfits for the club and I wouldn’t get anything. I would live my wallet at home. This is because; I know if I get the outfit, then I wouldn’t be able to eat the next day or days. Or If I go to the club this week, then I wouldn’t be able to do something else the following week. That is really frustrating!

**Nuru**

I find myself better able to make better financial decisions!… Yah… I have grown so much!

**Theme – Mentorship and Support**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research participant</th>
<th>Exemplar quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tumaini</strong></td>
<td><strong>Reference 1:</strong> And I am glad I did since I am sure I now have help with financial stability, I also have a great social support system on this campus. I am no longer a number; people know me by name and genuinely care about me and my dreams in life. <strong>Reference 2:</strong> I have people I can call, I have people I can...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Tumaini**          | **Reference 1:** And I am glad I did since I am sure I now have help with financial stability, I also have a great social support system on this campus. I am no longer a number; people know me by name and genuinely care about me and my dreams in life. **Reference 2:** I have people I can call, I have people I can... |

| **Tumaini**          | **Reference 1:** And I am glad I did since I am sure I now have help with financial stability, I also have a great social support system on this campus. I am no longer a number; people know me by name and genuinely care about me and my dreams in life. **Reference 2:** I have people I can call, I have people I can... |
depend on and above all, I know that when times are rough, they will not pull out on me.  
**Reference 3:** I would definitely say that the campus coaches here…[one of them] has definitely been a godsend. She has helped me on every level; financially, emotionally, educationally. She had helped me navigate through my personal life and academic life. She is all around there. She doesn’t… when times get hard, she doesn’t say, well you know you may wanna call someone else. Instead she is like, “whats going on?”.

**Reference 4:** Another source of help is the connections among our group of scholars coming from the same experience in foster care, where I can reach out and reach back and know that when they are reaching out for me, they are genuinely trying to help me out. That for me makes the biggest difference in my life helping me navigate through my own challenges as I begin my college career. I know I am not alone struggling with this new found life.

**Reference 5:** Some of the staff members on this campus have created a safe space in which I have been able to be open and tell my story without feeling like a victim. They have empowered me with the ability not to feel ashamed of my past experiences as a foster care youth. They have helped me realize that when I do not tell my story, I am somewhat hurting someone else because my story could help them. They have really helped me be able to voice my opinion, tell my story, my thoughts in a healthy way such that it could help someone else.

**Anisa**

**Reference 1:** Living here on campus keeps me close with the other students in our program because all of the rooms are pretty close, so we either have our own floor, or just a hall full of the [Seita] students. The staff who volunteer and work during the breaks help to make activities and events that all of the students can come together and participate in, and it’s just really fun and exciting. That way I’m not alone, and I have somewhere to sleep, and I have food available to me.

**Reference 2:** College is sort of like that big opportunity to have close friends and family. I had been Isolated from our family members, I did not even have close friends before.

**Reference 3:** I tried to dodge everyone and you know kind of kept to myself and retreated back into my shell and just kind of let the situation go by and expect it … ah… or hope that I would let it go away… but eventually … the more you avoid the problem the more challenging it gets … the deeper the hole and so … when I finally approached my campus coach and I said I am in this situation and I do not know the beginning from the
end ... from A to Z and ... there was An A to Z. There was an A to Z. I knew the A, I knew the Z (laughs)!. It was all the possible levels of what in the world was going on (laughs)! And it was me and my campus coach and the director of the program and we all sat in this room and we went through the entire thing from day one that I had been on this campus all the way until that day and we went through all the events that occurred...that were important till that day that were relevant to the situation that I had had. At the end of the problem solving, the Program Director had me leave the office, shut the door, wait for a while, knock on the door and ask to come in to ask for help for whatever it was that I was facing. And when I did it, after I got the word “help” out, all of a sudden... and after the question ... all of a sudden IT was just like aaaah  a sigh of relief ...woosh! I kind of felt ... I felt this big “whoosh”! I felt the distress on my chest.

Reference 4: My program director then asked me to get of the room, close the door behind me, wait for a few seconds and knock on the door and ask for help. The director also instructed that even though I knew that everything is going be ok, she nonetheless insisted that I ask for help. I stared at her and asked “Are you Crazy? Why would you make me ask for help now if I haven’t asked for it before?” But I couldn’t say no because she has been there for me. I trusted her.

Reference 5: One of the best experiences is the friends that I have made on campus, they have helped me be more outgoing and to grow into this warm loving person that I want to be and what other people see in me. I have come to learn that there are people who can accept me for what and who I am, being honest with them and so long as I allow myself to be open to others and be appreciative of whatever I have to offer.. the friends I have made in my first year, I can’t do anything else but just smile whenever I think about them.. we learn so much from each other because we were so diverse from each other.

Reference 6: It seems to me that my friends and I brought so much to the table and it just created aaah....friendly and diverse environment such that other people would want to join us and get together when we went out and stuff. This has helped to grow and be comfortable with my own experiences as individuals amongst all these different students on campus.

Reference 7: When I really need help, I go to my campus mentor. I will rush to her, pull her aside and let her know what the deal is and tell her I need her guidance again.

Imara

I took the pre-matriculation seminars seriously. There were
seminars on financial literacy, about career services, getting jobs on campus, study skills, time management, and independent living skills training. I took those training seriously. Perhaps some of my peers were not as best prepared to handle this new found freedom.

**Swabra**

Reference 1: Later on I shared a room with girl who had also been in foster care. We kind of shared life experiences and she understood some of the things I went through.  
Reference 2: The student support services targeting emancipated foster on this campus reached out to me from day one. They help you even when you don’t want to accept it. I do not qualify for ETV but the program has helped me even get an apartment and settle in very smoothly. They helped get furniture and other items, Shopping, etc.

When I reached out to my campus mentor, she did not judge me, she did not even attempt to send me to a psych ward or something like that. She just listened to my story and helped me with ideas that gave me a sense of hope. She took me out to eat and worked to with me to sort out the problems I had…

Reference 3: I lost a very close friend of mine through prison. We came here together. He writes to me often and encourages me to succeed in college. I haven’t been good at going to anybody for help. I don’t know how to ask for help. It is so hard! I am so scared on what people will think of me. I am scared of judgment. I have been judged my whole life and labeled my whole life! But this program in college that brings us to college before school starts has been very helpful. The campus mentors and coach show that they care about my wellbeing…that they care about who I am and where I want to go. They are not judgmental! They simply listen to me and are there for me, anytime I need help!

Reference 4: My campus coach has helped me see that the strengths and good things about me and I am more and more beginning to believe in myself.

**Adili**

But the Women’s center on this campus is 100% behind me on it. I talked to the dean of students and she is certainly helping me move forward with the project. The survivor advocacy center is also very supportive and I will continue pushing forward the idea of the group.

**Shamiri**

Reference 1: We have created a community here, helping each, we are all good friends. I know whom to go to whenever I need help.

Reference 2: The Smart Start Program was critical in my transition into this college. It bonded us as a group of freshmen
and we got to do scavenger hunt to get to know the resources available on this campus. This was very helpful. This is how I met my current best friend and some of us who had been in foster care. We had time to sit across one another during meals and just goof around and get to know each other. We did not have all this long lectures, but we actually got to know one another at a personal level.

**Reference 3:** Actually it has been the foster family from my last placement and my therapist because even though they are not physically here with me, I can still call them, connect with them and share with them my struggles, and ask for their advice and opinions related to my experiences here on campus. I send them emails, we just talk often about so many things. That keeps me going… knowing there is someone out there who genuinely cares about me and my wellbeing.

**Reference 4:** The people in my dorm have also very critical in my smooth transition into college. Whenever you have people who accept you as you are then it frees you from many things.

**Reference 5:** My peers happened to be people who had experienced the terrible experience of working with case workers and being on medication that we probably never needed. We simply wanted to be ourselves and become successful college students. And so we have had a good time together, enjoyed our time together and helped each realize that we have to move forward! We are smart and we can make it in life!

**Reference 6:** I initially had this thing amongst those of my peers who had been in foster care - we said if I got it you got! If they had food and I did not, they would say, hey come eat with us! I would then repay the favor. However, we did not really expect the favor, we just did it. I have had dinner with them for the last three days. This morning, I just said, you know what lets go down and have breakfast. We went down to a restaurant and paid for the breakfast and we just sat down goofed off and had a good time!

**Reference 7:** Instead of me calling my foster brothers and family, they called me! That was a big surprise! They called to ensure that I was ok and going to class! It struck me so much that some of my foster brothers would actually take time to call me … and express that they would like to be where I am today!

**Reference 8:** It is the coordinator of my foster program prior to coming to college. I call her every week. We talk about all things about college.

**Nuru**

**Reference 1:** My foster mom helped me apply and figure out the
financial aid stuff. She even taught me how to drive and bought me a car! They also paid about 75% of my out of pocket expenses as I moved into college! They made my transition into college so smooth and easy!

**Reference 2:** I was involved in a minor accident with my car. I was driving back home from my internship through a bridge – I am an education major - and the hood of my car flipped up and blocked my windshield and I hit the bridge railing and my car was written off! I also broke my ankle. My foster parents came and took care of everything and even helped me get a new car! My foster mom has always been there for me. I spend my holidays with her and keep contact with her all time! I just do not know how I would be without her!

**Reference 3:** There are about 2 or 3 of my friends that I kind of really appreciated them for accepting me for who and what I am. We all went to college in different States and they have always reached out to me. For once I had met people who understood me and accepted me as I am!

**Reference 4:** My RA was very helpful to me as I transitioned into college life. She was someone I lived closed to and she was able to reach out to me and even point out to other ideas and directions I needed to consider as I transitioned into college. She did not really know me much but she was there for me. She provided me with some practical ways of sorting my problems. She did reach out to me and was genuinely concerned about my wellbeing!

**Hafidha**

My friends are also very supportive. Foster care is tough! There is order and routine but very little loving care … if you actually find it. You consume a lot of negative stuff such that you become bitter and hate everyone! I decided that I did not want that to take control of my life. I decided to hang out with positive looking people!

**Theme – Negative Freedom**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research participant</th>
<th>Exemplar quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Imara</strong></td>
<td>For me the freedom and lack of structure was so overwhelming. You get so confused and start asking yourself what you have gotten yourself into! It is like what? I can wake up whatever time I want to wake up I can go wherever I want to go and no one is holding me back.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Shamiri</strong></td>
<td>Reference 1: It was a new found freedom. This was so overwhelming! We went from a highly structured environment to suddenly being on our own! At times, we did not even know what to do or expect of ourselves! We could pretty much do whatever we wanted! It was also tough! At first it was very</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
difficult to get up on your own and get ready to go to class! .... Make your own schedule. You know foster care is very structured…. Very structure, time for creativity and doing your own thing is not common. I had to figure out and remind myself that it was a brand new day. I had grown up overnight. There was no going back.

**Reference 2:** I had to figure out my food situation, living situation. I had no one to call and ask to meet a case worker to sort out my problems. You are on your own. You have no one to tell you hey get up and go to class! I have lost a lot of credit hours. I realize nothing in foster care really prepared me the challenges I am facing now and I cannot turn the clock. I have no home to go to, no parents to call, no case worker to talk to anymore. I am on my own! It has been hard, coming from a structured environment to you can do whatever you want!

**Reference 3:** Some of my own friends from foster care got so overwhelmed with this free unstructured environment and simply stopped going to class and they did not return for the second semester.

**Hafidha**

**Reference 1:** You are an emancipated youth and you are now on your own! You have to learn how to take care of yourself in every aspect of your life!

**Reference 2:** It has not been easy, coming from a structured environment of foster care and then suddenly all this freedom.

**Theme – Positive Freedom: Building Internal Foundation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research participant</th>
<th>Exemplar Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Anisa**            | **Reference 1:** Mmmmh...You get a lot of freedom here. When I first came up here, I didn’t feel my life was so exposed … In the foster care system there was no privacy... Everything about me was so exposed!

**Reference 2:** A lot of the things that I couldn’t do, I could do now. I could go out… whenever, and with whoever. I could interact with whoever I please wherever, and whenever. It was just... it was just like… I kind of felt, I had been empowered to have control over situations and things that previously was out of my hands … it was just, it was just … a whole new life style… a whole life style coming to college. |

| **Adili**            | **Reference 1:** When I first came to this college campus, I was thrilled! I said to myself, this is sweet … a fresh start! No more structures, no more innumerable case worker meetings, and so on!

**Reference 2:** College has been an experience of freedom. From a foster care student all decisions for the most part are made for you. Everything is so structured. You are choked for the most |
part. Freedom is awesome but you have to learn from it. **Reference 3**: The best experience was walking down the college campus during Halloween festivities. I did not have to worry about me or anybody else. I just walked down being what I wanted to be. I was just me happy and walking around and enjoying my evening without having to worry about what people will ask me about who I am and what I am doing. It was complete freedom!
Appendix D: IRB Approval

The following research study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Ohio University for the period listed below. This review was conducted through an expedited review procedure as defined in the federal regulations as Category(ies):

Project Title: Developmental Meaning - Making Dynamics of Emancipated Foster Care Youth Transitioning into Higher Education: A Constructivist-Grounded Theory

Primary Investigator: Jacob Odhoch Okumu

Co-Investigator(s):

Faculty Advisor: Peter Mather

Department: Counseling and Higher Education

Rebecca Cale, AAB, CIP
Office of Research Compliance

Approval Date
12/19/12

Expiration Date
12/19/12

This approval is valid until expiration date listed above. If you wish to continue beyond expiration date, you must submit a periodic review application and obtain approval prior to continuation.

Adverse events must be reported to the IRB promptly, within 5 working days of the occurrence.

The approval remains in effect provided the study is conducted exactly as described in your application for review. Any additions or modifications to the project must be approved by the IRB (as an amendment) prior to implementation.
Appendix E: IRB Periodic Review w/Amendment

The following research study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Ohio University for the period listed below. This review was conducted through an expedited review procedure as defined in the federal regulations as Category(ies):

Project Title: Developmental Meaning - Making Dynamics of Emancipated Foster Care Youth Transitioning into Higher Education: A Constructivist-Grounded Theory

Amendment: New Funding Source; Revised Consent Form

Primary Investigator Jacob Odhoch Okumu
Co-Investigator(s):

Faculty Advisor: Peter Mather
Department: Counseling and Higher Education

Rebecca Cale
Office of Research Compliance

10/12/2
Approval Date

10/14/13
Expiration Date

This approval is valid until expiration date listed above. If you wish to continue beyond expiration date, you must submit a periodic review application and obtain approval prior to continuation.

Adverse events must be reported to the IRB promptly, within 5 working days of the occurrence.

The approval remains in effect provided the study is conducted exactly as described in your application for review. Any additions or modifications to the project must be approved by the IRB (as an amendment) prior to implementation.
Appendix F: Ohio University Consent Form

Title of Research: Developmental Meaning-Making Dynamics of Emancipated Foster Care Youth Transitioning into Higher Education: A Constructivist Grounded Theory

Researcher: Jacob O. Okumu

Dear Participant:
You are being asked to participate in a qualitative research. For you to be able to decide whether you want to participate in this research, you should understand what the research is about, as well as possible risks and benefits in order to make an informed decision. This process is known as informed consent. This form describes the purpose, procedures, possible benefits, and risks. It also explains how your personal information will be used and protected. Once you have read this form and your questions about the study are answered, you will be asked to sign it. This will allow your participation in this study. You should receive a copy of this document to take with you.

Explanation of the study
This study will investigate the experiences and developmental meaning-making dynamics of emancipated foster care youth transitioning into college. You are being asked to join this study because you are an undergraduate first-year or sophomore foster care alumni. If you agree to participate you will be asked to talk about your experiences transitioning into college, what those experiences mean for you and the role you perceive your college campus environment play in fostering your life goals and aspirations.

Risks and Discomforts
No risks or discomforts are anticipated by participating in this research.

Benefits
This study is important to society and science because it seeks to provide additional theoretical grounding for future studies in meaning-making dynamics among college students. It also extends the theoretical foundations of meaning-making dynamics to include diverse college student populations. Individually, you may benefit from this study by having an opportunity to reflect upon, clarify, and process how you make sense of your transitional college experiences and align them to your life goals.

Confidentiality and Records
Your information will be kept confidential by assigning code to identify cases and will be saved on electronic media. Data will be entered into a database using a password that only the principal researcher will know. Audio tapes will only be used to transcribe interview. Once the interview is transcribed, the audio tapes, memos, field notes, and interview transcripts will be locked in a safe in the office of the principal investigator at Ohio University, Athens, which is only accessible to the investigator. While quotes may be used, no identifying information will be included in the final research product. The
information during this study may be published in scientific journal or presented at scientific meetings but data will be prepared as aggregate data.

Additionally, while every effort will be made to keep your study-related information confidential, there may be circumstances where this information must be shared with:
* Federal agencies in the USA, for example the Office of Human Research Protections, whose responsibility is to protect human subjects in research.
* Representatives of Ohio University, including the Institutional Review Board, a committee that oversees the research at OU

**Contact Information**

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact:

Jacob O. Okumu (Researcher)    Dr. Peter Mather (Advisor)
Jo241309@ohio.edu    matherp@ohio.edu
740.331.0973       740.517.9029

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Jo Ellen Sherow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740)593-0664. Email: Sherow@ohio.edu

By signing below, you are agreeing that:

- you have read this consent form (or it has been read to you) and have been given the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered
- you have been informed of potential risks and they have been explained to your satisfaction.
- you understand Ohio University has no funds set aside for any injuries you might receive as a result of participating in this study
- you are 18 years of age or older
- your participation in this research is completely voluntary
- you may leave the study at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Signature____________________  Date__________________

Printed Name____________________

Version Date: 11/15/11
Appendix G: Recruitment Letter

Dear Colleagues,

I am beginning a doctoral qualitative research project for Ohio University entitled *Developmental Meaning-Making Dynamics of Emancipated Foster Care Youth Transitioning into Higher Education: A Constructivist Grounded Theory*. I plan to recruit undergraduate emancipated foster care youth currently in their freshman or sophomore year, and I am asking for your help to identify potential research participants in your institution.

Using a Constructivist Grounded Theory Methodology, this research will explore the dynamics of emancipated youth’s transitional experiences into our college campuses as well as investigate how different ways of understanding those experiences influence their developmental process of *meaning-making*, college success, and life decisions.

I plan to conduct short initial interviews to ascertain whether or not potential research participants are willing to engage in a 60 to 90 minute in-depth interview as well as to determine a convenient location for the student. The consent will occur before any individual interviews take place. After the explanation of the study and the consent form, the selected research participants will be provided with time to thoroughly read the consent form, and ask arising questions. The consent form will be taken to each residential college campus in which interviews will be conducted. I will also remind the participants that their participation is voluntary and that they are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

At the end of the interview, I will ask the research participants if quotes from the interview could be used. To track this, the code of 1 or 0 will be recorded with the participant’s code so that I know if quotes will be used. Personal data of the research participants will be de-identified.

After the initial interview, each participant will be asked to review the emerging codes and themes in subsequent follow up interviews for validity and reliability. I will finally present the final draft of the research project to the participants for a final review and input. Kindly share this information with emancipated foster care college students interested in becoming research participants in this study and ask them to contact me at 740-331-0973 or jo241309@ohio.edu

Attached is the Ohio University Institutional Review Board (IRB) Research Compliance Authorization.

Thank you,

Jacob O, Okumu, MS., LPC-CR
Appendix H: Interview Protocol

1. Introduction to the Interview: Thank research participant for coming, complete consent form

2. Building Rapport and accessing meaning-making during college transition
   a. Highlight consent and confidentiality
   b. Confirm interview end time
   c. Review interview procedure and purpose of the interview
   d. The purpose of this interview is to learn how your experiences transitioning into college have shaped who you are and how college student personnel can help serve your unique needs. In this interview I will ask you about your specific experiences since coming into college after foster care and how your transitional experiences mean for you.

3. Share with me about your background, you experiences in high school and how you eventually joined this college.
   Probes:
   a. Significant high school experiences.
   b. Family background
   c. Friends.
   d. How did you introduce yourself to your roommates, colleagues, newly found friends?
   e. Why did you choose this college?
   f. What were other options? How did you end up choosing this institution?
4. What expectations did you have about college? What did you envision college life would be like?

Probes:

a. How different did you envision a college learning environment would be like compared to your previous experiences?

b. What were your concerns and fears?

c. How did you envision your relationships with your fellow students would be like?

d. In what ways did you anticipate to change as you began your college career?

e. In what ways did you see yourself getting involved outside the classroom? Why?

5. a. The interview will return to questions 3 probes and draw out what it means for the research participant so far.

b. What has been your experience as a student in this college?

c. What is the most unexpected experience so far? What does this mean for you?

6. What did you gain from your life experiences in foster care that has helped you as you transition into college?

Probes:

a. Quest for self-identity.

b. Path to personal autonomy and independence.

c. What was the Rhythm of life like while in foster care?

d. Kindly describe your prior life experiences that you consider most significant.

e. Why was it most significant?
f. How did it affect you?
   a. Meaningful Experiences
   b. Kindly describe some of your college experiences thus far?
   c. How have you been able to balance the various demands and commitments of your college life thus far?
   d. What do you consider the best and worst moments/experiences in college so far?
   e. Any other significant transitional experiences so far
   f. Why do you consider them most significant?
   g. How did those experiences affect you?

7. Who or what are the support systems that have reached out to you as you transition into college?
   Probes:
   a. If you encountered a difficult experience, whom would you tell/go for help?
      why? why not
   b. What persons have been most helpful to you since you entered college? In what ways/areas have those individuals been most helpful?
   c. What persons have been least useful? In what ways have they been least helpful?
   d. If something is perilous in your mind, whom do you seek help from?

8. Meaningful Interpersonal relationships
   a. How would you describe your interactions with fellow students who differ from you due to their different backgrounds such as personalities, religious beliefs, race, sexual orientation, values, color, etc?
b. What insights have you gathered from those interactions?

9. Difficult decisions and Pressure from multiple directions (succeed academically, to belong socio-economically, work obligations, campus activities, career directions, etc).

   Probes:
   a. What difficult decisions have you had to make so far?
   b. How did you handle it/them? Why? How did it/they affect you? Looking what was it like for you as you navigated through those decision.(impact on values, quest for personality identity, reframing values, interpersonal relationships)
   c. If there is a time when what you desired conflicted with what others wanted, how did you handle it?

10. How has coming to college affected your life in general?

   Probes:
   a. What has prompted this? What does that experience mean for you?
   b. How have college campus experiences you have so far shared impacted your transition to college?
   c. What does it mean for you to be in college?

11. How has your college life transitional experience affected your life goals for the next year? What have you gained from your first year college experience so far?

   Probes:
a. How has your experience transitioning into college impacted your personal and academic goals for the rest of your academic year and the rest of your college career?

b. How would you describe the way you relate with your biological family, your professors and peers since coming into college?

c. In what ways have those relationships shaped the way you currently view yourself?

d. Thinking about your overall transitional experience into college, what is the most important thing you gained since you entered college?

e. What would you share with an incoming college student with foster care experiences regarding transitioning into college?

12. Based on what we have discussed and your reflections, kindly share with me any additional college transitional experiences that have been very significant and came up during our interview and you expect you will want to explore further.

13. Are there any other observations that you would like to share?

14. Debrief with the research participant and schedule for a face to face follow-up interview.

(Adapted from Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education, 2006)